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The Primacy of Interrelating: Practicing Ecological Psychology with Buber, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract

This study explores the primacy of interrelating and its ecopsychological significance. Grounded in evidence from everyday experience, and in dialogue with the phenomenology of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we discover that humans are inherently relational beings, not separate egoic subjects. When experienced intimately (not just conceptually), this realization may transform our (often pathological) interrelationship with the beings and presences in the community of nature. Specifically, interrelating is primary in three ways: 1) interrelating is always already here, transpiring from the beginning of the human species and human culture, from the beginning of every infant's life, and (most significantly) from the continuously arising beginning of every presencing moment; 2) the quality of our interrelating is truly what matters most, the most important expression of and facilitator of health, compassion, and justice for humankind and the rest of nature; and 3) interrelating is the ever-present path via which we discover/create and carry on our (inter)existence. Interrelating is an existential given—indeed we *are* our interrelating—yet we are summoned ethically to cultivate our way of interrelating so as to serve others and the non-human natural community. Thus interrelating is our essence, our calling, and our path.

Keywords
ecological psychology, phenomenology, nature, I-Thou, ethics, interrelationships

One day a class of undergraduate students and I were discussing humankind's interrelationship with the rest of the natural world. A bright young woman spoke up and acknowledged her lack of interest. "I'm a city person,"

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she said. "I don't have a relationship with nature." Similarly, upon hearing about my work in ecological psychology, an acquaintance asked "Why aren't you working on something that really matters, like therapy, instead of that abstract academic subject." He said he was trying to offer a little helpful advice since "all that environmental stuff sure doesn't affect the ordinary person's life." In each conversation I was taken aback at first, but such comments should not be surprising. Unfortunately they are all too common. Yet they are symptomatic reminders of just how alienated from nature we actually are.

Our participatory involvement within the community of nature comprises one of the most important interrelationships in all our lives. But we often do not realize this today because our culture's dominant mode of relating with nature is so desperately impoverished. Therefore a key task for the field of ecological psychology (or ecopsychology) is simply to help us "Acknowledge... the Human-Nature Relationship *as* a Relationship" (p. 7), as Andy Fisher (2002) observes. In my view this is one of the great existential responsibilities of contemporary life, both for individuals and for collective human culture(s). Yet, simultaneously, this splendid aspiration is itself a testimony to our profound estrangement. Regarding a relationship in which we all participate, is it not strange that we are being encouraged to appreciate that it really is a relationship? Is it not disturbing that we now must argue that all of us and all human cultures are in fact—of course!—involved in interrelationships with the rest of the natural world? And since such interrelating is necessarily so and cannot be otherwise—*how well we relate is always in question, but we cannot not relate with nature*—is it not uncanny that we face this as an urgent task rather than an essential given in our daily lives? Nonetheless, here we are and this is our work.

Or at least this is our initial, remedial work. It comprises one constituent in a larger psycho-cultural therapeutic, an interdisciplinary endeavor which aspires not only to understand our way of interrelating with nature but to transform it. Such therapy is devoted to serving the mutual well-being of humankind and the natural community. In contrast, motivated partly by genuine needs but largely driven by narcissistic confusion, fear, and greed, the prevailing human culture is devoted to dominating, mastering, controlling, and exploiting the natural world. And this often means annihilating the natural world. Is this really how we want to interrelate?

Crises such as global warming, environmental toxicity, habitat destrution, and mass extinction are often noted but quickly ignored. Similarly, we tend to keep ourselves ignorant of a corresponding fact, one that is terribly disturbing. That is, by creating such ecological impoverishment we are condemning our children, neighbors, and ourselves to suffer increasingly from cancer and asthma, devastating hurricanes and floods, water shortages, and aesthetic and psycho-spiritual deprivation (to mention only a few examples). Our pathological way of relating with nature is a symptom of our confusion and fear regarding who we are, what nature is, and how to participate with others in this one world we share. And, in a truly vicious circle, our current way of interrelating generates further confusion and fear. The present study is offered in the context of this anguished confusion, its catastrophic consequences, and its potential for transformation.

It is becoming ever more evident that our specific ecological maladies are situated within a larger psychological/cultural/spiritual pathology. Joining with many others, I believe this pathology is driven largely by three key constructs of the modernist world-view: *an exclusively ego-centered, individualistic, narcissistic subjectivity; an illusory (even delusional) separation or dissociation of humans and the rest of nature; and exclusively human-centered cultures, values, and practices (such as the idolatry of material consumption and market economics)* (Adams, 2006). Oriented (or actually disoriented) by this narrowed self-sense and socially constructed paradigm, the shadow side of modernity's great accomplishments, *we tend to reduce nature to a feared threat, an objectified material resource to exploit, and/or an inconvenient impediment to our narcissistic wishes.* Herein we are captured by the grandiose fantasy of being, as Descartes (1637/1996) proudly proclaimed, "the masters and possessors of nature" (p. 38).

This crisis is affecting the whole earth and all the kindred beings who dwell within it. But "humankind" in general is not responsible for the crisis. The responsibility lies mostly with cultures captivated uncritically by the ideologies of individualism, materialism, industrialism, technologism, corporatism, consumerism, and militarism. (No longer are these limited to the Western world.) Notice that these interconnected social structures do not center on the interests of all humans (as the term anthropocentrism might suggest), but mainly on the interests of those holding economic and political power. Even for this small minority, however, such ways of being provide only the most superficial and fleeting satisfaction. Fortunately, we

are beginning to understand that our exploitation of nature is mutually impoverishing for humankind and the natural world. As Gregory Bateson (1972) declared over thirty years ago, "We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself" (p. 483). Conversely, we are starting to see that the well-being of humans and the well-being of nature are interdependent. Thus we are realizing that *our current eco-catastrophe is not only a biological crisis but a crisis of consciousness and culture.* These perilous circumstances call for an innovative psycho-cultural therapy which cultivates individual awareness and direct experiences with nature, intersubjective exchange with other human beings, and socially engaged practices—three distinctive forms of interrelational involvement. In this spirit, we will explore the primacy of interrelating and its implication for humankind's interrelationships with the rest of nature.

With the help of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we will show that humans are primarily relational beings, not separate egoic subjects. This realization—when experienced directly and deeply (not just conceptually)—subverts the three maladies of modernism: narcissism, dissociation (of humans and nature), and anthropocentrism. Evidence for our interrelational nature will be presented via lived examples from everyday existence in dialogue with the testimony of the three great phenomenologists. At times I will convey what is explicit in these philosophers' writing. Other times I will draw forth what they seem to be implying. And often I will allow my voice to co-arise interresponsively with theirs, hoping in this way to foster fresh perspectives, further conversations, and engaged practices within the field of ecological psychology and the community at large.

Rather than speak only of "interrelationship," I use the somewhat awkward, verbal form "interrelating" to emphasize the active, ongoing, dynamic quality of our participatory engagement with the rest of the world. The phrase "the primacy of interrelating" is meant to resonate appreciatively with Merleau-Ponty's profound work on "the primacy of perception." While embracing his phenomenological discovery that ordinary perceiving—itself an interrelational exchange—is primary epistemologically, I hope to show that interrelating is primary in three other ways: 1) interrelating is always already here, transpiring from the beginning of the human species and human culture, from the beginning of every infant's life, and (most significantly) from the continuously arising beginning of

every present (or presencing) moment; 2) the quality of our interrelating is truly what matters most, the most important expression of and facilitator of health, compassion, and justice for humankind and for the community of nature; and 3) interrelating is the ever-present path via which we discover/create and carry on our (inter)existence. This means that interrelating is an essential given in human existence, yet we are summoned ethically to cultivate our way of interrelating so we may be of service to others and to the non-human natural community. *Thus interrelating is our essence, our calling, and our path.*

Buber on Interrelating: From I-It to I-Thou

The work of Martin Buber is a spiritual treasure of existential philosophy, one that is often underappreciated today. In light of our present concerns, *I and Thou* (1923/1958; 1923/1970) is an exquisitely sensitive exploration of the primacy of interrelating. Early in this great text he declares that "In the beginning is relation" (1923/1958, p. 18). The beginning for Buber refers both to the earliest emergence of the human species and human culture, and to the earliest experiences of infants in the course of individual development. Buber discusses archaic humans by way of analogy with non-Western, pre-modern cultures. Drawing attention to the interrelational structure of such peoples' language, he remarks:

