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Power, Possibility, and Agency:
Speculative Realism and Whitehead's Theory of Relations

Abstract:

At the turn of the twentieth century, the debate between supporters of internal and external relations showed how our assumptions on the nature of relations result in ontological, epistemic, and ethical commitments. In this debate, Alfred North Whitehead provided the most articulated and satisfying account through his "philosophy of the organism," which holds relations to be internal yet vectorial, without excluding completely external relations. Today, the debate has become once again topical and constitutes a core issue for speculative realism. This paper aims to show how the theory of external relations endorsed by some leading figures of speculative realism (Meillassoux, Harman, Bryant) does not suffice to preserve the *desiderata* it was designed for, and how a more serious consideration of Whitehead's theory would have beneficial effects on the ontological and ethical issues of this rejuvenated metaphysical discourse.

Keywords:

Whitehead, speculative realism, relations, Meillassoux, Object-Oriented Ontology

I. Introduction

Jean Wahl wrote almost a century ago that "the development of contemporary English and American philosophy is bound up with the development of the problem of the externality of relations."[1] Wahl is here talking about a landmark debate, prior to the split between continental and analytical philosophy, between supporters of internal and external relations. This debate is today once again topical, acting as a rift within the most important philosophical event of the last years: speculative realism. Starting from 2006, especially with the publication of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, the "speculative turn" has rejuvenated the metaphysical discourse in a way that seemed barely possible at the end of the last century.

Among the heroes of this movement, it is Whitehead who best marks the regained actuality of the debate. His monadic cosmology, the "philosophy of the organism," is arguably the most articulated and accomplished ontology of relations available on the metaphysical market. This paper will try to show how Whitehead's theory of relations offered the best response to the heterogeneous problems that originated in the classical debate, and how many needs of speculative realism would be adequately vindicated by giving it a more thorough consideration.

I shall begin by sketching the classical debate between internal and external relations, focusing on Bradley, Russell and James, and exposing Whitehead's response through his complex theory of relations. I shall then put this theory to the test of speculative realism, considering first Quentin Meillassoux's cosmology based on the *necessity of contingency*, to show how his endorsement of the Humean axiom of external relations, intended to leave room for freedom, actually deprives beings of their power. Whitehead's metaphysics of power, founded in a version of internal relations, leads instead to think of beings as autonomous and drenched with a capacity to produce effects. I will then consider Graham Harman and Levi Bryant's "Object-Oriented Ontology," that retrieves the axiom of exteriority for epistemic, metaphysical and ethical reasons. A comparison with Whitehead will show how, while the *desiderata* of keeping relations external are to be preserved, the faith in such an axiom is misplaced: Whitehead's view of relations as internal yet vectorial gives these *desiderata* a better service than the opposite view.

The comparison between Whitehead and speculative realism makes evident how our assumptions about the ontology of relations affect deeply our ethical aptitudes toward nature, people and society: as written by the early Richard Rorty, "a philosopher's views on internal relations are themselves internally related to all his other philosophical views."[2] We have no clear insight on ontology, epistemology and ethics without an efficient theory of relations. What are our reasons to believe in this world? What is our relevance, and what can we reasonably hope to attain in it? Only through a clarification of our relationship with the world can these questions hope for an answer.

II. Monism, Pluralism, and the Debate About Relations

Around the turn of the twentieth century, a certain uneasiness with Hegelian legacy lead to the birth of various philosophies waving the banner of "pluralism." There is no Spinozian substance nor Hegelian whole; there are only parts, and wholes result from their sum, without any loss of singularity. The debate about the nature of relations is possibly the main emblem of this tension. Are relations internal or external? The first view implies that not only are relations grounded in their terms, but also that a thing is so closely tied with all the other entities of the universe that it could barely exist without them. When pushed to radicality, this view leads to the

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1) Wahl, *The Pluralist Philosophies of England & America*, 289.
2) Rorty, "Relations, Internal and External," 126.

existence of a single substance that subsumes every individual. On the contrary, "If we recognize the theory of the externality of relations, then parts are not modified by entering into wholes."[3] Relations are added somehow only after individuality has been granted: ontology and ethics become immediately indiscernible in the debate about relations, since pluralism is above all a claim for the dignity of individual beings.

The source of the debate is mainly the English neo-Hegelian, Francis Herbert Bradley, whose aim in *Appearance and Reality* is to hunt down the contradictions of phenomenal experience to show how the world, ordinarily understood, is just an appearance. Under such a world lies reality, whose "absolute criterion" is that "Ultimate reality is such that it does not contradict itself."[4] Bradley's strategy is to systematically adopt a quasi-Humean skeptic approach to dispel the many contradictory aspects of experience, and then to appeal to an idealistic absolute as the matrix in which these appearances are pacificated. And yet, "The Reality itself is nothing at all apart from appearances."[5] The stuff of the absolute is sheer experience once purified from the errors of our common usage of concepts, and Reality is just the site where the conflicts of immediate experience are subsumed and harmonized.

