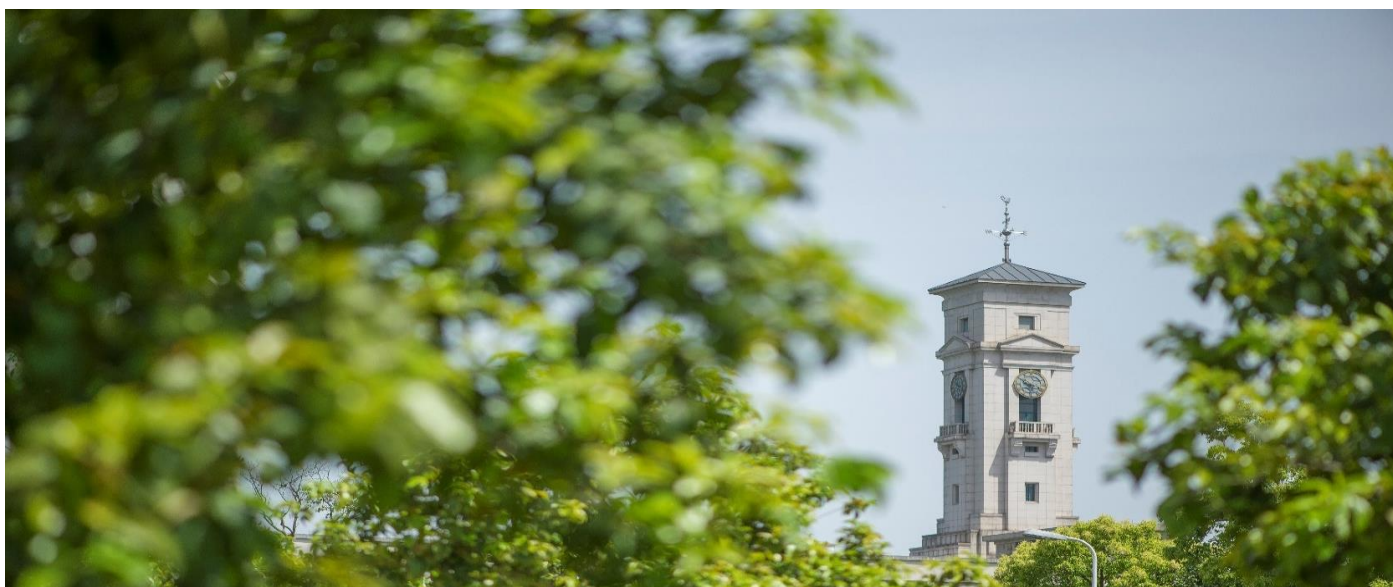


# Inside/Outside and around: complexity and the relational ethics of global life

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**Title:** Inside/Outside and Around: Complexity and the Relational Ethics of Global Life

**Abstract:** It has become expected of policy-makers, pundits, and scholars to refer to a whole raft of global dilemmas—from the economic downturn to climate change—as complex. The complexity of these challenges intimates a pattern of interactions marked by sharp discontinuities and exponential transformations triggered by incremental changes. How can one act ethically and politically in such a turbulent environment? Proponents of Complexity Thinking (CT) have responded to this query by drawing attention to the radical relationality of global life, which contests the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism informing the IR mainstream. The study demonstrates that the ethical models inherent in such a “complexified” outlook are relational. Therefore, the ethical understanding of political action on the world stage—both cognitively and affectively—is simultaneously shaped and mediated by ethical obligations and commitments to others, the structure and content of which is acquired through the very relationships by which ethical obligations and commitments are formed and justified. Such relational ethics simultaneously critiques the atomistic individualism dominating the IR mainstream and reimagine the international as a dynamic space for dialogical learning, which promises a world that is less hegemonic, more democratic, and equitable.

**Keywords:** Complexity Thinking, Eurocentrism, Anthropocentrism, relationality, relational ethics

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## **Inside/Outside and Around: Complexity and the Relational Ethics of Global Life**

International Relations (IR) has struggled to foster different ways of seeing and encountering the world that can help it generate meaningful answers to the pressing questions of our times. The dominant models of IR are implicated in the construction of a world that is unravelling socially, fracturing economically, and deteriorating ecologically. There is an urgent need for a change in perception, outlook, and vision that can help uncover new modes of thinking and doing world affairs that transcend established paradigms and practices. Proponents of Complexity Thinking (CT)<sup>1</sup> have responded to this call by drawing attention to the radical relationality of global life, which contests the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism that informs the IR mainstream. In the process, CT makes available much-needed vocabularies and optics for engaging phenomena, practices, and dynamics that cut across the turbulent pluriverse of global life. The claim is that CT advances a valuable alternative picture (simultaneously in analytical, ontological, and normative terms) of the fundamental characteristics and purposes of world politics. This article draws attention to such alternative by foregrounding the connection between complexity, relationality and the study of IR.

The point of departure for such ‘complexification’ is the recognition that IR is marked by a poignant lack of ontological pluralism. Regardless of their distinct theoretical commitments, IR scholars tend to subscribe to a ‘Newtonian’ vision of the ‘world out there’ as a closed system populated by states whose interactions are motivated by power-maximization in the pursuit of their own self-interest.<sup>2</sup> Thus, given the dynamics of linear causality that backstop this metanarrative, what comes to pass in world affairs is positioned as subject to anticipation as a result of reductionist models which postulate that all physical phenomena change in gradual manner and following foreseeable trajectories. This ‘atomistic ontology’ asserts that all social phenomena are quantifiable and predictable.<sup>3</sup> The normative fundamentalism of this stance leads IR to adapt a mindset of continuities that makes it difficult to address chance, change, and uncertainty.<sup>4</sup> In particular, the framework of instrumental-rational action has become the standard against which alternative claims are judged. Thus, the ‘international’ produced in this manner is an artefact of ontological and historical constructs with significant epistemic and ethical effects.

According to the proponents of CT, the mechanistic (and nearly clockwork) features of this Newtonian imaginary disclose a normalization of oppression evidenced by the control, domination and exploitation of various others – be they human (indigenous, non-Western, gender, and other vulnerable communities) or non-human (nature, species, and objects). To be sure, some international phenomena – especially, when treated in isolation – may appear orderly at times (that is, predictable, rational, and linear); however, the point of CT is that systemically, global politics as a whole is defined by non-linearity, recursivity, and unpredictability. Thus, by painting itself in the Newtonian corner, the disciplinary mainstream has, on the one hand, evaded the need to recognize that there are dynamics which are not only

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<sup>1</sup> Instrumentally-speaking, the use of the label *Complexity Thinking* aims to suggest that this study does not pretend to provide a uniform, grand-narrative-style account of a singular *Complexity Theory* or *Complexity Science* for IR. Instead, the aim is to develop a consistent, if eclectic, exploration of the diverse ‘alliances’ forged between CT and IR, and allow IR to develop the skills, frameworks, and governance mechanism to ‘think the unthinkable’ dynamics of the future. See William Connolly, *World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Jairus Grove, *Savage Ecology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Emilian Kavalski, *World Politics at the Edge of Chaos* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “Waking IR up from its ‘deep Newtonian slumber’”, *Millennium*, Vol.41, No.1(2012), pp.137-150.

<sup>3</sup> Miljia Kurki, *IR in a Relational Universe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.107.

<sup>4</sup> Jim Whitman, *The Limits of Global Governance* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 119; Y.C. Cho and Emilian Kavalski, “Governing Uncertainty in Turbulent Times”, *Comparative Sociology*, Vol.14, No.3(2015), pp.429-444; S.Guntisky, “Complexity and Theories of China”, *International Politics*, Vol.5, No.1(2013), pp.35-63.

unknown, but probably cannot ever be meaningfully rendered comprehensible, and, on the other hand, has stifled endeavours that can engage in thoughtful deliberation of the discontinuities, unpredictability, and non-linearity of global life.<sup>5</sup>

CT challenges the atomistic metanarrative of IR by proposing a relational ontology in which global life resonates with and through complex and interpenetrating presences whose sociability is infused with the contingent opportunities inherent in the encounter with the other. The very claim that the world is populated by and emerges through the continuous interactions between plentiful varieties of life and matter calls for the positing of alternative ontologies that exceed what is possible (and imaginable) under the Newtonian metanarrative of IR. At the same time, the ‘complexifying’ move recognizes that the current ecological crises are profoundly shaped by the histories of colonialism and the practices of plunder and exploitation. Thus, by moving away from the atomistic universe of IR, CT amplifies the call for relational ethics and politics claiming ‘a more just coexistence of worlds’.<sup>6</sup> CT’s irruptive translation of such coexistence brings in dialogue the form and the substance of the languages and experiences of the diverse and infinitely complex worlds cohabiting in global life. Such relationality becomes coextensive of and standing together with the interpolating spontaneity of surrounding events and things.

