

relational ontology in nietzsche: an introduction

riccardo carli

WHY RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

Although intriguing, the association between Nietzsche and Relational Ontology (RO) is rarely discussed in the scholarly literature. A notable exception to this rule is Matthew Meyer who has recently advanced a` captivating account of this association¹. Meyer aims to mediate between two polarizing positions within Nietzsche scholarship—naturalism, as defended by Leiter, versus Nehamas' aestheticism—proposing instead what he calls a “naturalized aestheticism”. In this context, RO is the key concept: in his support for it, Nietzsche proves to be neither a pure aestheticist nor a pure naturalist. Meyer describes RO as the Heraclitean ontology of Becoming, which is the type of ontology Nietzsche explicitly supports²: Heraclitus was the first to deny the existence of anything self-identical (Parmenides' Being), refusing at the same time every transcendental source of Becoming (like Anaximander's Indefinite). From a Heraclitean viewpoint, the world is sustained by relations, rather than substances. In the first place, Meyer contends, RO seems an aestheticist position since it respects Nehamas' two pillars of aestheticism; namely that the world is indeterminate and that it may be interpreted in terms of aesthetic categories. Nietzsche, however, does not consider it merely one of the infinite possible ontologies. As a naturalist, he seeks scientific proof of this vision, turning to a series of contemporary physicists and biologists,

the most important of whom is probably Roger Boscovich (BGE 12)³. Meyer summarizes this position in the following terms:

Nietzsche's Heraclitus sees the world according to the aesthetic category of play (a version of the second pillar), rather than the moral categories of good and evil. On the other hand, Nietzsche's Heraclitus understands the world as one in which everything exists and is what it is only in relation to something else, and so the most fundamental entities of the world, considered in themselves, are essentially indeterminate (a version of the first pillar). Although he merely describes Heraclitus's views in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age*, Nietzsche eventually appropriates this Heraclitean ontology in his later works by turning to the natural sciences for support. Since Nietzsche appeals to the natural sciences to justify key features of an aesthetic worldview, there is reason to think of Nietzsche's project in terms of what I call a naturalized aestheticism.⁴

In other words, Nietzsche uses scientific results (instead of metaphysical ones), in order to justify the practice of art (interpretations) as an affirmative tool of existence.

With Meyer, I contend that this anti-substantivist position that Nietzsche shares with Heraclitus is best described as a relational ontology. The evidence of Becoming does not allow for any stable individuality: without fixed *relata*, the subsistence of the world must be guaranteed by relations. We can understand the basic commitments of a relational ontology as consisting in the assumption "that the relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves." By contrast, a substantivist ontology takes entities to be ontologically primary, and casts relations as derivative.⁵

RO is therefore a vision of the world in which Being and all its declinations—such as individual, thing-in-itself, subjects or objects, ultimate truth—lose their ontological subsistence and primacy. Reality is not to be understood as an organisation of discrete unities, but is seen in its relational structure and dynamical development, in which every apparent unit is merely an intellectual simplification. Everything that exists is a combination of innumerable influences, a sort of unstable totality, always subject to becoming: our limited perspective does not succeed in grasping it as a complex of drives. Relationships, rather than things, constitute the basic structure of the world, the network which gives consistence

to reality⁶. In addition, it is important to emphasize, as Meyer does, the artistic nature of RO⁷, so as to avoid every metaphysical over-evaluation of the concept. For reasons that will become clear, RO is only tacitly endorsed by Nietzsche⁸, especially in his unpublished notebooks and in association with the ‘dynamic quanta theory.’⁹ In the published oeuvre, Nietzsche preferred to prudentially substitute, translate or symbolize it, with the theory of will to power¹⁰ (BGE 36, GM-II 12).

In this article, my aim is to test Meyer’s hypothesis of a Nietzschean RO, precisely understood within its Heraclitean semantic realm. I will offer a broad overview of this theme, in order to unearth its potentiality. To this extent, I will first discuss some aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy that lend support to Meyer’s hypothesis, but which Meyer does not discuss. I will then present some of the most common problems associated with RO, and address Nietzsche’s possible responses to them.

In summary, this article seeks to contribute to the project of legitimizing a description of Nietzsche’s ontological commitments in relational terms.

While Meyer gives credibility to the idea of a Nietzschean relational ontology, he does not explain how things work within a relational world. That is why a reference to Ciano Aydin will be fundamental too. Aydin proposes a so-called ‘organization-struggle model’¹¹: in Nietzsche’s ontology, the world of forces is not only characterized by struggle between the innumerable wills to power, but also by a certain grade of organization. Aydin names these organized complexes ‘will to power organizations’: reality is constituted by infinite, variable and relational multiplicities of will to power, which arrange themselves, decay and rearrange. The essence of power is a striving for expansion: sometimes this expansion is obtainable only by accepting a hierarchy, a sort of meta-stable organization of wills, in which it can be useful to play a secondary role. These organizations are characterized by unstable internal equilibrium (the struggle of wills never ends) and external relations with others complexes. In this manner, the process (or illusion) of individuation finds its rationale as well: individuation is the apprehension as a whole of these will to power organizations, bypassing their constitutive struggle. Aydin provides a useful twofold model. On the one hand, it casts a light on the dynamics within a relational world, explaining the persistence of our illusions of stability, unity, principle of non-contradiction, durability and so on¹². On the other hand, it clarifies how Nietzsche dismantles substance thinking: will to power is just a directedness, without a primary cause or a final goal. Its very expres-

sion allows the appearance of will to power complexes, which do not annul the struggle, but rather constitute its meta-stable organization. In this sense Becoming (namely, the evidence of the world) includes Being (our illusions of stability).

