

Chaos or Relationalism? A Pragmatist “Metaphysical” Foundation for Human-Nature Relationships

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to identify and explore the strengths and weaknesses of a pragmatist metaphysics of chaos and its effect on theories of human-nature relationships. Before endeavoring to do this, I note that pragmatists in general are loathe to subscribe to anything that might be supposed to be a proper metaphysics, hence the quotation marks around “metaphysics” in the title. And while it is not the purpose of this paper to explore that issue at length, I suggest that, by pragmatists making suppositions about the nature of human experience, they are defining a metaphysics. This is so even if it is an abbreviated one. In that sense, I don’t take metaphysics to be any ultimate or privileged truth, but instead a set of baseline assumptions or arguments about the nature of reality upon which pragmatists found their theories.

Specifically, I take pragmatism to root its descriptions of experience in a chaotic universe. In this essay I’ll explore the basis for such a supposition, particularly as it pertains to theories of human-nature relationship. I undertake this because, while pragmatism’s rooting in experience has shown great promise as a basis for various

environmental ethical prescriptions,^{1,2,3} I believe its metaphysics of chaos works against those efforts. This is so first because I believe that such a view of chaos is not empirically evident and second, because notions of a chaotic universe are, in my estimation, grounds for dualist individualism and substantivism that work against accurate descriptions of the relations between humans and nonhuman others. If this is so, then one of the most powerful metaphysical levers humans have to ameliorate environmental problems—that of metaphysically basic relations between humans and nonhumans—is in jeopardy.

Having said this, I am not disputing the suggestion that chaos exists. But it is one thing to treat chaos as existential, and quite another to position it as responsible for the fundamental patterning and/or nature of the universe (and thus is ultimately generative of all the reality we experience). And, if it is the case that the universe is fundamentally relational instead of chaotic, this means that a certain set of universal relational dynamics must be at work. This, in turn, can lend support to the possibility of humans and nonhumans entering into the kinds of close relationships that many environmental ethicists see as essential to the amelioration of environmental problems.

The Chaotic Universe of Pragmatism

That the universe is taken by pragmatists to be chaotic is echoed, in varying measures, by four of the most important pragmatists: John Dewey, William James,

¹Andrew Light and Eric Katz, eds. *Environmental Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²Erin McKenna and Andrew Light, eds. *Animal Pragmatism: Rethinking Human-nonhuman Relationships* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2004).

³Hugh P. McDonald, *John Dewey and Environmental Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

Charles S. Peirce and Richard Rorty. For example, in discussing the nature of the “conjunctive relations” that James takes to be essential to “pure experience”, he says, “Taken as it does appear, our universe is to a large extent chaotic.”⁴ Peirce also holds a chaotic view when he says that

the infinite diversity of the universe, which we call chance, may bring ideas into proximity which are not associated in one general idea...But then the law of continuous spreading will produce a mental association; and this I suppose is an abridged statement of the way the universe has been evolved.⁵

Peirce’s “chance” and James’ “chaos,” then, are the dynamic that governs the interaction of things connected, or that are in relation. In particular, Peirce seems to be suggesting that his “ideas,” as sets of the “living feelings” that constitute the basis of his synechism, have no metaphysical connections beyond that of accident, and come to be understood as connected more meaningfully or purposefully through human mental associations.⁶ In this way, that which conducts things into proximity with each other is random, and only later do connections or relations as humans know them develop.

James reflects this aspect of Peirce’s perspective when he offers his range of types of “conjunctive relations.” He sees them as having “different degrees of intimacy” progressing from the most distant or meaninglessly co-incidental to most closely

⁴William James. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 46.

⁵Charles S. Peirce *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vols. 1-8. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), 6.142 : 105.

⁶Peirce, 6.138 : 103.

entwined.⁷ To “designate types of conjunctive relations arranged in a roughly ascending order of intimacy and inclusiveness” he suggests this list of terms: “With, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through, my.”⁸ As to the least connected, that of the realm of “with,” James says, “Merely to be ‘with’ one another in a universe of discourse is the most external relation that terms can have, and seems to involve nothing whatever as to farther consequences.”⁷

Dewey’s view of the nature of the universe is a bit harder to pin down. In the primary source which I examined, his metaphysical treatise *Experience and Nature*, he makes no clear statement about it. And yet, within it there are at least some indications of his beliefs. For example, when critiquing dualism, he says that “some of the most cherished metaphysical distinctions... [are really just] learned counterparts.”⁹ What he means by this is that while distinctions can be made, treating them as metaphysically separate is incorrect. I agree with him to the extent that these counterparts are complementary and interdependent, forming a dyadic whole that cannot be truly, metaphysically separate. But, by suggesting that these dyads are “learned,” I believe Dewey is intimating that they are *post hoc* conceptual overlays of a reality that carries no such inherently related counterparts. In support of this interpretation of his statement, Dewey says of primary experience that “Things in their immediacy are unknown and unknowable...because knowledge...is a memorandum of conditions of

⁷James, 44.

⁸James, 45.

