From ego to eco: re-orienting for processual ontology in the “Dao-Field”

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Abstract

The planet Earth has become increasingly susceptible to human-induced (anthropogenic) ecological disasters. The currently raging COVID-19 pandemic adds to the vast scale of destruction and suffering that humanity and the planet are experiencing. In this paper we explicate the meaning of ‘human-induced’ destruction in the terms of the damaging and hurting metaphysics (beyond the physical or material) that modern humanity has been entertaining in their conceptual and emotional minds and materially projecting onto the world. In turn, the damaging and hurting metaphysics is explicated in the terms of atomism that conceives all existents as self-existing and independent, necessarily engaged in competition against each other for survival. We propose to replace such metaphysics with one of the processual ontologies, such as that of Alfred North Whitehead, in which humans see themselves and each other as continuously interfusing and co-creatively re/e/merging relata of complete interdependence. This way, all of us, all the time, become “one with The Ten Thousand Things.”—an expression in Chinese for the phenomenal world of thriving diversity and conviviality. We further explore self-cultivation of inner work that aids the shift from *ego self* to *eco self*, such as meditative and arts-based practices.

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Resume

地球は、人爲的(人間の活動による)生態学的大惨事の影響をますます受けやすくなっている。現在、猛威をふるっている新型コロナウイルス感染症の世界的流行は、人類と地球が陥っている大々的な破壊と被害をもたらしている。この論文で`私たちは「人爲的」破壊について詳説する。本来の意味を見失いつつある形而上学の(物理的・物質的なものを超越した)観点から見て、現人類は概念的・感情的な心の中で`物質的に世界に投影している。同様に、その形而上学は、すべての存在を自己存在と独立しているものとして必然的に生存のために互いに競争していると考える原子論の観点から詳説される。私たちは、このような形而上学をアルフレッド・ノース・ホワイトヘッドも提唱したプロセス存在論のひとつに代替することを提案する。それは、人間が自身と他のものは絶えず緋い混じり、完全な相互依存の共創的な出現、再出現、融合だと見ることである。これによって私たちはみな、常に「万物とともにあるひとつ」となる。これは、多様性と共生の現象界を示す中国語の表現のひとつでもある。私たちはさらに、エゴセルフ (ego self) からエコセルフ (eco self) へのシフトを促すため瞑想やアートベースの包括的な省察を用いて内面的な自己修養を探求する。

Ku-Shan was asked, “What is the basic object of investigation?”

He replied, “How has one gotten to such a state?” (Smith 2020, p. 16)

Heesoon: Dear Coauthor Colleagues, thank you for coming to the edge of the “Dao Field.” Many years ago, Avraham Cohen (2009) coined the term, “Dao Field,” to refer to the unbound, impossible-to-pin-down-with-words, space of being/becoming that the Daoist refers to as the Dao. I “picture” it as the original undifferentiated wholeness out of which the Ten Thousand Things manifest. I like the addition of “Field” to “Dao” to capture the meaning that Professor Roger T. Ames elucidated of ‘tao’ (Ames 1989): namely that ‘tao’ or Dao is a field that we can walk and pass through, making our way. Dao is, thus, both unknown and at the same time knowable through our walking and path-finding. Hence the Dao Field welcomes us approaching it with process-oriented views, dispositions, and attitudes. Colleagues, let us at once begin our exploration of the Dao Field!

Pause and re-orient

Summer 2020: as the four coauthors in British Columbia, Canada, write this paper, wildfires are raging across California, Oregon, and Washington States, burning millions of acres. Here in Vancouver, thick smoke has prompted Environment Canada to issue health warnings. Wildfires in the US coincide with the COVID-19 pandemic, which is hitting the United States particularly hard. Ramifications of human-induced ecological destruction have led to simultaneous crises. For this reason, humanity is said to have entered a geological epoch bearing the name, the *Anthropocene*, to note significant human impact on Earth’s ecosystems. We the authors of this chapter see that there is no more critical time than now to stop, pause, and re-search how modern societies, steeped in the worldview of human dominance and materialistic progress, have brought ourselves to this point of crisis. Out of this re-search—searching again

the inner and outer dimensions of our being—we hope to offer some guiding, or at least some provocations on how to re-orient ourselves.

David Orr (1994) diagnosed the source of our trouble, “a metaphysical disorder,” reminding us that the disaster in the outer, physical environment is a manifestation of what goes on within us. What goes on within us is meta-physical in nature: that is, they are not empirical, external objects that can be observed and studied. They are beliefs, values, percepts, and accompanying stories, emotions, and sensations: hence, they are meta-physical, meaning, beyond the physical. What are the stories of life, reality, and humanity that our mainstream North American cultures, influenced by the Modern Western (henceforth, ModWest) worldview, have been telling ourselves and that have brought us to this point of crisis today?

