

In Perpetual Motion: A Dialectical Reading of Michael Della Rocca

Dialectics and monism seem at first glance like contradictory concepts: di-, a pair, both, double; mon-, one, single, sole. In this reading of Michael Della Rocca's book-length argue for monist philosophy, The Parmenidean Ascent, I argue that in trying to achieve monism from a starting point of relational metaphysics, we are inherently engaging in a dialectical exercise, and that such exercise is in fact more valuable than either our starting point or end goal. To do so, I describe Michael Della Rocca's argument for radical monism, putting it into dialogue with Hegel's dialectics. In doing so, I argue that the process of arguing for radical monism is more key to The Parmenidean Ascent's insight than monism by itself. Not only that, but it is our only option, as I argue that Della Rocca's Ascent renders both its starting and end points invalid, and leaves only the motion between them. I then demonstrate how we might apply such an understanding of perpetual argument by connecting it to the method of phenomenology, specifically as it is formulated in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Finally, I conclude that this perpetual incompleteness is a feature, not a bug: in valuing a process of constant ascent, we can find value in the fact that philosophical inquiry can always be taken further, that there is always more to be found and to know. To support that such a state is more insightful than completion, I highlight examples of insights derived from similar perpetual dialectic motion in contexts other than metaphysics.

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To do so, I first briefly describe Michael Della Rocca's argument for radical monism, and put it into dialogue with Hegel's dialectics. Under this framing, I show that the process of arguing *for* radical monism is more key to *The Parmenidean Ascent's* insight than monism by itself. I support this reading by asserting that Della Rocca's *Ascent* succeeds in rendering relational metaphysics invalid, but does not make a standalone case for the validity of monism, only for the motion between the former and the latter. I then demonstrate how we might apply such an understanding of perpetual argument by connecting it to the method of phenomenology, specifically as it is formulated in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Here, I argue that just as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology requires the continuous existence of a differentiated world which must be rendered undifferentiated in order to perceive it, Della Rocca's *Parmenidean Ascent* requires the pre-existence of relational metaphysics, as it is only through relational logic that Della Rocca's monism is achieved. I show that this, when combined with Della Rocca's sound argument for the invalidity

of relational metaphysics, forces us to simultaneously move towards monism and acknowledge that we can never *reach it*, making the *Ascent* a perpetually incomplete, but worthwhile process.

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Michael Della Rocca's Monist Argument

Though Michael Della Rocca's Parmenidean Ascent explores several different philosophical concepts, ranging from knowledge and substance to action and philosophy itself, he takes roughly the same approach in engaging with each of them. First, he lays out the standard rationalist and relational metaphysics understanding of the concept, as posited by a variety of philosophers (such as Locke, Leibniz and Descartes, in the case of substance)¹, and shows how all such views ultimately depend on relations between differentiated subjects. Though this

¹ His engagement is broader (and more modern!) when it comes to other sections, such as on the concept of action or knowledge.

is not usually seen as a problem, Della Rocca goes on to argue that there is no way to define relations that does not violate the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or PSR, which rationalist metaphysics claims to accept. To actually accept the PSR, Della Rocca argues, we must perform an *ascent*, in which we discard our prior notions of differentiation and relations and accept a radical monism towards metaphysics (Della Rocca, 2020, pp. 77–79). To break down each of these steps, let's examine how Della Rocca tackles the idea of *substance*.

Our first step is laying out the mainstream view of substance in analytic metaphysics: (i) some things are *substances*, (ii) a *substance* is a different thing than *action* or *knowledge*. We will also usually want there to be *different substances*, not just one. (Della Rocca 2020, 53–56) Finally, most² philosophy works under the Principle of Sufficient Reason: we cannot simply posit things without explaining *why* they are so, e.g., we need a *reason* why something is a substance instead of an action. (Della Rocca, 2020, xiv (proem)). Locke, for example, asserts that substances are a union of qualities (e.g., a stone unifies size, mass, color, etc.), and that there must be some reason that this is the case, though he self-admittedly isn't sure what it is (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 53).

² Though not all philosophy does or must, as Della Rocca (2020, p. 230) notes when discussing Hume and other "PSR-deniers".

The dependence on relations lies in two separate places here. The first instance is when we say that there are *different* substances: for example, if we say that silver *is a different substance* than gold, then we are defining silver *in relation* to gold, and silver is thus not a simple, self-justifying substance (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 11). Even if we dispute this³, there is a much more fundamental dependence on relations in this view. The PSR demands we not only say that silver is a substance, but that it is so *because of* something. This is a fundamentally relational statement: we are saying that we can only define silver through its relation with *something else*, be it material composition, a broader set of its qualities, etc. (Della Rocca, 2020, pp. 56–57).