⁹John Dewey. *Experience and Nature* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1929), 56.

their appearance, concerned...with sequences, coexistences, relations. Immediate things may be pointed to by words, but not described or defined.”¹⁰

I take Dewey’s explanation to mean that “sequences, coexistences and relations” are things that we conceptually associate with primary experience, but since they are “refined” through “reflection,” are not part of primary experience itself.¹¹ Thus, understanding a thing as Thing A vs. as Thing B, or Thing A as related to Thing B, is not a part of primary reality but instead something that happens inside humans after exposure to an inherently connectionless (or if things are connected, the connections are accidental) primary experience. In other words, for Dewey, to see relations is an act of retrospective *understanding*, not one of *perceiving* or *experiencing*. And this seems sensible if one takes relations to be conceptual instead of existential, but this is not *de facto* true. Doesn’t experience tell us that relations between things actually exist? Doesn’t the hawk taking the dove in front of our eyes constitute a relationship in primary experience? James is one pragmatist that holds that relations are actually part of pure experience, but he still echoes the notion of unknowability found in Dewey’s suggestion when he says that

[o]nly new-born babes, or men in semi-coma from sleep, drugs, illnesses, or blows, may be assumed to have an experience pure in the literal sense of a *that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manyness, but in respects that don’t appear; changing

¹⁰Dewey, 86.

¹¹Dewey, 3-4.

throughout, yet so confusedly that its phases interpenetrate and no points, either of distinction or of identity, can be caught.¹²

Rorty, in echoing the experience that Dewey suggests can only be “pointed to... but not described or defined” suggests that what pragmatists are doing is not rejecting the “brute physical resistances” of the external world, but that “there is no way of transferring this nonlinguistic brutality to *facts*, to the truth of sentences.”¹³ He, too, rejects differentiations as anything universally (to humans) existential, and would restrict any consensus on differentiations to agreements between particular group of humans using a particular language at a particular time in history. For him, the dove could be giving itself to the hawk, or, should human socialization support it, the dove and hawk aren’t differentiable as dove and hawk at all, but only as atoms flying in random sequence at or away from each other. The “relations” between hawk and dove, as such, could be anything at all, and as perceivable entities, are totally subordinate to conceptualization by the human in her place and time. As Argyros critiques, though, this means that for Rorty, relations and indeed “all axiomatic systems are arbitrary. Although once in place they have real and at times pervasive effects, all ‘regimes of truth,’ to use Foucault’s formulation, are ballasted by nothing more fundamental than chance.”¹⁴

¹²James, 93.

¹³ Richard Rorty. *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 81.

¹⁴ Alexander J. Argyros. “Chaos vs. Contingency Theory: Epistemological Issues in Orwell’s 1984,” *Mosaic* 26 (1993): 1, 109.

Given these views of the largely accidental or chaotic nature of experience and any existential connections or relations, then, the question that must be answered is whether such a view is justified. In other words, according to James' radical empiricist dictum to "neither admit into [radical empiricism's] constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced," is chaos or lack of metaphysically featured relations actually descriptive of experience?¹⁵

A Case for Metaphysical Relations

James himself offers the perfect statement to contradict the notion of chaos as descriptive of the essential nature of the connections in the universe even though in offering it, he is attempting to lend such a notion support. The statement comes in response to my quote of him above, when he suggests that the universe appears to a large extent to be chaotic. To justify this view he says it is because "[n]o one single type of connection runs through all the experiences that compose it."⁴ And while it may be true that there is no single type of connection that does, it is also true by his own assertion that there are always connections--or relations. As such, they can carry with them metaphysical attributes that move beyond the mere proximity that his "with" and its lack of "farther consequences" seems to suggest. If there are always relations, then reality must be governed at least in part by their basic attributes as they pervade all that follows them or is conjoined by them. At the least there is a dyadic patterning of interchange (two being the most basic relation) in reality and experience and because of

¹⁵James, 42.

this, a root pattern to the dynamics of the great “flux” of experience that pragmatists suggest is instead chaotic.¹⁶

Because of this, object chaos cannot be the fundamental nature of the universe. Instead, connection or relations must be the basic “glue” of reality, in whatever myriad forms they come (from protons orbiting an atom’s nucleus to a marriage between two human beings). Therefore, though experience can certainly look chaotic, I hold that this is based on the complexity of relations infinitely and diversely compounded, not on a lack of any metaphysical patterning beyond chaos.

And, if it is true that there is a relational patterning to the universe, one is left to wonder why this is not thought of as being part of primary experience while the things or substances that are connected by those relations are—even if as Dewey says they can only be “pointed to by words.” I suggest that this is rooted in a substantivist view that positions relations as being inside the primary and precedent individuals that “have” them. This is echoed in Dewey’s and Peirce’s notions of relations forming subsequent to the chance or chaos of primary experience. Dewey speaks to relations as subordinate and subsequent to individual things by critiquing

materialists and idealists [who wrongly] agree in an underlying metaphysics which ignores in behalf of relations and relational systems, those irreducible, infinitely plural, undefinable and indescribable qualities which a thing must have

¹⁶James, 94.

in order to be, and in order to be capable of becoming the subject of relations and a theme of discourse.¹⁷

In this view, Dewey clearly sees relations as the product of irreducible individuals, and as such, is employing individualist and substantivist views. Again, this can be linked to a root notion of lack of relations--of chaos--in his metaphysics since in a chaotic universe relations are random, thus it is individuals which determine them and their form, and not vice versa.

