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Relational Being in Question: A Reply to my Colleagues

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**Abstract**

I thank my colleagues for both their generosity and engaging reactions to my book. It is interesting, as well, to see the variations in the readings they give to the text. Churchill's initial view that I am not offering ontology is useful, as it speaks to a pervasive concern within the other commentaries that I am dismissing or dismantling cherished concepts of agency, experience, responsibility – and indeed, physical reality. I underscore that the conception of relational being – just as these concepts – is a social construction. I do not wish to debate ontology, but rather, to explore how such constructions function – for good or ill – in everyday life.

## Relational Being in Question: A Reply to my Colleagues

Perhaps I should not be surprised at the rich, creative, and sophisticated array of responses to which I have been treated by my colleagues. Here we find just the kind of work that has established their quite significant reputations. What does surprise and please me so very much is the grace with which they have challenged various proposals in my book. The scholarly world is so wedded to a tradition favoring individual dominance through the destruction of the other. In contrast, these papers constitute what one might see as “best practices” for future scholarly interchange. For me they are indeed relational being in action.

I also found myself fascinated by the considerable range of replies to my work. My interlocutors were each unique in what they viewed as significant or problematic about my writing—or, one might say, each read a different book. Yet my fascination soon gave way to a pleasurable sense of vindication of one of the central messages of the volume: our actions never contain meaning in themselves. All meaning derives from the coordination of actions. My book will never speak for itself; it comes alive (or not) through the supplementary action of my readers. These readers have certainly brought me to life, and I am very grateful.

In my reading of Scott Churchill’s (2011) sophisticated contribution, I found myself delighted: Here was someone who understood the unspoken assumptions in the paper in ways almost identical to my own. My writing surely has an “ontological ring” to it, as Churchill points out, setting out a world of ostensible realities into which the reader may enter. As he further proposes, I proceed to construct this world out of a wide range of observations, experiences, logics, and so on. In this sense, I proceed as a bricoleur,

attempting to blend whatever resources are at hand to generate a sense of the real. We do not have, then, an *a priori* ontological commitment, one that stands in an antagonistic relationship to the many alternatives available and in the making. Rather, I present here a way of understanding our world, with potentials to be explored and developed, and clearly, I view these potentials as enormously valuable to the human condition.

At the same time, Churchill's commentary about "equiprimordiality" in ontological theory stands as a significant challenge to my account of relationality. As he points out, it is impossible to select out isolated components of the relational process, or to point to any component not included in the process. "In the end," as he says, "one lifts the whole carpet" (Churchill, 2011, p. ?). I struggle with this issue throughout the volume. I want to speak of relational process, but inevitably I must employ a language of nouns—of elements, or separable entities. To speak of the entire relational process, the "whole carpet" leaves one with no words. In effect, here is a case in which our linguistic resources obfuscate the attempt at intelligibility. In the Prologue of the volume I ask the reader's indulgence, and to understand that wherever I talk about individual persons, for example, I am using a "place holder" for a subsequent account in which the person would be inseparable from relationship. In the final chapter I explore the mystery attending to "the whole carpet." Herein lies a dialogue that must be continued.

In my first reading of Joshua Clegg's (2011) evocative contribution, I was bemused. Here was a commentator taking me to task for my writing within "the tradition of Enlightenment rationality" (Clegg, 2011, p. ?). How often, I thought, it has been the other way around, with critics finding my constructionist views all too postmodern. Then, I reconsidered: there are certainly ways in which he is correct. There are many forms of

argument in the book that indeed use the modernist discourses of reason and evidence to make their mark. I am working here very much in the rationalist tradition of generating compelling coherence. At the same time, there are subtle differences between the way a modernist would understand this achievement and my own. For the modernist, the aim is the “well wrought urn,” that is a final logic or rational system, one towering over its predecessors and defending itself against discreditors. For me the “urn” has a different shape. I do not seek a final word, nor the displacement of all that has preceded. I am after meaningful dialogue. Thus, since many of my readers will indeed appreciate the modernist penchant for coherent reason and evidence, this is one discourse through which I may reach them. Yet this is but one of the voices to appear in the work. There are many others: biographical, visual, poetic, dialogic and the like. Each invites another community of readers to the table.

Then the question emerges, from what standpoint is Clegg critiquing Enlightenment rationality, if not from the Postmodern? An early answer is to be found in his championing of the “mysteries of lived experience.” I do take up the issue of lived experience in my book, attempting to show how experience is not separate and distinct from relationship (as individualists and romanticists might hold), but indeed is a manifestation of relational process. However, Clegg’s critique seems to represent a tradition that might be characterized as pre-modern spiritualist. He speaks, for example, of a “transcendent rupture of all reason,” which includes “the sacredness of obligation and responsibility” (Clegg, 2011, p. ?) I scarcely want to abandon the rich array of potentials emerging from such a tradition. In fact, I find a certain affinity with the ends favored by Clegg, with the difference primarily one of means. Clegg seems to rely on the

unreasoned assertion of some transcendent presence, that which we simply must recognize in order to realize an ethical life. In terms of Churchill's essay, he is doing ontology. In contrast, I rely on various traditions of discourse to reach the point, in the closing chapters of the book, at which I cannot justify the central concept of relational being. My "best reasoning" simply collapses in its attempt to "capture" the relational process from which the concept emerges. My response, not unlike Clegg's, is to invite a collective responsibility for sustaining the generative process of relating itself. Clegg and I join hands in viewing this as a condition of peace.

