



Research Paper

Human Relativity versus Einsteinian Relativity: Problematising the Human Paradigm in the Scientific Expositions of D H Lawrence

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ABSTRACT: *The concept of self has been the most elusive of all that the world of knowledge has ever grappled with. There is a wide range of meanings that come into play with reference to 'self', from the apparently simple denotation of human beings by terms such as man, woman, boy, girl, etc. to very complex and abstract significations such as life, consciousness, being, soul, spirit, etc. The main objective of the present study is to examine, with particular reference to his *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, the idea of wholeness of life and his theory of human relativity that obsessed Lawrence the artist. Einstein's presence in *Fantasia* is hardly surprising when we consider what Lawrence was reading while writing this text, but what is surprising is the absence of Lawrence from critical texts that explore the impact of relativity on literary works. This paper explores Lawrence's direct engagement with relativity in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, and scrutinises some of the reasons behind tendency of critics to overlook and underestimate this engagement.*

Key words: *Self, Human Relativity, Duality*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the dawn of civilization, humankind has been consciously engaged in unravelling the mystery of the human self. The Vedic sages of India made ceaseless enquiries into the nature of Atman (soul) and Socrates in Greece gave the dictum "Know thyself." In modern times too, sages like Ramana Mahrshi have seriously dwelt on the question, "Who am I?" The question pertaining to the individuality of the human species has occupied not only the minds of philosophers and seers but also of great creative artists. But it is not often tackled in isolation; the inquirer, by the very nature of the subject, studies the individual in his relationship with "his circumambient universe" (Paul 416). The individual self and the wide spectrum of relationships it enters into in its existence have been the greatest of D.H. Lawrence's concerns as a creative genius, especially in his capacity as a novelist and short story writer.

The main objective of the present study is to examine, with particular reference to his *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, the idea of wholeness of life and his theory of human relativity that obsessed Lawrence the artist. And an examination of the artist's idea of the integrated life of the human being necessarily involves an inquiry into his conception of the human self and its varied relationships with the human world and beyond.

To begin with, it is impossible to separate Lawrence the man from Lawrence the writer. This is, at least in Lawrence's case, the starting point in a life of dualities and double measures. In Lawrence's writings there is a constant rhythm of powerful forces pulling against each other: a contradiction between the man and the writer; an attraction or a repulsion between man and woman; a struggle between the forces of life and death, but most of all, a forked vision of human relationships towards both darkness and lightness.

Fantasia is peppered with references to relativity and Einstein, from the light-hearted opening of the second chapter where "We are all very pleased with Mr Einstein for knocking that eternal axis out of the universe" (14), through to Lawrence's explanation of "what I understand of the Einstein theory" (132). Einstein's presence in *Fantasia* is hardly surprising when we consider what Lawrence was reading while writing this text, but what is surprising is the absence of Lawrence from critical texts that explore the impact of relativity on literary works. This paper explores Lawrence's direct engagement with relativity in *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, and scrutinises some of the reasons behind tendency of critics to overlook and underestimate this engagement.

Lawrence and the Theory of Human Relativity

Of the two realms which the self can create or perceive or respond to, the one that lies beyond the immediate, concrete reality of the self is more controversial than that of art. The physical cosmos moves centrifugally in a four-dimensional frame of Space-Time. It is made five dimensional by life on our planet. And, by a gift of the Spirit, the human souls are raised to a sixth dimension. The souls, in this larger frame, move, through a fateful exercise of their spiritual freedom, either towards their Creator or away from Him. His is more complex by reason of the flights of fancy in which the artistic self launches itself. Naturally, the artist, equipped with a more complex set of tools and a more complex angle(s) of vision, should be capable of having the darshan (vision) of God or the realities that lie beyond the self. This raises a few questions that are yet to be answered. What kind of darshan does Lawrence have when his profoundly intelligent creative mind exercises its freedom towards “the beyond”? What kinds of relationships does Lawrence perceive to exist between the self and God or the beyond?

Towards the end of his 1922 essay *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, D. H. Lawrence provides an extended summary of “what I understand of the Einstein theory”:

As far as I can see, Relativity means, for the common amateur mind, that there is no one absolute force in the physical universe, to which all other forces may be referred. There is no one single absolute central principle governing the world. The great cosmic forces or mechanical principles can only be known in their relation to one another, and can only exist in their relation to one another. But, says Einstein, this relation between the mechanical forces is constant, and may be expressed by a mathematical formula: which mathematical formula may be used to equate all mechanical forces of the universe. (Fantasia 133)

Despite his claim elsewhere that “I like relativity and quantum theories /because I don't understand them”(Ingersoll 101), here Lawrence demonstrates a perhaps unexpected grasp of Albert Einstein's special theory of relativity: there is no one absolute force in the physical universe; mechanical principles can only be known in their relation to one another, or, more accurately, in relation to their particular frame of reference; and the relation between mechanical forces is constant and is expressed using the Lorentz Transformations.

