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Atomism and Atelic Conceptualization

‘Sometimes we see an elephant, and sometimes we do not.’

Alfred North Whitehead

In order to understand the aim of this brief account, we must first acknowledge this statement: That every experience can be analysed and understood as a theoretical entity. The theorization of experience is only the outcome of what appears to be the *History of the Philosophy of Experience*, a History in which we meet John Locke, John Dewey, William James, E.B Holt, Bertrand Russell, and A.N. Whitehead.

Experience: Between Atomism and Causalism

Edwin Holt, thanks to James (1904), thought that experience was the stuff of which everything in this world was made. He went further, and gifted experience with a logical status: since Holt (1914) was convinced that logic is ‘the science of truth’, the concept of experience was translated into a logical entity. The main problem was the monist character of this entity, which could be either physical or mental. Russell adopted this monistic theory without any scrupulous stare. But Whitehead did not. That’s why he took the next step and transformed the Holtian entity into something pluralist and social, that is, organic. Hence, the expression of ‘actual entity’ for his universal concept of experience. According to Whitehead what is real is actual; hence, reality is actuality. This is a first encounter with Chinese Philosophy. According to Wing Tsit Chan (1968), ‘the validity of principles can be tested only in actual events. As a matter of fact, Chinese philosophers

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generally do not distinguish between reality and actuality'.¹ When one starts to face experience as theoretical, we cease to wonder where experience starts and where does it stop; it's everywhere and, because of its social character, we don't have to get entangled by supervenient guessings,² for the very reason that experiences gather, and aggregate together, forming, following the Whiteheadian taxonomy, some 'nexus', 'societies', and 'enduring objects'. For instance, our body is an enduring object, and a chair is a 'society'.³

In this paper, I focus on atomism as the foundational rhythm of nature, and on non-telic (or what I call *atelic*) conceptualization. Atomism and conceptualization fall under the concept of experience. The link in between operates because of the theoretical nature of experience, which is physical ('actual entity') and mental (the 'eternal object', which is the name of the pure mental part in any experience. We do not perceive an eternal object, as Whitehead points, we 'ingress' it (from his neologism 'ingression'). But not only is the functioning of experience atomic, it is also potentialist and causalist. Let's first approach this atomism considering its relation to potentiality:

There is a prevalent misconception that 'becoming' involves the notion of a unique seriality for its advance into novelty. This is the classic notion of 'time', which philosophy took over from common sense. Mankind made an unfortunate generalization from its experience of enduring objects. Recently physical science has abandoned this notion. Accordingly we should now purge cosmology of a point of view which it ought never to have adopted as an ultimate metaphysical principle. In these lectures the term 'creative advance' is not to be construed in the sense of a uniquely serial advance. Finally, the extensive continuity of the physical universe has usually been construed to mean that there is a continuity of becoming. But if we admit that 'something becomes', it is easy, by employing Zeno's method, to prove that there can be no continuity of becoming. There is a becoming of continuity, but no continuity of becoming. The actual occasions are the creatures which become, and they constitute a continuously extensive world. Thus the ultimate

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- [1] According to Chan, the only western philosopher whose philosophy could fit in this Chinese frame is Whitehead, because his is a philosophy of *events*. I do not have the space here to explain how, from actual entities we pass to *events*. Let's say for the time being that an event represents the mesoscopic scale in which we, human beings, fit.
- [2] I here refer to the problem of adaptability between theoretical facts with observational facts, mentioned for instance in Chalmers (1996, p. 75). Experience is observable, as well as unobservable (quanta, cosmic events, my neighbour's mind). Since experience is everywhere, we can, at the same time, obtain a theory from it, and *live* it, through the highly sensitive experience-receptors and producers that we are. There is, I think, one supervenient problem concerning how *mentality* emerges in us.
- [3] Whitehead pushed back into the inorganic world what he phrased as the *evolutionary theory of experience*.

metaphysical truth is atomism (Whitehead, *Process and Reality* [hereafter PR], 1978, p. 35).

