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Progeny
Yarn, Spray Adhesive

Mother and child. Parent and newborn. Guardian and infant. Pure, wholehearted, and honest love. Both individuals bonded through some invisible connection, and each dependent on the other for life. The most ageless and enduring example of a relationship. Inspired by ideas on relation, the symbolism of this piece is founded on two key philosophical concepts: interconnectedness and interdependence. Interconnectedness meaning that we are all in relation to each other and the world around us, and interdependency meaning that we rely on these relationships to sustain ourselves. These ideas are woven into the very yarn of the sculpture, the medium itself meant to symbolize the threads connecting not only one individual to another, but also an individual to the natural world. Motherhood, both in the sense of mother to child and of Earth to humanity. The piece is meant to beg the question that, if we are in constant relation with everything, in valuing ourselves and our personal relationships, must we also value the natural world around us?

In Relation To

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The Oxbow School

OS48

Writers Note: This paper mainly addresses the philosophical ideas of relationships, interconnectedness, and interdependency. It later discusses how these ideas directly translate into environmentalism and The Climate Crisis. My line of research was led by my own interest in both philosophy and eco-sustainability, and questions of "What does it mean to be in relationship with something?" and "Do we as humans have a moral obligation to repair the environmental damage we've inflicted?". While this paper is heavily informed by research, many of the thoughts written are my personal opinions and conclusions, and as a result are not objective facts. But such is the nature of philosophy.

I.   Introduction: Humanity in Relation

Humans are social creatures. Simply put, our connection to each other is a key factor in what makes humans human. Our "dependence on and cooperation with each other enhanced our ability to survive under harsh environmental circumstances. Although the survival threats of these circumstances have lessened in today's world, people continue to have a need to affiliate with others" (Psychology Today). It's something we've grown up knowing, even if on an unconscious level. Nowadays, we depend on a parental figure to raise us, friends to support us, teachers to teach us, bosses to give us jobs and money, and so on. The list of our everyday relationships is so extensive that even the most introverted introvert can't deny its truth. Even on a broader scale, our politics, economics, and other societal systems are based on relationships between people, states, and countries. We require being in constant conversation with one another. More than that, we *crave* that conversation. We crave community and emotional connection. Different people experience this craving to different extents of course, but the simple fact is that we could not survive as an isolated self. We need other people. We need interconnection. We acknowledge this

fact and in turn create spaces for these relationships to grow and thrive. From schools and churches to highschool parties and family dinners, we are incredibly intentional about opening up our time and energy for interpersonal connection.

II.   Philosophy and The Web

This idea of placing importance on relationships is something recognized widely in the philosophy world as well. Even Aristotle, in his short treatise *Categories*, places relationships in "ten highest forms" of categories, and dedicates a whole chapter to describing their significance. Many philosophers have followed suit in appreciating relational relevance, allowing for the emergence of the term Relationalism, the philosophical theory of giving meaning to relationships. Not only does this theory place emphasis on relationships in a human sense, but also broadens the horizons to the importance of *worldly* relations–and how humanity fits into it.

Our entire universe is made up of a vast web of tangled and twisted connections. Each branch of the web is linked to countless other branches and so on and so forth. The thing is, every *single* one of these branches makes its way, over time and space, to us. And thus, we also make our way to them. Every single connection in the known universe is crucial to our existence. The web reveals how important the relationship between humanity and the natural world is; how we rely on the natural world around us to sustain us. We depend on it for resources like food and water, and it depends on us to inhabit it. Therefore, it is, or rather should be, a balanced interdependency. We say we understand this, but do we really? Or do we pretend to, and go about our lives as if the only relationships that matter are the ones that pertain specifically to us?

III.   Mistaken Thought

Unfortunately, the latter seems to hold much more truth. We tend to treat the world around us as if it exists purely to support us, and forget our role in supporting it back. What causes this discrepancy between our thoughts and actions? Well, one of our biggest misunderstandings lies in the fact that we often consider ourselves to be in the center of this web. We see ourselves as the sun in a heliocentric model of the relationship solar system. This causes issues for a multitude of reasons, one of which is that it places us on a pedestal of importance. By seeing ourselves as the center, we see ourselves as above all else. The MVP of life, if you please. This idea of anthropocentricity is one that dates back centuries in human history, in multiple different cultures– although most notably in European culture. Take the concept of Humanism for example. Putting aside its religious context, the system of thought places emphasis on the individual, and more importantly on humanity as a whole. It feeds into the collective human ego by encouraging an individual to focus on humanity as a distinct whole and the advancement of human society. This mindset, while at times valuable, can allow for a rapid devolvement into anthropocentricity and progress at the expense of all others. Unfortunately, ideologies of this latter type have dispersed widely and become a very popular attitude among all kinds of people.

