

September 30, 2002

**LEVEL: 10**

**[Chapter 2]**

***A Summary Formulation of the Ways of Relating Perspective:  
The Concepts of “Ways of Relating” and the Relational  
Principle***

[URL: RelationalPrinciple]

SECTIONS (& perhaps subsections):

- I Ways of Relating
  - II The Relational Principle
  - III Case Study: Assisted Suicide and the Right to Die
  - IV The Issue of False Sincerity
  - V The Agreement Problem and the Acceptance of the Other as Part of One’s Moral Universe
  - VI Realism and Reciprocity [xx?]
- 

In the early mornings here, the water is never more than a degree or two above freezing. [Dr.] John Liam’s been doing this work [freeing whales tangled in fishermen’s nets] for many hundreds of whales, but there’s a price – he gets severe sinus pains from the constant immersion of his head so he can see how to plan his next move. Yet John Liam has learned that if he can only achieve eye contact with a trapped whale, there will often be a change in the whale’s attitude from fear to relaxation and sometimes even cooperation.

— Payne (1992:59 minutes)

1. Ways of relating: Note that these are about the overall form of the relationship, not any specific decision. To put this another way, a relationship is constituted in how people reach decisions, not in the decisions they reach.
2. The Relational Principle:
  - a. Defined
  - b. What it means to look each other in the eye. (Later: extending the principle beyond ftf relationships.)

3. This isn't a normative principle in the sense of giving one norms. It points you in the direction of where the shoe pinches, so to speak; it lets you notice what's happening in the moral area.
4. The Connection with Empathy: Note that it requires empathy to do this. But shutting people out does not meet the Relational Principle. "I don't have a relationship with you, so I don't have to look you in the eye in the first place" does not mean you've satisfied the principle. Anyway, recall that empathy is automatic, even if accurate empathy isn't. One could argue that repression creates greater attention to the other than simple indifference – not that this results in better empathy, necessarily, but it does mean that one can't just forget the other, any more than you, dear reader, can avoid thinking about elephants now that I've mentioned them.
5. Note the connection with Gestalt Therapy's "empty chair" and with therapeutic discourse generally.
6. Is morality the exercise of empathy or looking each other in the eye? Both, as in wave vs. matter theories of quantum mechanics.

## **I Ways of Relating**

A friend, whose family was slightly more affluent than my own in its time, had been condemned to endless piano practice despite the fact that she was virtually tone deaf. Painstakingly, she memorized enough piano compositions of one sort or another to complete the course and then never ceased to bewail the fact that she had not been allowed to have dancing lessons, for it was dancing that she had *really* wanted to learn.

I said, “At least you won’t make your mother’s mistake with your own daughter.”

“Certainly not,” she said fiercely. “Whether she likes it or not, my daughter is going to *dance*.”

— Isaac Asimov (1971:243 [Joke #353])

xx Note that these are about the overall form of the relationship, not any specific decision. To put this another way, a relationship is constituted in how people reach decisions, not in the decisions they reach.

## **II The Relational Principle**

“I understood why she didn’t want to meet me. Once the anonymity is removed, the appeal to confess disappears. You become more self-conscious about what people know about you when you have to look at them face to face.”

— Sue Ann Jaffarian (2001:60)

[This is the obverse of what I talked about earlier in terms of Therapeutic Discourse.]

[Tell the story of “Gertrude”’s rape, where her attacker kept stabbing her while saying things that had no relevance to her. Clearly he wasn’t seeing her.]

[Take material from p.2 of notes.]

[Intro: Give the principle.] Now we elaborate it.

[Not a new principle. And not a complete treatment of all moral questions. {I can’t recall now what moral questions I was thinking of here.} But the foundation of morality, nonetheless.

Perhaps the main virtue of this principle is its use of “being able to look each other in the eye” as the final criterion of morality, a metaphor that I think has a literal, physical-emotional referent.

The problems with the principle will be unfolded through this work.]

