

THE PROBLEM OF RELATIONS AND THE NOTION OF CONTRAST IN WHITEHEAD'S CRITIQUE OF BRADLEY

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Abstract. In recent decades, the concept of *relation* has come to occupy an increasingly central place in the philosophical discourse, both in the continental and the analytic traditions. A particularly significant development has been the redefinition of the longstanding conflict between realism and relativism. The way in which relations intervene in the construction of the link between subjectivity and objectivity has given rise to a plurality of divergent ontological perspectives: some privilege the internal nature of relations, conceiving them as structurally constitutive of the terms they connect, highlighting the mutual entanglement and interpenetration of the subject's noetic activity and the objective world (Latour; Gabriel); others insist on their external character, preserving the ontological autonomy of the objects involved and insisting on the independence of reality from perceiving subjects (DeLanda; Harman). Nevertheless, despite the centrality assumed by this notion in many contemporary theoretical constellations, the concept of relation remains elusive, if not problematic. A rigorous conceptualization of its meaning often yields unforeseen consequences; consequences that can expose the fragility of the ontologies constructed upon it, to the extent that the new relational frameworks run the risk of falling prey to hypothesis insufficiently tempered by critical caution. A revealing instance of this dynamic can be found in the historical reconstruction of two philosophical perspectives that are at once similar and, in key respects, complementary: those of F.H. Bradley and A.N. Whitehead. While the latter represents an unreserved expansion of the concept of relation within an ontological framework, the former constitute a rigorous logical and metaphysical critique animated by uncompromised scepticism. The present analysis focuses on Whitehead's response to the problem of relations as posed by Bradley, aiming both at assessing the exegetical accuracy of Whitehead's interpretation, and at evaluating the validity of the philosophy of organism on the basis of a correct framing of Bradley's considerations. The article is divided into four parts. In the first, I outline the essential features of Bradley's critique of relations. The second addresses Whitehead's critical reworking of Bradley's theses, with particular focus on the Whiteheadian distinction between "relations" and "contrasts". In this section, I highlight the limitations of Whitehead's interpretation, arguing that it fails to offer a satisfactory solution to the problem raised by Bradley. The third part explores the hypothesis of a structural similarity between the Bradleyan and Whiteheadian systems, concluding that their divergence lies in the differing cognitive power attributed to the experiencing subject.

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Finally, in the fourth part, I draw the consequences of Bradley's critique for the philosophy of organism, pointing out the difficulties Whitehead would face were Bradley's sceptical considerations proven to be valid.

Keywords: Whitehead, Bradley, Rorty, Relations, Contrasts, Eternal Objects.

1. BRADLEY'S METAPHYSICS AND THE PROBLEM OF RELATIONS

In order to provide an overview of the fundamental tenets of Bradley's philosophy, it is beneficial to consider a note dated back to 1923, written prior to the drafting of an article that was never completed, entitled *Relations*:

The view in main is as follows. Relations are not a way of being or knowing which is ultimate in reality or in knowledge. What comes first in logical order and in time is what may be called immediate experience or Feeling. It is on this that the relational stage of knowledge is superinduced as a remedy made necessary by its defect. And this advance not only is necessary but is fully justified, but on the other hand itself is not ultimate. It is in principle and in the end a self-contradictory makeshift. And it points therefore to an experience beyond both itself and the stage of feeling in which the claims of both are realized fully - though in a way not in detail intelligible. And this experience as in principle satisfying every possible claim and as at once consummate understanding and feeling and will, may be called the Absolute Reality (*RR* 356).

The distinction between (I) a plane of immediate experience, (II) a relational dimension of thought and (III) a horizon of consummation identified in the Absolute, appears as a consistent thread running throughout the entirety of Bradley's philosophical work. This tripartite structure follows a reversal of the approach previously taken by Green, who – still sharing one of the main assumptions of orthodox empiricism – had emphasized the habitual assumption that senses convey nothing more than single isolated determinations: distinct atoms from whose experience ideas take shape as products of thought. In contrast, Bradley argued that sensory experience, when grasped purely, is marked by unity and harmony, such that the whole is given as a “totality” composed of parts held together in constant and complete cohesion. “*Feeling*”, as depicted in this manner, corresponds to a complex of empirical perceptions that, preceding all forms of analysis, occupy a domain devoid of oppositions, in which distinctions between the determinations cannot as such be pointed out or, otherwise said, without any possibility of establishing relations between terms, that are rather aligned according to what might be described as a form of “togetherness” (*AR* 511).