This anthropocentric misbelief exists as a stark contrast to the nature of the web. In truth, the web has no center and is solely a broad expanse of interlocking connections. It is not two-dimensional, but rather a multidimensional expanse. Whittling it down to simple centricity is, quite bluntly, a narrow point of view. It's egocentric, something that appeals to our sense of uniqueness. The truth is, despite our high intelligence and advanced technology, we are not particularly special. We are not the center of life. Our importance is founded in the fact that we exist simply as a part (to be fair, it is a relatively large part) of a far larger whole. We coexist with other parts of the web

and are mutually dependent on being in relationship together. To expand upon our point of view would be to become far more altruistic and recognize the equal importance of all things.

Besides our centristic beliefs, another issue we often run into when trying to understand interconnectedness is the way we actually define relationships themselves. When we think of relation, we think of two things; an entity, or the properties *of,* and the connection between entities, the properties *between.* The way we see relationships, the individual entities create the connection between them. They come first. Entity and then relationship. We don't really consider relationships to be essential to the existence of said entities, rather a bonus, something extra that expands upon but doesn't define any given thing. That is where our understanding falls far too short. In reality, entities are practically meaningless without relation to others. A candle without a match. A pen without ink. A book, with its pages blank and pristinely white. Relationships are not only beneficial, but *necessary* to the development of an entity. A more correct version would be to consider how relation makes up an individual thing, concept, or person. Relationship *then* entity. It's a minor shift in wording, with a much larger shift in connotation. With this rearrangement, we place emphasis and importance on the "between" rather than just on the "of". In fact, by doing this, we begin to insinuate that the "of" is partially created by this "between". In other words, an individual entity is influenced so heavily by the relationships it has with others, that those relationships begin to shape the entity itself. Understanding this allows us to truly understand how the connections we share with each other and the natural world around us are crucial to our individual existence.

IV.   Roots of Thought

So where do these lines of thinking stem from? Why is it so difficult for us to actually accept our common place in the web? It comes down to our sense of individuality. It's quite easy for us to accept the theoretical concept of interconnectedness. "We're all linked together," "we're connected to the world around us," "we're parts of a larger whole." This messaging is easy to digest and, in fact, is often a uniting and comforting idea: we aren't alone in the world. However, it is much harder for us to swallow the concept of interdependency. As stated previously, interdependency is our *reliance* on relationships to people, concepts, and the world. When we really begin to think about it, we realize it calls into question our concept of distinct individualism. And this scares us. Badly. We've grown up in a society that preaches and praises the individual. We believe that each one of us is unique in our personhood and that we all play a specific role in the structure of life. We find comfort in the stability of ourselves, our personal monologues, and emotions, and opinions. While we recognize the power of outside influence, we tend to believe that it can not shape us that much and that we are stagnant in the solidity of ourselves. Interdependency seems to contradict this all. By stating our reliance on relationships, not only does it bruise our collective ego–believing that humanity in itself is isolated and special– but also demolishes the foundation of our individualism. If we are so dependent on relationships, who's to say a drastic change in our surrounding environment wouldn't change us fundamentally? If we are ever fluctuating based on our relationships, does a true self even exist? Or is it purely a figment of our imaginations? At this point, the entire concept of an isolated individual is thrown out the window. And if the individual self doesn't exist, what happens to concepts of personal autonomy? Freedom? That idea, even if we don't explicitly articulate it to ourselves, is more than

uncomfortable for us. It challenges our core beliefs about our own existence and what we believe to be our own human rights. Who wouldn't be terrified by it?

Thankfully, it doesn't have to be that grim. You can choose to believe that interdependence destroys the concept of self, or you can choose to believe that it *enhances* it. A less existential viewpoint is that interdependence doesn't dismantle our idea of individualism, rather simply changes the definition. Biologist Kriti Sharma says it best herself, stating that we only need to "shift from considering things in isolation to considering things in interaction." The fact that we are reliant on the connections we make through the web does not change the fact that we each exist as our own individual entity. While subject to change, our minds and bodies are still our own and we are still afforded our autonomy and free-will. Interdependence merely suggests that our individual self is prone to fluctuation. Similar to how an opinion can change over time, our identity can change drastically over any period of time. This does not make it any less "ours". In fact, interdependence proposes a much more uniting implication. If an individual thing is reliant on other surrounding entities, valuing itself translates directly to valuing these other entities.To prioritize keeping oneself healthy, we must also prioritize the health of others. It shifts the narrative from one of self-centered ego, to one of empathetic understanding.