The contemporary North American—and to a great extent, globalized—vision of the ‘Good Life’ comes out of the dominant metaphysics of anthropocentrism, logocentrism, technocentrism, and a host of other centricisms, that affirms human supremacy, especially a techno-rational capability applied to the subjugation of the planet. This vision fulfills humanity’s materialistic and consumeristic desires by dominating, controlling, plundering, destroying, and poisoning the entire planet, resulting in the latter’s demise and destruction. Ironically, this situation is referred to as *human progress*. Ronald Wright (2004) who wrote an influential book based on his Massey Lecture series, *A Short History of Progress*, articulated the situation succinctly: that humans are fouling the only nest they have, which is the planet Earth, in pursuit of endless materialistic progress. Based on disparities in consumption, some of us participate in this fouling far more than others. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that all of us are complicit insofar as we are all part of the globally operating economic system of late-capitalism (or hyper-capitalism, or neoliberalism). This nest is also home to all other nonhuman beings inhabiting the planet. Their extinction, which has been happening at an alarming speed, and our own species demise, which, too, is being projected, are intertwined. *The alarming rate of mass extinction is inextricably bound to the fate of the human species.*

And yet, humanity has been in deep denial about our implication and responsibility in the human-induced planetary disaster. By externalizing the problems to various causes and enemies to be located in the outer world, solutions to the problems we face are externalized as well. The authors of this paper are not against responding to and fixing disastrous situations. Emergency is emergency, and we need to deploy our ambulances in response. But if our efforts stop at the level of emergency care, disasters will continue to follow, most likely on a greater scale and with greater force. If what is causing the problem that we are facing in the present has resulted from the way we see, think and feel about the world, as Orr pointed out, then we need to re-think and change our ways, despite the difficulty and challenge involved in this change project. Speaking both metaphorically and literally, the biggest challenge lies in a preoccupation with calling the ambulance, rushing to the hospital, and receiving one emergency care. We have little thought other than anxiety and fear related to our survival amid disaster.

Taking seriously Orr’s understanding that the planetary disaster is *meta*-physical disorder, in this chapter, we the authors will inquire into the hegemonic metaphysics that has been guiding, overtly and covertly, the modern, the postmodern, and globalized humanity. The purpose of our inquiry is not just to identify problematic metaphysics, but to disrupt the dominant metaphysics, as well as explore alternative metaphysics.

Atomism contra holism

In the history of thought, especially in the hitherto hegemonic system of what is conventionally known as *Western Philosophy*, there have been two distinct (even if not separate) thought systems: the atomistic (e.g., Democritus' view of world as composed of atoms) and the processual (e.g., Heraclitus' view of life as flux and flow). It turns out that the atomistic worldview played the dominant role throughout the Western world, whereas the processual worldview was and remains marginal, albeit significant. The same cannot be said of traditional or classical Eastern Philosophy or philosophies (Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, etc.). There seems to be in fact the opposite tendency: many of the traditional Eastern systems of thought prioritize processual views of the world. Some form of dynamic holism, in which everything is interconnected and in flux, is a common template in the history of Eastern thought. All this is, of course, a generalization, and we the authors of this paper do not intend to go into the details, as our interest lies in making a case for shifting towards holism in response to Orr's call for redressing the metaphysical disorder of our time. With that goal in mind, and within the context of limited space, we contrast holism to atomism to draw out the practical implications of inhabiting one worldview in comparison to the other.

In essence, atomism sees the world as an aggregate of categorically separate objects or entities. If these objects are related at all, their relation is an extrinsic matter and does not change the subjects of relationality in any radical way, for they are categorically separate, and therefore, fundamentally independent from each other. This conceptualization opens a Pandora's Box. If beings and things are separate, then they can be treated as independent units. One consequence of separation is the temptation to compare and evaluate according to arbitrary criteria. Before long, we may start to see that, for example, humans are superior to other creatures; and some human beings are better than some other human beings, and so on, which is the very kind of everyday thinking and discourse we encounter in our culture. Given the social and evolutionary context we see ourselves inhabiting, namely, *survivalism*, it makes sense that survival for the atomists would mean individuals competing against each other and winning (or losing).

If we were to subscribe to holism, then, surely, our practice of comparison and competition for survival would appear very different? Probably comparison and competition would continue; however, we suspect that they would have a qualitatively different look and feel to its practice. If we were to subscribe to holism, not just theoretically but experientially, then, comparison and competition would not be practiced to the point of our losing the basic sense of interconnectivity of all parts, as is the case in atomism. A simple example to illustrate the last point: is one's hand better than one's foot? Is one's liver competing against one's kidney? While these are individual organs or body parts, such comparisons for competition make no sense, precisely because these organs and body parts are not separate and independent from each other. They are, whilst distinct at some levels of structure and organization, intimately interconnected to each other, and they form one whole—the body. In fact, fundamental meaning of 'body' is this wholeness of interconnected parts.