Relations are among the first targets to be dispelled. Bradley adopts a Humean view of objects as composed by bundles of qualities. Relations are then either internal, but predicating them would be futile, a mere tautology; or they are external, but predication would be simply erroneous: "If the predicate makes no difference, it is idle; but, if it makes the subject other than it is, it is false."[6] This is the basis for Bradley's complex argumentation that leads him to affirm that every type of relation is contradictory, and therefore that "the Absolute is not, and cannot be thought as, any scheme of relations."[7] However, Bradley's severity is more starkly directed toward the assumption of relations and terms as independent from one another, a vision that will later be assumed by Russell:

> Let us abstain from making the relation an attribute of the related, and let us make it more or less independent. "There is a relation *C*, in which *A* and *B* stand; and it appears with both of them." But here again we have made no progress. The relation C has been admitted different from *A* and *B*, and no longer is predicated of them. Something, however, seems to be said of this relation *C*, and said again, of *A* and *B*. And this something is not to be the ascription of one to the other. If so, it would appear to be another relation *D*, in which *C*, on one side, and, on the other side, *A* and *B* stand. But such a makeshift leads at once to the infinite process.[8]

This "principle of fission," also known as "Bradley's regress" (a rejuvenated version of the *Third Man Argument* that Plato turns against his doctrine of Ideas in the *Parmenides*), asserts that "while we keep to our terms and relation as external, no introduction of a third factor could help us to anything better than an endless renewal of our failure."[9] If relations are external to their *relata*, what is the relation between relations and *relata*? Thus, as Leemon McHenry argues, we may discern in Bradley "a level of experience between the relational level and the supra-relational level (in other words, the Absolute) where all relations are internal… And indeed, for Bradley, relations do exist and, in some sense, qualify the Absolute, but in a distorted way; internal ones distorting it less

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3) Wahl, *The Pluralist Philosophies of England & America*, 260.

4) Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, 135.

5) Ibid., 551.

6) Ibid., 21.

7) Ibid., 195.

8) Ibid., 21.

9) Bradley, "Relations," 643.

than external ones."[10] Bradley's position on relations is in short a moderate anti-realism, more prone to admit internal than external ones to qualify the absolute.

Paralleling Moore's refutation of idealism, Bertrand Russell's attack on monism was the strongest reaction against neo-Hegelianism. Russell's analysis of Leibniz's theory of relations was meant to show how monism and internal relations are mutually implicated: every monad is internally related to all the others across the whole space and time; but how can Leibniz distinguish between monads then? Because of the identity of indiscernibles, a consequence of the interiority axiom, if a difference has to be genuine it should be grounded in some non-relational attribute of the terms; but if this difference in attributes cannot be external either, it should be grounded in another non-relational property, generating an infinite regress, so that a thorough cosmology based on internal relations can only end up in a Spinozian (or Bradleyan) monism, in which things are so strictly related that "only the whole truth is quite true";[11] but such a monism would be self-refuting, since "if no partial truth is quite true, it cannot be quite true that no partial truth is quite true."[12]

Russell's alternative is based on the axiom of external relations, according to which "(1) relatedness does not imply any corresponding complexity in the *relata*; (2) any given entity is a constituent of many different complexes."[13] This axiom has various functions in Russell's philosophy: it justifies analysis as a philosophical method, it grounds the possibility of mathematics, and it is explicative of realism since cognitive relations are external. But Russell has also a more radical ontological use for the exteriority axiom that results in what Federico Perelda calls an "ontological externalism," based on an "absolute atomism of the terms"[14] in which the relation is numerically different from its *relata*: "We could distinguish in the world a stuff … and a structure. The stuff would consist of all the simples denoted by names, while the structure would depend on relations and qualities for which our minimum vocabulary would have words."[15] But Russell is thus incapable of responding to Bradley's fission: how are stuff and structure related if relations themselves are part of the structure? Russell could never find a satisfactory answer. It seems, in fact, that at least a certain degree of interiority is necessary to make possible the existence of relations themselves.

A more genuinely experiential account of relations is provided by William James, whose argumentative superficiality was often balanced by a deepness in intuitions. He held two complementary theories about relations, a phenomenological theory which is the core of his "radical empiricism," and a metaphysical one, that grounds his "pluralistic universe." Radical empiricism is for James amply different from classical empiricism *à la* Hume:

> To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude any element that is directly experienced. *For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system*.[16]

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10) McHenry, "Bradley, James, and Whitehead on Relations," 152–53.

11) Russell, "The Monistic Theory of Truth," 152.

12) Ibid.

13) Russell, "The Basis of Realism," 158.

14) Perelda, *The Controversy About Relations in Russell's Philosophy*, 6.

15) Russell, *Human Knowledge*, 275–76.

16) James, *Writings 1902–1910*, 1160.

Whereas classical empiricism "has always shown a tendency to do away with the connections of things, and to insist most on the disjunctions,"[17] radical empiricism "*does full justice to conjunctive relations.*"[18] Against both internalism and externalism, James appeals to the "legitimacy of the notion of *some*: each part of the world is in some ways connected, in some other ways not connected with its other parts."[19] Both internal (conjunctive) and external (disjunctive) relations are required in order to account for continuity and discontinuity in experience.