Feeling is immediate experience without distinction or relation in itself. It is a unity, complex but without relations. And there is here no difference between the state and its content, since, in a word, the experienced and the experience are one. And a distinction between cognition and other aspects of our nature is not yet developed. Feeling is not one differentiated aspect, but it holds all aspects in one (*ETR* 194).¹

This is a definition of experience that contradicts Hume's assumption that perceptions are "substances" "distinct and separable" (*Treatise* 223), replacing it with the idea that feeling is an immediate and a-conceptual prefiguration of the "Absolute": the "whole in which distinctions can be made, but in which divisions do not exist" (*AR* 128), the "continuous mass of presentation in which the separation of a single element from context is never observed" (*CE* 209). There is no proper contradiction in immediate experience; none other than the "dissatisfaction" its partial nature generates with respect to the totality of the Absolute. The relational plane of thought is implied by the fact that the contents inhabiting the whole of feeling, recognized as "universals", exceed the given moment, and open up an ideal horizon of broader applicability (*ETR* 175; 182). Moreover, the exclusion of analysis and any possible intellectual operation renders immediate experience constitutively unintelligible. Hence, the lack of understanding justifies the constitution of a plane superior to that of pure sensibility.

The relational plane of thought represents the place within which a first, real attempt at knowledge can be advanced. "Discursive intelligence" and "reflection" dominate this space, operating by means of the "splits" and "individuations" characteristic of analysis². The pre-relational unity of *feeling* is now dissected in order to allow the acquisition of knowledge. However, with the fragmentation of the one into many and of the whole into its parts, thought encounters its own limit, because it is no longer possible for it to reconstruct the whole from the parts it has analytically obtained. If analysis corresponds to the series of operations to determine, isolate and abstract the contents unfolded organically from immediate experience (*PL* 472), thought, as a consequence, encounters the impossibility of an authentic synthesis, that is, of a principle of unification that truly relates the analytically identified elements (589). The consequence is that true knowledge, even at the level of thought, cannot be properly dealt with, since the relations it attempts to establish turn out to be nothing more than a *simulacrum*, or, to use Bradley's own terms, mere "appearances".

¹ See also *ETR* 200: "[Feeling] involves a felt totality, and on this inclusive unity the relation depends. The subject, the object, and their relation, are experienced as elements or aspects in a One which is there from the first". For an in-depth analysis of the concept of feeling, one is referred to the articles by Fortier, Crossley, Pugmire, Mander and Sievers.

² "The immediate unity, in which facts come to us, has been broken up by experience, and later by reflection. The thing with its adjectives is a device for enjoying at once both variety and concord. But the distinctions, once made, fall apart from the thing, and away from one another" (*AR* 19–20).

The reason, as it's well known, lies in the very nature of those relations by which thought attempts to re-establish the lost unity of feeling. In the second and third chapters of *Appearance and reality*, the problem arises by the application of the so called "principle of fission" (26). In a nutshell: neither externally nor internally³ can relations satisfy that ideal of *real connection* that thought seeks. Not externally, since conceived as independent of their *relata*, they take on the character of *terms*, thus exposing themselves to the necessity of regress: given that A and B are connected by the relation C, which is taken as a term by itself, further D and E will have to be given to join A and C respectively as C and B; except that, once again independent, these will imply further relations, and so on *ad infinitum*.

On the other hand, that real connection cannot be given even internally, as long as the problem of the third man invests the very constitution of each quality. The aporia of internal relations in fact uncovers a twofold, but equally impracticable, alternative: either the terms (be they again A and B) identify themselves with the relation C, thereby failing to affirm their own distinction, or each quality is subjected to an internal division, such that part of A, as of B, is independent and part is not, thus again invoking the problem of how these parts can connect with each other, avoiding further divisions. In both cases, either because the relation cannot be established without separation of the *relata*, or because each term is internally split by an infinite regress implied by the impossibility of uniting the parts, no solution is offered. Internal relations, as well as external ones, can only belong to the domain of appearance.⁴

Generally speaking, considering the results of the argument described by Bradley, what appears to be lacking is a "principle of connection", should the separation of terms be assumed, or of "distinction", should their conjunction be unconditionally taken (505). And whether the qualities appear as mutually unrelated or are forcibly brought back to an indistinct unity, the core problem lies in the impossibility of conceiving relationships as anything other than "solid thing[s]" (28), that enjoy their own autonomy and constitute themselves as objects of thought. If we assume that each term is independent insofar as it is distinct from everything else, we then become aware of the inability of reason to establish a *real connection* between its data, without violating the principle of contradiction or falling into the problem of fission. Every relation, regardless of whether one assumes it to be internal or external to the terms, is itself, just because it is thought,

³ The terminological distinction between internal relations and external relations is not present as such in *Appearance and Reality*. It must be traced back to a later period of Bradley's work, to the years of the *Essays* and his dialogue with Russell. However, the argument put forward in *AR* already anticipates the meaning that Bradley will attribute to the pair of internal-external relations, and will remain unchanged throughout the Oxonian's philosophical career.

⁴ The literature on the subject is particularly extensive. For a more detailed account, see Baxter, Candlish 141–173, Gaskin and Griffin.

a *term*, as such unsuitable to assume the guise of the “ground” necessary to unite the manifold within a more extended unity.⁵

“What is thought to do [...] but either make or accept an arrangement which to it is wanton and without reason [...]?” (501). If, as Bradley writes, “we have to take reality as many, and to take it as one, and to avoid contradiction” (28), what we need to seek is the realisation of a synthesis that unites the different while maintaining their distinction, without thereby incurring their endless division. It is the Hegelian ideal of “identity in difference” (528), here translated into the utopian projection of an Absolute that constitutes the *telos* of metaphysical knowledge; a *telos* that implies the reconciliation of opposing elements in the continuous harmony of the whole, the place where they “*consummati sunt*”.

