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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Relational revolution and relationality in IR: New conversations

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## Abstract

There is a multifaceted relational revolution afoot in International Relations (IR) and in the social sciences more widely. This article suggests, via engagement with varied forms of relational thought and practice in IR, but in particular via engagement with ‘relational cosmology’ associated with the ‘natural’ as well as the ‘social’ sciences, that there are important reasons for relational thought and practice in IR and around it to be more attentive to dialogues on relationality across natural and social sciences. If relational thought in IR has challenged the colonial and bifurcated ontologies of the field, relational cosmology too assists in shifting ‘modern’ understandings of science and the cosmos by facilitating engagement with situated knowledges and deep-going relationalities across ‘nature’ and ‘society’, ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ communities. Relational cosmology may be productive in joining, and perhaps even in facilitating, conversations across multiple relationalities emerging from different parts of the world and in different fields of inquiry, and yet – reflecting its relational and pluriversal orientations – it is not proposed here as a new ‘meta-’ or ‘grand-’ narrative for relational theorising or IR.

**Keywords:** Relational Theory; IR Theory; Pluriverse; Relational Cosmology

## Introduction

This article explores recent advances in, and conversations between, varied relational forms of thought in International Relations (IR). In particular, it explores some new avenues in relational theorising that suggest that IR – despite being ostensibly focused on the study of International *Relations* – has not fully engaged with what it takes to think truly relationally. Much deeper relational reorientations – beyond ontology, epistemology, and methods as we know them – are required; reorientations shaking not only our understandings of the ‘international’ but also of ‘science’, ‘knowledge’, and of constituents of ‘reality’, such as ‘nature’ or ‘society’.

While moving beyond rationalism and individualism is the aim for all forms of relational thought – from classical constructivism to Marxist structuralism – the ‘new’ forms of relational critique I focus on here arise from a set of different origins: ‘new’ relational theory (a misnomer of course in the sense that many of these traditions are not ‘new’ as such, only new to some Western IR audiences) arise from varied non-Western, non-Newtonian, and critical humanist orientations that tend to go beyond the more classical forms of relational ‘social’ theorising that informed constructivism and Marxism, for example. The ‘new generation’ of relational thought in IR is less Eurocentric and also less uniformly ‘social scientific’ in nature but also, crucially, has been much less committed to ‘fixing’ what a relational perspective entails, in favour of encouraging manifold situated relational knowledges and conversations between different forms of relational thought and practice, from different parts of the world

and across disciplinary experiences. Whether it is posthuman relationalism, imagining new relational ways of living with animals and plants, or Daoist relational thought, new relational theories have sought to shift how we should imagine relationalities that matter and also how we should think through them.

Given the importance of what has already been called a ‘relational turn’ in IR,<sup>1</sup> this piece seeks to not only articulate some of the distinct aims of the varied strands of relational theorising but also to add a perspective – another relational one – to the mix as *one* way of understanding the significance for the field of IR, and for natural and social sciences more widely, of this ‘relational turn’. Via *relational cosmology*, developed here in conversation with varied interlocutors on relationality from across fields and genres, I argue that a cross-scientific relational revolution is afoot in the natural sciences alongside relational shifts in arts, humanities, and social sciences. I argue that in IR we need to engage with this wider relational revolution too as part of the attempts to develop richer relational perspectives and conversations.

Relational cosmology I draw on here, and which I have elaborated on in detail elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> suggests that one of the key challenges in modern sciences has revolved around the difficulty of thinking ‘past’ ‘things and backgrounds’; that it has been difficult for modern scientific thought – natural and social scientific – to think truly relationally, that is, without ‘things’ or ‘backgrounds’, from relations. At the same time, at stake in such relational reframing are also our understandings of science, objectivity/situatedness, religion/reason/emotion, secularism/religion, and enchantment/disenchantment. A critique of many of the underpinning assumptions of ‘Western science’ are generated from relational cosmology, even as it was itself originally generated from within what could be called ‘Western science’. In this article I cannot fully discuss all these interesting dimensions that relational cosmology can open up. Here, I focus more specifically on articulating three reasons for why we should contextualise the emerging relational thought in IR in the context of relational cosmology’s suggestion that there is a wider relational revolution afoot in the natural and social sciences.

First, I will argue that the relational revolution(s) in the natural sciences push(es) in similar directions as new forms of relational thought in the social sciences and IR – towards more fully relational and processual but also more situated approaches to knowledge construction. In the sciences too, intriguingly, the historical particularity and dominance of specific types of knowledge constructions (for example, those drawing on language of laws and objectivity) have been a concern: to know (and be/act) relationally is also to take on historically constituted conceptual framings embedded in various religious, colonial, and cosmological knowledge constructions.

Second, relational cosmology also calls for reassessments of the many distinctions and dichotomies embedded in academia, seeking to ‘loosen’, ‘undo’, and ‘reframe’ our conceptual understandings. Varied efforts to rethink the modernist categories and binary dichotomies – ideas and matter, agency and structure, human and environment, nature and culture – are put forward in the rich traditions of relational thought. Relational cosmology introduces a complementary set of reasons, arising from natural scientific discoveries, to take the challenge of rethinking these dichotomies seriously.

Third, relational cosmology, despite coming from the natural sciences, also seeks to undo the misleading ‘modernist’ notion of ‘Science’ dominant in natural sciences and also in fields such as IR. Sciences in this perspective become part of the situated relational processing and probing of cosmological relations and also have important roles to play in facilitating new forms of community and democracy, far beyond the confines of modernist notions of ‘liberal’ or ‘participatory’ democracy.<sup>3</sup> This is without the sciences ‘fixing’ what relations are and how we should ‘capture’

<sup>1</sup>Emilian Kavalski, *The Guanxi of Relational International Theory* (London: Routledge, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Milja Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Milja Kurki, ‘Coronavirus, democracy and the challenges of engaging a planetary order’, *Democratic Theory*, 7:2 (2020), pp. 172–9.

them. Indeed, relational perspectives entail the sidestepping of ‘God’s eye perspectives’, in favour of development of new conversations between polyphonic experiences of relationalities.<sup>4</sup> This article then, despite detailed engagement with the sciences, does not propose a turn to an ‘authoritative’ Science to ‘ground’ a relational turn in IR but argues that the sciences should not be put aside in developing relational thought, for they too are part of the relational conversations.