Rorty also holds that relations are concepts that form subsequent to primary experience. For him, human social context is the source of all that is differentiable and differentiated, including any human notion of relations. To reinforce this, Rorty says of “the causal forces of the universe” such as physical texts that humans read that

these forces merely print little replicas on our retinas. From there on up it is up to us to make something out of these replicas by telling a story about their relation to other texts, or the intention of its author, or what makes life worth living...or whatever else seems appropriate in a given [human] situation.¹⁸

Rorty, then for his part, also sees knowable things not as existential, but as flowing directly from the contextual conceptualizations of the human in response to brute physical contact. But, Rorty’s move is a deceptive one because, in a sense,

¹⁷Dewey, 85.

¹⁸ Rorty, 82.

characterizing the nature of the contact with “causal forces” as brute and physical (or even as “causal forces” instead of, say, “intelligent others”) is itself an application of a socialized perspective. And while Rorty might see this point as making his case—that all of it is relative to one’s position in history—I would counter that eventually, if discourse is even to be possible, one has to make a commitment as to what one believes human experience with others to *actually be like*. Rorty does this very thing by defining any encounter as brute and physical. In doing so, he is making a universal statement of truth. In light of this metaphysical commitment of his, then, what first matters is whether one thinks his universal truth statement is, indeed, the best portrayal of the raw experience of encounter humans have with “causal forces” and the others that exert them. I, for one, believe that such a view is dualistically materialist, and reduces both the existentially distinguishable features of the others whom I encounter as well as my ability to accept those perceived features as existential. The second thing that matters is that an encounter with others is what humans are actually having. In other words, Rorty’s position supports the notion that humans are in relations with others and metaphysically so. If that’s the case, then I suggest the next step of work is not to apportion what parts of the encounter are wholly human, but instead to include in metaphysics an undivided, reciprocal relationalism. Further and finally, if one experiences those relations to be more than chaotically directed, brute, physical contact from material stimuli, then the work expands to encompass defining and including whatever existential relational attributes we find within those dynamics.

In addition to Rorty, James also sees *some* kind of relation as part of pure experience. Also like Rorty, James does not overtly accord them any sort of governing

influence, nor does he see them as necessarily having any inherent attributes beyond the pure proximity of his “with.” But, as I stated above, if relations are taken to be metaphysical, then the attributes of such relations are also necessarily metaphysical. Thus, to admit relations of whatever sort into the metaphysics of pragmatism means that relations do in some way govern the activity and interrelation of “things” within their matrix. In other words, chaos or randomness does not dictate the movement of things through the universes, relations and their inherent attributes do. By failing to see encounters as relational events and instead as the mysteriously conducted arrival of atomized “things,” pragmatists often overlook this controlling relational influence.

To add one other bit of support for a relational metaphysics, I offer something as simple as the roots of the word “existence.” In one sense, this word could be understood to be simple, individual being-ness, and yet etymologically, it is a far more relational word. It comes from and *ex-*, “forth” and *sistere*, “cause to stand.”¹⁹ This means that existence is not merely “to be present” but instead is “to stand forth.” Thus, it carries the notion of being in the foreground *in relation to something else*. If existence were to mean standing forth from nothingness, then I’d suggest the etymology would indicate no such foreground/ background dyad, but instead would be much more aligned with something like “to be” or “to be present.” But, even the word “present,” when examined etymologically, originally meant “to be before” in a spatial sense of standing in front of someone or something (e.g., an observer who can see the presence).²⁰ As can be seen, there really is no way to describe the experience of being without locating that

¹⁹Douglas Harper. “existence” listing. *Online Etymology Dictionary*. <http://www.etymonline.com/>. 2008.

²⁰Harper, “present” listing.

being-ness in relation to what is around it. This is ultimately metaphysical, and as such, essential to any description and subsequent understanding of experience.

The Problem of a Chaotic Underpinning for Relations

I believe that some of what pragmatists are attempting to do by describing things in experience as unknowable, indistinguishable, or without sequence, coexistence or relations (and thus arranged chaotically) is to suggest that the only way to differentiate or understand what is differentiable must occur outside the present moment. This is the case since any given moment is filled with experience to which any human reaction or understanding must be subsequent. But, if one employs a relational perspective to look at such moments, one must see that if the human participation in experience is relegated to a *post hoc* reaction, then one is actually not in the present moment at all except as a passive receptacle. If, on the other hand, one were relationally participating in that moment, then coexistences and relations, and the human recognition of and response to them, would be part of that moment as much as any supposedly external events that trigger them.