> The nuclei of this language… generally designate the wholeness of a relation. We say, "far away"; the Zulu has a sentence-word instead that means: "where one cries, 'mother, I am lost.'" …What counts is… the genuine original unity, the lived relationship. (Buber, 1923/1970, pp. 69–70)

Similarly, Buber stresses that infants interrelate for the sake of interrelating and not merely as a means of gratifying physical needs. Here he presages the clinical and research findings of psychoanalytic relational theory (see Mitchell, 1988). From the moment of birth onward—and even earlier it seems to me—attunement to interrelationship is always already here both as an existential given and a developmental calling, as a "category of being, as readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul" (Buber, 1923/1970, p. 78). Buber speaks poetically this basic human phenomenon:

> The innateness of the longing for relation is apparent even in the earliest and dimmest stage. Before any particulars are perceived, dull glances push into the unclear space toward the indefinite; and at times when there is obviously no desire for nourishment, soft projections of the hands reach, aimlessly to all appearances, into the empty air toward the indefinite.… these glances will eventually, after many trials, come to rest upon a red wallpaper arabesque and not leave it until the soul of red has opened up to them. Precisely this motion will gain its sensuous form and definiteness in contact with a shaggy toy bear and eventually apprehend lovingly and unforgettably a complete body; in both cases not an experience of an object but coming to grips with a living, active being that confronts us… [This] is the drive to turn everything into a You [Thou]… It is not as if a child first saw an object and then entered into some relationship with it. Rather, the longing for relation is primary, the cupped hand into which the being that confronts us nestles; and the relation to that, which is a wordless anticipation of saying You, comes second. (1923/1970, pp. 77–78)

Buber is not suggesting that an I-Thou interrelationship is present from the beginning. That requires a more conscious participation via one's whole being wherein one is openly responsible to the being of other. Rather, by showing that we yearn for interrelationship from the first moments of our existence, Buber emphasizes that humans are essentially interrelational beings. He goes on to demonstrate that from birth to death we are always involved in relationships, whether these be with oneself, others, the world, nature, or God. Buber thus teaches that interrelationality is a key dimension in the very structure of human existence. As he puts it, "Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity" (Buber, 1923/1970, p. 67). In fact, for Buber, our very self or subjectivity is interrelational: "There is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* and the *I* of the primary word *I-It*" (1923/1958, p. 4). There is no such thing as a separate self, but always a self-in-relation.

According to Buber, the world ceaselessly offers opportunities to move from merely instrumental, narcissistic, I-It interrelating into more open, intimate, loving, I-Thou modes of involvement. We are called by the world to respond consciously and compassionately: "Signs happen to us without respite, living means being addressed, we would need only to present ourselves and to perceive" (Buber, 1929/1965, p. 10). Other people, the social world, and nature—simply by presenting themselves—are asking that we make ourselves available and respond accordingly. Yet defensively

and self-deceptively, our habitual ego-centered attitude often claims "nothing is required of you, you are not addressed" (Buber, p. 10). More critically, Buber declares that "The signs of address are not something extraordinary, something that steps out of the order of things, they are just what goes on in any case... The waves of aether roar on always, but for the most part we have turned off our receivers." (p. 11)

At any moment, in any relationship, we may deepen our awareness and responsivity, thereby becoming open for truly meeting the other. According to Buber, such an I-Thou relationship is what is most real and most important in human existence. Celebrating the I-Thou encounter, he asserts: "All real living is meeting" (Buber, 1923/1958, p. 11). For Buber this is the heart of spirituality. As it comes forth in human existence, spirit *is* I-Thou interrelating and I-Thou interrelating *is* spirit.

> Spirit in its human manifestation is a response of man to his Thou.... the response to the Thou which appears and addresses him out of the mystery.... Spirit is not in the I, but between I and Thou.... Man lives in the spirit, if he is able to respond to his Thou. (1923/1958, p. 39)

Interestingly, in his youth Buber primarily located spirituality not in relationship but in exceptional moments removed from daily life, for example in powerful experiences during solitary prayer (see Buber, 1929/1965). Yet, as a mature philosopher, he claimed that "real living" involves meeting and he equated I-Thou responsivity with spirit. Given that Buber was such a deeply spiritual man, these formulations regarding the primacy of interrelating are all the more significant. Throughout his writings he calls upon each of us—and shows that others, the world, and nature are also calling us—to realize and cultivate the sacramental quality of our everyday interrelationships. In practice, then, what are we being called to do? Ultimately, says Buber, we are summoned to be loving: "Love is responsibility of an I for a Thou (1923/1958, p. 15).

Buber on Interrelating with Nature

According to Buber, I-Thou interrelationships may occur in our encounters with other humans; with God or the spiritual world; and with the natural

world. Thus he explicitly includes the community of nature in his dialogal (interrelational) philosophy. Time and again Buber urges us to appreciate that we are constantly being addressed by others and by the world of nature. In every encounter "a word demanding an answer has happened to me" (Buber, 1929/1965). Correspondingly, I am asked to become consciously aware in order to respond to this voice of the Thou.

> It by no means needs to be a man of whom I become aware. It can be an animal, a plant, a stone. No kind of appearance or event is fundamentally excluded from the series of the things through which from time to time something is said to me.... The limits of the possibility of dialogue are the limits of awareness. (Buber, 1929/1965, p. 10)

Joining with Buber, it is clear that our present awareness (or lack thereof) is implicated in our ecological crisis. Without consciousness of our actual interrelationships with the natural community, no real dialogue is possible. Correspondingly, without appreciative cultural discourse and interpersonal dialogue concerning the natural world, significant personal experiences with nature become less likely.

Regarding our conventional approach to nature, Buber (1923/1970) acknowledges that our attitude is quite immature and limiting: "I contemplate a tree... I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance... I can dissolve it into a number... Throughout all this the tree remains my object" (pp. 57–58). Such are the characteristics of an I-It relationship, wherein we reduce the tree to a mere object and use it instrumentally for our gratification. Far from being an authentic dialogue, this is actually a monologue with our own fantasies. We force the tree into a predetermined role in the human scheme of things. Today, our predominant culture presumes this to be only type of relationship we can have with nature. But Buber disagrees vehemently and implores us to look more deeply. An I-Thou relationship between humans and nature is not only possible, but urgently needed:

> But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It.... The tree... confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it—only differently. One should not try to dilute the meaning of relation: relation is

> reciprocity. Does the tree then have consciousness, similar to our own? I have no experience of that. But... must you again divide the indivisible? What I encounter is neither the soul of a tree nor a dryad [a tree nymph], but the tree itself. (Buber, 1923/1970, pp. 58–59)

This is an authentic relationship with a real other, but we do not have to take his word for it. We need simply to recall (and avail ourselves for further) experiences wherein the natural world spoke to us and summoned us into an intimate encounter. Dwelling with Buber's example, I imagine that most of us have been touched at some time by an experience with a tree (or some other natural being or presence). Remember, perhaps, your feeling as a child when responding to that old tree which beckoned to be climbed; or your grief when your neighbor chopped down that same tree or when the timber corporation clear-cut your beloved forest; or the astonishing epiphany of cherry blossoms in spring or glorious leaves in autumn. And even today, we each could walk out our door and be open to the possibility encountering—freshly and vividly—that nearby tree we've passed by countless times. With these invitations I am simply invoking our ever-present potential to deepen our interrelating in this shared life-world. Yet, of course, the primary invitation is from the world itself, the world (human and otherwise) that is always beckoning our response. Likewise, Buber encourages us to sacralize our ordinary existence, to discover/create an interrelational spirituality of everyday life, welcoming nature and each other as an authentic Thou. As he eloquently proclaims:

> ...what is greater for us than all enigmatic webs at the margins of being is the central actuality of an everyday hour on earth, with its streak of sunshine on a maple twig and an intimation of the eternal You [Thou]. (Buber, 1923/1970, pp. 135–136)

Buber clearly opened himself for such intimate encounters, so why don't we?

Levinas on Interrelating: The Ethical Call of the Other

Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas surely had their differences. Nonetheless, their relational philosophies complement one another and serve as inspiring allies in our current ecopsychological inquiry. In dialogue with

Levinas's great texts, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, and with the overview in *Ethics and Infinity*, let us explore the relevance of his thinking for ecological psychology.