By considering relational turn in IR through the prism of relational cosmology, this article seeks to demonstrate that relational cosmology can be productive in joining, and perhaps even in facilitating, conversations across multiple relational ontologies emerging from different parts of the world and in different fields of inquiry. In so doing, its aim is *not* to act as a ‘bridge’ or a ‘meta-narrative’ for relational worldviews and worlds. Yet, it is argued that the methods of engagement which emerge from its ‘open’ and ‘affective’ conception of sciences helps, in part, to foster listening, acknowledging, and becoming across difference in a relational pluriverse.

### Relational turn in IR

International Relations (IR) theory and scholarship has an increasingly well documented but also troublesome and contested history. For some, the field arises in an Anglo-European attempt to address issues of war and peace in the aftermath, and preceding, the First World War. Or so goes the ‘founding myth’ of the field of IR, a founding myth that has also been much criticised and analysed at length in recent decades and with increased vigour in the run up to the supposed centenary of the field.<sup>5</sup>

Many recent analyses have pointed to the troublesome origins of IR in specific kinds of political, religious, and cultural beliefs and power structures. For example, the imagination of secularism has hidden the deep religious commitments in IR’s conception of order<sup>6</sup> and as Audra Mitchell argues<sup>7</sup> the humanist bias in IR’s so-called secular order generates important and curious patterns of thinking and practice. Bentley Allan<sup>8</sup> has recorded the history of state system’s as well as IR’s conceptions of it in particular cosmological beliefs among scientists and in societies at large. And, crucially, many of the recent analysts of the origins of international political practice and of the field have pointed to the ways in which certain colonial and racist assumptions have informed the field. John Hobson, for example, details the varied ways in which different forms of Eurocentric thought, some of it explicitly or implicitly racist, inform the history of the field and also continue to inform the field and its theorisations.<sup>9</sup> Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale’s work on South Africa, race, and the making of the international (and IR) is an equally important

<sup>4</sup>An interesting point, raised by a reviewer of this article, arises around whether we need to ‘orchestrate’ polyphonic voices to ‘hear’ them, that is, what are the conditions of being able to hear polyphonic experiences. Further, relational cosmology or relational dialogues themselves may be certain kinds of orchestrations which both enable and potentially also delimit our capacity hear or experience. It appears some sense of orchestration is indeed afoot here, perhaps inevitably so and what this involves for relational conversations is an important question to explore.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics: the Birth of American International Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015); Robert Vitalis, ‘The graceful and generous liberal gesture: Making racism invisible in American International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29:2 (2000), pp. 331–56; Benhamin Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John Hobson, ‘The Big Bangs of IR: The myths that your teachers still tell you about 1648 and 1919’, *Millennium*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 735–58; Brian Schmidt, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy: A Disciplinary History of International Relations* (New York: SUNY Press, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>William Bain, ‘Thomas Hobbes as a theorist of anarchy: A theological interpretation’, *History of European Ideas*, 40:1 (2015), pp. 13–28; William Bain (ed.), *Medieval Foundations of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2017); William Bain, *Political Theology and World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>Audra Mitchell, *International Intervention in a Secular Age: Re-enchanting Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>8</sup>Bentley Allan, *Scientific Cosmology and International Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup>John Hobson, *Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

contribution to understanding the tying in of imperial and racial dynamics to the constitution of the field and the practices of international politics.<sup>10</sup> Such works have pointed to the ‘moral aporia of race’ as Cecelia Lynch characterises it<sup>11</sup> in the field and the deep constitution of the international order on racialised practices and assumptions.<sup>12</sup>

Engagement with the difficult past of IR has gone hand in hand with the opening up of the field theoretically to many new perspectives, including many more ‘relational’ perspectives. While for some decades constructivists and critical theorists of various hues have argued that the ‘atomist’ or ‘individualist’ understandings of the world embedded in liberal individualism and realist statism provide misleading starting points for analysis of the complex interconnections of world international politics, these voices today have multiplied and diversified.

A powerful early relational call from close to the ‘mainstream’ of American IR was Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon’s<sup>13</sup> push for a more relational processual IR. They argued that if only the processual relational nature of international processes and indeed the state itself was properly recognised, the field of IR could finally start cashing in on its promise to deliver analysis of relations around the international. For Jackson and Nexon, the hidden tensions in the field between ‘substantialism’, perspectives that think in terms of essences and things, and ‘relationalism’, perspectives that think in terms of relational processes unfolding, does a great deal of work in the field. Crucially, they suggested that while substantialism can have its uses, it is the relational path that we should now follow as we think through global changes.

If Jackson and Nexon’s account was one of the first explicit relational critiques of atomism and substantialism in IR, similar and related criticisms have arisen from a variety of other ‘relational’ traditions of thought. For decades the constructivists argued that we are constituted in social relations with others and as such all knowledge in the field must be recognised as arising from mutually constitutive relations of social actors and their shared understandings.<sup>14</sup> Marxists on the other hand have emphasised that an atomist individualist ontology leads to a deep misunderstanding of the ways in which we are constituted in social structural relations.<sup>15</sup> Critical theorists of various hues have joined the discussion with an emphasis on critique of the universalist (and capitalism-reproductive) assumptions embedded in the social sciences that assume objects or subjects have essences.<sup>16</sup> These forms of relational thought were joined by many feminist scholars, who emphasised the social construction of gendered order,<sup>17</sup> and postcolonialists for whom the construction of essentialist narratives hid a deeply relational construction of selves and others globally.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Vineet Thakur and Peter Vale, *South Africa and the Making of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2020). See also Alexander Davis, ‘Making a settler colonial IR: Imagining the “international” in early Australian International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, Online First (July 2020).

<sup>11</sup>Cecelia Lynch, ‘The moral aporia of race in international relations’, *International Relations*, 33:2 (2019), pp. 267–85.

<sup>12</sup>Amy Niang, ‘The slave, the migrant and the ontological topographies of international’, *International Relations*, 34:3 (2020).

<sup>13</sup>Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon, ‘Relations before states: Substance, process and the study of world politics’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 5:3 (1999), pp. 291–332.

<sup>14</sup>Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>15</sup>Mark Rupert, ‘Marxism and critical theory’, in Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (eds), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

<sup>16</sup>David Campbell, *National Deconstruction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998); Andrew Linklater, *Transformation of Political Community* (London: Palgrave, 1998).

<sup>17</sup>For classic statements of (varied) feminist relational sensibilities, see, for example, Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas Beaches and Bases* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Christine Sylvester, *Feminist International Relations: An Unfinished Journey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, discussion in Siba Grovogui, ‘Postcolonialism’, in Dunne, Kurki, and Smith (eds), *International Relations Theories*; Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North/South Relations* (Minneapolis: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

It is these critical perspectives – feminism and postcolonialism in particular – which have in part motivated the ‘new’ set of explicitly and also *more global* ‘relational’ perspectives to IR.