[The relational principle only exists within the framework of seeing one another as fellow members of a common moral universe. Here are some descriptions and elaborations of this concept, lifted from my emails to my 4190 class: Nicole writes: “How can you justify a concept of \*one correct moral universe\*” when you’ve said that the elimination of all people’s oppression is equally important? How can the idea of a right moral universe account for each person’s right to his/her own perception? Wouldn’t \*one moral universe\* imply that certain perceptions are wrong? If you can \*never\* know what is right/correct (info or what to do), how can you justify \*one\* right moral universe?” I answer: “I’m not talking about one \*correct\* moral universe but rather about one \*common\* moral universe. What’s the difference? -- well, the former wording is about the domain of actual norms, while the latter wording is about the domain of moral discourse, without any presumption that norms are correct or can even necessarily be found. ¶ I’ll say this in another way. If people are able (even if only potentially) to talk with each other about what they want and how they can achieve it, then they are in a common moral universe. Even the most apparently irreconcilable of differences -- say, that between two religions -- can be discussed. To pursue this example: belief in a religion is not irrational; people believe in religions because they make sense of their world, but if that is so, they can also come to understand the sense that another religion might hold for someone else. Even religions’ apparently absolute and unanswerable claims -- “My religion is the true one, because (say) Mohammed’s revelation was later than Jesus’s” -- still fall before basic questions like, “How do you know that Mohammed was divinely inspired?” ¶ And

here is what I said in a follow-up email: "The term, "moral universe", can be taken as meaning "a universe in which everyone is moral" (and thus one in which we know what morality is).

However, my meaning is "a universe in which everyone recognizes each other as a worthy partner for meaningful moral discourse, despite possible short-term difficulties" (without assuming that this discourse actually produces mutually-agreed-to norms). ¶ That meaning is of course closely related to my idea of being able to look each other in the eye -- when, in my metaphor, people throw someone out of their moral universe, it means that they don't have to look that person in the eye. ¶ My meaning is probably the less natural meaning than the first one, especially since people today tend to see the subject of morality as concerning external norms instead of the process by which we search for such norms. Perhaps one of you will be able to suggest a different, better way for me to express my idea. ¶ People are uncomfortable with a view of morality which never seems to reach a resolution, which never seems to stand on any firm ground. Even though the Muenchhausen Trilemma shows that we cannot find any such firm ground, we still search (rather desperately) for it. ¶ I read a quotation from Sartre (or Camus, maybe) to the effect, "In the midst of winter I found within myself an invincible summer." That's what I think of in my theory. In the midst of the winter of being unable to find any firmly grounded norms, I found within myself a comfort that the ad hoc, "muddle through" way we have of finding norms may be enough in the long run and is the best we can expect. ¶ Nicole also writes, "how can the idea of a right moral universe account for each person's right to his/her own perception?" I'm not denying that each person factually has h/her own perceptions, but the task of morality is finding norms that we can agree to in order to coordinate our behavior. Thinking we are right does not address this problem of agreeing on some norm, and just because we agree to be regulated by a

norm doesn't mean that we agree to stop believing that we are right.]

[The following is from an exchange of emails with {someone who may not want to be identified};

the original copies – there's an oxymoron! – are in my "wor" mail folder.]

\*\*\*\*\*

I'll try to clarify the concept here, although I must be brief. The relationship is not a direct one, as you point out. In a society as big as ours, we cannot deal with each other on a one-to-one basis without these individual behaviors winding up with larger consequences we might not want. So we set up big institutions like law and government and family and so on to both divide and regulate the moral labor, so to speak. But where do these fictions that we live by get their authority? Ultimately they are simply the expression of how we want to relate to each other, given that we *\*are\** in a situations in which we must rely on these mediating fictions. The problem with the homelessness example (or really with all such examples) is that the problem presents itself to us in a direct way -- what am *\*I\** specifically to do about *\*this\** person? -- but the problem is in fact an indirect one. So the issue is not whether I give this or that homeless man some money; the issue is whether I support a system of fictions that allows homelessness. Now in a concrete situation the homeless man is obviously going to be more concerned with whether *\*I\** am going to give him money, so my criterion of "looking him in the eye" can't be taken too literally. (Maybe what we need is a homeless philosopher to ask this question of.) But in my mind, and I hope in yours as well, I can't look a homeless man in the eye and say that I support a system that creates his situation and that he ought to also.

