

Inquiring Relational Approach: Beyond the Limits of Substantialism

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Abstract— Acknowledging how disciplinary boundaries helped us to generate definitions throughout the history, today demands a new understanding of the world which is more about the relations rather than divisions. How to understand and acknowledge these relations and what outcomes are to be held by blurring the disciplinary boundaries have become significant in current studies. The approach, in fact, should not be considered only as the method but cogitated as a pivotal part of a research. This study is a critical inquiry on substantialist approach in general, with an aim to discuss `so-called` relational approaches. Comprehending the concept of “relational” and how to actualize a relational approach are crucial for a research, in which a relation might appear as an illusion rather than a connection. The problematique appears when the relations are defined beyond a relational context as if these relations happen outside of fundamentals- which is suggested to be named as “pseudo-relational” through this article. As an example, if we assume that there is a limit separating the fundamentals x and y from each other, both x and y stand as the reason of the other one`s becoming. If relation is defined as a distinctive entity besides x and y, it would only appear as relational while it is essentially substantialist. In other words, when the relation between x and y is considered as a third entity, relation stands in a sort of eclecticism. That sort of inquiries are interpreted as relational, however, they should be addressed as substantialist or outlined as “pseudo-relational”. Hence, what is meant by pseudo-transactional or pseudo-relational is a sort of illusion in which a thing is not what it really is. Within this point of view, this paper is to inquire transactional (relational) approach versus to substantialist one, referring to critical theories in regard to a trans-disciplinary understanding.

Keywords— relational approach, transactional approach, substantialism, research methods, trans-disciplinary, interdisciplinary.

I. INTRODUCTION

“No one would be able successfully to speak of the hunter and the hunted as isolated with respect to hunting. Yet it is just as absurd to set up hunting as an event in isolation from the spatio-temporal connection of all the components.” (Dewey and Bentley, 1949, p. 133)

THE research is concentrated on hunting as the process rather than what is hunted and who the hunters are. Talking about hunting (the process) is not new, however, is limited whenever hunters and hunted ones are put in relations as like they would exist without the act of hunting. What makes a hunter is the process itself, and there won't appear a “hunted” one without

the subject, the hunter, being hunted. In fact, if there were a researcher making a case study about hunting, how he considers the subject-object relations of this process would generate all the results and lead the whole process. While substantialist approach might be concentrated on hunters and hunted ones, a relational approach would be more about the hunting process. However, it needs to be outlined that substantialism and relationalism should not be considered as opposites in a dualistic way because the contrary understanding leads the definitions into a substantialist consideration. In the following paragraphs, the concept of “relational” will be referred as “transactional” not to create confusion, while “transactional”, as a relatively new concept to describe relations, distinguish the “pseudo” relational ones.

II. RELATIONAL APPROACH: BEYOND THE LIMITS OF SUBSTANTIALISM

“Beyond the Limits of Substantialism” aims to discuss how substantialism has differed today as if it has become a relational one. The basic assumptions, which beholden to the idea that the fundamentals or substances come first and relations among them subsequently, hold sway throughout the disciplines. The approaches relying on those basic assumptions brought a demand where the process is not subsequent and relational perspective is emphasized (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 281). The concepts need to be acknowledged in relation to the other concepts rather than ontological entities. Thus, transactional or relational methodologies involve “a shift away from thinking about a concept as a singular categorical expression to regarding concepts as embedded in complex relational networks” (Somers, 1995, p. 136; Emirbayer, 1997, pp. 294-295).

Substantialism is defined as an approach acknowledging substances of various kinds that constitute the fundamental units of its referred inquiry. It is fundamentally differentiated from transactionalism as transactionalism relies on relations themselves. Today, substantialist approaches also have varieties where fundamentals differ in comparison to what was conceived as a substance in ancient and medieval philosophy. The confusion appears when relations are described through a substantialist point of view. In those cases, substantialist approach exists more into a sort of eclecticism by mentioning that there are fundamentals with relations. In other words, the substances, or previously defined fundamentals are put in relations with each other, as like the relations happen outside of them. Correspondingly, substantialist approach differs, as

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like it becomes a transactional one, where relation exists as a pseudo of it.