Anna Agathangelou and Lily Ling, for example, inspired by both feminism and postcolonial thought, sought to offer a ‘vision and approach to world politics based on a notion of ‘multiple worlds’, conceived as ‘multiple relations, ways of being and traditions of seeing and doing’, worlds which are in ‘entwinement’.<sup>19</sup> For them, the self and the other were implicated and fundamentally relationally bound. This leads to embracing and listening to multiple perspectives rather than seeking to ‘wipe out’ experiences of the world. ‘Worldism’, for them, is about ‘social relations that make worlds’, an approach they characterise as ‘relational materialism’.<sup>20</sup> Ling’s long-standing efforts to develop this notion further by building on Buddhist and Daoist orientations has been an important extension to IR of this type of relational thinking. Here the self and the other become bound together in such a way that makes a separation of one and another, friend and enemy, difficult. The world is perceived of as in a conjoined relational process.<sup>21</sup>

This is not the only relational theory drawing on Asian cultural traditions. Yaqing Qin’s major contributions to relational theory, in particular the book *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, have sought to put forward a clear and distinct way of thinking relationally with concepts and experiences arising from Chinese and Confucian traditions.<sup>22</sup> From these cultural understandings of the world we come to IR, not from Western notions of rationality and atomism, but from Confucian emphasis on ‘a world of relations and a universe of relatedness’.<sup>23</sup> Here actors are ‘relators, relating and being related all the time’.<sup>24</sup> Usurping the Western rational actor model by a relational theory of world politics, Qin shows how and why cultural contexts matter for how we interpret world politics.

Emilian Kavalski in his relational theory of world politics calls this relational process a ‘dance’, of constant inter-relation and processing. This relational theory, via the concept of *guanxi*, is an attempt to build more relational ways of understanding international politics with conceptual tools from non-Western conceptual canon. This concept, contrary to IR’s ‘dualistic bifurcations’ ‘illuminates that the complex patterns of global life resonate with the fragility, fluidity and mutuality of global interactions’.<sup>25</sup> Relational IR for him is about ‘cultivating attentiveness to the self-organizing, shifting, and historically and geographically contingent realities of the global life we inhabit’.<sup>26</sup> This process is messy but essential for a more relational IR. It allows for a more global conversation for how we understand the world, and yet for him ‘a genuinely *relational IR* theorising is neither Sinocentric or Eurocentric but cultivated from the convivial, yet dissonant cross-pollination of values, narratives and practices in the study of world affairs’.<sup>27</sup>

It is not only in Chinese or Asian contexts that relationality has been developed. Robbie Shilliam, for example, has developed various ways of rethinking relations from engagement with Pacific cultural traditions. The focus of his *Black Pacific*, for example, was on thinking through what he calls ‘deep relation’. Deep relations for him are the ‘relationality that exists underneath the wounds of coloniality’.<sup>28</sup> To seek deep relation is then to ‘repair colonial wounds,

<sup>19</sup>Anna Agathangelou and Lily Ling, *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 1.

<sup>20</sup>Agathangelou and Ling, *Transforming*, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup>L. H. M. Ling, *The Dao of World Politics: Towards Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2014); Lily Ling, ‘Don’t flatter yourself: World politics as we know it is changing and so must disciplinary IR’, in Lynne L. Dyvik, Jan Selby, and Rorden Wilkinson (eds), *What’s the Point of IR?* (London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>22</sup>Yaqing Qin, ‘A relational theory of world politics’, *International Studies Review*, 18:1 (2016), pp. 33–47; Yaqing Qin, *A Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>23</sup>Qin, *A Relational Theory*, p. xvi.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>25</sup>Kavalski, *The Guanxi*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>28</sup>Robbie Shilliam, *Black Pacific: Anticolonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2015), p. 13.



binding back together peoples, lands, pasts, ancestors and spirits'.<sup>29</sup> Opening our eyes to different ways of relating by engaging experiences of relating of Pasifika, Māori, and Rastafari communities, Shilliam's work offers us a way to generate general principles towards a more relationally attuned way of understanding the world. Here the 'ethos of humanity' is to 'relate'<sup>30</sup> and thus to 'bind diverse but relatable matters'. Here 'everyone must be recognised as relatable entities rather than categorically segregated objects'.<sup>31</sup> A decolonial science of deep relation 'utilizes a key skill: the creative preparation of a ground for relating'.<sup>32</sup>

Agathangelou and Ling, Kavalski, Qin, and Shilliam have been joined in recent years by a whole series of other relational theorists and perspectives, not only writing from different parts of the world but also from different conceptions of humanity, the environment/nature, and indeed from different perspectives on how to view 'difference' and 'similarity'. As a recent forum arising from the 'Doing IR Differently' group and its various activities argues: 'Doing IR differently and relationally ... implies seeing the Other and alternative forms of knowing and being not in terms of "better" or "worse", but as critical elements of that whole.'<sup>33</sup> Crucially, the aim of this movement then is to 'forg[e] new pathways for doing IR and engaging difference and sameness differently':<sup>34</sup> 'both-and' logics as well as 'self and other' logics are allowed, explored. Another important set of interventions developing 'global relational theorising' points towards the need to develop new connections, relationally, and globally. Developing a conversation between anglophone and sinophone relational theory, this special issue shows how different geo-linguistic traditions can converse.<sup>35</sup>

While addressing cross-cultural dialogues, an interesting aspect of relational thinking has also been its interest in addressing anthropocentrism.<sup>36</sup> Thus, while on occasion critical of so-called new materialism and post- or critical humanism<sup>37</sup> there is a parallel wish in many forms of 'new' relational thought to attend to the problematic definitions and uses of categories such as human and non-human, culture and nature. In other words, there is a wish to undo and reshape the classical Western bifurcations of these notions and the delimitation of IR to the sphere of the 'human' without thinking through the effects thereof, not only for the inequalities of concrete humans and the effects for non-humans of their exclusion from our conceptions of 'politics'.<sup>38</sup>

Various writers combine both the sensibilities of recovering subaltern cosmologies and an interest in critiques of classical forms of humanism in IR. Amaya Querejazu, for example, discusses the limits both of colonial and humanist IR in the context of Andean traditions. Querejazu argues that we need to recognise the multiple, and relational, nature of non-Western cosmologies and recover and explore 'other' ways of relating to the subjects and objects of IR.<sup>39</sup> Instead of arguing for a singular world in which we relate to others, she argues

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>33</sup>Tamara Trowsell and Arlene Tickner, 'Differing about difference: An introduction', *International Studies Perspectives*, *International Studies Review*, 22:1 (2021), pp. 2–7.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Astrid H. M. Nordin 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.

