

CHAPTER 5

The World of Relationships

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the mainland; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

— John Donne, English poet

Have you ever thought about what processes make this world an integrated entity? What causes particles to form atoms and molecules, and people to form a human community? What is the fundamental principle and dynamic on which the world stands?

Why don't people dream of spending their lives in solitude? Why are their relationships with other people and things so important?

Nothing in the surrounding world exists by itself, neither in nothingness, nor in isolation. Everywhere we see the dynamism of interaction permeating our world and forming an organic whole, a vibrant unity. The process of interrelationships among elements, and the connection to the organic whole, function as a most fundamental principle of the world's activity.



Things or relationships?

For a long time people have speculated about the nature of reality. The ancient Greeks came up with several ideas:

- ✗ Thales suggested that everything was made of water, since water could exist as vapor, liquid, or solid.
- ✗ Pythagoras thought that numbers were the essence of reality.
- ✗ Democritus proposed that everything was made up of atoms (meaning "indivisible").

In the nineteenth century scientists agreed that the best explanation of reality was that everything is composed of atoms, which were thought to be small, indivisible, solid balls. However, in the twentieth century the atom was “split” into more fundamental particles. More recently, scientists have discovered that, depending on experimental conditions, these particles can behave as waves of energy. Finally, they have determined that it is the different forms of relationships (“forces”) within matter and energy that are most primary and that nothing can be understood or explained except by referring to these relationships. Everything is composed of elements in relationship to one another. Each thing’s existence is determined by the relationships both within it and between it and other things.

In human life, also, relationships are of primary importance. Imagine a car. What do you think about it? What you think and feel about it depends on the nature of your relationship with it. For example: if it is exhibited in a car dealer’s showroom, if you will never see it, if you own it, if someone you envy owns it, if you are a passenger in it, or if it is about to run you over.

A person’s happiness and well-being depends on:

- ✗ the relationship among the different organs of his physical body; the relationship between his mind and body; and the relationship among the different parts of his character, such as his intellect, emotion and will;
- ✗ the relationship he has with his parents, siblings, friends, and other people with whom he associates;
- ✗ the relationship he has with the environment that he inhabits and the things that he owns (or doesn’t own).

This is why almost no one wants to spend his whole life in solitude, without human contact. Who we are is in so many ways defined by the relationships we have formed.

Human society is composed of the relationships among individuals, families, groups, businesses, associations, and nations. In fact, if we tried to diagram the interactions among all these different components of society, the picture would be quite complex.

Absolute equality?

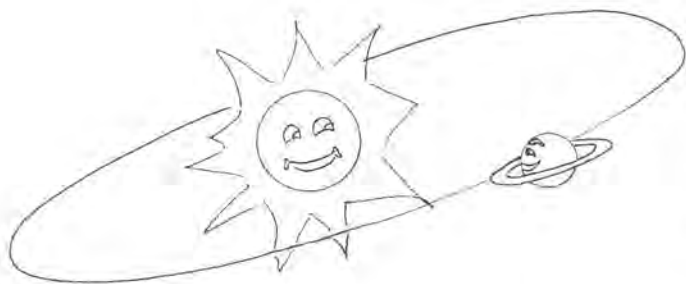
Let us discuss a few important principles according to which relationships appear and develop.

First of all, the word “relationship” itself implies the presence of at least two separate elements, or partners, which come into interaction. One of the elements is the subject partner, recognized by its leading position, initiating the relationship; the other is the object partner, recognized by its dynamic response to the initiative of the subject.

In all relationships this subject and object dynamic can be recognized. Why? What is the difference between the relative positions of subject and object? Are these roles and functions equal? Exchangeable? Can anyone or anything play the subject role?

In considering these questions, let us look at some examples:

- ✗ **The planetary system.** At the center is the sun, around which all the planets revolve. The moon revolves around the earth. We can recognize that the sun is in the subject position, while the planets



are in the object position, responding to the gravitational pull of the sun. The earth, while in the object position to the sun, is itself in the subject position with respect to the moon. What would happen if one of the planets left its orbit?

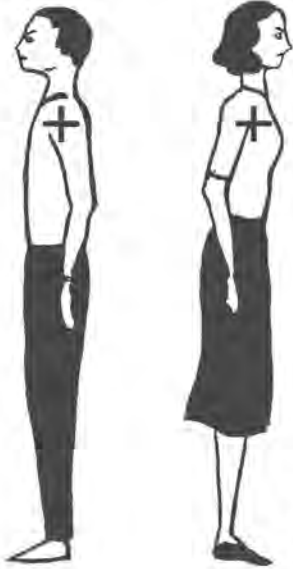
- ✘ **A conversation.** During a conversation there are speaker (subject) and listener (object) positions. These are fluid positions transferring dynamically from one party to the other. Can we say that there is a conversation if two people are speaking simultaneously? No. Rather we would call that scenario an argument.
- ✘ **A lecture.** The teacher's position as subject makes no sense unless there are students in the object position to learn, receive and respond to the information given. A teacher can fulfill his or her role only when there are students to be taught. What happens if, between teacher and student, there are no clear subject and object roles?
- ✘ **A family.** The parent-child relationship requires clear roles and responsibilities. Parents, in the subject position, give love and care to the children, who are in the object position. However, later in life, children may care for their elderly parents, and the subject and object roles in the relationship are reversed. In a family, the purpose and direction of love determine the subject-object dynamic.

