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Recontextualizing Reflective Consciousness: A Meadian Approach to Relational Care

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Abstract

This paper offers an interpretation of George Herbert Mead's thinking on the nature of self-awareness and explores the intersection of his ideas about this "consciousness" and its relationship to the argued embodied impulse to care. The still ubiquitous tradition of conceptualizing ethical behavior from the context of rational and teleological frameworks is critiqued and contrasted with a more frankly metaphysical postulate of relationality. It is argued that Mead's treatment of self-awareness as an emergent of the "act" and his founding of action in relationship is reason to consider care as manifesting simultaneously with all other phenomena understood or perceived by reflective human consciousness. The implications of this argument for social psychology, child raising, education, social justice, and social practice and organization are considerable. What is suggested is a strengthened warrant for recognizing the natural, emergent, and ubiquitous nature of care and caring behavior in social practice.

Keywords: GH Mead, Care, Social Theory, Embodiment, Complexity, Consciousness, Social Psychology

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Nature and culture, facts and norms, body and mind, and a host of other binary characterizations of phenomena confuse efforts to develop a coherent and sensible approach for understanding and practicing relationality, reciprocity, and human caring. We have the apparent choice of approaching the general topic of care or concern for the “other” from the perspective of either intersubjectivity or objectivity. Attempts to craft an argument that includes both perspectives are likewise subject to claims of incoherence or illogicality (Crotty, 1998, pp. 8-17). This paper is an effort to mitigate this difficulty through an analysis of the work of George Herbert Mead as it applies to the origins of relationality and the consequent expression of reciprocity and care in both biological and social phenomena. A more satisfying explanation of the nature and role of relationality, reciprocity, and care may offer to education, parenting, social work, public safety, and their attendant policy arms the hope for a coherent discourse that maps ontogenetic development phenomena to social practices and the seemingly “ordinary” waking consciousness of daily life and common sense. This kind of “mapping” or sense-making may translate to specific practices for making child raising, early childhood education and community development more humane, sensible, and sustainable.

Mind & Nature

However, before one can speak about definitions or attributes related to the general idea of “relationality” one has to establish scientific legitimacy related to primary assumptions and first principles of the discourse in general. This is problematic in that conversation about relationality and its cognates in care, ethics, values, morals, and normative characterizations of behavior has generally been relegated to a secondary status by the conceits and judgments

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of scientific naturalism (De Caro & Macarthur, 2004, pp. 1-17). From this general perspective science and a philosophy “continuous with science” (p. 3) become the benchmarks for what ideas, theories, and concepts are legitimate. Because normal science has become the gold standard against which scientific claims can be made the ambiguous and often paradoxical discourses of social science and the humanities are suspect. Rather than hold the natural sciences superior to the social sciences we can note that in general scientific naturalism attempts to create predictive theories grounded in closed systems and the social sciences work with explanatory theories arising from open systems (Bhaskar, 1978, pp. 18-19). What follows here is an effort at explanation based on the open nature of social psychological phenomena and the emergence of the novel through the agency of relationship. Where this paper will provoke the hegemony of the natural sciences is in noting that it (science) and its objects are themselves subsumed by the process of knowing that defines reflective consciousness itself.

This paper will argue from the perspective of a pluralistic naturalism (Dupre, 2004) which embraces both scientific naturalism with its rigorous and reductive techniques as well as the more problematic methods of the social sciences and humanities that include subjectivity, language, and consciousness in its purview. I will suggest a perspectival naturalism based on the work of George Herbert Mead that grounds our understanding and speculations about the nature of nature and attempts (along with scientific naturalism) to reason and work from a hypothetical perspective outside the domain of ordinary reflective consciousness (to be more fully articulated below).

Knowing from this perspective is ostensive, metaphorical, and fundamentally discursive. Following Ricoeur (1976) and utilizing his framework on discourse it follows that interpretation is implicated in both the explanations of scientific naturalism and the

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understandings of the subjective, phenomenological, and constructionist traditions. I will argue, as Mead argued, that the self with its attendant self-awareness is a construction resulting from social processes (which are natural processes) and that underlying this social process is a primary relational process/field. And further, that this primary process is the origin of multiple perspectives of which reflective human consciousness is one; and from which science has identified the objective process (space, time, object) that drives scientific naturalism and the open ended pursuit of human inquiry in general. My thesis turns on this assertion.

The paper will first discuss the necessary but problematic use of the term consciousness followed by a section outlining Mead's conclusions about the consequences of a relational ontology. Relationality in general will then be taken up with a concluding section on care as its primary manifestation in human and social relationships and some practical suggestions for both conceiving of and enacting the social differently.

Human Consciousness

Reflective human consciousness (RHC) as conceived here follows Mead (1934; 1932/2002; 1938; 1981) in suggesting that the self is the ongoing result of social organization. Further, that language as originating in the significant symbol both carries and creates the phenomena of self reflective thought that is basis for interpretation, understanding, and explanation that I characterize here as RHC. Mead observed that the self necessarily is composed such that subject/object distinctions could be made and acted on both individually and collectively. Symbolic interactionism has followed as a more or less explanatory strategy for working with both semantic and material artifacts or objects at both individual and collective levels but is somewhat contested by Lewis (1981) and others thinking that it (symbolic interactionism) is not sufficiently scientific.

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The interactionist tradition holds that culture, history, ideas, beliefs, and the material world itself are all only known within the confines of complex symbolic networks sustained and validated by RHC.

RHC is understood here as the base state of waking reflective consciousness (consciousness of consciousness; or consciousness of awareness; or an awareness of consciousness) that supplies the background and reference point for the location of the self in a subject/object world. I do not use the term to characterize or locate the multitude of other reported conscious and/or cognitive experiences or neurological events that inform the whole of consciousness studies and cognitive science (see for example, Zeman, 2001). As will be discussed below states of awareness and other interpretations of sentient, purposeful, or mental behavior are contrasted with the particular state of consciousness that we experience as singular selves in an objective world.

