

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Problematising entanglement fetishism in IR: On the possibility of being without being in relation

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Abstract

The following article seeks to question the deterministic tinge behind entanglement fetishism, namely the celebratory, uninhibited, and totalising projection of the world as a relational wholeness. Alongside the rise of Anthropocene debates and the claimed incapacity of post-positivism to account for contemporary socio-natural transformations, the text embarks on two main goals. On the one hand, the article sketches a brief genealogy of processual and relational thinking, with a focus on International Relations (IR) literature. On the other hand, the text seeks to move forward critical engagements with the entangled grand narrative. To this end, the article exposes a problematic ontological assumption often overlooked by both entanglement fetishists and their critics: entanglements are infallibly generative, that is to say, they deterministically precipitate further beings and events. In doing so, the text invites IR scholarship to explore non-generative encounters and hence to address the question of the possibility of being without being in relation. Drawing from an unorthodox line of research, the article unearths non-relational, or beyond-the-relational, instances, whose engagement with an entangled world can only be materialised through the logics of subjugation. For this mode of being, the texts hints, non-engagement, refusal, and withdrawal become a form of political resistance and survival, thus distorting the controversial association between political subjectivity and emancipation.

Keywords: Anthropocene; entanglement fetishism; ontology; refusal; relations

Introduction

Over the last two decades, coinciding with the popularisation of conversations on the Anthropocene, namely the geological era of the anthropogenic footprint on ecosystems, various disciplines in the natural and social sciences, including Earth System Sciences, Biology, Philosophy, and Anthropology, amongst others, have increasingly delved into an ostensible relational ontogenesis of being. Barely unquestioned, this sweeping narrative on the entangled feature of world elements potentially offers a liveable mode of staying in the current ecological and subsequent socio-political planetary glitch. In short, this plethora of accounts suggest that the reification of durable relations between living species, human and non-human, and their material environments might lead to emancipatory futures.¹

Contaminated by this broad trend, the discipline of International Relations (IR) has recently unfolded a reinvigorated interest in this relational character of the cosmos. Even more so, the disciplinary proneness towards the exploration of entanglements, relations, assemblages,

¹ See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

interconnections, entwinements, knots, frictions, collisions, negotiations, etc. as constitutive of perceived experience, namely reality, is unambiguously in vogue. The 2024 International Studies Association (ISA) annual conference in San Francisco will be held under the theme ‘Putting Relationality at the Centre of International Studies’. In the presidential address to the 2022 ISA annual conference in Nashville, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch highlighted that the world is becoming more and more interconnected.² In the same year, the European Workshops in International Studies (EWIS) conference in Thessaloniki was encapsulated under the title ‘The Interconnected Worlds of the Past and the Present: Co-Constituting the International’.³ In a similar fashion, the 2021 European International Studies Association (EISA) online conference exposed in its welcoming remarks that ‘planetary thinking is, indeed, only possible through attentiveness to particularities of critical “entanglements” ... of the relations of power’,⁴ paraphrasing Édouard Glissant, a French-Caribbean poet and one of the most eloquent voices to convey the complex and intimate relational character of cultures and their geographies. One year before that, the 2020 Millennium conference, hosted by the London School of Economics, took place under the theme ‘Entanglements and Detachments in Global Politics’, perspicaciously introducing notions of disconnectivity and detachments as an invitation to scrutinise the limits of totalising assumptions about an entangled world, on which the present article seeks to build.

On a smaller scale, a significant number of recent academic and policy initiatives framed in the discipline of IR are also contributing to boost and expand what Kurki has celebratorily called a ‘relational revolution’.⁵ As examples, since 2014 the renowned IR professor James Der Derian, based at the University of Sydney, has been developing Project Q (Peace and Security in a Quantum Age), with the overarching goal of examining the possibilities that the quantum realm can offer to global politics in an increasingly interconnected world.⁶ Promoted by IR scholars too, the Planet Politics Institute, whose seed needs to be found in the 2016 article ‘Planet Politics: A manifesto from the end of IR’,⁷ bases its work on a new analytical category, the planetary, from which the already popular ‘we are all in this together’ becomes the substratum that nurtures the struggle against ecological catastrophe.⁸ In 2021, the Tokyo International University hosted a forum under the title ‘Doing IR Differently: Relational Cosmologies around the World’, including mostly decolonial IR scholars such as Navnita Chadha Beher, Amaya Querejazu, and Chih-yu Shih, amongst others.⁹ This event has managed to consolidate an ambitious intellectual inquiry on rethinking the universe through the lens of IR, assuming that relations are prior to the existence of entities.¹⁰ To add one final example, the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) has recently created RELATE (European Studies in a Relational Universe), a three-year research network aimed at introducing social relational theory to the study of contemporary issues in European politics.¹¹ In all, a significant body of IR literature, from a wide range of sensitivities, substantiates this thematic and analytical veering.¹²

²Full source available at: <https://www.isanet.org/Portals/0/Media/Conferences/Nashville2022/2022%20Printed%20Program-Interactive.pdf>.

³Full source available at: <https://eisa-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/EWIS-2022-Programme.pdf>.

⁴Full source available at: <https://eisa-net.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PEC2020-Call-for-Sectin-Proposals.pdf>.

⁵Milja Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 112.

⁶Full source available at: <https://projectqsydney.com/>.

⁷See Anthony Burke, Stefanie Fishel, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby and Daniel J. Levine, ‘Planet Politics: A manifesto from the end of IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 499–523.

⁸Full source available at: <https://www.planetpolitics.org/vision>.

⁹Further information on the event available at: <https://www.tiu.ac.jp/etrack/events/2021/12/004511.html>.

¹⁰See Tamara Trowsell, ‘Recrafting ontology’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2021), pp. 1–20. See also the rest of the articles in this special collection, available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/special-collections/pluriversal-relationality>.

¹¹Full source available at: <https://relateuaces.com/>.