In this paper, Aydin's model will play an important role, as theoretical background for many responses to RO-related problems. However, while Aydin considers absolute novelty problematic and thinks that a certain kind of Aristotelian 'potentiality' is necessary to justify it,¹³ I try to avoid this conclusion by appealing to the example of Gauguin's *Christmas Night*: here, the world-Gauguin (with 'World' I understand something very similar to Aydin's idea of will to power organization) meets the world-Marquises Island and produces the world-Christmas Night. This latter is not only the composition of the first two, but it represents a genuine novelty since it enters in relation with a third 'World', the art-world: only in connection with this latter is it considered a masterpiece, therefore ontologically unique. Meyer and Aydin thus represent two of the most important references I use in order to legitimate a reading of Nietzsche in terms of Relational Ontology. Although RO is not an idea commonly associated with Nietzsche, I think it can represent an innovative perspective, with a series of unexplored potentialities.

Firstly, it can become a valuable point of coagulation, a ground for a great number of Nietzsche's claims: his refusal of any priority of Being, his non-systematic tendency, his non-absolute perspectivism, his skepticism regarding the linguistic effect of simplification, his antipathy to every Truth-system (from Christianity and idealism, to passive nihilism). Secondly, this position creates opportunities for new philosophical reflections and comparisons, creating a communal language for previously unrelated issues. On the one hand, it is possible to test Nietzsche's thought within the problematic horizon of RO, which is the aim of the following discussion. On the other hand, it facilitates a comparison with other traditions and philosophers commonly associated with RO: not only some Indian or Chinese lines of thought, but also a deeply-rooted western tradition, which goes at least from Plotinus, through Meister Eckhart and Spinoza, up to Deleuze and Foucault. Although RO is in itself an interpretation (and therefore fictional and perfectible), it can become the background for the creation of always new philosophical experiments in concept creation. This is its third and most important potentiality. If the ambition is to play the game of the world without seeking refuge in any anthropomorphisms, RO can be the theoretical premise which supports such a goal. Indeed, RO not only allows, but also encourages the free spirit to be creative. It is therefore a good ally in the endeavor to pursue one of Nietzsche's most im-

portant aims: to educate future free spirits, and make them possible.

Let us begin by listing six Nietzschean claims, which seem particularly well suited to being interpreted in terms of a RO: (1) Nietzsche gives an ontological priority to Becoming, instead of the static conception of Being (PTA 5, HH 2). As a direct consequence, he treats as an illusion—that is: showing its relational and genealogical structure—every thing-in-itself or monolithic concept, every duality subject/object, every uncontested truth or fixed standpoint¹⁴, giving very few credits to philosophical positions like those of materialism and determinism¹⁵. (2) He recognizes that Becoming expresses itself through relations: if there are no fixed things, relations should be the ‘reality’ which sustains the structure of the world, which feeds the illusory images of stability that we have, which allows us to think the world as an organisation of discrete matter: nevertheless, under every apparent mass there are only bundles of relations (NF-72 19[236], NF-81 11[36], NF-88 14[93] etc.). (3) He exalts the endless dynamical development of reality, avoiding every illusion of stability. That is why Nietzsche can celebrate processes like those of play, war or struggle (PTA 5-7, HC, HH 170, BGE 259, GM-I 13 etc.). (4) He maintains that human intellectual activity is a production of simplifications (PTA 5, TL 1, GS 110-112, TI ‘reason’ 2, WP 556), a continuous process of complication, starting from some original errors (HH 11 and 19). The world emerges as the summation of the various kinds of relations we have with our environment (NF-80 6[441]). Nonetheless, we have a limited understanding of this process, since we guess the world from a corner (WP 567): it is impossible for us to reach a cosmic perspective, in which all the relational links are considered together; moreover, in that hypothetical case of complete knowledge, action would be impossible. We can call this limiting situation ‘perspectivism’ (GM-III 12), which is therefore both a physical and existential need, even though not an ontological one¹⁶. (5) He assumes that language is the basis of this illusion, as a series of necessary metaphors, which try to crystallize the underlying relations (PTA 11, TL 1, TI ‘reason’ 5). (6) He recognizes a net or web of relationships, namely a general connection between everything and between times¹⁷.

SEVEN PROBLEMS OF NIETZSCHE’S RELATIONAL ONTOLOGY

Whoever endorses an ontology based on relations faces a range of problems. I will roughly list here seven of the most pressing, leaving for the next paragraph the discussion of Nietzsche’s possible responses.

The first issue is that of coherence, and it is problematic above all for Nietzsche: is 'relational ontology' a logical oxymoron, especially for a philosopher who refuses every metaphysical explanation of the world? Related to this, there is the problem of thought. Indeed, there is a cognitive limit within a RO: in order to be thought, every relation requires some relata. This is a hurdle often treated by critics, for example by Poellner, who exposes it in this manner: "Relations require relata, and there can only be such if they have some non-extrinsic properties."¹⁸ Even more pertinent to Nietzsche, there is what we can call the problem of knowledge in general. RO reduces the known (individualities) to the unknown (relational structure), and it is clearly in conflict with Nietzsche's general working assumption that knowledge is the reduction of the unknown to the known (GS 111 and 355, TI 'errors' 5). These two problems, of thought and knowledge, are what Meyer refers to as the double scepticism regarding a RO:

Because it presents a world of relations without pre-existing relata, such an ontology creates a disjunction between the way we think and speak and the way the world is ... The second form of scepticism is explanatory. According to Nietzsche, knowledge requires the reduction of the unfamiliar to the familiar such that the former is explained in terms of the latter.¹⁹

The fourth problem is more strictly ontological, since it touches on the huge issue of emergentism: how is the emergence of something new possible, something ontologically different from all the other things, if the relational system allows only the recombination of its materials, namely the relations themselves? The theory of power quanta alone does not explain how a novelty can emerge. Moreover, if the organisation-struggle model is valid, how can Nietzsche explain causation and consciousness?

Then, there is the problem of persistence: how can a RO explain the sensation I have of being the same person through time, the same thing? Moreover, if it is true that I desire my own increase of power, it means that something of me will remain the same through time²⁰. As Aydin puts it: "If all reality is continuous interaction among 'will to power' organizations, how then is it possible that we seem to perceive durability? And if that interaction has no teleological character, how then is it possible that we seem to find regularity in the world?"²¹

Once the role of relations is accepted, the question of their existence remains: do relations really exist or are they only an attribute of language, an explicative

simplification? In fact, whether they really exist or not, the mere fact that they are recognisable by us means that they acquire again a sort of individuation, in contradiction with their own nature.