What is suggested in contrasting ubiquitous states of sentient biological awareness with human consciousness is that the distinction between “mind” and “matter” can be understood as existing on a continuum that links sentience to reflective consciousness. It is here that Mead (1932/2002) (following Whitehead, (1978)) connected the physical theory familiar to scientific naturalism with his social theory and attendant thoughts on reflective consciousness. He achieved this primarily through his analysis of relativity theory (Mead, 1932/2002, pp. 35-56) and its consequences for the experience and theory of subjective and objective time. This putative division between matter and mind is, of course, familiar as the basic characterization of dualism. I think it important at the outset to admit that my thinking and theorizing is distinctly “metaphysical” in that there is an inferred and even phenomenologically empirical non-dual origin for reflective consciousness and indeed for all

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matter and energy as currently understood. See Barad (2007), for example, for a cogent discussion of how modern physics and narrative are joined.

While this paper does not subscribe to this simplistic dualism as ontologically primary or absolute it does hold that RHC is inevitably and epistemologically dual in that we are unavoidably objects to our own subjectivity (and vice versa). Mead (1932/2002) notes that,

...the field of mind is the temporal extension of the environment of the organism, and that an idea resides in the organism because the organism is using *that in itself* (italics mine) which moves beyond its present to take the place of that toward which its own activity is tending. That in the organism which provides the occasion for mind is the activity which reaches beyond the present within which the organism exists. (p. 55)

The “that in itself” that Mead speaks of is, under my interpretation, reflective consciousness or RHC. This capacity (RHC) in its creation of the perceptual object distinguishes subject (self) from object (other) and space from time (Mead, 1932/2002, p. 126). Consequently, discourse makes distinctions between mind and matter that we assume are ontologically primary or prior to thought or observation. One of the casualties of this tendency (at least in the West) has been either the marginalization of ethics and moral reasoning in the domain of scientific thought or its appropriation (Kelly, 2004, pp. 262-263). Consequently, ethical considerations have, in general, remained primarily lodged within either rationalism or spiritualism and so understood as having no fundamental place in reality as interpreted within the current paradigm of scientific naturalism. This paper’s intent is to partially reconcile that state and show that care (or the relational underpinnings of Mead’s act) is an inevitable constituent of biological and human activity. Fundamental to Mead’s articulation of reflective consciousness is the more comprehensive notion of the perspective. Martin (2005) quoting Mead makes the broad claim that

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Reality is a field of perspectives “characterized by the relation of an organic individual to his environment or world. The world, things and the individual are what they are because of this relation” (Mead, 1938, p. 215). “The perspective is the world in its relationship to the individual and the individual in his relationship to the world” (Mead, 1938, p. 115). (p. 234).

Under this reading we see first that perspective goes beyond the particular case of human sentience and consciousness and that it encompasses a relationship between any organism and its environment. However, as will be discussed below this is not a relationship forged from the juxtaposition of the pre-existing phenomena of separate entities but a relationship that itself creates the distinction(s) that reflective consciousness later apprehends. Non-reflective conscious perspectives likely perceive the world whole with themselves as non-problematic locations navigating space-time as events. Reflective consciousness however makes a distinction of this wholeness and creates a practice via language we have come to call the social self. This self, of course, is both subject and object.

Relationship’s Consequences

A primary argument of this paper is that reflective human consciousness is a perspective of perspectives that inevitably creates categories and structures resulting in an alienation of the social self from the animal body and the larger environment of our direct experience. Further, that we hold this “social self” as higher and more refined and advanced form of being than that of our more primitive and unschooled children, animals, and other biological and ecological forms.

Ethical and normative characterizations of behavior can be viewed as coming from “outside” or from “above” the person or group for at least two fundamental reasons. First parenting and socialization are seen as grounded in externally derived religious prescriptions (Miller, 1984;

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2009). Second, psychological interpretations of cognition and consciousness are understood as derived from representational models that makes an absolute distinction between a psychological and mental reality inside the body and a world of distinct and discrete objects outside the body (Altman & Rogoff, 1987; Reed, 1998). Both of these modes of thought result in an interpretation that holds direct experience of the world as problematic. One of the results of this belief is that what we actually do experience directly and in a relatively unmediated form is suspect. Emotional, impulsive, or instinctive behavior or action is interpreted a lower order type of experience in need of refinement and mediation by either God, society, evolution, or the mature and controlled self. Experience, sensation, emotion, and behavior are concepts representing properties or phenomena assumed to move from the bad to the good, the crude to the refined, the simple to the complex, and the meaningless to the meaningful.

This story is familiar in both religious and secular terms. From a western religious perspective, for example, humans are in need of redemption from sin – that is, we anticipate a movement from a bad existence to a good one. From an evolutionary perspective we are the results of a slow ascent moving from the primitive to the sophisticated or complex. This general story is fertile ground for the utilization of teleological or deterministic frameworks rooted in historically hegemonic, patriarchal, and/or elitist narratives to characterize and direct individual and collective behavior. These frameworks generally privilege the future, the prediction of the future, and/or the deference of the past over the present. They all signal a purpose or intention coming from outside of immediate experience to give meaning or justification to that experience. Lest we assume some nefarious plot in all this we can, following Lakoff (1987) infer the natural development of these linguistic categories in the evolutionary process of language development itself as reflective consciousness emerged from its embeddedness in space-time.

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However, as applied to social worlds and the phenomenology of the body I argue that these initial framing assumptions are inadequate – that our characterization of the cosmos through the lens created and continually being re-created by RHC are interpretations in need of substantial reform (see Shotter, 2011; 2009). One of Mead’s (1932/2002) primary contributions is his use of the concept of the “specious present” as a way to characterize the perspective of an immediate and local past/present/future within which the activities of individuals are both meaningful and embodied. One of his central points was that this “specious present” was the locus of RHC and the context for the bifurcation of subject from object and time from space. His analysis of the “act” (as will be developed below) assumes a teleology inherent in human activity but it is considerably “shortened” from that of the rational and theoretical perspectives forwarded by classical and modernist thought given that it operates within the local horizon and biological movements of each interlocutor. Absolute characterizations of purpose, meaning, or activity are thus relativised, rejoined to the direct experience of activity, and opened up for empirical review.