¹²See Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science. Unifying Physical and Social Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Karen Tucker, ‘Unraveling coloniality in International Relations: Knowledge, relationality, and strategies for engagement’, *International Political Sociology*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 215–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/oly005>;

Illustrative of the critical angle that the following text seeks to engage with, at the subatomic level, scientists have investigated for decades the ‘relation’ between matter and antimatter, which is defined in modern physics as that type of matter composed of antiparticles. These antiparticles have the same mass as their matter counterparts, but their electric charge always has the opposite sign. For example, discovered in 1932, positron was the name given to the antimatter part of an electron. In high-energy particle accelerators, scientists have been able to add positrons to antiprotons, namely the antimatter part of protons, thus forming tiny fractions of antimatter. To the interest of this article, when matter comes into contact with antimatter, for example an electron with its positron, they mutually annihilate each other, leaving behind a large amount of energy in the form of electromagnetic radiation.¹³ The presence of antimatter is detectable by gamma rays produced every time positrons annihilate nearby matter. Demonstrated by numerous experiments in quantum field theory, every particle has its corresponding antiparticle. However, there is strong evidence that the observable universe is mostly composed of ordinary matter. This asymmetric matter–antimatter composition of the cosmos, a phenomenon known as baryogenesis, is one of the great unsolved problems of modern physics. Without the baryogenesis episode, which is speculated to have produced the particle–antiparticle asymmetry in the early universe, the conditions for the creation of ordinary, visible matter would have never been enabled.

Baryogenesis exemplifies that not all encounters are generative, which is presented here as an invitation to reimagine a mode of being in the cosmos that surpasses a universalising entangled ontology. As such, the following text does not intend to blossom into one more account building on what is defined here as entanglement fetishism, namely the celebratory projection of the world as an all-encompassing relational wholeness.¹⁴ Instead, seeking to push an important set of criticisms that have exposed the limits of this all-out relationality,¹⁵ the present article exposes a problematic ontological assumption often overlooked by both entanglement fetishists and their critics: entanglements are infallibly generative, that is to say, they deterministically precipitate further beings and events. In doing so, the text invites IR scholarship to explore non-generative encounters, what Deleuze, through Leibniz, calls ‘impossibility’.¹⁶

Thus, the first argumentative storyline of the article hints that the preconditions to be ontologically relational are not already given. Addressing the question of the possibility of being without being in relation is what is at stake in the present contribution. To be clear, the article does not intend to engage with a metaphysical question about a hypothetical possibility of pure material isolation, which seems rather unfeasible even from extreme imaginative exercises. For example, even imagining something purely isolated in the vacuum requires resorting to a level of relationality between the something and the vacuum. This abstract discussion resides outside the remit of this text. Instead, as the matter–antimatter accident illustrates, the absence of relation invoked here refers to the absence of the generative character of relation, a feature which, as it is argued below, seems deterministically taken for granted by both entanglement fetishists and their detractors. Drawing on a rather unorthodox line of research,¹⁷ the article then unearths non-relational, or beyond-the-relational, instances, whose engagement with an entangled world can only be materialised through the logics of subjugation. For this mode of being, the second argument of the texts suggests, non-engagement, refusal, and withdrawal become a form of political resistance and

Laura Zanotti, *Ontological Entanglements, Agency and Ethics in International Relations: Exploring the Crossroads* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); Joana Castro Pereira and André Saramago (eds), *Non-Human Nature in World Politics. Theory and Practice* (London: Springer Link, 2020).

¹³See Frank Close, *Antimatter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁴See Ignasi Torrent, *Entangled Peace: UN Peacebuilding and the Limits of a Relational World* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

¹⁵See Claire Colebrook, ‘A CUT IN RELATIONALITY: Art at the end of the world’, *Angelaki*, 24:3 (2019), pp. 175–95.

¹⁶Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 59.

¹⁷See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

survival, thus distorting the controversial association between political subjectivity and emancipation.¹⁸ The article deliberately eschews adding an entity against which the relation is refused (i.e. being without being in relation to modernity, to colonialism, etc.) because first, entangled sensitivities cut across these categories and surpass the limited contours of Eurocentric cosmologies, and, second, recuperating these ontological cuts would simply amplify identity politics, difference, and the categories that this text modestly seeks to resist.

The article is organised into three sections. With the goal of describing the incorporation of entangled ontologies in the discipline of IR, the first section revisits in a sketchy fashion a genealogy of processual and relational thinking, whilst emphasising that core pioneering philosophical traditions anchored in this intellectual undertaking were noticeably situated outside the geographical contours of Europe, where relational ontologies arrived far later. The second part scrutinises critical engagements with entanglement fetishism, which are classified in a normative spectrum. Seeking to move these criticisms forward, the third section invites IR scholarship to question the deterministic tinge behind entangled ontologies. With this goal, the text exposes the possibility of modes of being that reside in the cracks of the relational rubric and, therefore, of reimagining perceived experience as radical openness, where the theatre of the real unleashes an infinite multiplicity of arrays of being, relational and beyond-the-relational, breaking from fetishised exclusionary cuts.

Entanglements and IR: A brief genealogy

The increasing ontological invocation of relations and entanglements as analytical categories in the discipline of IR needs to be contextualised in a much broader and older tradition of processual and relational thinking. Whilst Continental philosophy would not consolidate a process-sensitive philosophy until the spring of modernity, in many traditions of thought outside Europe the ontogenesis of the being has been for centuries conceived of as processual, bound to limitless emergence, always in relation to other beings and their circumstances. For example, Qin argues how processes and relations are crucial elements of Chinese political philosophy. In short, this author exposes that, first, processes and beings are inter-constitutive, and neither precedes the other; second, processes enable interactions and therefore yield inter-subjectivity; third, Confucianism, an ancient Chinese belief system, sees the contours of processes as blurry, and therefore taxonomies are not rigid as in the European Kantian tradition. As Qin concludes, if the Western tradition of thought has based its intellectual edifice on rationality, the Chinese philosophical and spiritual tradition has always had relationality at its core.¹⁹ Similarly, Ling elucidates that Daoist (or Taoist) dialectics, also rooted in Chinese philosophy, are founded on the idea of complementarity, namely that each being retains other beings within, as illustrated by the famous yin–yang symbol.²⁰ In addition to these, drawing from ubuntu, an East and South African philosophy, Ngcoya conveys how in this ancient African tradition of thought ‘a person is a person because of/by/through other people’. The author further argues that ubuntu’s essential conceptual framework resides in the notions of community, sharing, and caring. In other words, true human potential can only be realisable in relations with others, which presumes interdependence and connectedness as a prime condition for being in the world.²¹ On the American continent, different ancient communities, including the Mayan

¹⁸ See Kennan Ferguson (ed.), *The Big No* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

¹⁹ Yaqing Qin, ‘Relationality and processual construction: Bringing Chinese ideas into International Relations theory’, *Social Sciences in China*, 30:4 (2009), pp. 5–20. See also Kwang-Kuo Kwang, *Confucian Relationalism: Cultural Reflection and Theoretical Construction* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2006); Astrid H. M. Nordin, Graham M. Smith, Raoul Bunskoek et al., ‘Towards global relational theorizing: A dialogue between Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship on relationalism’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:5 (2019), pp. 570–81.