According to Levinas (1984), "To be or not to be" is not the "the first and final question", but rather "how being justifies itself" (p. 87). In other words, the primary and ever-present existential question is interrelational and ethical: How do I justify my being? That is: How shall I respond to the face of the other? Levinas emphasizes that his entire work centers on establishing the "primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man—signification, teaching, and justice—a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest..." (1961/1969, p. 79). This essential structure is the interrelationship between self and other, the same and the other, I and the face (of the other), myself face-to-face with a neighbor or a stranger (to cite Levinas's various terms). Thus, he says, "The face to face remains an ultimate situation" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 81). And "this relationship with the Other as interlocutor... is the ultimate relation in Being" (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 48).

For Levinas, both self and other are absolutely unique, singular, and irreplaceable. Writing of this radical other, Levinas begins to convey what he means by the face: "The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face.... The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure" (1961/1969, pp. 50–51). Who the other is, and what his or her expression means, is infinitely beyond any conceptual representation or knowledge that can be constituted by my ego. In conversing face-to-face, the other necessarily transcends my egoic presumptions, resists being incorporated into my same old way of being and thinking. By expressing this radical alterity the other confronts me with meaning beyond my autonomous capacity to construct it, calls me to become open in conversation with a mystery beyond myself, and thereby offers me a (potential) teaching.

> The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching... Teaching is not reducible to maieutics [drawing out something I already know, as Plato would have it]; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. (1961/1969, p. 51)

Levinas teaches that it is my unique responsibility to welcome this ultimately incomprehensible yet ultimately significant other: "My responsibility is untransferable, no one could replace me" (Levinas, 1985, p. 100). Indeed, in an authentic face-to-face relationship, the unique other comes forth as an epiphany and speaks her/his/its radical alterity and exteriority to us: infinitely transcending all thematization, comprehension, and knowledge, yet vividly calling us to respond. And the self—each of us according to our unique subjectivity—responds to this revelatory obligation and assignment, responds, that is, by openly embracing this primary responsibility or by defensively refusing to fulfill the undeniable call. Further, Levinas (in Bernasconi & Wood, 1988) specifies the nature of such responsible interrelating: "That which I call responsibility is a love, because love is the only attitude where there is encounter with the unique" (p. 174).

Discussing "the authentic relationship with the Other," Levinas remarks, "The face speaks.... it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship" (1985, pp. 87–88). Levinas (1985) privileges such responsive conversing with the other—this participatory process of "saying" or interrelating—over any specific thematic content that can be expressed: "In fact, for me, the *said* does not count as much as the *saying* itself. The latter is important to me less through its informational contents than by the fact that it is addressed to an interlocutor" (p. 42). Working with these ideas (while attending to daily experience), we discover that the quality of interrelating is primary—first, ever present, and most important—with specific information or knowledge simply comprising a momentary form in which our interrelating is carried forward.

These realizations led Levinas to articulate a radically interrelational notion of (inter)subjectivity. For Levinas, to be a self or a subject is to be subjected to this ethical summons of the other, to be called to respond with our unique singularity to the unique singularity of the other. From this perspective, subjectivity *is* this responsive and responsible interrelating.

> I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. (Levinas, 1985, p. 95)

Over and over Levinas presents "subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality" (1961/1969, p. 27), especially in the face of the other's

suffering. Indeed, the ethical call that occurs in our interrelationship with others actually constitutes our very subjectivity. Thus Levinas stresses that "The relationship... is an extremely urgent assignation—an obligation" (1974/1981, pp. 100–101). And "subjectivity," he goes on to say, is "made out of assignation" (p. 111). Stated most concisely, "I am... a responsibility" (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. 128). Or we could say: I *am* my interrelating. My interrelating *is* who I am.

In my interrelational responsibility to and for the other, the other presents herself or himself as simultaneously more than and less than me, as one who is both master and destitute, from a position of transcendent height and a position of poverty. Levinas 1961/1969) addresses this apparent paradox:

> To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated. (p. 215)

According to Levinas, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the neighbor (and I would include the beings and presences of the natural community), all such others "accuse", "dominate", "obsess", "persecute" me. These are intensely powerful descriptions of the other's claim on me, and of my obligation. Although he does not make it explicit, Levinas suggests that the call of the other feels traumatic because we conventionally (mis)identify ourselves as separate and autonomous egoic subjects. That is, when living egoically we are preoccupied with mastery, domination, and control, but the other's transcendence is infinitely beyond any pretensions of mastery. (Clearly, for Levinas, the other "dominates" me in a thoroughly different sense than the way humankind "dominates" nature.) Before we even realize it consciously, if we ever do, the other disrupts the momentum of my habitual, ego-centered way of being: My plans, expectations, and wishes are upset, called into question by the presencing of the other. Therefore the

other is an epiphany experienced as "...an obsessional and persecuting accusation. It strips the ego of its pride and the dominating imperialism characteristic of it" (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. 110). The other is not (and can never be) who or what the ego thinks the other is, nor who or what the ego wishes the other to be. In response to the other, then, we can either fortify our defenses and pursue our narcissistic desires for domination and control, exploiting the other for our own gratification. Or we can open ourselves for the revelation of the other, far beyond our comprehension and mastery but not beyond our ability to be responsive, loving, and just.

Levinas on Interrelating with Nature

Let me offer a reflexive comment as a transition into exploring Levinas's relevance for ecological psychology. Levinas's philosophy is alternately bewildering and revelatory. Upon recently exposing myself for the fist time to his intensely moving work, I must say that his writings present themselves (in his terms) as a radical other, an epiphany disrupting my present understanding (and way of being) and calling vitally for my response. My encounter with Levinas's alterity is so fresh that I am feeling accused, obsessed, even traumatized. And yet mysteriously, I am also experiencing a deeper sense of resonance, revelation, and even transformation. In a similar way, I believe that reading Levinas vis-à-vis our interrelationship with nature can be creatively "traumatizing" and transformative for us.

Guided by Levinas's urgent challenge, what might happen if we allow ourselves to interrelate with members of the natural community as unique and authentic others, as kindred subjects in a commonly shared world? What if we would openly participate in a face-to-face encounter with that deer who is eating the lilies in our garden, the maple tree in the park, the river that winds through our city, the breeze that caresses our cheek, the nearby mountain, or even the whole bioregional neighborhood of which we are participating members? And building upon such situated ethical encounters with uniquely singular others, how might we conceive and create greater compassion and justice in humankind's interrelationship with the other-than-human natural world? It is clear to many of us that these are real potentials and opportunities, yet Levinas is not quite ready to respond to the faces of our neighbors in the natural world. He definitely privileges the face-to-face relationship between human beings, and equivocates when

considering the rest of the natural community. Interestingly, Levinas does call for ethical responsivity to all animals. As he says, "It is clear that, without considering animals as human beings, the ethical extends to all living beings" (Levinas, in Bernasconi & Wood, 1988, p. 172). And he even grants that "One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal" (Levinas, in Bernasconi & Wood, p. 169). Nonetheless, he is ambivalent about fully affirming the relevance of his philosophy for the human-nature interrelationship:

> I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called 'face'. The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal. I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed. (Levinas, in Bernasconi & Wood, 1988, pp. 171–172)

Being a rigorous philosopher, Levinas's desire for "a more specific analysis" is understandable. Yet for me his statement evokes a bittersweet smile. The sweetness is partly a wry appreciation of the great care involved in practicing philosophy, and partly a heartfelt hope that we will actually take up Levinas's invitation for a deeper inquiry into our relationship with nature. The bitterness is that such analysis is required in the first place, is needed only because of our extreme alienation from the natural community. Yet, as we asserted at the outset, one of our key tasks is simply (but profoundly) to acknowledge our interrelationship with nature *as a real relationship*. We are so estranged from the rest of nature that many deem it preposterous to even consider the possibility that natural beings and presences are authentic others with whom we are interrelating, fellow subjects calling for ethical responsivity, love, and justice. Yet, not so long ago cultural forces made it seem just as preposterous that African-Americans and women could be welcomed as fellow subjects.

We know that the lack of direct experiential involvement with those perceived as "other" is a key factor in creating and sustaining prejudice and oppression. Analogously, given our massive extinction of species, destruction of habitats, and lifestyles that numb us to our inextricable involvement with the rest of nature, we are losing our direct experiential relationships with our neighbors in the natural community. And, in a terribly vicious circle, we increasingly destroy the natural world. Thus, the very ground of any further "analysis" must be further direct and conscious experience with non-human nature. I do not know how many snakes Levinas encountered

in his life, or how intimately he encountered even one or two. But I do know that such experiences are becoming ever more rare in contemporary Western society. And as these relational encounters become extinct we lose the experiential source of ethical, compassionate, and just interrelationships with the community of nature.

