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Immovable Presumptions as Philosophical Limit

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The essay collection *Relations: Ontology and the Philosophy of Religion* is fascinating and curious. As a contribution to ongoing issues in contemporary ontology, philosophy of religion, and the history of philosophy. There are many things to praise about its different essays and all of the authors. All of them are valuable additions to their discourses.

However, I'm reviewing the book from a peculiar position. My own philosophical work includes a great deal of thinking on the ontology of relations, so I began the book thinking that I'd have much in common with the authors. Yet I found myself at times alienated from the discussion.

Sometimes, it will be an issue of method. For example, some essays discussed the ontology of relations in linguistic terms. A central example here would be something like 'John is far away from Justin,' analyzed as if there were some simple property or object in common between John and Justin called 'far away.'

I know this approach because it's the same as that of the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy's first generation. But my tradition of ontology focusses on material assemblages of forces and substances. Simple descriptions of relations like 'far away' or 'larger than' do not stand for actually simple relations, but complicated physical assemblages.

I experienced similar moments throughout the book, where contributors and I would seem to share a common subject, but without much common ground. It's difficult to know whether the different discourse communities of our academic sub-disciplines are so separate because of institutional pressures, or because we all discuss truly different concerns. So the following reflections will engage with the book meta-philosophically, to discover ways that essays in one fairly restricted subject matter can produce insights and questions that matter to us all.

### **On What Ground Should We Trust Our Presumptions?**

I may not be a specialist in the precise areas of all the experts that the book's editors, Daniele Bertini and Damiano Migliorini, assembled to contribute to this volume. But I am still a philosopher, and so can identify mistakes, errors, or other problems someone makes in their inferences. Specifically for the following case, I can identify, among many of the essays collected in a volume, any common presumptions, and examine whether we should take for granted what a particular writer does.

The best example of this in the *Relations* volume is Mario Micheletti's "Radical Alterity and the God-World Relationship." One of the major points of his argument is to lay out what limits are present among different explanations for the existence of the universe. He argues that an atheist's range of such explanations is more limited than those that a believer in God can hold. This is because an atheist cannot accept the contingency of the universe, since its contingency would make its nature depend on an external clause. Micheletti writes:

“The atheist can . . . claim that while the universe has an explanation of its existence, the explanation lies not in an external ground, but in the necessity of its own nature. This is however, an extremely bold suggestion which, Craig notes, atheists have not been eager to embrace. For we have a strong intuition of the universe’s contingency, and we generally trust our modal intuitions.”

Yet there is no reason why we should trust our modal intuitions, our at-first-glance presumptions about the contingency and necessity of existence as a whole, as well as particular events and states of affairs. Micheletti presumes that the universe, without the external contingency of God’s will, would unfold with an immanent total necessity. But there is no reason why the immanent nature of the universe need be necessary; the only necessity immanent to the universe may be its own radical contingency.

After all, what makes sense to Micheletti to presume about the nature of the universe does not make sense to me. Since these are intuitions, there is no ground to establish whether he or I are correct. As intuitions, they provide the starting points for our arguments, but are rarely themselves interrogated. When they are interrogated, as in the philosophical surveys and focus groups of experimentalists like Jonathan Weinberg, intuitions are revealed as variable, ungrounded, unprovable, contingent.

So there is no genuine ground for us to trust our modal intuitions, our intuitions about what is contingent and necessary, or what the source of contingency and necessity would be. Yes, we may “generally trust our modal intuitions,” but there is no guarantee that they will turn out to be just as reliable as our intuition in everyday perception that the sun spins around Earth.

From this line of criticism, take the following question. *Why do you believe in the truth of your intuitions, when an intuition is merely a presumption you have never thought to question?*

### **Paths Divided Laid Down in the Travelling**

Vera Tripodi’s “Beyond the Transcendence: The Feminist Critique of the Concept of God” is admirable in its ambition. She aims, ultimately, to synthesize a feminist conception of God from sources that would seem, at least to me, utterly ill-suited to the demands of our time.

She writes that her project draws upon “the classic ontology of being – that is, the tradition that conventionally begins with Thomas Aquinas – and the ontology of becoming that finds in Alfred North Whitehead its essential reference point.”

Blending the ontologies of Aquinas and Whitehead together is an admirable project of synthesis. Yet Tripodi writes as if Whitehead’s is the only ontology of becoming available to us in any great detail. Whitehead’s work on the ontology of becoming is historically remarkable. He used his background in mathematics and logic to develop a concept of process, central to any ontology of becoming.

He developed a detailed, technically sophisticated system for this process ontology that ultimately understood the development of organic powers of perception, human powers of knowledge, foundational principles of morality, and even the nature of God. Impressive, and an excellent reason for Tripodi's choice of Whitehead's work to blend with that of Aquinas for her creative synthesis.

