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ON THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF ALL THINGS

Abstract: My tattoo of a figure symbolizing interdependence has framed my reflections on the concept for three decades. Biological and social interdependence is an omnipresent fact, but we need direction as to how to respond to it. This question leads to two major problems in moral philosophy: the source of moral obligation and the need to reconcile universal and local ethical commitments. I explore panpsychism as a partially satisfying answer to the first of these. The part it does not satisfy is to be sought by answering the second of these problems. This answer might be that we should develop the human response to interdependence by working to form community with other forms of life and with nature as a whole. This is slow, long-term work. But our moral obligation will arise from doing it – from the hard job of making community based on our abilities to do this and not from the fact of interdependence. These concepts, though initiated by reflection on the subject of my tattoo, suggest no doctrine but, instead, philosophical and practical tasks that only great efforts and hard work by the human community can determine, pursue, and fulfill.

Keywords: Asante; community; ecology; ethics; historicity; identity; interdependence; moral obligation; moral philosophy; moral responsibility; personhood; panpsychism; Yaomami

On my only trip to Indianapolis, thirty years ago, it immediately caught my eye: a small Asante cast metal finger-ring in the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields.¹ At first it was the radiant gold alloy that attracted me because, though small (57 x 63.5 x 28.5mm), it took me out of the white-box of the gallery into the sunny faraway forested world of the Akan empire in Ghana, echoing the very hot Midwestern summer's day I had left in the park around the museum. But then its remarkable message captivated me. This ring became my touchstone for a puzzled, absorbed interest in the interdependence of all things that developed over the last 30 years, as I started to explore the many philosophical and religious holistic accounts of life and of existence. The image of the ring now never leaves me because it became a part of my body.

The ring is surmounted by a sculpture of two crocodiles that share a stomach in common as one organism. They are crossed at their middles like an X. Each looks in a direction away from the other, and their tails point in directions opposite to that in which their heads are faced. Each has its own nature and fate, its own history and its own future. Every and all living things are in much the same situation that the ring portrays. The crocodiles' common stomach represents our dependence on one another and on the world for the sustenance of life. Their opposite directions suggests that sometimes we quarrel in seeking what we need or even become greedy in obtaining these goods. Akan belief recognized

1. <https://collections.discovernewfields.org/art/artwork/20063> (1989.494). For a similar motif see See the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, <https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/235319> (AF2422).

both sides of this paradox.²

For some years before this encounter I had mused about the interconnections of life in various ways: as the branching rain forest roof of tree limbs and leaves, or as an ethereal atmosphere down here inside and throughout us all, or as time the creator and devourer, or as divine in its changeful and infinitely reflected dynamic. Here in Indianapolis our interdependence unexpectedly appeared before me, through the work of unknown artists, presenting the middle way between the opposite poles of dependence and independence. The persuasive power in this object arose from the complete conception fully realized in its tiny form, as if I could grasp the entire relatedness of co-existence in one hand, as if everything about the concept could rest in my palm. Immediately I saw it as an emblem of the forces of the interdependence of living beings that pull creatures apart as well as together.

The memory of my brief single encounter with this forceful allegory in metal did not leave me when I left the museum. About two years afterward, I reproduced the sculpture as my first tattoo, very much enlarged and splayed in black across the top of my back. These two little creatures are now like black blood, representing the blood that nourishes many forms of life and also of the water and air that carry nourishment to every form of life. The center of the common stomach rests on my spine as an angular white space, their eyes facing up to my head; their tails extend much farther than the those of the sculpture, reaching my shoulders and curling its spirals on my deltoid muscles. Ordinarily I cannot see it because it is on my back, but my two eyes are looking outward just as the crocodiles' eyes are looking forward. Sometimes I think they are looking in the direction opposite to that of my eyes, and sometimes I feel they are looking through my eyes at what I am looking at or thinking about. It seems all the more inside me because it is invisible to me, as the soul is to all of us. I have come to feel that all these years the tattoo has an agency that encourages me through a course of thinking that I am still working out and writing about.