²⁰ L. H. M. Ling, *Imagining World Politics: Sihar & Shenya, A Fable for Our Times* (London: Routledge, 2014). See also K. M. Fierke, ‘Contraria sunt complementa: Global entanglement and the constitution of difference’, *International Studies Review*, 21:1 (2019), pp. 146–69.

²¹ Mvuselelo Ngcoya, ‘Ubuntu: Toward an emancipatory cosmopolitanism?’, *International Political Sociology*, 9:3 (2015), pp. 248–262 (p. 253). See also Mogboe B. Ramose, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu* (Harare: Mond Books, 1999).

and the Mapuche, amongst others, share the philosophy behind the Quechua notion of *sumak kawasay*, translated into Spanish as *buen vivir* (good living), which encapsulates the fulfilment of a harmonious life in intimate connection with the planet. Querejazu describes two essential traits of Andean cosmology. On the one hand, *tinku* is a cosmic function that enables an equilibrium of forces. When beings encounter one another, relations trigger their transformation into something else. On the other hand, *taypi* denotes the ‘-in between- dimension, process, space of mediation, and connection where difference can encounter and negotiate, where the transformation and the becoming happens’.²² As a final example, through dharmic philosophy, which is of utmost relevance in various Indian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, Shani and Behera suggest that ‘Dharma binds human beings to each other and to the universe. The main concern of Dharma ... is with the universal foundations of human life and human relationships ... In the dharmic view, the two [self and other] are not separate. That is because only when one’s relationship with the self is ‘right’, can one’s relationships with others be considered ‘right’, and it is not until one attains a ‘right’ relationship with others, that one’s relationship with the self can be considered ‘right’. The ‘others’, the authors note, include human beings as well as the rest of non-human elements.’²³ Too often underestimated by Continental philosophy, this heterogeneous corpus of theory has articulated for centuries a source of erosion of Eurocentric essentialising ontologies.

On the European continent, the ontology of being was for centuries based on the Aristotelian tradition, for which there is an ultimate being, or substance, that is given (in Latin ‘datum’), static, concluded, objectified, out there waiting for the knowing (human) subject to be found. At the dawn of modernity, Spinoza and Leibniz, who was profoundly influenced by the Confucianist intellectual tradition, pioneered the questioning of this essentialising ontological rubric and robustly systematised the exploration of the being as a non-static relational entity, as mediated with nuance by the work of Gilles Deleuze in the second half of the twentieth century. In the Spinozist philosophical edifice, the being enters into composition with other things in existence. Therefore, things are always composed and decomposed in relation. For Deleuze, in Spinoza the parts of a whole ‘are not themselves individuals; there is no essence of each one, they are defined solely by their exterior determinism, and they always exist as infinities’.²⁴ In a similar fashion, the French author uses Leibnizian thought to suggest that the whole and the parts are not already related, but they encapsulate potential ‘derived infinity’, namely every possible relational outcome that will be materialised in the world.²⁵ Thus, in Leibniz, relations are the basis for primeval materiality, or what the philosopher refers to as monads: relations surge up in a region that ... involves the possibility of creation. ... The whole and the parts are not (and similitude) are not already related, but the original formula of a derived infinity, a sort of intelligible matter for every possible relation: thus the primary terms, without relations themselves, acquire relations by becoming the requisites or the definers of the derived, in other words, the shapers of this material.²⁶ Drawing on Whitehead, as explained below, Deleuze insists that relations are themselves types of events, which in turn enter in relation with further events, giving themselves a concrete existence in a continuous spacetime framings.

In the twentieth century, noticeably influenced by Auguste Comte, John Dewey, William James, and Henri Bergson, all of them renowned processual and relational philosophers, Alfred North Whitehead delved thoroughly into the relational ontogenesis of being. For this author, who was also knowledgeable of ancient non-European traditions of thought such as Confucianism, relations precede being, what he calls ‘actual entities’, namely the things that compose the world. In Whitehead, an actual entity is a composite, meaning that ‘every actual entity in the universe

²²Tamara A. Trowsell, Arlene B Tickner, Amaya Querejazu et al., ‘Differing about difference: Relational IR from around the world’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 22:1 (2021), pp. 25–64. See also Arlene B. Tickner and Amaya Querejazu, ‘Weaving worlds: Cosmopraxis as relational sensibility’, *International Studies Review*, 23:2 (2021), pp. 391–408.

²³Giorgio Shani and Navnita Chadha Behera, ‘Provincialising International Relations through a reading of dharma’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:5 (2022), pp. 837–856 (p. 8).

²⁴Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988), p. 77.

²⁵Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, p. 46.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 46.

is constituent of any other actual entity'.²⁷ More importantly, the being is its process of becoming, which is never isolated, but constitutively entangled with further processes of becoming, or 'events', considered by Whitehead the true 'relata', namely the composites of a relation.²⁸ Essentially, in Whiteheadian philosophy, relationality becomes a tool for picking apart Cartesian dualism, which drastically separates the spheres of the (human) subject and object, i.e. culture and nature. The separation naturally bestows an unfounded superiority on human beings on Earth, which over the last three centuries has degenerated into unbridled anthropocentric progress with devastating effects on the planet. In addition, this stark division has also generated violent exclusions in respect to race, gender, and the canons of beauty, insofar as the human subject in the Cartesian imaginary is not just any human subject, but, metaphorically speaking, the image of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian: a white and perfectly proportioned Man. Relational thinking vehemently rejects what some contemporary authors have described as 'correlationism',²⁹ in other words, the controversial fact that the existence of a human subject is a *sine qua non* condition for the existence of the separate world. In the processual tradition, human beings and their material milieu cannot be dissociated or hierarchically ordered: they are folds of the same fabric of reality.