What irks me as a reader is that Tripodi doesn't treat Whitehead as the best possible choice because she gives a reasonable set of justifications; instead, she treats Whitehead as the best possible choice because he is the only possible choice. That is simply not true.

Henri Bergson had developed an ontology of becoming while Whitehead was still working on *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell, which had become far more popular among academics and the general public during his own lifetime. This achievement of fame for his work is far from anything Whitehead could have claimed.

A two-headed conflict with Albert Einstein over the interpretation of relativity theory and over the management of French-German reconciliation through League of Nations organizations did serious harm to Bergson's reputation by the 1930s. But in the same period, Bertrand Russell's confused rejection of *Process and Reality* did similar harm to the reputation of his former teacher Whitehead.

So while I am proud to count Tripodi among those bringing Whitehead's ideas to the mainstream. Yet to treat him as the only source of approaches to ontologies of process or becoming ignores an equally fruitful revival of Bergson-inspired ideas. The work of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and others who followed their influence such as Luce Irigaray and Antonio Negri has built a vibrant new tradition of ontological and political philosophy in France and Italy.

The ontology of becoming – whether influenced primarily by Whitehead or Bergson – is a bold and creative direction to move in philosophy. Yet I am left wondering why the Bergson-influenced tradition of ontology of becoming is absent from Tripodi's essay and the entire Relations collection. It appears simply to be a matter of her not having seen any of it. *How deeply does what we take for granted affect the ideas and traditions we expose ourselves to? Or question?*

### **The Most Bizarre Ontology to Make Perfect Sense**

Speaking of how presumptions guide our place in traditions, "Russell and the Question of Relations" by Federico Perelda looks explicitly at an ontology utterly counter-intuitive to my own presumptions about the nature of reality. So much was this the case, that as a student I took several courses on the subject matter and only realized its central presumption on the eve of graduating with my doctorate.

I'm talking about Bertrand Russell's propositional realism: the ontology that logical and linguistic propositions and terms are the primary constituents of the world; facts of existence

therefore only exist insofar as they instantiate those propositions and terms. My own presumption or obvious (to me) starting place for ontology is that the world is primarily the material arrangements and processes of actual bodies, forces, and fields, all interacting through contingent causality. Logic, mathematics, and language are the tools of thinking and communication that we use to build frameworks of thought to understand all this stuff.

Perelda frames his essay as bolstering Russell's argument against Ludwig Wittgenstein's foundational axiom, "The world is everything that is the case." Russell and Perelda both stand firmly for an ontology of propositional realism, whereas I am just as adamant a fellow-traveller of Wittgenstein on this point.

Nonetheless, Perelda was brilliant, insightful, and informative about the sources of Russell's ontological foundation of propositional realism: it was the one inheritance from his scorned professor Francis Herbert Bradley. Perelda traces Russell's intellectual evolution as an acolyte of Bradley, who rejected his professor's metaphysics of absolute idealism. Orthodox accounts of this split, which are typically taught in North American university courses on early analytic philosophy, take the split to have been over idealist ontology itself.

Perelda's insightful historical and philosophical analysis argues that the real reason for Russell's split from Bradley was over the ontology of relation, a much more complex and subtle question than the brute simplicity of the choice over idealism and materialism.

Bradley considered all relations internal, and so illusions of our limited perceptual powers. Russell considered relations as fundamentally external, and so real. But Bradley held that, because relations are fundamentally internal, considering them to be real is a terrible mistake, trusting your senses where they are unreliable. The split that created analytic philosophy was not metaphysical or ontological, but epistemic: whether we should trust our senses to reveal the true nature of relations as they exist in the world and in logic.

Russell never disagreed with Bradley over propositional idealism, and in fact always shared that ontological principle. Throughout his life, Russell was a propositional idealist who believed that material reality was ontologically anterior to logic, simply the medium through which propositions instantiated themselves. The order of logical propositions is, for Russell and for Perelda himself, the fundamental constituent of existence because it is necessary.

Remaining unspoken is any argument for why a necessary structure, like that of the propositions and terms of mathematical logic, must be the fundamental ordering principle of the universe. Causality's contingent character need not disqualify it from a foundational role in an ontological system, unless you explicitly argue for why contingency is necessarily a dealbreaker. That is how philosophical system building works.

So we are left in an impasse of uncertain direction for philosophical work. *How does it become so difficult to think of the world as contingent?*

## Does Existence Need Limits?

*Relations* is also a contribution to philosophy of religion, its focus being the ontology of the divine, or the nature of God's existence. Jaco Gericke's essay probes this question directly, its aim being to identify and begin developing a more precise metaphysical conception of God. Coming from a Western tradition of religious metaphysical thinking, Gericke follows the language of the Old Testament.

