One of the most interesting, and yet challenging, projects within the philosophy of physics is the quest for the most fundamental constituents (if any) of reality. Scholars who work in this research area generally refer to the notion of primitive ontology to identify the basic building-blocks (if any) of the universe. Although it is not among the issues that philosophers discussing fundamentality are primarily concerned with, the question regarding the ontological status of space-time is certainly relevant in this context. For, the two main contending views, namely substantivalism and relationalism, are at root views about the fundamental.

On the one hand, substantivalists argue that both material entities and spacetime are to be conceived as fundamental. In this view, which is generally traced back to Newton, spacetime is a substance in its own right. A particular version of this perspective, which is called super-substantivalism, goes as far as to recognize only spacetime as fundamental, claiming that material objects are identical to space-time regions. On the other hand, relationalists believe that only material entities are fundamental, while spacetime exhibits a derivative existence. In Oliver Pooley’s words (2013, 523) “claims apparently about spacetime itself are ultimately to be understood as claims about material entities and the possible patterns of spatiotemporal relations that they can instantiate”. In its latest developments, this second approach, which was famously elaborated on by Leibniz, takes particles as the building-blocks of reality. The distance of particles from each other varies and this results in the evolution of the system under scrutiny.

Here, I will take a critical look at the substantivalism/relationalism debate, and propose a novel approach. To commence, I will provide a concise description of the main advantages/disadvantages of these two perspectives, with particular attention to the parameter of parsimony, both in terms of ontology and of explanatory representation. Based on this, I will claim that neither of them is completely satisfactory. I will then try to construct my case by drawing from Spinoza’s notion of substance. While he is generally regarded as a pioneer of super-substantivalism (or substantivalism), I will provide the ground for holding that this is not the case. It is my contention that Spinoza’s notion of substance does not correspond to spacetime. Rather, substance is by definition all that exists in itself and that causes itself. In terms of contemporary physics, substance can thus be conceived as the universe. What I will try to defend in my paper is the thesis that the definition of substance as it is assessed in Spinoza’s *Ethics* cannot be juxtaposed to spacetime – at least according to those perspectives to which the physical universe is not essentially a spatio-temporal structure.

Indeed, according to present-day physics, spacetime only results from one of the quantum covariant fields (namely, the gravitational field). This is no facetious conclusion, for it entails that there is more to the fundamental structure of reality than just space-time. In fact, those who identify Spinoza’s substance with spacetime neglect the relevance of his philosophical insights to the issue of primitive ontology and its relevance in the context of contemporary physics.

I will suggest that, what is particularly significant in this context is Spinoza’s conceptualization of substance as something that cannot be split into parts. Not only is substance all that exists, but all that exists is impartible, that is to say cannot be subject to actual partitions. In this paper I will propose a novel form of substantivalism, based on this Spinozian insight. I call it *reticular substantivalism*. 
My objective is to set forth an account of Spinoza’s conceptualization of substance to offer a few insights for revising basic notions of primitive ontology. What I am concerned with is the idea of substance being as an all-encompassing system in which individual processes – that is, temporal succession of events – are party to the system as a whole. In this regard, Spinoza’s proposal is particularly relevant in that he thematized the relation between the whole and the parts in such a way not to objectivize them and not to pit the one against the other. On this account, the quest for the fundamental constituents of reality does not follow a route from the global (macro) to the local (micro). The two levels get continually altered and recombined in a network of local processes that generate constituents always amenable to change. The notion itself of “fundamental” gets profoundly weakened insofar as it is impossible to determine a hierarchy between macro- and micro-events. In other words, constituents of reality are temporary, morphing expressions of a set of net-like processes, viz., modal configurations of the universe. Therefore, the very idea of discernible constituents gives way to the notion that reality is an impartible succession of reticular events that mold each other as they unfold.

Bibliography:

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