Such an inquiry requires multiple caveats, many of which will be addressed throughout the text. However, it is important to tackle here the tension surrounding the ‘colonial signs’ of CT.<sup>7</sup> As several commentators have pointed out, owing to its ‘scientific’ credentials, CT might be seen as complicit in the epistemic violence associated with the Eurocentric ‘colonial’ neglect of indigenous ways of knowing and being.<sup>8</sup> These are legitimate concerns which require critical reflection. For instance, it is significant that one of the most powerful recent calls for rewriting IR and pushing it beyond its anthropocentric limits occludes the disciplinary collusion with imperialism.<sup>9</sup> The point here is that such interrogation of the histories that gave birth to the deep structures of dominant theories should not be used as an excuse to commit the ‘genetic fallacy’ of discounting an analytical framework simply because ‘it was born in Europe and exposit by metropolitans, therefore its principles and theorizations serve only the “imperial standpoint”’.<sup>10</sup> Such reasoning is misleading because it entails the peculiar conclusion that strictly nothing in the realm of ideas can transcend its formative context and ideological use.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Erica Cudworth, Stephen Hobden, and Emilian Kavalski, *Posthuman Dialogues in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Cristina Rojas, “Contesting the Colonial Logics”, *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 10, No.4(2016), pp.369-382 Such claim should not be misunderstood as a suggestion that relationality originates in or is exclusive to CT. As it will be demonstrated in the following sections, the understanding of relationality draws on extensive conversations in feminist, post-colonial, post-modern, and critical IR theory as well as political theory, more broadly. Most of those working in this vein have taken on a Levinasian or Heideggerian for conceptualizing a meaningful encounter with “Otherness” through the practices of recognition, mutuality, respect, etc. of “entangled humanism”. Some of the authors associated with this relational move have been David Blaney and Arlene Tickner, “Worlding, Ontological Politics, & Decolonial IR”, *Millennium*, Vol.45, No.3(2017), pp.293-311; Christine Sylvester, *Feminist Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Campbell, *Writing Security* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Emilian Kavalski, “The Puzzle of India’s Relations,” *Asian Security*, Vol.15, No.3(2019), pp.304-322; Veronique Pin-Fat, *Universality, Ethics and IR* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> H.Muppidi, *Colonial Signs of IR* (London: Hurst, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> A.A. Azoulay, *Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019). Zoe Todd, “Indigenous Feminist’s Take on the Ontological Turn”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol.29, No.1(2016),4-22.

<sup>9</sup> A.Burke, S.Fishell, A.Mitchell, S.Dalby, D.J.Levine, “Planet Politics”, *Millennium*, Vol.44, No.3(2016), pp.499-523; cf. V.Thakur and P.Vale, *Race and the Making of IR* (London: Rowman&Littlefield, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Gregor McLennan, “Complicity, Complexity, Historicism”, *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.17, No.4(2014), pp.451-464.

<sup>11</sup> McLennan, *op.cit.* This ‘genetic fallacy’ can have many faces. One of these reflects the triple error of essentialism (i) the assumption of a pure/authentic ‘indigenous’ culture and experience, (ii) the tendency to suggest ‘intrinsic affinities among far-flung indigenous societies’, and (iii) the occlusion of the ways in which non-Western knowledge is also implicit in the production of oppression and the exploitation of diverse groups and individuals.

Concepts – just as life – arise relationally; ideas have a history and cultural-specificity, yet they do not grow in a vacuum but are shaped continuously through peregrination, interactions, and cross-fertilization.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, CT offers one of the most sophisticated and sympathetic approaches in the ‘scientific’ knowledge tradition that co-exists productively with indigenous perspectives for envisioning a less hegemonic world.<sup>13</sup> In this respect, CT has proven particularly potent for the ‘contrapuntal reading’ of established knowledge.<sup>14</sup> As a number of scholars have noted, CT yields meaningful tools ‘to conceptualize the interplay between coloniality and indigeneity’ and should be welcomed for its meaningful inclusiveness ‘of “indigenous” experience’.<sup>15</sup> The point being that instead of ‘objectivity’ in the narrow Eurocentric and modernist sense, CT facilitates epistemological pluralism that engages ‘the complexity of reality and its oppressive dimensions’.<sup>16</sup> Many have remarked that CT is simultaneously (i) the key to a critical praxis of reflection and action cognizant of the ways in which ‘all frames of reference and all approaches to research are shaped by dominant ideologies, discourses, and values’; and (ii) a critical ontology of deploying difference to make ‘an unprecedented difference’ through the possibility of imagining new ways of thinking, knowing, doing, being as well as ‘being interconnected’.<sup>17</sup>

Before detailing the relational ethics of this endeavour, the following section briefly outlines the key characteristics of CT and its implications for the complexification of IR. The suggestion is that an underlying aim of CT – both in general, and in IR in particular – is to aid the ability to engage in an ever-changing world. The ethical point is then to account for the possibilities attendant in the living in an abundant, yet profoundly entangled world. The point here is that the way we imagine the ‘international’ has profound effects on future patterns and practices of world affairs. At the same time, the proposition is that by removing the veil of the atomistic ontology of IR, the endeavours of CT reveal the impossibility to consider issues of ethics, ontology, epistemology, and politics in separation and as if they are not mutually implicated in one another.<sup>18</sup> CT can act as a catalyst for a critical consciousness and emancipatory praxis that pushes our thinking, feeling, knowledge-production, and socially responsible actions to ‘transcend the codified worldviews and incorporate new understandings

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Such a move has powerful ontopolitical implications: namely, far from producing a decolonization of knowledge-production, such valorisation of indigeneity is being deployed to amplify ‘disempowering conceptions of subjectivity. Dispossessed, and disallowed the possibility to assert its counter-power to repossess, discourses on indigeneity produce the image of a subject that perseveres through adapting itself to the natural exigencies of its existence. This is a subject whose life lacks the force “to act in the sense of making anything like a definitive event occur in the world,” but that nevertheless persists through its embodied and performative capacities for resilience: enduring and coping under extreme duress’. See David Chandler and Julian Reid, “Being in Being”, *European Legacy*, Vol.23, No.3(2018), pp.251-268.

<sup>12</sup> As John Hobson has demonstrated (in *Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*[Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004]) apart from seizing material resources from the non-West, the “West” also appropriated many ideas, which became foundational both to the norms of “science” and the practices of imperialism. Furthermore, the “genetic fallacy” also overlooks the historical experience of colonized and indigenous peoples who engaged creatively with “Western” knowledge-production to disrupt existing power structures – from the exploitation of Christianity as a potent counter culture among disenfranchised and oppressed peoples to the creolization and provincialization of “Western” science. The “genetic fallacy” also fails to problematize the ways in which “empire might develop after the West and through the combined resources of *alternative modernities*”(McLennan, *op.cit.*, p.10. Emphasis in original). See also Emilian Kavalski, “EU-India Strategic Partnership,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol.29, No.1(2016), pp.192-208.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Ching-Chang Chen and Kosuke Shimizu for this suggestion!

<sup>14</sup> Pinar Bilgin, “Contrapuntal Reading”, *International Studies Review*, Vol.18, No.1(2016), pp.134-146.

<sup>15</sup> Nora Fisher Onar, J.H.Liu, and M.Woodward, “Critical Junctures”, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol.43, No.2(2013), pp.22-34; Emilian Kavalski, “The Peacock and the Dragon,” *China Quarterly*, Vol.203(2010), pp.719-725; G.Steinmetz, *Sociology and Empire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Joe Kincheloe, *Key Works* (Boston, MA: Sense, 2011), p.80.

<sup>17</sup> Kincheloe, *op.cit.*; Peter Herschok, *Reorienting Global Interdependence* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Cudworth et al., *op.cit.*; Emilian Kavalski, *The Rise of Normative Powers* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012),

into a new reflective attitude'.<sup>19</sup> Glossed as 'global life', complexity discloses an ever-changing and polyphonous world. The concluding section evokes these registers of worlding mutuality by elaborating the ways in which CT embraces the ethical and political promise of transcending the expected by engaging creatively with the contradictions, challenges, and opportunities of an entangled and unpredictable global life.