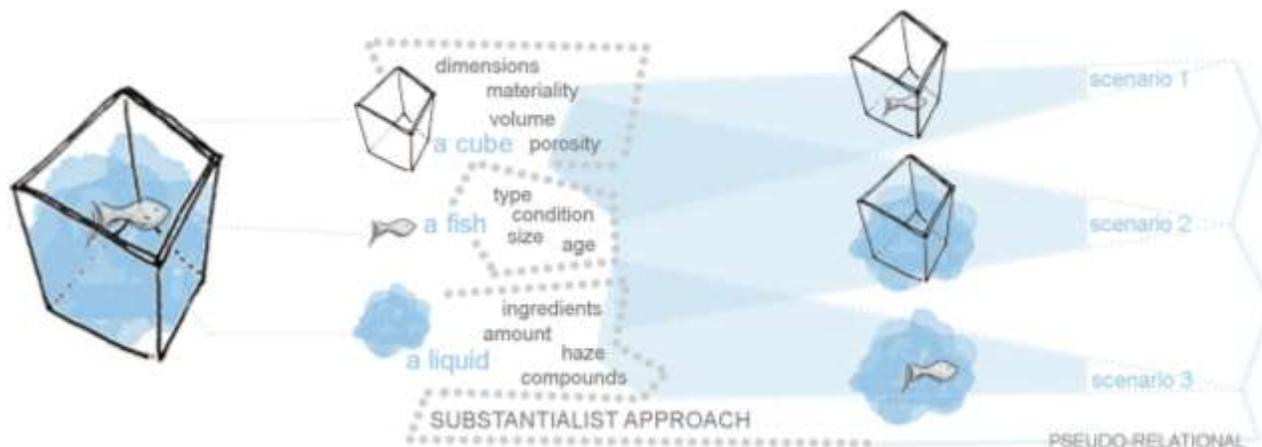


Fig.1: Representation of substantialist and pseudo-relational approaches.

What is meant by *pseudo-transactional* or *pseudo-relational* is a sort of illusion in which a thing *is not* what it really is. For a further and a general understanding, an illustration of a fish swimming in a cubic fish tank is shown in Figure 1. What happens in this image is a fish, doing the act of swimming in a limited environment. A substantialist approach is biased to classify the entity and decompose it to its so-called substances. According to that decomposition, a fish tank, as the space for the fish, might be defined as a cubic glass prism with a volume that might be defined quantitatively. Prism's alternative dimensions and its maximum capacity might be indicated as well. The tank becomes the "fish tank" with its subject doing the act. Fish's type and its origin in zoology might detail what that fish is, and its size and/or its appearance could provide an info of its approximate age and health. Water, on the other hand, might be defined with its components, and an accepted measurement unit, such as liters, could mention the amount of water. What is meant by *pseudo-relational* or *pseudo-transactional* might be shown through this basic illustration when those three are put in relations in limited ways. Three scenarios, as shown in the same illustration, indicate each (so-called) fundamentals' integrative existence during the act of swimming. Types of relations shown by scenarios represent a sort of eclecticism. Scenario 1 represents the condition in which the lack of water does not allow the fish to swim. Necessary conditions for a fish to swim already require water where the relations between a cubic glass and fish become pointless. Seen at scenarios 2 and 3, the characteristics of a liquid make it necessary to be placed inside a volume, to provide an environment for a fish. Furthermore, a similar cubic glass prism would not be called as a "fish tank" without having the conceivable circumstances for water and a fish inside.

Dewey and Bentley (1960) state two varieties of substantialist approaches: Self-action and inter-action. Accordingly, self-action conceives of "things as acting under their own powers" while inter-action is "thing (as) balanced against thing in casual interconnection" (Emirbayer, 1997,

p.108). In an inter-action, substances do not generate their own action; but rather, the relevant action takes place among the entities themselves. Therefore, the substances are accepted as unchanged, and stable. Emirbayer (1997) mentions that today's variable-centered understanding finds its home in that viewpoint where the relevant action takes place among the substances rather than being generated by them. Divergent to both varieties of substantialism, trans-action stands as the relational perspective. According to that discourse, substantialist approaches are employed to deal with aspects and phases of actions, without a final attribution to elements, essences or realities: "There is no isolation of detachable relations from such detachable elements" (Dewey and Bentley, 1949, p. 108). Consequently; elements, essences or realities are the terms of relations themselves.

