

## The Relationality of Perspectives

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The most important of the more general options with which philosophy today must deal is the possibly relational character of reality. It is the most important metaphysical or ontological issue for several reasons. First, if we regard nature to be relational throughout then we have posited a fundamental alternative to the more atomistic assumption that has dominated philosophy since its inception. From Aristotle's *ousia* through the substance of the modern rationalists and empiricists to the essentialism of most analytic philosophy it has been taken as a given that ultimately analysis of any topic will reach a bedrock of constituent elements that are not relational. There have been exceptions to this generalization in the history of philosophy, the most important of which are Hegel and the various idealist and materialist versions of Hegelianism that flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to a certain extent Whitehead and process philosophy, and, closer to home, the pragmatism and pragmatic naturalism of 20<sup>th</sup> century American philosophy.

Second, the relational challenge to traditional assumptions is central because if we expressly think relationally rather than atomistically then our understanding of many contemporary issues in philosophy and other fields changes radically. The dispute between objectivism and constructivism can be resolved while retaining important insights from both sides; an all too common reductionism can be avoided, which is to say that it becomes possible to understand ourselves and our world without having to explain things away; a coherent account of the relation between experience and the rest of nature can be offered without falling into a denial of either the material world or of consciousness, and without fracturing nature or experience into irreconcilable pieces; and a new and fruitful understanding can be achieved concerning, for example, the character of nations and their relations with one another. In other words, our approach to much that concerns contemporary philosophy and other fields changes if we approach nature relationally. Hence its importance.<sup>1</sup>

The first sustained effort in Western philosophy to understand things relationally came from Hegel and the idealists who followed him in developing an ontological conception of internal, constitutive relations. However, if one were discomfited by such an absolute idealism, the common alternative was to reject its relationalism in favor of an atomistic realism, a tendency most pronounced in Russell and those who followed him in his early Leibnizian moments. Another alternative was to maintain Hegel's relationalism but house it in materialism, which is to say the approach taken by Marx and the dialectical

materialists. Yet another alternative was to be found in the pragmatists and Columbia naturalists. James argued for the value of a relational empiricism, Dewey for interactionism, and Buchler for ordinality. In the next few pages I would like to consider George Herbert Mead's role in this process.

Mead's most important and durable contribution, and the most well known aspect of his work, was his understanding of the social nature of the self. What I would like to examine here is the attempt he made late in his life to generalize the sociality of the self into a theory of nature and experience. In 1930 Mead was invited to give the Carus Lectures at the APA meeting in Berkeley, California. Unfortunately he died before he could develop the lectures into a more thorough examination of his topic, but they were published, with several supplemental essays, as *The Philosophy of the Present* in 1932.<sup>2</sup> In the lectures and essays that comprise the book Mead deals with several of the issues that were of moment at the time, and with which others such as Bergson, Whitehead, and Dewey were also struggling. Like Whitehead, Mead was interested in working out the philosophical implications of the physics of the time, specifically the theories of relativity and quantum mechanics; like Bergson and again Whitehead, the aspect of the developments in physics that seemed to interest him the most was the revised conception of time, specifically the relational integration of time and space such that material objects were no longer simple entities in Newtonian space but more complex spatio-temporal objects; like Dewey he was concerned to develop a conception of both experience and nature that fully integrated the two without reducing either to the other; and like a number of other philosophers of the period, one thinks for example of Roy Wood Sellars, Mead was convinced that an adequate understanding of nature required a way to account for emergence and novelty in natural processes.

So Mead notices several features of nature that call for an accounting: relativity in space-time, natural emergence, and the sociality at the heart of individual identity and social processes. *The Philosophy of the Present* is an attempt to understand what nature is like such that it is characterized by relativity, emergence and sociality. In the end his answer is that sociality can justifiably be generalized to apply to nature as a whole. We will look in a bit more detail at what this means, but we can point out now that Mead's interpretation of nature as characterized by sociality is akin to Dewey's "situations" and, intriguingly, it is a proto version of Buchler's ordinality. Buchler was aware of Mead's work, of course, but it is interesting that he does not refer specifically to Mead as a source of his ideas. The one reference to Mead in his *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes* is indeed to *The Philosophy of the Present*, but it is a criticism of Mead's inclination to understand reality in temporal terms, specifically in terms of the present.<sup>3</sup> That Buchler refers to Mead in this light is indeed revealing because what makes Mead's sociality a "proto" version of ordinality rather than a more fully blown predecessor is that Mead does in fact develop his conception around the temporal present, while Buchler approaches the relationality of nature in a more generic spirit.