Hope that explains the concept. Now I turn the question back at you: can you look him in the eye? And if so, what would you say? I guess this goes back to the question of what your conception of justice is.

[XX:] I think we probably do have a different definition of justice and a different idea about what a relationship is. When I pass a homeless man on the street, what is our relationship? Does justice require that I share my income, home, family, love, etc with him until some level of equality is reached? In what sense am I responsible for his plight? I believe I have a moral responsibility to help him escape his plight, but that is not the same thing.

Finally, if it is better that Bill Gates give up his money to help the homeless, is it not also better that you do so? You have control over your money. You can remedy that injustice immediately.

[This is what I originally wrote:] Let me be clear that I am attacking capitalism as practiced, i.e., as represented by our actual economic system; I'm not attacking Adam Smith or current, visionary versions of capitalism. Perhaps there are ways it can be made to work justly; I just don't know of any. (I wrote those sentences back when I hadn't sorted out these issues.)

Let me further clarify that no one sets out to create an unjust system or, once in it, to maintain

the injustice. No one is blameworthy here. But the injustice exists anyway, even if it isn't inherent in the free market. The injustice is able to arise because capitalism does not \*build in\* a concern for others, that is, a concern for justice. It's like walking around without an immune system. This lack doesn't \*make\* people sick or \*require\* them to be sick, but in a world with various germs and viruses, the lack will almost certainly be fatal.

It may be that we have different views of what constitutes justice. I have placed beneath my signature some material (from a book I'm writing on moral theory) that states my criterion for it. (It's still in draft, so please don't quote or refer to it elsewhere.) I'd be interested in hearing your understanding of justice and how it evaluates the justness of our current system.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **III Case Study: Assisted Suicide and the Right to Die**

[From the email I sent Roger on 11/7, although it only hints at what I want to say:] I understand the perils of allowing assisted suicide. But my basic guide for moral judgments like this is what I call the "relational principle", which has to do with looking someone in the eye. In these circumstances, if I encountered someone dying painfully, someone who had clearly chosen to commit suicide if possible, I could not look them in the eye and say that I was going to withhold medicine because we \*feared\* that some unknown others \*might\* be killed as a result. There is just too far a distance between the hypothetical possibility and the immediacy of the person's need. It is very bad for us to start thinking that way. Why? – because it degrades the very sense of relationship that is the foundation of our (and all) societies.

### **IV The Issue of False Sincerity**

[etc. from p.2 of notes.]

## V The Agreement Problem and the Acceptance of the Other As Part of One's Moral

### Universe

“In *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander* Thomas Merton writes of visiting Louisville on an errand for his monastery: ‘At the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers.’”

— Quoted in Kathleen Norris *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), p.16

[Move the following to the Agreement Problem essay.]

[Note *Brothel* (Albert 2001), involving the author's acceptance of the prostitutes as fellow humans. Note in LeCarré's *A Perfect Spy*, p.409: “An all-night coffee shop stood at the corner of Half Moon Street and on other early mornings Brotherhood might have stopped there and let the tired whores make a fuss of his dog, and Brotherhood in return would have made a fuss of the whores, bought them a coffee and chatted them up, because he liked their tradecraft and their guts and their mixture of human caniness and stupidity.”]

“A Benedictine sister from the Philippines once told me what her community did when some sisters took to the streets in the popular revolt against the Marcos regime. Some did not think it proper for nuns to demonstrate in public, let alone risk arrest. In a group meeting that began and ended with prayer, the sisters who wished to continue demonstrating explained that this was for them a religious obligation; those who disapproved also had their say. Everyone spoke; everyone heard and gave counsel.

“It was eventually decided that the nuns who were demonstrating should continue to do so; those who wished to express solidarity but were unable to march would prepare food and provide medical assistance to the demonstrators, and those who disapproved would pray for everyone. The sister laughed and said, ‘If one of the conservative sisters was praying that we young, crazy ones would come to our senses and stay off the streets, that was O.K. We were still a community.’