From Mead’s perspective experience is local, immediate, emergent, and continually generative of the reflective consciousness that keeps us coherent as selves, citizens, and apparently objective organisms (Mead, 1932/2002. pp. 35-59). The social world of language, meaning, and objects on the other hand appear to us as external and prior to our immediate experience giving us the sense of being “in” the world of fixed and enduring structures and forms. It is in this latter symbolic world that we have created the teleological and external principles that we hold as proper, moral, or good. Mead’s point is that this apparent external world is in fact a co-arising phenomenon with the self as produced by RHC and supported by the collective, symbolic, and social nature of RHC. In this sense the social world is “behind us”. What I am experiencing now is new and involves a reconstruction of the world as it was in its totality as interpreted from my perspective (which is always fundamentally social). In

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mistaking this always reconstructed world of the “past” for the enduring world of a lived present we have created an illusory world to which we are teleologically connected. As Mead (1932/2002) observes when speaking of the later phase of the emergence of reflective consciousness,

The selection and organization of these responses [to the experience of distance experience or perception of a timeless space], together with the characters of the objects which they [the responses] have selected, now become objects within the environment of the organism. The animal [the person] comes to respond to an environment consisting largely of possible futures of its own delayed reactions, and this inevitably emphasizes its own past responses in the form of acquired habits. These pass into the environment as the conditions of his acts. These characters of the environment constitute the stuff out of which values and meanings later arise, when these characters can be isolated through gestures in communication. (p. 104)

We have created a virtual world of truth where our explanations of the whole or the real are subsets within the virtual nature of RHC which itself is a partial manifestation of the act. Reflective human consciousness tells an incomplete and partial story of “reality”.

Relational Methodology

The ideas about relational behavior explored here are developed in the context of a relational or process metaphysics (Emirbayer, 1997; Rescher, 1996) and a pragmatic account that suggests the ultimate arbiter of meaning is the social self. This is a problematic formulation in that the social self is understood in the Meadian sense as the human person consisting of both our organism/body self and our social/mind self as mutually enacted. The tension between the subjectivist position and the constructionist position parallels the tension between the objectivist and constructionist positions as articulated by Crotty (1998, pp. 42-65). At either

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pole of this continuum the self subsumes the world or the world subsumes the self. The Meadian position is, like the constructionist perspective, a middle way. Unlike the constructionist position Mead's pragmatic perspective attempts to systematically relate the insights and discoveries of empirical and positivist science with the complexities of discourse, language, and consciousness. The modified constructionism considered here is also supported by what Heft (2001, pp. 69-71) understood as a "neutral monism" suggesting a deep commitment to the totality of experience/existence (monism) out of which dualism necessarily springs but making no claims as to the absolute nature of that originating unity. The radical approach of some constructionist accounts which denies any concept of the "real" is not followed here. The world is stable enough (real enough) to treat its products as essential components to human life. On the other hand language (and RHC) does situate us in an apparently hermetically sealed world of our own making in which we know only what our own consciousness offers. It is exactly in negotiating this "space" between the hermetically sealed world of RHC and the putative world of "stuff" that this paper is concerned.

Mead's theoretical perspective is characterized by Chang (2004) as conditionally interactionist—and takes into account the conditioning effects of history on interaction and activity in the present to create a "world" in terms of RHC that serves as the matrix for culture and institutions (pp. 406-408). Mead's position reflects an emergent dialectical relationship that sees matter and meaning as mutually constitutive and recognizes the basic and continuous role that the organism's contact with the world of matter plays in the foundation of RHC and the meanings that animate it. Mead suggested that what appears as dual is actually a process that is fundamentally non-dual in its operation.

It seems clear (for example) that spiritual interpretations of phenomena, relativity theory, and quantum theory all legitimately point to the likelihood of the non-dual but it is also the case

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that the “thoughts” and the tools that manifest these insights are themselves irrevocably lodged within the confines of RHC. Under this interpretation we continually create a virtual world that strives for a more and more exact correspondence or congruence with either the absolute “real” world of objectivism or the absolute “spirit” world of subjectivism and idealism.

This interpretation has led to a de-emphasis of the personal and the local. What we have neglected from both a scientific/psychological and an ethical perspective is the world of direct immediate experience and relationships (Buber, 1970; Noddings, 1984/2003; Reed, 1996a, Sander-Staudt, 2006) in which relating and caring with and for others is of primary ethical concern. This abandonment of experience has primary roots in philosophy and psychology (Reed, 1998) and continues to assert itself in narrow interpretations of scientific naturalism as offered by many in cognitive science, neurobiology, and evolutionary biology.

What is suggested here is that an ethical model based on the dualisms inherent in RHC is inadequate and that we should look elsewhere for the origins of how we regulate ourselves as individuals and as a society. Mead, for example, observed that:

If one finds reality in immediate experience and admits that the various intellectual, aesthetic, and perceptual processes exist only as parts and functions of an act which is the ultimate form of immediate experience, the recognition of the ethical statement of this act as its fullest statement would found metaphysics upon ethics. (Mead, 1981. p. 85)

Mead’s conception of the “act” (1938, pp. 3-25) consists of impulse, attitude/perception, manipulation, and consummation. These phenomena are phases of a unitary process of “being”, or as Mead says above “the ultimate form of immediate experience” that carries the organism forward in its activity as a living entity. Mead’s act is foundational in explaining the

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emergent phenomenon of RHC but also rests on a larger metaphysical principle that is at its base ethical. Which is to say that the movement and manifestation the “act” implies is a constitutive element of all physical and psychological phenomena. His interpretation is a consequence of the idea that relationality is at the heart of both RHC and the larger phenomena of sociality that subsumes it. From Mead’s perspective “sociality” is the general phenomena of emergence from the perspective of its “happening” or the phenomenology of the present emergence. It is, as Mead says: “...betwixt and between the old system and the new..” (Mead, 1938, p. 73). It is “social” in the sense that it involves parts and wholes and relationships. In order to bridge Mead’s work to relationality and its specific ties to care, it is necessary first to investigate the relationship of experience to my interpretation of reflective human consciousness.

