

PROVOCATION

Do you follow? Rethinking causality in archaeology

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Abstract

Philosopher and physicist Karen Barad (2003; 2007; 2012) has brought a new understanding of causality to the academic discourse (agential realism theory). Inspired by this new take on causality, I problematize the argument that archaeologists ‘follow’ materials. I begin by challenging the act of ‘following’ on two counts (causality and universalism), and then consider the work of Malafouris (2008a) – a thinker whose ideas have the potential to remediate this issue through his examination of the ‘in-between’ humans and matter. I argue that, despite offering an inspirational approach to mind–matter relationships, the dialectical relationship he evokes remains problematic from a Baradian perspective as it is still rooted in ‘following’. I suggest that Barad’s agential realism offers a valuable conceptual framework for researchers who are weary of ‘unilateral’ linear causality and keen to move beyond dialectical thinking (Barad 2007, 214).

Keywords: Causality; agential realism; phenomena; following; dialectics; New Materialisms

Introduction

Anthropologist Tim Ingold argues that humans ‘follow’ things; he contends that ‘knowing is a process of active following, of going along’ (2013, 1; see also Ingold 2007, 26). Quoting Deleuze and Guattari (2005), Ingold (2013, 25) notes that ‘matter-flow can only be followed’. This idea has seeped into and informed archaeological texts; Matt Edgeworth (2012, 91) writes, ‘Archaeologists follow cuts of features, affordances of materials and rhythms of artefacts’. Similarly, Christopher Witmore (2014, 205–6, 226) notes that material culture is the things archaeologists start with, and explains that archaeologists ‘follow this stuff wherever it may lead’. Also of note is the work of Mary Weismantel and Lynn Meskell (2014, 235), who propose ‘following’ as a method, arguing that ‘following the makers’ focus’ and following the material substance can aid archaeological interpretation (see also Kersel and Chesson *n.d.*).

When used as a preposition, ‘following’ means ‘coming after or as a result of’; when used as an adjective it means ‘next in time’ (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). Therefore a linear and progressive causal model is employed when we use the word. New Materialist thinker Karen Barad has offered a new conceptual approach to causality which contends that causes and effects emerge in phenomena rather than through ‘unilateral’ movements from causes to effects (Barad 2007, 214). Undeniably, the causal link between archaeologist and the material (‘we follow’) sustains a particular model. Thus, when using a Baradian approach to understanding the archaeological record, viewing archaeological methods and practices in terms of ‘following’ becomes problematic.

Post-Cartesian thinking

Barad’s agential realism theory rejects the idea that causes lead to effects; it also disputes the idea that causes are external forces (Barad 2007, 214; 2012). Thus ‘following’ is incongruous with an agential

realist framework. Of equal importance is the problem that ‘following’ articulates a universal human body with definite contours, and this is rooted in a Cartesian dualism that I am keen to move beyond (see Barad 2003; Govier 2016; 2017; 2019a; 2019b; Attala 2017; Attala and Steel 2019). A Baradian approach highlights that the analyst is entrenched in the ‘knowledge-getting’ processes (see Kolb 2015, 38) that inform the production of the event (Barad 2007, 48–49). Thus the act of ‘following’ is problematic as it creates a formal break between the archaeologist and the past, and also neutralizes their role in the formation of knowledge (on ‘representationalism’ see Barad 2007, 48–49; Anderson and Harrison 2012, 14–15, 19). From a Baradian perspective, archaeologists do not simply follow matter, nor is matter as clearly removed, separate or apart from archaeologists as implied by the act (see Barad 2003; 2007; DeLanda 2006; Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010).

‘In between’ or following

I propose that archaeologist Lambros Malafouris has the potential to remediate the issue of ‘following’ via his examination of the ‘in-between’ humans and matter (Malafouris 2008a). Malafouris challenges mind–body dualism through the neuroscientific analysis of material interactions (see Malafouris 2008a; 2008b; 2008c). Using the relationship formed between the potter and clay, he examines the ‘in between, rather than within, persons and things’ and describes this as the ‘brain–artefact interface’ (Malafouris 2008a, 20, 22). Malafouris (2013, 236) focuses on the hylonoetic (‘thinking through and with matter’), and presents the concept as an alternative to hylomorphism, a model which is often conceived as a process where the potential object is formed in the internal mind and then projected onto materials (Ingold 2013, 21). The problem with hylomorphism is that it is blatantly anthropocentric and, crucially, it is inaccurate to assume that humans categorically and consistently impose form onto ‘passive’ matter (see *ibid.*, 21; Malafouris 2014, 145). Equally, externalist approaches to the mind contend that we think through things, and not necessarily before making things, which leads to a causal issue. Put simply, hylomorphism suggests that the idea comes first and the making comes second (again, a linear causal relationship is envisaged) (on ‘hylomorphism’ see Malafouris 2014, 152).

Malafouris’s approach clearly addresses the hylomorphic predicament by adapting the causality of the emergence; for Malafouris, the focus is on the creative idea – an inseparable mind–matter moment – which he describes as ‘a dialectical formation in action’ (*ibid.*, 145). Thus the potter at the wheel touching clay is conceived as a ‘hylonoetic space’. Whilst Malafouris’s ideas problematize Cartesian binaries, and, in terms of ‘inseparability’, resonate with agential realism, intuitively I would not describe a Baradian phenomenon as a dialectic formation.

