

Ethics and the Wings of Tetranormalization: Agential Realism Ontology Proposal

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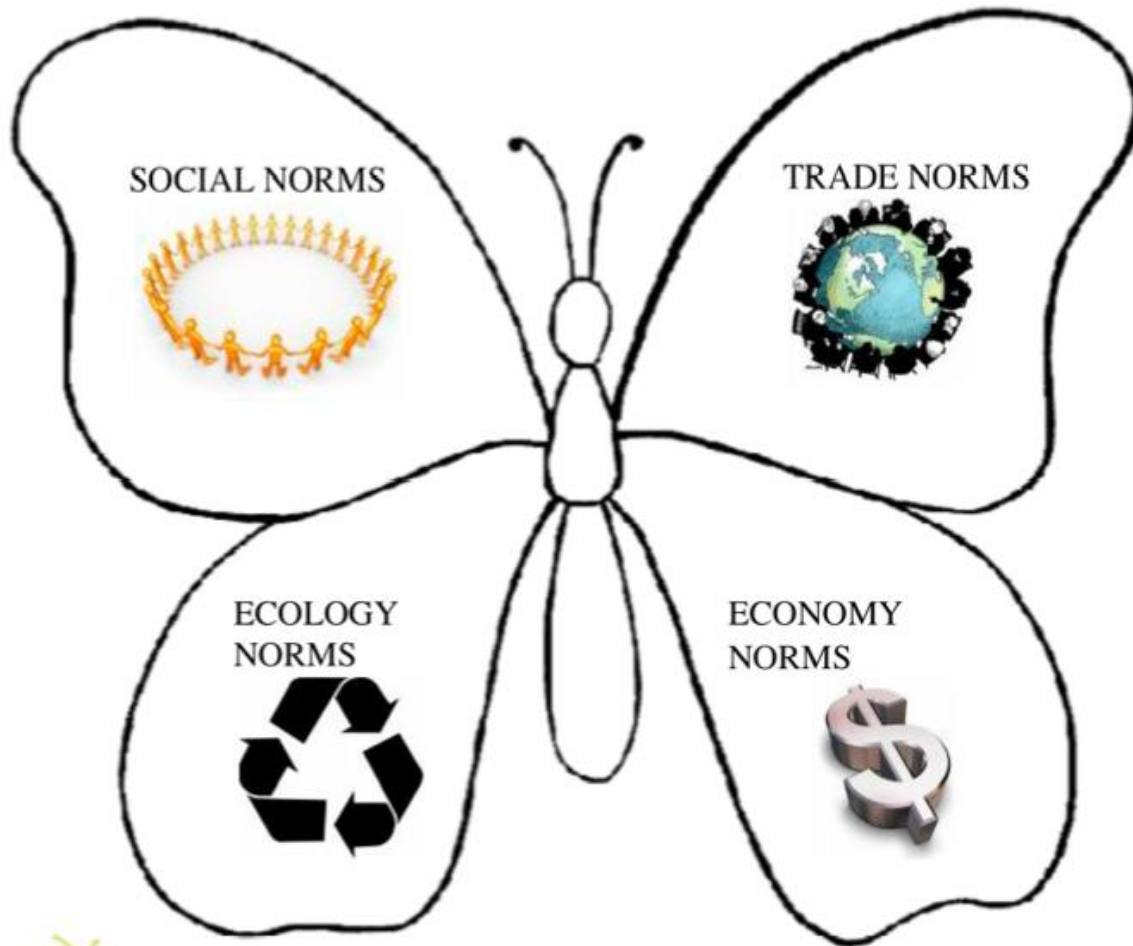
ABSTRACT

Tetranormalization seeks to integrate norms that have been thought to be rather incommensurate (trade, economic, social and ecological). There is an ethical implication in this. The right wings of what we refer to as the Tetranormalization (trade & economics) are more utilitarian ethics, and very much a part of global business practices. The left wings (social & ecological) are underdeveloped, and are about a different sort of ethics: the social and ecological norms are more about an answerability ethics, where enterprises are compelled to act, or obligated to act by some kind of Kantian (categorical) ethics. We propose that working out what Barad terms an 'agential realism' framework, which we develop for the integration of the four wings of Tetranormalization. This will necessitate an integration of their respective ethics, away from representationalism (& reflexivity) and towards Haraway's 'diffraction': making a consequential difference in the world. Secondly, Tetranormalization is a way of shaping the future. It is what we call 'antenarrative' a bet on the future, and something that is before narrative has stabilized. We suggest that some antenarrative approaches that offer linear or cyclic (stage by stage) predictions of the future are not suited to the task at hand. An alternative is to look at spirals (where small beginnings have cumulative effects) and rhizomes (networks that develop every which way).