How relations and entanglements were popularised in disciplines such as Sociology, Political Science, and IR in the late twentieth century was intimately influenced by the above sketched-out genealogy. In his 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology', Emirayber, inspired by John Dewey, picks up on and scrutinises the above-described distinction between Aristotelian substantialism and relationality, or what he calls 'the transactional approach', which 'sees relations between terms or units as pre-eminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances'.³⁰ In IR, drawing on structuration theory, Wendt criticises state-centric neorealist and world-system theories by unpacking the agent-structure problem in social ontology.³¹ This author hints that 'the capacities and even existence of human agents are in some way *necessarily* related to a social structural context – that they are *inseparable* from human sociality' (emphasis in original). Wendt underlines the generativity and relationality that twines agents, practices, technologies, territories, and anything that could be framed in a social structure. Importantly, for the author these elements 'cannot be defined or even conceived independently of their position in the structure'.³²

In historical perspective, the 2000s marked a qualitative split from the majority of previous cross-disciplinary accounts of relations and processes, arguably accelerated by the confluence of two mutually reinforcing processes. On the one hand, the current unprecedented techno-scientific progress in areas such as Earth System Sciences and Science and Technology Studies led to the definition of a new geological era, the Anthropocene, in which anthropogenic processes have saturated the sphere of human control.³³ This compelling narrative exposes unsettling events, including the potential effects of global warming, desertification, and further extreme weather events, alongside the uncertain future implications of developments in fields such as neuroscience and Artificial Intelligence. As a result of these challenges and speculations, the hypothetical finitude of the human being on the planet, far from abstract apocalyptic discourses, has become a strikingly imaginable fate. In other words, the stories about the distinctive, superior, and masterful character of the human on Earth seem increasingly to vanish, and the future appears unquestionably inextricable

²⁷ Alfred Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), p. 148.

²⁸ Alfred Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (Cosimo Classics, 2007).

²⁹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Bloomsbury, n.d.).

³⁰ Mustafa Emirayber, 'Manifesto for a relational sociology', *American Journal of Sociology*, 103:2 (1997), pp. 281–317 (p. 289).

³¹ Alexander E. Wendt, 'The agent–structure problem in International Relations theory', *International Organization*, 41:3 (1987), pp. 335–370 (p. 355).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 357.

³³ See Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The "Anthropocene"', *Global Change Newsletter*, 41 (2000), pp. 17–18.

from broader beyond-the-human phenomena.³⁴ On the other hand, the tenets of this growing theoretical rubric claim the exhaustion and incapacity of the post-positivist paradigm, particularly post-modernism and post-structuralism, as unable to provide analytical tools to enhance a comprehensive understanding of the repositioning of the human in the Anthropocene era.³⁵ To be precise, the limits of textual, discursive, and semiotic methodological techniques are exposed as insufficient to capture and examine how Anthropocenic processes of transformation are reconfiguring the role of the human on the planet, let alone the relations with its environment. This line of scrutiny states that post-positivist engagements with this quandary, such as the Foucauldian analysis of power relations behind the oppressive effects of modern dualisms and the supremacy of Man,³⁶ overemphasise the deconstruction of one component of the binary, namely 'the social', and underestimate 'the natural', or even the inseparability of both, thus ultimately reproducing and perpetuating a dualist cosmology.³⁷

In the context of the confluence of these two major processes, recent scholarly interventions have reignited a theoretical and practical response centred on beyond-the-human entanglements and relations.³⁸ In this regard, all beings are rendered vulnerable to the relations that compose them, which erodes and undermines the anthropocentric cosmovision where the human being stands as separated from the world in a position of ontological superiority. To Delanda, becoming is a 'molecular and intensive relation' that operates beyond ontological equilibrium and that is populated by real multiplicities. This growing intellectual framing contributes to the erosion of Cartesian dualism by conceiving of the object, matter, and nature as constitutive parts of the subject, mind, and culture/the social, respectively.³⁹ This rethought web of existence invokes a seeming sense of modesty sensitised with the complex interconnectedness of beings and events in the world as well as with the forces and (beyond-the-social) power relations that shape the outcomes of this entangled mode of becoming, what Stengers calls non-hierarchical modes of existence.⁴⁰

In the frame of IR, throughout the 2010s the discipline underwent a prominent veering towards beyond-the-human relations and entanglements as a mode of seeing, thinking, and being in the world. To be precise, the above-mentioned exhaustion of post-positivism to mediate and expose the semiotic-material transformations of the present Anthropocene age has prompted an important group of IR scholars to embark on a philosophical journey towards a new form of materialism, where entanglements play a crucial role in revealing the ontogenesis of perceived experience.⁴¹ Amidst the rise of what has been labelled new materialism, popularised in a wide range of disciplines,⁴² Aradau draws on Barad to suggest that security infrastructure is not opposed to or independent from people but is instead materialised through a constitutive friction between the human and the non-human, the material and the immaterial, in what became one of the first

³⁴See Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁵See Levy R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: RE.press, 2011).

³⁶Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

³⁷Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 145, 209; Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 95; Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p. 4.

³⁸See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³⁹Manuel Delanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 75.

⁴⁰Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics II* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

⁴¹See Nick Srnicek, Maria Fotou, and Edmund Argand, 'Introduction: Materialism and world politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41:3 (2013), pp. 397–397 (p. 397).

⁴²See Diana Coole and Samanta Frost (eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

disciplinary attempts to engage with entanglement literature.⁴³ Since then, the relational analytical framework has been noticeably instrumentalised across the discipline, particularly to account for the uncertain implications of the Anthropocene. As Harrington puts it, the Anthropocene 'reflects a new reality, where humans, nonhumans, things, and materials co-exist in complex relations of life and non-life'.⁴⁴ Events in this mesh of this new reality where the social twines with the natural further undermine the long-assumed separation of the binary, on which the entire project of modernity was illusorily based.⁴⁵ More recently, through the notion of relational cosmology, Kurki projects the universe as an interconnected wholeness. In this account, further discussed below, relations should be thought to precede the existence of the (human and non-human) being. In other words, in a Whiteheadian sense, to Kurki relational emergence outweighs an essential primal being.⁴⁶ In sum, IR manifests a disciplinary undertaking to expose an entangled mode of being as the prime condition for possibility. Notwithstanding the acclamation hitherto of relations and processes to account for the unfolding of world events, an important amount of literature has problematised this barely questioned and all-encompassing ontology of being. The following section scrutinises the most substantial critical interventions that examine this entangled puzzle.

Critiques of entanglement fetishism across the normative spectrum

The present section intends to conceptually organise a rich and diverse body of literature that cautions about the self-indulgent and unrestrained resorting to what is thereby defined as entanglement fetishism, namely the celebratory, full-blown, and totalising projection of a relational, all-too-relational, world. Admittedly, sweeping claims about the entangled ontogenesis of being in the Anthropocene have encountered noticeable resistance within (and outside) the discipline of IR. The following lines unpack critical engagements with entangled ontologies by designing a normative spectrum, in which criticisms scrutinise the problematic implications of an assumed entwined genealogy of being.