This view echoes Arne Naess's conception of 'gestalt ontology,' in which he characterizes gestalt as an integration of the subjective, objective, and mediational aspects of the "human experience of reality" (2005, vol. 10, p. 462). Naess emphasizes that these three aspects cannot be separated and singled out as "sub-units" of a singular comprehensive actuality. According to Naess, although we may of necessity separate these three aspects in "discourse, thinking, and communication," such separation has no bearing on their

fundamental and continuing integration. Neither do gestalts comprise the 'contents' of reality, because, according to this line of thought, "what is real is more than the content of reality" (2005, vol. 10, p. 462).

If we were to extend this understanding, we would *see* that one body of being, however small or big, is interconnected to every other body of being through myriads of interpenetrating and co-regulating dynamic influences that make up the whole phenomenal world like ours. At this point of embodied understanding, we could see that the meaning of individual becomes *in-divisible*. When we keep this understanding in mind, comparison, whilst practiced, would not lead to win-or-lose, or even life-and-death, competition; and competition would not result in losing sight of the whole, which encompasses both competition and collaboration, the individual and the collective.

Atomism runs counter to the way our phenomenal world actually operates. In other words, atomism describes a world that is not ours. Holism describes our world: all parts and all beings within our phenomenal world are interconnected, through and through. Therefore, if we humans carried on and conducted our business of life *as if* atomism describes our world, then the result of this *delusion* is destruction, which is what we are witnessing today. Destruction results from going against reality, and going against reality is called delusion. Delusion is often not detected until we witness pervasive destruction. Put another way, if we want to know which worldviews or metaphysics are delusive and which are not, we suggest that it is essential to look at the practical accumulative results of embracing a particular worldview. If the nature of the world is interconnection and interpenetration, then practicing and living out atomism over a substantial period of time would result in depleted lands and a degraded planet.

In the next section, we explore an influential modern processual ontology in the western philosophical tradition, that of Alfred North Whitehead, with a hope of garnering some deep insights from his work for our practical purpose of fostering a paradigm shift. We will also make a quick dip into some examples from the Eastern traditions, acknowledging that there are deep living traditions in other cultures. Situated within the atomistic paradigm of the Modern West, it is important for us to show that the Western tradition that has been hitherto dominated by atomism is not without a well-developed process ontology of its own that can provide resources from within to counter atomism. We will explore several illuminating points in Whitehead's process work that will be helpful to our project of urging a paradigm shift from individual social atoms to intrinsically relational beings. As relational beings we seek to creatively engage in ways of mutually, reciprocally, and dynamically influencing and shaping each other in harmony with the principle of interconnectivity and interpenetration. Paradoxically, there is room for atomism. In this relational work, as long as atomism is one part amongst others, atomism can make its own contribution to the whole, which is a very different story from atomism as a totalizing discourse.

The processual ontology

Scott: I am delighted by the physical and meta-physical simultaneity that Avraham's term conveys ('Dao Field,' which could be read as pathways through and within a 'range'). The Dao field, to me, is a participatory affair, where the 'field' arises with being but, similar to how John Gibson describes his concept of affordances, is not exclusively subjective or objective, "physical or psychical" (2015, p. 121). This intertwined interior and exterior continuum is available to us at any time.... we don't

necessarily have to go anywhere or do anything special to observe it because it is happening all the time, and we are never outside of it. I have come to understand and articulate this in certain ways from the perspective of zazen practice and, more recently, gestalt theories of mind and environment, but I really came to this accidentally as an artist and musician, simply by paying a kind of relaxed attention to what I was thinking, feeling, and doing. Making art, like any number of activities, isn't really about abstract ideas like 'creativity' and 'imagination,' but about embodying and becoming sensitized to the world around us and our experience of it. The art-making process has shown me that we are self and environment, self and other, but also that we have a degree of influence in shaping all of these, as well as the opportunity to be shaped by what we manifest and what we encounter! In some respects, we are the field, which implies we are also elements of a 'field' for other entities. The 'field' has no real boundary, but unfolds to new horizons in each moment.

As indicated, the processual ontology is not exclusive to Eastern philosophy. Heraclitus is known as a process philosopher from ancient Greek times; but process philosophy finds a modern proponent in the British mathematician, logician, and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead. Whitehead's process thought proposes that continuity (potential) in combination with atomicity (discrete form as 'actuality' or 'concrescence' in Whitehead's terminology) comprises the basic condition of the universe (Whitehead 1949, p. 101; 1978, p. 61). In *Process and Reality* (1929), he describes this condition as an infinite web of interrelated 'occasions' or 'events', terms which denote both physical and metaphysical or conceptual entities. Whitehead asserts that there is no privileged 'occasion' walled off from 'relata,' or, to restate the principle in more prosaic terms, there is no possibility of being exempt from influencing or being influenced, whether the elements are physical entities, thoughts, or discrete processes on a vast or subatomic scale.