### **Inside/outside and around global life**

To speak of world affairs as 'complex' might appear to be no more than an unnecessary truism. Most IR scholars would have no problem agreeing that the world of their investigations is complex; in fact, it has become expected of policy-makers, pundits, and scholars to refer to a whole raft of global issues as complex. Yet, the reference to complexity is more than a convenient metaphor for the intricate nature of international affairs. It acts as a corrective to the IR metanarrative presenting world affairs as complicated but, in the final analysis, predictable, rational, and linear-hierarchical.<sup>20</sup> The recognition of such complexity has important scholarly and policy consequences; it also has important (and oftentimes overlooked) ethical implications – namely, by 'detaching normative discourse from concrete realities' the assumed universalism of the atomistic ontology of IR renders 'normative discourse monological and potentially violent by ignoring or excluding ethico-political concerns of different others'.<sup>21</sup>

Having its roots in the Latin word *complexus*—describing 'that which is woven together' as well as something that has 'embraced', 'plaited' several elements—CT infers the *interwovenness* of life (both as an inherent quality and a systemic condition). The ethics and ontology of such interwovenness invokes the 'international' not merely as the domain of world affairs, but as *global life*. In contrast to international politics, the concept of global life is brimming with the coexistence of multiple 'worlds', 'domains', 'projects', and 'texts' of ongoing and overlapping interconnections.<sup>22</sup> The reference to global life reflects a relational entanglement with the 'around' excluded from IR's Newtonian dispositif about what happens 'inside/outside' the state. The point here is that the fundamental rift in IR's inquiry is not merely about the divide between the domestic (internal) and the international (external) as mainstream orthodoxies aver, but about the very context (involving its multiple histories, hierarchies, contested power relations, etc.) in which such schisms are located and performed. In other words, the inside/outside problematique is not given exogenously but emerges within a specific milieu and simultaneously reshapes it. The occlusion of such relationality both demonstrates the artificiality of the inside/outside divide and makes it unproductive for addressing the challenges of global life.

This should not be misunderstood as an either/or proposition; instead, the claim is that the 'inside/outside' and the 'around' aspects are not fixed, homogenous, and isolated. On the contrary, they are co-dependent, mobile, and mutually interpenetrating, and both *together* co-produce the dynamic patterns of global life. It is the very processes of relational 'interaction and semifusion of [these supposedly distinct aspects], however uneven and continually evolving, that is fundamentally transforming our understanding of how the world works'.<sup>23</sup> Relationality is disclosed in the processes of interaction between the 'inside/outside' and

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<sup>19</sup> Kinchloe, *op.cit.*, p.81. Some have even suggested that CT allows for a rare "methodological neutrality", which furnishes a space in which "different logics might be entertained [as legitimate] on the assumption that they are meaningful within their own terms"(D.Osberg and G.Biesta, *Complexity Theory and Politics* [Leiden:Brill, 2010],p.122)

<sup>20</sup> Emilian Kavalski, "From Cold War to Global Warming", *Political Studies Review* Vol.9,No.1(2011),pp.1-12.

<sup>21</sup> Heikki Patomäki, *After IR* (London: Routledge, 2002),p. 158.

<sup>22</sup> James Rosenau, "Chaos in Global Life", *International Political Science Review*,Vol.9,No.4(1988), pp.327-364; Emilian Kavalski, "The Struggle for Recognition", *Cooperation & Conflict*,Vol.48,No.2(2013),pp.247-267.

<sup>23</sup> Philip Cerny, *Rethinking World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010),p.18.

‘around’ aspects of global life that act upon the world.<sup>24</sup> Such ‘symbiogenesis’ reflects ‘traffic in and out’ between ‘sets of evolving organic systems within systems’.<sup>25</sup> Human societies and their international interactions are just ‘one component in a package of interdependent life forms that continue to adapt to each other’.<sup>26</sup> In this perspective, world politics draws attention to a turbulent set of ‘man-milieu relationships’, which includes ‘both tangible objects, non-human and human, at rest and in motion, and the whole complex of social patterns, some embodied in formal enactments, others manifest in more or less stereotyped expectations regarding the behaviour of human beings and the movements and mutations of non-human phenomena’.<sup>27</sup>

In the context of such ongoing and contingent mutual co-constitution, any occurrence does not exist merely in isolation (as a standalone event), but reflects a nexus of innumerable interactions which interpenetrate one another in the shifting tapestry of social relations. Hence, the attentiveness to relationality makes a powerful case both for envisioning the fluid iterations of social transactions that percolate and gain salience in the context of ongoing interactions and for creating ethical openings to reimagine the complex webs of entanglements and encounters with others beyond the divisiveness and violence suffusing current domestic, national, and world politics.<sup>28</sup> Such contextualization reframes ethics as a “relational practice” simultaneously attuned and open to the contradictions, challenges, and opportunities of a dynamic and unpredictable global life.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in such a dynamic and dialogical context the possibility for constructing ‘new histories’ emerges by altering the suspicion and bias from past interactions and opening up opportunities for new relationships founded on the affective feeling produced by the process of repeated interactions. The point is that CT presages an understanding of international action and agency – both cognitively and affectively – as simultaneously shaped and mediated by ethical obligations and commitments to others (the structure and content of which is acquired through the very relationships by which ethical obligations and commitments to others are disclosed). Shared understandings are thereby not imposed as rules, rights, or obligations, but emerge relationally – *in* and *from* the very process of interaction.

As indicated, CT offers a meaningful contribution to the project of *worlding* IR.<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, CT shares with the *worlding* endeavour a willingness to engage other ontologies as a way of learning different ways to observe and encounter the world, ourselves, and the problems that embroil us, and to put such alternatives into a nuanced comparative conversation with more familiar critical political lexicons and procedures inherited from academic

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<sup>24</sup> M. Albert, L. Cederman, A. Wendt, *New Systems Theories of World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), 106-108; Emilian Kavalski, “Coming to Terms with Complexity”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol.2, No.1(2011), pp.21-29.

<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Fischel, *Microbial State* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 2017); Magdalena Zolkos and Emilian Kavalski, “The Hoax of War”, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol.15, No.3(2007), pp.377-393.

<sup>26</sup> J. Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004).

<sup>27</sup> H.Sprout and M.Sprout, *Man-Milieu Relationship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1956). The emphasis on the interwovenness of the “inside/outside” and the “around” aspects of global life should not be misunderstood as a suggestion that human and nonhuman systems are indistinct and reducible to one another. Rather, the point here is that the shift is from “vertical” (and hence hierarchical) structuring of the human and nonhuman systems to the “horizontal” structuring that presumes juxtaposition and continuum of agencies: the need is to “be flattened, read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being. It’s a feature of our world that we can and do distinguish... things from persons [nonhuman and human systems]. But the sort of world we live in makes it constantly possible for these two sets of kinds to exchange properties”. See J. Bennett, “Force of Things”, *Political Theory*, 32,3(2004), 347-372.

<sup>28</sup> Magdalena Zolkos and Emilian Kavalski, “Recognition of nature in international relations”, in P.Hayden and K.Schick (eds), *Recognition and Global Politics* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), pp.139-156.

<sup>29</sup> Y.Qin, *Relational Theory of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> L.H.M.Ling, *Dao of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2015); Emilian Kavalski, “Venus and the Porcupine,” *South Asian Survey*, Vol.15, No.1(2008), pp.63-81.



scholarship.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, CT discloses the world as a multiversal space where alternative realities can and do coexist and have done so for quite some time. As such, the relational knowledge-production underpinning the worlding of the study of global life mandates tolerance of at least as much diversity and contradictions as evident in the social relations being narrated. Prior to engaging with the normative dimensions of this endeavour, the following sections offer a brief outline of CT and the current state of the art on the complexification of IR.

### *What is complexity thinking?*

Complexity Thinking (CT) has become an umbrella term for a number of approaches that emerged initially in the natural sciences.<sup>32</sup> In the absence of a unifying theory of complexity, some have suggested that – at the basic level of theoretical construction – the glue that binds the somewhat fragmented complexity research agenda seems to be the aphorism that ‘the whole is greater than the sum of its parts’.<sup>33</sup> This point of departure then leads many to suggest that global life does not have a single ordering principle (such as anarchy), but multiple ones which interplay continuously and contingently with one another. As a result, change (rather than stability) emerges as the defining feature of such an interconnected and dynamic order. It needs to be acknowledged that owing to the conceptual and analytical fluidity of CT, the ontological schema outlined by this study is only one of many possible ones (and therefore subject to debate and contestation).