<sup>36</sup>Emphasised also in Kavalski's notion of complexified relational ethics. Emilian Kavalski, 'Inside/Outside and around: Complexity and the relational ethics of global life', *Global Society*, 34:4 (2020), pp. 467–86.

<sup>37</sup>Trowsell and Tickner, 'Differing about difference', p. 4; Niang, 'The slave, the migrant'.

<sup>38</sup>Rafi Youatt's book *Interspecies Politics* is an important intervention in showing the interspecies structures on which concrete world politics is structured. Rafi Youatt, *Interspecies Politics: Nature, Borders, States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

<sup>39</sup>Amaya Querejazu, 'Encountering the pluriverse: Looking for alternatives in other worlds', *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 59:2 (2016).

for a pluriverse of relational beings that cannot be conceived as descriptions of the whole.<sup>40</sup> This perspective allows us think through the possibilities of relational cohabitation across humans and non-humans but also to recognise the violence done on knowledge and life by non-relational and universalist understandings of the world.

These perspectives, in a similar sense to new materialism and complexity theory, have argued that the nature of agency is more ‘distributed’ than classical substantialism allows for; that is, in new materialist/complexity theory terms, we exist in complex assemblages in which relational determinations are spread across the networks/systems but also ‘us’ as being made in them.<sup>41</sup> In so arguing both global relational interventions and new materialisms have also challenged the humanism implicit in constructivist and (post-)Marxist critical social theory. Many interesting investigations of the Anthropocene and anthropocentrism arise from relational perspectives.<sup>42</sup> These investigations, as many strands of posthumanism, argue that humans can be ‘more-than-human’, in that humans are fundamentally relationally bound with and part of ecologies that we process through.<sup>43</sup> The ‘broader networks of relations’<sup>44</sup> beyond the human and which make the human is what we should be attentive to. Challenging the ‘disenchanted nature’<sup>45</sup> as a mere background to human agency, relational scholars open up new ways of understanding and being in relations, human and non-human.

Yet, as Niang has recently argued, the relationship between decolonial and posthumanist perspectives can also be tense.<sup>46</sup> While showing interest in the unequal constructions of humans and non-humans, Niang argues that there is in posthumanist relational IR also a tendency not to think through the deep racial constructions of humanity. In a wish to see relations across beings – human and non-human – the deep construction of relationalities and, in fact, ‘non-relations’ in processes such a slavery can be curiously elided in this scholarship.<sup>47</sup>

Despite their disagreements, the above perspectives, and the many others developed alongside them (see, for example, the perspectives of many contributors in this issue) have, at least in some circles, become known as the ‘relational turn’ in IR.<sup>48</sup> But if these interventions constitute a ‘turn’ (and we should be sceptical of the tendencies to invoke ‘turns’)<sup>49</sup> this is certainly not a univocal movement, more of a series of traditions moving past each other and filtering each other, but generally moving in the same direction.

<sup>40</sup>See also David Blaney and Arlene Tickner, ‘Worlding, ontological politics and the possibility of a decolonial IR’, *Millennium*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 293–311.

<sup>41</sup>William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2017); Diane Coole and Samantha Frost (eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2010); Diane Coole, ‘Agentic capacities and capacious historical materialism: Thinking new materialisms in the political sciences’, *Millennium*, 41:3 (2013), pp. 451–69; Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Michele Acuto, and Simon Curtis (eds), *Reassembling International Theory: Assemblage Thinking and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014).

<sup>42</sup>For summary, see, for example, Jarrad Reddekop, ‘Why Runa?’, *International Studies Perspectives* (forthcoming).

<sup>43</sup>See, in particular, Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations: Complexity, Ecologism and Global Politics* (London: Zed, 2011); Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobson, ‘Complexity, ecologism, and posthuman politics’, *Review of International Studies*, 39:3 (2013), pp. 643–64; Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project of Posthumanism* (London: Routledge, 2017); Erika Cudworth, Stephen Hobden, and Emilian Kavalski (eds), *Posthuman Dialogues in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018)

<sup>44</sup>Cudworth, Hobden, and Kavalski (eds), *Posthuman Dialogues*, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup>Niang, ‘The slave, the migrant’.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>Kavalski, *The Guanxi*, p. 2.

<sup>49</sup>Stephane Beale and Gregorio Bettiza, “‘Turning’ everywhere in IR: On the sociological underpinnings of the field’s proliferating turns”, *International Theory*, Online First (June 2020).



We can perhaps associate these perspectives with three key interests:

- 1) **Pluriversality.** The ‘new’ relational perspectives represent many voices, experiences, and relational unfoldings. Yet, they are not motivated merely by an interest in expressing new voices in a ‘one-world world’ (universe) but rather by impetus to decolonise IR conceptions of ‘the world’ (as one). That is, these perspectives develop conceptual tools capable of exploring and appreciating different ways of experiencing and existing (affect as well as knowledge). The notion of the pluriverse is of interest to many relational thinkers for this reason. It moves us away from the idea that the world consists of multiple voices in a ‘single’ world towards the project of worlding multiple worlds.
- 2) **Re-relating.** Yet, the aim of such pluriversal perspectives to IR is, while recognising different worlds, also attending to the relational connections of the worlds, to loosen oneself into the worlds unfamiliar with careful listening, empathy, and relational sensibility. The point is not to listen to voices on one world but to start from recognition of multiplicity of worlds and their relations, without a view from above. This necessarily requires re-relating to relational connections and worldings, not only through rethinking knowledge, but also spirituality, emotions, and notions such as universality and objectivity.
- 3) **Human/non-human IR.** The relational perspectives call for attentiveness to the human and the non-human in an attempt to think through the complex processing of ‘humanity’ and ‘non-humanity’. This does not mean there is an agreement on critiques of humanism or approaches to posthumanism; but there is an interest in exploring the conjunctures and multiplicities of these debates.

While there are common trajectories, there are some important disagreements and discrepancies between relational perspectives of the relational turn. The difficult conversations between posthumanism and decolonial thought continue.<sup>50</sup> There are also differences on the questions revolving around science. Some postcolonial perspectives take a much more sceptical stance towards science than some complexity theorists, for example.<sup>51</sup>

These disagreements are important to recognise, as we will see, precisely so as to appreciate the strength and importance of this new relational theorising: *it is not about constructing a new paradigm with specific conceptual or ontological orientations. Rather it is about exploring, in always situated and attentive ways, different ways of thinking relationally in and around IR.* Rather than a univocal voice there is a polyphonic chorus of voices developing new ways of being, feeling, and thinking through relational connections.