The understanding of becoming as a unique seriality belongs to folk psychology, and goes back to Newton. According to the *Scholium*: ‘Absolute, true, and mathematical time, in and of itself and from its own nature, without reference to anything external, flows uniformly and by another name is called duration’ (Newton, 1999). But nothing like such a flow exists. The continuity of a phenomenon consists in all its re-experiential entities, re-issued as long as there exist some possibilities for them to maintain the state in which they are. As Whitehead puts it: ‘Also in the creative advance, the nexus⁴ proper to an antecedent actual world is not destroyed. It is reproduced and added to, by the new bonds of feeling with the novel actualities which transcend it and include it’ (PR, p. 238). In other words, whatever endures does not continue because of a Newtonian flow of matter, but because of the ‘material’ and spatio-temporal conditions, considering that these conditions are experiences *prima facie*. That’s one of the reason why Whitehead insists on saying that experience takes place only once, and not twice: ‘No thinker thinks twice, and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice’ (PR, p. 29). And this is a second encounter with Chinese Philosophy:

In the Confucian process of production and reproduction, however, time never comes to an end or repeats itself. Every production has an element of novelty, since it requires a new relationship of *yin* and *yang*. When Confucius urged people to ‘renovate oneself every day’, he meant a daily development of personality. Neo-Confucianists, however, gave the phrase a metaphysical flavour, that everything is new’ (Wing Tsit Chan, 1968, p.136).

Overarching the centuries, this last four words are exactly what Whitehead is saying.

While reading Whitehead, we’d better not forget he was also a mathematician, and that he was expected to write the fourth Volume to *Principia Mathematica*, devoted to Geometry, and never to appear... Nevertheless, there’s a great deal of mathematics, geometry, and logic in his philosophical work. And then it’s not a metaphoric discourse

[4] PR is rich with a ‘Categorical Scheme’, which counts one ‘Category of the Ultimate’, eight ‘Categories of Existence’, twenty-seven ‘Categories of Explanation’, and nine ‘Categorical Obligations’. The fourteenth ‘Category of Explanation’ states that a ‘nexus is a set of actual entities in the unity of the relatedness constituted by their prehensions [i.e. ‘feelings’] of each other, or — what is the same thing conversely expressed — constituted by their objectifications in each other’ (PR, p. 24).

when we read that *Continuity* (also named *potentiality*), is something that is *real* and *geometrical in nature*:

The contemporary world is objectified for us under the aspect of passive potentiality. The very sense-data by which its parts are differentiated are supplied by antecedents states of our own bodies, and so is their distribution in contemporary space. Our direct perception of the contemporary world is thus reduced to extension, defining (i) our own geometrical perspectives, and (ii) possibilities of mutual perspectives for other contemporary entities *inter se*, and (iii) possibilities of division. These possibilities of division constitute the external word a continuum. For a continuum is divisible; so far as the contemporary world is divided by actual entities, it is not a continuum, but it is atomic. Thus the contemporary world is perceived with its potentiality for extensive division, and not in its actual atomic division (PR, pp. 61–2).

We cannot perceive any entity unless there have already previously been these geometrical properties. As soon as we divide the continuum (the *extension* of the world) the continuum ceases to exist *for us*. And this is precisely because we divide the continuum that we're able to say that we perceive some things. When we perceive the world without perceiving any definite entity, the kind we are able to name, then we perceive the world as a continuum, and because we perceive the world as a continuum, we perceive Nature as a whole, through what Whitehead has called the 'sense-awareness' in his *Concept of Nature* (1920). In other words, we're not conscious of the sense-awareness, and still, we perceive ('continuously', as argued rightly Locke). The sense-awareness is a full experience, whereas 'sense-perception' is a part objectified experience; it paves the way for concepts. But since we are not conscious of this sense-awareness, we usually, and unconsciously, look for a foothold into folk psychology and in what Anil Gupta phrases as the 'Naïve Epistemological Realism', namely 'the thesis that the given in an experience yields ordinary judgments of perception' (Gupta, 2006, p. 31). But in the continuum, there is no judgment of any kind. The continuum, in its solid geometrical nature, is the scaffolding of 'sense-awareness', rendered possible by the biological nature of it. There could be no sense-awareness on the pure computational scale.