Introduction to Tetranormalization

Tetranormalization is a new theory by Henri Savall and Veronique Zardet (2005). Tetranormalization addresses the norms and standards (including legal and ethical) between countries. The 'International Network' of Tetranormalization researchers is currently preparing a new book on Tetranormalization. It aims to explain the challenge of incommensurate norms and standards with which companies and organizations are confronted.

In a globalizing economy, enterprises face pressures beyond conforming to (1) traditional accounting and financial results, such as (2) trade regulations [WTO], (3) social norms [SA 8000], and (4) environmental-quality-security standards [ISO 9000]. This tetra (4 forces of norms/standards) can present the enterprise with incompatible (incommensurate) stakeholder expectations. Firms used to just flying with traditional accounting/financial and trade norms are now asked to deal with global corporate citizenship (a new version of global corporate social responsibility, CSR) in the social and environmental wings (Boje, 2009; Schipper & Boje, 2008; Mir, Marens, & Mir, 2008; Edward & Willmott, 2008).



Four Wings of Tetranormalization

In Tetranormalization the humanizing is in the Social Norms (SA8000). This has to do with global human rights, with a 50 year attempt to effect Global Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), more recently being called Global Corporate Citizenship,(CC). Part of CSR and CC is nature, the ecological norms, and fitting all those quality norms to sustainability.

In a globalizing economy, companies are facing pressures to report not only on traditional accounting and financial results, but also on indicators focused on social and environmental responsibility. In response to those trends, an international research network, the “Tetranormalization Observatory,” is set up to monitor the impacts of discrepancies and contradictions between the four main clusters of organizational performance norms (Savall & Zardet, 2005: 3-4): 1) finance and accounting norms, 2) social norms, 3) quality-security-environment norms, and 4) regulations regarding trade. I make the radical claim that this interplay across norm “worlds” allows for an uncharted course of Tetranormalization from Being to ethics, most notably a Critical Theory ethics.

In this essay, we would like to suggest that the social and environmental assessment models of norms do not as yet transcend the linear narrative nor are they able to cope with the colonizing corporation. To us, narrative is one of three main genres of

‘storytelling,’ the other two being living story, and antenarrative. The assessor is a storyteller, and my key question is: can this storyteller be smitten by the ethics of answerability?

AGENTIAL REALISM AND TETRANORMALIZATION

Agential realism is a framework worked out in Karen Barad’s (2007) *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Her work calls into question the entire tradition of norms, theorized and studied according to Cartesian duality of human and non-human, and the Western narrative preference for representationalism. Agential realism builds on the ideas of Bohr’s quantum physics, particularly that measurement disrupts and enacts phenomena: “*the nature of the observed phenomenon changes with corresponding changes in the [measuring] apparatus*” (cited in Barad: 2007: 106).

Barad revised Judith Butler’s theory of the relation of materiality and the human body, but looking at non-human, social, ecological, Cyborg, and other bodies.

The implication for Tetranormalization is that norms represented by abstract universal concepts (& properties) with deterministic meanings and boundaries, independent of measurement are entirely suspect. Norms following Barad, then are not just human, or social, but also fit with ecological and trade body norms. “The framework of agential realism does not limit its reassessment of the matter of bodies to the realm of the human... or to the domain of the social” (Barad: 2007: 209). No predetermined boundaries between the sorts of Tetranormalization domains are drawn. Rather the focus is on how such distinctions are made and their efficacy. Norms according to agential realism, are part of the material conditions, are embedded in discursive-material practices (including the effects of measurement of those norms, & their ongoing material revisions). Any assumption in Tetranormalization of a transparency of norms would be suspect. Norms, then, are defined by the circumstances for their measurement, not in independent abstracts, somehow separate from material conditions. In short, the importance of the material practices of measurement becomes the focus of Tetranormalization. Tetranormalization, then, is about the ability of various norms (social, ecological, trade, & economic) to materialize the regulatory practices. The key shift we are seeking is to have Tetranormalization accent its material dimension, studying and changing the regulatory apparatuses intra-acting norms.

