FINDING GROUND FOR A RELATIONAL ETHIC
By Emily Nguyen-Vo

The important attempt to broaden the scope of ethics to include nonhuman entities has been only partially successful; this project requires more attention to cultural and social contexts and a stronger philosophical rationale. Here, the concept of “place” can make a significant contribution. Leading scholars working on various aspects of place-based perspectives have suggested that environmental ethics cannot successfully abandon anthropocentric assumptions as the broader environmental discourse continues to encapsulate a fundamental mind-world ontological dualism. This dualism explains our need to disengage with messy social (and natural) contexts in order to find universal truths—whether in science, anthropology, or ethics. As a result of this simultaneous dualism and disengagement, our ontological grounding supports an unquestioned faith in an abstract and impersonal system of rights and rules to govern our moral conduct. Morality that is determined by abstract rights and rules fails to accommodate the actual relationships that we uphold in our everyday lives and the kind of moral behaviors that such relationships entail.

Many scholars who aim to overcome our current ontology propose a relational framework of environmental ethics, starting with the notion of a relational self. An ethics of relations is sensitive to the intimate bonds that we already have with our human and nonhuman others. Mick Smith’s *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* brings the discussion of ethics back down to the places that we inhabit, where our senses of morality towards others are the strongest. Smith’s ethics of place supports a relational self (which he calls an *ecological self*); however, his proposal does not provide specific details on the ontological foundations. When placed within our modern, post-Enlightenment cultural framework, an ethics of relations becomes controversial, because it comes into friction with two fundamental tenets of moral thought: impartiality and rationality (as determined by the dictates of universal reason). In what kind of world does the relational self emerge? What sort of being or ontology does it have? And what do human-nonhuman relations look like through a view of the ecological/relational self? Moving in the direction of finding an answer to these questions—and serving as a useful complement to Smith’s work—is the anthropological lens of *Perceptions of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* by Tim Ingold. In this essay, I focus first on Mick Smith’s critique of abstract modernist paradigms, after which I describe Ingold’s appraisal of abstract modern ontological frameworks. I conclude that Ingold’s ontology of dwelling provides the foundations through which a relational self has potential to emerge.

*An Ethics of Place* contains both a critique of modernist paradigms and a proposal for an ethics of place. Smith aims to uncover the social and historical contexts of our ethical debates. He argues that, like our economic structure, governance, and pedagogy, our moral frameworks reflect the social formations of a particular place and time. If we can point to the underlying contexts of an unsuccessful environmental ethics, we may be able to transcend our current modes of thinking to find a more dynamic and innovative moral discourse.

Smith writes, “ethical debates are not simply about the kind of world we should inhabit, but the kind of social environment we actually do inhabit.” And, following Ingold’s lead, we might add that such debates are also about the particular ontological framework that the social environment involves. According to Smith, contemporary ethical discourses, whether they are classified as utilitarian or rights-based, are rooted in a particular ontological context of industrial capitalism that he refers to as “modernity.” Our dominant ethical debates are invariable in the sense that they maintain the moral framework (and hence an invariable ethical content and form) of modernity. This modern context is one that regards a person as a bounded,
Another important problem with modern ethical discourse is one that Smith refers to in his description of an “Economy of the Same.” An ethics rooted in an unreflexive modern paradigm does not make room for difference and diversity in moral discourse. An environmental ethic of modernity determines moral consideration and intrinsic value through an emphasis on the bounded and atomistic self. This search requires a disregard of difference and an emphasis on sameness, a rationale of modern man that “reduces all others to imperfect copies of himself” (p. 182). For example, in an extended moral theory of animal rights or welfare, we may discover that a cat matters morally because I am. The cat’s differences from me have no place in the discussion of ethics. In this formulation of ethics that places self at the center of moral considerations, an Economy of the Same not only is shamefully anthropocentric, but also deprecates the ways in which we value and are moved by diversity in itself. The problem with dominant environmental ethics is that they fail to account for “the diversity and beauty to be found and experienced in being party to the wider, natural community and of communing with that nature” (p. 168).