While CT may entail different things for different authors, almost all of them share a normative commitment to relationality. Namely, ‘to articulate and organize and thereby recognize and understand the problems of the world, we need a *reform in thinking*... This means *conceiving new ways to reconnect that which has been torn apart*’.<sup>34</sup> Trickle into IR during the 1990s, the ideas of CT have eroded the ‘faith in a “makeable world”’.<sup>35</sup> Rooted in an Enlightenment fantasy that progress can undo the mistakes of the past, such ‘faith’ backstops the conviction in reversibility owing to the allegedly growing human ability to control not only natural space, but also future temporalities. As such, the complexification of IR undermines the very conviction in – let alone the possibility for – such full recuperation (and the associated human/Western mastery over the world) by reconsidering the temporal and spatial circularity of contingency. Owing to the complex trajectories of relationality and systemic interactions alterations occur whose outcomes are wholly unexpected and nearly impossible to predict.

CT is integral to the project of producing ‘worlds and knowledge otherwise’ by actively seeking to change ‘the terms and not just the content of the conversations’.<sup>36</sup> The claim is that the nascent patterns of world politics beckon more fine-grained hypotheses that would present the character of international life as ‘open, complex, partially organized and coupled in

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<sup>31</sup> Astrid Nordin, Graham Smith, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, Emilian Kavalski, L.H.M. Ling, Daniel Nexon, Yaqing Qin, Chih-yu Shih, Marysia Zalewski, “Towards Global Relational Theorizing”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 32, no.5 (2019), 570-581; Milja Kurki, *op.cit.*; Chengxin Pan and Emilian Kavalski, “Theorising in and beyond International Relations”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol.18, No.3(2018),pp. 289-311 .

<sup>32</sup> Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, *Posthuman International Relations* (London: Zed, 2011); Neil Harrison, *Complexity in World Politics* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “The Fifth Debate and the Emergence of Complex International Relations Theory”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol.20, No. 3(2007),pp.435-454.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar Morin, *Seven Complex Lessons* (Paris: UNESCO, 1999),pp.1-12.Emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> David Earnest, *Massively Parallel Globalization* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015); Robert Jervis, *System Effects* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); James Rosenau, *Turbulence in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); Jack Snyder and Robert Jervis. *Coping with Complexity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Arturo Escobar, “Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise”, *Cultural Studies*,Vol.21,No.2/3(2007),pp.179-210; Emilian Kavalski,“The Logic of Relationships” in T.Struye de Swielande and D.Vandamme(eds), *Power in the 21st Century* (Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain,2015),pp.139-154;Magdalena Zolkos, “Aporias of Belonging”, *Journal of European Studies* , Vol.44, No.4(2014), pp. 362-377.

complex, conditional ways'.<sup>37</sup> Overlapping ecological, economic, political, and social crises not only suggest that the existing analytical frameworks, institutions, and types of international behaviour have become 'dysfunctional and can no longer deal with the situation in the old ways', but that they have actively contributed to the real and epistemic violence against seeing the world otherwise than through the atomistic lens of the mainstream.<sup>38</sup> Inhabiting a world out of control demands frameworks that trouble the fiction that that we (humans/'the West') are in control.

The reference to complexity usually implies the properties of complex adaptive systems. Such systems are defined through the connectivity and circulation of the incalculable movements of small units in large numbers, in which minor variations at the individual level can produce large-scale organizational transformation. Popularly referred to as the 'butterfly effect', such sensitivity to and dependence on initial conditions recounts a relational ontology 'where every element is in "sympathetic" relation with the rest' and whose interactive entanglements get amplified to the point where it is impossible to attribute causality.<sup>39</sup> In this respect, complexity tends to be identified by its relations rather than by its constituent parts. Such relational ontology provokes a reckoning with 'the multiple possibilities of *becoming* and *becoming-other*' defining global life.<sup>40</sup>

Emergence is a key attribute of complexity that underwrites the uncertainty of its properties, which toggle between the old propensities and the sprouting dynamics. It suggests a focus on process rather than on structure.<sup>41</sup> The emergent properties of complex systems are often surprising and underdetermined, because it is difficult to anticipate the full consequences of even simple forms of interaction. The implication is that 'historical contingency conspires with episodes of randomness to create the actual forms and behaviours that populate the social world'.<sup>42</sup> A function of conjunction, emergence intuits that system-wide characteristics do not result from superposition (additive effects of system components), but from interactions among components. In response to the unpredictability of emergence, complex adaptive systems self-organize into nascent forms that cannot be anticipated on an understanding of their parts. In this respect, each component of a system participates in the production or transformation of other components, while the system itself is produced by its constituent parts and, in turn, produces those parts.

The unknowability of the different causes involved in the production of events intimates that interactions cannot be understood solely in terms of the behaviour of participating actors; instead it is the very relationality that produces complex behaviour. Robert Jervis insists that in complex adaptive systems the fates of the units and their relations with others are 'strongly influenced by interactions at other places and at earlier periods of time [which makes] it hard to treat issues separately: disputes that would be small if they could be isolated are highly consequential because the world is tightly interconnected'.<sup>43</sup> This tendency to develop unexpected properties, qualities, forms, and patterns draws attention to the underlying relationality of processes of self-organization – especially, the radical qualitative effect of feedback for the ways in which complex adaptive systems behave. Such dynamic multiplicity of interdependent conditioning factors calls for a contextual attunement to the transient

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<sup>37</sup> Snyder and Jervis, *op.cit.*, p.13.

<sup>38</sup> Gerda Roelvink and Magdalena Zolkos, "Climate Change as Experience of Affect", *Angelaki*, Vol.16, No.4(2011), pp.43-57; Gerda Roelvink and Magdalena Zolkos, "Posthumanist Perspectives on Affect", *Angelaki*, Vol. 20, No.3(2015), pp.1-20.

<sup>39</sup> Rojas, *op.cit.*, p.374; Emilian Kavalski, *Stable Outside, Fragile Inside* (London: Routledge, 2010); Magdalena Zolkos, "Violent Affect", *Parrhesia*, Vol.13, No.178(2011), pp.1-16; Magdalena Zolkos, "Return to Things as They Were," *Contemporary Political Theory*, Vol.16, No.3(2017), pp.321-341.

<sup>40</sup> Gerda Roelvink and Magdalena Zolkos, "Affective Ontologies", *Emotions, Space, and Society*, Vol.14, No.1 (2015), pp.47-50.

<sup>41</sup> Lars-Erik Cederman, *Emergent Actors* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>42</sup> Audra Mitchell, "Only Human", *Security Dialogue*, Vol.45, No.1(2014), 5-21.

<sup>43</sup> Jervis, *op.cit.*, pp.17-24.

constellations of factors and actors impacting on the content, trajectories, and possible transformations of any interaction.

### *Complexifying IR*

How does CT affect IR? As already suggested, by ‘normalizing’ change it disturbs the discontinuous, linear, and deterministic metanarrative of the discipline. Perceiving the natural sciences to be an ‘exact science’, cohorts of IR students have been developing ‘powerful’ and ‘parsimonious’ models for the explanation and understanding of international politics.<sup>44</sup> What IR intends to produce in this way is a nearly mechanistic model of international politics that is perceived to be as rigorous and robust as the one of the natural sciences. In this respect, the proponents of the complexification of IR have noted that while the ‘hard’ sciences have become increasingly ‘soft’ as a result of their acceptance of the uncertainty and randomness of global life, IR has ‘hardened’ as a result of its suppression of ambiguity, disregard for surprises, and overinvestment in its desire to forecast international developments.<sup>45</sup> By drawing attention to ongoing interpenetration between agency, structure, and order, amongst the diversity of agency, form, and matter implicated in, enacting, and enabling global life, CT challenges the conviction that the proper way for acquiring knowledge about the world is through the modelling of linear relationships with homogeneous independent variables that discern between discreet stochastic and systemic effects.