What it’s like to be a Self

The nature of experience is a fundamental question across many academic disciplines. A central problem in the descriptions and explanations of experience is its relationship to the concept of reflective consciousness as discussed here. Mead (1938) recognized that RHC is only part of what informs the nature of experience - “Mind and consciousness are not coterminous. Dewey recognizes this in stating that mind is a structure of relationships within the world and that consciousness operates within this relationship” (p. 658). Mind as a “structure of relationships” is another way of talking about Mead’s act and recognizing its universal nature in the biological world. However, the link between “mind” and how we define awareness of experience is not clear. What is it to “have” an experience? On this issue I point to Reed (1996b), quoting Darwin, and his work with earthworms demonstrating that worms “do “exhibit some degree of intelligence instead of a mere blind instinctive impulse, in their manner of plugging up the mouths of their burrow”” (p. 23). Which is to say that earthworms are aware of the world (pp. 24-26). This awareness is happening in an organism

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that has “neither separate sensory organs (although one might well count their entire epidermis as a sensory organ) nor brain (only a cerebral ganglion)” (p. 21). This implies that awareness is an apparently ubiquitous process for organisms and necessarily implies experience. As Bolton (1981) noted, “it seems clear that Mead, in common with Dewey and other Pragmatists, accepted a form of consciousness or immediate awareness of stimulus-events occurring in the organism prior to and less complex than the consciousness Mead associates with minding activities” (p. 252). Unlike Bolton, however, I interpret this primary awareness, or mind, not as a less complex type of “consciousness” but as the always operating matrix (viz., Rescher, 1996) out of which consciousness has developed. The point to grasp is that this primary awareness is a direct experience of the “mind” that undergirds reflective consciousness (also see Bateson, 1979 for an extended argument related to this thesis). And, as will be developed below this primary awareness is the source of relationality and care.

Prior to the development of the self or RHC the organism (infant) presumably “experiences” or is “aware” of the world as a unified field of sensation. Gradually this experience begins to articulate itself into more and more coherent partitioned actions eventually resulting in language and “self”. Within this process there develops increasing perceptual abilities to pick out or select relevant aspects of the environment to create what we from the perspective of RHC understand as “objects” (Mead, 1938, pp. 135-151). Beginning with initial contact experience emerging from the unified flow of impulse, sensation, perception, and slowly developing into the “distance experience” of RHC the infant begins to perceive and interact with “objects” in the “world”. Distance experience is a central concept for Mead (1938) and reflects the “expanded manipulatory area” (pp. 16-23) that is progressively revealed with the development of RHC. This “expanded” area is in my view the domain of symbolic interactionism as conceived by Blumer (1969). Distance experience implies spatial

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perspectives, objects, and stable wholes – all, from Mead’s view, developing out of “contact experience” and the ongoingness of the act. However, these are not absolute or universal objects but rather co-arise with the percept of the person. As Lewis (1981), following Mead, observed, “The physical object is a percept, and a percept is a set of anticipated contact experiences linked by imagery to distance experiences” (p. 131). Mead distinguishes between un-reflected upon or pre-RHC experience and experience mediated by RHC by drawing this distinction between “contact” experience and “distance” experience. Contact experience is the characterization of both our first experiences as motile organisms and remains as a basis for all further experience as eventually mediated by RHC (Mead, 1938, pp. 14-15).

Contact Experience

The central point here is that after the development of a “self” *all* of our characterizations of “contact experience” and its “objects” come through the filter of RHC with its ontological assumptions built on distance experience. As mentioned above this point is often naively overlooked in our descriptions and characterizations of reality. We assume that the world is as we sense it and think about it and we sense and think about the world according to our cultural and normative scripts. The chief normative script, it is argued here, is scientific naturalism. Other modes of being or knowing simply aren’t generally seen as credible.

It is typically assumed that the experience of being in the world is a consequence of the apparent wholeness and “reality” of a timeless space (distance experience as developed by RHC). Our experience is understood as a consequence of material processes in this originary object filled landscape and our felt activities of contact experience are interpreted as secondary or derivative. That is, the “things” of the world are the causes of our feeling or perceiving them. From Mead’s perspective we have this backwards. We first are connected or in direct contact with our environment and the sensation and feeling are primary (Mead,

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1938, pp. 215-219). These sensations and perceptions then entail the eventual creation of objects as we use our encounter them. Lewis (1981) observed that “the animal forms into perceptual objects only those sensory inputs which constitute perceptual objects having associated contact experiences vital to the biological needs of the organism” (p. 131).

Rosenthal and Bourgeois (1991) observe that “The perception of organism and object as distinct emerges from a unified field of active resistance which undercuts the subject-object distinction” (p. 18). Reed (1996a) writes from the perspective of ecological psychology that “Perceptual experience is determined by information but not caused by it. What the information specifies is what one perceives” (p. 104). The interface between RHC and the animal body then is conceived of as perception and “perceptual beliefs” (Dreyfus, 2001, p. xx) without conceptual content.

The above analysis is meant to frame the “otherness” of our embodied lived experience in relation to RHC and to highlight its nondual origins. This lived experience of contact between organism and environment occurs in the domain of space-time and is non-dual in this sense. Space-time is interpreted here as the 4 dimensional “Minkowski space-time” (Mead, 1932/2002, p. 36) out of which RHC has emerged through the separation of space from time and the consequent creation of the timeless space of distance experience and the spaceless time of experienced duration (for a more detailed discussion of this see (S. Rosen 2004)). Mead’s discussion of space and time in relation to RHC is also reinforced by Gebser’s (1985) analysis of the evolution of perception from its primordial origins to the present day.

Even so, reflective consciousness as evolved from a more universal embodied state acts (much as all sentient animal activity does) to further the ends or goals of the organism.