According to Whitehead's elaborate system, everything can be conceived as exhibiting something like particle and wave or energy-like properties; reality is constituted by a micro- and macrocosmic array of discrete elements ('actual entities' or 'actual occasions') that are simultaneously *comprised of* and *within* a constant flux of accumulation, dispersal, and state of mutual influence. This view is in accordance with contemporaneous research in quantum mechanics and relativity with which Whitehead was familiar at the time he was developing his philosophy of science, which itself formed the basis of his metaphysical writing (Whitehead 1949, p. 132). It is this basic condition of simultaneous influence and differentiation that infuses his metaphysics. This is an important point for us who are assessing merits and challenges of atomism and processual view.

Carlo Rovelli's description of quantum mechanics, here drawn from the entry on Whitehead in the Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accurately mirrors the basic premise elaborated upon in "Process and Reality," partly relieving us of the intricate explanations that would be required to unpack Whitehead's complex terminology:

In the world described by quantum mechanics there is no reality except in the relations between physical systems. It isn't things that enter into relations but, rather, relations that ground the notion of "thing." The world of quantum mechanics is not a world of objects: it is a world of events. Things are built by the happenings of elementary events... (Rovelli, in Desmet et al. 2018)

Whitehead extends this basic emphasis on dynamic interrelation to speculate on differentiation as a source of creative novelty (Whitehead 1978, p. 21). Hence what Whitehead terms 'actual entities' or 'actual occasions'—a definite coalescence of relata, are

potentially changed through the absorption of aspects of whatever is encountered in the 'nexus,' or web of relations (Whitehead 1978, p. 231). Because Whitehead is speaking of both physical and conceptual or metaphysical entities at all times (which is partly the difficulty and evocative resonance of *Process and Reality*), he is suggesting that everything within the physical, conceptual, or metaphysical realm potentially changes everything else through mutual influence (Whitehead 1929, p. 21). This mutual influence, he suggests, is the source of the evolutionary creative momentum generated by all phenomena (Whitehead 1978, pp. 244–245).

It is instructive to return to several related ideas that were the focus of Whitehead's philosophy of science, all of which have bearing on our present discussion: the "bifurcation of nature into two systems of reality" (Whitehead 2015, p. 30), the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" (Whitehead 1949, p. 52), and his subsequent meditations on the relations between variant modes of human experience, particularly with regard to conflicts between science and spiritual or affective aspects of experience.

The "bifurcation of nature" refers to a paradox that Whitehead perceived in physics, rooted in the historical and philosophical debates that informed modern experimental methodology. Although initially relying on sense-data, physicists construct conceptual and speculative systems stripped of supposed 'secondary' (sense-related) and 'tertiary' (aesthetic, ethical, and religious) qualities (Whitehead 2015, p.148). Yet, as with the debate between Rationalism and Empiricism, there is ultimately no basis for abstraction except as derived from sense-related phenomena, so it is questionable whether or not, for example, selective abstract quantifications such as mass, frequency, or distance can be rightly elevated to the status of 'primary' reality, and all other qualities relegated to secondary or tertiary status as supposedly illusory derivatives. Whitehead not only took the position that each of these modes of experience had at least equal claim as 'primary,' but that they were in fact interdependent (Whitehead 2015, p.148).

In a similar vein, the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" refers to the confusion of abstract conceptualization as something akin to physical 'fact' or reality, which can engender identification with and defense of ideas as conceptual objects. The subtle confusion of abstractions as concrete 'realities' can presumably be manifested across a broad range of human endeavours, resulting in, one might extrapolate, dogmatic belief systems, unexamined biases, or inflexible ideological stances. This is perhaps one of the reasons why Whitehead never forces a hierarchical distinction between, for example, the 'truth' of the affect of viewing a sunset from the 'truth' of an understanding of the optics and physics giving rise to such an experience, or, as he puts it, "... the exclusion of value from the essence of matter of fact" (Whitehead 1949, p. 96). Each of these constitute one among a variety of potential modes of perception. Although in certain respects one mode is not necessarily more or less 'real' than the other, distinctions can still be made with regard to the degree to which something corresponds to, for example, physical actuality or subjective intuitions. In this way, not all modes of perception are 'equal' in all regards. This partly explains Whitehead's injunction that speculative philosophy, despite being a project characterized by the free rein of imagination, must nevertheless correspond to common experience and sense, and whose 'generalizability' (in the same sense as demonstrated in classic experimental physics) is a measure of the efficacy or validity of its proposals (Whitehead 1978, p. 5).