In addition to Lawrence's apparent grasp of the special theory of relativity (as evidenced in the quotation above), *Fantasia* also demonstrates Lawrence's understanding of some of the key principles behind the general theory of relativity, which had received experimental confirmation during the solar eclipse expeditions of 1919. Lawrence employs a series of images related to curved and straight lines and deflections which tie in directly with Einstein's suggestion that light from distant stars is bent by the gravitational field of the sun before arriving on earth, thus travelling in curved lines, rather than straight lines as had previously been supposed. Lawrence writes that there is 'no straight path' between individuals, highlights “some strange deflection as your music crosses the space between us”, and describes “the long curve of your own individual circumambient atmosphere”, a particularly resonant image given that Einstein had shown that space-time itself is curved (pp. 72-73). While Lawrence's language is obviously not that of a scientist, it is clear from moments like these that Lawrence had internalized some of the fundamental ideas associated with relativity, and was seeking to work through them for himself while writing *Fantasia*.

Although Lawrence's reading must have had a significant impact on his ability to understand, and then to write about, some of the ideas associated with relativity, it is clear from *Fantasia* that there are certain aspects of the theories which he failed to grasp. Most important among these is the place of absolutes within the theory: while Lawrence acknowledges that “the velocity of light through space is the deus ex machina in Einstein's physics”, he also goes on to claim that “there is nothing absolute left in the universe. Nothing” (Fantasia 190). In fact, Einstein's special theory of relativity revealed that the speed of light 'plays the part of a limiting velocity, which can neither be reached nor exceeded by any real body'; that is to say, it is an absolute. (Einstein 36) Thus when Lawrence states “I feel inclined to Relativity myself. I think there is no one absolute principle in the universe. I think everything is relative” (Fantasia 191), we see him making what A. S. Eddington called the “common mistake” of conflating relativity with relativism (Eddington 23). However, Lawrence does not stop there, ending his paragraph with a reflection on the relative and absolute natures of individuals: “But I also feel, most strongly, that in itself each individual living creature is absolute: in its own being. And that all things in the universe are just relative to the individual living creature. And that individual living creatures are relative to each other” (Fantasia 191).

The shift in this paragraph from the scale of the universe as a whole towards a more human, individual scale is highly significant, and also appears much earlier in *Fantasia*:

I am I, but also you are you, and we are in sad need of a theory of human relativity. We need it much more than the universe does. The stars know how to prowl round one another without much damage done. But you and I, dear reader, in the first conviction that you are me and that I am you, owing to the oneness of mankind, why, we are always falling foul of one another, and chewing each other's fur. (72)

While the tone here, as in much of *Fantasia*, is mocking, there is also a serious point being made which is relevant to the whole of Lawrence's output with its almost obsessive focus on the nature, and difficulties, of contemporary human relationships.

It is in his suggestion that "we are in sad need of a theory of human relativity" (*Fantasia* 1) that we see the main difference between Lawrence's engagement with Einstein's theories and that of many of his contemporaries: Lawrence does not mention relativity in passing, like Rose Macaulay in *Potterism* (1920); nor does he transform Einstein into a representation of a means by which man can 'get outside his body' as Virginia Woolf does in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). Rather, Lawrence uses Einstein's theories of relativity, extending and developing Einstein's ideas in the direction that interested him most: human relationships. It could be argued that such employment of scientific ideas is not out of place within a non-fictional text like *Fantasia*; yet if we turn to *Kangaroo*, the first of Lawrence's novels to appear after the publication of *Fantasia*, we find a similar exploration of ideas of absolutes and relatives on the human scale in a fictional work.

That Lawrence was thinking of Einstein while writing his own theorization of the nature of relatives and absolutes in *Kangaroo* is suggested most forcefully by the fact that Lawrence makes direct reference to Einstein's work on relativity in *Kangaroo*, although on this occasion he does not mention Einstein by name. When Somers first goes to meet and lunch with *Kangaroo*, the latter "started a discussion of the much-mooted and at the moment fashionable Theory of Relativity" (*Kangaroo* 109). Interestingly, we do not hear *Kangaroo*'s own contributions to this discussion, but they gain significance a little later when Somers reflects on *Kangaroo*'s "kindly love for real, vulnerable human beings" which "had given his soul an absolute direction, whatever he said about relativity" (111). Lawrence tells us that the lunch itself "passed frivolously" and that "Somers was bored" (110), but the choice of relativity as a topic for lunchtime conversation does not seem purely coincidental in light of the reflections on relatives and absolutes that appear later in the novel.