Mead's great insight in his account of the development of the self is to have understood that the self develops in relation with the other, either individualized or generalized. The self and all that goes with it, most importantly consciousness and experience, is therefore relational in its very nature. When Mead looked at the implications of then contemporary physics, as well as biology since Darwin, he realized that a similar relationality is at work. Once space and time come to be understood in the single, complex concept of space-time such that objects, motion, and duration exist only in relation to one another, as well as through related concepts like fields, it is no longer possible to ground our understanding of material nature in the older absolutes of spatial points, temporal moments, and atomized particulars. There are of course points, moments, and particulars, but they are no longer absolute or atomistic. They have become comprehensible only in and through their relations, which may be spatial or temporal or of any number of other sorts. Furthermore, we can only make sense of emergence in nature in a similarly relational way. As the novel arises from what has been, it carries the past into its present in such a way that both the past and the present are a function of one another. The past, Mead argues, is not simply what has been. It is, rather, what has been in relation to a present for which it is past. There is a past only in relation to a present, and a past *as a past* has whatever traits it does only from the perspective of a present. Of course a present emerges from a past and takes it up, so to speak, so a present is also in a constitutive relation with its past. Mead refers to any integral set of such mutually constitutive relations as a "perspective."

The concept of "perspective" is critical for Mead, and for our claim that there is a 'proto-ordinality' here, because it indicates that there are not only relations but also and necessarily systems of relations. He says, to give one illustration from the text in which Mead draws from Whitehead, that

What I wish to pick out of Professor Whitehead's philosophy of nature is this conception of nature as an organization of perspectives, which are there in nature. The conception of the perspective as there in nature is in a sense an unexpected donation by the most abstruse physical science to philosophy. They are not distorted perspectives of some perfect patterns, nor do they lie in consciousnesses as selections among things whose reality is to be found in a noumenal world. They are in their interrelationship the nature that science knows... Thus the world of the physical sciences is swept into the domain of organic environments, and there is no world of independent physical entities out of which the perspectives are merely selections. In the place of such a world appear all of the perspectives in their interrelationship to each other.<sup>4</sup>

This passage and its ideas bear some unpacking. First, notice that Mead is concerned to avoid what might be an easy misunderstanding. We may be inclined to think that perspectives consist of ordered relations among entities that exist independently of the order, as if somehow we, or nature, impose the perspectives on what is essentially a non-perspectival natural world. Such a conception may be understandable, especially after Kant, but it is definitely not what Mead means. He is explicit that he wishes

to replace such a conception, such a “world of independent physical entities,” with “all of the perspectives in their interrelationship to each other.” This is not a skepticism in which we rest in darkness with respect to the character of a noumenal world beyond the perspectives, nor is it a Berkleyan sort of idealism wherein the material world disappears. And it is not mere appearance, only dimly related to a more perfected Platonic reality. This is a full-blown naturalism complete with material objects, people, awareness, consciousness, knowledge, experience, and all the rest, but it is a naturalism in which all of that is perspectival, or as Buchler would put it some 36 years later, ordinal. Mead’s view is that there are objects, people, etc., but only in so far as they obtain in systems of relations, or perspectives.

Mead’s nature is plural in that there is not simply one perspective, but many; there are, to use Arthur E. Murphy’s phrase from his Introduction to *The Philosophy of the Present*, many “orders of relation.” Furthermore, these perspectives or orders of relation intersect with one another such that any given object or entity participates in any number of them simultaneously. Murphy puts the point clearly:

In emergence, as in the theory of relativity there is a plurality of "systems," that is to say of distinct standpoints, and we have the consequence that the "same" object must be in different systems at once. The system of physical relations is one thing, with its own organization of experience; the system of vital relations includes, as essential, elements which, from the merely physical standpoint, are external and contingent. And neither of these can be reduced to the other, since the vital really is emergent and hence additional to the merely physical while the physical is, in its scientific standpoint, determined exclusively by relations in which uniquely organic features of the world have no place. And yet the living animal belongs to both orders of relation and is in both "systems" at once. Consciousness is additional and irreducible to mere organic behavior, yet a sensation is at once an organic event and also implicated in that system of meanings which, in objectifying the possible future activity of the organism, is the distinctively conscious aspect of experience.<sup>5</sup>