Identity, memory, a sense of self, and reflection on feelings, emotions, and behaviors are developed and enacted within the confines of RHC and as such can be seen as existing within

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the parameters of language. However, the familiar functions of RHC are not the developmental result of more “primitive” or “base” elements generally ascribed to contact, or primary experience but rather ongoing adaptations continually fueled by the abiding properties of contact experience embedding the organism in a non-dual “reality” of space-time. Lingis (1998) characterizes our experience as one of sensuality that “is a movement of involution in a medium” (p. 15) where the “sensibility of the organism is inseparable from its motility” (p. 30). The so called “primitives” of traditional psychology (e.g., impulse, instinct, libido, reflex, etc.) then are social constructions reflecting the limited and sometimes erroneous perspectives of culture and science on the activity and phenomenology of organisms. Our collective cultural interpretation of primary or originary ontological phenomena are skewed from the very beginning. It is with the utmost difficulty that we not see an apparently objective tableau of “objects in a space before a subject” (S. Rosen, 2004, p. 21) which in turn calls up and refers to our fundamental narrative of progress, evolution, and teleology. This thesis has also been forwarded and interpreted through a Heideggerian lens where the distinction between “skilled coping” and reflective consciousness is sharply made (e.g., Stewart, 1996). The problem with this more or less unacknowledged distinction is that ordinary human practice as a combination of RHC and its habits does not recognize the novel, emergent, and creative ground of its own being. This perspective also tends to foster either a dismissal or a vilification of the body’s expressions.

An analogy of this situation may be drawn from a game - football, for example. If everyone on the field is considered a player of the game (everyone is a member of the culture – everyone a member of the RHC community) then any behavior on the field will be interpreted through the lens of the game and its rules. The rules of our current RHC “game” define unmediated impulse as more primitive and unrefined than thoughts and concepts. Further, we believe that socialization channels these instincts and impulses into socially

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appropriate feelings and emotions that are necessarily interpreted and filtered through the matrix of thoughts, beliefs, norms, and concepts of a developed RHC and have the meanings of that context. These contexts then come to characterize or write the story of the feelings and emotions accordingly. We learn to feel, emote, and act according to the scripts of RHC interpreting instinct (for example) as a primitive element or rule of motivation that cannot, on its own, express appropriate behavior or fair play in our collectively enacted “game”.

In traditionally psychoanalytic terms “complexes” can be interpreted as a consequence of the imposition of culture on impulses and instincts fundamental to contact experience (e.g., Freud, 2002). From a complexity perspective these complexes can be seen to emerge as part of a complex adaptive process (Axelrod & Cohen, 2000) driven by the phenomena of activity in general. Cognitive, conative, and affective behaviors enacted by social beings within RHC ride, as it were, on the carrier wave of contact experience but are not reducible to contact experience in the same sense that a complex emergent is not reducible to its constituent parts. Consequently we are unable to find satisfying causal explanations for primary motivations or “impulses” and hence either deem them (the explanations) as metaphysical or, in more recent parlance, emergent. Contact experience itself is a mediation between the organism (and the organs, tissues, cells, molecules, and quantum elements) and the emergent flux out of which spacetime (and all its constituents) continually arises. Contact experience is a process out of which and into which RHC manifests (also see Cooper, 2007, for an excellent discussion of this general theme).

How contact experience remains the basis for our overall experience is simply that it is itself that which is always embodied. This metaphysical reading of Mead’s contact experience is similar to Whitehead’s (1978) notion of prehension which carries the notion of embodiment and perception beyond the psychological human (RHC) and is an explanation of how forms

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persist in spacetime carrying themselves as themselves in a continual emergence. Griffin (1989) observed

This prehension is the receptivity...with which every occasion of experience begins. Panexperientialism implies that every actual entity enjoys perception in the sense of this nonsensory prehension. Sensory organs are not necessary, in other words, to perceive, in the sense of prehend. It is therefore not absurd to attribute a type of perception to things such as cells, and even molecules, and electrons. They can perceive their environment, in the sense of “internally take account” of it. This position also implies, that, even in organisms with sensory organs, such as ourselves, *sensory perception is a secondary, not the primary, form of perception.* (italics in the original) (p. 25)

Obviously claims about the relationship between “matter” or organic and inorganic “objects” and human perception and consciousness are complex and detailed. Mead’s account of both sociality and the “act” are sufficient in my view to answer that complexity but too detailed to go into here (see Barad, 2007). Consequently perception and response to the world are of the same order or family as that of animals, organisms, and the structure of matter itself.

From Reed’s (1996b) perspective we are complex, animated, seeking, sentient, biological organisms in a process of constant and complex change that is the matrix or context for RHC. The co-emergence of RHC and contact experience can be understood as the source of the complexity in which rational thought (Rosen, 2000, pp. 43-44) gets tangled in the local and complex world of direct contact experience. Latour (1996), using insights from ethology and sociology described the move in primate communities toward reconfiguration of troop size when the complexities of a troop reach a critical threshold ($n > 100$) to reform in smaller numbers. Human societies, through the evolution of language, move from the complex to the

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complicated through the “partitioning” function of symbols, language, and categories (pp. 233-235) and so can handle the increased load of larger groups albeit with less access to the participatory complexity of direct experience. However, we nonetheless remain as physical organisms in that contact experience is the basis for our primary experience and our daily material and local actions (Reed, 1996a; 1996b). The complexity of bodies (our own and others’) and our local concerns tends to confuse rational categories. This tangle is continually (and paradoxically) both disrupting and “emerging” into the stabilities and rational models (e.g., cause and effect) of reflective human consciousness. Recent insights and explorations around complexity have resulted in useful conceptual models to help connect Mead’s thinking and that of classical rational ethics to the current perspective that holds all perspectives lightly.

Relationality and Complexity

Complexity theories also suggest an arc that travels from scientific naturalism or objectivism to subjectivism and phenomenology. This is often characterized as the difference between “reductionist” and “soft” complexity science (Richardson & Cilliers, 2001, pp. 5-7).