The complexification of IR is thereby about the creation of openings that make it possible to flee the atomistic partitioning of the world. The central pillars of this partitioning are the Eurocentric makeup and anthropocentric commitments of the Newtonian metanarrative of IR, both of which assist with the creation of categories to contain the contingency of global life in an ongoing attempt to control its multiplicity. As evidenced by the overwhelming inequality proliferated through the geopolitics of distinct European hierarchical assemblages (such as the ‘Third World’, ‘Global South’, etc.), such classifications have come to normalize unjust governmentalities of life and subject-formation. Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism have coevolved in parallel with the forces of racial superiority, economic hegemony, settler colonialism, primitive accumulation, and violent power politics producing the crises of our times.<sup>46</sup> CT thereby contributes to the decentring IR by outlining a feasible post-Western and non-anthropocentric mode of inquiry.

Firstly, the relational ontology of CT discloses the complex, eclectic, and non-objective blend of cultural universals and culturally-specific patterns of social interaction underpinning the encounter with global life. As such, the acknowledgement that humanity has been (and continues to be) distinguished by the coexistence of and interaction between a diversity and range of worldviews is a distinguishing feature of the complexification of IR. The critical question is why the IR mainstream continues to draw only on one tradition – that of Eurocentrism – for its explanation and understanding? Informed by the atomistic ontology of its Newtonian outlook, IR prescribes ‘imperialistic epistemologies which assume that the world is one and that it is knowable on a global scale within single modes of thought, and thus manageable and governable in those terms’.<sup>47</sup> Thus, all that falls outside the ‘authorized imaginaries’ of IR is scorned as primitive, magical, and animistic, and, thereby, delegitimized and neglected.<sup>48</sup> The relational ontology of CT is not merely a critique of the Newtonian metanarrative that produces the atomistic world of IR, but resonates with the emancipatory

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<sup>44</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “Timescapes of Security”, *World Futures*, Vol.65, No.7(2009),pp.527–551

<sup>45</sup> Burke et al., *op.cit.*,p.7.

<sup>46</sup> Grove, *op.cit.*;Emilian Kavalski, “Unexpected Consequences,” *International Studies*,Vol.57,1(2020),pp.1-19

<sup>47</sup> Janet Conway and Jakeet Singh, “Notes from the Pluriverse”, *Third World Quarterly* Vol.32, No.3(2011),pp. 689-704; Emilian Kavalski, “Chinese Concepts and Relational International Politics” in E.Aydinli and G.Biletkin (eds), *Widening the World of International Politics* (London: Routledge,2018),pp.104-122.

<sup>48</sup> Amaya Querejazu, “Encountering the Pluriverse”, *Revista Brasileira Política Internacional*,Vol.59, No.2(2016),pp.1-16.

mutuality of many different ways of knowing and being in global life. In this setting, the relationality lens of CT helps outline the contested terrain of post-Western IR as a space for dialogical learning, which encourages engagement with the possibilities afforded by the interactions of multiple worlds and privileges the experiences and narratives of neither of them.<sup>49</sup>

Secondly, CT contests the anthropocentrism of IR. It is the ‘unpredictable awareness of matter’ that draws attention to the diversity of ontological entanglements in the world.<sup>50</sup> The linear reductionism of IR’s ontological purview has been underpinned by the perception that human/socio-political systems (such as civil society, states, international organizations, etc.) are both *detached from* (not only conceptually, but in practice) and *in control of* the ‘nonhuman’ systems (be they biophysical, technological, or other). Not surprisingly, therefore, IR’s concern *only* with ‘the human subject’ (and its anthropomorphized effects such as states) has been part and parcel of the ‘disciplinary imperialism’ characterizing the mainstream of Western social science, whereby ‘the human-symbolic-cultural-phenomenal dimension is asserted at the expense of the natural-organic-noumenal properties of things’.<sup>51</sup> In this setting, references to complexity and ecological interconnections extend a normative gesture aimed both at breaking ‘the spell of the human’ and at disclosing IR’s ‘disembodied understanding of knowledge’ which depends on the ongoing practices of abstraction and decontextualization.<sup>52</sup> In particular, the ‘terraformative power’ of current global patterns of commodity production and consumption seem to enforce poignant ‘asymmetries between different populations of humanity and aggregations of nonhumanity’.<sup>53</sup> The scale of the crisis and the seemingly arbitrary ways in which life is being affected by anthropogenic environmental change challenges existing modes of thinking and practice – not least, because of their interpolation in the production of global ecological stresses.<sup>54</sup>

Both the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism of IR’s atomistic outlook are unreceptive to the flexibilities, contingencies, and transformative possibilities engendered by the encounter with other lifeworlds and knowledges. Striving to overcome ‘the ontologies of separation and metaphysical individualism’ that dominate IR, the proponents of CT suggest that the “‘realities” informing both the materiality of the world and by extension the realms of IR are intrinsically relational, permeable, shifting, open-ended, and always historically and geographically situated properties’ The proponents of CT have thereby sought to confront the Eurocentric and anthropocentric certainties dominating the purview of the discipline by encouraging interest in and recognition of the embeddedness of world affairs in broader networks of relations. The point of departure is that the IR mainstream has remained peculiarly and poignantly resistant to the insertion of either post-Western or posthuman imaginary on the agenda of the international. Thus, despite the intellectual challenges posed by the growing interdependence and connectedness between various forms of being and acting, the mainstream of IR has been dominated, on the one hand, by the preoccupations of the West/Global North and, on the other hand, by a reductionist mode of investigation reflective of an inherent antibiologism (if not biophobia). In this respect, the complexification of IR strives to overcome the ‘genesis amnesia’<sup>55</sup> of the discipline by uncovering modes for understanding, explanation, and encounter not only attuned, but also able to sustain complexity, foster dynamism, encourage the cross-pollination of disparate ideas, and engage the plastic and heterogeneous processes

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<sup>49</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “The Complexity of Global Security Governance”, *Global Society*, Vol.22, No.4(2008), 423–443.

<sup>50</sup> Cudworth et al., *op.cit.*, p.13.

<sup>51</sup> David Inglis and John Bone, “Boundary Maintenance”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol.9, No.2(2016), pp.272-287.

<sup>52</sup> Cudworth et al., *op.cit.*, p.288; Emilian Kavalski, “Shanghaied into Cooperation,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol.45, No.2(2010), pp.131-145.

<sup>53</sup> Timothy Luke, “International or Interenvironmental Relations”, *Alternatives*, Vol.28, No.3(2003), pp.393-422.

<sup>54</sup> Cameron Harrington, “The Ends of the World”, *Millennium*, Vol.44, No.3(2016), pp.478-498

<sup>55</sup> Heyward Alker, *Rediscoveries and Reformulations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.374.

that periodically overwhelm, intensify, and infect (while all the time animating) the trajectories of global life.

### **Relational Ethics in a Complex World**

Inhabiting a complex universe reveals not only the interdependence between international actors, but also their mutual implication in each other's interactions and roles as well as the overwhelming embeddedness of these relations in the world. CT inaugurates pluriversal politics proposing a more just coexistence that exceeds the atomistic imaginaries of the possible prescribed by the disciplining Newtonian metanarrative of IR.<sup>56</sup> Ethics in this setting resonates with the sense of living relationally in and with the world. The normative bite of this proposition bespeaks 'our being caught, surprised in a certain responsibility, and the most ineluctable of responsibilities, an ethical and always asymmetrical debt'.<sup>57</sup> As Ernst Haas reminds us 'ethical choices have evolutionary consequences'.<sup>58</sup> Such relational ethics reflect an acknowledgement of and responsible adaptation to the turbulent reality of international interactions. Global life – just like life in general – is profoundly relational, interstitial, and has a tendency to pass, flow, and connect (meaning that it can move, relate, transform, and become) beyond boundaries and across limits.