The logic of wisdom emanates from the emotional core of the individual. Thus wisdom and correspondingly beauty rest in the "living dynamic relations" each person establishes in the world around him/her, and not in the dead or outmoded ideals of a static social group. However, Lawrence laments that this kind of wisdom is being submerged in the verbally slick, "feel-good" politically correct wisdom of modern society: "But nowadays men have even a stunt of pretending that children and idiots alone know best. This is a pretty piece of sophistry, and a criminal cowardice, trying to dodge the life-responsibility which no man or woman can dodge without disaster" (*Fantasia* 53).

Lawrence also reiterates his belief that: "Thought-forms are thought-forms, they do not make life. Our life is made still of elemental fire and water, earth and air: by these we move and live and have our being" (106). His plea is again for an organic wholeness of being that receives an ineffable affirmation of its own cosmic selfhood through the experience of beauty. And for Lawrence beauty is to be found not only in the bright and "pretty" side of life and humanity, but also in the darker passions which are both seductive and challenging to the human soul.

The question that remains, then, is why Lawrence is absent from so many accounts of the literary response to Einstein and relativity. Lawrence is not included in Alan Friedman and Carol Donley's *Einstein as Myth and Muse*, nor in Thomas Vargish and Delo Mook's *Inside Modernism*. In addition, while Michael Whitworth has made the useful suggestion that Lawrence "resembles Conrad in combining a negative valuation of science with an enthusiasm for the new physics and its philosophical consequences," his analysis of relativity in *Fantasia* is brief, and he does not mention *Kangaroo* (Whitworth 124). This combination of negativity and enthusiasm may remind us of Nancy Katherine Hayles's assertion of Lawrence's "ambivalent approach", although it is worth noting that Hayles's assessment is rather drawn into question by her misplaced claim that Lawrence was "essentially ignorant of the New Physics" (Hayles 107).

Part of the reason behind this absence clearly lies in the common perception of Lawrence's negative approach to science, but there is more to this critical omission: Lawrence's approach to contemporary scientific concepts does not fit easily into standard critical models for analysing a literary author's response to science. For example, Morse Peckham has described the range of responses to Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) as follows: "Those who totally rejected it; those who completely misunderstood it; those who incorporated it into their existing set of attitudes by misinterpreting it; and finally those who understood it and subjected their personal cultures to a complete restructuring" (Peckham 33).

In order to explain Lawrence's response to Einstein's theories of relativity, we need a new category which would include elements of Peckham's third and fourth categories mentioned above, but also acknowledge that Lawrence restructures Einstein's theories in order to apply them to the question which interested him most: human relationships. Rather than appropriating the language of relativity in order to debunk its theories, as Fiona Becket has suggested, Lawrence uses Einstein's theories, appropriating their language and some of their ideas in order to create a new theory of his own.

II. CONCLUSION

In *Fantasia*, Lawrence appears to suggest that relativity itself may have played such a role in the early twentieth century when he writes that “people have got the word Relativity into their heads, and catchwords always refer to some latent idea or conception in the popular mind” (Fantasia190). Lawrence's increasing use and privileging, after 1921, of concepts such as relatives and absolutes to discuss human identity and relationships, an area with which he had been engaging since his earliest writings, suggest that Lawrence saw some kind of parallel between Einstein's theories of relativity and his own explorations of relationships and relatedness. Einstein isn't so metaphysically marvellous for Lawrence in his apparent revelation of the relatedness of all things because Lawrence was already aware of something similar. He knew and approved of Einstein's Theory of Relativity because it confirmed his belief in the total interdependent connectedness of the universe, and Lawrence's reading of William James no doubt played a part in this belief.

Gerald Holton has proposed that when literary writers include science in their work they make “a new alloy”(Holton137).The new alloy which Lawrence created in the early 1920s, combining what he had read of Einstein with what he had read of James along with his own ideas on human individuals and relationships, was his ‘theory of human relativity’. Lawrence's highlighting of our need for such a theory in *Fantasia*, and his subsequent explorations of relatives and absolutes in relation to human individuals in *Kangaroo*, suggest that Lawrence did indeed find in his reading of Einstein the suggestive thought that the latter had hoped for his readers, a thought which resonated in some way with Lawrence's own understanding and vision of the world, and of human relationships in particular.

Lawrence may sometimes bore the reader as a preacher; he may nauseate him with his worship of the male; he may also tire him with his imagined religion and imagined leaders. But, as John Fowles would vouchsafe, “sometimes, one leaps to him or rather he leaps you with him, like the horse in *St Mawr*, to an effortlessly and infinitely higher plane, almost to another planet.” Then he really “speaks” to the reader; there is then “a close human bond, the most serious reader-writer bond” (91).

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