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Whitehead's Legacy in Latour's Philosophy

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to relate Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy to Bruno Latour's symmetrical anthropology. Whitehead's philosophy offers to Latour a metaphysical framework in order to move beyond the modern distinction between objects of history (human cultural constructions) and unhistorical objects of nature itself (non-human beings). Whitehead's metaphysics, based on the concepts of actual entity and society, allows Latour to postulate the non-hierarchization between human and other-than-human collectives. However, saying that all actors or agents are at the same ontological level, does not imply to affirm that there is no difference between them. Against any form of homogenization, both Whitehead and Latour defend the idea of "heterogeneity" based on the notions of plurality and composition.

Key Words

Whitehead; Latour; agency; moderns; symmetrical anthropology; non-hierarchization; ontology; actual entity; society; historical realism; other-than-human beings; plurality, composition

In an article discussing the discovery of lactic acid by Louis Pasteur, Bruno Latour invites us to symmetrically grant a historicity to all the elements – all the actors – that enter this story. He writes: "If, once again seeking refuge in the cozy Kantian framework, one were to speak only of *representation*, [...] Pasteur would be said to transform the ideas that chemists and dairymen have formed 'about' lactic fermentation. But, given generalized symmetry, we want to reach the phenomena, to emerge from the childhood home of idealism and rediscover, with realism, the risks of ontology. [...] We must therefore explore this path, however bizarre it may appear, and speak of Pasteur as an *event that occurs to lactic acid*." (Latour, 1996, p. 82). Latour calls for a generalized principle of symmetry capable of postulating the construction of both nature and society by letting appear the *collectives* of both humans and non-humans (p. 78-79). This symmetrical anthropology that Latour develops in the wake of his actor-network theory demands that we abandon the idea of nature as a substance without history, that is as an unchanging

support of change to which human could access directly. However, according to Latour, it is not enough, to denounce this supposedly direct access to the objects of nature by revealing their socially constructed character. This approach would only historicize mental representations and would deny objects themselves their uncertainty and their historicity. Latour wants to think a historicity of things and, to do so, he must avoid both naturalism and social constructivism (p. 90). In this sense, Latour will find a metaphysics worthy of its ambitions in the ideas and reflections of certain authors: in the pluralism of William James, in the monadological sociology of Gabriel Tarde, and, of course, in the relational metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead.

This article seeks to give an account of Whitehead's metaphysics in Latour's thought. Latour finds in Whitehead's philosophy a radical historical realism, a realism not based on the notion of unchangeable substance, but on the idea that what is real is only the historical path that beings (both human and non-human) follow throughout their existence (p. 78). We will discuss how certain con-

cepts and gestures present in Whitehead's philosophy find a continuity in Latour's actor-network theory and in his symmetrical anthropology. The aim, beyond clarifying Latour's intellectual sources, is to determine how Whitehead's metaphysics inform the various degrees of agency at stake in Latour's approach. Can we speak, in Latour's actor-network theory, of different levels of agency? To what extent should we consider entities belonging to distinct organizational levels of matter and of life – a bacterium, a cell, a multi-cellular organism, an animal body, a social group, an ecosystem, or an entire planet for instance – as actors? What changes and what is preserved at each change in scale? This article cannot give a definite answer to each of these questions. Its objective is to articulate Latour's symmetrical anthropology and Whitehead's cosmology in order to explore some possible answers. The goal of approaching this subject from a metaphysical standpoint is to generalize the results obtained from particular cases – that is to say, to bring them to other registers, to other domains of existence and experience.

Metaphysics at the Height of Collectives

Latour's ANT (see Callon & Latour, 1991; Latour, 2005) as well as his symmetrical anthropology (Latour, 1993) and his later reflections on the new climate regime (Latour, 2017) revolve around the notions of "actor," "agent," and "agency." However, Latour radically separates these concepts from the notions of intention, will, and consciousness. For him, the notion of agency is not exclusively human, and does not merely belong to a restricted human dimension. On the contrary, it "precedes the attributions of humanity and personhood" (Latour, 2017, p. 49). Indeed, the notion of agency must be widened to accommodate things other than humans such as a river, a mountain, a nuclear power station, a scientific theory or a report by experts on climate change. That said, in order to make this shift in the understanding of agency possible and effective, it is necessary to pull away (or at least to disturb) a certain number of modern ideas. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour analyzes the separation established between natural things and technical things, between objects of knowledge and the