In archaeology, dialectics is often used informally to mean ‘inextricably intertwined, mutually constitutive, or simply interdependent’ (Marquardt 1992, 103); I believe that Malafouris envisages this type of relationship between mind and matter. Marquardt illustrates the complexity of the term, and how it ‘can be employed as a worldview, a method of inquiry, and a medium of exposition’ (*ibid.*, 102). In philosophy, whilst there are important nuances in the dialectics discourse, it is clear that Hegelian dialectics involves opposing sides, and a linear progression is achieved through dialogue (see Maybee 2016). Archaeologists Webmoor and Witmore (2008, 54, 57) highlighted the failings of such an approach, describing dialectics as ‘the impoverished logic of contradiction’, and arguing that characterizing the relationship between humans and things as dialectical ‘is to begin with a particular, asymmetrical bifurcation of the world’. By proposing tension between two interacting forces, dialectics (in the formal sense) tends to indicate a linear causal chronology. Additionally, a further issue with dialectics is that it is tied to ideas about progression (on ‘progressive momentum’ and dialectics see *ibid.*, 58). In response to this problem it is worth noting that Barad (2012, 50) offers a ‘diffractive’ methodology which entails looking for ‘the patterns of difference that make a difference’, and this analytical method resonates with broader anthropological and archaeological concerns regarding difference, multiperspectivism and cultural relativism.

Thus the archaeologist is always entrenched in the knowledge-getting process, and is embedded in the ‘chronoarchitecture’ of the archaeological event (Malafouris 2008a, 26). Malafouris clearly evidences mind-matter moments that challenge the binary implied through the act of ‘following’; however, the dialectical relationship he evokes remains problematic from a Baradian perspective. Dialectical thinking begins with the assumption that there are unique entities, and Barad (2003, 815) contests this point by arguing that things are ‘in-phenomena’. This incongruity suggests that Barad’s theory offers something different.

Matter–discourse–movement

Agential realism offers a conceptual framework that recognizes how discourses and material conditions inform the materialization of matter-action (phenomena) (Barad 2007, 34). A vital aspect of agential realism, and a key reason why it is bracketed within the New Materialisms turn, is that matter plays a crucial part in the process (Barad 2012, 170); therefore causality emerges from the intra-action of matter, discourse and movement (cf. Marshall and Alberti 2014, 26). If we think of the potter at the wheel, whilst making, the body moves and makes shapes and forms that correspond with the materials ‘in-phenomena’; the material’s properties and capacities also inform the making event and the agency that emerges from the enactment (Barad 2003, 827; Govier 2017). According to Barad (2003, 809, 822), the body as material ‘plays an active role in the workings of power’, and she contends that the regulatory practices in action are ‘fully implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity’. Crucially, there is no ‘a priori division between matter and meaning’ (Marshall and Alberti 2014, 22). For archaeologists, this means that the discourses that shape and inform our interpretations impact on the archaeological materials we analyse; equally, these materials are not passive, but similarly inform the emergence of the archaeological record (or phenomena). Barad (2012, 62; 2007, 175) highlights the act of measuring and how measuring produces ‘determinate boundaries’; therefore, by creating ‘cuts’ and observing ‘things’, the archaeologist is in-phenomena with the archaeological record. Thus archaeologists are ‘with’ – not ‘following’ – the material (see Ingold 2017a, 13; for further discussion of Barad’s theory see Marshall and Alberti 2014; Govier 2017; 2019a; 2019b).

Conclusion

Reflecting on the nuances between causal models can help us locate the type of analytical method we wish to employ when interpreting material events in the archaeological record. From a Baradian perspective, the analysis of phenomena entails the consideration of matter, discourse and movement; therefore, there is a dynamic between matter (the properties and capacities of the matter), discourse (the culture-specific movements of the doing), and action (the creative knowledge transmitted during the correspondence between matter) (cf. Marshall and Alberti 2014, 26). In recent publications, particularly in his work on ‘correspondence thinking’, Ingold (2017a, 41; see also 2017b) seems to move away from ‘following’ and towards ‘togethering’; I contend that this subtle change marks a notable shift in his thinking. In this paper, I have argued that Barad’s agential realism offers a new way of thinking about material engagement. The intention behind this provocation is not to diminish the rich data that can be achieved through following; rather, it is to problematize the act for those who subscribe to post-Cartesian thinking. I contend that Barad’s reconfiguration of causality is important for archaeologists. If, according to Barad, ontology is not predetermined but shapeshifts depending on the apparatus used to make the measurement, then the ‘ontological gap’ – that causal flow – is collapsed, and everything is in the ‘doing’ (see Marshall and Alberti 2014, 26). To end this article, I embrace the spirit of the provocateur and finish with a question that reads a little like a riddle: when it comes to archaeological

interpretation, do you ‘follow’ the material or are you ‘in-between’, and even if you are ‘in-between’ – are you still following?

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