Understood as such the relational turn is, I would argue, quite distinct in arguing for *multiple* relational ways of understanding the world and arguably new kinds of debate around how we can place in conversations with each other relational perspectives of varied kind, from varied parts of the world (without assuming the superiority of specific relational ontologies).

To explore what this might mean, I now turn to relational cosmology as one way of understanding the significance and the contours of the relational challenge for IR. Below I will argue that while this turn in part reflects the changing power relations in IR and international relations (away from Western-centric traditions of thought) it also reflects a resultant realignment of understandings of science, the cosmos, and the human role in (what we used to know as their) ‘environment’ in the context of the ecological challenges. Relational turn is thus part of the unfolding of processual relationalities in a world. Emphasising this relational cosmology can help ‘connect’ (if not ‘bridge’) these relational theories and link their development also with changes in the sciences.

<sup>50</sup>Niang, ‘The slave, the migrant’; Mustapha Kamal Pasha, ‘After the deluge: New universalism and postcolonial difference’, *International Relations*, 34:3 (2020).

<sup>51</sup>Cudworth and Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project*; Blaney and Tickner, ‘Worlding’.

## Relational cosmology and the relational turn

[I]n paintings of Picasso and the surrealists and abstract expressionists; in music of Stravinsky and Pert; in the dances of Martha Graham; in Wittgenstein's anti-philosophy; in Godel's theorem; in modern topology; in literature and theater, in molecular biology and the visions of Margulis and Lovelock ... we see a great shift of where humans are looking to find and to create coherence and beauty in the world ... And I hope I have convinced the reader that the signs of a great transition maybe read nowhere more clearly than in the incomplete and unresolved state of our physical and cosmological theories.<sup>52</sup>

My aim here is to follow up Lee Smolin's claim that there is a *multipronged* wave of relational revolutions taking place across the world and across fields of study. According to him, relational shifts are experienced in the arts but equally in the natural, physical, and biological sciences. Shift towards more relational theories, experiences, and methodological tools for him reflects deep shifts in, or at least discomfort with, the dominant religious, secular, scientific, and social tropes that have confined how modern Western sciences have understood the world. Science it seems has also been disenchanting, associated with rational knowledge 'from above' lacking emotion, connection, and spirituality, and it has been colonised by particular worldviews, concepts, and philosophies. Further, it has been depoliticised: separation of politics and science has contributed to the sense in which questions of science are somehow separate from those of politics.<sup>53</sup> Relational cosmology allows us to challenge these associations and shows that science too can be philosophical and relational, situated, and political. Through exploring relational cosmology here, I am interested in embedding our understanding of the rise of relationality in IR in the context of this wider 'relational revolution' to which Smolin refers.

Below, I first introduce relational cosmology, the perspective from which I make my claims. Then I proceed to argue that there are (at least) three reasons to understand relational theories in and around IR in the context of relational cosmology, that is: (1) relational thinking across arts and sciences pushes in similar directions with trends in IR; (2) relational thinking challenges modernist dichotomies; and (3) it leads towards a new understanding of science, which is also political and embedded in the world (not looking down on it). These arguments, I want to suggest in the final section, help us think through the significance and the structure of relational challenge in the field of IR as well as connecting it to challenges beyond it.

Let us start, however, with a brief appreciation of the basis of relational cosmology.

### Relational cosmology

Relational cosmology is a perspective developed, initially, in the natural sciences in the works of cosmological theorists such as Lee Smolin and Carlo Rovelli. It found its most explicit and worked through expression in the works of Smolin.<sup>54</sup> As a cosmological theory, relational cosmology argues for some fundamental shifts in our understanding of the cosmos and indeed argues that there is deep 'trouble with physics'<sup>55</sup> as a scientific field as physicists try to come to grips with our discoveries about the cosmos with language and theories derived from a past that seems misaligned with the nature of our discoveries. In particular, relational cosmology advances and develops a Loop Quantum Gravity (LQG) perspective from within which its understanding of relationality arises.

<sup>52</sup>Lee Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos* (London: Phoenix, 1997), p. 367.

<sup>53</sup>Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring Sciences into Democracy* (London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>54</sup>Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos*; Lee Smolin, *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity* (London: Phoenix, 2000); Lee Smolin, *The Trouble with Physics: The Rise of String Theory, The Fall of a Science and What Comes Next* (London: Penguin, 2008); Lee Smolin, *Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013).

<sup>55</sup>Smolin, *The Trouble*.

For LQG and thus relational cosmology space is not a background but formed of spin networks, of relational unfoldings of the cosmos.<sup>56</sup> Challenging the Newtonian idea of ‘configuration space’, where time and space exist as background to objects, relational cosmology removes the idea of a ‘background’ and as a result the idea of ‘objects’ from our conception of the world. What we would within a Newtonian language call ‘objects’, and indeed what we call the ‘background’, are nothing but processual unfoldings of relationalities. There really are no such things as things, only relationalities, and there really is no space as a background for things to move in. What there are is relations, relating.

In this processual world, crucially, relations are *not* relations of things, that is, ‘inter-actions’ of things in networks, but rather *relationality is ontologically primary to any notion of ‘things’ or ‘essences’*. In other words, the world is an unfolding relational ‘mesh’ (as I have called it elsewhere, drawing on Timothy Morton),<sup>57</sup> a mesh in which ‘we’, and ‘things’ porously ‘intra-act’, as Karen Barad<sup>58</sup> would have it. This mesh is not a ‘background’ or a ‘thing’; it is the relational mesh of which and in which ‘we’ process. Indeed, in this relational view ‘we’ and all ‘objects’, are really processes, and we do not really exist ‘on our own’ but rather we are fundamentally and inescapably *smear*ed in the relationalities that make ‘us’ possible. This is true equally of mobile phones, rocks, turtles, and human beings. There is no escaping the mesh, for anyone in the relational mesh. You cannot stand outside it or separate yourself from it. We are in and of relationalities that exceed us and are at the same time always ‘local’ (specific to all locations) but also always ‘connected’ or ‘processing with’ (the mesh).

