

True Flatness: A response to Garcia - Emanuel Rutten - The Future of Realism - 20 Feb 2015

In his thought provoking book *Form and Object. A Treatise on Things* Garcia develops a hyper-flat or ultra-liberal ontology of things. Garcia takes everything to be equally something, no matter what. In short, anything whatever is a thing. Everything is reified into a something. Nothing is more or less something. A thing therefore only needs a minimal determination to ensure its existence. As such things are almost nothing. They do not even have identity, unity, consistency or actuality as a defining characteristic. As a consequence, absolutely nothing is immune to the fact of being a thing.

His ontology thus displays a true spirit of radical flatness. Garcia embraces a formal equality of all things. His inflationary ontology of things is in any case more flat than the ontologies of Meinong, Quine, Latour, Harman and many others. But is his formal ontology of things really flat enough?

Now, according to Garcia, the thing is the difference between its components and its environment. More formally, the thing is the difference between what it comprehends and what comprehends it.

Further, *that in which all things are* is the world. The world itself though is *in nothing*. The world enters into nothing. For this reason, Garcia argues, the world itself is not a thing. The world is the unique non-thing to which all things are related in their solitude. Each thing is alone in the world.

By excluding the world as a something Garcia is in good company. As we all know Russell's famous paradox that destroyed naïve set theory, was in fact caused by the assumption that the world, the set of all sets, exists. As soon as one rejects this assumption, as soon as one accepts that the world, the set of all sets, does not exist, Russell's paradox disappears. And this seems to be a pretty good reason to accept the non-existence of the world. In fact, it was precisely this resolution of Russell's famous paradox that brought us modern twentieth-century Zermelo-Fraenkel axiomatic set theory. According to Zermelo-Fraenkel's *axiom of specification* or *axiom of restricted comprehension* a set can only be defined as a precisely specified subset of another set that is already given to us, so that indeed the unrestricted unqualified set of all sets, and therefore the world as such, does not exist. Also one of the founding fathers of speculative realism, Quentin Meillassoux, believes strongly that the world does not exist. As he writes in his magnificent book *After Finitude. An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, there is no *whole*. There is no *totality*.

Instead of just applying set theory, he wants to demonstrate the non-existence of the world, the absolute *de-totalization* of being, the absence of an ultimate quantity, the transfinite Cantorian *non-all*, as a so-called *figure* of his speculative *principle of factuality* or the principle of radical contingency. And more recently Markus Gabriel wrote a whole book to argue that the world does not exist, using yet another series of arguments. Examples such as these can easily be multiplied. So again, in arguing that the world is a non-thing, a non-existent, Garcia is in good company.

But the exclusion of the world from the list of all things renders Garcia's ontology not really flat. For it is simply not true that *anything* is something, *no matter what*. After all, if really anything would be something, no matter what, then the world should be something as well. Now, can we make Garcia's ontology truly flat by also allowing the world to be something after all? Let us see.

Take Garcia's definition of thing. As said, a thing is the difference between its components and its environment. Or more formally, a thing is the difference between what it comprehends and what comprehends it. Now, as Garcia writes, the world is in nothing. There is nothing in which the world enters. There is nothing that comprehends the world. So, if we assume the world to be something, the world would be the difference between what it comprehends and what comprehends it. But then, since there is nothing that comprehends the world, it follows that the world is the difference between what it comprehends and nothing. In other words, the world is what it comprehends. Let me make precisely the same point by using a bit different terminology. If we assume the world to be something, then it would be the difference between its components and its environment. But

since the world has no environment, it follows that the world is the difference between its components and nothing. That is to say, the world is its components. Therefore, if the world is something, the world is the sum of all things. More precisely, the world is the mereological sum of all things, including itself. But then, is the world conceptually equivalent to our universe; a big thing full of stars and planets? No, clearly not. The world includes *everything*. Any multiverse, any Platonic abstract, any divinity, any shade of grey, any Meinongian possibilia, enters it as well.

This all seems to be perfectly coherent. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, if we take the world to be a thing just as any other thing, all key characteristics of Garcia's ontology are actually preserved. For example, each thing is still *in the world* simply by virtue of being a part of the world. Each thing also *enters into the world equally*, since they are all equally parts of the world. Moreover, all things are still *alone in the world*, since being a part of the world is entirely independent from entering into relationships with other things in the world. Garcia also requires that the world is not a reality prior to things. This follows as well. It is not prior to things, since it exists as the sum of all things.

Would it then perhaps follow that the world is *compact*, which would frighten Garcia? No, the world is not compact. After all, the world depends for its very existence on the existence of its parts, and therefore it depends for its existence on things other than itself. But then it is not self-sufficient, it does not exist in and by itself. The world is therefore not in-itself. In short, it is *not a substance*.

Besides, as being the sum of all things, the world is precisely that which is *common to all things*. It can therefore still properly be said to be the *form of all things*. It's the form of all things simply by virtue of being their holistic all-inclusive.

Moreover, because the world is just the sum of *all* things, it has hardly any other determination than merely being this totality - which nicely fits Garcia's thin inflationary notion of a thing as something that has *minimal determination* and as such lacks intrinsicness, intensity or depth.

All in all, instead of arriving at an untenable ontology, we arrive at a perfectly coherent truly flat ontology that adheres to the main attributes of Garcia's system. But perhaps more importantly, the system we arrive at is even more flat than Garcia's original ultra-liberal ontology. It's even flatter than Garcia's hyper-flat ontology because truly anything is something, no matter what. After all, on the ontology that we obtain even the world itself is something - no more and no less.

So, it seems to me that Garcia has good reasons to embrace this flat ontology as the true ultimate flat ontology of things. It is only this ontology that is faithful to the true spirit of liberal flatness.

How is this true flat ontology referred to? It is the well-known extensional theory of wholes and parts and is called extensional mereology. It has been with us at least since the days of Plato and Aristotle, or even since the Presocratics. Its *formal* formulation though can be traced back to the work of Lesniewski and to the work of Leonard and Goodman in the first half of the last century.

On *formal* extensional mereology Russell's famous paradox is prevented. The reason for this is that, contrary to set membership, mereological parthood is reflexive. Whereas a set is normally not a member of itself, a thing can always be understood as being a part, or more precisely, a non-proper part, of itself. The mereological sum of all things that are not a part of themselves is therefore necessarily empty, so that within formal mereology Russell's paradox can indeed not arise.

Taking all of the above into account, I invite Garcia today to become a true flat ontologist. I invite him to become an adherent of formal extensional mereology, or more specifically: of *mereological universalism*, according to which *every arbitrary sum* of things is a thing. Embrace this ultimate flat ontology, Garcia. Lose your fear for acknowledging that even the world itself is a thing. For, again, as you yourself have learnt us, *anything* is equally something, no matter what. No more, no less.

I thank you for your attention.