In this third phase of experience, the totality unfolds by “transmuting” the different beyond their apparent form. It is a cosmos in the Greek sense of the term, an order that implies, in some ways, an aesthetic perfection (Camporesi 102). The Absolute corresponds to a system whose space is saturated with elements that not only imply each other, but also join together contiguously, bridging the separation that in the plane of appearance prevented their real connection. Only at this point, where the determinations are no longer opposed but complementary, is thought given to “go *proprio motu*, or, what is the same thing, with a ground and reason” (AR 501) – as “if the diversities were complementary aspects of a process of connexion and distinction, the process not being external to the elements”, but an “intrinsic and natural transition” (507).

However, that “foundation” and that “reason” that thought needs, although they find a prefiguration in *feeling*, are not elements that it actually has at its disposal. The overcoming of heteronomies constitutes the ideal of thought; but this ideal is no more than the symbol of its effective ignorance. We are compelled by our nature to treat relations and their terms as objects, and so we are unable by our own strength alone to restore the image of that *together* and *between* whose existence we are aware. The Absolute, thus, we can only postulate negatively, on the basis of the certainty that it alone can respect the criterion of incontrovertibility with which our intellect finds full “satisfaction” (140). That is to say: Bradley’s metaphysics arrives at a reference to an ultimate reality that unifies the manifold and justifies its cohesion, but does not imply that such a reference to truth is accompanied by the possibility of knowing it. The unity of being can thus only be understood indirectly; through the fact that, precisely because thought contradicts itself by moving through a field of relations that it understands contradictorily, there must be at its foundation an original *concordia entium* that harmonises the plurality of the world into a shared One.

⁵ [...] a relation standing alongside of its terms is a delusion. If it is to be real, it must be so somehow at the expense of the terms, or, at least, must be something which appears in them or to which they belong. A relation between A and B implies really a substantial foundation within them. [...] everywhere there must be a whole embracing what is related, or there would be no differences and no relation. (18).

2. WHITEHEAD'S CRITIQUE OF BRADLEY: THE NOTION OF CONTRAST AND THE QUESTION OF ITS INTELLIGIBILITY

Having given a general outline of Bradley's philosophy and of the relational problem it defines, it is worth noticing that Whitehead's considerations on the Bradleyan argument find wide anticipation in the voices of those who, perhaps more directly, participated in the debate on relations started by the Oxford philosopher. Exemplary, in this regard, is what Alexander writes in *Space, Time, and Deity*:

Whether a relation is of the same stuff as the terms or not, it makes the terms into a connected whole, an integral situation [...]. Moreover, on our hypothesis it is clear that in the end all relations are reducible to spatio-temporal terms. Even apart from this ultimate reduction there can be no jump from term to term, for the relation, if it is to be concrete and not a mere thought about its terms, must be some specific bond between its terms which binds them into one continuous tissue. (Alexander 239)

The difficulties which Mr. Bradley has found in the notion of qualities and relations are due in the first place to the inversion of the natural order of things. [...] The evil of the so-called infinite regress [...] appears once more to depend on the abstraction of relation from its business of relating, so that we have the ironical result that relations, whose externality Mr. Bradley strenuously denies, are treated in effect as if they were external (255–256).

The prevailing view – which finds one of its most characteristic expressions in this text – holds that the incommunicability of terms identified by Bradley is not attributable to an inherent limit of thought. Rather, it stems from the undue abstraction of the relation from its relata – an inappropriate 'reification' of an element that, when considered concretely, ought not to be conceived as an independent term. The idea that a relation is a "term among terms" is a mistaken assumption to be traced back to the misconception of the relation as a *universal*, applied to relate two otherwise separated terms. Instead, it would be more appropriate to state, as Stout similarly observed, that "a character characterising a concrete thing or individual is as particular as the thing or individual which it characterises" (Stout 386). Far from being an object C posited between objects A and B, a relation is rather their immediate unity AB, devoid of self-subsistence or of any ontological relevance as a term, but existing as the concrete fact of their being-together. Bradley, therefore, erred by engaging in abstraction and hypostatization, thereby losing sight of the particularity of the concrete thing. And in doing so, he indulged in what Alexander described as an "inversion of the natural order of things"⁶.

⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of the comparison between Bradley, Stout, and Alexander, see J. Levine's *Russell, Particularized Relations and Bradley's Dilemma*.