As a result of denying the ‘background-dependence’ (a view that depends on there being a background to ‘things’ moving) embedded in most natural and social scientific theorising, relational cosmology also argues that cosmological sciences really are very different in what they should do to what physicists think they should do. For Smolin, physics and cosmology really should be conceived of more like what has been considered as characteristic of ‘social science’, and in particular ‘history’: they study the unfoldings of multiple historically constituted relational processes, from the situated positions of observers within the relational dance. This is because ultimately there are no ‘laws’ of the universe that our maths could ‘get at’ or our theories could ‘capture’, as if we were outside of the cosmos.

And there are for relational cosmologists no such things as God’s eye theories of the universe. Why? Because you cannot know a relational universe ‘from the outside’ but only within the relations within which you process. All knowledge of the universe must be from within the universe.<sup>59</sup> Thus, all knowledge, including all physical science knowledge, is *approximate* and *situated* knowledge. The ‘god trick’ (as Haraway would have it) – the idea that we can examine the facts of the world from the outside, or that facts exist outside of our relations with them – of the positivists is simply unthinkable in a relational cosmos.

But relational cosmology is not just a physical theory. Smolin was always open about his interest in developing the societal and political implications of this theory. Working with the social and political theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Smolin has developed a natural philosophy perspective from this orientation to the cosmos.<sup>60</sup> At stake is not just how we understand the cosmos

<sup>56</sup>For more detail, see Smolin, *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity* and *Life of the Cosmos*.

<sup>57</sup>Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>58</sup>Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half-Way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>59</sup>Here it is worth clarifying the meaning of universe within this frame for it is curious within this Special Issue in particular. On the one hand, Smolin and Unger argue precisely for a universe: that is the existence of a singular universe. They are critical of the ‘flight from’ reality arguments, which underpin for them many string theoretical and multiverse accounts. This universe for them, however, incorporates multiple experiences and sites and thus is akin to pluriverse notions in some important respects. For further discussion, see Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*, ch 5.

<sup>60</sup>Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin, *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

but our own role in it. Indeed, cosmological theorising is an inherently social, political, philosophical, as well as a 'scientific' endeavour. This is what makes cosmology such a challenging but vital branch of philosophy/science/humanities.

Unger and Smolin develop together a perspective that emphasises the openness of the world and the need for a 'light' approach to understanding it, that is, ways of understanding the world that come from the situated relations in the world, not from a 'heavy' metaphysics that attempts to 'capture' the world in its 'essence'.<sup>61</sup> What they mean by the light approach is that we should be averse to heavy metaphysics, also of philosophy of science, and always recognise the limitations of our scientific theories: they instead call for an openness to complex relational reality. They have an aversion to beautiful mathematical theories in favour of reality checks on our aesthetic intuitions. We need to push and stretch ourselves as we try to, with our limited brains, understand the relations, which make us and others around us.<sup>62</sup>

They are also interested in the questions of democracy and tie questions of democracy, radically reconceived, together with questions of science. As we will see in more detail below, science – if dissociated from modernist God's eye view of Science – is akin to democracy – if this notion itself is dissociated from liberal democracy. As Smolin emphasises, science as democracy is about an ethic of openness, of probing views and experiences and realities (worlds) of others differently situated in the mesh. It is not about rigid assumptions or methods but rather about making our ideas open to the relational universe, that is, about ensuring that the relational universe is able to probe or become part of our being/understanding in it.

Why might this perspective – a perspective somewhat in line with other post-Newtonian and quantum explorations of IR, and yet distinct from them<sup>63</sup> – be of interest in considering the relational turn in the social sciences and IR? Below I explicate three reasons.

### **Shared direction of travel**

What is interesting about relational cosmology is the way in which it draws from scientific findings a set of propositions that challenge the existing paradigmatic ways of doing science and relating to the world. The aim of relational cosmology is to say that while the traditional conceptual categories of Western science have led to some of the discoveries of cosmological patterns, these conceptual tools also *delimit* our ability to understand what the cosmos has been telling us. We need to then undo and redo our conceptual tools to realign with the world.

In this realigning it is their emphasis on relational ways of comprehending the world that is strikingly closely in line with the insistence on 'opening up to' relations in the postcolonial and posthumanist lines of thought. These perspectives have also argued that colonial science and its conceptual ways of 'gathering' the world transmits to us a 'twisted world', not in line with the relational dance that we inhabit. This is precisely why we need to be 'creative' to loosen ourselves back into the world and its relational unfolding. This emphasis on relationality and how to 'loosen' into it by letting go of modernist assumptions then is a shared orientation between these varied forms of relational thought.

So is the emphasis on the situated nature of knowledge. All of these sets of perspectives emphasise the fundamentally, and inescapably, relational nature of our knowledge

<sup>61</sup>Unger and Smolin, *The Singular Universe*.

<sup>62</sup>Milja Kurki, 'Stretching situated knowledge: From standpoint epistemology to cosmology and back again', *Millennium*, 43:3 (2015), pp. 779–97.

<sup>63</sup>The lines of conversation with quantum perspectives in IR are complex and have been discussed elsewhere. Suffice it here to note that relational cosmology, while developing in conversation with science, is not seeking to establish a truth of the quantum on which an interpretation of the nature of the human, the social and reality 'rests' in an objective manner. Thus, while there are important similarities with Alex Wendt's important work on the quantum for example, relational cosmology is not simply reducible to a quantum perspective. For Wendt's important account, see Alexander Wendt, *The Quantum Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

construction activities. They are guided by a refusal to work with God's eye perspectives, knowledge from as if 'outside' of relational dance. And these perspectives recognise and argue for a science that does not hang on authority of the objective outsider or the 'universal' laws. There is no objective outsider in a relational universe and there are no universal laws. Indeed, the critique of universalism in relational cosmology, while generated from a different standpoint, nevertheless supports the criticisms of universalism developed, for example, by postcolonial authors.<sup>64</sup> Universal laws or concepts fail to understand and mislead us away from appreciating the relational dance, the deep relations, the relational unfolding of the world in which we are made; and yet to deny universalism does not deny our ability to try to generate some general principles which decolonial, situated sciences can and necessarily do develop.<sup>65</sup>

### ***Beyond dichotomies***

The relational cosmology is helpful also because it supports and allows us to understand, from a different perspective, the need to critique modernist attempts to categorise, especially via dichotomies, the 'essential' nature of existence. Nature and culture, human and environment, individual and structure, fact and fiction, secularism and religion, thought and action, theory and practice, material and ideational, rational and emotional: all of these kinds of dichotomies come under fire in relational forms of thought, including relational cosmology.