Finally, a problem of reductionism must be faced: even though the concept of relations does not give rise to any problems, what about their description in terms of will to power? Once we reduce the logic of relations to this single drive, or single concept, do we re-introduce a misleading simplification?

NIETZSCHE'S RESPONSES

Nietzsche would answer in an affirmative way to the problem of coherence: 'relational ontology' is probably an oxymoron but, as I suggest below, a linguistic contradiction does not necessarily represent a contradiction in reality as well. The logical structure of language does not allow us to recognize a relation without some objects in reciprocal connection. Nietzsche's challenge is to figure out if intuition (more specifically, corporeal or physiological intuition) can succeed where intellect and logic fail. In fact, it is true that language is the main instrument for the expression of thought, but we can nonetheless wonder whether this thought is something more, or deeper, than its linguistic rendering. Moreover, we can wonder why Nietzsche studied Bosovich, Roux or Mayer, if RO was only a nonsensical oxymoron, a metaphorical speech or a mental exercise. There was a time, during the so-called middle period, in which Nietzsche even tried to find scientific proofs of his vision. Between *Human, All too Human* and the *Gay Science*, the combination of philosophical view and physical research allows Nietzsche to develop a description of the world, the nearest possible to RO. The insuperable final obstacle seemed to be the impossibility of translating it in all its depth and formulating a doctrine. In this regard, Meyer writes:

Nietzsche openly acknowledges that Heraclitus's relational ontology resists conceptualization and creates a disjunction between the laws of thought and the way the world is ... So although we may not be able to think a world in which relations do not supervene on pre-existing relata, Nietzsche argues that there is no good reason to believe that the limitations of our thinking must also be the limitations of reality."²²

Cognitive organisation is therefore fallacious, and our intellect grasps reality only through simplifications.²³ But the question now is: once we recognize these limits,

is it possible to see something beyond the boundaries? It seems another insurmountable contradiction, but it is precisely the attempt made by Nietzsche²⁴: he recognizes individuation and logical-linguistic simplification as our limits, but the push of his particular will to power, what he would call his ‘instinct of truth’, forces him to think beyond these limits. As is well known, the path he found was that of metaphorical and poetical speech, as is evident in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*. He had no other communicative tool besides language (GS 93): with poetry, inspiring images and physiological suggestions, he tried to go beyond linguistic limits.

In addition to this linguistic impossibility there is also a sort of existential impossibility: our simplifications have a primary importance for our survival and flourishing: they are fundamental for our action into the world (NF-72 19[64], HH ‘Preface’ 1, BGE 4 and 24, NF-85 34[253]). That is probably one of the reasons for Nietzsche’s discretion regarding RO: a full acknowledgement would be, rather than impossible, an obstacle to life. What would it be to live beyond these limits, in a world of relations instead of individualities? For instance, it would probably be a life beyond the principle of non-contradiction, since we would not recognize any discrete object, any ‘A’, and the comparison between two distinct objects, or the same object in different times, would be a non-sense. So far, we have recognized that RO is an oxymoron, both from a linguistic and from an existential point of view. Nevertheless, this problematic dimension is surmountable in a twofold way: from the viewpoint of a scientific and physical analysis of reality and via a metaphorical and poetical speech. Nietzsche attempts both.

As regards Nietzsche’s firm refusal of metaphysics, it is important to underline one of the possible differentiations between metaphysics and ontology. In general, the first is firmly condemned by Nietzsche (HH §18), the second—even though *Ontologie* is a word cited only a couple of times in Nietzsche’s entire *oeuvre*—could be considered a polished name for his ‘view from above’ attitude: one of the most important features of the free spirit, as discussed in the section titled *Wir Gelehrten* (in particular BGE 205, but already in BGE 30). The difference between them lies, first of all, in the approach: metaphysics is an *a priori* approach to reality²⁵, since it wants to explain the latter using an explicative principle, idea or faith, as a rule for the phenomenological expression. On the other side, ontology uses an *a posteriori* approach: in order to understand reality at the highest grade possible, it tries to consider the entire event of our existence, drawing a collective picture of our experiences, our way of organizing the world, our intellectual limits etc. The first is a philosophy that wants to stand before the world, as an

indisputable explanation of it; the second comes after the world, as the best possible description²⁶ (GS 112). I find an implicit agreement on this, even in those philosophers who try to give a new vitality to the metaphysical enterprise. Just take, for instance, Lowe's triple definition of metaphysics²⁷: metaphysics is seen as the "science of essence" and "the study of the most fundamental structure of reality as a whole", but the median term is that it is "the systematic exploration of the bounds of possibilities." This account does not contradict my differentiation between metaphysics and ontology in terms of approach: so much so that Lowe's antidote against metaphysical scepticism is "simply trying it for yourself [...]. My advice is: just pursue these arguments and see where they lead you."²⁸ One could say that the positive philosophy of Nietzsche is, to the same extent, an exploration among others, and one would surely be right. The difference lies precisely in how one approaches this exploration: what historically concerns metaphysics has ever suffered what we can call the risk of faith. On the contrary, Nietzsche's ontological approach, as we have connoted it, exalts the honesty of the vision, instead of its *aura*. As imaginable, we must therefore apply a particular care in reading Nietzsche's later philosophy, where his most famous ideas stand as explicative ontological concepts, instead of metaphysical principles²⁹. Nietzsche's position regarding physics is explicative of this difference. There are few doubts that physics, during the last two centuries, has taken on the task of the ontological description of the world: Nietzsche is probably one of the first philosophers who understands this and tries to follow physics. The studies of Boscovich and Mayer are, therefore, an example of Nietzsche's attempt to remain up-to-date. The outline and the forecast of what Nietzsche calls "historical philosophy" (HH 1) is the result of this attitude. In general, the attempt made by the Nietzsche of the middle period—to outline a joyful science—is at the same time an effort to look at the world besides (HH 16) and despite human simplifications (BGE 24, BGE 34): this science represents the last possible devotion (GS 344) for a free spirit, and physics has probably the right approach, in this sense³⁰. However, once we have distinguished metaphysics from ontology, and once we have recognized that Nietzsche refused every metaphysic but had an ontological approach, a problem remains. It seems a real paradox that Nietzsche endorses an ontology which refuses metaphysics but, at the same time, entails a dimension we cannot clearly identify: that of pure relations. Here we have to confront a second group of problems, those we related to thought and knowledge.