The ethics of political action under complexity demands accepting to live with 'the fundamental principle of uncertainty whilst moving away from the very modern idea that the role of reason is to provide certainty for decisions on human action'.<sup>59</sup> In particular, relational ethics signal an attitude that embraces and resonates with uncertainty. As such, relational ethics are free from any clear normative hierarchies or universalizing (and universalizable) regulations, responsibilities, or obligations; instead, shared understandings are not imposed as rules, rights, and duties but emerge *in, from, and through* the very process of interaction and are contingent on the (contextual interpretation and relational signification of the) memory of previous social experiences. Of course, this ethic of entanglement at the planetary scale mandates that we respond, reimagine, and receptively approach global life with 'care in all its complexity. Humans must take responsibility for wrongs to multiple Others, even if we may not be able to communicate with them in a shared world or know precisely what these claims might be'.<sup>60</sup>

This requires axiological skills for living (if not thriving) in a social environment beyond the control of any of the participating actors. The distributed change provoked by the interactions of multiple actors in entangled complex settings demands an ethic of 'responsibility-in-time': 'an extraordinary kind of strategic and moral responsibility [which is] temporally and structurally intertwined... both for the past and for the future generations of humans, animals, plants, forests, and fish'.<sup>61</sup> Such framing of the ethical underpinnings of the 'complexification' of IR suggest that political action does not occur in a vacuum, but in idiosyncratic and dynamic spatio-temporal contexts. What is normatively important emerges not as a result of individual decisions, but relationally in the process of interactions with a wide variety of 'others'. Thereby, it becomes meaningful in the context of doing things together with

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<sup>56</sup> Rojas, op.cit.,p.370;Niv Horesh and Emilian Kavalski, *Asian Thought*(Basingstoke: Palgrave,2014),pp.230-48; M.R.J. McCulloch and Emilian Kavalski, "Pre-Westphalian Suggestions for a Post-Westphalian World", *Atlantic Journal of World Affairs*,Vol.1,No.1(2005),pp.106-127.

<sup>57</sup> David Steiner and Krzysztof Helminski, "Politics of Relationality", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Vol.24, No.4(1998),pp.1-21.

<sup>58</sup> Ernst Haas, "Is There a Hole in the Whole?", *International Organization*, Vol.29, No.3(1975),pp.827-876

<sup>59</sup> Damien Popolo, *New Science of IR* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011),p.215; Emilian Kavalski, "Normative Power beyond the Eurocentric Frame" in P.James (ed), *Oxford Bibliographies of International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>60</sup> Frank Biermann and Eva Lövbrand, *Anthropocene Encounters* (Cambridge University Press, 2019),p.100.

<sup>61</sup> Anthony Burke, "Nuclear Time", *Critical Studies on Security*,Vol.4,No.1(2016),pp.73-90; Emilian Kavalski, "Partnership or Rivalry", *European Law Journal*,Vol.13,No.6(2007),pp.839-856.

them. The resultant ethos of relational interdependence nourishes responsiveness towards other (radically different) kinds of beings.<sup>62</sup>

Such relational outlook should not be misunderstood as a call for new hegemonic hierarchies privileging one lived reality over another. CT's relational ontologies do not proscribe antagonism, nor do they suggest that its elimination is required.<sup>63</sup> Difference – including radical difference – is not merely desirable, it is the very condition of possibility for the self-organizing emergence of global life. In other words, difference belies 'interdependence-in-antagonism' – a normative stance that treats cooperation and competition as corresponding forces which underpin the mutual dependence of all those inhabiting global life.<sup>64</sup> Thus, rather than a condition requiring ongoing securitization, difference discloses 'a relation that brings disagreements into the conversation and forces the mechanisms that proscribe from politics earth-beings and relational ontology to become visible'.<sup>65</sup> In this setting, ethical responsibilities emerge from the awareness of coexistence and the practices of sharing a relational global life. The following sections outline what probably are the two key features of such relational ethics: improvisation and the art of acting politically.

### *Improvisation*

By recognizing the pervasive uncertainty of global life, the complexification of IR calls for an urgent change in both the structures of and ideas about politics. More often than not, such emergent capacities for ethical action have been associated with the concept of *improvisation*. Alfonso Montuori points out that improvisation is usually conceived as an exception, 'as making the best of things, while awaiting a return to the way things should be done'. As he demonstrates, however, improvisational practice is neither deterministic, nor arbitrary; instead, it is a relational activity reflecting an ability 'to make *choices* in context, which in turn affect the context'. Thus, the choice to improvise does not indicate an inability to conduct 'business-as-usual', but recognition that it is the cognitive patterns of 'business-as-usual' (in particular, the belief in 'the one correct way of doing things') that are accountable for the current predicaments of global life, such as climate change.<sup>66</sup>

Let's take the experience of surfers (probably one of the most conspicuous socio-ecological relationships out there) as an example. Surfers go out into the ocean expecting to ride a wave whose size, speed, strength, and timing is completely unknown to them. In the ocean, they spend significant time (quite literally) *dancing* with the rhythm of the water. In this dance, the surfers learn to distinguish between the different ripples of the water and read which one is likely to be an 'ankle buster' (a small wave), an 'awesome' (a nearly perfect wave), or a 'cruncher' (an impossible to ride wave). Premised on their interpretative dancing with the unpredictable motion of the ocean, surfers decide whether they are going to take off or back down from a wave. Their fitness, in terms of adaptation to the movements of the ocean, allows surfers to make decisions that are crucial to their ability to catch and ride the wave. Yet, while waves are similar to each other, they are never exactly alike, and surfers never know – regardless of whether one is a 'kook' (a newbie) or a 'boss' (a pro)—how the ride is going to proceed and whether it is going to be successful at all. The normalization of this underdeterminacy is part of the relational decision-making of surfers. In essence, each ride is

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<sup>62</sup> K. Litfin, "Sovereignty in World Ecopolitics", *Mershon International Studies Review*, 41,1(1997),pp.67-204; Emilian Kavalski, "India: Breaking Out of the Middle Power Straitjacket" in T.Struye de Swielande, D.Vandamme, D.Walton, and T.Wilkins (eds), *Rethinking Middle Power* (London: Routledge,2018),pp.162-173.

<sup>63</sup> Querejazu, *op.cit.*,p.11; Y.C.Cho and Emilian Kavalski, "Still Searching for Strategy", *Asia Europe Journal*,Vol.16,No.1(2018),pp.51-63.

<sup>64</sup> Patomäki, *op.cit.*,p.62.

<sup>65</sup> Rojas, *op.cit.*,p.380; Emilian Kavalski, "Recognizing Normative State Action", *Political Studies Review*,Vol.15,No.2(2017),pp.231-242.

<sup>66</sup> Alfonso Montuori, "Complexity of Improvisation", *Human Relations*, Vol.56,No.2(2005),pp.237-255

an improvisation combining the individual skills of the surfer and the unpredictable shape, motion, and breaking point of the wave.

Yet, it is this inherent insecurity of surfing that underpins its appeal. Having accepted unpredictability as a constituent ingredient of the surfing experience, surfers not only learn to live with it, but also gain the freedom to respond creatively to such uncertainty. Time and experience can improve the competences for coping with the simultaneity of emergence, yet it is the *openness to relational learning* and *willingness for adjustments* that frames the effectiveness and the range for the possibilities of action. The ‘openness-to-revision’ underpinning such practices of improvisation ‘invite both complexity and a mixing of viewpoints, which carries the potential for both conflict and creativity’.<sup>67</sup> The sense of order and harmony reflects an ongoing interrelation with the world to negotiate such tensions rather than resolve them. In terms of politics, the suggestion is that policy-makers, scholars, observers, and ordinary participants need to develop a surfer-like ability to revel in ambiguity by broadening the propensity of circumstance and perfecting the capacity to make decisions based on incomplete and constantly changing information (as opposed to the constant hankering to control, constrain, and simplify the indeterminacy of global life). Improvisation, therefore, acknowledges the randomness of relational practice, but it is ‘randomness for a purpose’ that draws on behavioural versatility and policy experience to construct an appropriate response for a particular moment in time.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, rather than reducing uncertainty, the ethics of improvisation outlines political action capable of continually imagining global life other than what it currently is. In this respect, and paraphrasing Haas, rather than an inflexible steering of the ship of state, the understanding and explanation of IR entails a surfer-like relational practice of ‘zigging and zagging’ through the turbulent reality of global life in which ‘old objectives are questioned, new objectives clamour for satisfaction and the rationality accepted as adequate in the past ceases to be a legitimate guide to future action.’<sup>69</sup> At the same time, it cautions that even if adapting appropriately, improvisation is not boundless. It can be quickly undone by external surprise. For instance, going back to the metaphor of the surfer, the unexpected appearance of a shark riding the same wave infuses the decision-making context with emotions ranging from panic to an adrenaline-fueled exhilaration. At any rate, such surprises (and the emotions that they provoke) heighten the surfer’s investment in reaching the shore (from the one prior to the appearance of the shark). Hence, while those who are afraid of sharks most probably should not go into the ocean, the knowledge that sharks inhabit the same waters and, thereby, are not unlikely to be encountered when surfing encourages an awareness that assists in the development of a capacity to respond appropriately when confronted with rapid change and surprises.