“Things were different at a meeting of a church women's group in a small Dakota town, when a younger member distributed informational pamphlets about an upcoming election. Prepared by the county agricultural extension service, they explained in a nonpartisan manner several complicated constitutional issues on the

state ballot. The woman was stunned to discover a few days later than another woman, a former teacher, had been criticizing her behind her back for bringing politics to /the women's Bible circle. This is a story about fear, a fear so pervasive that even in a small group of people you've known most of your life you can't speak up, you can't risk talking about issues. That meeting had begun and ended with prayer, but no one had a say, no one was heard, and community was diminished.

“Paradoxically, though monks are said to be ‘formed’ into one way of life, monasteries are full of people who feel free to be themselves, often to the point of eccentricity. ... A monastery is cohesive; it is not a schismatic society that survives by expelling those who don't fit into a mold. This difference might be summed up in two versions of heaven I once heard from a Benedictine nun: in one, heaven is full of people you love, and in the other, heaven is where you love everyone who is there.”

- Kathleen Norris *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, pp.114-115.

At academic conferences I've begun to feel uncomfortable in political theory sessions presenting normative political positions,<sup>1</sup> whether of the left or the right. This discomfort comes from my perception that in the end, the panels / papers / panelists / discussants / audience are arguing for their right to rule and are excluding from their moral universe people who disagree with them.

But why should I feel uncomfortable? After all, political philosophers are supposed to figure out and advocate a just political position. It is to be expected that he advocates and aims to live in for a social milieu that holds to his position. For some, that milieu happens to dominate a society. For others, that milieu happens not to. Even if the latter tend not to attend these conferences – in fact, even if the overall dynamics of the society militate against their inclusion –, this is at most a judgment on academic conferences, not on the philosophical positions of those attending. It isn't a crime to be successful, but the cynic makes it one, asserting that (or at least acting as if) failure is the only mark of virtue. This is surely perverse; at any rate, it is a normative position that needs justification itself, justification that the pose of cynicism finesses.

---

<sup>1</sup>As opposed to those sessions that pursue better understanding of some previous theorist.

The claim and counterclaim of the last two paragraphs are, in condensed form, the conflict between modernist and postmodernist. The postmodernist says, “You’re confusing success with virtue.” The modernist says, “Yeah? So what do *you* suggest? I’m actually doing something. Carping criticism is a cop-out.” And soon they’re rolling in the dirt, pulling each other’s hair and shouting, “You justify your position!” “No, you justify yours!” “Mommy, he’s hitting me!” etc. As a child, one can pick sides in this dispute, but as an adult, one sees that in that way lies madness. If you have children, you will have already discovered the futility of trying to adjudicate their quarrels. In the end, one’s goal as a parent becomes – out of desperation, perhaps, but still rightly – not to discover who is right but rather only to have them stop quarreling all the time, only to teach them how to get along with each other.

The postmodernist challenge of self-interest is valid and worth noting, but it is still only an *ad hominem* attack. We should certainly suspect and scrutinize self-interested arguments, but their self-interestedness doesn’t automatically negate them.<sup>2</sup>

However, my problem arises from a somewhat different concern. I am concerned about a failure to distinguish between two uses of political theory: as offering and as self-justification. In the political theory I envision, theories are offerings to one another, offerings of ourselves, both in our willingness to open ourselves to others by showing the fundamental ground and nature of our fundamental perceptions, and in our opening ourselves to the other’s response. We plop down in front of the other and say, “Come; let us reason together.”

When political theory is self-justification, however, our theories are not openings to

---

<sup>2</sup>That would be a form of the Genetic Fallacy, meaning to condemn an idea based on its origins instead of its content.

engagement but rather positions we defy others to dislodge us from. They act as a null hypothesis, if you will; they assert that “unless you can prove that my position is false, it will continue to be my position.” My image here is of storming a castle. Congruence with the adversarial assumption (Wyant Cuzzo 1995). When one is powerful, the latter position is in one’s (apparent, narrow) self-interest.