Let me offer some common examples of interrelating with nature, lived experiences that are consonant with Levinas's approach. Vividly recall your experience of a glorious sunset, an awesome thunder-and-lightening storm (and perhaps destructive floods that followed), a mountain-top vista, a rattle-snake's rattling, a deer bounding gracefully, the sweet song of a thrush, or some similar encounter. In your original experience, was there not some sense, let us say, of infinite mystery, depth, intelligence, power, or beauty—so much so that it transcended your comprehension and ability to convey it in words (even if, therefore, it was all the more important to speak of it)? Is this not congruent with Levinas's characterization of the face of the other as overflowing all thematic representation, always "*exceeding the idea of the other in me*" (1961/1969, pp. 50–51). Having spent years studying wolves, the great nature writer Barry Lopez shared his humble appreciation of such infinite mystery: "No one—not biologists, not Eskimos, not backwoods hunters, not naturalist writers—knows why wolves do what they do" (1978, p. 4). Levinas focuses on the infinity and transcendence (in this sense) of the human other and of God, but why not also of nature?

Taking another perspective, perhaps at some point in your life you found an abandoned kitten: hungry, aware, frightened, and adorable. Remembering your experience when face-to-face with this little being, even before you decided what to do—before you welcomed it into your family or took it to the animal shelter or scared it away—and regardless of what you actually did, did you not feel touched and moved to respond? Were you not immediately called to be compassionate, even if fleetingly, and even if your secondary reaction (which we've all felt at times) was an effort to avoid this primary call? In its mystery, beauty, intelligence, and preciousness, the kitten manifests infinite height and transcendence (in Levinas's terms). And, simultaneously, in its vulnerability and suffering the kitten expresses destitution and poverty. Both its height and destitution call forth our responsibility. Before we can even begin to think about how to respond, indeed as the original source of any such reflective consideration, we feel summoned and obligated, yes? Although the orphaned animal does not

have language, and though we may not articulate it at first, one primordial thing is immediately clear: The kitten says, "You should not kill me." Prereflectively sensing this urgent and undeniable command, feeling it viscerally and intuitively, we are asked to cultivate a compassionate response. Likewise, if we would only let ourselves notice, we are being addressed by all the beings and presences of nature.

Completely consistent with our face-to-face encounter with the kitten, yet speaking of our encounter with another human being, Levinas (1985) declares:

> The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person,' I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call. (p. 89)

Of course, not to kill is the beginning but not the end of our responsibility. May we all find the resources to respond to the face of the earth, to the call of the natural community.

Merleau-Ponty on Interrelating: The Intertwining, the Chiasm, the Flesh

Maurice Merleau-Ponty explicates our interrelational nature not only in the context of our involvement with other human beings, but in the context of all perceptual experience. And this clearly includes our interrelationships with the natural world. The cultural anthropologist and ecophilosopher David Abram (1996) is doing outstanding work in this territory, incarnating the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's wisdom and carrying it further. It is with great appreciation that I join him in this endeavor, offering here a complementary exploration.

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/1962) Merleau-Ponty demonstrates that perception is primary, both existentially and epistemologically. In the "Primacy of Perception" (Merleau-Ponty, 1947/1962), an essay summarizing the discoveries of his classic text, Merleau-Ponty (1947/1962) declares: "The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either

rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth" (p. 13). Supporting the concerns of our present study, Merleau-Ponty's insights into the primacy of perception simultaneously demonstrate the primacy of interrelating. Quite significantly, in the final sentence of his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty chose to leave his readers with the following quote from Antoine de Saint-Exupery: "Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 456).

Driven by the fantasy of splitting mind from heart and self from nature, modern and post-modern Western cultures valorize the (supposedly) disembodied intellect. Our cognitive abilities are great gifts, yet all too often we deaden our sensuous attunement with the world and thereby fabricate a desensitized, anesthetized existence. In contrast, as Merleau-Ponty (2003) shows, when truly alive "the body... is open in a circuit with the world" (p. 217). Such interrelating is an essential dimension of our very being, since the lived body is naturally "esthesiological" (p. 210): sensing, feeling, libidinal, erotic, desiring, empathic. Spontaneously "The body asks for something other than... its relations with itself" (p. 225). With these insights, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the interrelational structure of our embodied existence: "...the body as the power of *Einfuhlung* [feeling into, or empathy] is already desire, libido... The esthesiological structure of the human body is thus a libidinal structure... a relation of being and not knowledge" (p. 210). Therefore, he says, "there is a *natural* rooting for-other", an "intercorporiety" between my flesh and the flesh of the world (p. 210). As we shall discuss here, Merleau-Ponty's work discloses all being as interbeing, intertwining—and such interrelating is intrinsic to the very structure of subjectivity and lived reality.

Focusing on the inseparable relationship between our lived body and the phenomenal world, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) encourages us to appreciate that "every perception is a communication or a communion... a coition, so to speak, of our body with things" (p. 320). Everyday perceiving involves intimate intercourse between ourselves and the world, although this intimacy usually passes by unnoticed. We tend to live it prereflectively, anonymously, pre-personally, beneath the threshold of our conscious awareness. Nonetheless, we ceaselessly participate in an "intercorporeal" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 143) conversation involving self and world (and self and nature), one that is always already ongoing. As Abram (1996) describes, for Merleau-Ponty:

> ... participation is a defining attribute of perception itself. By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. (p. 57)

Realizing that perception is inherently participatory we realize at the same time that it is inherently interrelational.

In the years preceding his tragic death, inspired to take his earlier discoveries even deeper, Merleau-Ponty was exploring the ontological primacy of phenomena and the phenomenal world. To be clear (and to highlight interrelationality), a phenomenon is whatever is presenting, manifesting, showing itself (albeit never totally) in or as perceptual (interrelational) experience. As M.C. Dillon (1997) explains:

> A phenomenological ontology is an ontology in which being or reality is conceived as phenomenon.... In the case of Merleau-Ponty, the ontological thesis of the primacy of phenomena has to be interpreted in conjunction with its epistemological correlate, the thesis of the primacy of perception.... For Merleau-Ponty, the real world is the perceived world is the phenomenal world. (p. 156)

In working with these ideas, let us acknowledge a key challenge in Merleau-Ponty's endeavor to understand our lived existence. That is, dualistic language—especially self/other, self/world, body/world, human/nature—confounds us because such ways of speaking suggest an unquestionably real and necessary separation. As Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) stresses (in his working notes): "I—the other, an inadequate formula" (p. 220). Aware of this caveat, we could say that the phenomenal world manifests as the relational, dialogal interchange between the being of the self and the being of the other/world/nature. (Here, following Heidegger, "being" is a verb—be-ing—connoting the dynamic processes of existing, not a noun referring to an entity that exists statically.) Stated differently, with various nuances, the phenomenal world is the participatory, experiential, conversational, interrelational intertwining of perceiver and perceived, lived body and lived world, self and other, self and nature, our flesh and the flesh of the world.

Building on the relationally grounded epistemology of the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) went even further in the unfinished text published as *The Visible and the Invisible*. This radical work reveals the ontological primacy of our experiential interrelating. In his evocative working notes, he writes: "wild Being (= the perceived world)" (Merleau-Ponty, p. 170). Then he adds: "wild being which, ontologically, is primary" (p. 200). Linking these remarks with our previous discussion, we find that the perceptual or phenomenal world—which is the interrelational world—is ontologically primary. This implies that interrelating is our essence and nature. Thus Merleau-Ponty(1964/1968) finds an "Underlying kinship between essence and perception" (p. 220), or, in our terms, a kinship between essence and interrelating (since perceiving is inherently interrelational). Moving beyond classical ontologies that (try to) separate the phenomenal and essential worlds, Merleau-Ponty shows how this "essence... is an inner framework, it is not above the sensible world, it is beneath, or in its depth, its thickness" (p. 220). This essential "inner framework" is our interrelating in (and even *as*) the depth of the world. (We humans are nature *and* nature is distinctively other.) This is a radically "redefined" (or freshly experienced) essence, one that subverts the traditional "anti-thesis of fact and essence" because it is not "beyond but at the heart of that coiling up of experience over experience..." (Merleau-Ponty, pp. 112–113). Using this ontology to reinterpret subjectivity and lived reality *as* interrelational experiencing (rather than objective substances), Merleau-Ponty goes on to declare, "It is to experience therefore that the ultimate ontological power belongs... I am a field of experience..." (p. 110). Again, "we are experiences" (Merleau-Ponty, p. 115). We are our interrelating.