The distinction of transactional approach is that "it sees relations between terms or units as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances" (Emirbayer, 1997, p. 289). What is relational and how relations could be indicated demand for an inquiry as transactional consideration appeals dynamic relations. Hence, the tendency to reduce the relations into static conditions appeals to be the main difficulty of that approach. The swimming fish example shows some possible ways of *process-reduction*. Elias (1978) outlines the *process-reduction* as the reduction of processes to static conditions: "We say, the wind is blowing, as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if a wind could exist which did not blow" (pp. 111-112). As mentioned with the act of hunting in the beginning of the article, hunters and hunted ones exist by the act, where the process could not either be mentioned outside of them or reduced.

Transactional approach disputes categorization. Thinking through categories (categorical thinking) normalizes and accepts previously devalued categories. It totalizes historically variable matrices to constitute distinctions (Emirbayer, 1997, pp. 308-309). Periodization could be given as a well-known

sample of categorical thinking: Human prehistory is subdivided into three-age systems, the stone, the bronze and the iron ages. Those ages are based on the changes in tool-making technologies. The categories are based on the materials but can vary in another periodization in regard to regions. Pre-defined source for a sort of categorization leads the process to be more static within its context. Therefore, it becomes necessary to acknowledge that each category, or period, is drawn within its stable context that may not reflect the process behind. Besides, thresholds arise as a necessity to define the limits of each period. Accordingly, the categorical thinking compels a substantialist approach rather than a transactional one.

Substantialist approach is close to a hierarchical understanding by organizing the data through categories. Assuming the organizational schemes such a tree represents by its roots and leaves; substantialist approach defines a static organization. *Rhizome* concept by Deleuze and Guattari (1997), in fact, indicates the existing but a new way of considering that sort of hierarchies. *Rhizome* is not comprised through a hierarchy but an interactive becoming, involving dynamic relations. As Deleuze and Guattari (1997) mention, "a rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from its roots and radicles" (p. 6). Unlike trees or their roots, a rhizome connects any point to any other point. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and overflows. Unlike a structure, which is stated as a set of points and positions with binary relations; a *rhizome* is made only of lines: lines of segmentarity and stratification (Deleuze and Guattari, 1997, p.21). Besides, a *rhizome* is not amenable to any structural or generative model. It represents a transactional understanding, by not reducing the whole into substances.

Transactional approach could be seen through various contemporary researches, including scientific admissions. For example, fuzzy logic stands as the logic where variables cannot be strictly defined. Compared to formal logic where variables may take values as true or false, fuzzy logic proposes other values that may range in degree between 0 and 1. While the formal logic depends on exact binaries (true and false), this form of many-valued logic deals with what approximate is. Fuzzy logic points out the continuity between 0 and 1 in which there could be a partial truth (such as: 0.6 true and 0.4 false). Hence, the truth-value could range between an exact true and an exact false. Paradoxes also emerge through transactional thinking. Sorites paradox, for example, is known as the paradox of the heap that concentrates on the substantialist understanding as the problematic (Figure 2). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains sorites paradox as the "name given to a class of paradoxical arguments, which arise as a result of the indeterminacy surrounding limits of application of the predicates involved." There are two assumptions explaining the paradox: Removing a single grain does not turn a heap into a non-heap; and, adding one grain to another one does not turn one or multiple grains into a heap. The paradox is to consider when and how to define a heap or a non-heap. "How many grains are necessary to define a heap" becomes the core question, outlining the ambiguity for a quantitative limiting: The concept of a heap appears to lack

sharp boundaries and, as a consequence of the subsequent indeterminacy surrounding the extension of the predicate is a heap, no one grain of wheat can be identified as making the difference between being a heap and not being a heap. (Url-1)



Fig.2 : Representation of sorites paradox.