And so this symbol of the interdependence, activating a physical and psychic background to shape my thinking. It does not give me answers. It provokes questions and inquiry. As an exhortation to reflection, it is like a flag, or a relic, or a very deeply sung song: it carries the numinous power that provokes our allegiance and devotion or our concern and care. Material visual symbols can help us to recognize what is going on in our lives and the world. They rise up, like a bright yellow flower in the meadow of our awareness, to urge us to attend to what they pick out from the virtually infinite field of activity before us. With our big brains, we have many other ways to make ourselves focus on specific events or things or forces. Indeed, our powerful capacity to hyper-focus is one of our powers that, rather readily ballooning into extreme pulsations of emotional, mental, and physical energy, can bring us the benefits of our intellectual and spiritual powers as well as the most regrettable results of these same powers. For people ruining other people and our world in slavery to an idea or an image is, God knows, all too common. Neither facts alone nor ideas alone can guide right action. That our moral agency requires a conscious faculty of critique, employed with as much freedom as we can find, and is a part of living with the interdependence of all things is one of the ends to which honest thinking on this matter will point us. Saying this is a principle point of this essay.

The concept of the interdependence of all things is a way of apprehending the practical and existential connections of everything to everything else. Philosophers can look at universal relationality through ontology or logic, but the resulting theories ride in on the back of the

2. Of the shared stomach it was said that "Two crocodiles have one common stomach, but when they are eating (dinner) they fight over the food.' This is said of a family member who becomes greedy and wishes to take everything for himself." Christina Griffith, *Expedition Magazine*, vol. 61, no. 2 (2019). <https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-asante-gold-weights/>

necessities of existence and especially of life. So the practical relatedness I refer to is a factual existential requirement. Bioforms depend on the inorganic more than the inorganic depends on the organic and in different ways, but in an age of human domination of the Earth the principle is the same. Mutuality and symbiosis are essential to life. Our bodies are permeable; our selves are not immune to the interpenetration of courses of life. Birds, ice, plastic, pollen, copper, water, oil, salt, data, ships, quiet, houses, anger, love, bombs, sports, missiles, sunlight, prions, neurons, oceans, wheat – we live and we die by it all.

Yet acknowledging a fact is far from knowing how to respond to it by a long chalk. If we expect the fact of interdependence to become a self-actuating form of our ethical life, talk about it is little more than a symbol of our virtue. I sometimes worry that my tattoo is no more than a badge of ineffectual virtue. Having borrowed it from the very rich spiritual and artistic culture of the Asante by an exchange that itself is an effect of interdependence, I owe to them, by the same interdependence, genuine absorption of its meaning and active loyalty to the purposes its meaning suggests. If I do nothing toward this end, I would be guilty of much more than imprescience or idleness in the face of our scorching planet. Such an outcome of my or anyone's knowledge of our interconnections with the world is fruitless.

But there are even worse possibilities in our behavior than empty talk. To our interdependence with other species and with the world, we humans can react in two harmful ways. We can, on the one hand, try to ignore it, suppress knowledge of it, repress rational fear of its consequences, and defend our defiance of it in our habits. The fact of symbiosis can, on the other hand, overwhelm us, leading to loss of confidence in our potential, or despair, or hostility. These two reactions, often working together, fight the efforts of so many good people to provide for our survival and well-being by learning to act in harmony with the interdependence of all things. By ignoring interdependence, or being paralyzed by it, or even by paying it mere lip-service, we fail to think through the problems of how to understand what are the right courses of action. In whatever way we come to understand its force – as supernatural, or as cultural, scientific, or logical, or as matter of our emotions, memories, and passions – it will move us toward something more important: the well-being of persons, which ought to be more important than things we want to possess or ideas to which we want to cling.

Yet if interdependence is already there, always a part of existence, why do we need to do anything at all about it? It is at work with no assistance from us. We sense it all around us: when we look at an animal we know well, such as a dog or a horse; or when we ride on a train or airplane, or buy food; when we feel the dangers and opportunities of the politics in which we must live; and when awareness and memory carries us on the drive-train of associations with others and their imbrications with ourselves, of which our lives do consist. The idea picks out nothing that is not already there at all times. It is not like the tallest blade of grass in a field; it is just the grassy field itself that we already now to be as it always must be. In other terms, if reality is a given, so is the relationality of all real things. It is virtually impossible to conceive of any real existent that has no dependence on other entities. This vast and basic reality we must face is everywhere, is a part of everything, informs everything, and is inseparable from all that it inhabits. It is just the case that this is the way the world is. Neither good nor bad, facts in themselves are morally inert. What do we do with the fact of interdependence? How do we seek the moral force to which facts alone cannot guide us?