As James' discourse goes ontological, however, he seems to give more and more importance to external relations. His "pluralistic universe," which treats "the whole as a collection and the universal as an abstraction,"[20] aims at preserving the role of individuals even when they are subsumed in larger wholes, asking for instance whether "a visual sensation of our own exists in any sense *less for itself* or *less distinctly*, when it enters into our higher relational consciousness and is there distinguished and defined."[21] Drawing on Fechner, he outlines an anti-holistic compound metaphysics with larger and larger individuals, up to the "world soul" and to a finite God, that foreruns Manuel DeLanda's "flat ontology," based on external relations. Notwithstanding his endorsement of conjunctive relations, James concludes that "Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism … means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related*."[22] Jean Wahl is thus correct in writing that "Pluralism, realism, the pragmatist theory of knowledge, the theory of possibility, the theory of time, all these different conceptions of William James are aspects of this affirmation of the externality of relations,"[23] and that such a theory when thoroughly endorsed is unable to account for the fundamental togetherness of the world, if not through the *ad hoc* postulation of a *de jure* continuum which backs the *de facto* pluralism.[24]

III.   Whitehead's Relational Monadology

Summarizing, Bradley tries to dissolve relations ending up in a transcendent absolute in which internal relations are the lesser evil. Russell holds relations to be external but is unable to resolve the problems raised by this thesis. James accepts both kinds of relations, gaining in explicative power but without providing a metaphysical background adequate to this moderate position.

Whitehead agrees with James' radical empiricism that "Evidently the relations holding between natural entities are themselves natural entities"[25] and must be accounted for. Also, like James, he appeals to the "legitimacy of the notion of *some*," since he is strongly convinced that "all points of view, reasonably coherent and in some sense with an application, have something to contribute to our understanding of the universe."[26] However, whereas James' pluralism leads him to give more relevance to external relations, Whitehead accentuates the internal ones, both in his early philosophical work (the "*1920 books*"[27]) and in his mature "philosophy of the

17) Ibid.

18) Ibid., 1161.

19) Ibid., 666.

20) Ibid., 1160.

21) Ibid., 708.

22) Ibid., 776.

23) Wahl, *The Pluralist Philosophies of England & America,* 144.

24) Ibid., 298.

25) Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 13–14.

26) Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 52.

27) See Whitehead, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, 64; Whitehead, *The Principle of Relativity*, chapter 2. Whitehead initially divided world into *events*, defined by their own relations, and *objects*, relatively independent from their rela-

organism," on which I shall focus. But there are three *desiderata* of the exteriority axiom that Whitehead wishes to preserve. First, a certain independence of individuals with respect to the whole: we shall preserve some room for individual agency. Second, the possibility of novelty: creativity is Whitehead's ultimate, and it cannot be attained if the subject cannot establish new relations without being destroyed. Finally, he is sensible to Russell's epistemological issue: if relations are internal, everything is linked, and we do not have any knowledge of a part if we do not know the whole. This tangle of demands explains why Whitehead is still today the landmark of the debates about relations.

Whitehead's cosmology, elaborated to its fullest in *Process and Reality*,[28] may be seen as an up-to-date version of Leibniz's monadology. It is a "relational monadology," springing from a reading of Leibniz influenced by Russell's but resulting in an opposite evaluation.[29] Leibniz seemed to hold two opposite views about relations. First, he famously claimed that "Monads have no windows":[30] they do not have causal connections with one another and have hence absolutely external relations. But at the same time each monad "has relationships which express all the others … it is therefore a perpetual living mirror of the universe":[31] a monad is identical to this expression, and thereby its relation to the world is absolutely internal. "Preestablished harmony" was Leibniz's way of making consistent these claims: Leibnizian God is the impossible identity of internal and external relations.

Whitehead is not satisfied with this account. He maintains that the aim of philosophy is to operate "a shift of meaning which converts the opposition into a contrast" (PR, 348). The philosophy of the organism is an attempt to transform the Leibnizian opposition between internal and external relations in a patterned contrast: both kinds of relation are required, but in different degrees.

Whitehead advocates a bold panpsychism in which every individual entity can be said to have *experiences*, even if not consciousness. "Actual entities," his expression for the monads, are identical to their windows. That means, they are defined by their "prehensions" of the other actual entities, by how they experience them: "Actual entities involve each other by reason of their prehensions of each other" (PR, 20); "Each monadic creature is a mode of the process of 'feeling' the world, of housing the world in one unit of complex feeling" (PR, 80). His "principle of relativity" holds that "every item of the universe, including all the other actual entities, is a constituent in the constitution of any one actual entity" (PR, 148). The entities are intertwined so that their relations must be internal. To Whitehead, reality is identical to the *process*, the becoming of the *togetherness* of actual entities. Such process is defined as "a complex of activity with internal relations between its various factors."[32]

Still, Whitehead holds that "the ultimate metaphysical truth is atomism" (PR, 35). His monadological commitment entails some exteriority of relations. "The proper balance between atomism and continuity," or between exteriority and interiority, "is of importance to physical science" (PR, 35): the same goes for philosophy. Whitehead's theory does not exclude external relations, but demands thinking them as an aspect of internal relations (PR, 309): that means, *rather than accepting as ready-made the individuality of entities, we must account for it in terms of the mutual relationships between entities*.