On one end of the spectrum, authors inclined towards strongly normative and emancipatory stances, including neomarxists and post-structuralists, tend to expose the depoliticising slippage that a flat ontological substratum, namely a de-hierarchised and mutually constitutive ontological configuration, might engender. For Swyngedouw and Ernstson: in the transcendence of the nature–society split promised by introducing a human/non-human ontology, the radical otherness upon which relationality is necessarily conditioned is strangely often suspended (...) In other words, the move to a relational-materialist ontology sutures things such that the exteriority that undergirds and structures relationality runs the risk of disavowal. To put it simply, the effort to contain and transcend the nature–society split or dualism through ontologies of internal relationality disavows the separation upon which relationality is necessarily constituted.⁴⁷ To these authors, this depoliticising feature of relational ontology ultimately perpetuates the continuity of capitalist society, namely the 'exteriority' or the 'structure' where relationality unfolds. Following a similar theoretical position, Joseph draws on Bourdieu's work on agency and structure to criticise the Latourian flat ontological world for eschewing discussion of anything other than practices, thus contributing to 'the reproduction of existing social orders by refusing to examine its conditions

⁴³ Claudia Aradau, 'Security that matters: Critical infrastructure and objects of protection', *Security Dialogue*, 41:5 (2010), pp. 491–514. See also Roger Mac Ginty, 'A material turn in International Relations: The 4×4, intervention and resistance', *Review of International Studies*, 43:5 (2017), pp. 855–74.

⁴⁴ Cameron Harrington, 'The ends of the world: International Relations and the Anthropocene', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 44:3 (2016), pp. 478–498 (p. 481); see also Scott Hamilton, 'I am uncertain, but we are not: A new subjectivity of the anthropocene', *Review of International Studies*, 45:4 (2019), pp. 607–26.

⁴⁵ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Planetary crises and the difficulty of being modern', *Journal of International Studies*, 46:3 (2018), pp. 259–82; Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (London: SAGE Publications, 2010).

⁴⁶ Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*.

⁴⁷ Erik Swyngedouw and Henrik Ernstson, 'Interrupting the Anthropo-obscene: Immuno-biopolitics and depoliticizing ontologies in the Anthropocene', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 35:6 (2018), pp. 3–30 (p. 19).

of possibility and the hierarchies that lie behind it.⁴⁸ Without disavowing the value of this critique, some uses of entanglements would admittedly escape this depoliticising stigmatisation. For example, whilst Latour's flat ontologies might certainly be prone to unleash controversial politics-free ontological frameworks,⁴⁹ the use of entanglements in Barad's agential realism is anything but depoliticising, since it articulates sharp epistemological and ethical claims against exclusionary practices of knowledge production.⁵⁰

Wary of this tension, some IR scholars attempt to address it. For example, seeking to overcome this potential depoliticising feature, Kurki, in an exercise of academic juggling, swings from the affirmation of an entangled cosmos, circumscribed in the ontological turn, to an acknowledgement of the process of knowledge production as a historically situated process and the resulting neglect of the human 'privileged access to god's eye',⁵¹ a stance admittedly framed in the epistemological turn. Pushing this radical position, the author invokes Andean pluriversal forms of being and becoming to invite the reader to stretch, 'queer',⁵² and unsettle situated-knowledge assumptions by stressing the limits of 'imagining our immediate felt relations as all there is'. This admittedly shoehorned wink to decolonial rationalities maintains that 'knowledge arises inescapably from the relations we are in'.⁵³ Notwithstanding Kurki's continuous cautionary statements against relational cosmology being the 'truth', a 'master theory', or a 'totalistic narrative',⁵⁴ the author ultimately upholds a rather fetishised view on entanglements: 'there is nothing outside of the relations of the universe and our relationality within it',⁵⁵ thus falling onto the deterministic path which is the object of interrogation in the present text.⁵⁶

On the other end of the spectrum, other authors note instead the problematic normative character of entangled ontologies. To Colebrook, this all-out Harawayan affirmation of a relational world intensifies the normative ethos of the being: to be relational or not to be.⁵⁷ The author picks up on the moralising dimension embedded in the normative ethos of the relational matrix and shared by the vast majority of processual traditions of thought, both ancient and contemporary: being in relation is morally good. Colebrook elucidates this premise: 'The norms of simultaneity and relationality have shored up a quite specific Western, European, rationalist morality of the world: humanity is, properly, that which can recognise itself in all the rich cultural variants that make up one interconnected and self-aware whole. To lose that form of humanity would be the end of the world.'⁵⁸ The utter underestimation of the beyond-the-relational, as discussed in detail in the next section, or 'the horror of something that simply is, bearing no relation to anything',⁵⁹ and the privileging of relations and emergent becoming regresses an apparently cutting-edge and radical conversation back to the same exclusionary logics of previous modern ontological cuts, from which social critique in Anthropocene debates so insistently claims to be refraining.

Illustrative of what Colebrook discerns, Connolly arguably reinforces a moralising humanism intimately associated with the conversation on entanglements. In an attempt to demystify and unveil the weaknesses of sociocentrism and human exceptionalism, the author invites us to forge

⁴⁸Jonathan Joseph, 'Beyond relationalism in peacebuilding', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 12:3 (2018), pp. 425–434 (p. 432).

⁴⁹See Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

⁵⁰See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*.

⁵¹Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*, p. 70.

⁵²*Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵³*Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 60, 84, 131, respectively.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵⁶For a similar positionality, see Benjamin Klasche and Birgit Poopuu, 'What relations matter?', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:1 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad010>.

⁵⁷Colebrook, 'A CUT IN RELATIONALITY'.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 175.

intellectual and political alliances around what he describes as ‘entangled humanism,’⁶⁰ namely a project ‘in which the entanglements include both layered human cultural processes that enter into bumpy relations and nonhuman processes that exhibit periodic unruliness.’⁶¹ In more practical terms, Connolly makes emancipatory ecological claims around threatening events such as the potential complete melting of the Arctic ice. ‘What is needed,’ the author exhorts, ‘is radical ecological action now to reduce the flow of CO₂ into the atmosphere and oceans to discourage such tipping point from occurring.’⁶² Thus, the embrace and reification of a liveable entangled mode of being becomes the moral substratum that ushers humanity to salvation. By using the concept of the ‘politics of swarming,’⁶³ Connolly constrains political action to the acknowledgement of human entanglement ‘in larger nonhuman worlds that exceed our capacities of mastery and demand several modes of collective organization to respond to the contingencies they engender.’⁶⁴ To be sure, the author resorts to the so-called new secularism to expose how spiritual affinities across different creeds and modes of becoming might be conducive to durable pluralist assemblages as well as political responses in the Anthropocene. Thus, Connolly ties the morality underpinning entangled humanism to the human (and humanist) awareness of other modes of experience so as to enhance multi-species appreciation.