knowing subject, and finally between humans and non-humans. Latour asserts that this operation of purification between two distinct ontological regimes – that of *Nature* and that of *Culture* – is always accompanied by a work of hybridization. He affirms that, if we look closely, we can observe the immense proliferation of Nature-Culture hybrids that surround the practices of the Moderns, from Boyle's air pump to the hole in the ozone layer or to any pharmaceutical product. Indeed, in spite of the discourse the Moderns give about themselves (we are the ones who know the radical difference between Nature and Culture, between Objects and Subjects), the main characteristic of the modern world is the emergence of a large number of hybrid beings that Latour calls, following the insight of Michel Serres, *quasi-objects* or *quasi-subjects* (Latour, 1993, p. 51).

According to Latour, history of philosophy is characterized by a disproportionate use of pure forms, such as Nature/Culture or Subject/Object. Philosophers have tried to describe or understand the phenomena of the world by placing them in one of these categories, namely the category of a non-human nature considered as eternal and the category of human society considered as constructed. Instead, he proposes a change of perspective that relies on a radical symmetry: taking as starting point the hybrid forms of Nature-Culture (actors conceived as quasi-objects or quasi-subjects) to think the multiplicity of beings, their essence and their existence. Indeed, the horizontal axis Nature-Culture is now replaced by a vertical axis that measures the degree of stabilization of each actor – a social fact, a scientific theory, etc., following its own historical trajectory. That is to say that no being or agent can be considered as eternal (not even the elasticity of air or the force of gravitation), because it follows a trajectory that goes from the local existence in the laboratory to its essentialization or stabilization in a wider network, but not less local or situated.

Latour multiplies the axes and perspectives around the overly closed categories of subject and object. The same philosophical gesture is present in Whitehead's *philosophy of organism*, which consists in splitting the notion of subject into two by granting it both roles at different phases (subject and object). Whitehead labels this new subject an actual entity

This notion is fundamental in Whitehead's metaphysics: an *actual entity* is, in his cosmology, the last and most concrete reality of which the world is composed; it is the minimum of concrete existence, the ontological limit that designates an individual reality. However, actual entities are not the matter or material of an unchanging substance that is always already there. On the contrary, actual entities are exactly their own process of becoming towards existence, a process that Whitehead calls *actualization*. In other words, an actual entity is neither the subject who actualizes something else nor the object actualized, but both at the same time. That is why, in Whitehead's philosophy, the morphological description of the form is always derivative from a genetic process, that is, of its historical trajectory or its actualization (Whitehead, 1929, p. 219).

In addition, Whitehead describes the actualization process of an actual entity by the relation that this one maintains with its environment, that is, with others actual entities. Thus, an actual entity is what it is due to its power to incorporate something beyond itself, to capture other actual entities. It finds its existence by capturing, prehending, or feeling other actual entities which, in turn, establish their own existence(s) by capturing other actual entities. Whitehead calls the actual entity subject-superject in order to account for the double role that it plays in its process of actualization: as an active subject in the constitution of its own subjective unity and as an object that, once it has perished, is prehended by subsequent processes. As Deleuze explains, every actual entity has a private dimension as a subject and a public dimension as an object (Deleuze, 1988, p. 78). This term, subject-superject, allows moreover to underline that any act of feeling is inseparable from what it tends towards, namely, the subject of the feeling. Whitehead writes: "The feelings are what they are in order that their subject may be what it is" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 222). Thus, the notion of subject in Whitehead's philosophy does not imply a closure or clear distinction with the outside, but an opening and relation with it: "An entity is both a singularity and a cosmic experience. Individuation can be illuminated by returning to the two meanings of the word subject in this way: intensive and relational, individuation amounts to a determination

of relations from a point in experience, a perspective on everything that exists" (Debaise, 2017, p. 72-73).