One more difference between Whitehead and Leibniz is in fact that, while the latter sees monads as eternal developing substances, the former is a philosopher of *individuation*. Whitehead's criterion for individuality is

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tions. But the "cogitation" of the objects is a refining abstraction from the "awareness" of events: the concrete world of becoming is characterized by internal relations, whereas external relations result from human abstraction.

28) Whitehead, *Process and Reality*. Hereafter parenthetically cited in text as PR along with page number(s).

29) See Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 193–94.

30) Leibniz, *Monadology*. In *Philosophical Texts*, 268.

31) Ibid., 275.

32) Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 145.

a certain unity or coherence in the *telos* of the becoming of the entity. Each entity prehends other entities as *data*, or "feelings," which are then elaborated and organized in a way conformal to the "subjective aim" of the entity, the participation of the feelings in a single subjective form. This is the "concrescence," a concept that allows Whitehead to think what Gilbert Simondon called "individuation" without starting from a reality completely prior to any individuality. *Individuality is defined by the way an entity feels the rest of the universe*. Then, rather than on internal relations, Whitehead's cosmology in grounded on an *interiorization* of relations: concrescence is identical to the prehensive interiorization of the other actual entities. This is what Whitehead means by saying that all relations are *vectorial*. Alberto Toscano thus writes that "The prehensile, vectorial movement from world to subject … is thus revealed as an internalization, one that nevertheless does not exclude external relations."[33] Whitehead's whole process metaphysics is an effort to harmonize the contrast between interiority and exteriority, universe and individual.

IV. Law and Possibility: Whitehead vs. Meillassoux

Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* marked the birth of speculative realism as a self-conscious movement.[34] Meillassoux's ambition is the overcoming of *correlationism*, "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (AF, 5). He concedes to correlationism that there is probably no absolute being outside of our correlation to it: to move *au delà* of correlationism demands then the discovery of "*an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entity*" (AF, 34). Meillassoux's confrontation with "strong" correlationism, which holds the correlation itself to be contingent, leads him to affirm that such necessity cannot be other than the "necessity of contingency": both beings and invariants of the world are merely *factual* – they are *de facto* in a certain way, but there is no reason why *de jure* they could not be otherwise. Thus "facticity pushes the critique of the principle of sufficient reason to its ultimate extreme" (AF, 40): Meillassoux's opposition to the principle of reason is found in a principle of "un-reason" [*irraison*] (AF 41), the absence of any foundation, that Meillassoux considers "an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge" (AF, 53). He is convinced that "this absence of reason *is*, and can *only* be the *ultimate* property of the entity. We must convert facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world *is* without reason, and is thereby *capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason*" (AF, 53). Meillassoux claims that this is the demonstration of "*the absolute necessity of everything's non-necessity*": that is, the "absolute necessity of the contingency of everything" (AF, 62). Meillassoux's world is a "hyper-Chaos" (AF, 64), a pure *virtuality* that allows the irruption *ex nihilo* of something formerly inconceivable.[35] Contingency is something that creates its own possibilities. He goes as far as to say, against believers (according to which God necessarily exists) and atheists (for whom God necessarily does not exist), that *God is possible*: God probably does not exist *yet*, but he could – rigorously without any reason – come to exist in every moment.[36]

Meillassoux does not address directly the question of relations. Nevertheless, his project consists in an "ontologization of Hume's epistemology."[37] He holds that denying the principle of reason entails the "contingency of the laws of nature" (AF, 83). Hume's famous thesis is that laws consist in mere observed *regulari-*

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33) Toscano, *The Theatre of Production*, 74–5.

34) Meillassoux, *After Finitude*. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as AF with page numbers.

35) Meillassoux, "Potentiality and Virtuality."

36) Meillassoux, "Deuil à venir, Dieu à venir," 105–115.

37) Johnston, "Hume's Revenge: À Dieu, Meillassoux?" 95.

ties, a projection of our habits upon the world: "there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion, which is conceivable by us. All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined*, but never *connected*."[38] This reflects what Whitehead calls the "positivist" image of law, holding that a law of nature is "an observed persistence of pattern in the observed succession of natural things: Law is then merely Description."[39] Hume is by right the "leader" of positivism,[40] and Meillassoux himself endorses this positivist principle arguing that the supposed invariants of the world "can only be described, not founded" (AF 39).

But the positivist image results from the historical evolution of a metaphysical image of law as a *transcendent imposition*, that sees laws as imposed behavior patterns. This is the classical Newtonian view, prevailing even today: Whitehead's organic realism is designed to oppose such "scientific materialism" in which matter "just does what it does do, following a fixed routine imposed by external relations which do not spring from the nature of its being."[41] Brian Ellis has shown how Hume is nothing more than the secularized outcome of this "passivism" whose world is made by powerless beings animated by an extrinsic force coming from God.[42] This means that "you cannot discover the natures of the *relata* by any study of the Laws of their relations. Nor, conversely, can you discover the laws by inspection of their natures."[43] Things are disjoined from one another. The images of law as transcendent and as mere description are founded upon the axiom of the exteriority of relations. I shall highlight the difference between Whitehead and Meillassoux about the theory of relations through their respective treatment of the laws of nature, showing how our assumptions about relations are strictly tied to ethical and practical ones.