Alas, in Dewey's and James' description of experience at least, it appears to be outside of them. In their views, experience is akin to a movie being viewed. Rorty also critiques this sort of detachment from experience when discussing epistemology. He notes that it is rooted in a dualism between a notion of self with consciousness as separate from the others about which one is conscious. As such, according to him

“experience” is “a term of philosophical art.”²¹ To such experience, one can only have sub-sequent reactions and contributions. The moment and the human response to it are utterly separate. This, it seems, is a result of the disconnectedness of a chaotic universe that lacks reciprocating relations as a fundamental “glue” of reality. They seem to be suggesting that it’s possible for human subjects to experience things without actually having their presence and participation constitute part of the moment. But, this cannot be true. One cannot observe from a detached (chaotic/individualist) vantage point because wherever that is, it is part of the experience. In other words, reciprocity is present in the primary experience itself. It is a co-respondence in which self is contemporaneously acting and shaping the experience as much as the experience is shaping any “observer.” It’s interesting that Rorty’s position supports this, but because of his subscription to a chaotic universe, the separation he seeks to eschew remains embedded in his theory—especially as it pertains to human-nature relationships. Ultimately, such chaotic notions of relations are individualist. They are also substantivist if the reason that a human being cannot be inside external relations is due to one defining relations as *post hoc* conceptions that exist only inside of the human. That such a non-relational view is underwritten by chaos is also evidenced by the fact that it is chaos that eliminates existential relations from the moment, thus prohibiting them from framing that moment such that any human could recognize or participate relationally in it as it’s occurring.

It’s also why, in reading both Dewey and James, one can come away from their descriptions of primary or pure experience with the distinct sense of the observer being

²¹Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 150.

detached--of a subject-object split that is foundational and thus, irreconcilable. The existential philosopher Martin Buber critiques such a separation in his masterwork, *I and Thou*.²² Buber even goes so far as to trace one possible cause of such an anti-relational split directly to the notion of "experience." Whether he intended his critique of experience to also be a critique of pragmatism is unknown, but at the time that he wrote about it he certainly could have been exposed at least to Peirce's and James' thinking on the subject.

In *I and Thou*, Buber takes issue with the notion of experience by saying, "Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is 'in them' and not between them and the world."²³ For Buber, experience is a way of treating those one encounters not as ones to whom one is related, but as separate objects--as "Its" instead of "Thous." As soon as one is "experiencing" something she has made of herself a subject to the other's object. This can be seen when James suggests that "[t]he relation itself is a part of pure experience; one of its 'terms' [i.e., entities] becomes the subject or bearer of the knowledge, the knower, the other becomes the object known."²⁴ In this description of both subject and object, the orientation is around the knower. The object, defined as that which is known, is defined and known by the knower. What is an object, if not something possessed by the subject? And though James holds that "[t]he instant ... of the present is at all times what I call the 'pure' experience ... [and] is only virtually or potentially either object or subject," the product of perception in his estimation still

²²Martin Buber. *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970).

²³Buber, 56.

²⁴James, 4.

eventually becomes “subject” or “object.”²⁵ This means that the salient quality of either is conceived of inside one of the relational participants instead of in the space between them in existential relation. And while James holds that, depending on situation, one can be subject or object--that “pure experience” is not always positioning “I” as a subject and others as objects in a dualistic or anthropocentric sense--the fact that the basic relation is subject-object is still the world of Buber’s I-It, and as such, is a world of separation or chaotically rooted detachment. Of such an arrangement, Buber says,

The life of a human being does not exist merely in the sphere of goal-directed verbs. It does not consist merely of activities that have something for their object. I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something...All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It. But...[w]hoever says You does not have something for his object...Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.²⁶

In such “experience,” the experiencer is the master at his controls--a theme that Dewey echoes throughout *Experience and Nature* when he talks about the anthropocentric “control,” “use” and “enjoyment” of experience that he seems to see as a natural outgrowth (since he makes no mention of the basis for holding such a belief)

²⁵James, 23.

²⁶Buber, 54-55.

of human interchange with those the human experiences.²⁷ I see this belief as the direct result of a reality conceived as first connectionless or with connections that are only proximal due to their being products of accident or chaos. That is, there is no reciprocity or mutuality in a real dynamic between things in any given moment. Nor are there larger relations of which these are a part. Thus, there is no obligation, nor understanding of the metaphysical unavoidability of conducting oneself according to whatever relational constraints exist.

But, since in a relational metaphysics, one cannot exist outside relations, such individualistic conceptions of reality must become conceptual overlays of an otherwise existentially relational reality. Because such an overlay allows humans to operate as if the relations that exist are the result of accident, the implication is that there are no “good” or “bad” relations with which to concern oneself. This also means that relations don’t require any particular contribution--any maintenance of good ones (e.g., in such relations as ecology and ecological health) or any avoidance of bad ones (e.g., the act of polluting). I contend that such a view of metaphysical connections is simply not an accurate portrayal of relation-saturated experience. By implication, if relational participants are acting and reacting in their relationships as if they don’t exist or don’t have intrinsic dynamics that constrain action, one can imagine that the result would be the relationships and their participants suffering. I believe this to be the exact problem of human behavior toward nonhuman beings today--and the root cause of the environmental crises we face. I’ll address this more in the final section of the essay.

Distinguishability of Experience

²⁷Dewey, 7.

