

## Intercultural Dialogue: Relations and Interests

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I would like to propose that we consciously and explicitly revise a metaphor that underlies much of the way we think about things. The reason for doing so is that the traditional metaphor impedes our understanding of the possibility and fruitfulness of intercultural and international dialogue, and correlatively the revised metaphor will better enable our communication. To be specific, the proposal is that we abandon the metaphor of atomistic entities and replace it with a more ecological metaphor. Let me explain.

Our attempts to grapple with the many challenges of contemporary globalization tend to run aground on our conception of borders. Our habit is to conceive of borders as the more or less hard surfaces that separate us. Hard edges separate one table from another; the surfaces of our bodies separate us from one another and the environment in which we live; legal borders separate one nation from another. We tend to regard them all as sufficiently rigid to enable us to discriminate one entity from another. A related conception of the entities that are separated by these borders is that they are objects or entities that are self-contained, atomistic particulars. Again, we tend to use this metaphor of atomistic entities to apply to everything, from sub-atomic particles to people to nation states.

To think of objects or entities in this way, which is to say as self-determined individuals that are essentially cut off from one another, has been the received philosophical wisdom at least since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It derives in part from Descartes' substances, and it receives its strength from the success of Newtonian mechanics with its assumption of nature as constituted by atoms in a void. The same metaphorical assumption animated British thought at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the form of Bertrand Russell's atomism, and in the process gave subsequent analytic philosophy, both English and Austrian, one of its most long-standing ontological givens. The early Wittgenstein could say in his *Notebooks*, in a noteworthy non-sequitur, that if there are complexes there must be simples.<sup>1</sup> Little has changed in analytic metaphysics since that time, with the significant exception of the later Wittgenstein, though because he explicitly rejected metaphysical exploration his insights left the standard metaphor intact and in use. The Baroque era metaphor has captivated philosophy, even if it has long since been abandoned by physics, biology, and the arts.

The influence of the Baroque metaphor of atomistic entities has also long been assumed in the social sciences. This should not be surprising given the fact that the social sciences began to emerge from the midst of the Baroque world. Modern economics grew from the overtly Newtonian theory of Adam Smith. As natural order is the result of the subjugation of discrete, self-determined atoms in the void to the laws of thermodynamics, so order in the social world results from the subjugation of the self-interested activities of discrete, self-determined individuals to the invisible hand of the laws of the marketplace. The success of Newtonian physics encouraged the social sciences as they emerged throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century to mimic its

methodology and its Baroque ontological assumptions. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the social sciences were largely attempts to apply the assumptions and methods of classical natural science to the social world. There were alternatives, specifically the idealistic and materialistic versions of Hegelianism, but with some notable exceptions the social sciences chose to follow a Baroque path.

In no discipline is this clearer than in international relations theory, and the associated approaches to foreign policy that stem from it. It should not be surprising that our conceptions of and assumptions about the nation-state embody the Baroque metaphor because they also derive from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Hobbes gave us the theory of the absolute monarchical state in mid-century, and Locke the liberal theory of constitutional monarchy at the end. And the modern nation-state itself is the product of the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the 30 Years War and structured the modern European political map. Like so much else that comes to us from those years, we tend to understand nation-states rather like atoms in a void, or billiard balls on a table, to use a 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphor that conveys basically the same idea. Nation-states on this model are distinct entities that have their character, and their interests, entirely independent of one another. Furthermore, they exist in the political correlate of Newton's void, which is to say a state of nature. Contemporary international relations theory is still an attempt to articulate, among other things, the regularities that help to order or structure the relations among these atoms or billiard balls, as Smith accounted for the order in the marketplace and Newton the order among material objects.

The foreign policy options available to contemporary nations reflect the same assumptions. Realism, for example, attempts to manage the interactions of the billiard balls as they roll around the table in such a way that the damage done when they collide is minimized, and the internally determined interests of one's own is maximized. Liberalism is much the same as realism, though in taking international organizations seriously, as well as overarching values such as human rights, it tends to be a bit kinder and gentler. And the more recently ascendant neo-conservatism makes the same Baroque assumptions about the nature of the nation-state, but in managing the relations among states it tends to be more aggressive than its alternatives.