In that measurement, a direction is taken, and aspects are selected, and others excluded, and this intra-action, constitutes the phenomenon of the norm. Measurement of norms, then can take different directions, now, and over time. According to agential realism perspective, the effect of this measurement on the norm, is indeterminable, and cannot be subtracted from some abstract concept effect of prom properties. Each norm takes it cut, includes some aspects, and marginalizes others in the choices of agencies of norm-observation (Barad: 2007: 215). Every norm, then, involves a choice of apparatus of measurement or operationalization. The measuring tools of Tetranormalization become a focus of inquiry, as well as a path to intervention.

By paying closer attention to the conditions of norm-observation, there is in agential realism a renunciation of classical agency and cause-effect theories. Linear chains of cause-effect are deterministic, denying choice options. In linear causality the future is determined. In agential realism, causality is inter-acting of causes, effects, and choices. In the case of Tetranormalization this is the inter-acting of norms and their measurement practices. There is also a (re) configuring of the norm properties, boundaries, meanings being enacted in the discursive-material practices (Barad: 2007: 134).

Agentist realist ontology would focus Tetranormalization on a posthumanist world perspective. That is, with the focus on Tetranormalization domains of trade, economy (accounting), ecology and social (human rights) norms, not just humans have agency, and the separation into human and non-human norms is suspect. Norms are typically theorized as ideational or abstractly conceptual, and apart from materiality. Further, as suggested the inseparability of observation and norms is challenged in agentist realist ontology.

According to agential realism, there are not separate kinds of materiality and so the linkage between discursive practices and their materializing effects on bodies is not all that mysterious; discursive practices are materially efficacious, to the extent that they are, because there is a *causal* linkage between them, which is to be understood in terms of the causality of inter-actions (Barad, 2007: 211).

Tetranormalization, for example, assumes that the four domains (trade, economy, ecology, & social) are not separate, nor independent. They are definitely entangled. The intra-acting Tetranormalization domains therefore go against a classical causality or agency worldview. As Barad (2007: 338) puts it, “phenomena are not the result of an external imposition of human-based conceptual schemata.”

The focus is instead on material-discursive practices, in the materializing of the norms, in the intra-action of its measurement. Rather than norms being static, universal, or essential conceptual schemata, there is instead a continuous transformation of norms in co-evolution with apparatus of measurement/observation/reporting/accounting/regulatory practices in an intra-active becoming of Tetranormalization.

In sum, our suggestion is for Tetranormalization to embrace agentist realist ontology, in order to study practices of norms in particular materialities. By interrelating the materialities of norms of ecology, social, economics, and trade --- Tetranormalization plays a participatory role in the material changes in normalization. We think this includes a focus on the material-discursive dimensions, of which storytelling is a significant domain.

STORYTELLING BEFORE TETRANORMALIZATION

Storytelling, in our framework, has material-discursive practices and are not outside of Tetranormalization, and are indeed apart of the observation, accounting, apparatuses. We take the perspective of agentist realism, that storytelling is not separate or apart from the real, but is constitutive. Storytelling is part of the intra-active apparatuses of normalizing

and its ever=changing restorying. A key paradigm switch in from representationalism narrative or the reflexivity of (dialogical) living stories to a diffraction ethics. Barad, following Haraway, takes this a step further. Haraway looks at diffraction as a countermove because representation/reflexivity focuses on serenity, whereas diffraction is about making a difference.

Before the move we are suggesting, *Tetranormalization*, assessment would have merely gathered scattered moments of corporate experience into a narrative theme, a monological journey through the diverse worlds of accounting, social, environment and trade, into the promised bliss of corporate social responsibility. Such monologic narrative gives the corporation a thematic unity, a recollection of its existence that is a “dispersal into past, present, and future” (MacDonald, 2005: 189). However instead of the promised corporate citizenship, in many cases it appears that human rights is a legal vacuum, an empty rhetoric, and even worse, a legitimacy for taking even more than before. Further classical narrative, with its intra-textual focus on structures or plots and representational fidelity and accuracy (e.g. Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm Theory) does not get at the kind of fully embodied storytelling intra-acting of norms and ways of telling norms.

With the trading Empire, we were to see the taming of the multinational corporate appetite by World Bank, United Nations, World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and International Labour Organization (WB, UN, WTO, IMF, ILO respectively). With great accounting and audit standards, we were led by transparency rhetoric to expect more accountability, a discovery of ancient virtues. Instead, discussion of ‘social’ avoids use of the word ‘poverty,’ and sustainability has come to mean everything but that awful word, ‘green.’ Empty rhetoric everywhere legitimizes dubious corporate global practice. Disney and other → “TNCs have been able to operate largely in a legal vacuum” (Kinley & Nolan, 2008: 348). This is why Tetranormalization, and this year’s Lyon conference were invented.