The reason for this is that the 'essential' nature of the world in 'substances' is being brought under question with significant effects for understanding how our worldviews have been constructed via these dichotomies and how as such they have become restricted and prone to 'dead ends' in terms of thinking through our condition. Processing in relations, we 'stretch' constantly to understand anew, to hold together anew, to ground anew. As such our effort is less on fixing categories and more on letting go of categories to loosen ourselves into the world anew.

It is also recognised that this kind of science of (decolonial deep) relations requires new skills: affective as well as rational, practical as well as theoretical. We are called to *re-relate to the world*, not simply to do science differently. In so doing we are also called to think beyond generating 'knowledge' but are also opened up to other ways of being and becoming.<sup>66</sup> The disenchantment of Western science is criticised as we are loosened into a world of exposure to others.

### ***Science and democratic community in the pluriversal cosmos***

Besides these critiques of modernist categories, narratives, and concepts there is a certain letting go of modernist interpretations of science, agency, and of democracy which is worthy of note. Different kinds of dialogues, and dialogues between actants of different kinds, are revealed here; the agency of the decolonising knower or the posthuman actant are recognised and tied up with how we know. Science is not Science of authority but a (decolonial) science of cosmos *collaborating in relational conversation*. Democracy here is not 'liberal democracy' of voting every four years in national elections, but an ethos tied up not only to representing the 'other' but 'loosening' oneself into complex sets of relations. A rethinking of democratic possibilities and indeed the meaning of 'community' and 'representation' is opened up.<sup>67</sup>

Crucially sciences in this perspective become part of the situated relational processing and probing of cosmological relations and also have important roles to play in facilitating new forms of democratic

<sup>64</sup>For a fascinating discussion, see Pasha, 'After the deluge'.

<sup>65</sup>Shilliam, *The Black Pacific*.

<sup>66</sup>Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*.

<sup>67</sup>Kurki, 'Coronavirus, democracy'.



community in a relational *pluriverse* of human and non-human communities.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, there is a striking set of conversations to be had between the pluriverse perspectives and relational cosmology. In neither is the world ever a ‘whole’ to be captured as a totality, rather it is always a multiplicity.<sup>69</sup>

This is why this article does not propose a turn to an ‘authoritative’ Science<sup>70</sup> to ‘ground’ a relational turn in IR but also argues that the sciences should not be put aside in developing relational thought. An interesting cross-disciplinary set of conversations open up from this perspective. What used to be the domain of ‘IR’ now leaks into concerns of others and what concerns them is no longer outside of IR – how are conceptions of the international tied up with scientific conceptions of the cosmos and vice versa?<sup>71</sup> In a relational cosmos there really are no ‘levels of analysis’, nor neat disciplinary boundaries. Every ‘thing’ is smeared across which is why the challenge is how to ‘think together’, while always thinking differently, situatedly. This also means that to think politics is not only to think ‘humans’ but also ‘animals, vegetables, and minerals’, in a ‘planetary’ politics.<sup>72</sup>

### Relational conversations and rethinking communities that matter in and around IR

What is the significance of the above for IR as a social science? Does it make no difference? Some scholars in IR have been sceptical of the efforts to produce more Global IR, more posthuman IR, more relational IR. Critics of global IR, for example, have argued that Amitav Acharya’s<sup>73</sup> global IR is really not very different from classical IR’s orientations.<sup>74</sup> Critics of posthuman IR argue that the posthumanists in aligning with relations with non-humans are too quick to forget the human, the centre-ground of IR, and as such also can be uncritical about the way in which their own perspectives are tied up with colonising projects.<sup>75</sup> The critics of more relational IR further argue that it has not presented perspectives that have adequately readdressed the classical problems of IR.<sup>76</sup> Some also argue that social scientists in a rush to ‘also do science’ run the risk of misunderstanding the sciences or over-extending their implications for the social.<sup>77</sup>

I would like to suggest that all these criticisms, while provocative, do not understand the *wider relational revolution of which the relational turn with its efforts to be more global, more relational and more critically humanist* is part of. They do not appreciate the situated but also ‘general principles without universalism’ approach of the new relational science and social science presented for them. This means that while the critics can attack certain aspects of individual relational

<sup>68</sup>Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1991); Latour, *Politics of Nature*; Kurki, ‘Coronavirus, democracy’.

<sup>69</sup>See also Philip Conway, ‘On the way to planet politics: From disciplinary demise to cosmopolitical coordination’, *International Relations*, 34:2 (2020), pp. 157–79.

<sup>70</sup>Science conceived as ‘capitalised’; as a modernist authority of knowledge construction akin to the Church. When speaking of the sciences, rather than Science, Latour for example, shows for us how scientific practices are of and in the world, making and constructing realities, rather than knowing them from ‘the outside’. See, for example, Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1988).

<sup>71</sup>Bentley Allan’s work in this regard has been important for the field of IR as has that of Alexander Wendt. See Allan, *Scientific Cosmology*; Wendt, *Quantum Mind*.

<sup>72</sup>Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*; Conway, ‘Towards planetary politics’; Burke et al., ‘Planet politics’; Youatt, *Interspecies Politics*.

<sup>73</sup>Amitav Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds: A new agenda for international studies’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 58:4 (2016), pp. 647–59.

<sup>74</sup>Tickner and Blaney, ‘Worlding’; Trowsell and Tickner, ‘Differing about difference’.

<sup>75</sup>David Chandler, ‘Post-political ontologies and the problems of anthropocentrism: A reply to Tsouvalis’, *Global Discourse*, 1:2 (2015), pp. 40–2.

<sup>76</sup>Ken Booth, ‘What’s the point of IR? The international in the invention of humanity’, in Dyvik, Selby, and Wilkinson (eds), *What is the Point of International Relations?*

<sup>77</sup>For recent exchanges on Wendt see, for example, Badredine Arfi and Oliver Kessler, ‘Forum Introduction: Social theory going quantum-theoretic? Questions, alternatives and challenges’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 47:1 (2018), pp. 67–73.



perspectives; they do so without necessarily understanding of the new criteria of evaluation required in a relational cosmos.

In a relational cosmos positivist criteria for knowledge – facts and general laws understood objectively – no longer stand as they have been sidelined by findings of modern science itself. Nor do classical postpositivist paradigms of interpretivism or constructivism rule, for they have been revealed as manifestations of a particular kind of Western humanist relational thought, relational thought that has delimited the ways in which we can and could ‘loosen ourselves’ into the world.