V.   Imbalance

Despite the majority of people being unaware of the intricacies of interdependence and interconnection, we practice these principles frequently on a human scale. That is where our practices become limited. We recognize the reciprocal connectedness between ourselves and other humans, but oftentimes forget this same connection exists between us and the outer world. It goes back to human ego. We are either wrapped up in the thought that we are superior and that the world

is meant to serve and sustain us, or we forget that we are inseparable from the web, and are required to give back. Either way, we upset the balance.

A key factor in achieving successful and healthy connections in the web is balance. There are two broad kinds of relations that exist within the web. As informed by Fraser MacBride, a professor in philosophy, a symmetric relationship is one where give and take is equal between two entities. On the other hand, an asymmetric relationship is where one entity takes more than the other (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Consider a romantic relationship between two people for example. If one person loves the other more, they will often give more. Vice versa, the other person will take more. This creates an imbalance in the relationship and, more often than not, leads to conflict. Most often, when an imbalance occurs, the relation will eventually return to some kind of balance. In the relationship scenario, this may look like a break up, or possibly a conversation setting give and take boundaries. Whatever the result, relations have the natural urge to return to balance. Almost like a homeostasis of sorts. Obviously this can happen in much more complex ways, but for the most part short-term imbalances are common in the web and don't cause any permanent damage. The issue arises when larger-scale imbalances remain over extended periods of time. The consequences for these imbalances are far more detrimental. One of the most prevalent and urgent imbalances we see in our modern day web, is the connection between us–humanity–and the natural world–Earth. In other words, The Climate Crisis.

VI.   Responsibility

The fact of the matter is that we are taking more than the Earth can give. This is not just a scary hypothetical, but an unfortunate reality. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change supports this, stating that "since systematic scientific assessments began in the 1970s, the influence of

human activity on the warming of the climate system has evolved from theory to established fact."(IPCC) The symptoms of this imbalance aren't subtle either. From a rapidly rising global temperature, to increased natural disasters, to the ocean rising due to melting glaciers, our planet is screaming at us to do our part in mending this imbalance. The Earth needs us to acknowledge and change our behavior, so it can begin the process of healing. Because of our inaction, we are actively harming one of the key relationships that we rely on. We forget that in sustaining ourselves, we must also sustain the Earth.

The actions of humanity are not-so-slowly killing our planet. As scary as that is, it's not an exaggeration. Countless scientists from all over the world will tell you, and continue telling you this. However, that does not mean we as a species are inherently evil. We are not a virus plaguing the Earth, or some kind of invasive species. We *belong* in the natural web. We have only made a mistake in forgetting our role. A large mistake, but not one that's impossible to fix. For although we are not special in the sense that we are superior, we *have* been provided with a unique set of tools to aid us in restoring balance. While our intellect and desire to advance have helped create this imbalance, they can also be used to mend it. What we need to do is shift our mindset on how we use these tools. For that's all they are: tools. Not weapons of destruction, but a box of gadgets and gizmos that we get to decide on how to use. That's where the idea of intentionality comes into play. Once we fully understand interconnectedness and interdependency, we allow ourselves the ability to be intentional about our decisions. We allow ourselves to consider how every single decision we make will affect the people and world around us. This will look different for different people and organizations. For schools, it may manifest in teaching kids about the environment. For households, it may look like installing solar panels or making a compost bin. For children, it may be simply teaching them empathy and awareness. We each have our own role to play, no

matter how big. The important thing is that we recognize the significance of the relationships we share, and that we are intentional about how we cultivate them.

Once we do this, we begin to recognize the beauty in relationships. Reinstating balance between us and the natural world does not have to be solely about saving us from a fiery doom. It's also about seeing the beauty in interconnectedness, in the world around us, and in ourselves. When we become aware and intentional, we decide for ourselves and for future generations to cultivate a world in balance. A world where connectedness unites us to a collective whole, and we become part of something bigger than ourselves. The first step is only promising ourselves to try.

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