By describing things as unknowable or indistinguishable, some pragmatists also seem to be assuming that there is no correspondence between the inherent qualities of a thing in experience and the process of recognizing, interpreting and coming to understand it. This is Rorty's main contention in disputing a "correspondence theory of truth" when he says that "we so-called 'relativists' claim that many of the things which common sense thinks are found or discovered are really made or invented."²⁸ But, if understanding is to reflect reality--if it is to be other than purely internally-sourced delusion or idealism--we must treat as existential, and at least as approximable (if we are studious observers and categorizers), the traits or attributes of things we experience. Of such a correlation between things and one's experience of them, Peirce says that since "feelings are communicated to the nerves by continuity...there must be something like them in the excitants themselves."²⁹ Perhaps Dewey's purpose in suggesting that things in primary experience are unknowable is to warn us off of treating our categorizations as more real or more important than what is in the experience itself (and which at times is unknowable). If so, he is quite correct in doing this since any attempt at description or understanding necessarily reduces the complexity of that which is experienced. But, if this is Dewey's purpose, I think he is too quick to throw out the "baby" of existential distinguishability with the "bathwater" of *post hoc* reductionism. He is too quick to characterize distinguishability as concept and dismiss it instead of treating it as Peircian feeling--as part of experience directly.

²⁸Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, xvii.

²⁹Peirce, 6.158 : 111.

As Peirce notes, feelings are in the world and could be things that all entities are inherently predisposed to experience.³⁰ To show the difference between such external feelings and internal ones, Peirce says of the experience of seeing the color red that “it is the psychic feeling of red without us which arouses a sympathetic feeling of red in our senses.”³¹ Thus, if feelings are part of external experience, then the world is not an indistinguishable, chaotic flux but instead has features that can be perceived directly, regardless of the imperfection those perceptions may carry from being made by imperfect observers. One such distinction or feeling is of relations in the world.

For example, once when visiting a friend’s farm in Colorado, I occasioned to be out walking in the fields when I approached the fence of a neighboring horse pasture. The iron black stallion at the far end of the field, upon seeing me, turned and began to gallop toward me, pulling up at the fenceline thirty feet in front of me to stare at me and paw the earth furiously. The power of his territoriality--of the territorially relational encounter between me and the horse--were *in* the experience beyond any question in my mind. That we could have a relational encounter, in fact, is the basis of any experience I had with the horse at all. Of course understanding the encounter as “territorial” could be seen as a subsequent conceptual interpretation. But then, it could just as easily be a feeling in the Peircian sense of it being external, which is certainly how I experienced it coming from the horse to me through the matrix of our actual relation. If to counter such a claim one were to suggest that I wouldn’t know a feeling as territorial without some past conceptions applied to the present feeling, I’d suggest that

³⁰Peirce, 6.133 : 101.

³¹Peirce, 1.311 : 155.

there is something innate in horses and humans that understands territoriality directly and by instinct--thus, that recognizes it when it comes across as an external, shared feeling instead of conceptualizing about it internally and then responding to it. That's why my instinctive inclination was to move backward as the horse approached me even before I had a chance to think.

Thus, I claim that through a relational participation in experience, distinctions and experiential attributes are able to be perceived directly. Further, those distinctions being existential, they correspond with the nature of the things distinguished. This opens the door for things in experience to be inherently complementary and purposeful, amongst many other relational attributes. This also means that, ultimately, experience at its roots is not chaotic. Though we may not be able to think about or systematize certain feelings and experiences in the moment, our subsequent undertaking of such processing is in correspondence with the attributes of the innately information-laden experience itself. As such, it is as much a mirror of such experiences as it is an interpretation.

Implications of a Relational Metaphysics

Surely by now and in response to my suggestion that reality is foundationally relational, some readers might be thinking that it's still possible for some of the relations to which I speak to be as James suggests, a pure "with," and thus a product of accident instead of a relational dynamic. As an example of such a thing, one could imagine two stones sitting near each other on a hillside. Aren't those stones in proximity and nothing

more? Perhaps, but in the context of the present discussion, two questions must be answered before such a conclusion can be reached. First, is such a purely proximal relation indicative of the most basic kind of relation? And second, are the two stones really purely proximal to each other?

To answer the first question, I'll undertake a bit more etymological investigation. "Relations," as a term for connections, certainly carries definitional elements of mutuality and reciprocity. In contrast, one might want to offer more seemingly neutral or basic term such as "co-existence" or "conjunction" to describe the stones' connection. But, by pressing beyond the neutrality these alternatives seem to afford, one sees that like "relations," these words too carry an indication of the quality of the meeting of its participants beyond pure proximity. I offer the etymology of the word "conjunction" as an example of this since James uses the term "conjunctive relations" to describe all relations ranging from "with" to "my" in his portrait of pure experience. "Conjunction" comes from *conjugare*, which means to "join together" in the sense of sexual union or marriage. This comes from *com-*, which means "together" and *-jugare*, which means "to join," which itself comes from *jugum*, or "yoke." At its root, then, conjunction means "to be yoked together."³²

From a relational perspective, the two most interesting features of this etymology are a) that the word is indicative of marriage, which is hardly the simple togetherness in space and time that seems to represent basic connections or relations in much pragmatist thinking. And b) this union is founded on the notion of two animals yoked together. Being yoked together, as a pair of oxen might be, means pulling together in

³²Harper, "conjunction" listing.

work toward something. This means having some common goal or purpose toward which the work is directed, or to which the team that is pulling is in service. As one can see, the roots of this word indicate a particular kind of togetherness that is far from featureless or purely proximal.