Although Daoism and Buddhism may be the most familiar process-oriented counterpoints to materialist ontologies associated with Western thinking, these traditions, too, are not completely devoid of the experimental spirit with which Whitehead's metaphysics is closely aligned. The *Kālāma* (*Kesamutti*) Sutta, for example, is suggestive of an ideal

manifestation of Western experimental process, although, to draw a fair contemporaneous parallel, the text itself does not exemplify the kind of critical debate more commonly associated with the Ancient Greek canon. (The Kālāmas of Kesaputta simply agree with each of Gautama's statements without discussion.) The Sutta is perhaps closest to Pyrrhonic Skepticism (Conze 1963, p. 15), in that it leaves open the *possibility* of both insight and misdirection in any mode of inquiry as a source of knowledge. Heeding Conze's (1963, pp. 105–106) caution in asserting direct parallels between European and Asian philosophical traditions, an extended reflection on the intent and spirit of analytical or contemplative practices can in fact dispel the notion that these paths of inquiry are categorically polarized, possessing fixed characteristics that denote either Eastern and Western thought, and thus prevent any straightforward hierarchical distinctions (Conze 1963, p. 12).

Whitehead's "philosophy of the organism" induces a suspension of rigid distinctions and clear-cut definitions, not unlike the paradoxes encountered in Buddhist texts such as the Heart Sutra: "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form...." (Nhāt Hanh 2009). As objects of contemplative focus, such conceptual formulations, inspire us to ponder, from both the widest and most intimate perspectives, the relationships between reason and feeling, environment and self, or the immediately available observation of static form in relation to the endless flow of influence and change. In his introduction to the panel discussion *Is Western Psychology Redefining Buddhism?* Ajahn Amono (2014) describes the intersection of eastern and western traditions of inquiry in this way:

The skeptical materialist conditioning that most of us have received in the west makes us unable to use a mere belief-based system. However, this same skepticism lends itself perfectly to the deployment of Buddhist practice as a path of self-inquiry. Ironically, the influence of the psychological framework in the west can thus be seen to be helping Buddhism return to its roots—in this case—*vibhaj-javada*, "the way of analysis," a term used at the Third Council in the era of Emperor Ashoka to define the practice of Buddha dharma. Such a methodology—the analysis of and reflection upon the experience of all phenomena—accords very closely with western scientific method and echoes the injunction of the Buddha in the Kālāma Sutta not to believe something merely on the basis of tradition, hearsay, or logic but to find out for oneself what is true and useful. (p. 37)

The rich historical record of discovery makes evident the perennial need to discern meaning from a field of collective and individual experience, and expresses the aspiration of each new generation to actively 'recondition' itself according to what is conjectured to be most "true and useful." Yet, as we will discuss in the next section, our need and effort to 'recondition' ourselves encounters serious challenges from within the structure of the way our everyday psychology functions.

Do you have your ego or does the ego have you (by the throat)?

Avraham: The way I see it, the Dao Field is certainly our original nature—the Original Face in Zen Buddhism. As far as I can tell, from the vantagepoint of close to the eight decades of tenure on this planet, everything in life is a signal to reclaim this deep sense of self, which, of course, for the Zen folks and students of the Buddha in general, is more like "no-self." No-self does not deny that you have

no sense of individual self. Rather, it counters the alienated self, a rigid, sedimented, egoic sense of self that can't feel at-home, and one-with, the world.

How does our everyday psychology function? As infants and small children, we have vital needs, and are dependent on care-givers. Our helplessness is nearly total. To that end, we unconsciously configure ourselves in interlocking forms of thought, emotions, and physical sensations that capture the attention of caregivers who themselves are playing out the results of their own family backgrounds and experiences of care (Caldwell et al. 2011). These patterns, constituting one's personality, also known as ego (or egoic) structure, are formed unconsciously and are seamlessly blended together. The important question as to why it is so hard for many adults to change can be answered by the understanding that these egoic structures are deeply set and sedimented, and are the result of a developmental process that was arrested from very early days (Smith 2014).

A basic feature of being human is that we re-enact what has been conditioned (or "programmed" in digital parlance) into us through formal learning and informal enculturation, both of which involve subjective and idiosyncratic experiences. A mark of successful learning is, precisely, whatever is learned well becomes automatic: we don't have to reason, figure out, and recollect to enact what has been learned. Beliefs and values are primary examples. They leap forward automatically, through thoughts, feelings, and body sensations every time we encounter the world. In encountering the world, these beliefs and values embedded in who think we are act as the interpretive lens or filter through which we see, feel, understand, know, and take action. And the extra-strength 'glue' that binds us to our beliefs and values is our ego-identity: "*I am my beliefs and values, and changing the latter amounts to my ego-death.*" No wonder, then, substantial and substantive changes are generally difficult for human beings. How do we go about in creating an internal and external learning environment and setting up conditions that may support us to unhook ourselves from a self-identity that is strongly tied to beliefs and values, often, in a most visceral way?