Crucially, determinate new criteria of evaluation are difficult to come by in a relational cosmos. For sure, there is a commitment to the world, to a realism of some kind: that is, we are of and making the world. Yet, because we are limited as knowers and are always in particular relations, we always approximate the world from somewhere and also in so doing ‘cut it’ or make it relationally. Knowing is also doing and it is being and becoming. ‘Onto-epistemology’ of relational knowledge makes it difficult to have general criteria for ‘knowledge’ ‘of’ ‘the world’.<sup>78</sup> A key criterion for relational exploration is, as I have argued elsewhere, an ethos of ‘stretching’, pulling away from how we conceptualise the world, to ‘loosen’ ourselves into the world anew.<sup>79</sup>

It follows that science is, as Smolin too emphasises, about openness of method, of undoing existing knowledges and ways of being, of ‘loosening’ into the world. Whether it is Smolin’s constant reapproximation of our concepts in the recalcitrance of the universe to our conceptions of it, or Shilliam’s decolonial science of regrounding in relations, relational revolution has shifted the modalities of not only knowledge production but also how knowledge ‘cuts’ the world relationally.

Not only this, relational revolution has shifted ‘who’ should be included in conversations, not only about knowledge, but about how we should live. No longer are the communities that matter ‘scientists’ or ‘politicians’ or ‘international organizational actors’: they are also potentially animals, vegetables, and minerals. These processes also speak with and through us: something which we can appreciate as we loosen ourselves into the relational sciences. Here also we are no longer separate, autonomous, outside of others: we are literally smeared into relations and thus in relation to others, never separate. How ‘we’ do science from here – or politics and democracy – is a matter of key concern to the relational theorists – as it is for cosmologists and decolonial theorists. Their orientations may have slight differences, certainly worth probing and discussing, but also many similarities.

What emerges from this view is a less abstracted science, less abstracted humanity, more ecologically concerned and grounded set of relational beings/becomings, in new kinds of conversations where authorities do not regulate the intra-actions but where horizons are open to new ways of relating, new ways of thinking and being in relations.

What are the modalities of engaging relationality in this manner? What are the politics of doing relationality in these ways rather than the ways we have done them before in IR theory debates and social theory? I cannot possibly, nor do I wish, to conclude this discussion here. These explorations have but started, reflected in the many important such conversations unfolding at present in the field<sup>80</sup> and indeed in this issue.

<sup>78</sup>What I mean by this is that if we know as we process, we are never lifted off the relations in order to generate criteria for engagement with ‘it’ (the world). Being/becoming is also knowing and also an act of politics and ethics. In this sense knowledge is ethics and politics as much as it is tied to particular ways of becoming. There is no self-evident (separate) notion of ‘knowledge’ with criteria to be delineated objectively and without discussion of the very ways in which acts make the world.

<sup>79</sup>Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*; Milja Kurki, ‘Stretching situated knowledge’.

<sup>80</sup>Nordin et al., ‘Towards global relational theorizing’, pp 570–81; Trowsell and Tickner, ‘Differing about difference’.

## Conclusion: Relational conversations in the next century of IR

The second century of IR calls for something new, something different in the field of IR. We can reflect on ‘continuity and change’,<sup>81</sup> but we also must acknowledge the need for change. Much has changed about power relations, about how we engage different viewpoints, and about scientific knowledge of our surroundings.

Relational perspectives speak directly to this changed condition. As Peter Katzenstein notes, they also explicitly build uncertainty and fluidity into their frames, against the Newtonian and modernist impulse to fix, to stabilise, to order, and to manage.<sup>82</sup>

They ask us to loosen our orientations, abandon the God’s eye perspectives, to listen to differences of experiences and becoming in relational unfoldings of different kind, and to develop a new kind of IR from this understanding, listening, being vulnerable to and seeking exposure to others in relations.

What kinds of implications might this have for IR? What kinds of concrete conversations or research agendas might arise?

In line with the broadly pluriversal nature of these perspectives and the different contexts within which they are developed, the interests, puzzles, and focal points of relational analyses will no doubt differ considerably. It would thus be a mistake to too firmly set out a ‘research agenda’ for this scholarship. Instead, I set out below three possible, interesting lines of conversation. These inevitably reflect the situated knowledges from within which I develop my interest in these questions. These points are not put forward to exclude or to narrow down what relational conversations can and should look like.

1. **Conversations on humanisms, posthumanisms, and decolonial thought.** This relationship is something that needs to be discussed in more detail. As Niang’s recent intervention shows,<sup>83</sup> there is an important set of concerns attached to how humanism and indeed post-humanism is discussed in the field and what relational thought can bring to this. Are there certain kinds of relations even relational thought is not skilled to see: are there relationalities of non-relation and should we pay more attention to these, than mere relations?
2. **New dimensions of relationality.** Oliver Kessler and Marc Lenglet<sup>84</sup> in a recent article suggest that relational thought, while interesting, has suffered from a crucial lack: it has inadvertently worked with spatial metaphors and concepts but as such as failed to think through how relationality figures temporally, for example, in politics of speed. This, and related or different, hidden dimensions of relationality bear need for further consideration and discussion.
3. **Questions around democracy, science, and what a transdisciplinary ethical practice or ethos would mean.** An interesting aspect of relational practice and thought is the coming together of various ‘disciplines’ or ‘fields’ into a conversation around democracy. There is the potential for relational revolution to precipitate a new kind of less disenchanted science: one where feeling, becoming, community building, and politics is being done in and through ‘science’ too. These conversations are crucial for the so-called planetary politics debates in IR<sup>85</sup> and the rethinking of democratic politics more widely, not least in the context of the changing nature of social and natural orders in the context of the pandemic.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>81</sup>Ken Booth, ‘International Relations: The story so far’, *International Relations*, 33:2 (2019), pp. 358–90.

<sup>82</sup>Peter Katzenstein, ‘Worldviews in world politics’, in Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *Uncertainty and Its Discontents: Worldviews in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>83</sup>Niang, ‘The slave, the migrant’.

<sup>84</sup>Oliver Kessler and Marc Lenglet, ‘Between concepts and thought: Digital technologies and temporal relationality’, *International Relations*, 34:3 (2020).

<sup>85</sup>Burke et al., ‘Planet politics manifesto’; Conway, ‘Towards planet politics’.

<sup>86</sup>Kurki, ‘Coronavirus, democracy’.

Relational cosmology as a perspective is one way of feeding into but also allowing us to understand the significance of the relational 'turn' in IR, the social sciences, and indeed in the sciences. In a relational universe we are entangled, smeared into each other and also thus able to rethink our ways of conversing, being, and becoming. The task of 'IR' too must be to loosen into these entanglements in which and of which it is made.

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