This actual entity or subject-superject thus becomes a historical trajectory defined by the series of feelings that it has inherited from other subjects, from other acts of feelings close to each other. Indeed, since an actual entity is subject and object at the same time, Whitehead's metaphysics is completely coherent with Latour's world full of hybrids that are impossible to segregate into the exclusive categories of Nature and Culture or Subject and Object. Additionally, the gesture of identifying the actual entity with its historical trajectory is consistent with Latour's proposal to extend the notion of historicity towards the whole of human and non-human beings. In the aforementioned article about Pasteur, Latour sees in Whitehead's philosophy the metaphysical or ontological framework on which to base his symmetrical anthropology and his actor-network theory. He finds in it a radical historical realism that will allow him to escape the framework proposed by the metaphysics of essences and attributes, which would explain Pasteur's discovery as the mere appearance of a new form of representation of an eternal and unchangeable object, the lactic ferment. For Latour, Pasteur does not discover the ferment, but he acts in history at the same time as he is acted upon by his objects. Latour writes:

"Before reading Whitehead, I could not extricate myself from this dilemma. It seemed that we always had to choose between two evils: Whitehead opens a new possibility and allows us to understand why the contradiction is only apparent. Lactic-acid yeast changes its history upon contact with Pasteur and his laboratory. It is quite real, but its historical reality puts it on an equal footing with the researcher and the laboratory in which it is involved. Lactic acid has also changed. The yeast has taken the little push that Pasteur has given it as a historic opportunity to manifest itself by altering its entire trajectory." (Latour, 1996, p. 87)

With the help of Whitehead, Latour asserts that so long as nature was thought of as the reign of cause

and effect, it was impossible to think the historicity of inanimate and living things, because invention, freedom and novelty were elements exclusive to humans in the midst of a raw and inert natural world. Whitehead's metaphysics, based on an extended notion of subject and history and centered on relations of prehensions and feelings, seems to provide much more interesting and realistic explanations. As Latour says, "Nature shares with society the same historicity" (p. 89).

An Ontological Principle for a Multiplicity of Scales

Whitehead's metaphysics and Latour's theory of agency thus postulate a large number of subjectivities beyond humanness and consciousness. But we must now ask how those subjectivities might fit together; we must apply this to cases like, for instance, the subjectivity of a cell within a cell ensemble, and that of the latter within an organism, etc. I propose to confront this problem of scale with the metaphysical premises set forth by Whitehead and Latour.

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead affirms that his ambition is to overcome what he calls the fallacy of *misplaced concreteness*. Thus, the notion of actual entity would be an effort to "base philosophical thought upon the most concrete elements of our experience" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 18). He writes: "There is no going behind actual entities to find anything more real. They differ among themselves: God is an actual entity, and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far-off empty space. But, though there are gradations of importance, and diversities of function, yet in the principles which actuality exemplifies all are on the same level" (p. 18). This passage shows how Whitehead projects on the same ontological plane - on the same level -, all actual entities without distinction, from eternal divinity to a tiny piece of matter at the edge of the universe. That is why he affirms that: "apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing, nothing, nothing, bare nothingness" (p. 167). The gradation and difference that Whitehead mentions in the passage quoted above are thus not ontological, but functional. In other words, there is no difference of nature between actual entities. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the cosmos is entirely homogeneous. This means

that heterogeneity and the difference must always be found in the composite and becoming nature of actual entities.

Latour is oriented by the same gesture in *We Have Never Been Modern*, a book in which he postulates his own ontological principle to think the new role of anthropology beyond the modern habits of thought. He links it to a principle of radical symmetry to think the question of agents and their local integration in more or less long, more or less global networks. According to Latour, the Moderns have granted an ontological difference to what is only a difference of size. They thought they could separate and hierarchize ontologically the objects of Nature and the objects of Culture. On the contrary, for him, there is no ontological difference between the different collectives of quasi-objects or quasi-subjects: "a nuclear power plant, or a hole in the ozone layer, or a map of the human genome, or a rubber-tired metro train, or a satellite network, or a cluster of galaxies, weighs no more than a wood fire, or the sky that may fall on our heads, or a genealogy, or a cart, or spirits visible in the heavens, or a cosmogony" (Latour, 1993, p. 108). Latour imitates Whitehead's way of thinking about subjects: these agents are all historical trajectories; they certainly differ from each other in terms of size, but not in terms of nature (p. 109). With their *particular universalism* (p. 105), the Moderns wanted to affirm the weight and authority of their Science - with a capital "S" - by arguing a supposed epistemological break with a prescientific past (p. 109). For Latour, if the Science and technique of the Moderns have dominated the rest of the world, it is only because their network is longer than others. In other words, there is no ontological difference between Western, modern knowledge and local non-modern knowledge, and this, because the former has not ceased to be local. The Moderns have exaggerated the universality of their Science and they "have imposed an ontological difference as radical as the sixteenth-century differentiation between the supralunar worlds that knew neither change nor uncertainty" (p. 121). He writes: "an organization, a market, an institution, are not supralunar objects made of a different matter from our poor local sublunar relations" (p. 121). Latour joins Whitehead by inventing a new topography and a new flat cartography which, as we