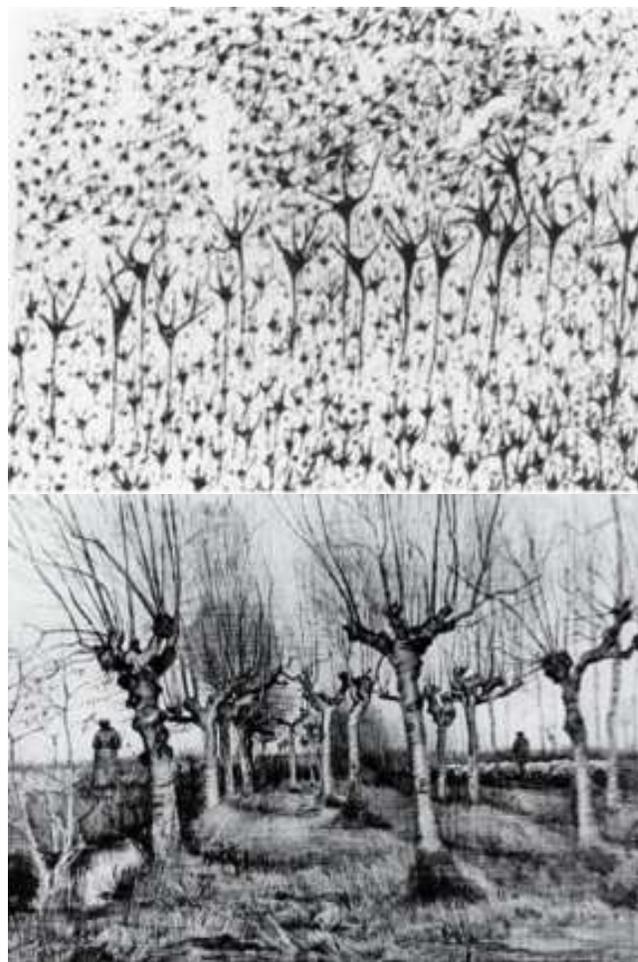


Fig.3 : Illustration of cells described by Vladimir Betz (1874) and Vincent Van Gogh's Pollard Birches (1885) (Buck-Morss, 1992, pp. 12-13).

Many other puzzles could be mentioned as similar examples, such as falakroz puzzle, which is known as a puzzle about a bald man. Falakroz puzzle asks where one could draw the line about a man being bald or not: How many hairs would make a man bald? In fact, sorites paradox, as well as many other paradoxes, confirms the ambiguity where a limit value could not be defined. In one of her articles, Susan Buck-Morss (1992) samples the human nervous system while discussing aesthetics relations: "The nervous system is not contained

within the body's limits" (p. 12). She points out the limited understanding of traditionally known nervous system that artificially isolates human biology from its environment. In order to differentiate the revised description of nervous system from its traditional conceptions; a new term, synaestheticsystem has been suggested. In regard to synaestheticsystem, external perceptions of senses come together with the internal images of memory and anticipation. Accordingly, the system is open to the world not only through the sensory organs, but also through the nerve cells within the body form a network: "They reach out toward other nerve cells at points called synapses, where electrical charges pass through the space between them" (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 13). The spaces between the synapses host all interactions, where they convert the relations.



Fig.4 : Illustration of pseudo-relational approach and the process.

The inter-action based substantialist approach would express the nervous system involving synapses (substances, or fundamentals) that are relational to each other. However, synaestheticsystem, to follow the example of nervous system, represents a transactional understanding, which becomes critical to the frequent considerations of human nervous systems. Synaestheticsystem, in fact, shows how a pseudo-relational understanding of a nervous system has been considered as relational. Buck-Morss (1992) talks about two images in one of her articles where she defines a remarkable relation between them: an illustration of cells described by Ukrainian anatomist Vladimir Betz and a painting of Van Gogh titled as Pollard Birches (Figure 3). First one is an illustration in regard to descriptions of Betz, as Betz left no illustrations but descriptions of those giant, pyramid-like layers of brain cortex - cells in 1874. Shown as in the second image, Van Gogh found a very similar form replicated in the external world in 1885, while he was a mental patient at St. Remy (Buck-Morss, 1992, pp. 12-13). The similarity between the trees drawn by Van Gogh and Betz's description of cells are underlined by Buck-Morss, not only relational in terms of representation but also their contexts.

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