In the modern era, we believe that concepts of the good and the right must be decided in a place above our messy social and ecological contexts. Smith writes, “the end result of this process of rationalization is the complete alienation of the person from their moral potential, from the values that would make them real rather than abstract and impoverished individuals” (p. 159). Smith’s formulation of the alternative, an ethics of place, is based on the idea of a relational, ecological self, rather than an abstract and autonomous self. Unlike the atomized self, the relational self requires others—both nonhuman and human—to become and to exist: “self-formation, becoming an individual,” Smith writes, “is inextricably caught up with the recognition of and respect for different others” (p. 217). As a result, an ethics of place that is grounded in localities...
and messy contexts captures the relationships of care and respect that we hold with the others. These are relationships that constitute our selves. As Smith writes, “[e]thics is then the flow of things in desire and wonder, it is a relation that lets things be, conserving and sustaining them in love and/or difference” (p. 184).

Perhaps the greatest weakness of Smith’s book is that his meticulous critique of modern paradigms is not matched by an equally coherent alternative in his ethics of place, as intuitively attractive as it appears. However, Smith’s analysis of modern moral frameworks leads me to question the possibility of an ethics that transcends our existing paradigms, even with increased reflexivity. For example, are we still constrained within the social context of the modern epoch? Is an ethics of place modern, postmodern, or counter-modern? If ethics is constrained by social formations of a particular historical and geographical context, then does it follow that we must alter our present social formations in order to develop a more relational ethic? What would the underlying social structure of a relational ethic even look like?

In Perceptions and the Environment, Tim Ingold also espouses a vision of a relational, rather than autonomous, self. As a social anthropologist, Ingold’s analysis primarily provides a critique on cultural relativism and its persistence within our dominant ethnographic methodologies and epistemological frameworks. His arguments regarding modern ontological frameworks mirror Mick Smith’s in many ways. Ethics and ontology join forces in these two works. In his comprehensive analysis of the natural sciences and anthropology, Ingold provides examples of alternative cosmologies within non-Western hunter-gatherer societies, in which a relational self and an ethics of place emerge. These alternatives constitute Ingold’s dwelling perspective, a view of the relational self in which awareness and activity in and of the world are rooted in an organism’s active engagement with the world.

Cultural relativism and formal rationality face the same ontological impasse, perhaps—as Smith might argue—because they were derived from the social structures of the same time and place. This impasse is characterized by a discourse of disengagement from our lived experiences in the world, in addition to an obdurate faith in some form of universal reason that explains reality and dictates our moral values. Ingold writes,

The anthropological claim of perceptual relativism reinforces the claim of natural science to deliver an authoritative account of how nature really works. Both claims are founded upon a disengagement of the observer from the world. ...Both claims, too, are underwritten by a commitment to the heart of Western thought and science...the commitment to the ascendancy of abstract or universal reason. (p. 15)

Like Smith, who argues that moralities are plural, Ingold believes that cosmologies—and their corresponding ontological frameworks—are also plural. Western thought does not lie in a plane above other non-Western understandings of the world; in fact, the view that it does is itself simply one cosmology among many. Western thought is one that divides nature from culture, where human-environment relations are understood as instrumental and biological, or else, merely metaphorical. Ingold’s support of a relational self offers transcendence from our mundane anthropological and scientific understandings of human-nonhuman/environment relations. Ingold suggests,

We need to descend from imaginary heights of abstract reason and resituate ourselves in an active and ongoing engagement with our environments...replace the stale dichotomy of nature and culture with the dynamic synergy of organism and environment in order to regain a genuine ecology of life. (p. 16)