Thus, we come to the conclusion that understanding the proper roles of subject and object is necessary for there to be order and harmony. The point is not that a particular person or thing has to be in the subject position, but that without these roles being filled, nothing can exist and nothing can be accomplished. Is the subject position more valuable or more important than the object position? No, they have equal value. They are necessary for each other and for the existence of the relationship. They belong together and to each other. Together they make up a larger whole, a higher level of existence. Thus, protons and electrons combine to form atoms, atoms combine to form molecules, molecules to form minerals and the complex molecules that form the basis of life. A nucleus and cytoplasm combine to form a cell, cells to form an organism, organisms to form systems, and so on. Everything is part of a great chain of being.

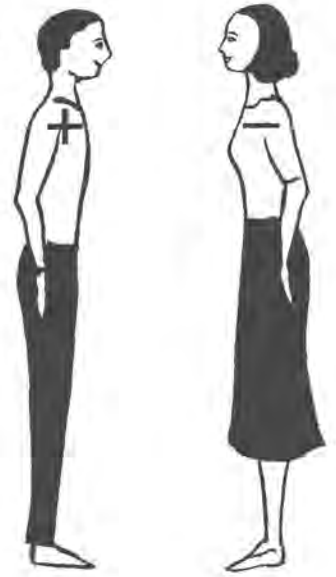
Similar patterns exist in human relationships. There is no conversation if only one of the partners speaks. A lecture isn't successful if the lecturer doesn't take into consideration his students. As the partner initiating love, parents seek to bring their children into unity with them. Through the process of giving and receiving love, the subject and object roles come into unity and equal partnership.

The harmonious interaction of subject and object leads to a new creation and the emergence of value. Accordingly, entities are formed as action and development occurs through cooperative and complementary interactions. Subject and object are necessary for each other and serve each other. Each is fulfilled through their unity and finds its value through participating in this unity while maintaining an individual existence. Each position finds satisfaction in supporting the other, and the value of each is enhanced. Love is the leading force that brings together subject and object. In fact, without subject and object roles, love cannot flow and develop freely. The positions of subject and object exist to allow for the vitality and development of other-centered love.

Complementary relationships



In the previous chapter we saw that everything has both an inner and outer dimension. But there is another type of complementary relationship present in our universe. Have you ever noticed that everything exists in pairs of polarity that exhibit mutual attraction? At the most basic level, all particles come in pairs, such as positively charged protons and negatively charged electrons. It is because of their mutual attraction that an atom comes to exist. Atoms can have a valence or charge that attracts them to other atoms of opposite charge to form molecules. Certain molecules combine in the same fashion to form extremely complex molecules that form the basis of living organisms. The most important one, called DNA, is itself composed of two complementary strands. Flowering plants have a stamen and a pistil that enables cross-fertilization.



Nearly all animals are either masculine or feminine. Of course, human beings are either men or women. See if you can think of other examples.

Human Being	Man	Woman
Animal	Male	Female
Plant	Stamen	Pistil
Mineral	Positive	Negative

Through the relationship between its two elements, each pair forms a higher level of existence. The highest expressions of life's possible relationships are those in human society. The human community contains many different kinds of social and spiritual connections culminating in the spheres of love in the family. The most profound, pure, and universal forms of relationship between people are those which involve love.

Some people believe that opposites repel each other and that progress comes about through conflict. But is this really true? Consider some examples from the realm of physics. A proton and an electron are attracted to each other, as are the opposite poles of a magnet. In the realm of biology, male and female are attracted to each other, too. Although in many ways the masculine and feminine realms are very different from each other, there is some mysterious force compelling men and women to seek one another.

What is the result of such unions? The result is the development of more complex levels of organization and the creation of new beings. Thus, a grain of pollen unites with a pistil, and a seed for a new plant is formed. The union of male and female animals results in offspring, be they little fish or lion cubs. And, of course, every human being is the result of the sexual union of man and woman.

Repulsion occurs when two subjects or two objects meet — for example, two north magnetic poles or two positively charged particles. Something similar happens in the animal world. Two stags may fight over which is to be the leader of the herd. Once this is settled, they stop fighting. The winner assumes a dominant position while the other is submissive. The same occurs in human relationships. People argue and fight because they have disagreements. Each wants to claim his authority in the subject position and prevail. However, if they persevere in their relationship for the sake of a common purpose, opposites eventually come to complement each other.