Whatever the assumption or view, complexity as it relates to biological and social systems deals with the unique problem of modeling phenomena that can’t in theory be modeled (Rosen, 2000, p. 306). This modeling problem is as acute for mathematical and reductionist methods as it is for subjective methods and interpretation itself. From a reductionist perspective the problem is fundamentally mathematical and physical; variables that recurse on themselves or otherwise contaminate their origins result in unpredictable behaviors that subvert the utility of rational functions.

From a subjectivist perspective we see that the limits of the senses to entertain the manifest universe (as described by our technologies and various apparatus) are quickly met. The world

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becomes too much to fully entertain. Too many variables become overwhelming.

Nonetheless in the spirit of the scientific method we make the effort to understand this phenomenon and are coming to learn how to work with it adequately and on its own terms. In recent years this has resulted in numerous organized efforts to work with complexity and understand its nature and role in both the natural and social sciences (e.g, the Santa Fe Institute and the Plexus Institute).

The perspective used here is a “soft” complexity and non-systems view based largely on the work of Ralph Stacey and colleagues (see Griffin, 2002; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2003; Stacey, 2001) at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK and their Complexity and Management program. The non-systems approach by the Hertfordshire group reflects the need to develop ideas about individuals and groups that are non-teleological and that hold to an epistemology of relational perspectives as opposed to a strict scientific naturalism. Conceptualization of phenomena as a ‘system’ immediately distances the observer from staying in relation with the phenomenon’s constitutive elements; consequently creating a closed system through characterizations of ‘whole’ or complete systems. For a more complete argument in this regard see Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw (2000 pp. 56-84).

In their work they have utilized the social theory of both George Herbert Mead and Norbert Elias in crafting a credible account for interpreting human social phenomena through the lens of emergent complexity. The authors present a compelling review of the philosophical underpinnings of rational, causal, and objectivist ontologies based on teleological arguments (see especially Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000, pp. 30-55) connecting our beliefs about the past, present, and future. They use Mead’s (e.g., Mead, 1932/2002) work to develop a characterization of our experience of being in time as the “living present” (Mead’s specious

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present) in making an argument consistent with both relativity theory and, I argue, other conceptions of embodiment that hold the horizon of experience as indication of the fundamental limits of reflective consciousness. In all of their work the Hertfordshire authors utilize foundational concepts in complexity science to contextualize their approach suggesting that complexity models "... demonstrate the possibility of order emerging from disorder through processes of spontaneous self/organization in the absence of any blueprint" (Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000, p. 1). This complexity in the realm of social systems is thought to facilitate (following Mead) reflective human consciousness (RHC). These authors call the ongoing activity of human relating a "complex responsive process" approach (CRP). This approach describes the micro, meso, and macro level activities that underlie social phenomena and contextualizes them within a body of theorizing that takes the non-dual aspect of consciousness, biological activity, and physical and social structure and dynamics seriously.

The key element of the Hertfordshire work suggested here is their comprehensive treatment of human embodiment from biological functioning and feelings (proto-symbols) to talking and telling stories (significant symbols), and finally to abstract concepts, writing, and the production of artifacts (reified symbols) (Stacey, 2001, pp. 100-145). Their work is also consonant with Boje's (2001) postmodern analysis of communicative action based largely on the work of Ricoeur. The Hertfordshire thesis around communicative action is about an always dynamic process of pattern creation and pattern maintenance resulting from mutual expectations born of experience and contact. These patterns result for humans in reciprocal (not necessarily symmetric or equivalent) behaviors in all our talking, sequencing, segmenting, & categorizing of activities. This is true for roles and status in social structures and the rhetorical devices we use to communicate the tones and patterns that guide and/or

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direct our conversations. From the perspective of complex responsive processes (CRP) the gesture/response dynamic of Mead's theorizing underlies all communicative action.

This work with CRP resonates with the above analysis critiquing the privileging of abstract and transcendent ideas over ideas and theories originating in direct and embodied experience. The inclusion of proto-symbolic forms as exemplars and/or manifestations of contact experience establishes a link between Mead's analysis of the social act and current theorizing about the contingent and complex nature of human interaction and communication. One of the most valuable and inevitable consequences of theorizing in the area of complexity, emergence, and consciousness is the realization that everything is always in process. This insight is the beginning point of a conversation on how and why the sustainable practice of caring is an inevitable consequence of complexity and the complex processes of human relating.

Relationality

Sustenance is perhaps the most important element of biological function. To maintain and sustain life processes is at the heart of an organism's work and reason for living. This is glaringly reinforced in our species' current condition as inhabitants of a world undergoing climate change, deforestation, fishery decline, soil depletion, and water scarcity due to our individual and collective social behaviors. Some argue that the root cause of our moral failing is the separation of subject from object and subject from subject (Adams, 2007; Buber, 1970) creating an alienated and isolated individual that doesn't recognize its connection and relatedness to all of creation or reality.

Certainly there has been much written and developed on this topic, particularly in the area of moral philosophy and theology. What I suggest is that a key principle to consider is the relatedness of "each in all" and "all in each". Drawing on a process metaphysics elaborated

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by both Whitehead (1978) and Rescher (1996) the continual manifestation of “creation” or “reality” is a dynamic and sustained process that can be interpreted as fundamental to the forms and processes of non-organic, organic, animal, and human life as reflective consciousness knows them. Further, that the processes that underlie this enormous phenomenon are similar at all levels of scale and constitutive of reflective consciousness itself. The implication drawn from Mead’s work is that both the microstructure of the “act” and its socially manifest “gesture and response” are intrinsically moral and ethical processes that both precede and continually co-arise with RHC and the language we use to characterize that behavior. The concepts of relation and relationship become the bedrock of this interpretation of metaphysical origins as moral and ethical and are manifest here in the concept of “care”. Notions of ethics and morals as normative codes relative to particular cultures, times, and places are peripheral to my arguments here. They do exemplify the consequences of complex social dynamics built on the generally top down, outside in, and external teleological framework that RHC has more or less globally produced. Any privileging I do of the concepts of impulse (as in Mead’s act) or the “natural” expression of a body’s process is not meant to be in and of itself a statement of an “ethical” act or as a standard or norm for things ethical. The ethical and moral behaviors of common sense or that are culture specific are either grounded in relationality or not and as such can be evaluated via this more primary caring principle that I am arguing here.