As regards thought, it is important to remember that Nietzsche does not think that the limits of thought must be the limits of reality as well (PTA 11, HH 19)³¹.

Human intellect has developed with a specific aim: to find meaning in the world and to guarantee the possibility of life. That is why its activity is self-referential and, in general, its outcomes are nothing but simplifications. This implies that 'relation requires relata', while a necessity of thought, need not be a necessity of reality: the possibility of a RO is therefore safe, probably ungraspable at a logical level, but deducible from a contingent point of view. More specifically, scholars like Aydin³² have underlined the role of organisation: there are, indeed, different levels and stratifications of relations. The phenomenology of relations, which we can translate with that of will to power, shows how those power quanta can organise themselves into groups. Our simplifying tendency starts to consider this bundle of relations as a whole, as if it had always been a single unique thing: this thing 'appears' to us as independent, with its own properties, and it exists for us 'as if' these properties are its stable essence. Nevertheless, looking at it with a genealogical gaze, we can find that these properties are only the summation, or a sort of representation, of those original and constitutive relations, now apparently deposited and fixed (GS 110). For Nietzsche, the lack of fixity does not mean that the 'thing' is not real, or inconsistent (NF-81 13[11]). This is precisely what we cannot figure out: how something can subsist without any proper matter, or relata. Nevertheless, this relational object in a relational world plays its role and maintains its rapport with everything else in its environmental net, succeeding in expressing its will to power. Therefore, there is no apparent difference between the behaviours of a 'relational' thing and that of a 'substantial' one: we can continue to treat the former as if it was an example of the latter.

In order to answer to the problem of knowledge, it is important to remember that simplifications and illusions have an evolutionary and vital role in human existence (HH 31, BGE 4). It would be impossible for us to grasp the entire relational background of every event, because the entire world and all temporal configurations are interconnected. Decision and action would be impossible for us in such a situation of acknowledgement: there would be too many variables to consider, too much responsibility to bear (D 116 and 128, TI 'errors' 7-8). That is why simplification has been the basis for our success in this world, our tool in order to act and survive within natural constraints. This caveat means that a life following a RO would have been impossible. Another approach to the problem of knowledge is Meyer's, who exalts the role of will to power³³: it is a single explicative concept, which precisely reduces the unfamiliar world of relations to a familiar one (BGE 9, 36 and 211). In this sense, will to power is the comprehensible concept that translates the underlying relational structure of the world, drawing

a graspable image of it, an interpretation. Another possible Nietzschean response should be focused on so-called non-linguistic or corporeal knowledge. This type of knowledge is very important to Nietzsche, Consider, for example, Nietzsche's description of the Dionysian side of Greek tragedy³⁴ (BT 1) or the wise type's features, such as his model of behaviour (which includes look, attitude, habits, food. See SaE 3), his *askesis* (the mastery reached when knowledge is so thoroughly embodied that it becomes an instinct, D 537) or the ancient corporeal way of reading (BGE 247). Furthermore, consider the poetical structure of *Thus spoke Zarathustra*: when Nietzsche wants to transmit his “deepest” and “whole” philosophy (NL-83 §427) he tries to find images for his thought, instead of formulating a doctrine. As already noted, Nietzsche was fascinated by the possibility of a corporeal or instinctive knowledge (he would say ‘physiological’), because it can bypass the limits of language (it conveys something that cannot be completely expressed by words, which always remain just an “army of metaphors”, TL 1). Now as then, the problem is rather how to build such knowledge: is it still a mission for art, as the young Nietzsche believed while in the grip of his Wagnerian illusion?

There are some scholars who maintain that RO, with its system of organisations, presents a particular hurdle, since it wouldn't allow any ontological novelty: this is the issue usually called emergentism. How is novelty possible if everything is only a combination of previous relations? This is the question raised by Santos, who affirms that:

the notion of organization by itself is not enough, and that ontological emergence can only be justified by assuming a relational ontological perspective that, in opposition both to atomism and holism, defends that the existence-conditions, the identity and the causal behaviour of any emergent systemic property can only be conceived, and explained, as constructed by and through specific networks of qualitatively transformative relational processes that occur between the system's components and between the system and its environment.³⁵

Even though Santos ultimately accepts the co-existence of relations and relata³⁶, there is a way to think of novelty only from a relational point of view, using the ‘organisation’ model. Indeed, in a relational world the general configuration changes every moment, so we can say that the same action or event would be ontologically different, whether it appears now, a minute ago, or tomorrow. The summation of relations constituting every event changes constantly, so it is possible to say that

the event is precisely itself only within the precise environment and time it takes place: one minute ago or one minute later would entail a completely different event, even though our eye does not perceive the ontological difference. This ontological difference entails the possibility of novelty, as well: since together, two bundles of relations become something new, thanks to their original link.