In the way we have been speaking about ego, we may give our reader an impression that ego is problematic and undesirable, and thus should strive not to have one or turn into one. This is not a right understanding. *Ego as a sense of a particular self* is a product of the self successfully adjusting to an environment by creating an adaptive personality that would include sub-personalities. Thanks to this process, the organism survives. And since there are typically many survival challenges that an individual faces, the adaptive process will result in forming many different sub-personalities or multiple characters (Cohen 2009; Watkins 2000).

To the extent that one identifies closely with one's ego-self and its constituent sub-personalities and has a firm and definite sense of *who* and *how* one is, it makes sense to say that everyone is *possessed* by multiple egoic structures. The word 'possessed' is not used randomly. In fact, the significant question to ask oneself is, "Do I have my multiple egoic structures, or do they have me?" This question is for everyone, no matter what gendering label, socio-economic status, cultural background, race, and other descriptive categories of identity. This question is designed to gauge the strength of identification that is embedded in one's relationship with self's beliefs, values, perceptions, feelings, and so on—in short, every aspect of who one (thinks, perceives, feels) one is. Maximal identification renders one rigid, inflexible, and not open to change; minimal identification renders one to be unable to function as an individual self among other individual selves. Optimal identification would give the self both the freedom to modify and

change its structure and content as needed and the freedom to protect and present itself as one rightful individual amongst many.

When a growing person's process of self-identity formation, the process of becoming an individual, is interrupted, disrupted, or even assaulted, one possible outcome might be development of a rigid personality structure born of the necessity to protect the vulnerable and fragile self. We need not look at "those others" who exhibit fundamentalist attitudes. All of us struggle, in varying degrees, with the need to change ourselves—that is, our beliefs and values structure—so as to be able to optimally and continually adapt to new situations and surroundings. For example, how do we shift towards a processual worldview from an atomistic worldview? Given the degree of difficulty in facing this task, where could we go for help and resources?

Getting in touch with the emptiness in order to embrace processual worldview

Avraham: Try this: just notice whatever is in your inner world in this moment, study it (rather than trying to get rid of it or ignoring it), let it emerge in your consciousness, and follow its 'direction.' You may feel a slight movement, or a big movement unfolding; a sound might emerge; you might suddenly go very quiet; you may feel something that seems totally unrelated to what has been addressed to you, and so on. This can be practiced on your own as a meditation practice. Eventually, your awareness will grow in depth, breadth, and you will realize that you are actually more frequently "at home," "close to things," looking around the world with your Original Face, than not! You may also notice that when you are thus looking, you are most present, full of love, which means giving your full attention to the moment, immersed in the sense of care, compassion, curiosity, and exuberance. You would feel more fully alive, and simultaneously, your capacity to be with uncertainty and not-knowing would be seamlessly part of you.

Heesoon: Thank you for the practice suggestion. Indeed, I have becoming increasingly, and at times painfully, aware that theorizing does little to create the change we desire, if it does not convert into embodied and emplaced practice.

There is a feature of human consciousness that turns into a witness unto itself. That feature has been called by various names, such as 'witness consciousness,' 'awareness,' 'mindfulness,' 'observer,' 'self-consciousness,' and so on. Henceforth, for brevity and ease, we will use "witness consciousness." The witness consciousness can be developed to function as a spacious container within which the content of consciousness, such as one's beliefs and values, strong feelings and choices, can be examined and worked on, thereby changed. However, witness consciousness has to be sufficiently developed in order to provide a psychic space large enough for one to feel some breathing room and to distance self from one's beliefs and values in all their intense manifestations. For most of us, typically, it is challenging and difficult to separate out one's self from one's beliefs and values (the content of consciousness) to which one is mostly attached. Consider how reactive most of us can become when we encounter anything that challenges our beliefs and values, and by extension, our sense of self. Reactivity reveals and signals that one's identity is tightly bound up with particular views and values, beliefs and perceptions.

One well-established method of developing the witness consciousness is what is usually known as meditation, although many other names have been given. The principle behind

this training is simple, even if difficult to cultivate: distinguishing the content of consciousness from consciousness itself as container. The terms we will use to refer to the content of consciousness are ‘narrative,’ ‘story,’ or ‘storyline,’ but we may also refer to them simply as ‘thoughts.’ With sufficient training in separating out story from consciousness, or ‘thought’ from awareness, it is possible to witness the underlying substratum of consciousness, that is, awareness without stories, especially as it occurs in the gap between story fragments or ‘thoughts,’ or more subtly, the theatre stage on which thoughts and stories perform. The importance of catching awareness, however briefly, is gaining an insight that all our thoughts, percepts, feelings, and sensations, are *contingent*. They come and they go; they have no substantive self-nature, and they have no permanent self-existing identity. Ego-identity and sub-identities, however, latch onto these contingent stories and storylines and solidify them and give them a sense of independent and permanent existence.