Under the PSR, however, we cannot simply state that things *are* without justification, and this includes relations. If we say that physical objects are substances because they are composed of some arrangement of matter, we must explain just how it is that arrangement of matter makes something a substance. We of course will then need to explain how an arrangement comes to be in the first place, and so on (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 56).

Here we come to Della Rocca's (2020, pp. 60–62) second step: if we demand that all things must have a reason that they are so, we must continuously also explain *why* those

³ For example, we might say that the difference between gold and silver exists *after* their respective definitions, not as a part of them (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 11).

reasons are tied to the things they explain, in an infinite regress. Thus: to say that **A** is explained by **B** is to say that there is some explanatory relation **R** between **A** and **B** ($R \rightarrow B$ explains A). But **R** itself requires another explanatory relation, **R**₁ ($R_1 \rightarrow R \rightarrow B$ explains A), which itself requires an explanation, ad infinitum (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 64). We could short-circuit this process by saying that **R** is justified by the fact that **A** and **B** are related, but this is equivalent to saying that **R** exists because **R** exists: $R \rightarrow B$ explains $A \rightarrow R$. This does not seem particularly illuminating or in the spirit of the PSR (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 67).

If we are convinced of this second step, we are left with two options: abandon the PSR, or abandon relations, and with them the power to differentiate between things. To choose the latter is to accept what Della Rocca calls *radical monism*, or *RM*: the view that we cannot make any rational case for differentiation between concepts or instances of concepts⁴. We cannot rationally justify why a particular thing is a substance, or that there are distinct substances, and therefore, we cannot say that there are particular substances at all. We might⁵, however,

⁴ Though the option of abandoning the PSR is out of scope for this essay, Della Rocca does discuss whether we are able to do so (and what it might cost us) on p. 258.

⁵ Della Rocca (2020, pp. 11–12) asserts that we can only say that *all is substance* instead of *all is not substance*, as the latter is a relational statement, like saying that silver *is not gold*, while the former isn't. I am not fully convinced by this precedence of being over non-being, and revisit it through my introduction of Hegelian dialectics.

be able to say that *all is substance*, though we can equally say that *all is action*, as our acceptance of RM makes us unable to distinguish substance and action in the first place. This acceptance is what Della Rocca terms the *Parmenidean Ascent*: to leave all previous notions, including ones we used to argue for RM, behind, and embrace the monist perspective (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 219).

Can we be truly monist | Can we truly not be monist?

One part of that ascent, though, might seem immediately troubling: Della Rocca's ascent includes throwing away the very tools that justify making an ascent in the first place, the sufficient reason to embrace monism. By his own admission, his arguments for RM are only possible with the starting point of relational metaphysics, and in undermining that starting point, he undermines his own path out of it, too. That, however, doesn't seem to worry him: why would we care about our path to RM, considering we've already arrived at it? Here, Della Rocca (2020, pp. 221–223) compares the Ascent to the (in)famous end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, where Wittgenstein asserts that the conclusion of his work makes all of his previous claims nonsense, but that it doesn't matter: we've already used them to achieve a new paradigm⁶, and have

⁶ Here, I am importing Della Rocca's (2020, p. 221) own statements on Wittgenstein, and my discussion of it is only applicable within the context of Della Rocca's

no further need of them. Relational metaphysics is a *ladder* with which we *ascend* to monism, after which we are done with it, free to discard it or scrap it for parts.

But precious little comes *after* the ascent in Della Rocca's work. There are tentative moves towards a "non-relational seeing", loose assertions that we are now free to use the language of relational metaphysics as arbitrarily as we want, without the (to Della Rocca, impossible) burden of making it coherent under the PSR. Perhaps it is unfair to ask for a clear view of this new paradigm in the immediate aftermath of reaching it. However, I see it as a clear sign that we are *not done climbing*. In fact, in the last paragraphs of Chapter 9, Della Rocca acknowledges that we might only be able to accept RM partially and gradually. But he still asserts that it is a standard we should aspire to (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 225).

This one-paragraph acknowledgement, to me, differentiates (sorry!) Della Rocca's *Ascent* from Wittgenstein's ladder: the latter assumes that we can reach an endpoint wherein we are safe to discard it⁷, whereas the former seems unable to ever be fully complete, either practically or because in reaching

own work. Readings of the *Tractatus* are also a heavily contested subject, with Della Rocca's view being self-admittedly aligned with the Resolute reading of Cora Diamond (1991) and James Conant (1992).

⁷ As previously, this is based on Della Rocca's own stated views on Wittgenstein, and is only applicable within that limited scope.

such a state we would be losing our ability to assert that we have moved at all.