As expressed through the title of his book, Ingold is concerned about perception. This concern lies at the heart of his conception of a relational self in an ontology of dwelling. Ingold’s analysis of perception and ontology leads him to support a notion of person-
hool in which “self is seen to inhere in the unfolding of relations set up by virtue of positioning in the environment” (p. 261). Ingold compares and contrasts the works of two influential anthropologists, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Gregory Bateson, and he ultimately favors the relational framework of Bateson’s ecology of the mind. Lévi-Strauss supports a mind-world dualism, in which mind, as a “processor of information,” grasps a world that is out there; he sees the world and the mind as separate and bounded entities. Perception consists of disengagement and then representation of the patterns and information gained from the outside world. In contrast, Gregory Bateson’s ecology of the mind is one in which the mind emerges through our entanglements with the world. Ingold describes Bateson’s theory of perception as one in which “mind is immanent in the whole system of organism-environment relations in which we humans are necessarily enmeshed, rather than confined within our individual bodies as against a world ‘out there’” (p. 16). In addition to Bateson, Ingold was also strongly influenced by ecological psychologist James Gibson, whose notion of organism-in-its-environment provides the foundation for Ingold’s dwelling perspective. Like Bateson, Gibson rejected both disengagement and duality between the mind and the outside world. Gibson’s theory of perception is of an organism-in-its-environment rather than self-contained individual confronting an external world (p. 171). Perception is achieved not through a mind within a body but through an exploratory movement of the organism in the world.

By drawing from Gibsonian ecological psychology and the works of prominent phenomenologists (such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty), Ingold sketches out an alternative ontological framework for an ethics of place. This alternative, relational framework constitutes Ingold’s dwelling perspective. In his development of the dwelling perspective, Ingold starts from a premise that Smith failed to acknowledge: how we relate to the world is inseparable from how we value things and act morally. An ontological framework of dualism and disengagement would support an ethics that is vastly different from one of engagement and a relational self.

Ingold borrows the concept of dwelling from Heidegger who states, “we do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell.” Through this statement, Heidegger and Ingold suggest that we do not build a world in our separate and bounded mind before acting upon it; instead, building and dwelling are the symbiotic activities of the mind and body that constitute our being in the world. Ingold’s ontology of dwelling is a perspective that “[takes] the human condition to be that of being immersed from the start like other creatures, in an active practical and perceptual engagement with constituents of the dwelt-in world” (p. 42). To Ingold, “apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view of the world but of taking up a view in it” (p. 42).

Before diving into the ethical implications of Ingold’s ontology of dwelling, I want to first summarize some of the key points in his analysis of personhood and human-ness. Ingold’s conception of a relational self provides some interesting perspectives on what it means to be human. Ingold rejects both disengagement and duality between the mind and the outside world. Perception is achieved not through a mind within a body but through an exploratory movement of the organism in the world.
his book extends the conversation of both place and the relational self as discussed in Smith’s *An Ethics of Place*. Ingold offers an ontology in which a relational self and ethics of place may emerge. However, we are still left to wonder if an alternative is possible when we are still entrapped in the social formations of modernity. Both Smith and Ingold emphasize the importance of reflexivity and grounded-ness in both moral discourse and anthropological discourse; these authors have illustrated our need to descend from the imaginary heights of abstraction back down to the messy entanglements of our lived experience. Although its primary focus is anthropology, Ingold’s book provides a captivating and comprehensive discussion of how the dwelling perspective may unfold our understandings of hunter-gatherer societies, memory, art/architecture, language, the metaphysics of sensory experiences, and cartography, among other topics. *An Ethics of Place* and *The Perception of the Environment* supply us with interesting critiques of our dominant moral and ontological frameworks that, if read in succession, are complementary.

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NOTES
1 M. Smith, *An Ethics of Place: Radical Ecology, Postmodernity, and Social Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 25. All subsequent references to this work will be given by page number in the text.
2 Smith distinguishes between modernity as a specific “epoch or a social formation with certain salient and distinguishing features” and modernism, which is “the dominant but not sole ideology/narrative within that society” (p. 10).
3 A term coined by Max Weber to describe the sociology of a modern society, formal rationality refers to a form of reason encapsulated within universal rules and regulations (often bureaucratic ones). Formal rationality relies on calculation, reason, and reasoning in contrast to personal insight, emotions, or myth.
4 T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5. All subsequent references to this work will be given as page numbers in the text.