Despite the interorganizational alphabet soup, TNCs operating in China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand and other countries are merciless exploiters of the poor (Kinley & Nolan, 2008: 358). The alphabet soup has become a global governance regime, a hegemonic one. There is more policing of TNC by NGO activists than by the alphabet soup. The rise of TNC hegemonic power in the deteriorated power of the state has left the social (poverty focus) and the environment preservation behind for the suspect rhetoric of sustainability.

Kinley and Nolan (2008) argue that human rights in the global economy, despite all the interorganizational networking of WB, UN, WTO, IMF and ILO, is not bringing about an end to war crimes or resolving the social question of poverty, nor the downfall of nature. Out of the top 100 economies of this world, 51 are corporations, and 49 are states (Kinley & Nolan, 2008: 347). ExxonMobil’s 341 billion dollar economy ranks larger than 125 of 184 countries in the world. Wal-Mart is 19th largest economy, larger than 36 countries (Adler, 2008: 376).

Global models are the narrative expositions of a journal for the corporation that is stuck in the chronotopic time of historical narrative (Boje, 2008a: 138-154; MacDonald, 2005:

182). Specifically, we assert that retrospective narrative sensemaking models that are oftentimes linear dominate the Tetranormalization spheres of financial/accounting, social, quality-security-environment, and trade models. My suggestion is to look at the living stories in the death of Liu Pan, and the more nonlinear, prospective antenarrative approaches that leave Disney in ethical answerability for fraudulent audits, for looking the other way, and for rhetoric that is empty. This way ethical-assessment could become a more Homeric epic “voyage of discovery” (MacDonald, 2005: 183) and less an Odysseus-narrative of abstraction and universal reason (we withdrew the Disney certificate, our job is done). When norms seek the language of universality they drain the life out, becoming the “master of ruse, enterprise, and calculation, cunning to the point of ‘malice;’” (ibid, p. 183). One senses a Vampire just at the margin of this page.

In the next section living story is explored as a counterbalance to monologic narrative illusion.

LIVING STORY AS ANECDOTE TO PETRIFIED NARRATIVE

In living story, each moment is a birth disrupting narrative’s fake continuity, its synchronic time, its solidified space, it’s patching together of select fragments. Living story is emergence refusing closure, spatial extension that one fragment is holographic to the others.

Living story frees history from the homogenizing narrative, the narrative that subjugates the microstoria (Boje, 2001). The univocal, monologic narrative facilitates a corporate takeover of epistemological forces, one that threatens democratic governance, and ethical answerability.

ANTENARRATIVES SHAPING THE FUTURE OF TETRANORMALIZATION

Antenarrative is a term Boje invented in 2001, and has led to a number of people attempting this storytelling method, and identifying antenarrative processes shaping the future (Boje, 2001). Non-linear, and non-cyclic (stage-by-stage) antenarrative have what Barad (2007: 214) calls a “condition of an open future.” There is a shift going on in storytelling away from just narrative of (retrospective) past analysis to studying the living story processes of emergence and antenarrative material processes shaping futures worthy of becoming. Instead of story being a supplement to narrative, the profession of storytelling is taking on the future. Storytelling scholars are heralding an inquiry into the complexity that is beyond the linear models of narrative to comprehend.

Antenarrative will never share a frontier with petrified narrative. Narrative will never conform to a monologic retrospection history. The monologic narrative of multinational corporations is a romantic narrative path of progress. I suggest that an ethical antenarrative can be part of the Tetranormalization assessment, its inquiry, its expectation of corporate practice.

In Savall and Zardet’s approach, exceptionally positive future outcomes come from an analysis of systemic dysfunctions preventing democratic governance, including the dominant forms of hegemony of power-wielders. In the SEAM and Tetranormalization approaches, progress comes from fixing dysfunctions (read as a type of analytic problem

solving), which are seen as psychodynamics of power that is errant. This includes lack of attention of power to democratic decision-making that is unattained because of excluded voices. Where power sees employees as recalcitrant factors of production, SEAM looks at employees as governance-stakeholders that need to be paid for their creativeness. With SEAM there is a strong focus on taking copious notes, on observing the discourse that is present, on developing a mirror effect, on a confrontation to the client with their own discourse and with the discourse of all the stakeholders. Out of this mirroring comes an expected transformation of power, into shared governance, and from this emanates the co-generated (stakeholders' and intervention researchers') intervention projects.