Let us take a macroscopic example: imagine Gauguin and his famous *Christmas Night*. We can easily reconstruct the particular existential relations which give life to that ontologically unique masterpiece: indeed, we can recognize both elements from Provence (oxen, snow, smoking roofs) and from the new exotic world (people's features and the odd nativity scene), experienced by the artist during his last years in Polynesia. Gauguin, with his particular European background, finds in the Marquesas Islands the unspoiled suggestions he is looking for, and his artistic flair produces this curious and unique syncretism. It is clear that the *Christmas Night* can be ontologically considered an 'organisation' of relations: innumerable and very different impulses are necessary for its birth. Nonetheless, it is a real and new picture, with its own characteristics: it is an ontological novelty, into the objects and artworks' panorama. But when and how the world-Gauguin meets the world-Marquesas Island is fundamental for the painting *Christmas Night*, as we know it. Indeed, just imagine that the painter arrives over there before the Spanish discovery, when the local population still flourished, or that he arrives by plane as a common tourist: the contact between the two worlds would be completely different, and so Gauguin's masterpiece would be different³⁷. Something ontologically new can arise from the combination of different 'worlds'—and, by definition, every bundle of relations differs from the others. Still following the artistic metaphor, reality works as an artistic exposition does. In order to create an original event, the fundamental thing for a curator is the choice regarding the presentation of the artworks: 'this picture must have a dialogue with that statue', 'these two images should be matched together', 'this general impression has to emerge from the relational path of knowledge I am suggesting'.

That is how we can figure out a dynamical configuration of the world, where every moment has the power to essentially change the whole, and where the innumerable possibilities of development of a minute ago radically differ from the innumerable possibilities of development of the present—and it is true even without human acknowledgement: our simplifying attitude forces us to consider the world of a minute ago as almost identical to the present one³⁸. In this sense, and without our acknowledgment, relations originate *relata*, and *relata* are continu-

ously in relation. It means that it is still an error to think of relation ‘and’ relata, as two entities, which search for harmony. As Santos says, these two dimensions are logically co-essential, but I would underline ‘logically’. From a relational point of view, Santos’ final acceptance of the subsistence of both is not acceptable. If you accept both relations and relata you remain in a non-relational world, composed by substances and individuation. It is precisely the problem of language, as Nietzsche presents it: a relation is recognizable for us only when we succeed in treating it as something in relation, namely as a relata. Once again, our logical categorisation forces us to use some individualities, even though we are talking about relations. In order to grasp a relational world, it would be necessary to go beyond language. With regard to causality, it is worth underlining that Nietzsche includes it among the anthropomorphisms (HH 18, GS 112, BGE 21). If it were possible to know the entire relational structure of an event, one would conclude the necessity of its appearance, without any particular cause or will; or better, with a sort of widespread causality (GS 109, CI ‘errors’ 8), where the entire world, of all time, predisposes to that particular event. For its part, consciousness is for Nietzsche one of the latest products of human intellect, which arises when humanity started to live in groups, or societies (GS 11 and 354). At that time, the need to communicate became pressing: in order to survive and flourish, we had to communicate ourselves to other people. The capacity to indicate things and give names to the relations we established within the environment proved to be particularly suitable for the new requirements of social life: as if in front of a mirror, we started to name our own characteristics, states of mind and emotions. If we accept this Nietzschean hypothesis, consciousness cannot be considered something strictly new, or ethically superior. Indeed, it is only the application of an old faculty to a recently acknowledged relational field, the naming process of our own attitude: therefore, it is explicable within a relational ontology.

Let us focus now on the problem of persistence. Nietzsche would probably explain the feeling of persistence in a twofold manner, a specific and a general one. As regards the former, it is important to remember what we said regarding consciousness, as a paradigmatic example of relational environment, perceived as fixed. As noted above, the perception of a unitary consciousness does not imply that this consciousness is non-relational. Let us follow Poellner’s argument:

The case of personal consciousness serves well to illustrate this point. What I am, qua consciousness, at this moment in time, is very largely a matter of actual, conscious relations to particulars that I am aware of as

other than myself-at-this-time: relations to external objects and ‘affordances’ in my environment, to other people, and to people whom I am conscious of as having affected me in various ways in the past. But my consciousness is also essentially characterized by non-actual (‘ideal’) relations to possible future particulars and states of affairs which, with various degrees of explicitness, I expect to encounter or to bring about, and which I am also aware of as other than myself-at-this-time.³⁹

So, in this specific sense, consciousness shows that what we perceive as persistent can conceal a vast number of relational and variable influences, which determine it at every moment. Yet, if we consider the feeling of persistence in a general way, it would be a miraculous and inexplicable sensation only if the relational system involved the ‘entire relata’ all at once. Conversely, it is important to remember the extremely stratified structure of every ‘thing’ within a relational world: every relata remains generally the same at every moment, yet in a continuous becoming. Every new relational input does not influence the whole relata, but only a few of its aspects: after this new influence it is not completely different, but only partially. Or better, every new input changes me totally, because it gives a new shade to the bundle of relations I am, but it does not change me completely, turning me in another different ‘thing’. Let us give an example: during one of my usual strolls, I see a huge stone which looks like a pyramid, and it prompts in me the thought of eternal recurrence (EH ‘Zarathustra’ 1). I am now totally different in comparison to a minute ago, since this new idea changes my perspective on the world; but, at the same time, I am only infinitively different, because what happened was only the production of a new thought, one of many during the day. The point is that I am now a ‘slightly different totality’⁴⁰ in comparison with the previous whole, but I am considerably different in respect to the period I went to school in Pforta, and almost another ‘thing’ if you consider that child who listened to his father’s sermons in Röcken’s church (HH 2, NF-81 11[156]). In more scientific terms, we can say that local changes are compatible with the persistence of the system’s global state⁴¹. Therefore, the fiction—illusion and simplification—of stability can be explained by the organisation model. In fact, this is how Aydin confronts that question:

Nietzsche’s ontology aims to clarify how the processes of individuation proceed—that is, how a variable and relational multiplicity arranges itself, decays, and rearranges itself in different directions and in multifarious ways, how different functions and phenomena form and decay, which we

can see in Nietzsche's conception of organization.⁴²

If this picture is valid, the feeling of persistence finds its explanation within RO: the world continuously influences us, but only gradually changes the organisation of relations we are. The illusion of identity persists, because of the limits of our cognitive power.