The way to progress

In every relationship, between subject and object there exists a creative tension based on mutual respect and cooperation. While conflict is sometimes necessary and inevitable, it is not productive unless it is resolved into cooperation. Violence doesn't produce love, and conflict doesn't lead to harmony unless there is first reconciliation. Antagonistic relationships in a family lead to family breakdown. Conflict between business partners can bring a company to ruin. These struggles should challenge us to transcend our differences and find the path to reconciliation.

What about the common struggles within human society? These struggles are often based on different opinions or ideologies. One person or group wants its view to dominate, and it may resort to violence to see that it is enforced. The root of this is insecurity, an inability to respect, appreciate, learn from and be enriched by something different from oneself.

The natural world is full of differences and variety. These differences, though, do not lead to conflict but to a beautiful picture of harmonious, mutually complementary relationships. The more varieties of plants one finds in a garden, the more beautiful the garden is. Beauty comes not from uniformity but from the harmony of variety.

For instance, if instead of an alphabet we had only the letter A, it would hardly lead to harmony since we wouldn't be able to communicate. On the other hand, the fact that Russian has 33 letters doesn't lead to conflicts. On the contrary, when we put those different letters together to form words in grammatical order, they enable us to understand each other.

People are different, but it is this diversity that makes human society creative and harmonious. Imagine what would happen to your class if all the students looked the same and had the same views about everything. What would such a class be like? There would be uniformity, but it wouldn't be true harmony.

How do relationships develop?

In order for relationships to develop, certain conditions are necessary.

First, there has to be a basis for interaction. It helps if people who wish to communicate with each other share a common language. They also should have something about which they both want to talk. The more they have in common, the deeper their conversation can be. At the same time, a certain degree of difference helps to stimulate give and take.

Besides having the potential to form a relationship, people must have a reason

for doing so. One can easily imagine two pupils passing each other in the school corridor day after day without speaking to each other. But if they find some common interest, this can become the starting point for a relationship. Common purpose makes the foundation for harmonious interaction. On the other hand, if two pupils approach each other with different or contradictory purposes, a confrontation may occur. Unless they can find some basis of mutual understanding, they may come to blows.



Further, for harmonious relationships to be established, there has to be a certain order. Human relationships take place in different contexts — family, work, school, etc. In each case, order needs to be clearly defined. For instance, in a classroom the teacher is the one who decides the purpose of the class and initiates the relationship with the class members. The pupils respond to the topic decided upon by the teacher. If either fails to keep their proper position, the class cannot function and confusion abounds.

When order and purpose are clearly established, there can be efficient give and take. This interaction, as it becomes deeper and smoother, leads to the harmony and unity of the different elements involved. For example, a soccer team, possessing eleven positions, will lose if all the players are chasing after the ball. In this case no one is keeping his position. In contrast, in a winning team each player is well disciplined and keeps his position, be it in goal, on the wing, at the back, midfield or striker. They pass to each other and play together harmoniously. With a spirit of cooperation passes go to the right place, players anticipate each other, and the team's performance seems like "magic." The players are not merely eleven individuals; they form an integrated unit.

Purpose of relationships

Everything holds a position in the hierarchy of being. Elementary particles exist not by themselves but as parts of a larger structure called an atom. Then, besides keeping their own integrity, atoms create relationships with each other, constructing molecules. In the natural world, every organism has a dual purpose: supporting its own existence and participating in a larger process. Each individual organism can exist only in connection with others, creating a more complex community, an *ecosystem*. In a pond, mineral elements are consumed by the plants and thus become part of living tissues. The plants serve as food for mollusks and fish and produce the oxygen they need for life. The fish feed on small algae but in turn become the prey of larger fish and birds.

To repeat, every being has two complementary purposes — an individual purpose that secures its individual well-being and existence, and a whole purpose that maintains a contribution to the greater organization of which it is a vital part. In a healthy ecosystem a balance is maintained between these purposes.

The same principle can be applied to humans as well. If we revisit the soccer team analogy, we can say that an individual player trains and practices for two reasons. On the one hand, he enjoys playing and wants to become a better player; on the other hand, he wants the team as a whole to be successful.

Of these two purposes, one has priority over the other. There are some people who are brilliant soccer players but not good team members, because they focus on the pursuit of personal glory and satisfaction. If they have to choose between doing what they want to do and doing what the team wants them to do, they choose the former. The result of this is that the team suffers and their results get worse. When this happens, the "star" player cannot fulfill his own personal desires either. If, however, the star player puts the team before himself, the team will be successful and so will he. The greatest happiness comes when we can contribute to the happiness of others. When we do this, we feel that our lives have value and meaning beyond ourselves.