On the same end of the spectrum, other authors have exposed the problems involved with the practical materialisation of political projects informed or inspired by relational sensitivities. For example, directly derived from the above-mentioned planet politics manifesto, the Planet Politics Institute can help shed light on the limits of the normative character of entanglement fetishism. On its website,⁶⁵ the institute is presented as a policy-oriented institution to connect ‘advanced academic research in ecological politics, ethics and law to active struggles for political change, improved governance, and ecological survival’. The vision of the institute upholds the commitment to explore ‘new modes of multispecies ethics, and imagining novel constellations of law, politics and governance that can chart just and sustainable futures for all the Earth’s beings’. The most relevant policy endeavour pursued by the institute is the design, implementation, and monitoring of a Coal Elimination Treaty, under which world states would ban coal mining and burning by 2030.⁶⁶ Through the invocation of dramatic claims of the sorts ‘it is time to get serious’, the institute, in short, becomes a political agent dictating the right way for humans to be on the planet. Chandler et al. attentively problematise the normative tinge in the planet politics debate by comparing its policy endeavours with liberal top-down governmentality. As expressed in a critical response, ‘Burke et al spend no time considering what new violences are afforded and enabled in their call for new global governance bodies to “enforce and penalise violence – slow and fast – against non-human communities and ecologies” as they seek to legislate for securing the planet against errant humanity.’⁶⁷ Even more so, the goals of planet politics are ‘beyond political negotiation and legal constraints.’⁶⁸ To be sure, these authors state that attempting to control carbon emissions through international law ‘is unlikely to be effective or to ameliorate planetary inequalities’, thus reproducing the colonial violence that sustains capitalism. As observed above, the implementation of a hypothetical Coal Elimination Treaty would imply mechanisms of enforcement and control which could barely eschew exclusionary practices, thus once again tripping over modern ontological cuts.

⁶⁰William Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 33.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 68.

⁶²Ibid., p. 104.

⁶³Ibid., p. 125.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 137.

⁶⁵Full source available at: <https://www.planetpolitics.org/>.

⁶⁶See Anthony Burke and Stefanie Fishel, ‘A Coal Elimination Treaty 2030: Fast tracking climate change mitigation, global health and security’, *Earth System Governance*, 3 (2020), 100046, pp. 1–9.

⁶⁷David Chandler, Erika Cudworth, and Stephen Hobden, ‘Anthropocene, capitalocene and liberal cosmopolitan IR: A response to Burke et al.’s “Planet Politics”’, *Millennium*, 46:2 (2017), pp. 190–208 (p. 7).

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 8.

'Instituting global governance in "firm and enforceable" ways, as if there were universal solutions that could be imposed from above, is a recipe for authoritarianism and new hierarchies and exclusions', as Chandler et al. put it.⁶⁹ For these critical accounts, entangled sensitivities have gradually turned from an analytical category into a normative one, namely from trying to decipher the world to norming on what it should look like. In fact, the authors of the planet politics manifesto vindicate in a later text in defence of planet politics having inescapable 'normative commitments.'⁷⁰

Interestingly, both ends of the spectrum, the normative and the not-so-normative, coincide in the diagnosis: whilst the normative and emancipatory critique stresses the complicity of entangled ontologies with the sustainment of capitalist violence by political omission, criticisms on the opposite end of the spectrum suggest that the type of normative projects enabled by relational frameworks can potentially reproduce liberal governmentalities which ultimately underpin capitalist structures of oppression. Seeking to move this conversation forward, the following section seeks to question an assumption seemingly shared by the majority of the above critical engagements: the fact that encounters are perpetually generative, thus problematically reducing the ontology of being to a deterministic entangled telos.

From entanglement fetishism to the possibility of being without being in relation

The present section departs from suspicions of a controversial stance common to both entanglement fetishists and the critical voices unpacked in the previous section: the assumption that entanglements are deterministically generative, as if the ontological pre-conditions for the relational character of being are already given. Criticisms framed in the above-described normative spectrum are illustrative of this, since the focus of scrutiny is always on the implications unfolding in the aftermath of the ontological encounter. In other words, being is by default drawn into the entangled world, in which, accordingly, an entangled ontological feature becomes the prime condition for possibility. Seeking to build on and push critical engagements with unfettered invocations by entanglement fetishists, the following lines attempt to argue for the possibility of non-generative encounters, that is to say, instances where being is outside the all-inclusive relational cosmos. To do so, the text hints that some beings and events are not given the ontological preconditions to be relational, namely the composites of an entangled world. In addition, the section also discusses the political implications for those subjectivities that reside at the margins of this web of totality. In short, the article intends to contribute to the debate on entangled ontologies in IR by engaging with the question about the possibility of being without being in relation as well as the political implications of such a possibility. Importantly, demonstrating the existence of a purely isolated material being is not the object of the present section. Admittedly, such an achievement escapes even from the most extreme forms of imaginative exercises. For instance, even imagining a purely isolated being in the vacuum requires analytically falling back on some form of relationality between the being and the vacuum. Instead, the following lines question the assumption that relations deterministically generate a new being, thus utterly overlooking the possibility of ontologically non-generative, disabling, or mutually annihilating clashes.

For entangled grand formulations, being is always generated in relation. Indeed, most literature tends to conceive of relations and entanglements as deterministically generative, namely conducive to further forms of being and becoming. Shaviro acutely reads this tenet of relations as 'oppressive' and claims that the ultimate metaphysical question is how to escape deterministic and overdetermining relations.⁷¹ With this provocation in mind, this section seeks to delve into the possibility of events where beings or processes refuse to tangle in a generative mode, what Deleuze,

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 10. For further critical engagements with the ethos of planet politics, see Philip R. Conway, 'On the way to planet politics: From disciplinary demise to cosmopolitical coordination', *International Relations*, 34:2 (2020), pp. 157–79; Anna M. Agathangelou, 'On the question of time, racial capitalism, and the planetary', *Globalizations*, 18:6 (2021), pp. 880–897.

⁷⁰ Stefanie Fishel, Anthony Burke, Audra Mitchell, Simon Dalby, and Daniel Levine et al., 'Defending planet politics', *Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 209–219 (p. 214).