Central to my analysis and before I speak of “care”, however, it is necessary to attempt a re-definition of the concepts of “relation”, “relationship” and “reciprocity” to more accurately evoke their non-dual meanings. Following the lead of thinkers from Darwin to Mead up to an including present day theorists such as Cooper, (1988; 2005), Barad, (2007; 2008), Rosen, S.M., (2004); Stacey, (2003), and others it is suggested that relationships between “things” emerge as a consequence of relationality, or as Barad (2007) puts it, “The world is not

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populated with things that are more or less the same or different from one another. Relations do not follow relata, but the other way around” (pp. 136-137). Barad’s point is similar to Cooper (2005) when he, following Merleau-Ponty, observes:

Space, any space, is much more than the container of things; it “is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 243). Things derive their character and thinghood from the space through which they re-late to each other: “This means that instead of imagining (space) as a sort of ether in which all things float ... we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 243). *Connection and relationship are the vehicles that human agency carves out of pre-objective space so that its latency can be re-lated through the meaningful arrangements of the things and objects that make up the human world.* The pre-objective world thus reminds us of the fundamental significance of the relationality of things rather than the things themselves. The preobjectival is a 'spatiality without things' and space in this sense is a medium through which the body and its senses realize themselves. (pp. 1693-1694. Italics mine)

This “space” or these “primitive relations” are to be found in the initial and enduring relations of care manifest as a “gesture” and a “response” and arising out of contact experience. The fundamental relationship that we can infer is that of a “space” accommodating a “manifestation” and a “manifestation” accommodating a “space”, which is the case for all beings and all manifestations.

Human beings (as both organisms and as beings with RHC) then are manifest in their underlying relationality and by virtue of their manifestation they evidence the “space” or the “relationality” that is their origin. This process is a dialectical and reciprocal one in that the

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contradiction of relationship (more than “one” or duality) creates and recreates the conditions of its origination (the “one” or relationality).

Our relationships are likewise dialectical and reciprocal in that what one calls out in another one calls out in one’s self in an ongoing conversation of gestures. For us this conversation of gestures suggests the “social act” which cannot be divided into independent parts but requires a relationship. Mead (1938) said,

In the human organism the pattern of the whole social act is in some sense initiated in the individual as the pattern of his act. The mechanism of this is the effect which the gesture of the organism has upon itself that is analogous to the effect which it has upon the other. In this fashion the organism which is stimulating another organism to its part in a social act can arouse the early stages of the same response in its own central nervous system; and, if the gesture is one which would call out attitudes of others in the group, and if their responses were organically related to one another in mediating the response of the organism in question, then the pattern of the whole social act could be initiated in the system of this organism. (pp. 446-447)

For Mead this explains the fundamental nature of reciprocal social relationships. We cannot be other than social and both relate to and receive from the other that which makes up our seemingly private experience as selves. This is the foundation upon which the social act of “care” and “caring” are based.

Relationship as Care

The ethic of care as developed by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1984/2003) is a critique of an ethics of justice or a rights based approach with its foundations in the western and masculine philosophical tradition. In these perspectives the general frame is one of

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rationalism, individualism, and an ultimately transcendent ethics (though certainly many are working in the field of ethics from a more bottom up and relationship oriented approach).

Similar to the thesis argued at the beginning of this paper the transcendent and external elements of modern conceptions of ethical reasoning are based on the particular conceits of RHC that separate (still) subjects from objects in a Newtonian world of absolute space and an independent absolute time. What Noddings, Gilligan, and others suggest is an understanding of ethics based on relationships or the processual relational nature of human existence. For Noddings (1984/2003) this is particularly manifest as an ethics based on care and caring relationships. A critical and controversial element of this perspective is the location of the primary impulse to care in the gendered phenomena of conception, gestation, birth, natal care and the body. Or, as commonly interpreted - mothering. The implications of this characterization for feminist theory go beyond the scope of this essay but suffice it to say that my intention is not to universalize or even gender the primary elements of care. To the degree that contemporary social discourse uses terms like “mother”, “motherhood”, and “mothering” as primary defining qualities of women or for care I reject that line of thought. The role of biology in the phylogenetic behavior associated with gender and caring is complex on a number of levels (Condit, 2008). What is asserted is that the sustenance, maintenance, and nurturing of offspring is at the root of both our experience and our concept of care and central to the larger social groupings that emerge from family units and local groupings.

What is essential about the relationship between conception, birth, and living is that there is a continuous and reciprocal relationship maintained between organisms that can then be interpreted in the same way as the ongoing relationships crafted in Mead’s social act. Human beings are social animals and in this social interaction there is an ongoing cultivation and development of reciprocity. This reciprocity can be understood as manifested in terms of behavior through the natural expression of the body first and then of language with its

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concomitant expression of culture. Of course it is not too long after birth that culture begins to explicitly mediate the 'natural' expression of the body but the argument here is that there is, as a matter of empirical assessment, a 'natural expression' in that metabolism, brain development, and ontogenesis in general as it unfolds in the body through the lifespan continues to affect and interact with social behaviors, language, and the self. Certainly the work of Damasio (1994) and the significant work being done on emotional intelligence suggests the need for a more nuanced approach to the body and its place in human sociality. Much of the behavioral/physical manifestations of reciprocity are the province of emotion and feelings and are often translated as caring, nurturing, or attachment oriented behaviors. Much like Stacey's (2001) "proto-symbols" we carry in our bodies meaningfulness that informs our behavior. Noddings suggests that ethics must take into account these behaviors and their origins to be relevant and useful to human life. A central element of caring for Noddings (1984/2003) is the simple fact of relationship.