In fact, just as with conjunction, whenever I sought a relational word that meant most neutral or basic, I found it to be almost impossible to accomplish. Almost all relational words carried some features beyond pure proximity. Given this experience, what emerged for me was the realization that pure proximity was quite likely not *de facto* the most basic connection. Instead, it became in my mind a connection with certain features like any other connection. In the case of pure proximity, though, its feature was its featurelessness. It is only taken to be most basic because the neutrality, detachment or featurelessness which is its main attribute is aligned with a sponsoring metaphysics that modern humans generally accept as the most accurate kind. What kind of metaphysics is that? Why, it's chaos, of course. Thus, pure proximity's features only come to be "neutral" because the detachment that underwrites neutrality is a feature of chaotic metaphysics. They only come to be seen as basic if the assumption of such chaos-rooted neutrality is taken as the most accurate and basic description of reality. Subsequently, the first step toward a relations based on such a metaphysics is that of proximity with James' no "farther consequences." As can be seen, then, the concept of pure proximity is not more basic, it's just more chaotic than other relational concepts. Thus, pure proximity only gets to be the most basic kind of connection if the assumption of a chaotic metaphysics is already conceptually in place. It is not proof of such a metaphysics.

To offer a contrasting view, holistic theory holds that the most basic relations are not featureless, but tend to form wholes, and that this is fundamental in the universe. Of this, Smuts says that “[w]holes are not mere artificial constructions of thought; they point to something real in the universe, and Holism is a real operative factor, a *vera causa*.”³³ Here, then, neutrality is not the fundamental nature of the universe, the tendency of things to form wholes is. Furthermore, such a tendency is the *determiner* of things in the universe. This means that holistic patterning indelibly stamps the form of the relations between all things, and thus forms a basic template to the pattern of the universe. One can imagine that in such a universe, reciprocity, attraction and other features that underpin the formation and maintenance of wholes would have to exist. Within such a holistic metaphysical frame, then, James’ “with” or Rorty’s brute, physical “causal forces” can only be a *post hoc* concept laid over a more basic, metaphysically holistic experience with attraction and other features that are observable and intuitively recognizable in the moment of experience. By extension in this example then, the chaos that underpins pure proximity is also a *post hoc* addition that obscures reality’s more basic holistic metaphysics. Given this possibility, if it can be shown in general that the metaphysics of experience are not chaotic, then not only may pure proximity’s position as a basic relation be in jeopardy, but so too may its standing as an accurate portrayal of existential relations of any kind.

To explore this further, I turn to the second question of whether it’s possible for two stones to simply be together in space and time. It could be argued, I suppose if one were to take a purely materialist view of the stones and freeze them in a moment in time

³³Jan Christiaan Smuts. *Holism and Evolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 86.

that they are purely proximal. But, artificially constraining one's experience thusly fails to account for some elements of their relationship that are, indeed, present. Even taken only at the material level, those stones may be influencing each other through some slight magnetism, for example. And by only dealing with a fixed moment in time, one also fails to see that the two stones were once part of a mountain that formed eons ago, where those two stones used to be one stone, and before that molten rock. It also fails to account for or see how more-than-material elements might play a role. What about the hiker who, having been insensitive to his wife and feeling frustrated with himself, kicked one of the stones into the place it lay now? Or, what about the desert hare who, scrambling to elude a coyote, reached this very point on the hillside and used both stones for footing to make a turn too tight for the coyote to negotiate, allowing the hare to escape? Love, anger, fear, pursuit, freedom: all are more-than-material elements utterly missed by a material, temporally fixed notion of pure proximity. Having expanded the scale of experience for the relationship between these stones in this way, I suggest it is an indication that all things in relation affect each other somehow and respond to each others' effects. Thus, all connections are at least mutual and reciprocal. And this is regardless of one's metaphysics (e.g., holism). In that sense, then, mutual effect and reciprocity become metaphysically basic attributes of a reality that must be relational.

Given all this, it begins to emerge that there is really no way for pure "togetherness in space and time" to exist. Put another way, pure proximity is a fiction. All things in reality have relations with each other that are governed by existential relational attributes that move beyond chaotic contact. And if that's the case, then just

as in the holism example, here pure proximity is a *post hoc* conceptual overlay that distorts a precedent, more basic, and more metaphysically, relationally faceted interchange. Of course what those metaphysically relational attributes are is a separate topic, but I believe that here I've at least laid the groundwork for there to exist mutual effect, reciprocity, and some number of other relational attributes.