Whitehead's critique of Bradley aligns, at least in its essentials, with this general line of thought, although the terms in which it is articulated must be interpreted within the cosmological framework of the philosophy of organism. Specifically, it is the distinction between "relations" and "contrasts" that, within the Whiteheadian lexicon, echoes the difference between a term conceived as a mere universal and the particularity of a connection understood concretely⁷. As Whitehead notes in *Process and Reality*, "[w]hat are ordinarily termed 'relations' are abstractions from 'contrasts'. A relation can be found in many contrasts, and when it is so found, it is said to relate the things contrasted" (228–229). The more the connection between two terms is abstracted from their particularity and treated independently as a term of conjunction, the more it is conceived as a "genus" under which particular connections can indeed be subsumed, but which they should not be properly identified with. In fact, it is evident that the notion of relation is not equivalent to the singularity of the contrast it seeks to represent, if by contrast one refers to the "complex entity with [...] individual definiteness", that is, the nexus that "cannot be abstracted from the contrasted relata" (228).

A relation is not a contrast, because the 'relational substance' that is posited as the link between distinct terms, cannot fully capture, or exhaust, the particularity of the link itself. The relationship between Boston, New York and Philadelphia, recalling an example from Whitehead, cannot be summed up in the simple application of a "universal 'between'" (AI 230), for it is, rather, "a complex actual fact which, among other things, exemplifies the abstract universal 'betweenness'" (230); whereupon one can conclude, "three towns and an abstract universal are not three connected towns" (230)⁸. A contrast, as a nexus of terms that together form the unity of an indivisible whole, exhibits its own particular *haecceitas*, which, by virtue of the specific perspective required to properly apprehend it, inevitably escapes the generality of any relation meant to describe it. Where a contrast indicates the phenomenal peculiarity of an occurring fact and the actual unity of the terms that compose it, a relation is an external term that is applied to signify the conjunction of two particular terms, but which, being universal, cannot be thought of as an effective part of that concrete unity.

⁷ On the topic, see Longo's *Whitehead's Category of Contrasts* and McHugh's doctoral dissertation.

⁸ Similarly in *Process and Reality*: One use of the term 'contrast' is to mean that particularity of conjoint unity which arises from the realized togetherness of eternal objects. But there is another, and more usual, sense of 'particularity'. This is the sense in which the term 'particular' is applied to an actual entity. One actual entity has a status among other actual entities, not expressible wholly in terms of contrasts between eternal objects. For example, the complex nexus of ancient imperial Rome to European history is not wholly expressible in universals. It is not merely the contrast of a sort of city, imperial, Roman, ancient, with a sort of history of a sort of continent, sea-indented, river-diversified, with alpine divisions, begirded by larger continental masses and oceanic wastes, civilized, barbarized, Christianised, commercialized, industrialized. The nexus in question does involve such a complex contrast of universals. But it involves more. For it is the nexus of that Rome with that Europe. (229)

Therein lies, according to Whitehead, the flaw to be found in the sceptical framework of *Appearance and Reality*: in the fact that Bradley is incapable of making an adequate distinction between relations and contrasts. “He is thus distressed”, writes Whitehead, “to find that a relation will not do the work of a contrast. It fails to contrast. Thus, Bradley’s argument proves that relations, among other things, are ‘mere’; that is to say, they are indiscretions of the absolute, apings of reality without self-consistency” (229). With reference to that principle of fission that prevents the establishment of authentic relations, Whitehead points out that Bradley’s error would lie not so much in recognizing the limits “of the *disiecta membra* provided by abstraction” (AI 233) but, more specifically, in ultimately concluding that such limits, in addition to external relations, should also be ascribed to two terms connected *internally*.

It is here that Bradley, like others, falls into what Whitehead wryly points to as a “pitfall”: namely, that the “doctrine of internal relations has been distorted by reason of its description in terms of language to the external relations presupposition of the Newtonian-type” (157). Instead of claiming that the relational terms incurred a division due to the need to establish a common element, Bradley should rather have recognized that relationality “is not a universal” and indeed “is a concrete fact with the same concreteness as the relata” (157).

Bradley’s internal division between an essential and a relational nature of the term, which inevitably leads to regress, is in fact necessary only if, once again, one assumes that relationality should have substance on its own. Instead, actual relationality should be identified with the nexus that integrally captures all connected elements without resorting to abstraction⁹. What must come first is the “focal region”, the comprehensive space-time field – as Alexander pointed out as well – of which each individual “piece of matter” and “quantum of energy” (AI 157) is part of. And the notion that a single logical or empirical fact can serve as the foundation from which the relation originates is a mystification, a metaphysical subterfuge. Against the presupposition of the single datum, we must reflexively oppose the conception that the whole comes first, and the parts are to be understood as mere abstractions from this integral unity¹⁰.

But is this not something that Bradley himself would have ultimately endorsed? Did he not affirm that there is an “Absolute whole” corresponding to Reality – a totality that transcends individual objects, whose relations are merely apparent? In response to Stout’s nominalist objections – not entirely dissimilar, at least in this respect, to Whitehead’s – the Oxonian had already offered a rebuttal:

⁹ Contrasts, therefore, take the form of internal relations in their proper sense, distinct from that conceived by Bradley – which, when subjected to the principle of fission, reproduces an order of thought no different from that of external relations, as Alexander also noted.

