The Metaphysics Of The Process By Alfred North Whitehead

The constitutive dynamism of reality

The history of Western metaphysics, beyond all the specific differences of authors, periods, and different cultural contexts, has always had, from antiquity to the modern era, a common characteristic: it was mainly the study of substances. The idea, in effect, that the world is made up of entities that persist over time appears to be particularly intuitive and consistent with our daily experience.

There is no wonder then that already in Aristotle, the fundamental category for the study of reality is precisely that of 'substance'. However, in fact, the initiator of the 'metaphysics of substance' is Parmenides, the first to argue that we should conceive being as simple, in the sense of eternally undifferentiated and immutable. Even Plato represents an eminent thinker belonging to the current of the 'metaphysics of substance': ideas, in fact, central entities of his conception of reality, are by definition immutable and eternally equal to themselves.

If we then proceed in medieval and modern philosophy, the situation does not seem to change significantly, at least until the end of the 19th century. Certainly, we must not even limit ourselves to unilateral characterizations. The idea, in effect, of a 'metaphysics of the process', or rather the idea that the fundamental components of reality are not entities that persist over time, but processes of continuous becoming, has always been - even if in a minority form - present in western philosophical reflection.

Its most obvious precursor in the Greek world is certainly Heraclitus, famous for his claim that everything flows. In fact, one must always be cautious in interpreting the thought of an author whose only fragments have been reached. Certainly, however, it cannot be denied that the metaphysical vision of the ionic thinker seems quite consistent: 'The ordering, the same for all, no god or man has made, but it was, is and will be: fire ever-living, being kindled in measures and going out in measures' (Heraclitus fr. 30). Every entity that exists is nothing but a transformation of this eternal fire, which remains ever-present in them and causes their change and becoming, according to a continuous movement generated by the opposition between forces.

Another thinker who gave an important space to the ideas of process and dynamism in his own metaphysics was Plotinus, who argued that the concept of enérgheia (????????), 'activity', underlies the generation of every level of reality starting from its unique and transcendent principle.

In modern times, Leibniz, in postulating the monads as fundamental elements of his own metaphysics, gave the 'metaphysics of the process' a new vital aspect. Indeed, monads are ordered sequences of states that consist of co-exemplifying properties over a certain period of time. However, in order for the transition from one state to the next of the sequence to take place, it is necessary for the monads to contain a dynamic principle, an 'active force' that allows this passage.

In the nineteenth century, an element in common with the so-called German 'idealists', Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, is precisely the fact that they gave a decisive role to dynamism in the generation of reality. The most important innovation, however, on Hegel's part, as far as the 'metaphysics of the process' is concerned, is the consideration that the principles regulating the becoming of reality, its dynamism, can be fully known through philosophical investigation. Precisely this idea is the basis of metaphysics and, more generally, of the speculative philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.

To present Whitehead's metaphysics, it is first necessary to situate it in the context of the great changes that marked the western conception of reality between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. First of all, the late nineteenth century was a time when everyday life became faster and even more interconnected, through new means of transport and communication. The world, in some way, seemed to shrink; it was indeed the era of the first globalization. Clearly, however, for a logician, mathematician, and physicist like Whitehead, the elements that most contributed to the formation of his metaphysics were more theoretical: First, the new concept of Maxwell physics. According to Whitehead, Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism, based on the conception of reality as a force field (that is, incessant activity, in the Whiteheadian reading), would have allowed overcoming the Newtonian fallacy according to which the universe is made up of isolated points of matter, corresponding to a precise space-time location. Once placed in a field, no point in space and time is independent of the influences of any other point in the field. Likewise, a second element that certainly contributed to the creation of Whitehead metaphysics was Frege's new propositional logic. Going beyond, after more than two millennia, the Aristotelian logic based on the rigidly distinct binomial of subject and predicate, the new logic was based on the proposition of a relation, of which subject and predicate represent only two relata.

Starting from these and other theoretical points, Whitehead developed peculiar metaphysics based on the notion of actual entity (or occurrence). An actual entity is nothing more than a set of elementary processes internally linked together. The simplest analogy, to understand what the philosopher means, is an organism; so, the entire metaphysics of Whitehead will also be called 'philosophy of the organism'. The extremely innovative element, however, of actual entities is the fact that they characterize both the 'inanimate' material (including also space and time, which emerge from the processes of the actual entities) and the sphere of life.

In fact, Whitehead was a radically antidualist thinker. He violently criticizes both the separations between subjective experience and the objective world of philosophy, and the mathematical abstractions of physics that believe they can grasp the essence of the natural world interpreting it in its exclusively quantitative, but not qualitative, aspects. The notion of an actual entity allows one to overcome precisely these dualisms. In fact, human experience, not dissimilar from any other region of reality, is constituted for Whitehead by a sequence of strictly interrelated elementary processes that bring multiple sentiments (in a broad sense) to become one. In this process, the fundamental element is not the essence of these sentiments, i.e. the answer to the question of what they are, but the way in which they are experienced, or the self-awareness of the experience in the first person.