Atomism and Atelism

What about atomism in Lao Zi (Lao Tzu, 1963)? From the first four verses of the *Dao De Jing* (*Tao Te Ching*), we are struck by its atomic conceptions. *The Way that can be spoken of Is not the constant way, The name that can be named Is not the constant name* (Verse I). Here it

is said that the Dao does not always bear the same name, although: *From the present back to Antiquity Its name has never deserted it* (Verse XXI). How, since we're talking about some unchanged name, can we enunciate in a changing manner what is designated? Because, contrary to the Dao, which does not change, its utterances change; and each utterance does not necessarily mean the same thing, *even if it's the same thing*. How is that? When I utter 'conscience', I might want to express something different than the person who listens to me. Or even I may pronounce the very same word another day and thinking something else; although it is the same word. I will have thought about the same object, but in another situation. This is a first approach to Lao Zi's atomism, which I would call *illocutory atomism*. This *illocutory atomism* we also meet in Whitehead:

A single word is not one definite sound. Every instance of its utterance differs in some respect from every other instance : the pitch of the voice, the intonation, the accent, the quality of sound, the rhythmic relations of the component sounds, the intensity of sound, all vary. Thus a word is a species of sounds, with specific identity and individual differences. When we recognize the species, we have heard the word. But what we have heard is merely the sound — euphonious or harsh, concordant with or discordant with other accompanying sounds. The word is heard in the pure perceptive mode of immediacy, and primarily elicits merely the contrasts and identities with other percepta in that mode. So far there is no symbolic interplay (PR, p.182).

Whitehead has just said earlier that 'the species from which the symbolic reference starts is called the "species of symbols", and the species with which it ends is called "the species of meaning"'. We have seen with Lao Zi what I call *illocutory atomism*, in which the same word diverges considering the circumstances. But here with Whitehead we could speak about another level of *illocutory atomism*, that is, a two-level *illocutory atomism*. The first level is the hearing of the *symbols*, and the second level is the understanding of the *meaning*. The 'pure perceptive mode of immediacy' is another sentence for *actuality*; in other words, this mode where we catch the immediacy of the actuality without catching the all necessary background of it. And one of the background is *thinking*. We do not necessarily think while we listen to an utterance, and yet, we hear the *symbols*. We can hear without listening, we can listen to and not understand, we can listen and misunderstand... As the specialist in the field of Categorical Perception might say, we cannot escape the *analogic* discourse, but we can escape its *digital* aspect. A second type of atomism in Lao Zi is his notion of Nothingness (*Wu* in Chinese). If there is something, it's

because there is nothing: *The myriad creatures in the world are born from Something and Something from Nothing*. (Verse XL).