### *The art of acting politically*

The discussion of improvisation above backstops the normative suggestion of the complexification of IR—namely, that the capacity to respond creatively to the contingent interaction of global life requires learning the *art of acting politically*. Global life is not necessarily a place where international actors merely find themselves; it is where they get lost in the complexity of interactions and relationships. In lieu of prescribing absolutes, ethical political action in this setting embraces the relationality of global life and stresses the possibilities emerging from the enmeshment of diverse modes of living. The contention is that in a complex world, relational activities engage individuals as conscious subjects in a responsible and sustainable interaction with each other and their environments. Such a contingent setting rejects established “‘predict-and-act” models’ of management and calls for

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<sup>67</sup> Tracey Nicholls, *Ethics of Improvisation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), p.107.

<sup>68</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “Complexity Thinking and the Relational Ethics of Global Life” in B.Schippers (ed), *Routledge Handbook to Rethinking Ethics and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>69</sup> Ernst Haas, “Turbulent Fields”, *International Organization*, Vol.30, No.2(1976), pp.173–212

adaptive policy-making with the ‘flexibility to respond both to new situations and to new knowledge of the situation’.<sup>70</sup> This framing also suggests the emancipatory potential embedded in the ‘explanatory critique’ of CT, which reconfigures political choices in their contextual entanglement with the world.<sup>71</sup>

Normatively speaking, the complexity of global life confronts IR with the ‘political effects of agents that are not conventionally perceived as “political” – such as, natural disasters, epidemics, etc.’<sup>72</sup> Hence, the ‘threats’, ‘dangers’, and ‘insecurity’ emanating from non-Western and non-human systems are not conventionally perceived as *intentional*—i.e., there is no conflict of wills between distinct (and opposing) strategic actors. The focus is on how can we all participate meaningfully in something that can plausibly, but still only vaguely, be called international politics populated by actors whose subjectivity lacks ‘agential intentionality’<sup>73</sup>? While this question does not have a singular and definitive answer, a crucial feature of the responses suggested by CT is the demand for an ethos willing to accept and engage with the ambiguity of global life. Such an approach has enormous bearing for an ethics of action in world affairs, especially with regards to issues such as conscience, responsibility, and accountability in situations where prediction and control are elusive. Political action, in this setting, becomes a co-creative process in which people, events, and their ‘enviroming circumstances’ are in responsive resonance with one another as well as are simultaneously shaped by and shape the spatio-temporal contexts of their interaction.<sup>74</sup>

As Edgar Morin reminds us, such framing has important effects on the ethics of relational practice: (i) its ‘multiplication of alternatives’ creates favourable conditions for spontaneity and innovative strategies; (ii) its randomness underscores the increasing significance of individual decisions, which can lead to irreversible and unpredictable changes for the entire process. Such ‘ethical complexification’ suggests a relational ‘ecology of action’, which Morin calls ‘living life’ – i.e., ‘not just living’ (that is, merely existing reactively), but ‘knowing how to resist in life’ by ‘daring the acceptance to risk’.<sup>75</sup> This understanding backstops an ethic of ‘living otherwise-relationally’<sup>76</sup> – namely, the cultivation of relational practices and nuanced adaptations sensitive to the emergent, historically-contingent, and self-organizing character of global life. The point is that while global life keeps on asserting its complexity, our policy making seems to be invested in stringent models insisting on staying the course and the ‘dogged, single-minded pursuit of an effect that is no longer important or even obtainable in the evolutionary system of strategic interaction’.<sup>77</sup> CT views global life as a messy social reality, always emergent, embedded in contingent spatio-temporal contexts, and shaped by interrelations with others (as well as the multitude of meanings that such interactions engender as their iterations are themselves inseparable from the multiple webs of relations through which such communication gets refracted).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “Acting Politically in Global Life”, in D.Walton and M.Frazier (eds.), *Contending Views on International Security* (New York: Nova),pp.87-101.

<sup>71</sup> Colin Wight and Jonathan Joseph, *Scientific Realism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave,2010),p.23; Emilian Kavalski, “Relationality and Its Chinese Characteristics”, *China Quarterly*,Vol.226(2016),pp.551-559.

<sup>72</sup> Gwyn Prins, “Definition of Global Security”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol.38, No.6(1995),pp.817-829

<sup>73</sup> Emilian Kavalski, “The Complexity of Empire”, *Canadian Journal of History*, Vol.42,No.2(2007),pp.271-280.

<sup>74</sup> Roger Ames and David Hall, *Focusing the Familiar* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001),p.16; Emilian Kavalski, “Worlding the Study of Region-Building”, *East Asian Community Review*,Vol.1,No.1/2(2018), pp.5-17.

<sup>75</sup> Edgar Morin, “Ethics of Complexity”, in J.Bindé (ed), *Future of Values* (New York: Berghahn Books2004),pp.43-46; Edgar Morin, “Realism and Utopia”, *Diogenes*, Vol.39, No.209(2006),pp.135-144

<sup>76</sup> Rojas,*op.cit.*,p.370.

<sup>77</sup> Y.C.Cho and Emilian Kavalski, “Worlding”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*,Vol.15,No.57(2018),pp.49-65; Emilian Kavalski, “The Shadows of Normative Power,” *Pacific Focus*,Vol.29,No.3(2014),pp.303-328.

<sup>78</sup> Such acknowledgement of the messiness of global life does not intend to downplay the fraught questions of justice, hierarchy, and violence in the international. Instead, the point here is to disclose the emancipatory potential of exceeding the established ‘models of conquest, conversion, community, and tolerance’ latent in the meaningful



The *art of acting politically* under complexity attests to an ethic of receptivity in resonance with living and becoming in uncertainty. A key feature of this normative framework is the expectation of long-term reciprocity as a result of a ‘more volatile image of being’ that pauses and listens ‘to the various relays with the world’.<sup>79</sup> Such relational ethics offer a marked divergence from the ethics of power politics informing the atomistic ontology of IR. By asserting the stabilizing effects of the structure of the international system, the latter ‘authorizes violence in the name of civilization’ in order to sustain the belief in a predictable international life; in other words, the more the world is under ‘our’ control, domination, and conquest, the more secure it is assumed to be – thus, stifling political imaginations and limiting options for action.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, CT’s normative stance recalls the intuition that the ‘realization of the complexity of world politics should make for a more tolerant and broad-minded attitude to foreign policy’.<sup>81</sup> Such relational ethics recall an outlook which favours contextual sensitivity to the subtleties of specific interactions at the expense of strict adherence to precise and rigid formulations. Decision making free from the aspiration to control rests on a choice to generate ‘desirable pathways’ in the face of rapid and fast alterations and pervasive uncertainty and risk.<sup>82</sup>

CT’s relational ontology presages an ethic of care, responsiveness, indebtedness, and mutuality that embraces the multiple interpenetrating enmeshments of global life and values the uncertainty and unintended consequences of these entanglements – all of which, of course, are not limited to the human dimension, but have a cosmic reach.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, such ‘complexification’ enables ‘our assumption of responsibility’. Such relational ethics call for frameworks, policies, and actions informed by a conscious nurturing of meaningful interactions rooted in the ontology of complex interconnections. Thus, *acting politically* under the conditions of complexity entails rejecting ‘security seeking’ in the conventional sense of this term and taking responsibility for leaving an impact, for forcing things in one direction rather than another – ‘since there is no way of guaranteeing in advance whether an act is good or bad... [thus] in a specific situation, one must run the risk that the effects of one’s actions turn out bad’.<sup>84</sup> In this setting, relational ethics are not about the hubris that we can control outcomes and steer history, but about care, attentiveness, humility, and responsibility to others attuned to the complex trajectories of living together in a shared global life. Thus, the reference to the *art of acting politically* reveals that the study and practice of IR should not aim at reducing (and controlling) the complexity of global life, but by acknowledging its interwovenness develop adaptive capacities for celebrating and working with the creative possibilities of change.

## Conclusion

The preceding discussion has sketched out some of the characteristics of the complexification of IR and the relational ethics that it informs. The point is that CT offers meaningful and productive ways to negotiate the critical junctures between imperialism, greed, environmental degradation, and hope. Such an endeavour is not intended to brandish CT – both in general and in IR in particular – as either a panacea for the crises plaguing the global condition or the flaws of the disciplinary purview of IR. Instead, the claim is that CT offers a range of alternative stories that need to be heard. This ethico-political stance ‘pluralizes the sources and codes of

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encounter with the ‘historically contingent and inherently relational’. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 48.

