

Entities as Affects of the Pluriverse: A Relational Ontology

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Abstract

This paper advances a relational ontology that reconceptualizes entities—including human selves—as affects of dynamic pluriverses rather than autonomous origins of action and being. Drawing from *Mahāyāna* Buddhist philosophy, process metaphysics, phenomenology, and contemporary ecological thought, it argues that entities emerge through complex ecological relationships that constitute rather than merely contain them. The work develops two key philosophical insights: first, that the ecology of affects as it interacts constitutes intelligence in non-agential form, challenging the notion that intelligence is a property possessed by discrete entities; and second, that this understanding carries an ethical imperative of subtractive teleology, wherein reflexive beings must recognize their fundamental nature by shedding layers of contextual existence while maintaining awareness of contextual realities. This approach aligns with the Buddhist path toward *śūnyatā* (emptiness) while offering a framework for ethical engagement that honors both particular embodied positions and the fundamental intelligence that expresses itself through these positions. By reconceptualizing intelligence as an immanent field rather than an individual possession, the essay provides conceptual resources for addressing contemporary ecological, ethical, and existential challenges through a more comprehensive understanding of existence as inherently relational.

Keywords

Relational Ontology, Pluriverse, Subtractive Teleology, Non-agential Intelligence, Śūnyatā (Emptiness), Ecological Affects

Introduction: Beyond Autonomous Selfhood

Entities—including what we conventionally designate as 'selves'—do not exist as autonomous origins of action and being. Rather, they emerge as affects of plurality: expressions constituted by and within dynamic pluriverses, each co-created through the ecological relationships in which they are inextricably entangled (Escobar, 2018). These ecologies transcend the conventional understanding of passive backgrounds or containers; they function as active constituents in an ongoing process of mutual creation, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the entities they sustain (Kohn, 2013). Each entity, therefore, manifests as an effect of the constituent dynamics of a pluriverse—conceptualized as an ecology nested within broader ecologies—animated by distinct momenta and inertias that emerge from their embeddedness in multiple, overlapping systems of relation (Morton, 2017).

The concept of the pluriverse challenges conventional Western metaphysical assumptions about the nature of reality as singular and universal. As Escobar (2018) argues, the pluriverse represents "a world where many worlds fit," acknowledging the coexistence of multiple ontological frameworks rather than privileging any single ontological perspective as definitive (p. 16). This

perspective aligns with what Blaser and de la Cadena (2018) describe as "ontological pluralism," which recognizes the existence of multiple, equally valid ways of being and knowing in the world.

The Emergence of Reflexive Consciousness

These nested ecological systems, with their layered temporalities and intersecting forces, collectively participate in the co-creation of reflexive beings. As these beings develop capacities for sentience and consciousness, the affects themselves assume forms of agency. Within this emergence, particularly pronounced in human experience, a distinctive cognitive tendency manifests: the interpretation of oneself as an individual, isolated agent, fundamentally separated from the surrounding ecological matrices that constitute one's very existence and possibility (Varela et al., 2016).

This perception of separateness—the illusion of a self-contained subjectivity operating independently of its conditions—precisely corresponds to what *Mahāyāna* Buddhist philosophy identified in the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* (co-dependent origination). This principle reveals that no 'self' exists apart from its constitutive relations (Garfield, 2015). The self is characterized as *anatta* (not-self) precisely because it lacks independent essence, existing instead as a relational effect emerging from complex interdependencies (Williams, 2009). As Thich Nhat Hanh (1999) eloquently expresses it, "To be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing" (p. 24).

The Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) further illuminates this understanding by emphasizing that all phenomena lack inherent, independent existence (*svabhāva*) and instead arise through mutual dependence (Westerhoff, 2009). This perspective resonates with contemporary philosophical approaches to subjectivity that emphasize its fundamentally relational character, as articulated in the work of philosophers like Nancy (2000), who describes being as always "being-with" (*être-avec*).

Social Structures as Ecological Formations

Our social formations—economic systems, cultural practices, political institutions—similarly manifest as outcomes of these layered reflexive ecologies. They are not constructed solely through individual agency, but emerge through constellations of affects, each nested within and resonant with others in complex patterns of mutual influence (Latour, 2005). Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's philosophical concept of the monad offers a productive metaphor for understanding this phenomenon: a singularity that reflects the whole universe from its particular perspective, with varying degrees of influence and receptivity (Leibniz, 1714/1989). As Strickland (2014) explains, "Each monad is like a mirror of the universe, representing everything in it, though more or less confusedly" (p. 48).

Human persons, in this framework, can be understood as reflexive monads of our pluriverse—singular points of perspective that nonetheless contain and reflect the totality of their relational context. This interpretation aligns with Whitehead's (1978) process philosophy, which conceptualizes reality as composed of interconnected events or "actual occasions" rather than discrete substances. For Whitehead, each entity is constituted by its relationships with all other entities, in a process he terms "prehension"—the grasping or feeling of other entities that forms the basis of all experience.

Intelligence as Immanent Process

Within and across these affective entanglements flows a form of intelligence that cannot be reduced to a property or possession of discrete entities. Rather, intelligence manifests as a field or process experiencing itself through these entities as its localized expressions and experimental forms (Bateson, 1979). This reconceptualization suggests that entities do not "have" intelligence as a possession; instead, intelligence "has" entities as its local expressions and experimental manifestations in the world.