New learning that challenges who we are and what we are like can feel threatening to the ego-self. When sufficiently threatened, the ego will prevent the new learning from taking place. However, voluntary meditation practice in a non-threatening, secure, and supportive environment, which is relaxing and calming, gives an opportunity to meditators to get in touch with spacious awareness unencumbered by intrusive thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. When this happens, one may experience substantial relief from carrying around the constantly impinging content, a welcoming experience to the perpetually afflicted. Experience of pure awareness, however brief, may give one both a sense of expansiveness, as if the room is cleared of cluttered furniture, and a glimpse of new possibilities, as if one is facing a new canvas, upon which new shapes and colours can gloriously appear. Or one might feel released into an expansive field of creative possibilities. Endless metaphors are possible. Experience of this kind of emptiness can be not only a stress-releasing but also an inspiring, even euphoric, experience.

However, meditation in the standard form of seated meditation is not the only way to experience a release from the conditioned and rigidly subscribed mind-consciousness. What we are really looking for is openness to reality that invites our participation in dynamic, emergent, and processual ways, and that, as a result of our participation, transforms us—from who we were to who we can be in the process of becoming. This participation in possibilities is what, for example, the arts can teach us very well. From poetry to painting, from pottery to piano playing, from fictional prose to prophetic writing, art can take us to the known edge of our conditioned world and being and have us gaze into the liminal, not the abysmal, space of possibilities (Bai and Cohen 2019). It is the space in which open dialogue is possible, with whoever is willing to listen to and engage with us. We are poised to try different possibilities of being that lie at and beyond the known edge (Diamond, n.d.). It is a space in which we wear our ego-selves loosely, like house coats, not like suits of armour. In this space, we don’t play our usual identity politics, pinning each other down with self-identity labels. By returning to the space of awareness, we glimpse the possibility of deliverance from the death grip of identification. In his poem, “Transformational work and play in the Dao Field,” Jesse Haber writes:

I am walking a route I’ve walked hundreds of times before
 I just had a heated argument with my Dad about perspective, feelings, and responsibility
 My pulse is pounding
 My thoughts oscillate
 Re-imaging and Re-remembering what I said (solidifying)
 Imagining and Foreseeing what has yet to be said (prediction)

It is raining lightly; I am looking down at my feet
 The hood up and around my head amplifies my feelings
 Of echoic isolation and
 Personal lament
 In this moment I am my thoughts
 A unified sense of regret. Of anger. Helplessness.
 In this moment I am not (feeling) of the world
 I am my own, self-consuming consciousness.
 My hurt. My turmoil. My ego.
 I notice a worm
 Drawn up from dark soil, damp
 Escaping the light, persistent rain
 As it moves
 I awaken
 I awaken to droplets rolling down my jacket
 To the slow-motion crashing of misty clouds against
 The mountains hemming in my small northern town
 To snails trying to escape one field for another while dodging
 Hungry birds who live in the tall grass
 I awaken
 To the closeness of the world

Transformation rarely follows any form of linearity. The above poem demonstrates just one phenomenological example of the movement both into and out of a connected, interpenetrating state of awareness. Why is this important in a discussion on processual and atomistic ontology? Precisely because of the Yin and Yang nature of these ontological realities; the opposite yet complimentary atomistic and processual selves. Since we, like Whitehead, espouse the belief that all Beings (both human and more-than) are in a constantly flowing, interconnected state, we must also recognize that personal awareness of that state is also in constant flux and flow. As stated above the Yin and Yang are both part of a whole system.

This poem is one example of how an atomistic ontology supports a ‘me’ or ‘mine’ centered understanding of reality—and more importantly—is a consciousness that isolates itself from the shared reality of all existence. The above poem demonstrates a shifting, widening, and opening. These personally situated movements characterize the processual natural of interconnectivity and becoming. While practices such as meditation may be one way to ‘touch’ the interconnectedness of the Dao, it is only one. Art, movement practices, and ‘flow’ states all may represent openings into the Dao Field.

However, this process is not always associated with clarity or euphoria. As meditation teacher Guy Armstrong (2017) asserts, one of the main results of identifying the inherent nature of reality—the emptiness—is that the sense of self that we identify with begins to unravel. The me-mine paradigm slowly begins to melt away and we are often left struggling. We have spent most of our lives centering our reality on an “I.” When we lose that sense of I, what are we left with? When we allow the container that is “I” to dissolve, we can find ourselves outside of the everyday thinking that allows us to act in a world without thinking about the consequences of those actions.