Remarkably, these profound insights are prefigured much earlier in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Circling back to that text for a moment, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological exploration of ordinary perceiving "discloses subject and object as two abstract 'moments' of a unique structure which is *presence*" (1945/1962, p. 430). When discussing subjectivity, Merleau-Ponty asserts that I am "identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field..." (1945/1962, p. 452). Presence, then, is intersubjective interrelating. Therefore presence might better be termed presenc*ing*, since presence is not a static substance. Rather, much more dynamically, presence is what "I am now realiz*ing*" in each moment of participating

with this specific world and with this unique other (always via my lived body and my particular culture, history, and language). Following both Merleau-Ponty and our direct experience, this intersubjective and interrelational presencing is who I am. No separate abiding self exists beyond or behind or above our interrelating.

Significantly, Merleau-Ponty's supreme philosophical notion, "the flesh," refers to an intrinsically interrelational phenomenon. "The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance" (1964/1968, p. 139), as he says. Instead, the flesh is a "concrete emblem of a general manner of being" (p. 147). Since the flesh refers to "a manner of being," what then is the nature such being? Let us remember that Merleau-Ponty joins Heidegger in affirming the dynamic quality of being: being is be-ing. Thus the flesh is neither consciousness nor thing, neither self nor world (as these terms are usually understood, each supposedly separate and independent of one another). Rather, the flesh is a dynamic happening or transpiring or presencing—or, anticipating our key point, a process of interrelating—involving and actually constituting (what are ordinarily called) self and world. Given this perspective, we still need to appreciate the distinctive be-ing of the flesh, the specific manner of this interrelational happening.

During the 1959–1960 academic period, about two years before his untimely death, Merleau-Ponty (2003) presented a series of lectures on "The Concept of Nature." There he began exploring the phenomenon of *Ineinander*, extending a notion he first came across in the work of Husserl and preparing the way for his philosophy of the intertwining/the chiasm/the flesh. *Ineinander* is a German word that means "in one another." Merleau-Ponty (2003) defines it as "the inherence of the self in the world and of the world in the self, of the self in the other and the other in the self" (p. 306). In our perceptual participation in everyday life, self and world and self and nature intertwine with one another. Seeing deeply into the self-world and human-nature *Ineinander*, Merleau-Ponty expresses the following aspiration: "The concern is to grasp humanity... not as another substance, but as interbeing..." (2003, p. 208). According to Merleau-Ponty's interrelational formulation, then, humanity *is* interbeing. To be is to inter-be. Interestingly, today the term "interbeing" is becoming well-known in the spiritual literature due to the evocative teachings of Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh (1988). Years before, the very same language was called forth in Merleau-Ponty's exploration.

Merleau-Ponty went on to develop his appreciation for the *Ineinander* into his notion of the chiasmic intertwining of "the flesh." In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he introduces "the intertwining—the chiasm" as a phenomenological description/interpretation of the flesh. Between the sensuously lived body and the phenomenal world, he says, "there is not a frontier, but a contact surface" (1964/1968, p. 271). Through this interrelational contact "the things pass into us as well as we into the things" (p. 123). We and the world are intertwining with one another, indeed interpermeating one another, in every moment of perceiving (see Adams, 1999). Merleau-Ponty asks us to consider the experience of one hand touching another while being reciprocally touched by the other (and to take this as a model for all perceiving). When I place one of my hands on the other, or when I shake hands with a friend, the crisscrossing tactile sensations arise as an intertwining of touching and being touched. To feel my hand touching warm beach sand is, correspondingly, to feel the sand touching my hand. We thus discover the interrelational nature of the "*chiasm*, that is: every relation with being is *simultaneously* a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is *inscribed* and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of" (Merleau-Ponty, p. 266). Our sensuous body is involved in a "participation and kinship with the visible" (p. 138). In this relationship between lived body and phenomenal world, "There is a reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other" (p. 138).

It does not go far enough to say that consciousness (the invisible) is always consciousness of something (the visible). Rather, the flesh is a manner of being, truly our essential being, one characterized by an indivisible, non-dual, chiasmic intertwining. And such being is always interbeing and interrelating. Describing this chiasmic intertwining (in ordinary perception!) of self with world, self with nature, seer with visible, toucher with tangible, listener with audible, our flesh with the flesh of the world, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) remarks that "through their commerce… each is only the rejoinder of the other, and which therefore form a couple, a couple more real than either of them" (p. 139). According to Merleau-Ponty, then, *what is most real is this interrelational couple—or coupling—of self with world, world with self.* This coupling *is* our self or subjectivity. And this radically interrelational (inter)subjectivity is what he means by the flesh. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explicitly describes "the flesh as *Self*" and goes on to observe that "the things are the prolongation of my body and my body is the prolongation of the world" (p. 255).

By exploring Merleau-Ponty's epistemological and ontological perspectives, we realize that both knowledge and being/reality are inherently interrelational. That is, knowledge arises in and as perceptual interrelating. Inquiring even more deeply we discover that what the world is, and who we are, *is* this interbeing. Therefore, building upon Dillon's formulation above: The real world is the perceived world is the lived world is the phenomenal world is the participatory world is the interrelational world. These are primary and most real, as Merleau-Ponty eloquently attests in one astonishing passage after another.

We *are* our interrelating: Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology demonstrates this so vividly. Yet this is not to claim that each momentary relational experience is who we in any final, totalizing, or permanent manner. Rather, this perspective—or better, this experiential revelation—discloses the absence in lived existence of any separate, substantial, independent, subjective self (as idealists would have it) or any separate, substantial, independent, objective world (as realists would have it). We can discover no enduring separate self behind our interdependently co-arising experience. (Thus, in this sense, when describing how interrelating is our essential nature, Merleau-Ponty and I are offering an *anti-essentialist* perspective.) To even speak independently of self and world (or self and nature) is misleading. Since both of these are secondary theoretical abstractions removed from our everyday (inter)existence, neither can claim priority. Instead, integrating the partial truths of transcendental idealism and empirical realism, Merleau-Ponty's work reveals the primacy in lived experience of the integrated yet differentiated phenomenal world, and thus the primacy of our ongoing, participatory interrelating.

Merleau-Ponty on Interrelating with Nature

Merleau-Ponty explicitly includes the world of nature in his interrelational philosophy. As we saw above, Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) teaches that "every perception is a communication or communion" (p. 320). He does not say 'every perception excluding those with the natural community.' On the contrary, he highlights our perceptual and conversational reciprocity with the natural world, declaring that "the whole of nature is… our interlocutor

in a sort of dialogue" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 320). Urging us to "grasp humanity... as interbeing" (p. 208)—as self and world inhering in one another (the *Ineinander*)—Merleau-Ponty (2003) affirms that "so too is the human to be taken in the *Ineinander* with animality and Nature" (p. 208). For Merleau-Ponty, chiasmic interbeing is the essence of humanity, the ontological structure of our being, and this clearly involves the human-nature interrelationship.

Building upon such insights, Abram (1996) eloquently conveys our essential interrelationality with kindred beings and presences of nature:

> Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils—all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of others. The landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams—these breathing shapes are our family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate. (p. ix)

Indeed, if we notice what is transpiring in any moment of our existence—if, coming to our senses, we let ourselves be more deeply and vividly aware than usual—we will discover that we are always already interrelating with the natural world. (It cannot be otherwise. We cannot not relate with the rest of nature.) In walking we are grounded in and supported by the body of the animate earth. With every bite of food, the flesh of animals and plants becomes our very flesh. In breathing, the earth's air becomes us. Correspondingly, our breath becomes the air of the earth. Self and nature are spontaneously interpermeating one another.

Going further, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) teaches that the ontological structure of all perceiving involves an interrelational reversibility—a "reversibility which is the ultimate truth" (p. 155), as he boldly declares. Herein, the perceiver is (simultaneously and reciprocally) perceived: the toucher is touched; the seer is seen, the listener is listened to, and so forth. Thus in seeing there is chiasmic reversibility through which I may "feel myself looked at by the things, my activity is equally passivity... the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen" (Merleau-Ponty, p. 139). Likewise, "The look... envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them... so that finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command" (Merleau-Ponty, p. 133). Seer and seen participate together in and as one single event of seeing, not one before the other nor one without the other.