¹⁰ Cf Leclerc 37: “In other words, it is assumed that no entity can be conceived in complete abstraction from the system of the universe, and that the task of speculative philosophy is to exhibit this truth. This character is its coherence”. See PR 137.

I am very largely in agreement with you. I think the question as to how identity and diversity are connected in the end is insoluble. One is driven back here as elsewhere on to immediate qualities as given. But, if one is to think and try to understand, one is driven beyond this, & then passes (more or less) into a relational world which is full of contradictions. Beyond this world is (as I think) the ultimate truth & Reality. [...] I agree that, so far as you take a quality as particularized in an individual, that quality so far is particular. Certainly that is so. But at the same time you take it and must take it as universal. Otherwise you have no 'instance' at all. (SC 259-260)

Bradley was fully aware that the terms of a relation must be understood within the context of the whole in which they are factually given. This insight is evident both in the domain of feeling and in the plane of the Absolute, whether in the incompleteness of empirical perception or in the ultimate truth and reality. The Absolute itself is nothing but experience of continuous totality devoid of abstraction, whole of elements which are distinct, but never separated from each other and singled out. The problem, rather, regarded the possibility for thought, as such, to grasp the particularity of the relations perceived in immediate experience without contradiction – the possibility for intellectual operations to work outside the dimension of abstract and universal conceptuality.

On this note, Bradley does not hide his scepticism. He posits a radical separation between the plane of thought and the pre-relational plane of feeling. The opposition between the two generates an inevitable dichotomy, one that is further emphasised, from a gnoseological standpoint, within the horizon of consummation constituted by the Absolute. Thus, the pertinent question is not whether Bradley misunderstood the nature of internal relations by reducing them to the sphere of an intellectualistic externality. Rather, the question is whether critics such as Alexander, Stout, and – most relevant here – Whitehead, were mistaken in conflating what for Bradley evidently were to be distinct levels of experience. Given that for Bradley two internally connected elements *must* lead to regress, as long as their relationship is investigated by thought, the question is whether this should also be the case for Whitehead, who, in this case, would have overestimated the power of the understanding, considering it capable of grasping the parts while holding the whole together.

3. HYPOTHETICAL PARALLELS: REPEATABLE UNIVERSALS AND UNREPEATABLE PARTICULARS

As a matter of fact, beyond the criticism of erroneous superimposition of relations on contrasts, Whitehead shows in several places of his work a deep sympathy for certain aspects of Bradley's thought, starting precisely with his "general adherence to [the] doctrine of Feeling" (AI 231), and acknowledging the central importance of immediate experience in the analysis of the relationship between terms. "Holding that the connectedness of things is nothing else than the

togetherness of things in occasions of experience” (233), Whitehead appears to advocate the idea that what is given in the immediacy of perception constitutes “an illustration of the required doctrine of connectedness” (233), showing, in this respect, a significant affinity with Bradley’s thought, ultimately such that he can declare an “evident approximation” (xiii)¹¹ to the thinker of the Absolute: “the final outcome [of our philosophies]”, he openly confesses, “is, after all, not so greatly different. [...] His insistence on ‘feeling’ is very consonant with my own conclusions” (xiii).

Moreover, supporting the hypothesis of an affinity is what Whitehead writes about *The Theory of Prehensions in Process and Reality*:

The truism that we can only *conceive* in the terms of universals has been stretched to mean that we can only *feel* in the terms of universals. This is untrue. Our perceptual feelings feel particular existents; that is to say, a physical feeling, belonging to the percipient, feels the nexus between two other actualities, A and B [...], a nexus also retaining the particular diversity of A and B in its unifying force. (230)

On the one hand, there is the endorsement of the thesis – shared by Bradley as well – that thought must proceed with an inevitable degree of abstraction, invoking universals by its very nature whenever it attempts to determine the qualities of an entity. On the other hand, there is the claim that this limitation does not apply to sensibility, which immediately grasps the particularity of the empirical world – a conclusion, as seen, that Bradley also conceded to Stout in his own response. Thus, the relationship between sensory experience and conceptual activity corresponds to that between particularity and universality, with no apparent possibility of achieving any actual unification of the two levels. The affinity between Bradley and Whitehead would then seem to be established, with the trace of a dualism between the particularity of perception and the universality of concepts also present, albeit latently, in Whitehead’s text.

This hypothesis can be further substantiated by drawing upon Richard Rorty’s analysis of Whitehead’s philosophy in two of his articles, *The Subjectivist Principle and the Linguistic Turn* and *Matter and Event*. In both works, Rorty frequently invokes the opposition between “unrepeatable particulars” and “repeatable universals”, a dichotomy that corresponds to the immediacy of actual perception and the conceptual determination underlying any linguistic description. If a repeatable universal is an ideal predicate describing actual phenomena occurring in experience, an unrepeatable particular is to be conceived of as the unique “substance” the universals are referred to, perceived as a totality of determinations

¹¹ Id., *Process and Reality*, cit., p. 79. Cf. L.B. McHenry 1–3.

embedded in sense experience (*The subjectivist principle* 134)¹². This opposition is evident in both Bradley's and Whitehead's philosophies. In the former, it appears in the contrast between the unrepeatability of feeling and the repeatability of ideas within the relational, abstract plane of thought: whereas the unrepeatability of immediate experience is due to its being a totality disclosed to the senses, the repeatability of relational terms arises from their being the outcome of a process of abstraction from the felt whole: once singled out from the totality of feeling, they can be conceived as ideal predicates referable to reality in different circumstances (*PL* 10).