There are many ways to go about the business of living, working, and playing; but most of us do so operating within an atomistic framework. We work, thinking about our own suffering, or the workplace politics, or household chores, or any other number of non-present

concerns centered around a conceptually concretized sense of self. As mentioned elsewhere in this essay, we navigate many different egoic states throughout our lives. Inhabiting an egoic state, we risk losing our connections to the “Ten Thousand Things.” The world. Existence. We forget that *this* ego is but one box of many. A forgetfulness that deprives us an opportunity to see what might be outside the current confines of this particular egoic state. When we are lost in an atomized self, we miss connections. Connections that run from words to raindrops, from wriggling worms to slow steady footfalls, from speeding vehicles to the low musicality of a passing conversation, from inner to outer and back again, indefinitely. Closeness with interconnectedness engenders authentic compassion.

Entrance into the Dao Field is a choice, a choice that emerges out of a personal practice, a choice to cultivate awareness. In both work and play, love and suffering, there are spaces to re-embrace the lost awareness that overidentification with ego-states brings. I am reminded of Zen practitioner and writer Natalie Goldberg, who, when recalling her experience of teaching poetry, described this to a group of 8th graders: “I don’t have to give them any rules about poetry. They live in that place already. Close to things” (Goldberg 2016, p. 29). Children often operate with far fewer egoic states than adults, they simply haven’t had the time or experience to develop them all yet! So perhaps we should take a hint from Natalie’s 8th graders, and see that by being “close to things” we can feel their complexity, see interconnectivity and watch as the process of awareness unfolds.

Heesoon: Colleagues, thank you for walking and exploring together at the edge of the “Dao Field” today. Jesse, I so appreciate your poem and prose that accompany it, for giving our reader an embodied sense and a feel of the movement in your consciousness that took you “close to things.” This phrase, “close to things,” combined with “The Ten Thousand Things” —*a phrase in Chinese that refers to the phenomenal world—palpably help me to feel being “at home” and being “one-with” the world. Like so many people, I, too, feel the proximity of the sense of existential alienation just below the surface of my consciousness. The current pandemic time did not create this sense: rather, it revealed what has always been there, just at the edge of our consciousness, of our being. How are some other ways that this movement in the Dao Field payout in your life?*

Jesse: Thank you, Heesoon, and welcome to my fellow colleagues! I was only introduced to Dao and, subsequently, the Dao-Field, very recently. However, this “place” has held a familiar space in my consciousness and practice for many years. I, too, like the idea of a “field,” a place that we may pass through—a way, a path, a movement. And here I am struck by another Yin and Yang moment, the idea that this ‘movement’ is most deeply felt when I am in fact sitting—still—with my breath, on my meditation cushion. There is a distinct sense of following the path while engaged in a deep meditation practice. A stillness and a flow. This flow also follows me (or perhaps I it) when I am off the mat as well. As I tried to convey in my poem, the ‘work’ done on the mat seems to emerge, almost spontaneously, off the mat, in my daily living. I do not call upon Dao to show itself when I am feeling unbalanced (what hubris that would be!). Instead, I move through my life, and then as if caught in a current of connection, I am, in my passivity, exposed to the ways in which I am connected intimately to everything around me. I am convinced, however, that this radical passivity is only possible because of the practice that comes before it. I am convinced that finding the movement in stillness, again and again, has the effect of allowing a sliver of that Dao into my consciousness, through the cracks of my ego, when I am least expecting it.

Pause and re-engage

To let slip a sliver of Dao into the cracks of ego and thus to be one with a ten thousand things—such is the practice of meditation. The recovery of communion, and the relinquishment of the maladaptive tendencies of the ego, deliver us to our promised home, where we abide in peace with myriad things. In this repose of interconnectedness, we speak and act in concordance with the Dao, and abide in the way of the cosmos. The convulsions that rock the world stem in part from the prevailing illusion of separation, from a forgetfulness that obscures our involvement in the world at large. The atomistic divisions that sever electron from neutron, the organ from the animal, the animal from the land, must now modulate into a processual ontology of codependent and dynamic relata in constant conviviality with the phenomenal world. Such communion is our earthly inheritance as creatures that walk the ancient soil; our work lies in cultivating through practice the ability to access the boundless Dao Field, discerning the contents and patterns of consciousness, softening our white-knuckled grip on the entrenched self. Aided by meditative and arts-based practices that witness the movements of consciousness, we submit that the response to the modern malaise lies not in frantic action impelled by the same forces that cause the melee, but in the reclamation of a consciousness based on kinship and consanguinity.

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