Having described the function of relations, Nietzsche has to face the apparent contradiction of their existence: indeed, if relations really exist and we succeed in thinking them, they seem to acquire a new type of individuation. More deeply, this problem is a variation of a bigger one: which Being is possible, within a world of Becoming? Actually, relations play a twofold, seemingly conflictual role: they represent the de-construction of 'matter' and individuation but, at the same time, they are responsible for the subsistence of reality within the new relational world; in both cases, their existence seems self-evident. Why, then, the appearance of that contradiction? Probably, we are too much involved in a vision of the world, which associates Being with 'some-thing'—therefore with the 'existent'—and Becoming with 'no-thing'—as if it means 'no-existence'. Nietzsche develops the idea of a 'being which becomes', beyond the principle of non-contradiction: things of the world continue to have their properties, but these are relational rather than intrinsic⁴³ (NF-81 13[11]). As is well-known, Nietzsche describes the nature and action of relations with a very general term: that of force⁴⁴. The relational system of reality is composed of this force, organised through those un-extended centres described by Boscovich. Now, one can say that the problem is simply shifted, not solved: 'do relations exist?' has become 'does force exist?' On the contrary, Nietzsche does not fall into this sort of Chinese boxes situation: force is force, as long as it is in relation with other forces. Aydin clearly explains this point:

That power is inherently relational implies further that it is characterized by a relation without relata that precede it or that can exist independent of it. Nietzsche's principle of the will to power implies that relation is not an additional element of things but, rather, something that constitutes in a fundamental way what a thing is. In other words, there are no first things, which then have relations with each other; rather, things are what they are by virtue of their relations.⁴⁵

Between forces, or relations, there is a mutual push to existence: the force to overcome doesn't exist if there is not the force to resist (NF-87 9[151], NF-88

14[79]). These types of definition sound similar to those of geometry, where every *locus* is defined by the relations it has with the other parts of the figure: in particular, the centre of a circle is the un-extended point equidistant to every point of the circumference, and it can exist only because of the existence of every other un-extended point. The definition of circle's centre can help to illuminate the centres of force in Nietzsche's ontology: these latter exist thanks to a mutual relationship, with everything else in their environment. As Boscovich had already realized, it is impossible for us to have a clear and sensorial experience of an un-extended point⁴⁶: to the same extent, it is difficult for us to understand and accept a RO. To sum up, the logical nothingness of relations is based on the prejudice that Being and Becoming are incompatible. Once we start to imagine a Being that develops, the space for RO slowly unfolds⁴⁷. Another way to face this problem is proposed by Wildman, who uses causation in order to avoid the conclusion of the nonexistence of relations (a position defended by those he calls strong empiricists). Wildman's argument is that the existence of a causal effect among relations proves their consistency⁴⁸. Nevertheless, a careful interpreter of Nietzsche's RO would ask: which causality are you considering now? Indeed, if you adopt the common understanding of causality—namely the individuation of a single or a few 'reasons', as the driving force of every event—you will fall again into a mental simplification (GS 112, BGE 21). Certainly, it seems unfair to explain an apparent linguistic simplification (relations) with a logical simplification (causality).

In summary, the explanation in terms of mutual dependence casts a light on relations' coming to existence. There are no further basic elements, which push for the appearance of relations or constitute their raw material: relations find their ontological justification between themselves. Here it is useful to read a letter to Peter Gast, dated 16th April 1881 (actually a postcard: NL-81 103). Nietzsche talks about J.R. Mayer's book *Der Mechanik der Wärme*, which Köselitz had given to him. The concept Nietzsche finds useful is that of *Auslösung von Kraft*, which can be described as a sudden release, after a process of growing tension⁴⁹. This idea can cast a preliminary light on the dynamics of a relational world: there is an accumulation of tension between forces, which culminates with an unavoidable release of power⁵⁰.

The last point to consider is that of reductionism. We have already said that will to power is one of the nth possible simplifications. As a free spirit, Nietzsche proposes it, since he cannot find something more, or better: most importantly, will to power is the first philosophical position aware of its limit, and therefore the first

step towards philosophy of the future⁵¹. Will to power is therefore, for Nietzsche, an interpretation among others, since men can do nothing but produce interpretations. For this reason, it remains at the level of description, and never reaches that of explanation. Meyer writes:

I understand the will to power to be something that, to use the language of an oft-cited *Nachlass* fragment, ‘completes’ the dynamic worldview Nietzsche inherits from the natural sciences (WP 619; KSA 11, 36[31]). In this sense, the will to power is something more than the relational ontology of force that the natural sciences justify... Nietzsche seems to think that whenever we begin to explain, rather than merely describe, we necessarily enter into the realm of interpretation. Thus, the will to power—Nietzsche’s primary *explanans*—seems to be an interpretation that transcends the limits of what we can know through empirical observation.⁵²

The role of will to power is important and delicate: it allows us to grasp the underlying relational system of nature, but it does not pretend to be the Truth, in a classic metaphysical sense; moreover, it guarantees the possibility of action, as long as this is understood in terms of Nietzsche’s attempt to ‘say yes’ to the world of Becoming. The free spirit and philosopher of the future must be aware of that. In conclusion, we must stress the following: in spite of the good reasons here exposed, Nietzsche maintains this *Weltanschauung* in the background of his philosophy. He neither coins the term ‘Relational Ontology,’ nor does he endorse it clearly and publically. We have no further space for a better analysis of this choice. Nevertheless, the ground we have covered allows a final positive remark to be made. We have recognised the singular power of the concept of RO, insofar as it best captures the philosophical position of the later Nietzsche. It says something more fundamental about the world, in comparison to the single Nietzschean concepts, taken alone. After all, both will to power and eternal return entail a relational view of the world, and the overman is the free spirit aware of his situation, the only one who plays within a relational world, sublimating his fate and limited nature⁵³. In this sense, Relational Ontology can be considered the latest lie of Nietzsche’s thought: a better philosophical position in comparison to his last conceptual triad, or at least deeper, in terms of ontic description. Either the latest simplification entertained by Nietzsche, or the first lie of his intellectual heir: the free spirit. In any case, it is another step in the direction of a philosophy of the future.