<sup>79</sup> Grove, *op.cit.*,p.21; Emilian Kavalski, “Relational Theory of World Politics”, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*,Vol.18,No.3(2018),pp.397-420.

<sup>80</sup> Rojas,*op.cit.*,p.375; Emilian Kavalski, “Explaining Compliance in a Post-Westphalian Europe,” *International Studies Review*,Vol.7,No.4(205),pp.651-653.

<sup>81</sup> Sprout and Sprout, *op.cit.*,p.130.

<sup>82</sup> M.Zolkos, *Philosophy of Catastrophe* (Boulder, CO: Lexington Books,2011),p.161.

<sup>83</sup> Querejazu,*op.cit.*,p.9; Emilian Kavalski, “Relational International Affairs”, *Chinese Political Science Review*, Vol.3,No.2(2018),pp.233-251.

<sup>84</sup> M.Zolkos, *Restitution and the Politics of Repair* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020),p.93.

ethics while acknowledging the contestability of its own assumptions'.<sup>85</sup> The contention is that the complexification of IR generates novel opportunities for a thorough reconsideration of the explanation and understanding of 7, No.4 (the disciplinary mainstream).<sup>86</sup> At the same time, the disruption of the entrenched atomistic ontology of IR can contribute meaningfully to ethical projects for equitable, just, and sustainable living. In this respect, the decentring intended by the complexification of IR should be read neither as a mode, nor a figuration of a relativism premised on disinterest and detachment, but as an ethical (and not only) stance of emancipatory relationality.

By accounting for the complex interactions between socio-political systems and the ecologies that they inhabit, the complexification of IR suggests that the entanglement of world politics within larger systems of global interactions demands 'asking questions about moments of imperial encounter and global governmentality that simultaneously involve multiple cultures and multiple forms of life'.<sup>87</sup> Such considerations call on IR theory to go back to the road less travelled of encountering the multiverse of relations animating global life. This move demands not only the rejection of the privileging of stability over change in IR's knowledge production, but also dispensing with the assertion (regardless of whether it is explicit or implicit) that such stability is normatively preferable. Instead of engaging in such relational intellectual travelling, IR theory still refuses to recognize 'other' forms of theory-building that fall outside its Eurocentric and anthropocentric frame.<sup>88</sup>

In order to rectify this trend, the interlocutors of CT in IR insist that rather than being fearful of analytical crossroads and the unexpected (and unintended) encounters that they presage, IR should embrace the uncertainty attendant in the journey beyond the atomistic ontology of the world. In other words, thinking beyond the Eurocentric and anthropocentric frames of IR urges 'us to connect the questions of political possibility with the dynamics and the intransigence of vast domains that are themselves recalcitrant to the purchase of politics' and, at the same time, acts as a provocation 'to imagine worlds both before and after us'.<sup>89</sup> Such a move has a palpable relational flavour associated with the convivial, yet dissonant cross-pollination of values, narratives, and practices in the study of global life. This endeavour is backstopped by the generation of new modes of thought opposing 'the symmetry of an economy of truth and understanding' with 'the radical asymmetry of an opening into the unknown and unknowable'.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, such relational ethics do not shy away from the struggles, tensions, and inconsistencies of global life.

The proposition here is that the complexification of IR engenders a rather gimballed view of global life – just like a ship's compass (or a gimbal), the patterns of world affairs are made up of multiple, interdependent, and constantly shifting spheres of relations. Each of these spheres represents an emergent and highly contingent nexus of complex relations, which interact simultaneously at different spatial and temporal scales. The result is a multi-scalar framing of global life in which diverse layers of actors and agency (and the various systems, institutions, and matter which they inhabit) produce overlapping levels of contingent aggregation animated by the intended and unintended consequences of their activities. The interlocutors of CT in the study of world affairs, thereby, illuminate that the complex patterns of global life resonate with relationality and dynamism, rather than the static and spatial arrangements implicit in the fetishized currency of self-other/centre-periphery/hegemon-

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<sup>85</sup> William Connolly, *Ethos of Pluralization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 87-191; Emilian Kavalski, "Unintended Effects", *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol.17, No.4 (2019), pp.403-419.

<sup>86</sup> Magdalena Zolkos and Emilian Kavalski, "Encountering Nature in Global Life", in J.C. Pereira and A. Saramo (eds), *Non-human Nature in World Politics* (Berlin: Springer, 2020).

<sup>87</sup> Rafi Youatt, *Interspecies Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2020), p. 123.

<sup>88</sup> Emilian Kavalski, "Relational Knowledge-Production", *Korean Political Science Review*, Vol.51, No.6 (2017), pp.147-170

<sup>89</sup> Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature* (London: Sage, 2011), pp.27-28.

<sup>90</sup> Jeffrey Friedman, *Societal Complexity* (London: Routledge, 2014), p.74; Emilian Kavalski, "From the Western Balkans to the Greater Balkans Area," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol.17, No.1 (2006), pp.86-100.

challenger models underpinning the binary metanarratives of IR. In other words, in contrast to the dualistic bifurcations that dominate IR imaginaries with their static and state-centric metaphors, CT reframes world affairs as a gimballed interface suffused with the fragility, fluidity, and mutuality of global interactions.

Such a gimballed outlook suggests a radical reconsideration of the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism exuded by the Newtonian certainties of the disciplinary mainstream. At odds with the ontological substantialism of the IR mainstream, CT discloses the world as an emergent, complexly-related web of interactions. Global life is constantly changing and always in flux, (trans)forming and adapting to the emergent rhythms of new circumstances and contexts. Thus, rather than looking at dyadic sets of relations as well as the identities and capabilities of individual international actors, CT inheres an IR pivoted on conscious openness to interactions with others, which demands both contextual sensitivity and an ongoing commitment to the deliberate practices of relationality. Owing to the underdetermined nature of such relations, what passes for world order is not only constantly changing, but demands ongoing commitment to participating and maintaining social exchanges. In this dynamic context, CT not only reminds IR of its complex entanglements, but its relational ethics posit effective figurations for managing such hyper-social environments.

The ethical verso of CT is about the cultivation of attentiveness to the emergent, self-organizing, and contingent reality of global life. This move implies that things in global life are not merely interconnected, but that they gain meaning and significance within complex webs of entanglements and encounters with others – be they human or nonhuman. In fact, ethics itself becomes an experimental (if not, a self-organizing) endeavour which can neither be fixed nor codified, but remains contingent on the contextual ability to recognize our entanglement with the world. The focus here is not only on acknowledging, but working creatively *with* and *through* the ‘circles of reciprocal implication’ engendered by such relationality.<sup>91</sup> Such gimballed outlook prompts comparisons, reflections, critiques, and understanding that ‘combine contradictory certainties’, while thriving on the contingency of interactions.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, the attention is to the ways in which the affordances of relationality are foreshadowed and/or foreshortened by the complexification of IR. As such, the myriad entanglements of people, powers, and environments (as well as their complex histories, cultures, and agency) stimulates an awareness of the dynamically-intertwined contingencies through which different paradigms have come to be articulated and assembled.<sup>93</sup>

CT’s attentiveness to the promise and possibilities of uncertainty makes the realms of IR research doubtlessly messy. Yet, the relational ethics of such theorizing reveal that IR theorizing is not merely about the provision of knowledge (in the sense of a positivistic measuring exercise); rather, it is about forming than purely informing; it is about the art of living than de-contextual and detached abstract thought. In other words, complex IR is incoherent and socially-mediated – just like the everyday patterns and practices of the global life it intends to explain and understand. In other words, messiness is needed if IR is to recover a disposition for encounter and engagement with currents, trends, and voices occluded by the Newtonian underpinnings of established paradigms. CT simultaneously amplifies and analyses the intrinsic relationality both of global life and the realms of IR. Such complexification uncovers an IR as a project of disclosure – on the one hand, disclosing worlds and possibilities foreclosed by the Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism of its Newtonian bias; and, on the other hand, disclosing the inextricable and invariable intertwinement between understanding, explanation, practices, and encounters in the study of world affairs. After all, what is IR as a discipline if not the conscious exploration and encounter with the interstitial and relational.

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<sup>91</sup> Roman Coles, *Visionary Pragmatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p.49.

<sup>92</sup> Emilian Kavalski, *Encounters with World Affairs* (London: Routledge, 2015), 100.

<sup>93</sup> William Connolly, *Fragility of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

Thus, the curious and provocative entanglements with the complexity of global life invoke the pluriverse of possible worlds.