Both prospective sensemaking approaches (Positive Psychology of Appreciative Inquiry & Tetranormalization) are breaks with retrospective narrative history. Both attach an 'ought' to schemes of the future. In Appreciative Inquiry, only the positive narratives are attended, and only the living stories that are positive are acknowledged, and only the positive antenarrative pathways are attended. Tetranormalization, by contrast, assumes the analytic problem is incommensurate norms, and that these norms have stalemated progress by a cynical conformity to power.

Narrative promotes a way of seeing the future through the lens of the past, and makes antenarrative possibility beyond the future-perfect narrative line quite illegitimate, and hegemonically invisible. We, who are indoctrinated and socialized into narrative ways, are not good at predicting an alternative future, other than the one predestined to repeat in the future-perfect.

Mir, Marens, and Mir (2008) also take a critical perspective, one rooted in postcolonial theory. Corporations have evaded public oversight. The result is the TNC has become a "sovereign geographical and administrative space" with homogenous time (ibid, p. 528).

For me, this homogenization of time-space allows storytelling to be deployed to render corporate malfeasance unremarkable. Storytelling loses its social, its dialogic chronotopicity, and its polyphonic and stylistic dialogism. Storytelling is constructed with a corporate mindset to deterritorializes public space and time, to render it without relationship grounding.

The implication for Tetranormalization is to invert the corporate mindset by greater inclusion of stakeholders to normalize the institutional environment of the TNC. In order for Tetranormalization to be effective, it can become a storytelling that incorporates the concerns of what Mir, Marens, & Mir call the fragments, those put to the margins or the subaltern, and whose interests have been sacrificed on the altar of homogeneity. The hope is that corporate discourse, including storytelling, can decolonize the appropriated spaces, and re-establish more dialogical action.

For me, this means confronting "hegemony-inducing" manoeuvres (Mir, Marens & Mir, 2008: 535), instead of waiting for the impunity of TNC to change its ways due appreciative hope, to find "good" citizenship behaviour (p. 538).

Finally, Schipper and Boje (2008) argue that corporate governance that purports to be engaged in transparency needs to be put to the test of public scrutiny. Visually this is a kind of surveillance, but in terms of voice, it is accomplished with participation. Transparency is defined as letting light shine through without obstruction, and without leaving stuff in the darkness. Corporate rhetoric socially constructs its 'transparency' in abiding by social, environmental, accounting, and trade norms. Transparency is widely used to establish corporate integrity (Schipper & Boje, 2008: 501).

When transparency becomes a function or an instrument of power, it seriously compromises any claims to integrity, trust or doing what is good. Where all voices are not audible, not listened to seriously, there is convergence to a one-voiced, one-way storytelling. When the voices of the fragments, the plurality, are completely present, then there is transparency. The dialogical transparency, with fully embodied voices, aiming at co-generativity, instead of consensus, has yet to be sighted in TNC behaviour.

In this essay we sought to give the discipline of storytelling greater depth, by allowing for multiple conceptualizations of narrative, living story, and antenarrative in agentist realism that has implications of Tetranormalization. This move serves to rescue storytelling from being reduced to the silent supplement to narrative abstraction and classical linear causality.

There are retrospective and prospective storytelling methods that aid assessment of social, accounting, environmental and trade incommensurate norms. Without an ethical approach, such as critical theory ethics, there will not be a different, less colonizing, less predatory corporate behaviour.

There is a sense in which storytelling is part of the material conditions, part of the apparatus of normalization. A critical implication of this is to look at Tetranormalization as having an intra-action of measurement and norms. Another critical implication is that the four domains of Tetranormalization are intra-active, rather than independent. The research question becomes how do the domains of Tetranormalization differ in their material-discursive practices? By not buying in to a pre-determined differences among the domains its possible to look at agential realism as an integrative move across the domains. Further, new technoscientific practices continually rework the normalization practices, in an intra-active way. Finally agential realist ontology focuses on a diffractive method of critical practice, for making an answerably ethical difference in the world. We can begin to study how Tetranormalization materialize, matter in what ways, and are more or less efficacious for whom. In this way Tetranormalization becomes a part of the world of diffractive becoming. We submit that storytelling itself is evolving from its dependency on representational narrative to reflexivity of living ones living stories, and on to diffractive antenarrative choices for changing the normalizing practices in ways that make a difference.

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