Implications for Human-Nature Relationships

If reality is foundationally relational instead of chaotic, where mutual and reciprocal effects are metaphysical, then no matter what corner of experience in which the human finds herself, she is in a network of relations with continual and complex effects and countereffects. Of course in the context of human experience, this is not just restricted to social relationships, but to human-nonhuman ones as well. As I mentioned in the section above, for humans to act in the world from a concept of the universe as chaotic instead of relational is to, at some level, either ignore those relations or treat them as haphazard. If one does so, then, there's no metaphysical or ethical imperative to contribute to their proper functioning if they are good relationships, or to discourage them if they are bad ones. Neither are there larger sets of more complex relations into which they fit. Thus, the nature and purpose of relations is both accidental and/or largely conceptual. The latter being subject to the vagaries of atomistically conceived human values. Within this view, then, humans take themselves to be completely in control of their relations. And yet, life would not--could not--exist if not for the good functioning of relations that extend beyond human concepts of, or desire for, control.

If modern humans persist in acting in their relations in this unilateral, anthropocentric way, it is almost unavoidable that they will impede or destroy the proper functioning of those relationships. Granted, it's a matter of no small debate as to what exactly is meant by proper, but good functioning relations exist. If this is ignored, relations deteriorate. I believe this is exactly what is at work in many of our environmental and ecological crises today. Ultimately, these problems are not "environmental" but instead relational--and begin in the metaphysics that undergird the modern human understanding of her experience.

My mention above of Dewey's notion of human "use," "enjoyment," and "control" of primary experience is an excellent example of human concepts of relations that ultimately impede their existential functioning. The result of such anthropocentric beliefs is that the relational needs and contributions of nonhumans tends to be marginalized or negated entirely. I'll explore how the groundwork for this has been laid in particular in Dewey's philosophy in a moment, but pause here to offer the words of feminist philosopher Val Plumwood who, in contradiction, says that humans must "recognise in the myriad forms of nature other beings [whose] needs, goals and purposes must...be acknowledged."³⁴ Thus, the well-being of all relational participants, and the existential relationships themselves, are what must be promoted in a relational reality if those relations are to carry on being the "glue" that holds life together. Hence, I define "good" relations here as relations that *tend to promote their own integrity along with the well-being and integrity of their "individual" participants, the smaller relations contained within them, and the larger ones of which they are a part. Further, they do this for as long as*

³⁴Val Plumwood. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 137.

their purpose dictates. I add the last stipulative sentence because it's possible that a relation is good only if it is ephemeral or periodic--if its ephemerality fits within the integrity of the larger functioning relations in which it operates. For example, winter as a season (and also as a complex set of relations), is persistent for as long as its purpose is served as part of the larger cycle of seasons (another relation). A winter that persisted year-round would not be considered a good relation, therefore its periodicity underwrites its status as a good relation. To each relation its time and place according to its tendency to promote the well-being of itself, its participants, the smaller relations contained within it, and the larger relations of which it is a part.

Contrast such a relational understanding to that of Dewey's. Dewey speaks to human control, enjoyment, and use of the "ordinary things" of "primary experience" as if it is a given that this is and ought to be the human role in its relation with the rest of the world.²⁷ To take an example of this kind of anthropocentrism, such as overcutting of trees in a forest, in presently imbalanced human-nature relationships it's believed that the "cost" of doing so can simply be passed off into the larger world (to be absorbed or paid for at some future date through "increased productivity" or some other human "use"). But, relationally speaking, this practice is an imbalance connected to and embedded in a set of otherwise balanced relations. Because of this, the imbalance in this particular relation cannot help but then affect the balance of the other relations to which it is connected. In particular, the compensation for overcutting is forced into other relations that must, by necessity, compensate. When too many trees are cut from an area, more sunlight hits the ground, warming snow that might've melted later in the year to provide water for myriad creatures downslope. Ultimately, it causes a relational

cascade such that there really is no way to find the solution to the imbalance outside of reinstating the particular relations where the impact first occurred, and doing so without amplifying and spreading the problem and permanently altering the entirety of the relational matrix. Thus, just as I've suggested that good relations are ones that tend to promote the integrity and well-being of its participants, of the smaller relations it contains and the larger ones of which they are a part, one can see that in the converse, bad relations tend to erode all of these things.

Of course, the counterargument to my supposition that Dewey's anthropocentric worldview is the result of a metaphysics of chaos is that his human control, enjoyment and use of experience are part of nature, and thus it is the nature of nonhumans to be the recipients of these effects from humans in this unbalanced way. Argyros suggests that this is Rorty's view as well when he says that "Rorty's metaphysic maintains that nature is lump-like *hyle* totally at the disposal of active human culture."³⁵ By extension of such a suggestion, nonhumans are incapable of anything beyond this "receptacle" status, and because of this, that no further obligation toward them or the relationship with them exists. In other words, the counterclaim is that such an imbalance constitutes the natural and properly functioning dynamic of human-nature relationships. But, if the scale and depth of the environmental crises we face today are any indication, such a stance is no longer tenable. It can no longer be uncritically offered as the fundamental nature of the workings of the universe.