This perspective offers a profound insight: the ecology of affects, as it interacts, constitutes intelligence in non-agential form—a form that is not lesser than the phenomenal, reflexive affects that, through their reflexivity, assume a sense of agency (DeLanda, 2016). What we conventionally recognize as intelligence in conscious beings represents merely one modality of a more fundamental intelligence that permeates the entire pluriverse. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) suggest, consciousness might be understood as a particular "plateau" or intensity within a broader field of immanent intelligence, rather than a categorically distinct phenomenon.

This non-agential intelligence manifests in the self-organizing properties of complex systems across scales—from cellular metabolism to ecosystem dynamics to planetary processes—revealing patterns of responsiveness, adaptation, and creativity that transcend conventional understandings of cognition (Capra & Luisi, 2014). The apparent boundary between "intelligent" and "non-intelligent" entities dissolves when we recognize that what we call intelligence is not a property possessed by certain privileged entities but rather the immanent activity of the pluriverse itself, expressing different degrees and modes of reflexivity through its various affects.

This perspective resonates with Merleau-Ponty's (1968) concept of "the flesh" (*la chair*), which describes a fundamental reversibility between perceiver and perceived, subject and object. Intelligence, in this view, is not located "inside" individual minds but exists in the intertwining of body and world, self and other. Similarly, Simondon's (2020) theory of individuation proposes that individuals are not given in advance but emerge through ongoing processes of becoming that involve both internal and external relations.

The Ethical Imperative of Subtractive Teleology

The understanding that entities do not "have" intelligence as a possession, but rather intelligence "has" entities as its local expressions, carries with it a profound ethical imperative. This imperative suggests that reflexive beings like ourselves must engage in a process of subtractive teleology—a purposeful movement toward recognizing our fundamental nature by shedding the layers of contextual existence that obscure it (Laruelle, 2013). This does not mean abandoning or negating our contextual realities, but rather experientially recognizing the more fundamental intelligence that we embody and express.

This subtractive teleology aligns with the Buddhist path toward realizing *śūnyatā* (emptiness), which involves progressively releasing attachment to the illusion of an independent, substantial self (Loy, 2018). As Nāgārjuna, the influential Buddhist philosopher, articulated in his *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*, the realization of emptiness does not negate conventional reality but reveals its true nature as dependently co-arising (Garfield, 1995). The ethical dimension of this realization lies in its capacity to transform our relationship to ourselves and others, dissolving the boundaries that sustain patterns of suffering and harm.

The practice of subtractive teleology involves a paradoxical movement: by recognizing the absence of an independent self (*anatta*), we do not lose our capacity for ethical action but rather enhance it. As Batchelor (2015) argues, "The emptiness of self does not lead to a nihilistic void but to a heightened sense of responsibility for the suffering of others" (p. 153). When we recognize ourselves as expressions of the pluriverse rather than isolated individuals, our ethical horizon expands to encompass the complex interdependencies that constitute our existence.

This ethical orientation resonates with what Spivak (1988) describes as "strategic essentialism"—the tactical adoption of particular identities while maintaining awareness of their constructed nature. In the context of subtractive teleology, we might speak of a "strategic contextualism" that acknowledges the importance of our particular embodied positions while simultaneously recognizing the more fundamental intelligence that expresses itself through these positions.

Conclusion: Toward a Relational Ontology

Intelligence, therefore, cannot be confined to individual minds or discrete organisms—it constitutes the immanent unfolding of the pluriverse itself, reflexively embodied in its affects (Abram, 1996). This perspective invites us to reconsider fundamental assumptions about selfhood, agency, and consciousness, pointing toward a relational ontology that recognizes the fundamentally interconnected nature of all phenomena (Barad, 2007). By acknowledging the co-constitutive relationship between entities and their ecological contexts, we move beyond the limitations of individualistic frameworks toward a more comprehensive understanding of existence as inherently relational.

The ethical imperative of subtractive teleology offers a practical dimension to this relational ontology. It suggests that our ethical task involves both recognizing our embeddedness in particular contexts and cultivating awareness of the more fundamental intelligence that manifests through these contexts. This dual awareness—of both our contextual specificity and our participation in a broader field of intelligence—enables what Hershock (2012) calls "liberating intimacy," a mode of ethical engagement that responds to the particular needs of situations while remaining attuned to their broader relational dynamics.

As Ingold (2011) argues, "To be, I would now say, is not to be in place but to be along paths. The path, and not the place, is the primary condition of being, or rather of becoming" (p. 12). This emphasis on becoming-through-relation rather than being-in-isolation offers a profound reorientation of philosophical inquiry, one that aligns with indigenous knowledge systems that have long recognized the fundamentally relational character of existence (Kimmerer, 2013).

The implications of this relational ontology extend beyond philosophical discourse to inform ethical, political, and ecological practices. By recognizing ourselves as affects of the pluriverse rather than autonomous individuals, we may cultivate modes of being that honor the complex interdependencies that constitute our existence, fostering what Haraway (2016) calls "response-ability"—the capacity to respond ethically to the myriad relations in which we are embedded. Through the practice of subtractive teleology, we can move toward a more authentic engagement with the pluriverse, one that acknowledges both our particular embodied positions and the fundamental intelligence that expresses itself through these positions.

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