Whitehead holds that laws are *immanent*: "The laws of nature are the outcome of the characters of the entities which we find in nature … and conversely the entities follow from the laws."[44] There are not two separated domains, the realm of beings and that of laws or relations; rather, entities and laws share a "mutual immanence." This is how Whitehead explains laws of nature according to this image: "Some partial identity of pattern in the various characters of natural things issues in some partial identity of pattern in the mutual relations of those things… A Law is explanatory of some community in character pervading the things which constitute Nature."[45] Whitehead underlines that

> The doctrine of Immanent Law is untenable unless we can construct a plausible metaphysical doctrine according to which the characters of the relevant things in nature are the outcome of their interconnections, and their interconnections are the outcome of their characters. This involves some doctrine of Internal Relations.[46]

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38) Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 54.

39) Whitehead, *Adventures of ideas*, 115.

40) Ibid., 125.

41) Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 22.

42) Ellis, *The Philosophy of Nature. A Guide to New Essentialism*.

43) Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 113.

44) Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 141.

45) Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 112.

46) Ibid., 113.

External relations exile powers out of this world; internal relations bring them back. We could define law, according to the immanent image, as *the expression of the powers of entities within their environment*. Whitehead's is a "metaphysics of power."[47] Not only does he subscribe Plato's definition of being in the *Sophist* as *dynamis*, capacity to produce effects. He also retrieves Locke's treatment of power as a great part of our idea of things. Power according to Locke is twofold: he distinguishes an "active power," the capacity to produce an effect, and a "passive power," the capacity to receive it.[48] Whitehead reinterprets active power as the power of an entity to affect another, and passive power as the capacity to prehend other entities. The definition of an actual entity is almost exhausted by the sum of its active and passive power (PR, 23). Concrescence is just the process of an entity's power to prehend the others, while "satisfaction" is the attainment of the completeness that permits it to become an "object" for the concrescence of the following entities. Whitehead's ontology is a Platonic-pragmatic "doctrine of the definition of things in terms of their modes of functioning."[49] The exclusion of internal relations results in the error of "vacuum actuality," the idea that there are inert beings animated only extrinsically, while the affirmation of law as immanent is parallel to the refutation of this vacuum actuality.[50] Far from being imposed from above to inert beings, law is the outcome of the powers of the entities themselves.

This means that "The entities being what they are, the laws must be what they are."[51] Laws can be contingent and change without their terms changing only if they are external.[52] Meillassoux is thus the extreme outcome of the traditional passivist view that deprives beings of any power, animating them from outside. His reasons for advocating contingency and external relations are also ethical ones: they prevent the future from being determined, leaving room for unpredictable radical changes and individual agency. He seems to assume that chaos is the only alternative to the principle of sufficient reason. Sufficient reason may be seen as inconsistent with a free course of human praxis; but it must be noted that chaos makes it simply impossible. Practical freedom means control over action, and chaos is insubordinate to laws but also to human activity. Humans always act in given conditions, and it is futile to delegate our freedom to a savage causality. Peter Hallward thus argues that Meillassoux's work may be seen as "a symptom of impatience with a more modest but also more robust conception of social and political change – not that we might abruptly be other than we are, but that we might engage with the processes whereby we have become what we are, and thus begin to become otherwise."[53] This is consistent with Whitehead's view that "inter-actions within society modify the social laws by modifying the occasions to which these laws apply."[54] *Laws cannot be contingent because they are grounded in us*. This engenders the need for different notions of possibility and freedom.

Whitehead offers both. Every actual entity is given "appetition," described as a "principle of unrest, involving realization of what is not and may be" (PR, 32). Also, they are given a capacity of "decision": while the "physical" data of an entity are determined by the other entities of the universe, temporal atomicity leaves room that is up to the entity to fill with its differential decision between a multiplicity of sheer possibilities ("eternal objects"), that colorize the physical data through a free "conceptual" prehension. At the basic levels

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47) Basile, *Whitehead's Metaphysics of Power. Reconstructing Modern Philosophy*.

48) Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, book II, chapter XXI.

49) Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 42.

50) Basile, *Whitehead's Metaphysics of Power*, 93.

51) Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature*, 141.

52) The contingency of laws is in fact advocated by philosophers who consider law as transcendent: see Armstrong, *What Is a Law of Nature?*

53) Hallward, "Anything is Possible: A Reading of Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*," 141.

54) Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, 42.

of the universe, this is no conscious decision: "An actual entity arises from decision *for* it, and by its very existence provides decisions *for* other actual entities which supersede it" (PR, 43). But entities whose development reaches the point where consciousness emerges gain an additional advantage: they assume *control* over their own concrescence. This is where an *ideal* can enter the process: controlling means directing the process toward an ideal. Whitehead holds that "Morality consists in the control of process so as to maximize importance,"[55] where importance indicates the pregnancy of an event of something that has a value for the whole universe. Such control requires possibility but is at odds with radical contingency. Immanent laws do in fact change over time, but they undergo a slow evolution guided by ideal, not the Messianic break hoped by Meillassoux.