will see later, reject neither the difference nor the plurality of the modes of existence, still less their specificity.

Latour's terms of quasi-object or quasi-subject are not isolated categories, but must be defined by their tendency to build the collectives of human and non-human beings, multiplicities in other words. In this sense, it seems that Whitehead's concept of actual entity, understood separately, is also unable to explain or describe experience. Indeed, while an actual entity is the ontological and metaphysical unit of existence, it is never directly experienced as such. That seems to be the reason why Whitehead introduces the concept of *society*, considered as an ordered set of two or more actual entities. Consequently, Didier Debaise's hypothesis is that there are modes of experience that are not identifiable with actual entities taken separately (Debaise, 2017, p. 123-125), but exclusively in light of their meeting in a multiplicity. In Whitehead's cosmology, the term society does not design exclusively human relationships or structures, but all enduring realities that can be experienced. They may be as different and varied as an atom, a living organism, a technical object, an ecosystem, a law or an entire civilization. "Everything that has experience, and everything that is *experienced* can be called a society" (p. 125). The notion of society allows Whitehead to take into account the inherent complexity of each thing. It allows him to consider and describe each being as a complex organization, or using Latour's term, a collective.

A society in Whitehead's cosmology is thus an ordered multiplicity of actual entities that can be experienced only as a multiplicity. He writes: "the term 'society' will always be restricted to mean a nexus of actual entities which are 'ordered' among themselves" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 89). However, multiplicity does not mean a simple juxtaposition or a mathematical order, because the notion of society supposes the emergence of new qualities that were not present in the actual entities taken separately. In other words, Whitehead's concept of society implies the emergence of new qualities that cannot be reduced to the sum of the qualities of the actual entities which compose it. In addition, as Whitehead affirms, all members of a society have a common characteristic which "consists in the fact that a cert-

ain element of 'form' is a contributory component to the individual satisfaction of each member of the society and that the contribution by the element to the objectification of anyone member of the society for prehension by other members promotes its analogous reproduction in the satisfactions of those other members" (p. 89). Stated differently, a society can only exist by reason of the genetic relation between the members that compose it, "by reason of the analogous character of the members of the society" (p. 91). And at the same time, each member can only exist "by reason of the laws which dominate the society" (p. 91).

Indeed, a society emerges from a complex set of relations between its members. These members can be either actual entities or other societies. These entanglements of scales and the interlocking of societies between them pose the problem of identity. Is it possible to talk about "one society" if this one is composed by a multiplicity of other societies? Whitehead solves this obstacle by considering that beings can be both individual and collective, both singular and multiple. Indeed, "these are groups that include other groups. At every level and at every scale – from an atom up to the cosmos – they form singular and individual unities that function as unique beings" (Debaise, 2017, p. 132). It seems that Whitehead understands the identity of a society in terms of a composite essence, that is, in terms of consistency and composition, and this, without losing the dimensions of individuality and singularity. A society is nothing before the relations which make it appear. A society is only the result of complex relations between its members, which implies that between two societies there is no ontological difference or hierarchy (p. 147). This is indeed in line with Latour's thesis about the ontological non-hierarchy between actors and the importance of the work of composition (Latour, 2011, p. 38-41).