The philosophical language is abstract, but the lived experience is not. It becomes obvious in the forest when, right over there behind the rhododendrons, I see a deer seeing me. And when, after enjoying the buzzing, whistling mating-song of a male black-throated green warbler—'*zee zee zee zee zoo zee!*'—but not yet able to see this beautiful bird, I step in for a closer look: And the singing stops. Then, when I sit still for a while, when I become quiet and unthreatening, the birdsong begins again. I listen to the warbler and the warbler listens to me. The little bird speaks with me and (via my gestural presencing) I speak with him. Such mutual (and mutually transformative) responsivity may also transpire over a longer time and in more subtle and complex ways. For example, when we destroy the bottomland forests and drain the wetlands in the southern United States, the ecological community responds: the ivory-billed woodpecker is nearly extinguished (as we have seen) and flooding becomes more destructive (as occurred tragically with hurricane Katrina). When we preserve such habitats, the ecosystem responds by resurrecting the ivory-bill and absorbing potential floodwaters. Notice that this latter response fosters the well-being of both humankind and the rest of nature.

More deeply, this relational intertwining is not merely a linear relationship of cause and effect, wherein a (supposedly) separate subject effects a (supposedly) separate object. Rather, through the chiasmic intertwining of all beings—through the interrelational structure of existence—the be-ing of each participant actually becomes incorporated into the be-ing of all other participants. (Such intertwining transpires across space and time, with every present experience gathering resonant influences from interrelationships that have occurred previously and elsewhere, and sending them onward and outward anew.) In this interpermeating communion, nature's subjectivity permeates and is permeated by my subjectivity. As Merleau-Ponty (2003) says, when interrelating with other beings and things (including those of the natural world), "they 'touch me' just as much as I touch them. ... I haunt them at a distance, they haunt me at a distance.... my within is an echo of their within" (p. 224). The warbler's singing imbues my being as my listening and seeing and walking imbues the warbler's being. It is an arbitrary abstraction to focus only on the warbler and me. In fact, there is no separate warbler and no separate me. Both of us are involved in and expressions of the integral human-nature community (within the local ecological and cultural systems, encompassing bioregion and society, and whole animate and sentient earth). The warbler is not singing for me but

for his mate (although his love-song changes to a warning cry when first faced with my presence); the mate who just flew to a nearby branch in order to eat a gnat; a gnat who was blown towards that tree by a breeze and who landed on a leaf to quench her thirst with a droplet of dew; a breeze that is the gentle leading edge of the thunderstorm I see rolling over the distant mountain ridge; and on an on. There is no end to these resonant interrelationships, all co-arising interdependently with one another. Thus, we and nature are always co-participating in and as an intersubjective field, network, or community (simultaneously natural and cultural), one that is infinitely deep and vast. By letting go of our habitual attitudes and mustering just a little attentiveness, such interrelational participation shows itself with vivid clarity.

The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty centers on the primacy of perception and corresponding primacy of the phenomenal world. His insights emerge from our everyday interrelating, interrelating that necessarily involves the community of nature (even if we remain unconscious of it or try to deny it). Just before his death, in what turned out to be his final working note, Merleau-Ponty emphasized that we must overcome a dualistic dissociation that has bedeviled us for hundreds of years: "Precisely what has to be done is to show that philosophy can no longer think according to this cleavage: God, man, creatures" (p. 274). This illusory separation impoverishes our relational sensitivity and generates great anguish in our everyday lives. The devastating consequences are all too evident. So alas, this is not just a challenge for philosophy, but for each of us and for our contemporary culture. Humankind's presumed (but delusional) separation from and elevation above nature is no longer tenable. Historically, with the emergence of the modern era, human culture undertook an important developmental movement: We differentiated ourselves from the rest of nature and empowered ourselves with increasing (albeit relative and situated) autonomy in our relations with nature and with the church and state. However, obsessively carried away by the powers of rationality and technology, such emancipatory "humanism" created not only a useful *differentiation* but a dreadful *dissociation* between humans and non-human nature (see Wilber, 2000). Our intimacy with (and within) the natural community was forcibly repressed. And as Freud and Jung taught, whatever is repressed returns in symptomatic form. We are still being haunted by this shadow of modernity, with the symptoms of our estrangement from

nature reappearing in the forms of ecological devastation and psycho-spiritual malaise.

Showing that such separation from nature is an abstract construction far removed from lived experience, Merleau-Ponty (2003) stresses the non-dual (non-separate yet still interrelational) structure of being: "The invisible, mind, is... the other side of the visible" (p. 212). Analogously, in one of the last insights he put to paper, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) affirms "Nature as the other side of man" (p. 274). Elsewhere he speaks of "the Nature that 'we are' ... the Nature in us" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, pp. 213–214). We *are* nature (while simultaneously existing as cultural beings): "We are part of some nature that is the world and Being" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 206). At the same time we may still appreciate the real otherness of the natural world, the significant differences between humankind and the rest of nature. Thus, humankind and nature are two different yet inseparable "sides" or participants an intersubjective community, always presencing together—intertwining, interpermeating, interbeing—and always already interrelating with one another in intimate conversation. Merleau-Ponty's premature death kept him from working through these profound insights. Yet to this very day he is helping us realize our inherent interrelatedness with the natural community, an interrelatedness which an essential expression of our very being and the being of nature. Guided by Merleau-Ponty, might we now listen freshly to the warbler; vividly feel the intertwining of our common flesh; and savor the singing as another side of our being and our responsivity as another side of the warbler's being?

Critiques of the Primacy of Interrelating

To acknowledge other perspectives, let me note that the primacy of interrelating might be questioned in three ways: 1) by an epistemological critique based on the common experience of misperception; 2) by an epistemological and ontological critique based on the way language and culture structure our subjectivity and socio-cultural reality; and 3) by an ontological critique based on the transpersonal experience of non-dual "oneness" in contemplative spirituality. Responding to these challenges requires more in-depth elaboration than is possible here, but a few comments may be helpful.

Regarding the first concern, we know that misperceptions and perceptual illusions can certainly generate misunderstanding. Yet, crucially, we can realize that our initial perception was mistaken only through further relational participation. And still further interrelating is the source for discovering/creating better understanding and more sensitive relating, a contextually situated understanding/relating which is practiced temporarily while being revised (via further interrelating) in accordance with the presenting circumstances. Indeed, authors such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas have demonstrated the limitations of conceiving "truth" as an accurate correspondence with a (supposedly) objective world. From the perspective of the present study, knowledge and truth emerge and evolve (secondarily) according to the quality of our (primary) interrelating. From this perspective, the phenomenon of misperception actually verifies the primacy of interrelating.

Regarding the second concern, the supposed primacy of language, post-structuralist research has helped us appreciate the powerful (and largely unconscious) ways in which language structures our experience, behavior, and subjectivity. Yet scholars such as Merleau-Ponty, Buber, and Abram have shown that language was originally founded upon something even more primary: our lived, perceptual participation with the phenomenal world, including the world of nature. This participatory interrelationship is what gives rise to language in the first place: in the collective evolution of the human species (interrelating with nature and the cultural community); in the individual development of the child (interrelating with one's parents and others); and in the presencing moment wherein our nascently meaningful interrelating (with oneself, others, world, and nature) emerges into language. Dillon (1997) summarizes Merleau-Ponty's view of language, a view guided by the thesis of the primacy of perception (and thus the primacy of interrelating): "one fundamental idea remains constant: language comes into being within the phenomenal world and could not exist without it or the human bodies interacting within it. Language is thus a founded phenomenon..." (p. 186). Language is founded, that is, on our lived engagement in the phenomenal world. Thus, he remarks, "In the beginning, there was the world" (Dillon, p. 223), meaning the world as experienced, the phenomenal world, the interrelational world. This world of interrelating is always already here from the beginning of human culture, the beginning of infancy, and the beginning of every moment as it is arising here and now. As Merleau-Ponty (2003) says, "There is a Logos of the natural esthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies" (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 212). Language arises out of and is grounded in our interrelational involvement in and with the life-world, including the world of nature. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty (1964/1968) asserts that "language... is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests" (p. 155). Authentic language does not merely represent or mirror the world of nature, nor does it totally structure our relationships with nature. Rather, language is one of the key forms in which the human-nature interrelationship comes into being and continues unfolding. Abram (1996) thus demonstrates how language originally emerged (and implicitly refers back to) our embodied interrelationship with the phenomenal world, and especially with the beings and presences nature. In his poetic words:

> It is true, of course, that our particular cultures and languages greatly influence our experience. But it is increasingly evident that our societies and even our languages have themselves been profoundly informed (and dynamically structured) by the diverse terrains, climatic cycles, and biological rhythms of the animate earth—by this more-than-human world with its thunderstorms and forests, its ravens and maliarial mosquitoes, its deserts and tumbling rivers and bison-stomped prairies. (Abram in Fisher, 2002, p. x)

There is no doubt that language is an immensely powerful force. Yet extreme versions of linguistic primacy can lead to the grandiose fantasy that humankind is totally self-sufficient and self-creating. From this stance, all other influences on our lived existence—including the infinitely powerful and pervasive presences of the other-than-human natural world—are ignored, subsumed under, or (ostensibly) controlled by exclusively human socio-cultural structures and discourses. (Such a stance ends up being a paranoid one, since it leaves us feeling cut off from our natural homeland and from our interrelational involvement with the rest of nature.) From an ecopsychological perspective, this belief is a pathological symptom, a post-modern version of modernity's narcissism and anthropocentrism. Concerning human existence today, we could say that interrelating and language/culture are co-primary, always manifesting together, reciprocally dependent upon and ceaselessly influencing one another, mutually founded and founding, without one coming before the other nor one coming without the other. Even so, it seems important to appreciate that culture and language are themselves intrinsically relational structures, at best collective

endeavors to foster meaningful, healthy, compassionate, and just interrelationships. Therefore, along with Merleau-Ponty and Abram, we can acknowledge the importance of language and culture while affirming the primacy of interrelating.

Regarding our view that interrelating is primary, the third concern has to do with the nature of so-called "oneness" in spiritual realization: How can there be any interrelating if there is only one? Significantly, great saints and sages spanning the world's wisdom traditions generally agree—speaking from direct contemplative experience—that "the One" and "the Many" (or "the Tao" and "the ten thousand things") are inherently non-dual, inseparable, and ultimately identical. We could say that "oneness" and "manyness" are differing (yet equally primary and integral) manifestations of one another. "Emptiness is no other than form, form is no other than emptiness" (Bercholz & Kohn, 1993, p. 155), as the Heart Sutra (of Mahayana Buddhism) classically articulates this experience. Similarly, in the words of Jesus: "It is I who am the All.... Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find Me there" (Robinson, 1977, p. 126) Likewise, William Blake (1988) declares that "He who would see the Divinity must see him in his Children... in friendship & love... so he who wishes to see... a perfect Whole Must see it in its Minute Particulars" (p. 251). Thus, every particular interrelational experience in the world of the many—every situated encounter with an absolutely unique singular other, a lightening bolt (let us say)—is simultaneously a manifestation of oneness (whether we realize this or not): *just this* flashing comes forth *as* the whole cosmos! And every experience of (or *as*) oneness occurs via our situated, embodied, interrelational participation with a particular manifestation of the many, with a singular unique other: the whole cosmos comes forth *as just this* flashing! "Each thing reveals the One, the One manifests as all things," in the wakeful words of Zen ancestor Seng-ts'an (c. 600/2001, n.p.). Here the great contemplatives join Merleau-Ponty (1947/1967) in affirming the "absolute" while bringing it "down to earth" (p. 13). Once again, interrelating shows itself to be primary.

Interrelating as Our Essence, Our Calling, and Our Path

Humans are interrelational beings. In every moment of our life, whether we are aware of it or not, we are always already interrelating: with our self,

others, the socio-cultural world, and the community of nature. Indeed, to be human is to participate in interrelationships. (*How well* we interrelate is another issue.) In the wake of modernism, after centuries of celebrating the power of the *supposedly* separate subject and the *supposed* autonomy of humankind from the rest of nature, we are beginning to realize our inherent relationality. This is not to deny our ability to participate in the world as distinctive, relatively autonomous, and actively engaged agents. Such individual agency is an important dimension of our existence. Yet there is a growing appreciation that all agency is "agency-in-communion" (p. 71), in Ken Wilber's (2000) illuminating phrase. That is, human agency is inherently agency-in-relationship-with-others, with society, and with the other-than-human natural community. From diverse perspectives (e.g., ontological, ecological, psychological, socio-cultural, spiritual, ethical), and from diverse traditions of inquiry (e.g., phenomenological, Buddhist, psychoanalytic), we consistently discover the primacy of interrelating. In the present study we have focused on psychological insights from the phenomenological tradition. If this were not already a long paper, I would offer complementary interpretations from Zen Buddhism and the relational schools in psychoanalysis. This consensus across disciplines is profoundly important, suggesting that our essential nature involves interrelating with others.

By essence or nature I do not mean some stable, permanent, unchanging, hidden substance that exists above or behind or beyond the phenomenal world. Rather, speaking psychologically as well as ontologically, I am saying that interrelating is an essential and inherent aspect of being human. It is a key manifestation of what it is to be human (but not the only one). The ways in which we interrelate vary widely across individuals, cultures, and historical eras, but the dynamic, participatory process of interrelating is always present. Even the hermit became a hermit via a relational response to life's circumstances. And such a solitary man or woman continues interrelating, for example, with him or herself, with books, and with the environment around the hermitage. Even in deep dreamless sleep—prepersonally, before being reflectively conscious—we continue interrelating with the night's darkness and quiet; with the bed's support and blanket's warmth; and perhaps with the reassuring rhythm of our beloved's breathing. Our essential interrelatedness, then, is our ever-present responsive involvement with self, others, world, and nature. We have seen how Buber, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty all affirm a kind of interrelational essence,

each attesting that our interrelating in everyday life is essential. Stated differently, our essential nature *is* our interrelating. Surely this includes our interrelating with the natural community.

I understand that speaking of any version of "essential nature" is dangerous (and easily misunderstood) in light of post-modern research regarding cultural and historical diversity and the contextual character of meaning. Countless events of atrocious oppression and deadly violence, driven by misguided essentialist fantasies, have taught us to be suspicious of such claims. Yet, thinking critically, we can honor differences while appreciating characteristics we all share in common. And a life of interrelating is an existential given of the human condition. Correspondingly, the impoverishment of interrelating lies at the heart of *our* suffering (with "our" signifying individuals, the human community, and the rest of the natural world together). Thus we are called to bring forth ever deeper awareness, understanding, and compassion in our interrelationships, thereby fostering the well-being of "all our relations" (in the eloquent words of the Lakota Sioux).

This means that while we are interrelational by nature—ontologically, ecologically, psychologically, and spiritually—*in order to be fully human (and fully our distinctive, authentic self) we must consciously cultivate our relational capabilities.* Buber invokes this deep need to move beyond superficial I-It encounters: "And in all seriousness of truth, listen: without It [i.e., I-It relationships] a human being cannot live. But whoever lives only with that is not human" (1923/1970, p. 85). This powerful testimony is simultaneously an ethical and developmental appeal: To be fully human we are obliged to open ourselves for I-Thou interrelating. Significantly, Freud made a similar claim. As he wisely said, a truly healthy person is able "to love and to work" (Freud, quoted in Erikson, 1990, p. 102). Similarly, seasoned psychotherapists consider the quality of one's relationships to be the best indicator of health (or its lack). All of these experiences and teachings lead to a crucial insight. *We realize that interrelating is our essence and our calling, what we are given and what we are summoned to bring to fruition, our ground and our aspiration, our nature and our culture.* And, regarding this process of deepening our consciousness and ethical engagement, we realize that *our path is itself an interrelational path.* That is, via ongoing interrelationships, our various paths lead (potentially) from the kind of interrelating which is given ontologically (and is always already

occurring, albeit mostly unconsciously) to our most sensitive and authentic interrelating (which must be cultivated consciously). Although we are always already involved in relationships, our conventional ways of interrelating are often confused, immature, underdeveloped, and therefore not (yet) capable of fostering the well-being of others, of nature, or of our most authentic selves. This implies that each of us and every culture is responsible for developing our inherent interrelational potentials. In practice this typically involves transforming narcissistic neglect and exploitation into open, intimate, compassionate participation and conversation. In this spirit, interrelating is our essence, our calling, and our path.

Would We Treat Our Children Like We Treat Nature?