Thus, for all of Dewey's insight into the nature of experience (which is expansive), at the same time he seems to fail at seeing the relational matrix in which it

³⁵Argyros, 114.

operates, and in which the observer of said experience--the individual human--is inextricably bound and participating. Instead, he seems to prefer to hold the human aloof as manipulator of a “crude, primary, experience” that needs to be “refined” through such supposedly benign processing as “reflective inquiry.”³⁶ As proof that such a stance is anthropocentric, I suggest that one cannot avoid the parallel in tone and dynamic between his expression of these views and those of more infamous abusers of nonhuman nature such as Francis Bacon. Dewey says of primary experience that it is

the method, and the only method, for getting at nature...[where it] penetrates into it, reaching down into its depths, and in such a way that its grasp is capable of expansion; it tunnels in all directions and in so doing brings to the surface things at first hidden as miners pile high on the surface of the earth treasures brought from below.³⁷

For a parallel in Bacon’s approach, I turn to Merchant, who calls out nicely what Bacon sees as the purpose of the human. That is, Bacon suggests that humans are to be “searchers and spies of nature’... to [be the] discover[y of] her plots and secrets.”³⁸ She expands this by noting Bacon’s suggestion that

³⁶Dewey, 4.

³⁷Dewey, 4-5.

³⁸Carolyn Merchant. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 169.

Miners and smiths [should've] become the model for the new class of natural philosophers...[because t]hey had developed the two most important methods of wresting nature's secrets from her, 'the one searching into the bowels of nature, the other shaping nature as on an anvil...[Because] the truth of nature lies hid in certain deep mines and caves' within the earth's bosom.³⁹

And, while Dewey suggests conducting such exploration into nature's "secrets" through "reflective inquiry," thus positioning one to argue that he is espousing a more benign form of Bacon's "search," this strikes me as a tenuous position for two reasons. First, as I already suggested, the dynamics between Dewey and Bacon are identical, even down to Dewey's use of the metaphor of a miner bringing to the surface that which nature holds secret (as if this is within his right in a human-nature relationship). Second, just because Dewey doesn't describe in detail what effects such a process of penetrating inquiry has on nonhumans and on human-nature relationships, his embrace of its effects as positive are unmistakable. I quote him at length as an example:

To distinguish in reflection the physical and to hold it in temporary detachment is to be set upon the road that conducts to tools and technologies, to construction of mechanisms, to the arts that ensue in the wake of the sciences. That these constructions make possible a better regulation of the affairs of primary experience is evident. Engineering and medicine, all the utilities that make for expansion of life, are the answer. There is better administration of old familiar

³⁹Merchant, 171.

things, and there is invention of new objects and satisfactions. Along with this added ability in regulation goes enriched meaning and value in things, clarification, increased depth and continuity a result even more precious than is the added power of control.⁴⁰

What the methods are for such better regulation Dewey does not specify, but methods there will be. And, given a relational reality, these methods are the best and really only indicator of the relationship's reciprocity and dynamics--and thus the quality of the relationship as "good" or "bad" as I've defined this above. Thus, specifying those methods is of the utmost importance for those nonhuman others in the world that stand in the path of such regulatory efforts. Granted, perhaps Dewey's prescriptions would never take on the ominous overtones of Bacon's, the latter of whom suggests that we ought to "bind," make a "slave" out of, and subject to "inquisition" the nature of the world.⁴¹ But, in a relational sense and by putting no overt constraint on the means by which Dewey's penetration is to be accomplished, in his conception the worst is certainly allowable. This is especially true when, in equating "the better regulation of the affairs of primary experience" with wholly human purpose, Dewey utterly depopulates primary experience of any but those that would serve human use and enjoyment. In a relational sense, at least, this ultimately positions Dewey as a direct descendent of Bacon. Because of this, one is left to wonder whether Dewey's anthropocentrism hopelessly debilitates his suggestions for the proper (relational) human response to

⁴⁰Dewey, 10-11.

⁴¹William Leiss. *The Domination of Nature* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1972), 55.

human and nonhuman others as some have suggested his philosophy is capable of doing.^{42,43} As constituted and through a human-nature relationship lens, his vision of experience uncategorically fails to be a good one as I've defined it.

Ultimately, I believe that a relational pragmatism that rejects metaphysical chaos emerges as the best hope for human-nature relationships. This is the case first because a relational metaphysics is better able to bring humans into the primary experiences from which they tend to conceptually detach themselves. In the process, it brings into the light of reflective inquiry how humans are relating to nonhumans in those moments, and thus whether the relations are truly good ones as I've defined them. Second, given that any theories or beliefs in pragmatism must ultimately pass the test of being observable in experience, I believe that I've made the case for there being a metaphysically relational patterning to the universe (including human-nature relationships) that is observable, and that stands in stark contrast to any supposition of a fundamental chaos. A logical next step lay in developing a more robustly defined relational pragmatism and applying it to human-nature relationships, where the dynamics and attributes of its functioning are gleaned directly from experience between humans and nonhumans. Only through this process will modern humans begin to see the metaphysical relational constraints on their lives, and through that, will be better able to understand the best way to interact with human and nonhuman alike.

⁴²Steven Fesmire. Dewey and Animal Ethics. In *Animal Pragmatism: Rethinking Human-nonhuman Relationships*, eds. Erin McKenna and Andrew Light, 43-62. (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 2004).

⁴³McDonald.

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