⁷¹ Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 34.

through Leibniz, calls the ‘impossible’.⁷² The sort of material ‘impossibility’ such as that illustrated by the particle–antiparticle event exposed in the introduction is conspicuously delved into in Deleuze’s *The Fold*, inspired mostly by Leibniz and Whitehead. Deleuze expounds how Leibniz’s ‘impossibility’ defines the very prime, original, and irreducible relation, whose genealogy is unknown to the human. At this juncture, Deleuze attempts to make a distinction between Leibniz’s monads and Whitehead’s relationalism: For Leibniz, bifurcations and divergences of series are genuine borders between impossible worlds, such that the monads that exist wholly include the compossible world that moves into existence. For Whitehead, on the contrary, bifurcations, divergences, impossibilities, and discord belong to the same motely world that can no longer be included in expressive units, but only made or undone according to prehensive [creative] units and variable configurations or changing captures.⁷³ By critically engaging with these marginally distinct cosmovisions, Deleuze also argues for a world enabled and enacted by captures instead of closures, thus emphasising the creativity resides in a metaphysical position of anteriority to relationality.

Contemporary IR literature on relations has also elaborated on what Dillon calls the ‘anteriority of radical relationality’,⁷⁴ namely, a prior stage where the non-relational thrives. Exposing the limits of assumptions on all-out ontological entanglements, the author defines the non-relational as the ‘utterly intractable, that which resists being drawn into and subsumed by relation albeit it transits all relationality as a disruptive movement that continuously prevents the full realization or final closure of relationality, and thus the misfire that continuously precipitates new life and new meaning’.⁷⁵ On a similar line of investigation, Nordin and Smith add that this non-relational, or what they call ‘radical otherness’, can become a recipe against the colonising attempts of a totalising and unforming understanding of the all-encompassing desires of entanglement fetishism. Drawing on Daoist philosophical formulations, the authors hint at radical otherness ‘as the unknowable and inaccessible. As a result, this sense of otherness indicates a limit to assimilation, categorization and understanding. The other is constructed as a hard limit for the self, a limit that cannot be broached and assimilated.’⁷⁶ Seeking to contribute to these rather intangible dialectics, the below argument exposes how this absence of relationality becomes materially perceptible for certain forms of being whose political subjectivity, and by extension their entanglement with the world, is fundamentally compromised.

An attentive reading of Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* might offer suggestive elucidations on this form of ontological radicality. Sceptical about the teleological imaginary of a redeemed world in harmonious relation, the French-Caribbean author states that an intense form of being ‘cannot bear having any interaction attached to it. Being is self-sufficient. ... Prime elements do not enter into Relation.’⁷⁷ Drawing on the colonial even, particularly the Creole reality, Glissant goes on to assert that a sweeping and universalising relational equilibrium subsumes this primal form of existence when non-prime elements, such as race and the violence through which it is reified, are introduced in the equation of being. His notion of ‘the opaque’ is particularly useful to illustrate this rubric of non-relation. To the author, the opaque is what cannot be reduced. Opacity replaces the absorbing concept of unity, refusing the coercive requirements of relation as erasing totality. The opaque prefigures reality without determining it a priori.⁷⁸ In Glissant’s own words, ‘to disindividuate relation is to relate the theory to the lived experience of every form of humanity in its singularity’.⁷⁹

It follows from Glissant’s stance that, first, the ontological preconditions for being entangled with the world are not deterministically given. Different to assumptions behind fetishised positions as

⁷²Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, p. 59.

⁷³Ibid., p. 81.

⁷⁴Michael Dillon, ‘Poststructuralism, complexity and poetics’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17:5 (2000), pp. 1–26 (p. 4).

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 5.

⁷⁶Astrid H. M. Nordin and Graham M. Smith, ‘Relating self and other in Chinese and Western thought’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:5 (2019), pp. 636–653 (p. 639).

⁷⁷Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 161.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 191.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 195.

well as most of its detractors, being is not already drawn into the cosmos. Second, the underlying condition for survival of a prime, irreducible form of being, which is alien to the world as relational and colonising totality, can only be preserved through a form of political resistance driven by non-engagement, refusal, and even withdrawal. Ferguson opens up a refreshing conversation about absolute refusal as a valid mode of thinking and acting. The author questions our form of being as conducive to a *sine qua non* involvement with reality. Ferguson's position refuses being as communal experience and collective purpose.⁸⁰ In opposition to the popular 'we are all in this together', often reproduced in Anthropocene conversations, the author insists that certain historical legacies preclude certain kinds of people from engaging in the political space.⁸¹ For example, apologetic symbolism offered by former colonial powers to descendants of enslaved people clashes with the process of reconciliation, which requires subsumption, 'get over it'. Thus, non-engagement, non-reconciliation becomes the political goal.⁸² In a similar vein, Wilderson uses the condition of Blackness to illustrate the impossibility of a liveable relational ontogenesis of the Black reality. This author compares the fight of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, which he defines as a reciprocal dynamic acknowledged between degraded humanity (Indigenous peoples) and exalted humanity (white settlers), with the struggle between Blackness and the world.⁸³ To Wilderson, 'social death', namely, a sense of ontological erasure exemplified in the violence perpetrated in the slavery event, manifests the absence of generativity in the encounter: the enslaved person is deprived of modern-like political subjectivity and therefore of the potential for its engagement with the world. Whilst Wilderson's relation-deprived ontology of the enslaved person can be read as deriving from an annulling process of colonial dispossession, Glissant's ontology unearths a bare, primal, non-relational form of being. However, both coincide, in that their only possibility for being engaged with modern relational totality is through the logics of violence, oppression, and subjugation. To these authors, these aesthetic actualities are ontologically excluded from a quasi-glorified, delusional, all-encompassing entangled form of being. More importantly, on these ontological margins, non-engagement, refusal, and withdrawal become a form of political resistance that preserves this mode of being, otherwise absorbed by the erasing force of relational totality.⁸⁴

Even more so, the possibility of being in relation becomes a privilege in the eyes of those whose intense form of being as well as political subjectivity reside beyond the rationality of a deterministically entangled cosmos, of those who instead of experiencing a Baradian 'withinness' of the world, their existence has been reduced to Laruelle's 'withoutness', which is generative inasmuch as its radical political substratum is associated with an absolute form of withdrawal.⁸⁵ Building on this concept of the politics of withdrawal, Culp reinforces the Laruelian idea of non-participation in relations as an active form of participating in the political space.⁸⁶ Unexpectedly, the retreat from the political turns out to be unambiguously politicising: Culp suggests that 'the way through is not to pity the nihilism of nonbeing in a move to redeem them; rather, the non- of the nonbeing and its survival is an ultimatum that invited an insurrection against the world.'⁸⁷ In Anthropocene terminology, these insights insist against saving the world and instead suggest ways to end it, as Culp notes. Rather than looking for solutions towards a realisable entangled world, this approach

⁸⁰Ferguson, 'Introduction: No Politics', in Kennan Ferguson (ed.), *The Big No* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), pp. ix–xxii (p. ix).