In my view, faced with the narcissistic ethos prevalent today (and perhaps throughout history), with our misidentification as separate egoic subjects entitled (even encouraged) to focus on our own self-interests above all, and with the immense suffering that this generates, it would be a great accomplishment if our culture(s) would simply awaken to the primacy of interrelating. Yet even further, once we realize clearly that humans are relational beings—that our subjectivities and lived realities are inherently interrelational—then it becomes obvious that we cannot exclude the natural world from our sphere of interrelating, nor from the ethical call to interrelate with awareness, wisdom, and compassion. In fact, when we together are willing go this far, this deep into our interrelational experience, we find ourselves already participating in a psycho-cultural therapy, already transcending the haunting maladies of narcissism, human/nature dissociation, and human-centeredness.

As I have endeavored to show—based upon evidence from our direct experience (when we attend more deeply than usual) and upon the profound teachings of Buber, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty—we are involved in an essential interrelationship with the natural community. It is our nature to interrelate with nature. But the evidence is all around us that industrial/technological/corporate culture typically treats nature as a mere resource to be exploited according to our ego-centric and anthropocentric wishes. As Heidegger (1954/1977a) put it, "Man… exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth" (p. 27). From this narcissistic stance, "The earth itself can show itself only as the object of assault…" (Heidegger,

1952/1977b, p. 100). Similarly, the great ecologist Aldo Leopold (1949) taught that "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us" rather than "a community to which we belong" (p. viii). Indeed, we are like the original Narcissus who not only rebuffs the affections of all others, but refuses to encounter the natural world right before his eyes. The structure and dynamics of our alienation from nature are much the same as our alienation from each other. Looking directly into a beautiful pond, Narcissus sees only his own reflection. Looking at a glorious mountain eco-community, we see only a coal deposit or timber harvest. Looking at the smooth gray bark of a great old beech tree, we see only a surface on which to carve our name. In all three cases, rather than being welcomed as a fellow subject the other is immediately reduced to the same. Perversely, nature is treated as merely a material extension of humanity. Significantly, Narcissus's unwillingness to relate with any real other (including those in the natural world) is precisely what killed him. And since humankind and the rest of nature exist together in intimate communion, we must recognize that *we actually are treating our children like we're treating nature.* Poisoning the earth poisons our loved ones. This is undeniable. On the other hand, when we bring awareness and love into our relationships with the natural community, we are truly loving our children.

All animals live off of other life. Being animal—and this includes being a human animal—requires the destruction of others, requires the killing of some of our fellow participants in the community of nature. This is one of the tragic dimensions of our existence, although it's often ignored. Yet the catastrophe is not that humans use the rest of nature as a resource, but rather—ignoring that we are even engaged in a relationship with nature in the first place (as if we had any choice in the matter!)—that this is by far the predominant way we treat the natural world. Even more troubling is that we do so mostly unconsciously, with dreadfully little awareness of the consequences of our blind and often violent exploitation. And we seem equally unaware of the opportunity for another way of interrelating. However, the very fact that we must necessarily kill to sustain our existence makes it all the more crucial that we become as conscious and responsible as possible in our interrelationships with each other and the sentient earth.

Humans are relational beings, and our interrelationship with nature is one of the most significant relationships in all of our lives (whether we appreciate it or not). We cannot choose to not relate with the rest of nature.

Interrelating with the natural world exists prior to any such freedom. There is no human being, no human community, no human culture that is not inextricably involved with nature. At issue is *how* we will interrelate: unconsciously or consciously, narcissistically or lovingly, exploitively or generously. I do not mean to oversimplify. In the challenging circumstances of daily life these alternatives often blend into one another; or one predominates according to the present context. We are always partly conscious and partly not. To be fully human is difficult. It is not easy to embrace the call to live responsibly, consciously, lovingly, justly, and generously. Nonetheless, it is even harder to do otherwise. That is, when we live (mostly) unconsciously, narcissistically, and exploitatively we generate even greater difficulties for ourselves and others. In truth, both psychotherapists and ordinary citizens know all too well that unconscious relationships do not work. And we also know that we have some choice in how we interrelate.

Our ecopsychological crisis is severe and complex. We are being called to develop a psycho-cultural therapy, yet there are no easy solutions here. Still, I believe three phenomena are imperative for real transformation. First, as an ongoing source of orientation, it is crucial for us to (re)connect consciously with our direct, interrelational experiences within the community of nature, allowing ourselves to be touched deeply by these encounters. (Becoming intimately familiar with our local bioregion, our distinctive home territory, is especially important.) A mutually enhancing relationship between two people depends upon frequent experiential engagement coupled with an evolving renegotiation of the relationship based upon such encounters. The same holds true in our relationship with the rest of the natural world. In this way of interrelating we transcend our habitual narcissism; open to the expressive solicitations of the beings and presences of nature; engage in a heart-felt conversation with these kindred others; attend carefully to their responses; offer our response in return; and then go on (repeatedly) to reengage in further conversations. Are these not the characteristics of any good relationship?

If we continue to extinguish our direct encounters with nature we will soon forget the sacred glory of this sentient earth: infinitely deep and vulnerable and precious. And thus we will leave ourselves no experiential ground for caring at all. Therefore, direct experience is the foundational source. However, the resolution of our crisis depends not only on how we humans relate with nature, but on how we relate with each other. This leads us to two other key phenomena in our emerging psycho-cultural

therapy. It is crucial that we develop both interpersonal relationships and collective socio-cultural discourses/structures/practices that cultivate intimate, ethical, ecocentric involvement with the rest of nature. The interpersonal realm involves sharing experiences, stories, and conversations with friends, mentors, and other kindred co-conspirators (including psychotherapists). In the socio-cultural realm, a few diverse examples include ecocentric values and ways of speaking; ecopsychological education for children and adults; preservation of species and habitats; socially engaged action; environmental law; ecological conscience in corporations, spiritual organizations, political leaders, and the field of psychology; development of green energy; community gardening; and rigorous research including further work in ecological psychology. (Spanning categories, other skillful means include ecologically sensitive art and literature; and experiential practices that foster awareness and transpersonal development beyond the skin-bounded ego, practices such as meditation, contemplative prayer, sensory attunement, and dream-work.) These three key modes of engagement—direct experience, interpersonal collaboration, and socio-cultural support—work synergistically, each complementing and being complemented by the others.

Domination, mastery, control, exploitation, and even annihilation: These atrocious ways of relating to the natural world are the norm today. However—and this is a hopeful opening—we act in these ways not because we are evil or intentionally malicious, but because we are confused and frightened. Indeed, we are desperately confused about who we and the world and nature are, and about how to respond to the great challenges of being human. (Here ontology and ethics are inherently interdependent.) We (mis)take ourselves to be merely separate egoic subjects and we (mis)take nature to be merely a stockpile of material objects. Thus, lost and afraid, we live as a partial self reacting partially to a partial world. Although we correctly intuit that we and the world are infinitely deeper than this, we do not know what to do with this intuition. Therefore, feeling that something is missing, we strive compulsively to fill this experienced lack by exploiting nature and pursuing other pseudo-remedies (such as consuming material products), all equally doomed to failure because they never get close to addressing our basic confusion and fear (see also Wilber, 1980; Loy, 1996).

In contrast, we have the potential to discover and embrace our interrelational nature, appreciating consciously that interrelating is our

essence, our calling, and our path. When we realize in a vivid and heartfelt manner that we are inherently relational beings (far transcending our ego-centered subjectivity), and when we know ourselves to be participatory subjects essentially involved with fellow subjects in both the natural and cultural communities, then ethical courses of (inter)action become clearer. For example, with this emerging awareness, we may be guided by the characteristics of healthy, loving, and just relationships with other human beings. At my best, how do I relate with my intimate partner, children, friends, and neighbors? Would I want to treat another person like our culture treats nature? Would I want to be treated like this? What about my daughter or son? Would I want my beloved child to be dominated, mastered, controlled, exploited, annihilated? Human relationships that center on these modes of interaction are clearly pathological, unethical, and often criminal. So also in our interrelationships with the community of nature.

Yet there are other ways, healing alternatives, transformative relational paths. We are interrelational beings by our nature or essence, prior to any freedom or choice. But—even within the context of a culture maniacally driven to destroy nature—we are relatively free to choose how we take up and cultivate our interrelating. Herein lives our responsibility for answering the urgent appeal from our kindred participants in this shared earth community. And since nature's well-being is inseparable from our own, this summons comes not only from the beings and presences of the natural world, but equally from our children, sisters, brothers, neighbors, strangers across town and around the earth, and all the generations to follow.

How shall we respond?

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