The upshot is that in the classical material sciences, social sciences, and international relations we bring to bear a metaphor according to which entities are discrete and self-determined. Of course there have been challenges to this metaphor for at least two centuries. We have already mentioned Hegel and the various possible Hegelianisms. In 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy the later Wittgenstein, Whitehead, Gadamer, and the American pragmatists and naturalists, have worked with other conceptions. Interestingly, physics since Maxwell and Einstein has left the Baroque metaphor behind, as has biology since Darwin. One can say the same for the plastic and performing arts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is rather stunning that given the availability of alternatives, and their undeniable success in the natural sciences and the arts, so much of contemporary philosophy, social science and international relations continues to accept the Baroque metaphor, largely unquestioningly.

The fruitfulness of thinking atomistically, however, and consequently our ability to continue to do so, is seriously challenged by contemporary globalization. The extent to which our economies are intimately linked, the threats to our well-being and the problems we face know no boundaries, and the fact of deepening intercultural interaction, all throw into question the entire Baroque conceptual edifice and the atomistic metaphor on which it rests.

My proposal, then, is this: we can better understand the extensive interconnections that we see in the process of globalization, and that we encounter in countless ways in our daily and intellectual lives, if we shift our basic metaphor. Rather than understand entities as atoms in a void, and again I mean to refer to any and all entities of whatever kinds, we instead understand them as ecosystems. In other words, I propose that we understand things not atomistically but relationally.

I do not wish to go into the complex categorial apparatus that is necessary to make this proposal plausible, though some pointers are necessary.<sup>2</sup> To propose that we understand things to be relational is to suggest that whatever exists is constituted by its relations. Such a view directly opposes the traditional idea that in order for there to be relations there must be something non-relational that stands in relation to something else. This is the early Wittgensteinian non-sequitur again. There is nothing non-relational, or so I propose. This idea also opposes the traditional distinction between internal and external relations. On the view I am suggesting, relations are neither internal nor external, but constitutive.

I have suggested the metaphor of an ecosystem to capture the point, and a short look at the meaning of the metaphor will help to clarify the general idea. Any ecosystem is characterized by intimate relations among the system's components. The relations are so intimate in fact that in some cases an alteration in the traits of one aspect can affect many of the other components. The introduction of a new plant or animal, for example, can affect the others, and an alteration in the chemical makeup of the environment can affect the traits of other constituents of the system. In such cases we may say that the elements or components or constituents of the system are constitutively related to one another because it is their relations that provide their respective characters. Of course not every alteration in an aspect of the system has the same or equally significant consequences for all or any of the other aspects of the system, which indicates that though the relations are constitutive, not all are equally relevant in any given respect.

So we may infer, first, that in an ecosystem entities exist in a set or order of relations, or to be more precise in several sets or orders of relations simultaneously. Any given animal, for example, exists or prevails in the order constituted by the members of its own species, in the broader order of biological entities, in the order of chemical entities, etc. Second, an animal, or any other entity, may also prevail in quite different kinds of orders of relations. It may for example, be a pet and thereby exist in an emotional relation with a human being or family; it may be an experimental subject, in which case it is a constituent of the general order of relations which is scientific research; or it may be the model on which a fictional character is based, in which case it is an element in the order of relations of human products generally and fiction specifically. The point is that the

orders of constitutive relations in which an entity prevails can be numerous and varied. In all of them, however, the entity is a constituent element, and each of them is a constituent relation of the entity. Such is what it means to employ the metaphor of an ecosystem to understand things, and to take them to be relational.

I hasten to remind the reader again that the general idea is not new. It was in Hegel and Marx, and more importantly it was implicit in Darwin. One of the other prevalent metaphors of the Baroque, Newtonian world-view was nature as machine, but a machine does not and cannot evolve. There is change in a machine, but it is cyclical rather than emergent. If nature is characterized by evolution, or any form of emergent novelty, then a machine metaphor is inadequate. A relational world, by contrast, enables novelty and emergence because as new relations develop, and if relations are constitutive, the entities for which such relations are relevant alter their traits, sometimes significantly. In such a way novelty and emergence happen. In the biological world the paradigmatic illustration of such novelty is evolution, and in this respect an ecological, relational metaphor is implicit in Darwin. It was also implicit in much of post-Darwinian physics, which some philosophers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century glimpsed. Both Alfred North Whitehead and George Herbert Mead, for example, explored the implications of relativity physics and in the process came to a more or less relational understanding of things.<sup>3</sup> But despite the fact that the idea is not new, it nevertheless remains under explored and its implications insufficiently appreciated.