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. xvii.

⁸³Frank B. Wilderson III, 'Without priors', in Kennan Ferguson (ed.), *The Big No* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), pp. 85–104 (p. 94).

⁸⁴See also Claire Colebrook, 'Deleuze after Afro-pessimism', in C. Daigle and T. H. McDonald (eds), *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism: Philosophies of Immanence* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), pp. 250–267.

⁸⁵François Laruelle, 'The big and small no: Critique of contemporary solutions of difference (Deleuze and Derrida)', in Kennan Ferguson (ed.), *The Big No* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), pp. 49–60 (pp. 49–51).

⁸⁶Andrew Culp, 'Afro-pessimism and non-philosophy at the zero point of subjectivity, history and aesthetics', in Kennan Ferguson (ed.), *The Big No* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), pp. 105–136 (p. 110).

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, p. 111.

declares the insufficiency of everything, which should not be confused for political inaction. The destructive character embodied in this sense of being without being in relation, the utmost refusal, the author continues, disrupts the long game of the political projects of coalitions, for example the accumulating of liberal democratic rights as if this would eventually conclude in human liberation.

This line of argumentation has been unfolded in this section as an invitation to move critical IR debates beyond the contours of deterministic and fetishised ontological entanglements. Anticipating the potential of this critical undertaking, Chipato and Chandler have recently cast into question the assumptions behind an all-in relational pluriverse, noticeably vindicated by the above-mentioned group of scholars behind the ‘Doing IR differently’ label. Through the invocation of a pluriverse, Chipato and Chandler observe, this strand of literature overlooks and neglects the genesis of exclusionary ontologies, i.e. ‘the preconditions for a world of “many worlds” in which there are plural modes of becoming human,’⁸⁸ thus amplifying the risks of reproducing rather than eroding colonial violence. Crucially, to these authors, ‘the escape into a vital, relational, creative world of complexity, and the search for new ways to become with nature helps to obscure how we got to the world that we have.’⁸⁹ Rather than the infallible and continuous generativity embedded in most literature on the pluriverse, Chipato and Chandler project a cosmos where being and its presumed deterministic relational condition of subject fade.

To be sure, in eluding the possibility of being without being in relation, the entanglement fetishism trend in IR risks reducing the ontological premises of being to an exclusionary conjecture resembling and reproducing the cuts and categories of totalising modernity. In addition, the celebration of the entangled ontogenesis of being contributes to obscuring those political subjectivities whose engagement with the world can only be enabled by the logics of subsumption and whose condition for possibility in the margins of the totalising assemblage can only endure through refusal, non-engagement, and withdrawal as a form of political resistance. In sum, this article has sought to push critical engagements with sweeping assumptions on the relational grid by looking into the possibility of events that are absent of generative relations and, subsequently, the implications that these might have to speculate about the indeterminacy of possibilities for being (and non-being) in the world. Thus, through the exposure of the limits of the entangled grand narrative, the article modestly builds on the attempt at reimagining perceived experience as radical openness, resonating with what Glissant calls the abyssal ‘unknown.’⁹⁰ A post-Cartesian ontological emancipation cannot be attained by reducing ontology to an entangled yoke, or worse, to the relational human experience of the world, for this would just reproduce the exclusionary violence of modern logics, and practices. Instead, an honest acknowledgement of the ontological vulnerability of being, so often claimed by Anthropocene discourses, would eschew such an overdetermining hurdle and be opened to the possibility of being beyond this all-embracing entwined cosmos. The leap from entanglement fetishism to a being without being in relation entails an invocation of the world as the arrangement of an infinite multiplicity of possibilities, which hinge on unpredictable forces that enable all generative collisions but also impossibilities.

Conclusion

Far from firm arguments, this exploratory article invites IR scholars to critically reflect upon the question of the possibility of being without being in relation, often overlooked in conversations about entangled ontologies, particularly in the invocation of a harmonious relationality as a form of survival in the Anthropocene age. Whilst most popular theoretical and policy accounts suggest that liveable futures require the hacking of current convoluted socio-natural tensions with the goal of

⁸⁸ Farai Chipato and David Chandler, ‘The black horizon: Alterity and ontology in the Anthropocene’, *Global Society*, 37:2 (2023), pp. 157–75.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁹⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 8.

materialising durable beyond-the-social entanglements, the present article has sought to speculate about the possibility of being beyond a deterministic ontological trait, embedded both in the full-blown entanglement narrative as well as in most critical engagements with it.

After a sketched-out genealogy of processual and relational thinking, with a focus on IR literature, the article introduces a normative spectrum to situate and scrutinise the plethora of critical engagements with what the article describes as entanglement fetishism, namely the celebratory all-encompassing affirmation of an entangled world. On one side of the spectrum, markedly normative stances such as neomarxism and post-structuralism claim that Latour-like ontologically flat encounters risk depoliticising the conversation by concealing those relations which have engendered circumstances of alienation, for example capitalism and its political and socioeconomic modes of organisation. On the other side of the spectrum, by questioning accounts such as planet politics, not-so-normative positionalities suggest that entanglement fetishism intensifies the normative ethos of being, thus generating problematic liberal-like dynamics of exclusion. Interestingly, both sides of the spectrum coincide with the diagnosis: the risk of reproducing the logics and practices that reproduce the violent structures that sustain the dreams of a totalising modernity.

Building on these critical voices, the present paper has sought to move the conversation forward by interrogating the seemingly inescapable generativity of relations, that is to say, the assumption that entanglements deterministically precipitate further beings and events. With this goal, the text has delved into and expanded contemporary literature, within and beyond IR, to discuss ontological possibilities for being beyond the determinism of entanglements as well as the political implications of being in the margins of the all-embracing relational rubric. Specifically, the article has attempted to push rather unfathomable dialectics such as radical relationality, namely the anteriority to relationality, by stressing the material dimension of beyond-the-relational political subjectivities whose engagement with an entangled world can only be reified through the logics of violence, oppression, and subjugation, and for which refusal, non-engagement, and withdrawal become a mode of resistance and survival.

In all, the present provocation is intended for a broader goal, namely the reimagining of perceived experience as radical openness. By reducing the ontology of being to a deterministic entangled ontogenesis, emancipatory claims about a plural and all-inclusive future, so present in Anthropocene and relational pluriverse narratives, are utterly compromised. As a word of caution, the text hints that interventions around entanglements might offer promising ontological and political paths to the poetics of IR as long as these are sensitive to an infinite multiplicity of possibilities for being in the theatre of the real, relational and beyond-the-relational, breaking away from fetishised exclusionary cuts.

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