The two hardest problems of moral philosophy arise right here, where we are trying to determine a good and right response to the problems that our exploitation of the Earth creates when it smacks into our dependence on what we are abusing.

This is the first of the two problems: what is the source, the justification, the reality of

moral obligation? The answer is no more to be intuited from facts in the case of our response to knowing the interdependence of all things than any ethical concept can be “proven” by empirical observation. Falling water wears away stone, but this does not instruct us to grind any stone we see. Life is full of predation, but to think and to act morally does not mean to prey upon anything we choose. We might think we need to kill or to use up the resources of the planet in order to survive, but no fact proves that our survival or disappearance has ethical value. It does no good to pretend that the fact of interdependence has moral force such that it directly prescribes our best courses of actions. The fact that we are free not to do what matches the outcome of facts marks the liberty that pertains to moral obligation, which exercises not coercion but intangible moral force.

Interdependence is also not the only fact that we must learn to draw a lesson out of. For us humans, it exists in tension with our need for our own identity. This is a profound and inescapable emotional need. We maintain a sense of personal identity, and we inherit or establish numerous group identities. The former is part of our psychology raveled into all our capabilities and dysfunctions. The latter is so vital to well-being that long traditions hold sociality to be at the core of being human. Nevertheless, not everything we want to do to benefit the group is ethically correct. Interdependence and identity are two poles that themselves interpenetrate. We move between the two because we need both to work together. We need their balance through conflict and resolution because both are actual facts constraining our survival and our flourishing. Both human individuals and human collectives frequently fear conquest by other groups even when their relationship has been beneficial. The psychological fact of our hunger for identity leaves us reluctant or even unable to tease ethical guidance out of the fact of interdependence.

These conflicts and the *agon* of these two facts – the natural fact of interdependence and the psychological fact of our need for identity – create the second of the hard problems of moral philosophy that interdependence presents to us. We have both universal moral ideals that demand impartiality in their application and also local loyalties and personal projects that are at the core of meaningfulness and purpose in our lives. Our universalist aspirations can make tyrants of us. In every cosmopolitanism we must take unceasing pains to curb dominative drives in order to protect individual persons. History shows our tendency to use loose universal principles as an excuse to pursue our private desires. At times, taking the best available right course of action harms some people, even when it benefits a great many more. We are too mortal for eternal truths and too small for the biggest concepts. It is our partiality that turns basic truths into partisan badges, slogans, and battle-flags. Mere human self-interest reduces smoothly universal goods into sharply serrated weapons of defense and of offense. Every kind of hesitation and reversal, every emergency and exigency, every species of stupidity and ignorance gash and pit the road we must follow, even when we are honestly trying to make the contingencies of our life into truths. Both the impartialist and the partialist impulses sometimes can demand everything of us, even though they pull in opposite directions. Both modes are very, very human.

Neither fact tells us what is the right thing to do. Interdependence is as inescapable as causality, a natural fact that contains no moral truth, a blank on which our worst impulses, which are no less natural and barely less inescapable, as well as our best, can determine our fate. This marks the need not just for theorizing interdependence but also for finding its moral force. The breadth of this concept thins into nearly nothing and resists nothing. This causes the impulses through which the real intricacy and depth of a concept can provoke our creativity to be uncontrolled. I fear that in this matter these impulses can become so unmanageable as to

seem not to guide creativity and thoughtful improvement but, instead, to authorize us to try to destroy what we have repressed and cannot process into reparative and ameliorative activity.

In a different way, both of these natural and the psychological facts tell us rather too many right things to do, so many that not only do these commands conflict with one another but also that no person can possibly do them all even were they not to conflict. Universal norms such as those which we might intuit from interdependence with the environment humble our selfishness, while particular demands for ourselves or for those we love render caring as concrete and urgent rather than abstract. Neither the needs that form interdependence nor the needs that form identities grounds the norms we require. Even if they could do this, we must still find a source of values by which to choose among the paths that the moral quandaries in each day present to us.