Hegelian Dialectics & Della Rocca

What are Hegelian Dialectics?

To understand what this inconclusiveness might mean for Della Rocca's ascent, it is helpful to put it in dialogue with another notoriously radical view of metaphysics: Hegel's dialectics.

Hegel first posits that *pure being* and *pure nothing* are both states of undifferentiation and indeterminateness. As with Della Rocca's radical monism, we can make no assertions about their specific contents, only that *being is*, or *all is being*. But the same could be said of nothing, itself another undifferentiated state. Therefore, *all is*, and at the same time, *all isn't* (Hegel, 2014, chap. 1, sec. A-B).

To Hegel, determining in favour of either would transform them into determinate and differentiated concepts, which would themselves require the kind of grounding that seems unfeasible (as we have seen in Della Rocca's arguments for RM). To not do so, however, is impossible, as both concepts assert that they are distinct *from each other*: either *all is* **or** *all isn't* (Hegel, 2014, chap. 1, sec C.1-4).

Instead of fighting this contradiction, Hegel argues we should accept that we can only know that the contradiction is constantly resolving itself: *being* must turn into *nothing*, and *nothing* must become *being*. We cannot understand either end-state, and regardless, it would transition into the other as soon

as it started; there is nothing but the constant movement between them, or as Hegel calls it, *becoming* (Hegel, 2014, chap. 1, sec 2).

The Dialectics of Ladders

Applying this mode of thought to Della Rocca means asserting that neither radical monism *nor* relational metaphysics are comprehensible and/or valid positions by themselves, i.e., that both distinction and indistinction are nonsense. In doing so, I assume acceptance of Della Rocca's claims about the invalidity of relational metaphysics *and* the self-undermining nature of his own monist account.

There is one additional assumption, however. In Hegel's framing of dialectics, the motion between nothing and being is driven by the fact that both propositions are defined by (i) their indeterminateness and undifferentiation within themselves but also by (ii) their complete opposition to *each other*, which yields a constant state of contradiction. This is in contrast with Della Rocca's (2020, pp. 11–12) assertion that nothing is defined as a negation of being, while *being* itself is conceptually self-sufficient, i.e, does not require a negation in its definition.

This is not justifiable except by a pre-existing preference for *being*. If we do not presume the existence of *being*, we can easily define *nothing* as requiring no negation of it. Therefore, we can either assume only one exists (in which case, we cannot justify picking *being* over *nothing*), or assume that both exist and are defined as negations of each other (as in Hegel's framing). A similar objection to Della Rocca's preference for being has been raised by Filippo Casati (2025, sec. 6).

If we accept, then, that (i) Della Rocca's claims about the invalidity of relational metaphysics hold, (ii) but are also self-undermining, and that (iii) we may not give precedence to either relational metaphysics or monism, we are left with nothing but the process of moving between the two states, of performing a Parmenidean Ascent (and also a Descent). Interestingly, similar readings have been made of the aforementioned Wittgensteinian ladder: instead of understanding Wittgenstein's plea as one that asks us to discard all his previous arguments, we might see it as asking us to constantly engage with them, to never stand still and accept them but be in a constant state of "intellectual restlessness" (as described by Ben Ware (2015, pp. 49-51).

With this framing, I now aim to establish (a) why ascending is necessary, (b) why it is a process that can never truly be complete, and finally (c) why this state of constant ascent is a state we might find comforting instead of frustrating.

Why Ascend?

A need to erase differences between ourselves and the world is not only a core feature of Della Rocca's work, but also that of the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2012, pp. 28-30, 69) argues that the objects we perceive necessarily pre-exist our seeing of them: objects are differentiated and external to us. Equally core to Merleau-Ponty's argument, however, is that in perceiving an object, we seek to erase that differentiation; in fact, this seeking itself is what perception is (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 72-73).

For example, the convenience store across the street pre-exists my looking out at it from my window: I did not invent it out of whole-cloth in my mind. However, I can only *actually* perceive it by seeking to merge that pre-existing external reality with my own self: I see its red facade by erasing the distinction between my mental conception of the color and the physical reality of the facade's material (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 69). Similarly, as I write this essay, I know that my keyboard is a differentiated, external object. But to use it, I seek to erase the boundary between the keys and my own fingertips: I stop having to consider the position of each key as a separate and external fact, and simply write.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Della Rocca's ascent deeply resemble each other: the boundary-erasing of Merleau-Ponty's perception is akin to Della Rocca's assertion that "in making the Parmenidean Ascent – and in seeing in this way – we literally are or become or are no longer distinct from the world [...]" (2020, p. 225). We can therefore put Merleau-Ponty's account in terms of ascents: to perceive and interact with the world we must constantly undertake a Parmenidean Ascent towards it.