Caring is largely reactive and responsive. Perhaps it is even better characterized as receptive. The one-caring is sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him and to take pleasure or pain in what he recounts. Whatever she does for the cared-for is embedded in a relationship that reveals itself as engrossment and in an attitude that warms and comforts the cared-for. (p. 19)

For Noddings engrossment is the intentional subsuming of one's own perspective to that of the other. It is the beginning point of the process that discerns the motives and goals of the other as they are expressed in the situation. The caring act "requires a constitutive engrossment and displacement of motivation" (p. 25) that then carries through as a committed activity on the part of the one-caring for the one cared-for. From a Meadian perspective the phenomena of engrossment and the ensuing actions of caring are consistent with the process

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of sociality inherent in the creation and maintenance of the self. In this context the process of being a language using social person requires that we necessarily assume the perspective of the other through the internalization of social phenomena. While in its broadest sense this other is “generalized” in its local encounter the other is ideally quite specific. The ‘generalized other’ in Meadian studies is a core element of the creation of the self and the bifurcation of cognition and awareness into an I/Me dialectic. This ‘social self’ has been created and is maintained through social relationships and the broader phenomena of ‘sociality’ which describes the emergence of ‘selves’ dynamically. To the extent that we are present to the other (engrossed) we are able to take on the other’s perspective and see into the requirements of that perspective from this displaced position. It is also in this sense that one could be thought of as engaging in an I-thou relationship (Buber, 1970) which can also be interpreted as an experience of the non-dual.

Noddings distinguishes between natural and ethical caring with Goldstein (1999) describing the difference between the two as: “Natural caring is driven by deep feelings for the cared-for, ethical caring is driven by the one-caring’s desire to enhance her ethical ideal, her vision of herself as a moral person” (p. 659). In describing the “deep feelings for the cared-for” Goldstein relies on the example of child-raising as utilized by Noddings and I believe this is certainly the origin of how we learn or don’t learn caring behavior. Ethical caring is evidence of the move that natural caring makes as it develops in the context of RHC. Another useful way to understand this process is through the lens of attachment theory. Here we find that the securely attached infant/person is able to successfully relate to the other and engage in “collaborative contingent communication” (Siegel, 1999, p. 70) for purposes of both initiating and staying in relationship with others.

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This transition from natural to ethical caring describes the arc of ethics developed in this paper. The emergent and “impulsive” act of relationality is the source for increasingly articulated networks of social relationships that result in patterned and historical situations such that normative standards for “ethical caring” are then identified with and incorporated into the self (in this case the one-caring). Of course this “natural” process is subject to transformations. It is here we encounter the pathologies and resultant lack of caring resulting from unsuccessful attachment and social and cultural institutions developed around such pathological states. Noddings writes:

We are obligated to do what is required to maintain and enhance caring. We must “justify” not-caring; that is, we must explain why, in the interest of caring for ourselves as ethical selves or in the interest of others for whom we care, we may behave as ones-not-caring. (p. 95)

If we were more focused on why and how the “normal” state of organisms and activity go from functional to dysfunctional (or from good to bad) we would be looking at the ethical issue from perspective suggested in this paper. The idea that there is a coherence and a “goodness” to the impulse of life is not new. But it certainly not commonly taken up as a basic assumption and not the one that modern social and behavioral sciences celebrate.

Noddings is even more insistent:

Indeed, I am claiming that the impulse to act in behalf of the present other is itself innate. It lies latent in each of us, awaiting gradual development in a succession of caring relations. I am suggesting that our inclinations toward and interest in morality derives from caring. In caring, we accept the natural impulse to act on behalf of the present other. We are engrossed in the other. We have received him and feel his pain or happiness. but we are not compelled by this impulse. We have a choice; we may

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accept what we feel, or we may reject it. If we have a strong desire to be moral, we will not reject it, and this strong desire to be moral is derived, reflectively, from the more fundamental and natural desire to be and to remain related. (p. 83)

So, Mead's conception of the mechanism of the social act is consistent with Noddings' characterization of caring and both suggest that relationality is at the heart of ethical concerns. From this perspective the act of caring is both natural and pervasive. In contradistinction to this constitutive human practice of care we begin to see the problems associated with a solely rational, teleological, and prescriptive ethics.

As Keith (1999) points out in contrasting pragmatist and feminist approaches to ethics with those of Kant in particular, we could choose to work within a system and culture that values human relationships as the source of the ethical ideal. Kant apparently did not suggest this,

There are many persons who are so sympathetically constituted that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading joy around them and can rejoice in the satisfaction of others as their own work. But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however dutiful and amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth. (Kant as quoted in Keith, 1999, p. 339)

Kant fails to couple natural care to ethical caring and so misperceives the source of moral action as arising from transcendental reason. Morals and ethics are "elevated" beyond the daily experience of people caring for one another and whatever good this caring does it is not the same as real "moral worth". While Kant was arguing for a reasoned ethics his interpretation of reason seemed to suffer from a lack of attention to the primary driver of consciousness itself – the primordial nature of relationality.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that underlying reflective human consciousness and all its “products” exists a fundamental ground of relationality. Further, that this relationality in its manifest reciprocal relationships implies an ethics constituted by care. The dilemma of RHC is that we are on the one hand driven by its dualistic structure of subject/object relations yet are compelled to the conclusion that we are relational beings and relation is fundamentally non-dual. The story that RHC continually presents to us is not the same as the story that initially told RHC to us. As Noddings (1984/2003) observes: “When one cares, there are active moments of caring in which the engrossment must be present. In those moment the cared-for is not an object” (p. 74). One can only presume this means an experience of some kind that touches on this original and originating “space”. From a complexity perspective we become more comfortable with the notion that things are in a process of continuous emergence. For Mead care can be interpreted not as the end or purpose of behavior but the potentiating of the act and thus carry and condition behavior as caring (or not) from the very beginning. From Noddings’ perspective care is the emergent property of the primary experience of embodied connection notwithstanding RHC. That is, human being do, and can, develop a perspective that takes into account the generative and always relational aspect of the natural world as conceived by scientific naturalism and its continuous emergent effects in our bodies and in our lives. From that we will develop a sustainable framework of ethical, moral, and compassionate behavior that can reasonably exist within the confines of reflective human consciousness.

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