“O.K., Chilton – that’s a distinction. But the very format of conference sessions (presenters, discussants, audience questions, subsequent discussions over drinks and by email) seems to invite discourse. The appearance of an adversarial process is merely an illusion; after all, even your ‘discourse’ has to involve the same structure of claims and responses. Isn’t your distinction really one without a difference?”

This is certainly a valid question. The actual difference appears when I<sup>3</sup> ask, “What if in the end, others reject your argument?” People have such varied understandings of the world that deeply held arguments made by one group are rejected by another side. I’m not saying that there are multiple moralities, or that morality is relative, or that people are unable to comprehend each other, or that they can’t reach real intersubjective understanding. I’m only saying that as finite, embodied creatures, we often find ourselves in situations where we lack the time or resources to work things out, where even the refusal to decide is itself a decision. Perhaps in God’s infinite eye it is clear that X is right and Y is wrong. Unfortunately, we have no access to that infinite eye, and history is filled with people (including theorists) whose solid, unassailable beliefs now lie fallen and decayed – historical relics like Ozymandius’s statue. I know that my own life history is

---

<sup>3</sup>The personal pronoun is deliberate, since I seem to be the only person asking this. (And when I ask it, I get the impression that I’ve farted in church.)

filled with examples of mistaken beliefs or, more accurately, beliefs that were valid enough at the time but whose limitations and implications I came only later to understand.<sup>4</sup> I believe each of us, if we are honest with ourselves, can find such shifts in our lives. Oliver Sachs (19xx:Ch. xx) described a man whose brain injury had deprived him of [long-term? xx] memory. His journal was an unending stream of notations, “*Now* I am awake. *At last* I am awake”, each lost to his memory, each consciousness discovered anew. Both in our own lives and in cultural histories, we are in that position, where we tell ourselves over and over, “*Now* I know what is Right. I *now* see where my error was; *now* I’m correct.”<sup>5</sup> We may profess humility, but in the end, everyone I’ve posed my question to says, “If the others can’t see the logic of my position, then really I have no choice but to impose it.” Because, after all, *now* we know what’s right.<sup>6</sup>

Let’s look squarely in the eye what we are doing when we take this position. No matter how the fundamental reality is disguised, in the end it reveals itself; the iron fist comes out of the velvet glove. And that reality is that we exclude some people from our moral universe. The *apparent* equality of the conference session is, when push comes to shove, completely unequal.

**[FURTHER NOTES, ADDED IN HASTE:]**

---

<sup>4</sup>Note Piaget & genetic epistemology.

<sup>5</sup>A [hermetic project](#). [xx Add this chapter.]

<sup>6</sup>I’ll mention here that this issue is discussed by John Rawls (1971:§§xx) as “tolerance of the intolerant.” But notice that even here Rawls only concludes that we should tolerate the intolerant in hopes that they’ll see we’re right and only as long as they don’t threaten what we have decided is right. So he acknowledges the problem but still casts it in a way that ultimately privileges his views over others’. “Tolerating” people who think differently may be better than nothing, but “tolerance” is a far cry from meeting people as fellow citizens of a moral universe.

“Hey, don’t blame me for using the iron fist. You drove me to it through *your* unreasonableness.

(And we won’t discuss who defined reasonableness that way.)”

“This hurts me more than it hurts you.” But the most important issue isn’t whether your guilt at causing me pain exceeds my pain in my rear end. The issue is, rather, whether you get to define reality and thus violate my moral standing.<sup>7</sup> And this leads me to how capitalists whine about the risks they take, the long hours they spend, carefully ignoring / bypassing the enormous benefit of being able to define social reality.