In this passage Murphy describes Mead’s understanding of multiple perspectives in the context of the emergence of novelty in nature. There are material perspectives that provide the subject matter of the physical sciences. To understand material perspectives requires no appeal to or reference to “vital,” that is organic, traits. But the organic does emerge from the material, and in so doing generates novelty in nature. As something novel, which is to say something not reducible to material properties and traits, the organic consists of innumerable perspectives of its own. Similarly, consciousness emerges from the organic and again generates novelty in nature such that the traits and characteristics of the conscious, or better conscious beings, are distinct and therefore not reducible to either the organic or the merely material. Yet because they are emergent in nature, the perspectives that constitute the conscious are related to organic and material perspectives. Mead does not do so, but one could go on to mention the perspectives that emerge from consciousness, which is to say the perspectives or orders of relation that emerge in nature through the

activity of conscious beings. To spell this out, however, would require a theory of human products that Mead did not offer, though Buchler did.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to describing Mead's understanding of the perspectives that characterize emergent properties in nature, Murphy also makes the important point that in such a "perspectival" or "ordinal" understanding of nature one must notice that, as he puts it, "the 'same' object must be in different systems at once." A living animal, he says by way of example, "belongs" to both material and organic perspectives simultaneously. And a functioning human being belongs to material, organic, and conscious perspectives simultaneously. Or we might say with Buchler that any complex prevails in multiple orders of relations. Some are material, some are organic, some are conscious, some are social, some are cognitive, and so forth. An object is multiply perspectival, and that is the natural condition, Mead holds, for all the phenomena of nature at any and every stage in the advance into novelty

Mead describes this situation of belonging to or in multiple perspectives as sociality in nature: "Sociality is the capacity for being several things at once."<sup>7</sup> By characterizing natural phenomena and processes this way Mead is reading back into nature the sociality he has all along attributed to the self as it develops in relation to an other. This is not to say that human activity constructs the perspectives of nature. Mead's perspectival naturalism is not idealist in this way. Mead wants to say rather that sociality as we find it in the human condition is a specific case of a condition in which all natural phenomena find themselves. It is perhaps unfortunate that Mead chose to use the term "sociality" to describe this general condition because by so doing he gives the impression that nature is understood through the human. As we will see further on, he does say elsewhere in the book that nature is perspectival and that sociality is the expression in human being of the perspectival character of nature in general. That at least minimizes any inclination to read Mead idealistically. In current parlance, Mead is an avowed objectivist in that he insists that the objects available to scientific study, in fact we can say that any entities that figure in our experience in any way, are not human constructs but found in nature. They are "naturally defined", to use one of Buchler's terms, in and through their perspectival, constitutive relations. Those perspectives and relations may include the human, and they do include the human once something becomes an object of study or enters into the process of experience in any way, but they need not. Perspectives are an aspect of nature, not simply of nature in relation to experience.

Mead is also interested in how in the process of emergence an object is related to its past. This is in fact one of the ways that Mead's approach differs fundamentally from Buchler's, and is presumably the reason Buchler takes him to task for it. For Mead the whole analysis of nature as perspectival rests on his

understanding of how the present emerges from the past, and what that process means for both the present and the past. He is clear about this in the following passage:

I wish to suggest that the social character of the present offers another standpoint from which to regard this situation. I have spoken of the social implications of the emergent present as offered in the occupation by the new object of the old system and the new, sociality as given in immediate relation of the past and present. There is another aspect of sociality, that which is exhibited in the systematic character of the passing present. As we have seen, in the passage from the past into the future the present object is both the old and the new, and this holds for its relations to all other members of the system to which it belongs.<sup>8</sup>

It is not clear why Mead wishes to undertake his analysis strictly in terms of the emerging present. Perhaps his reason is that the emergence of novelty in nature always occurs in the present, as does experience, communication, and indeed all activity and change. In that case, apparently, it makes sense to Mead to undertake an analysis of the present as it emerges and then apply the ontological categories developed to nature overall.

This would be understandable though nonetheless unnecessarily restrictive. First, it is not obvious that one can automatically generalize from the emerging present to the past and future. One can do so in so far as the past and the future stand in constitutive relations to the present, and Mead is at pains to point out that they do so stand. But their relations with the present are not the only relations in which they stand. There are respects in which past events have some degree of integrity regardless of their relation with us. Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon when he did, and it had the range of meanings for Roman tradition and the subsequent demise of the Republic that it did, regardless of its meaning in so far as it occupies a place in our perspectives. In that case one has to be careful about reading analyses of the present back into the past. This is no doubt one of the reasons Buchler objects to Mead's view that the present is the "locus of reality" and its "seat." Another reason to object is that by using present emergence as the sole context of analysis one runs the risk of placing undue emphasis on change as the fundamental condition of nature. This may have been another of the ways in which Mead was influenced by Whitehead, but there is no greater reason to emphasize change as a natural condition than there is to emphasize stability. Dewey makes both important in his metaphysical study, undertaken one might note not long before Mead was writing the *Carus Lectures*, and Buchler gives equal weight to the categories of prevalence and alescence. If everything is perspectival or ordinal, then neither change nor stability is fundamental because all change and stability is so in some respect, context, or perspective.