In Whitehead's case, the opposition between particularity and universality corresponds to the distinction between the process of actual entities – whose “subjective aim” constitutes their unrepeatable aspect (*PR* 240ff.) – and the “realm” or “multiplicity” of eternal objects (*SMW* 200; *PR* 29–31): actual entities are always unrepeatable for they result from the (positive and negative) prehension of their past totality (*PR* 23, 41–42): subsuming the entirety of the universe within their own “concrecence”, they cannot occur as isolated determinations in multiple spatio-temporal contexts. On the other hand, eternal objects are repeatable as “potentialities” forming a hierarchy of increasing abstraction (*SMW* 208–209); a hierarchy whose “ingression” through “conceptual prehension” represents the basis for determining the unique configurations of actualities (*PR* 27, 239ff., 257).

But even if such an association seems possible due to a structural similarity between the respective systems, this affinity can only be extended to a limited degree. As Rorty points out, the key difference between the two perspectives is that Whitehead does not share Bradley's “reductionist” tendency, which he inherits from both the empiricist and idealist traditions. According to this view, philosophical speculation is restricted to the horizon of repeatability, in the preliminary recognition that it cannot, by its very nature, describe the immediate horizon of subjective experience without implying contradiction.

Reductionism, as I shall use the term, is the position which adopts what Whitehead calls “the (unreformed) subjectivist principle” – the principle that “the datum in the act of experience can be adequately analysed purely in terms of universals” (*PR* 239). Holding to this principle, and defining a “universal” as “that which can enter into the description of many particulars” (*PR* 76), leads to the dissolution of particularity itself. [...] Making a virtue of necessity, reductionism then claims that particularity is either unknowable or unreal. The history of philosophy since Descartes [...] is the history of the failure of

¹² Rorty continues: “The substance-property framework, which philosophical thought has taken over from ordinary language, leads us to think of everything to which we refer as either a substance or a property of a substance. The distinction between a substance and a property is the distinction between what is in principle unrepeatable and what is in principle repeatable, for substances are the referents of proper names, and properties the referents of predicates.”

reductionism – of the foredoomed attempt to develop an adequate cosmology with only one type of basic entity – *viz.*, repeatable entities. The notion of an “unrepeatable entity” has, since Descartes, been taken to be an absurdity, and the admission that such entities exist has been taken as either a proof of scepticism or the mark of an “incomplete” analysis – which is why the Cartesian tradition can end only in Humean scepticism or Bradleyan idealism. (*Matter and Event* 71).¹³

If Bradley’s philosophy can be traced back to a tradition of Cartesian descent, which was committed to the task of sublimating particularity into universality, and ultimately arrived at sceptical or agnostic conclusions, Whitehead, on the other hand, should be seen as the author who rejected reductionism and assumed a “realist” approach. He argues that the description of prehensive experience is possible to a significant degree of approximation, thanks to the existence of an *hylomorphic* structure of distinct categorical levels irreducible to one another: precisely the chain of unrepeatable actual entities and the realm of repeatable eternal objects.

Every actual entity, being constituted by the totality of its past “prehensions”, can be conceptually determined to the extent that it achieves “satisfaction” through the actualization of corresponding eternal objects. With reference to the topic of relational complexes, it follows that it is possible to understand an experienced contrast in terms of a mentally represented configuration of eternal objects, thereby eliminating the incompatibility between the particularity of concrete facts and the universality of the corresponding concepts. Contrasts – complexes or *nexi* of actualities gathered into an internally related unity – which are inconceivable in the framework of Bradley’s theory, become in Whitehead conceptually penetrable and effectively thinkable elements.

This view allows Whitehead to develop his cosmological vision of the universe, which presupposes the ontological relevance of eternal objects in processual development. In so doing, Whitehead posits a real correlation between actual reality and the

¹³ The point was similarly expressed in the 1963 article, in terms of the substance-predicate dichotomy: “Now when we think about knowing, we are led to the conception of the experiencing subject as a substance having, among its properties, mental states. When we ask for the relation of these states to that which is known, it appears natural to say that what we know are other substances. But these mental states are not substances. They must, then, be representations of substances. But our mental states, being properties of a substance, are in principle repeatable. So if they are representations, it seems that they can represent nothing but what is itself repeatable”. [...] [This] led straight to Lockean paradox. For if the experience of substances discloses only repeatables, then substances, since they are unrepeatables, are not disclosed in experience. So [...] they do not exist. But if substances do not exist, what does? Not merely properties, one would think, for properties are properties of substances. But then what? The history of attempts to answer this question is a history of attempts to fall back on The Unknowable (Locke’s “I know not what”, Kant’s Noumenon, Bradley’s Absolute, and the like), and thus to tacitly betray Descartes-alternating with attempts to envisage a world of properties-without-substances. Neither sort of attempt can succeed.” (134–135).