Possibilities to change the world are to be pursued within the world itself, not out of it. This is the lesson of the "ontological principle," according to which "actual entities are the only *reasons*" (PR, 24). The ontological principle is a *via media* between Meillassoux's *irraison* and the principle of reason: entities are reasons, but unlike Leibniz's monads they are not *sufficient*. They are completed by ideals to be realized. This shows Whitehead's ability to navigate between extreme positions in order to preserve what is important of both. He dodges Meillassoux's Humean exteriority of relations, therefore conceiving world as made of Platonic powers; but he also refuses the sheer determinism of Spinoza or Leibniz. There are voids in the world to be filled, but we never act in a void. Whitehead's is a "culture of interstices";[56] his cosmology is not about the necessity of contingency, nor about necessity *tout court*: it is a cosmology of the *necessity of possibility*.

V. Acting in a Void? Whitehead and Object-Oriented Ontology

After Whitehead, the debate on relations undergoes a twisted faith. Jean Wahl transports it to France, making of the exteriority axiom an equivalent to pluralism, pragmatism and empiricism and a banner against every Hegelian attempt to totalize the world.[57] Gilles Deleuze, who considered Wahl the most important French philosopher after Sartre,[58] endorses Russell's ontological externalism in order to vindicate Anglo-Saxon pluralism: "relation is always third, being necessarily external to its terms."[59] Deleuze represents the tipping point for the reprise of the debate, being one of the main heroes of speculative realism: Manuel DeLanda uses external relations as a device to affirm his "flat ontology," an ontology "made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatiotemporal scale but not in ontological status."[60] It is from DeLanda that "Object-Oriented Ontology" (OOO), or (in Bryant's version) *onticology* draws the exteriority of relations as a fundamental principle. I will consider two of the main representatives of OOO, Graham Harman and Levi Bryant, in order to show how Whitehead's theory of relations offers adequate solutions to the problems that the exteriority axiom was meant to solve.

Harman's basic assumption is that "objects exist in utter isolation from all others, packed into secluded private vacuums."[61] This comes from a generalization of Heidegger's analysis of tools in *Being and Time*, and especially of his concept of *Zuhandenheit*, that results in an essentially *withdrawn* world: "Object-oriented

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55) Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, 13–14.

56) Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead. A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, 328.

57) Wahl, *The Pluralist Philosophies of England & America*.

58) Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 58.

59) Deleuze, *Cinema 1. The Movement Image*, 197.

60) DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, 47.

61) Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 1.

philosophy has a single basic tenet: the withdrawal of objects from all perceptual and causal relations."[62] An object is never exhausted by its actual relations; it never comes fully to presence. Harman explicitly agrees "with those who accept nothing but external relations. Nothing is allowed to contain anything else; all objects are mutually external to other objects."[63] Harman in fact draws "an absolute distinction between substances and relations"[64]: his externalism is even more radical than Russell's, since he claims that "every relation must be regarded as a substance in its own right."[65]

In *The Democracy of Objects*,[66] Levi Bryant follows Harman in defining his *onticology* as a flat mereological metaphysics based on the assumption that "there is only one type of being: objects" (DO, 20). He too holds that "relations cannot ontologically be *internal* to their terms or the objects that they relate. In other words, objects are not *constituted* by their relations to the rest of the world" (DO, 68). He is careful in distinguishing "endo-relations," that constitute the structure of the object, and "exo-relations" it enters with other objects (DO, 68). Bryant endorses Harman's withdrawal since "objects are always in *excess* of any of their local manifestations, harboring hidden volcanic powers irreducible to any of their manifestations in the world" (DO, 70), and he follows Deleuze in naming "*virtual proper being*" the substantial withdrawn dimension of the object (DO, 69).

Both Harman and Bryant seem convinced that the concept of object itself is dependent upon the assumption that relations are external, while internal relations inevitably reduce objects to something more fundamental: to a primordial continuum, to their pieces, to their appearance to human consciousness, or to their relations themselves.[67] Harman even assumes that the basic rift among realists is between "those who take individual entities as primary and those who view them as derivative."[68] They directly criticize Whitehead's "relationism," for three main reasons. The first is that "relationism does injustice to the *present* of an actor, by not allowing it to be real outside the alliances that articulate it."[69] OOO's great challenge seems then to consist in explaining what is real of an object outside of its relations. *What is withdrawn in the object?* While Harman, appealing to Xavier Zubiri's concept of *notes*, is never able to answer satisfactorily this question, one reason for Bryant's superiority here is that he follows Deleuze, thus giving a name to what in the object is withdrawn: *power*.

> My thesis is that the substantiality of objects is not a bare substratum, but rather an absolutely individual system or organization of *powers*. Powers are the capacities of an object or what it can *do*. The powers of an object are never something that is *directly* manifested in the world. And if this is so, then this is because the qualities of an object are only ever *local manifestations* of the object's power. (DO, 89)

This ontology of virtual powers seems however at odds with Bryant's assumption of the exteriority axiom. He assumes that powers inhere only to the internal structure of the object, and that objects must then be prior to

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62) Ibid., 20

63) Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 135.

64) Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 2.

65) Ibid., 94.

66) Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*. Hereafter referred to as DO parenthetically in text along with page numbers. In his later work, while distancing himself from OOO in favor of a "machine-oriented ontology," his ontology of relations remains basically the same: see Bryant, *Onto-Cartography*.

67) Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 187.

68) Harman, "Response to Shaviro," 294.

69) Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 129.

their relations, since "in order for objects to be acted upon in a relation it is necessary that the object possess affects rendering it capable of being acted upon."[70] But powers have been properly defined by George Molnar as "physical intentionalities."[71] A capacity to produce effects is a capacity to produce effects *on something*. We may say that this something is analytically included in the concept of power. The same goes for Lockean passive powers: being acted upon means being acted upon by something. There are no powers in the void: powers are virtual potentialities for relations *with other beings*. The virtual should be itself relational.[72] Bryant even recurs to an analogy with Spinoza's concept of affect, "the affections of the body by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked."[73] But this concept is dependent upon Spinoza's assumption that beings limit each other's power: his bold monism entails a theory of radical interiority according to which only substance, being considered as a whole, "is in itself and is conceived through itself," that is it "does not require the conception of another thing from which it has to be formed."[74] Only if things are internally related can they affect each other and be defined by this affects. On the contrary Hume, championing exteriority, affirms that "we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning."[75] It is unlikely that one can consistently maintain both powers and exteriority as Bryant hopes to do. This is why we are brought back to Whitehead and his tempered version of the interiority axiom.

Harman's second critique to Whitehead is that "relationism does injustice to the *future* of an actor, by not explaining how it can change."[76] Bryant too is convinced that "Were objects constituted by their exo-relations … the being would be frozen and nothing would be capable of movement or change. It is only where relations are external to objects that such change can be thought" (DO, 68). They both assume that one can account for change only assuming an Aristotelian dualism between substance and accident: "The concept of substance was developed to respond to the problem of the identity of objects as they change through time… It is not the substance that changes, but rather the qualities *of* a substance that change."[77] Thus "relations are not simply 'there', but must be *made*. Insofar as relations must be made, it follows that objects must *act* to form these relations."[78]

Whitehead's whole cosmology results from the refutation of Aristotelian substantiality. He sees correctly how the Platonic-Lockean priority accorded to power disqualifies substance meant as inert *substratum*: "The notion of 'vacuous actuality' is very closely allied to the notion of 'inherence of quality in substance'" (PR, 29). Harman and Bryant's notion of substance is simply inconsistent with an ontology of power. Whitehead holds that "In the philosophy of organism it is not 'substance' which is permanent, but 'form'" (PR, 29): actual entities "perish" as soon as they reach satisfaction, becoming data for the following entities, and only "societies," the massive organizations they form (electrons, rocks, living beings, nations) perdure. This is what makes the interiority axiom consistent with the manifest identity of the objects we commonly experience. We just cannot see the teeming chaos which grounds this persistence at the lowest levels of being.

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70) Bryant, "The Ontic Principle," 274.

71) Molnar, *Powers*.

72) Bryant himself implicitly acknowledges this criticizing Deleuze's virtual continuum: virtuality for Bryant must be itself individual (DO, 30). While Deleuze held relations to be external, his virtual ontology of power (that was greatly influenced by Whitehead: see Prewitt-Davis, "The Charge of Resistance: The Influence of Whitehead on Deleuze's Concept of Power.") seems to demand for a different theory of relations that he never developed.

73) Spinoza, *Ethics*, 278.

74) Ibid., 217.

75) Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 54.

76) Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 129.

77) Bryant, "The Ontic Principle," 271.

78) Ibid., 274.

Harman and Bryant fail to see the dynamical nature of relations. For Whitehead, relations are *vectorial*. His "organic realism" results from "the displacement of the notion of static stuff by the notion of fluent energy" (PR, 309), and in his relational cosmology the evidence of change needs no explanation, since vectors are just a mathematical translation of the metaphysics of becoming:

> Mathematical physics translates the saying of Heraclitus, "All things flow," into its own language. It then becomes, All things are vectors. Mathematical physics also accepts the atomistic doctrine of Democritus. It translates it into the phrase, All flow of energy obeys "quantum" conditions. But what has vanished from the field of ultimate scientific conceptions is the notion of vacuous material existence with passive endurance, with primary individual attributes, and with accidental adventures. (PR, 309)