In their beautifully crafted paper, Sugarman and Martin (2011) give voice to a tradition to which I am also drawn. The concept of human agency is central to the humanist tradition, and it is one that few of us would wish to relinquish. Nor would it be a contribution to human well-being to capitulate to the view, implied in so much contemporary psychology, that we are incapable of escaping the determining press of heredity and environment. Sugarman and Martin are sophisticated and creative defenders of the agentic tradition and, particularly in the current context of neuro-reductionism, we should all be grateful for this. Nevertheless, I wonder if their dissatisfaction with my seeming dismissal of the agentic self is not overdrawn. I say this first because the constructionist logic of my book clearly states that I am not attempting to eradicate traditional conceptions of the person. Relational being is offered as an *augmentation*—an addition to our potentials—as opposed to a denial. It is fruitless to debate whether we "really and truly" are free agents or not, but many of our ways of life do rely on such a discourse. The question for me is thus whether we wish to sustain all such ways of life, and if not, whether we must then capitulate to the deleterious implications of an

otherwise hegemonic determinism. I invite Sugarman and Martin to join me in such questioning.

At the same time, I also wonder whether my colleagues and I might not find some common ground in a more relational way of conceptualizing human agency. Why is it essential to separate human agency from relational process, placing it somehow above and superior, as Sugarman and Martin do? Why must we sustain a concept of self that ultimately thrives on a vision of a private possession, something that is all mine and not at all yours? As discussed at length in my book, why sustain a view of agency that acquires its meaning by virtue of its opposite, namely determination? Let us suspend this traditional binary; it is not one that is essential to our going on together. Rather, let us replace the problematic concept of free agency, with that of the person as the common intersection of multiple relations. What enables or invites us to move in one direction as opposed to another is not, then, some Doppelganger lodged behind the eyeballs, but our participation in multiple relational traditions. Each tradition lives through and with us, offering or compelling an alternative form of action. Ultimately we are neither free nor constrained, on this account, but with each new relationship in which we participate, we expand the domain of possible action.

I could go on at length about whether, as Sugarman and Martin say, my account denies the significance of first person experience of the self, and whether I have somehow been garroted by a “mereological fallacy.” Very briefly, in the first case, I reiterate: the constructionist orientation from which this work emanates neither denies or asserts anything as true or real. The challenge for me, however, has been to demonstrate how we can understand what we call first person experience as a relational phenomenon.



As I propose, for example, virtually all our experience of pleasure and pain is colored by the relational traditions in which we participate. Turning to the mereological fallacy, said to be assigning to parts of a person's abilities or powers what properly applies to the entire person (e.g. "my brain made me do it"), I must admit that I do not see this as a logical fallacy so much as metaphoric bending of the language—common to many forms of explanation. More to the point, could we not argue that assigning powers and abilities to an individual person is just such a "fallacy?" On the relational view, there are no truly individual actors; we are always already constituents of relationship. To say that "I decided" is to misappropriate for the self what more properly is an outcome of relationship.

Slife and Richardson (2011) complete this set of engaging discussions with what is surely the most surprising question: Is my account indeed relational enough? My answer in this case is both "yes" and "no," but the issues are not so simple. My commentators are quite correct in the surmise that I abandon the dualism that has plagued philosophy and contributed to individualist ideology. As I propose, let us replace subject and object separation with an inseparable and mutually defining subject/object. However, they go on to say that my constructionist orientation thus creates a new monism, an inter-subjective reality that denies the very real existence of mountains, and I suspect every other thing we would call a material reality. Well...not quite. First, my view of constructionism does not deny anything; as proposed some time ago (Gergen, 1994), constructionism is "ontologically mute." However, constructionism does propose that whatever we take to be mountains and all the rest are both *possible and optional* interpretations of our existence. For example, most maps of the world—assiduous

attempts to be as accurate as possible—will reveal no mountains and no curvature of the earth. For many purposes, such maps are very useful. It is not that “what there is” requires an ontology in which mountains exist, but that in our various pursuits we may often (but not always) find it useful to speak of mountains.

Now, with this said in defense of my constructionist background, I do agree with Slife and Richardson regarding the limits of my case for relational being. Essentially, I have limited the discussion almost exclusively to relational processes among people. In this sense, I have created these social processes as privileged realities within the space of this project. To be intelligible and to favor a course of action virtually requires such limiting. (Consider my response to Churchill’s concern with “the whole carpet.”) However, as I mention in the last chapter of the book—and thus agreeing with Slife and Richardson—it would be useful and desirable to extend this account of relational being to what we commonly construct as the physical environment. Most inviting would be an extension of the concept of co-action to include nature and earth. In what ways can we view the relationship between human action and the natural world as collaborative? How can we see this relationship as dialogic and mutually constituting? By thus extending the logic of co-action, the thesis of relational being could join the global efforts toward a sustainable world.

Are these rejoinders to my colleagues sufficient; do they constitute the final word on these matters? Scarcely. Whatever they mean will depend on what you, the reader, now does with them. They will become something quite different, I suspect, as my dear colleagues now take them on.

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