conceptual dimension, formulated in accordance with the ontological principle: "there is nothing but actual entities – nothing either in fact or in efficacy" (40). The universe is simply a "solidarity of many actual entities" (41), and these entities are the only ultimate "reasons" (25). What Bradley saw as an epistemological dualism, which led to the opposition of immediate experience and knowledge, sensitivity and reason, nullifying one with respect to the other and decreeing the unknowability of the world in its unitary character; becomes for Whitehead a pluralist ontology centred on the immanent interpenetration of eternal objects within the level of actualities, avoiding the sceptical outcomes of the cartesian tradition.

4. SCEPTICAL CONCLUSIONS

Yet, the issue that emerges from Whitehead's misunderstanding of Bradley's critique is whether such a cosmological description is ultimately intelligible, given that it presupposes both progressively related actualities and internally related ideas (Johnson 286). If we take up Bradley's thesis about the universality of the objects of thought, Whitehead's path toward the unity of the levels of experience becomes difficult to pursue¹⁴. In particular, if Bradley's aporias are indeed valid, they imply that both (a) the process of prehensions and (b) the relations established between eternal objects would lead to contradiction, thus compromising the solidity of the philosophy of organism.

In the first case (a), Hartshorne's valid point, that the asymmetrical relationality adopted by Whitehead marks a significant turning point in the history of thought, offers little reassurance. Although it is true that the process of prehension is based on a type of relationality not thoroughly considered by Bradley, the problem of the conceivability of relations does not appear to be so easily resolved.

The asymmetrical character of Whitehead concrescence is due to the fact that every actual entity (A) depends on its prehended contents (B), but these contents can be conceived independently of the actuality they are prehended from. The relation from A to B is internal because B represents an essential constituent of A; but the relation from B to A is external because B exists without A and is therefore autonomous.

Now, the fact that term A is internally related to term B, while B has an external relation with A, does not eliminate the risk of regress, but makes it internal or external depending on the direction considered. On the one hand, the independence of B with respect to A prevents the possibility of establishing a relation that is not external, so that the relation R connecting B to A is configured as a third term, causing the regress. On the other hand, the inclusion of B in A is inconceivable unless a distinction is made between the essence of A and its relational nature. As Whitehead rightly observes, Bradley reduces internal relations to a form of

¹⁴ For similar conclusions, see Basile 132–133.

Newtonian externality, with the result that relations, regardless of their type, ultimately reveal an externality that prevents the authentic connection of the relata. For Bradley, the alternative hypothesis of a truly internal relation amounts to nothing more than contradiction: the Megarian paradox in which distinct terms, brought together in a single conceptual unity, are simply identified, leading to the loss of their specific conceptual determinacy.

[...] starting with A thought will externally be driven to B, and seeking to unite these it will find no ground of union. Thought can of itself supply no internal bond by which to hold them together, nor has it any internal diversity by which to maintain them apart. It must therefore seek barely to identify them, though they are different [...]. (AR 504)

The consequence is that the relation of inclusion of B in A becomes inconceivable: if, insofar as it is internal, it is conceived externally, it falls into the principle of fission; if internality is conceived as identification, it results in plain contradiction.

Certainly, the asymmetrical nature of the relation between the actual entity and its content – which ultimately boils down to a part-whole relationship – has the effect of making Bradley's argument somewhat inelegant and rather cumbersome, requiring him to specify the clause of the verse of the relation in order to determine the internality or externality of the regress. But however much the argument loses its simplicity, it still highlights the difficulty of fully understanding the concept of relation as such, without assuming it as a factual observation or an empirical presupposition – a particular fact that, to an intellect universal in nature, is just to be assumed as 'given'. Thus, as far as its comprehensibility is concerned, the process of actual entities and the movement of concrescence remains – if Bradley's considerations are considered to be valid – a somewhat opaque and ultimately intellectually inaccessible theory.

Furthermore, even if one were to endorse Hartshorne's hypothesis that asymmetrical relations might offer an alternative immune to Bradley's regress, the issue of how (b) a realm of potentialities grounded in internal relations can be coherently conceived remains unsolved. Given that the realm of eternal objects is a totality of ideas, constituting a constellation of terms internally related to form different contrasting groups – or rather, different groups of contrasts – it follows the impossibility of conceiving the unity of groups while maintaining the conceptual autonomy of the unified terms, without falling back into the Megarian paradox.

In *Whitehead and Bradley: A Comparative Analysis*¹⁵, McHenry suggests that the abstractive hierarchy by which eternal objects are ordered precludes the possibility of infinite regress by positing a minimal level of complexity:

¹⁵ Analytic discussions about possible similarities between Bradley and Whitehead as well as their different role in the history of philosophy can be found in Whittemore, Basile's *Why did Bradley matter to Whitehead?* and James Bradley's *The Critique of Pure Feeling*.