University of Queensland

NOTES

1. Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized Aestheticism" *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 23:1. Routledge, 2015.
2. See Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 148, and confront with PTA 5, TI 'reason' 2 and EH 'tragedy' 3. These and all parenthetical references to Nietzsche are taken from the canonical Colli/Montinari edition (15 volumes, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1972). The abbreviations are followed by the year or the title/cardinal number of the section (when necessary), and by the number of aphorism: "Philosophy of the Tragic Age" (PTA), "The Homeric Contest" (HC), "Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" (TL), "Birth of Tragedy" (BT), "Schopenhauer as Educator" (SaE), "Human All Too Human" (HH), "Gay Science" (GS), "Daybreak" (D), "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" (Z), "Beyond Good and Evil" (BGE), "Twilight of Idols" (TI), "Genealogy of Morals" (GM), "Ecce Homo" (EH), "Nietzsche's Posthumous Fragments" (NF), "Nietzsche's Letters" (NL). Moreover, I use the English edition of *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage book, 1968 (WP).
3. Nietzsche searched for scientific proofs of RO during the so-called 'middle' period, especially in the beginning of the Eighties. As soon as he understood that such a definitive proof would have been hardly findable using contemporary physics, he however decided to maintain RO in the background of his thought, as an ontological position that fit with his latest philosophy. As regards the importance of Boscovich's influence on Nietzsche, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche's Brave New World of Force: On Nietzsche's 1873 'Time Atom Theory' Fragment and the Matter of Boscovich's Influence on Nietzsche" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 20. Penn State University Press, 2000.
4. Matthew Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized Aestheticism", 139. Compare with Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche, life as literature*, Harvard University Press 1985, 3.
5. Wesley Wildman, "An Introduction to Relational Ontology" *The Trinity and an Entangled World: Relationality in Physical Science and Theology*. Ed J. Polkinghorne. Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010, 55.
6. A similar position, although with different conclusions, is exposed in John Ryder, *The things in Heaven and Earth: An Essay in Pragmatic Naturalism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, chapter three. Here, he develops an apparently similar conception of RO: on the one hand, it goes beyond every type of individuation, refusing the differentiation internal/external relations; on the other hand, it entails a certain order among these relations (like Aydin, in his organization-struggle model). Nonetheless, Ryder's results lead to an ontology of ordinal complexity, rather than one of continuous change or process (as it is in Heraclitus). Furthermore, for Ryder there is no reason to think that everything is related to everything else: as I will sketch along the paper, this is in contrast with a certain interpretation of eternal return, from the perspective of RO.
7. For a better characterization of this 'artistic nature', see the conclusion of this paper.
8. There are only rare hints into the published works (for instance, GM-I §13), however supported by several posthumous fragments: see NF-88 14[79] and NF-88 14[188] (later reported in WP 635 and WP 1066).
9. This is directly inspired by Boscovich. See also Peter Poellner, "Nietzsche's Metaphysical Sketches: Causality and Will to Power" *The Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*. Eds John Richardson, Ken Gemes. Oxford University Press, 2013, 12. Compare with NF-72 19[236], NF-84 26[36], NF-88 14[93], NF-88 14[103].
10. The discrepancies between the early and the late conception of power can be brought back to a

gradual understanding of the implications of Heraclitus' ontology. Compare with Willard Mittelman "The Relation between Nietzsche's Theory of the Will to Power and his Earlier Conception of Power" *Nietzsche Studien* 9. De Gruyter, 1980, 125-130.

11. Ciano Aydin, "Nietzsche on Reality as Will to Power: toward an Organisation-Struggle Model" *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 33. Penn State University Press, 2007.

12. These are all simplifications of an extremely complex reality, in a world that is in continuous becoming. Here and elsewhere, I characterize them with the term of 'illusions', in order to stress a twofold trait: on the one hand, they always conceal an uncomplete knowledge; on the other hand, they are often improperly rewarded with the label of truth.

13. See Aydin, "Nietzsche Reality", 44.

14. As long as Heraclitus' ontology is Nietzsche's ontology, we can say with Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 142-143: "the world is not constituted by independently existing things with intrinsic properties (things-in-themselves), but rather by opposing elements that exist and are what they are only in relation to each other. In Heraclitean language, the world is composed of opposites that are necessarily united".

15. Here, the physics of Boscovich plays an influential role. See Ansell-Pearson, "Nietzsche's Brave", 4. Nietzsche's scepticism regarding truth and determinism is clear, from HH onward. It is also reflected in several posthumous fragments (NF-81 12[17]; NF-87 9[40]; NF-87 9[91]; NF-87 10 [202]; NF-87 11 [111]; NF-87 11[120], WP 557, WP 558, WP 583a) and some letters (NL-82 213, NL-83 460).

16. It means that perspectivism does not imply that the world is indeterminate, and it does not support the idea that infinite ontological positions could be endorsed. This latter is one of the risk in Nehamas' reading: Meyer uses Boscovich and the scientific studies of the Eighties as a proof of Nietzsche's belief in the ontological consistence of the world. See Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 149-150.

17. It is possible to read in this sense GS 233 and the 'tremendous' or 'immense' moment of GS 341. To the same extent, also the gateway vision in *Zarathustra* proposes a relational view for things and times. Moreover, *amor fati* and Eternal Return can be read in this way: as a sort of bottleneck or hourglass, where every 'now' takes all the 'past' with it, and preludes to every 'future'.

18. See Poellner, "Nietzsche's Metaphysical", 12.

19. Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 154-155.

20. See Poellner, "Nietzsche's Metaphysical", 13.

21. Aydin "Nietzsche Reality", 35.

22. Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 143-144.

23. As with the term 'illusion' (endnote 12), here the adjective 'fallacious' stresses the fact that these cognitive simplifications are usually and improperly taken as the truth upon reality.