So the concept, “to share a moral universe with someone”,<sup>8</sup> means to regard that person as someone whose separate sense of the Good one is committed to taking into account. I say “is committed to taking” instead of simply “takes”, because we can never actually be sure we know someone else’s sense of the Good. When we take action that affects them, we do so on the basis of our best understanding of what they conceive of as their Good – we have no alternative if we are not to ignore them totally –, but always recognizing that we do so only contingently, since we may be mistaken about their sense of the Good.<sup>9</sup>

Notice the way that people can miss the issue. Here’s a selection from Thomas Murphy’s

---

<sup>7</sup>My integrity was violated as a child so systematically that I go nuts when others threaten it. I was fooled / coerced into saying that truth was lies and war was peace.

<sup>8</sup>“Someone” extends beyond human beings, in a manner to be clarified in the next essay.

<sup>9</sup>One way for this to happen is for the other to have changed senses of the Good.

<tfmiii@worldnet.att.net> email of Friday, September 21, 2001, to the University of Virginia's

"habermas" e-list, in the thread entitled, "The 'fruits' of Habermas":

Very interesting point regarding motivations, one that Agnes Heller stressed in her 1982 article "Habermas and Marxism" in *Habermas: Critical Debate*; Ed. John B. Thompson and David Held (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press); 21-41. Habermas' theory does not imply that we must choose rationality, only that if we do choose rationality that we must pursue it in such-and-such a way.

It strikes me that such motivation is often determined by the perceived identity of the other. Hence 'rational' argumentation is often restricted to others with whom we can identify. In this respect one could say that identity has a key role to play in any actual practice of Habermasian critical theory. This would seem to undermine in actual practice the theoretical distinction Antii drew between Rawlsian and Habermasian theory with respect to the cultural boundedness of discourse.

In other words Habermas' UP seems to represent a detailed account of how to "treat equals as equals", but it neglects to tell us \*who\* to treat as equals - and it simply cannot provide us with motivation to treat everyone as an equal. Recourse to definitions of linguistic competency merely displaces the issue without resolving it. Some on this list have no doubt already come to the conclusion that either Raul or Fred (for instance) is 'incompetent (hopelessly biased) and one may therefore dismiss what that person has to say. Who is to decide? How does one decide? It is at this point it seems to me that identity (not in the simple or trivial sense of ascribed demographics) plays a pivotal - yet in Habermas' UP, an undertheorized - role in the pursuit of rational discourse.

Note how much this resembles what the social worker said to me about separating the deserving from the undeserving.

## **VI Realism and Reciprocity**

xx

---

[The material below is from an earlier draft, kept here in case I can still use it.]

“I can face you and say that the relationship between us – whether personal or mediated by a larger social order – does not disadvantage you [given that I have to be able to say the same thing to all others].”<sup>10</sup>

“Nothing I can do [no change in the social arrangement] can make you better off without someone else (including myself) being made as badly-off as (or even worse-off than) you. You’re not sacrificing yourself to benefit me, and I’m not taking advantage of you, even though the circumstances of fate are such that you are the one who gets the short straw.”<sup>11</sup>

---

Note in Schindler’s list how he demanded *his* Jews back, not a replacement of the same number. This indicates a connection with them; they aren’t just livestock. This seems to relate to what I said in an essay in Chapter 1 about the difference between Goods as economics regarded them (infinite; consumable) and Goods as people actually had them (complex; embedded in the matrix of human interaction).

I’m also reminded of my article fragment, “sharing a moral universe”, talking about that as a theme running through development discourse. And that reminds me of what I just read right at the beginning of *The Racial Contract*, to the effect that the political contract is one that is written

---

<sup>10</sup>The bracketed portion is for 2<sup>nd</sup>-order relationships.

<sup>11</sup>And, as stated in the “Prior to Society Perspective” thesis, “fate” means things genuinely not under human control. Jimmy Carter justified his welfare proposals (in the face of objections that this would disadvantage certain groups) with the statement, “Life is not fair.” This is true, if by “life” we mean the result of things we can’t control. It isn’t true as he said it, because “life” very much included what people wanted / did.

among white people, one (semi-)explicitly excluding nonwhites. We have to see people as both having something to say (i.e., to teach us) – this includes animals, even if all they teach us is what hurts them and what doesn't – and as counting in our moral regard (meaning that we have / can have / are capable of having empathy for them).