The word Dao is often associated with the word *Wu*, which signifies 'nothing'. But this does not mean that Dao means *nothing*. According to Wing Tsit Chan, 'early Daoists understood *wu* to mean "having no name", that is, that Dao cannot be described. Later Daoists, especially Kuo Hsiang, went a step further and definitely identified *wu* with nothingness'. Chan adds: 'It should be noted that Daoists were not arguing for nihilism. Rather, they were arguing for the doctrine of "self-transformation", that a thing comes to itself'. Wing Tsit-Chan writes that we owe to Wang Ch'ung 'the doctrine that all things are self-transformations'. But more, for the Daoists Kuan Li and Lao Tan, 'pure emptiness that yet not destroy objective things was form them actuality'. Emptiness is actuality. The phrase 'emptiness is actuality' means, by itself, the process of what atomism is. From the point of view of atomism, actuality fills the void [Greek: *to kenon*] which lies in potentiality. It's not that actuality builds itself on nothing; actuality takes its stance from all potentialities ever, and potentiality has the same meaning as emptiness just like the becoming in five minutes does not yet exist. What appears was not there before. Something coming from nothing. As Whitehead wrote: 'It is part of the essential nature of each physical actuality that it is itself an element qualifying the Receptacle [the *hypodochè* in the *Timaeus*], and that the qualifications of the Receptacle enter into its own nature' (Whitehead, 1967, p. 134). This sort of atomism which concentrates actuality to the point that we do not witness it we meet again in Lao Zi from the scope of behaviour: *The sage [...] accomplishes without having to act*. (Verse XLVII). This doesn't mean that the sage is doing nothing. He *does* without doing. He's practising the non-acting, and that's why he accomplishes. We might take this as an indication that acting in itself connotes usually too much time. Accomplishing is faster than acting. Accomplishing is a complete act, which is perfect in itself, as perfect as was for Spinoza every action. To accomplish is different than having to act, because there is no duty in accomplishing, there is no *deontic*. 'To accomplish' comes from the latin *complere*: 'to fill'. 'To act' comes from *agere*: 'to do'. The perpetuation of our being is the accomplishment. Atomism is without deontic, without deontology (from the Greek '*to deon*', obligation, and *logos*). Deontology is a moral science which intends to 'teach to apply happiness-producing and misery avoiding rules of conduct' (Bentham, 1834). The accomplishment is not guided by morals, but by the value. In the philosophy of Whitehead, the accomplishment is what symbolizes the fulfilment

of the act. That's the reason why we accomplish faster than we think. It might appear that we act without any telos, just like Lao Zi acknowledges: *It gives them life yet claims no possession Its benefits them and exacts no gratitude*, which is echoing this from the Verse LXXVII: *Therefore the sage benefits them yet exacts no gratitude Accomplishes his task yet lays claim to no merit*.

Atelism in Lao Zi

The extract from the Verse 47 may be understood from the atomistic point of view, but because it underlies some intention, it can also be understood from the *telic* point of view, or rather, from the non-telic or *atelic* point of view, such as the Verse 38 argues for: *A man of the highest benevolence acts, but from no ulterior motive*.

He acts without acting. To act without purpose, is that acting? Atomism prepares us to accept such a possibility. Atomism presupposes some accomplishment of an immediate act, that is, without *continuity*. Jaakko Hintikka has pointed to the *telic* character of the Greek thought, hence of philosophy. Hintikka (1967; 1995) writes about some 'implicit teleology', and about some 'conceptualizations aiming at some end', which he calls *telic*. Hintikka raises here some very important point with this telic characteristic of Greek thought. All this telic bias has affected our own way of thinking (not to mention the Judeo-Christian specific teleology), our thinking about thoughts, acting, behaviour, for instance those very peculiar *propositional attitudes*, which are a case in point, and let us not forget the massive concept of *intentionality*. With the Daoists, and Lao Zi, we have to think against our *telic predisposition*. We challenge an acting as non-telic; rather, as *atelic*. Acting in the atomist way means that there is no continuity of acting; that is, there is no necessarily some *telos*, some teleology to the act (we could say its *function*). According to Daoism, we must admit that the most rational acts are the non-functional ones. We're not used to consider rationality as such. Whitehead would not have disagreed with us, since he writes: 'It is said that "men are rational". This is palpably false: They are only intermittently rational — merely liable to rationality' (PR, p. 79). From the morphological point of view, many things happen without our will, and we don't even know *why* we are here, in *this* body, for instance. Added to this, the rationality of the world (if ever) expresses itself through actuality, although we never know how the creative advance of the world is going to take place. Finally, most of our acts are not motivated by an end, they instantiate themselves in the immediate necessity of the

moment, one might say: the *kairos*, this Greek word for the opportunity of the *khôra*. This is all the rationality to be found. Everything else is fictive. Every finality we allow to acting, as Spinoza once said, is nothing but figment.⁵

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[5] ‘There is no need to spend time in going on to show that Nature has fixed goal and that all final causes are but figments of the human imagination’ (*Ethics*, P.1, Appendix; Morgan & Shirley, 2006).