Nevertheless, Mead was writing a philosophy of the present, and there he placed his emphasis, and what he does with it has its own interest. For example, Mead makes much of the fact that as novelty emerges in the present the past is brought into the present even as the changing entity enters new perspectives. He uses two examples to make the point. The first concerns the solar system:

Before the approach to our sun of the stellar visitor, the portion of the sun which became the earth was determined in its character by its relationships to those portions of the sun's substance which became the other planets. As it is drawn out into its planetary position it retains this character which arises from the former configuration and assumes the new character which is expressed in the perturbations of its orbit through the influences of its neighbors. The point is that a body belonging to a system, and having its nature determined by its relations to members of that system, when it passes into a new systematic order will carry over into its process of readjustment in the new system something of the nature of all members of the old.<sup>9</sup>

The second example appeals to historical emergence:

So in the history of a community, the members carry over from an old order their characters as determined by social relations into the readjustments of social change. The old system is found in each member and in a revolution becomes the structure upon which the new order is established. So Rousseau had to find both sovereign and subject in the citizen, and Kant had to find both the giver of the moral law and subject of the law in the rational being.<sup>10</sup>

Mead is making a larger point than simply that we are influenced by the past, in part because the way things take up the past in their emergence is on this view not a matter of meanings. That is, the influence of the past on novelty is more than a matter of our being affected by the meanings of the past with respect to how we understand the novel as we experience or study it. The influence of the past as Mead describes it is more akin to the way in which a biological individual is influenced by the DNA it receives. The appropriation by emerging novelty of its own past is, to speak metaphorically, genetic; it brings the past with it. This way of describing the condition of sociality, in Mead's more expansive sense, is useful because it helps us to understand better what it means to say that objects or entities or complexes are constituted by their relations. Constitutive relations are, we may say, structural. Whether it is a solar system or new political forms, or anything else, the way an emergent novelty absorbs its past is a good illustration of what it means to be constitutively relational. It is, however, only one illustration in the sense that we would be mistaken to generalize it too far. Structural relations are one possible sort, and while all relations are constitutive, or in Mead's terms sociality pervades nature, not all relations are structural. A plant's relation to its atmosphere, for example, may be a structural relation in so far as there are chemical interactions, but the relations may be of other kinds as well. A tree may be part of a stand of trees in a park that affords a pleasant aesthetic experience for users of the park, and though such a relation is constitutive it is not structural the way Mead's examples are.

Another useful consequence of Mead's conception of perspectives or sociality in nature is that it helps to caution us against an inclination to think that by analyzing an object into its constituents we get a clearer understanding of it, even when we understand those constituents to be relational. The problem with such a literal analysis is that as we break an object of any kind into its constituents the object changes. As Mead puts it,

But it is evident that this analysis takes place within a world of things not thus analysed; for the objects about us are unitary objects, not simple sums of the parts into which analysis would resolve them. And they are what they are in relation to organisms whose environment they constitute. When we reduce a thing to parts we have destroyed the thing that was there. It is no longer a table or a tree or an animal. And even if by some process these parts should coalesce and become the things that they were, it still remains the case that they would not be things they were in this environment of this organism, if they ceased to be parts of this environment. We refer to these differences as the meanings these things have in their relationship to the organisms. Still, these meanings belong to the things, and are as objective as are those characters of the things that belong to them in the environments of other organisms.<sup>11</sup>

The relations of parts to one another and the broader relation of meanings of the object in its environment broadly conceived are all constitutive of the object and, as Mead points out, they are as objectively present and as relevant as any other dimension of the object. This is a critical methodological caution whether we are doing philosophy, natural science, social science, or art.

