In Medias Res: Andrew Benjamin’s Relational Ontology

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In his remarkable new book—or, rather, in one of his remarkable new books, for there are several of them—Andrew Benjamin presents a “relational ontology,” a picture he has been developing since his 1993 book The Plural Event. According to this picture, relations are more fundamental than the “singular entities” they constitute as “after-effects.” Singular entities include particular things and particular selves. Thus Benjamin doesn’t deny that there are singular entities, but he treats them as ontological offshoots of the “plural events”

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1 Andrew Benjamin, Towards a Relational Ontology: Philosophy’s Other Possibility (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015). Further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
4 “[P]articulars are only ever the after-effect of relations [...] any self is an after-effect of the network of relations in which it is located” (219).
that constitute them. Plural events are themselves relations that cannot be reduced to singular relata. Only retrospectively do the singular entities constituted by plural events appear to ground the relations that in fact ground them. This inverted image is something like a dialectical illusion in the Kantian sense.

Since nothing is more fundamental than relationality, nothing plays the role of an origin in the sense of a singular unconditioned condition. For this reason, Benjamin characterizes relationality as “anoriginal” (5). Anoriginal relationality is “ubiquitous” (17)—a formulation that echoes the title and argument of Dennis Schmidt’s *The Ubiquity of the Finite*.5 Like finitude, anoriginal relationality isn’t an abstract universal with multiple instantiations. Neither is it a predicament to which self-subsistent substances would be subject. On the contrary, it precludes the possibility of there being any freestanding abstract universals or self-subsistent substances. Any appearance that there are such things would once again have to be regarded as a dialectical illusion.

Because universality and particularity appear on the scene together, the dialectical illusion to which they give rise is two-sided rather than one-sided: that is, it has the character of a Kantian antinomy. Its two sides are Platonic idealism and Humean empiricism. For Plato, so-called abstract universals are the most concrete of entities—entities that somehow instantiate themselves in or as particulars. For Hume, there are no abstract universals, or “general” ideas. What purport to be such are only pale copies of particular impressions. Benjamin interrupts the dialectical “oscillation” between these two philosophical positions by revealing and critiquing their common premise, namely, that being is said primarily of something singular (10). He characterizes this shared premise as an underlying “set-up.” Against it he puts forth the counter-claim, or “counter-measure,” that nothing is prior to relationality.

Instead of resolving the antinomy between Platonism and empiricism (or, more precisely, between realism and nominalism), Benjamin displaces and condenses it. He *displaces* it from the oscillation between Platonic and empiricist theses to another type of oscillation between the sense in which relationality plays the role of an origin and the sense in which it doesn’t. He *condenses* it by shifting its locus from the level of explicitly opposed propositions to that of the implicitly opposed meanings of a single term, namely, “anoriginal.” This term is inherently antithetical because it doesn't just mean “not original.” Rather, it means something like “not original in the manner of a singular origin, but original in some other way.” Put otherwise, there is a difference between the negative judgment “Relationality is not original” and the