That requirement of *constantly undertaking* an ascent, however, is an important divergence from Della Rocca's own conception. Della Rocca asserts that becoming indistinct from the world we see is a stable endpoint: once we have undertaken an ascent, we need not undertake it again. This goes against Merleau-Ponty's initial requirement, that to perceive an object it must pre-exist and be differentiated from our seeing of it.

However, I believe that Della Rocca's ascent is not free of this requirement. If Della Rocca's arguments are self-undermining, if they are "a relational metaphysical challenge to relational metaphysics itself" (Della Rocca, 2020, p. 220), they *must* presuppose differentiated being and the relational metaphysics inherent to such a conception. The only way in which *The Parmenidean Ascent* can make its claims is by acknowledging that they start from a *different place* than where they end. I here echo Michael A. Rosenthal's assertion that Della Rocca's monist account must lead us to "descend back into the midst of endless relations precisely to find a reason to accept the One" (2025, pp. 361–362).⁸

Such a move might be countered by asserting that though we may return to a *semblance* of differentiation, we do so while knowing that this appearance of differentiation holds no real metaphysical significance (Della Rocca, 2025, pp. 374–75). To do so, however, still renders Della Rocca's arguments inert: if the Principle of Sufficient Reason holds no significance, his call for us to follow it is also insignificant.

Though Della Rocca may accept this inert end, I would like to propose that there is value in the exact opposite: in embracing the continuous potential of his arguments and of the broader

⁸ It is important to note that Rosenthal's account and mine *do not* arrive at this conclusion through the same means, his being significantly more focused on the ethical possibilities of differentiation versus undifferentiation.

concept of making an ascent *instead* of the inert endpoint they attempt to bring about.

Living with Perpetual Motion

To exemplify what I mean by potential, take this very paper. If it is true that we must continuously ascend, then this essay is doomed to be incomplete: I must continuously seek to erase the boundary between this essay and the context it is present in, bringing in more and more readings, letting it continuously expand in scope. On the other hand, if I accepted that I could complete this ascent in writing, by erasing the boundary between this essay and everything else, this essay would be worthless: it would be indistinguishable from the world, the difference between its existence and non-existence invalidated. It is a state Hegel describes as “equality with itself, complete emptiness, absence of all determination and content” (2014, chap. 1, sec. B). To truly achieve completeness would be to destroy it and me both, which I would (perhaps arbitrarily) prefer not to happen.

But this incompleteness, this state of restlessness, of perpetual striving towards a non-reachable completion, need not be a curse. Indeed, the persistent feeling that there is *more* to be found should not scare us, but be a call. We may never be able to appreciate an eventual conclusion wherein the entire world is made clear and known to us, but we *can* always make more things clear.

Therefore, to value the constant ascent is to say that though our final goal is unachievable, there *is* value to be found in seeking it. I find this more compelling than the conception of monism as an end-state, of which as previously discussed even Della Rocca seems to have little to say.

This appreciation of restless striving is also not exclusive to the practice of philosophy itself (nor could it be, as it demands that we move to erase such boundaries between practices). One such resonance is in discussions of dependence: as described by disability studies scholar Shane Clifton (2018, p. 125), there is no clear boundary between independence and dependence; rather, they are in constant motion, as we constantly vary how much we rely on others. Rather, Clifton proposes that we think of the continuous process of interdependence, as we constantly both give to and receive from others.

Another case where we find appreciation rather than fear of motion is in Julianne N. Chung's (2023, pp. 134, 137, 139) writing on grief, which espouses the value of maintaining the potential found in our relationships with persons who are now deceased, instead of accepting a clear end-state. In fact, Chung (2023, p. 134) calls us to appreciate "the wandering that is constitutive of human life" as we spend continuous effort in not letting our emotions coalesce (be it in absolute sadness or absolute joy), instead embracing continuous creativity in striving between one and the other.

I highlight these examples to show that the inconclusiveness of *The Parmenidean Ascent* as viewed through a

dialectic lens is not a bug, but a feature, and one that we might quite happily live with.

(non-)conclusion

My aim with this essay is not to do away with Della Rocca's monism, nor with relational metaphysics. It is to do neither, and keep both in constant tension. There is insight in erasing distinctions, and so there must be distinctions to erase, and so we must erase them. In so doing, we can embrace, rather than extinguish, the potential of *The Parmenidean Ascent*. We must keep on striving.

And take your foot off of the brake
For Christ's sake!

- Dilaudid (2005), *The Mountain Goats*

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