Aristotelian matter as ontological ultimate is substituted by *creativity*, "the principle of *novelty*," "the advance from disjunction to conjunction, creating a novel entity other than the entities given in disjunction" (PR, 21). The active powers of entities interact to create ever-new entities. This is how "The many become one, and are increased by one" (PR, 21). For Whitehead in fact the difference between relations and terms is a difference *in degree*. A relation or prehension "might have been a complete actuality; but, by reason of a certain incomplete partiality, a prehension in only a subordinate element in an actual entity" (PR, 19). A complete entity is distinguished only by "the subjective aim at further integration. … In other words, final causation and atomism are interconnected philosophical principles" (PR, 19). There is individuality where there is unified and coherent *telos*. The concept of "subject," counterpart to the Aristotelian matter as substratum, must be completed by that of *superject*, whose individuality emerges only *at the end* of concrescence. Entities are not a mere substratum for feelings: "the superject which is their outcome is also the subject which is operative in their production. They are the creation of their own creature" (PR, 255). A certain degree of subjective form emerges from the interaction of the active powers of existing entities; this form begins then to develop and enrich itself through the data furnished by the rest of the universe, in such a way that, while feelings or prehensions are defined by the passive power or subjective form, this form acquires reality and is filled only through the active powers of the other entities. Creativity is the form of the process itself, and "The freedom inherent in the universe is constituted by this element of self-causation" (PR, 88). Harman and Bryant's accusation that Whitehead fails in accounting for becoming is just a projection of their substantial view of the world.

There is a final critique of OOO against Whitehead's relationism. As Harman puts it, while he had the merit of freeing speculation from the human privilege typical of post-Kantian philosophy, "the real beneficiary of Whitehead's *coup d'état* against transcendental philosophy is not the objects – it is the *empire* of objects, the network that binds them together as mutually prehending actual entities… The great paradox is that Whitehead begins with the integrity of individual objects but ends up devouring them all in a total system of relations,"[79] whereas for Harman "being is not only an *empire*: it has local governments as well."[80] Bryant's attack is more general but more radical, highlighting the practical consequences of a theory of relations, since only exteriority preserves autonomy:

> The strange mereology of onticology and object-oriented philosophy where objects can be nested in other objects while nonetheless remaining independent or autonomous of those objects within

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79) Harman, *Tool-Being*, 233.
80) Ibid., 280.

which they are nested … destroys organic conceptions of both society and the universe, where all substances are thought of as parts of an organic whole. (DO, 152)

Bryant argues that structuralist theories of agency in which relations are internal and structure is necessary simply leave no room for agency: "Insofar as the relations constituting structure are themselves internal relations … it follows that there can be no external point of purchase from which structure could be transformed" (DO, 209). He rather opts for Luhmann and Badiou's mereological ontology of society, according to which "any social structure is contingent in the precise sense that relations among elements can be otherwise" (DO, 212). We are almost brought back to Meillassoux's necessity of contingency. Bryant goes as far as to say that a relationist "is either a fascist or a totalitarian" (DO, 277), since in his theory

> The being of the part is completely effaced, such that the part becomes merely a functional element providing perturbations that the Whole can draw on in producing information in its own ongoing autopoiesis. Objects themselves therefore have no autonomy apart from the Whole and simply are what they are as elements of the Whole. (DO 277)

The *desideratum* of agency is surely to be maintained – but a consistent realist view, for which "questions of ontology must precede questions of epistemology" (DO, 18), should not fall in the anti-realist bias of drawing its ontology of relations on how one would like society to be. The risks of Bryant's practical philosophy are ideology and inefficacy: a theory of praxis based on an erroneous conception of the world cannot hope to have any relevant success. A thorough realist should rather construct a coherent system of the world and then determine what are the possibilities for agency in such a world.

Spinoza gives maybe the greatest example in this direction. According to his definition, a "thing is said to be free which exists solely from the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone."[81] Because of his radical monism, then, "God alone is a free cause."[82] His *Ethics* is nevertheless an attempt to design a mode of conduct that accounts for human agency and makes it compatible with his necessitarism. Humans are condemned to a slavery of passions if they hope to find freedom in some *arbitrium indifferentiae* (or, we may add, in external relations); but they can, through a slow *apprentissage*, learn how to make their actions expressive of their own nature, becoming "adequate causes" and gaining degrees of activity:

> I call that an adequate cause whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through the said cause … we are active when something takes place, in us or externally to us, of which we are the adequate cause; that is, when from our nature there follows in us or externally to us something which can be clearly and distinctly understood through our nature alone.[83]

Whitehead is by far more confident in individuals than Spinoza. His articulated theory of relations allows him to go as far as to say that actual entities "satisfy Spinoza's definition of substance, that it is *causa sui*" (PR, 88), while also reminding that we never exist apart from this world. It is a famous Marxian claim that humans make history, but in given conditions. The world offers us possibilities, but it is foolish and unproductive to search for them where there are not any. Bryant's impatience with internal relations makes him fall back into

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81) Spinoza, *Ethics*, 217.

82) Ibid., 228.

83) Ibid., 278.

Hallward's critique of Meillassoux. Holding relations to be external just makes us forget of how difficult social change can be; hoping for different theories to facilitate the enterprise is just idle. The assumption that everything in the world affects everything else may be an "ontological paranoia,"[84] but keeping beings external and structure contingent is an unproductive ontological delirium. We shall not be fascinated by the claim that "the world doesn't exist" (DO, 246): only if we are part of the world, only if relations are internal we have *powers*, and we can gain some capacity to affect and control the process. Only if we believe in this world can we hope for our actions to be effective and for social change to be robust.

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84) Harman, *Tool-Being*, 261.

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