There are in fact more than a few useful dimensions or implications of Mead's understanding of nature as perspectival or social. He points out, for example,

that here is no nature that can be closed to mind. The social perspective exists in the experience of the individual in so far as it is intelligible, and it is its intelligibility that is the condition of the individual entering into the perspectives of others, especially of the group. In the field of any social science the objective data are those experiences of the individuals in which they take the attitude of the community, i.e., in which they enter into the perspectives of the other members of the community.<sup>12</sup>

When nature is understood perspectivally, all natural phenomena are in principle available to experience, cognitive and otherwise. In practice such experience may be exceptionally difficult in many cases, but there is nothing in nature that is by its nature unavailable to us. The sets or orders of relations that constitute anything also provide us access. Of course this is only true because the experiencing human being is as much a perspectival entity as everything else.

Mead also makes the point that the emergence of novelty in nature assumes that possibility is a fully genuine feature of nature. He further points out that it is precisely the perspectival character of nature, that is



the objective existence of perspectives in nature that enables possibility:

Thus the social and psychological process is but an instance of what takes place in nature, if nature is an evolution, i.e., if it proceeds by reconstruction in the presence of conflicts, and if, therefore, possibilities of different reconstructions are present, reconstructing its pasts as well as its futures. It is the relativity of time, that is, an indefinite number of possible orders of events, that introduces possibility in nature. When there was but one recognized order of nature, possibility had no other place than in the mental constructions of the future or the incompletely known past.<sup>13</sup>

Neither James nor the rest of us need to worry about the “block universe” in which nothing can happen because the relationality of nature makes it otherwise. In this respect Mead again anticipates Buchler, who posited both possibility and actuality as basic ontological categories.

We began by saying that relationality is perhaps the most important philosophical possibility for us at the present time, and that is the case because of the extensive implications that a relational view of nature has. If that is right, then any explicit and sustained efforts to develop a relational conception of nature are valuable for us. In Mead, specifically in the lectures and essays published in 1932 in *The Philosophy of the Present*, we have what may be the most thorough and careful attempt to develop a relational understanding of nature on naturalist terms before Buchler. I offer the qualification “on naturalist terms” because Whitehead was attempting something similar, as Mead was well aware, but in the end Whitehead’s eternal objects render his conception a stunted naturalism, if indeed it is a naturalism at all. Dewey was looking to do something similar in *Experience and Nature*, and in some ways he was more successful than Mead if only because he was more thorough. Had Mead lived long enough to develop the original Carus Lectures we can only speculate as to what he may have accomplished. Even in the undeveloped lecture form, though, Mead gives us a conception of a relational nature, its exemplification in relativity and quantum physics as well as in sociological theory, and a careful exploration of the rationale for and implications of relationality in nature. In the 1960s Buchler articulated a more thoroughly wrought conception, but with the exceptions noted above, Buchler was able to build on the insights that were already in Mead. Whether he did so consciously we do not know, though it is hard to imagine that at the very least Mead’s understanding of nature had not seeped into his own.

## NOTES

1. These points are developed in detail in a number of places. See for example John Ryder, “The Value of Pragmatic Naturalism,” in John Shook and Paul Kurtz eds., *The Future of Naturalism*, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009, pp 97-113; John Ryder, “American Philosophy and Foreign Policy,” in *Self and Society*, eds. Alexander Kremer and John Ryder, (Central European Pragmatist Forum, Volume 4) Value Inquiry Book Series, Rodopi Press, 2009, pp 139-157; and Lyubov Bugaeva and John Ryder,

- “Constitutive Relations: A Philosophical Anthropology,” with Lyubov Bugaeva, *Human Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 2, December 2005, pp 132-148.
2. George Herbert Mead. *The Philosophy of the Present*. LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court (1932). This edition includes the text of the Carus Lectures as well as five supplemental essays.
  3. Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1966. See page 4. Buchler’s ordinal ontology is basically the view that anything that exists, of whatever kind, is a relational complex that is “located” in any number of orders of relations, hence the terms “ordinal” and “ordinality.” The details of an ordinal ontology are developed in this book.
  4. George Herbert Mead, “The Objective Reality of Perspectives,” in *The Philosophy of the Present*, pp 161-175. See page 163.
  5. Arthur E. Murphy, “Introduction,” *The Philosophy of the Present*, p. xxx.
  6. See for example Justus Buchler, *Toward a General Theory of Human Judgment*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1951, and *Nature and Judgment*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1955.
  7. *The Philosophy of the Present*, p. 49.
  8. *ibid.*, p. 51.
  9. *ibid.*, pp 51-52.
  10. *ibid.*, p. 52.
  11. George Herbert Mead, “Empirical Realism,” in *The Philosophy of the Present*, pp 93-118. See pp 116-117.
  12. “The Objective Reality of Perspectives,” *op. cit.*, p. 166.
  13. *ibid.*, pp 173-174.