These dual purposes exist for all beings. They are not separate but are related and interdependent. Thus, a soccer player's individual purpose can only be accomplished through the fulfillment of the team's purpose.

It is difficult to balance these two purposes in our lives. The purpose for the whole should have priority, offering a moral context and guidance for the purpose for the

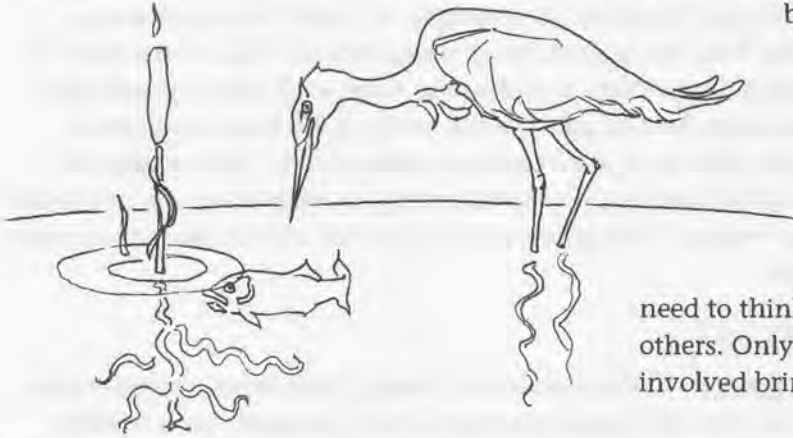


individual. If the purpose for the individual has priority, the higher level disintegrates. A family falls apart if each parent and child is concerned only about himself or herself. On the other hand, if the purpose for the whole is overemphasized, conformity and the suppression of individuality result, which is also wrong. When this happens, not only is the purpose for the individual frustrated, but also the purpose for the whole suffers. In order for harmony to be created, both purposes must be fulfilled cooperatively and simultaneously. The individual should live for the whole,

and the whole should respect and nurture the well-being of the individual. A good leader tries to keep all purposes in balance. He makes sure a job gets done but also tries to maintain a good morale on the team while taking into account the personal needs of each individual.

These are the basic principles that determine the existence of relationships. If we want to experience harmony in our world of relationships, we

need to think about our contribution to the welfare of others. Only then will the relationships in which we are involved bring us satisfaction and joy.



The Cossacks

by Leo Tolstoy

The day was absolutely clear, quiet, and hot. The morning freshness had dried up even in the forest, and myriad mosquitoes swarmed around the face, back and hands... Olenin looked at the dry greenery around him. It was cool and cozy; he thought of nothing, wished nothing. And suddenly he had such a strange feeling of an ungrounded happiness and love for everything that, out of his old childhood habit, he began to cross himself and thank someone. He suddenly understood with an unusual clarity, "Here I am, Dmitry Olenin, such a special being, lying God knows where, in some place where a deer lived, an old deer, a beautiful one, who could have never seen a man; in a place where no man had ever lain and thought. ... Flying between the leaves which look like great islands to them, mosquitoes are standing in the air and buzzing: 1, 2, 3, 1,000, a million, and all of them are something, and buzz for some reason, and each of them is as special a Dmitry Olenin as I am." He imagined clearly what the mosquitoes were thinking and buzzing about. "Here, here, boys! Here is someone to eat." They buzzed and swarmed around him. And he understood that in no way was he a Russian nobleman, a member of Moscow society, a friend and relation of these and those; he was just a mosquito, or a pheasant, or a deer, like those living around him. "Like them, like Uncle Yeroshka, I'll live, I'll die. And he is right: the grass will grow, that's all."



“What if the grass will grow?” he went on thinking, “Still I must live and be happy; for I want nothing but happiness. No matter what I am: a beast like them, on whom the grass will grow, and nothing more, or a frame, in which a part of the universal Deity is inserted — still I must live in the best way I can. But how must I live to be happy, and why wasn’t I happy before?” And he began to recollect his former life, and he felt repulsed at himself. He saw himself as a demanding egoist, while in reality he did not need anything for himself. And he looked and looked at the shimmering greenery, at the setting sun and the clear sky and felt as happy as before. “Why am I happy and for what did I live before?” he thought. “How demanding to myself I was, how I invented things and did myself nothing but harm and shame! And indeed I need nothing to be happy!” And he seemed to discover a new light. “Here is happiness,” he said to himself: “Happiness is to live for others. This is clear. The need of happiness is given to man; so it is justified. Satisfying it egoistically, that is, looking for wealth, glory, comfort, love for oneself, the circumstances may prevent it. It means these desires are unjustified, and not the need of happiness in itself. But what desires can always be justified, no matter what the circumstances are? Love, selflessness!” He became so glad and excited on discovering this truth which seemed new to him, that he sprang up on his feet to search impatiently for someone to love, to whom to do good, for whom to sacrifice himself. ...