We may illustrate this last point, which is to say that the import of the metaphor of an ecosystem or a relational ontology is under appreciated, by turning again to the fields of international relations and foreign policy. How, we may ask, might our conceptions of nation-states, international relations, and foreign policy change if we adopt a relational understanding and metaphor? On this view nation-states and their related cultures, ethnicities, religions, etc., like components of an ecosystem, have their characteristics as a result of the relations in which they stand. Nation-states, like everything else on this model, are relationally constituted. To put the point another way, the sets of relations in which nation-states find themselves are constitutive of what they are, which is to say their traits and characteristics. Furthermore, our approach to and understanding of the borders that separate nation-states also changes. In general, if entities are relationally constituted then the boundaries between one and another are not as sharp and rigid as we expect when we treat things atomistically. Sharp boundaries are no longer necessary to individuate one entity from another because identity comes to be understood as a function of the specific set of relations that characterizes any given entity. Furthermore, boundaries are not the sharp surfaces that divide us, but more like permeable membranes through which we interact.

National borders are no exception. As a matter of simple observation we are all well aware that our national borders are more permeable than we often prefer. People come and go, and goods enter and exit, legally or not. Our borders are in fact irrelevant in many respects: communication no longer respects borders as it becomes increasingly digital; the more serious of our problems are multinational; knowledge, learning and education are increasingly global in scope; and problems that are somewhat distinctive, for example the

imagined challenges to European cultures and nations of Muslim immigration, find a reflection elsewhere in such concerns as those expressed in the U.S. over Mexican immigration. This is not to say that national borders are irrelevant. They are relevant in many obvious ways, for example in delineating the extent of the writ of national law. Though even in this respect, many nations are engaged in a process of relinquishing the authority of national law in favor of a multinational approach. The obvious and significant illustration of this process is the European Union as well as the Euro and Schengen Zones. Nations are relinquishing their authority to police borders, print money, and set trade and customs policies, all in the interests of a more integrated Europe.

The latter point illustrates another important feature of a relational notion of the nation-state. Not only are borders more porous than we might have thought, a fact obvious in experience and implied by the constitutively relational character of nation-states, but relationality also indicates the need to think again about the nature of national interests. European nations have realized that their interests are not determined independently of one another. On the contrary, there is a good deal of common interests among them, and European leaders are wise enough to craft their foreign policies in an effort to realize those interests together. In fact, a relational understanding of the nation-state suggests that we can expect nations to have some interests in common if only because their interests, like all their traits, are determined in and through their relations.

If this is a plausible approach, which is to say a justifiable shift in metaphor, then it suggests that European nations have done the sensible thing in their pursuit of common interests across the continent, and the rest of us should follow suit. If our national interests are relationally determined then we would do well to pursue foreign policy not as an effort to advance national interests but as the pursuit of common interests, either found or made. This will mean in part that the prevailing theories of international relations will need extensive revision, and foreign policy habits will have to change. As difficult as both of those implications may be to realize, the fact is that a relational approach to the nation-state and foreign policy is justified not only theoretically but also pragmatically. Such an approach will help us to address better the many challenges that globalization presents, if for no other reason than that it will incline us to cooperate more than compete in the pursuit of solutions to problems that we share and that require our cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, we may also say that a relational conception, or the metaphor of an ecosystem, points in the direction of dialogue among nations, cultures, people, and religions. To the extent that this is true it may be the most important rationale for making the shift in metaphor that I have suggested here.

## NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks, 1914—1916*, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969, p. 60
2. Interested readers may consult Justus Buchler, *Metaphysics of Natural Complexes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, eds. Kathleen Wallace and Armen Marsoobian, with Robert S. Corrington, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990, for a detailed account of the categorial apparatus of a relational ontology.

3. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, New York, NY: The Free Press, 1978, and George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1932.
  
4. I have developed this sort of analysis of international relations and foreign policy in much more detail in "American Philosophy and Foreign Policy," in *Self and Society*, eds. Alexander Kremer and John Ryder, (Central European Pragmatist Forum, Volume 4) Value Inquiry Book Series, Rodopi Press, 2009, pp 139-157; One may also consult John Ryder, "Democracy and Common Interests Across Borders" *Human Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2010, pp 108-113 for a somewhat more thorough discussion of the issue of borders.