His goal is to understand the meaning of God as a term of the Old Testament's language, knowing the complete set of propositions that describe God.<sup>1</sup> However, there is a problem with Gericke's philosophical method: it is equally theological as it is metaphysical and ontological, because it restricts its logical analysis to the Christian tradition. Such a conception of God, logically rigorous though it may be, remains limited, a hypocritical universal.

First, I should explain the nature of this hypocrisy. Gericke hopes to develop a concept of God that grounds the universality we presume of God in the universal scope of logic. But that logical interpretation rests on the analysis of the Old Testament, a single (if massive and hugely influential) text. It is a Christian text, and therefore partisan. But it is the Christian uptake of what was originally a Jewish text, the Torah. So it also overwrites the tradition, including the theology and philosophy, that produced it.

The Old Testament is the uptake of Torah into the Christian tradition, Torah interpreted always and inevitably in relation to the Gospel. It erases the Jewish theological ontology of divinity, overwriting the Christian. There are profound differences between these two theologies, which complicate terribly any straightforward application of logical and linguistic analysis to the words themselves of any holy book.<sup>2</sup>

One important ontological critique of Gericke's method comes from the Jewish tradition that is obscured by the presumption that Torah is the Old Testament. Gericke seeks to understand the extension of the term God, but the conception of Torah's text according to Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig makes such a general extension disappear.

In Buber and Rosenzweig's approach to Torah, there is no single logical term instantiated in each mention of God. Each mention of God is itself a unique, context-appropriate logical term, incommensurable with every other such mention. Each manifestation of God is a unique divinity, and that from which it emanates has no nature adequate to logic.

Torah understands God as a divinity understandable only as a concretely situated manifestation. The Old Testament understands God in the context of the Incarnation,

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<sup>1</sup> Using logic to know the names of God? – *Editor's Note*

<sup>2</sup> Leave aside as well the problems of the plurality of holy books themselves, many of which overlap with ritual (as in the Nishnaabeg moral theology of their oral and practical tradition), or materialist ontology (as in the ontological arguments of the Daoist tradition). How to reconcile in a single concept of divinity those of Rome, Chi'Nbiish (Lake Ontario), and Beijing through logical analysis of text alone? – *Writer's Note*

where God demonstrated oneness with humanity by becoming Jesus and the Christ. Christianity therefore rests on a metaphysics of thorough ontological monism, in which God is a thing just as a mountain, person, fungus, river, star, boat, or blade of grass is. Since God is a thing, it is the extension of a term, and this term is no different than any other term.

The work of Duns Scotus best explores this ontological monism that is a fundamental metaphysical presumption of theologians and philosophers in Christian traditions who explore the nature of God. But the project of exploring the nature of God seems terribly limited when constrained by the presumptions of a single tradition. *Why do such presumptions become unquestionable?*

### **When the Refusal to Choose Is Itself a Dogma**

Jeffrey Long brings a possible antidote to this prison of presumptions. His essay is “Anekantevada: The Jain Ontology of Complexity and Relationality, and Its Implications for the Philosophy of Religions.” He analyzes an approach to the metaphysics and ontology of divinity in the Jain religion that promises to avoid problems of absolutism like those I discussed above.

Jainism, in short, holds that the divine is essentially multifaceted. Its pluralism could likely be a partial reflection of Jainism’s place as a minority religion throughout its existence; at no point in the history of Jainism has it ever been the dominant religion in a territory. Conveniently, its ontology of divinity depicts all religions as valid accounts of divinity.

Jain thinking is a perspectivism about the nature of divinity. Hindu and Buddhist communities, taking relevant examples for Jainism’s historical place in India, each have their own perspectives on the overall nature of the divine. So the concept of God in each religion (or in each concept of God within many theological traditions) understands a few aspects of the divine.

The parable about the blind men and the elephant might be useful here. That parable also shows the theological hypocrisy Long identifies in Jain ontology. From the Jain perspective, theirs is the only religious tradition that accurately and completely understands God, because other religions mistake their perspectival limitations for absolute truths. Jainism itself thereby becomes an absolutism, the unquestionable presumption that its pluralism is the only true conception of divinity because it includes all the variety that God can be.

Even this attempt to find an escape from absolutism closes itself off, because the temptation to consider your own perspective to be the most correct, or the only fully correct, never disappears. All our judgments would seem to rest on presumptions which are simultaneously unassailable and fragile.

Fragile because they are unassailable. Every argument and conceptual exploration must rest on presumptions that are themselves taken for granted. But to question those presumptions

exposes their inevitable limitations. Knowledge requires firm foundations, but examining those foundations exposes that they need foundations of their own.

Knowledge therefore rests on dogma inevitably, a refusal to question. For any system of thinking to stand, questioning must cease somewhere, but the decision to cease is never a conclusion, always a decision. *Do our unquestioned and unquestionable presumptions leave us no antidote for absolutism, and its inevitable dangers of dogmatism and fanaticism?*

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