Whitehead proposes the idea of an abstractive hierarchy where eternal objects are ordered in terms of grades of complexity. At the base of the hierarchy, there are eternal objects whose individual essences are simple. [...] From the base, grades of complexity are ordered according to the complexity of components, and as we pass from the grade of simple eternal objects to higher and higher grades of complexity, we pass to higher grades of abstraction. (99)

However, this solution is problematic for two reasons. First, such an answer risks being criticized as an *ad hoc* solution, for it falls back on the indivisibility of simple terms to solve the logical problem of the divisibility of relations between terms: the postulate of the indivisibility of the basic level of the eternal objects' structure serves just to prevent the divisibility of higher-order relations.

But more fundamentally, as McHenry himself seems to concede¹⁶, assuming the existence of a set of irreducible elements fails to address the core problem of how two eternal objects can be genuinely connected. If two determinations are assumed to be irreducible, it still follows that a relation (itself an eternal object, as Whitehead acknowledges¹⁷) must connect them, which leads to an infinite chain of relations as soon as it becomes clear that the relational eternal object is not conceivable as in itself relating. In fact, the eternal relational object is a "repeatable universal", therefore a term *between* terms, which implies other relations in order to effectively connect the distinct conceptual contents. Conversely, if one maintains *a priori* that no regress occurs by assuming a minimal level of complexity, the result is that, given the impossibility of establishing further relations, the two elements remain unconnected.

At this point, it will be objected, according to Whitehead's argument, that the relational units of eternal objects shouldn't be considered as united by relational terms, for they rather constitute contrasts, whose unity is the actual fact of their concrete togetherness; and it is therefore inappropriate to consider the *nexi* of eternal objects as complexes held together by external relations, as such exposed to the problem of regress. But even if we assume that the connection between distinct terms constitutes a contrast without implying external relations, this does not explain how the relational unity can be conceived without falling into the contradiction denounced by Bradley: again, the impossibility of representing the unity without identifying its terms or denying their conceptual determinacy. "How can thought unite except so far as in itself it has a mode of union? To unite without an internal

¹⁶ "The problem with this solution, from Bradley's point of view, is that the postulation of a base of simple essences does not prevent such eternal objects from fracturing into further parts once they are viewed as related. A simple eternal object is still a quality that must be conceived in its relation to other eternal objects, and as related, it must involve parts, namely, the fission of further qualities and relations that results from the initial relation." (100).

¹⁷ See the whole discussion of the problem in *SMW* 204ff.

ground of connexion and distinction is to strive to bring together barely in the same point, and that is self-contradiction” (*Appearance* 505)¹⁸.

Ultimately, the category of contrast, equivalent to a complex of internally connected terms, seems to constitute more a declaration of intent than a logically sustainable solution; more a re-proposal of the problem than an alternative to the hypotheses Bradley considered. In fact, the idea of internal relation defended by Whitehead as an alternative to the Newtonian paradigm constitutes precisely the case of particularity in relation to which the Oxonian concludes inconceivability: it is the idea of a connected whole of determinations held together and constituting a fact of experience, but whose unity remains a problem for an intellect capable to conceive only in universal terms and by positing external relations. To recall the aforementioned example, Boston, New York and Philadelphia may form a contrast particular in kind and unrepeatable in number, a specific space-time occasion which is given as a real event; but to an intellectual understanding universal in kind such as Bradley’s, its nothing but a problematic unity of instances to be connected through a universal term purposely posited to join them.

Thus, the conclusion to be drawn is that it is impossible to verify both the thinkability of the concrete elements constituting the series of prehensions and the possibility of establishing relations among the abstract determinations whose ingression enables the development of the process. Before being ontological, the problem is epistemological: the inconceivability of relations undermines our ability to fully grasp the universe as portrayed by Whitehead. The coherence of his cosmological framework relies on the conceivability of the very relations upon which it is built. Consequently, their incomprehensibility casts doubt on the intelligibility of the systematic whole they are meant to structure. As W. Urban aptly observed, it seems that: “[...] *Process and Reality* is a magnificent attempt to expound the unintelligible and to express the inexpressible” (637).

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¹⁸ Bradley seems to foresee the Whiteheadian objection: “‘But’, I shall be told, ‘you misrepresent the case. What is offered is not the elements apart, nor the elements plus an external bond, but the elements together and in conjunction.’ Yes, I reply, but the question is how thought can think what is offered. [...] if the sensible bonds of union fall outside the inner nature of thought, just as much as do the sensible terms which they outwardly conjoin – the case surely is different. Then forced to distinguish and unable to conjoin, by its own proper nature, or with a reason, thought is confronted by elements, that strive to come together without a way of union. The sensible conjunctions remain for thought mere other elements in the congeries, themselves failing in connexion and external to others. And, on the other hand, driven to unite without internal distinction thought finds in this attempt a self-contradiction.” (504–505).

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