24. This attempt sounds similar to the Kantian one, with a fundamental distinction though. In particular, Nietzsche tries to pursue this goal without postulating the existence of the 'noumenon'. Kant's solution is for Nietzsche only a phase of the 'history of an error'. More precisely, the third phase, where "the true world, unattainable, unprovable, unpromisable, but the very thought of it a consolation, an obligation, an imperative". See TI 'true world' and compare with D 'preface' 3.

25. See Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 206.

26. Nietzsche would say that the different possible answers to Quine's ontological question—what is there?—are therefore a matter of initial approach, and a different disposition to faith. Compare with Willard Quine "On What There Is" *The Review of Metaphysics* 2:5. Philosophy of Education

- Society Inc., 1948. The fact that ontology establishes something regarding the world—we said ‘it comes after’—and metaphysics instead presumes something—we said ‘it stands before’—does not mean, naturally, that the latter is more fundamental. On the contrary, ontology maintains its priority, as well argued by Achille Varzi “On Doing Ontology without Metaphysics” *Philosophical Perspectives* 25:1. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
27. E. J. Lowe “New Directions in Metaphysics and Ontology” *Axiomathes* 18. Springer, 2008, 277-278.
 28. Lowe, “New Direction”, 277.
 29. Poellner too stresses that the decision regarding whether Nietzsche is a metaphysician depends on the particular interpretation we give of concepts like those of will to power or eternal return. See Poellner, “Nietzsche’s Metaphysical”, 1.
 30. Afterwards, Nietzsche will be less enthusiast regarding physics (BGE 14 and 22, WP 628 and 629). In GS §335 he wrote *Long life physics!* but ‘physic’ has probably a different semantic here: it is a general knowledge of the corporal dimension. As known, even science is one of our anthropomorphism, for Nietzsche.
 31. See also the previous quote of Matthew Meyer, endnote 22.
 32. Aydin, “Nietzsche Reality”, 34-35.
 33. See Meyer, “Nietzsche’s Naturalized”, 155. The idea of will to power as direct emanation of a relational ontology is shared by Aydin too. See Aydin, “Nietzsche Reality”, 27.
 34. Nietzschean distinction between intellectual and corporeal (or Dionysian) knowledge is well described by Maudemarie Clark. See Clark, *Nietzsche Truth*, 90.
 35. Gil Santos “Ontological Emergence: How is That Possible? Towards a New Relational Ontology” *Foundations of Science*. Springer, 2015, 1.
 36. Santos, “Ontological Emergence”, 11-12.
 37. Compare with Nehamas’ conceptions of the subject and the world, as described in Nehamas, *Nietzsche Life*, chapters 3 and 5.
 38. Let us distinguish here between the regularity of some physical phenomena of the universe and our activity of simplification. Indeed, the former is something accepted by RO: for instance, Aydin’s model of will-to-power organizations recognizes the recurrence of some forms of coordination. The problem is not regularity, but rather our presumption to find identities.
 39. Poellner, “Nietzsche’s Metaphysical”, 12-13.
 40. Simondon’s idea of individuation as a ‘meta-stable equilibrium’ could be useful here: see Gilbert Simondon, *L’individuazione psichica e collettiva*. Trans. Paolo Virno. Rome: Derive Approdi, 2006, 87-110.
 41. See Santos, “Ontological Emergence”, 16. In order to justify its persistency, this relational Self doesn’t need any ‘primitive’, for Santos: the great number of relations and stratified organisations do not necessitate the assumption that something remains the same over time, such for example the ‘bundling relation’ itself. In this sense, our view is not reducible to Benovsky’s argumentation. See Jiri Benovsky “Relational and Substantial Ontologies, and the Nature and the Role of Primitives in Ontological Theories” *Erkenntnis* 73:1. Springer, 2010, 107-112.
 42. Aydin, “Nietzsche Reality”, 29.
 43. See Poellner, “Nietzsche Metaphysical”, 12.
 44. Poellner, “Nietzsche’s Metaphysical”, 1.
 45. Aydin, “Nietzsche Reality”, 26.
 46. Ansell-Pearson, “Nietzsche’s Brave”, 14.
 47. After all, Aydin’s organization-struggle model is nothing but that: a description of the dynamics

within a relational world, also justifying the persistence of mental simplifications, such those of being or substance. See Aydin, "Nietzsche Reality".

48. Wildman, "An Introduction", 58.

49. See Pietro Gori, "Volontà di potenza e descrizione del mondo: le ragioni di una scelta terminologica" *Nietzsche y la Hermenéutica*. Eds F. Arena-Dolz, L. Giancristofaro, P. Stellino. Valencia: Nau Llibres, 2007, 514.

50. Incidentally, it is precisely how the will to power organizations organize themselves, for Aydin. See Aydin, "Nietzsche Reality" p. 32: "Applying Robert Mayer's thesis of discharge, Nietzsche states that the suppression of a weaker 'will to power' organization by a stronger and the (re) arrangement of the elements of the organization that go along with that do not proceed gradually but abruptly...It is the force that is released through the discharge of the tension by which a stronger 'will to power' organization overpowers a weaker 'will to power' organization. This overpowering is only possible if a 'will to power' organization possesses more force than it needs to organize itself, that is, to persist".

51. There is therefore a double dimension within Nietzsche's positive concepts (namely: will to power, overman and eternal return): on the one side, they are nothing but individuated ideas, simplifications of the world like many others; on the other side, they are useful 'thoughts of the limit', which continuously push for a better understanding of the dynamics of reality. This is quite accepted by the largest part of critics. See: Clark, *Nietzsche Truth*, 212-227; Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 154-157; Aydin, "Nietzsche's Reality", 25; Keith Ansell-Pearson "Incorporation and Individuation: On Nietzsche's use of Phenomenology for Life" *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 38:1. Routledge, 2014, 83.

52. Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 154.

53. It is, from the very beginning of Nietzsche's thought, an aesthetic approach, that of the free spirit. See Meyer, "Nietzsche's Naturalized", 141.