By following this principle of ontological non-hierarchization, we could ask whether we run the risk of missing the specificities and differences that exist between beings. This question constitutes a legitimate criticism that could be directed towards Latour's thinking. This seems to be the criticism that Baptiste Morizot has addressed to Latour (Morizot, 2021, p. 77-117). Morizot comes back to Latour's project of taking non-humans, living and non-living

beings, out of the realm of things and to attributing to them social and even political aptitudes. However, he criticizes him, wrongly according to me, for making disappear all the specificities and particularities of the living beings and for making them indistinguishable. Concretely, he overtly criticizes Latour's concept of agency. He considers that this concept represents the gateway to the homogenization of living beings. According to me, there is a very great misunderstanding here. I consider that Morizot, in this article, does not understand Latour's project which, contrary to what he may say, is not an epistemological project but a metaphysical one. In this sense, articulating Whitehead's legacy in Latour's philosophy could clear up this misunderstanding. Indeed, when Whitehead affirms that all actual entities (all subjects) are at the same level, it does not mean that all are or behave in the same way. On the contrary, each actual entity is inhabited by a subjective form (a manner). In other words, each subject has its own style and feels in its own way. For this reason, Whitehead identifies three factors in the analysis of prehensions or feelings: "the 'subject' which is prehending, namely, the actual entity in which that prehension is a concrete element," "the 'datum' which is prehended," and "the 'subjective form' which is how that subject prehends that datum" (Whitehead, 1929, p. 23). Concerning the form: "there are many species of subjective forms, such as emotions, valuations, purposes, aversions, consciousness, etc." (p. 24). In the same sense, a society is also inhabited by a mode, a style or a character. It is a multiplicity of elements connected in a certain way, in a certain manner (Debaise, 2017, p. 131). As Debaise affirms, Whitehead's ontology is akin to an aesthetic because of the decisive importance of the ways of feeling (Debaise, 2015, p. 95-96). Latour is inhabited by the same concern with difference and with qualitative dimensions. Certainly, he attacks a certain concept of difference coming from the Great Modern Divides, but he does not give up thinking about difference, about leaving a place for plurality of specificities. For him, thinking in terms of collectives and agency implies accepting that the divisions will always be local, that is, refusing the hegemonic divides between Nature and Culture, between human and non-human (Latour, 1993, p.

104-109). In this sense, one of Latour's most important texts is entitled *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence*, a title that is an homage to Étienne Souriau's text entitled *The Different Modes of Existence*. In addition, in *Facing Gaia*, the attention to specific ways of acting and particular modes of being continues to haunt Latour's thinking. He advocates for the need to dissect concepts in order to accommodate "the multiplicity of existents, on the one hand, and to the multiplicity of ways they have of existing, on the other" (Latour, 2015, p. 35).

Conclusion

Bringing to light Whitehead's influence on Latour's philosophy provides us with a finer and more pragmatic understanding of his thought. Latour's aim is none other than to escape the modern framework that distinguishes between the objects of history (the products of culture or human subjectivity) and the nature of epistemology (the thing-in-itself). It is necessary to find a metaphysics able to grant a historicity to the beings *other-than-human*. He writes: "what seemed absurd in a metaphysics of essence and attributes [such as speaking of Pasteur as an element that happens to the lactic acid] can become a child's play for 'an ontology of events and relations'" (Latour, 1996, p. 82). This new framework based on the historicity of beings other-than-human imposes a principle of ontological non-hierarchization. Indeed, as in Whitehead's metaphysics of actual entities and societies, there is no ontological difference between the plurality of human and other-than-human agents. However, this principle should not be understood as a homogenization operation. In other words, this principle does not imply that we should stop considering the differences between the agents and their heterogeneity. On the contrary, this principle allows one to make room for the differences and singularities of realities that otherwise would be drowned in ever larger organisms or bodies. Latour writes: "the principle of symmetry aims not only at establishing equality – which is only the way to set the scale at zero – but at registering differences –° that is, in the final analysis, asymmetries – and at understanding the practical means that allow some collectives to dominate others" (Latour, 1993, p. 107-108). Indeed, the crucial aspect for both White-

head and Latour is to avoid referring the plurality of modes of existence and relation to a superior explanatory instance, to a totality with an ontological legitimacy superior to the elements that compose it. We can conclude from this that at the intersection of Latour and Whitehead, metaphysics has political consequences. In this sense, considering the human and other-than-human beings as local historical routes allows to escape the danger of falling into fascination and thus into powerlessness facing categories that are too massive and too distant from concrete real experience. As Latour states: “Every totalization, even if it is critical, helps totalitarianism. We need not add total domination to real domination.” (p. 125).

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