It is not on account of these philosophical puzzles alone that I am apprehensive about the approach to interdependence. I am wary on account of something I have referred to that is deeper than these puzzles and deeper even than our stubbornness in creating our identities. Deeper than this need is the drive behind the actions we take to which the rougher elements of moral psychology, such as anger, guilt, and fear, will bring us. This is our self-destructiveness. I am thinking here of the plain evident fact that we humans destroy a very great deal of what we create, and I reason that since these wreckages are the products of our own facture it is rightly called self-destructiveness. Destruction relentlessly tempts human beings. It often goes to war against our sociability. It has an imperishable force, a glamorous evil, that we often must work hard to resist, even while it pushes us by conscious passion into revenge for the wrongs we suffer with which our unconscious seems to seek a satisfaction it needs and that has the greatest meaning to it alone, regardless of our regrets. The quandaries and antinomies from which we face the reality of interdependence can seize upon our deflated position in the universe and, by excessively deflating our sense of what being human is worth and of what humankind is good for, can ignite this most dangerous of drives. When we lose our self-respect, we frequently will lash out dangerous hostility against whatever persons or ideas causes this loss.

In the face of the dangers and complexity of this massive fact of existential interdependence, where do I myself, or where does any one of us, stand: first, cosmically, in relation to the interdependent universe; and second, historically, in the flow of the history of humankind as we roll up to the unavoidable encounter with this fact? Amidst unresolving antinomies, our self-aggrandizing and self-destructive impulses, our lifelong needs for fulfillment, and one's own weaknesses and ambitions, how do I, how can we move from knowing a fact to knowing the right things to do in response to that fact? Or does the universality of interdependence vitiate any possibility of its having moral force, so that as a common fact it can be picked out only in merely superficial ways? Yet at every moment of my work on this my conscience has called to me – literally from right over my shoulder – to attend to our sociality, to the collectives and the great collectivity that is our history, the sum of human behavior, and to what we owe to others living beings and to the non-organic world in which we are permanently raveled.

Interdependence might be the situation of consciousness or spirit, as Hegel thought, or our material situation, as Marx thought. But how can we understand it as our moral situation, obliging us to attend and to act? Two elements are, in my view, necessary to moralizing it. They correspond to the two deep and broad issues in moral philosophy that I have mentioned. The first is to find the ground, if any, on which it binds us to respect it. The second is to find a way, if possible, to moderate the extreme demand it might exert from its binding ground. It humbles our selfish strivings, but we also have local loyalties and projects we cannot forget and must

cultivate because they too are necessary to our survival and well-being.

To find a moral obligation in interdependence (the first of the issues in moral philosophy I described above), we should seek, I think, a way of understanding the interdependence of all things that brings it closer to us, making it more a pulsing, summoning thing—one that renders our universe more like the living and the dying that we know. Our finitude animates us. It is the ground of action. Interdependence, because it is endless and overwhelming, if not alienating, almost suggests something outside of time and space, not sufficiently proximate to the circumstances of mortality that are our horizon and within which we generally focus our determinations and decisions about action. But there are better ways to think of it.

Thoreau, in his short and very busy years, discovered in the woods around Concord and on the Concord and Merrimack rivers how to pull the “ought” of the interdependence of life from the “is” of the natural world, even from the death of his brother, whose body he placed by a marsh where it could return as a bit of the human into nature itself in the terrain they explored together. This was part of his apparent belief that all of nature is conscious.

Panpsychism is the doctrine that all things in the entire universe have “psyche.” This might be soul, but consciousness is a better candidate. We directly know what it is like to be conscious, so that we can think about extending it from the form in which we know it to other forms, if we are willing to try. Soul, on the other hand, stands as exactly one kind of thing; is more fraught by sectarian beliefs; and it comes to us burdened by a most complex social, political, economic, and religious history. In addition, consciousness is a matter of lively current scientific inquiry in a way in which soul is not. The two might both be nearly equally black-box words, but at least consciousness seems more amenable than soul to the practical empiricism with which we conduct our lives. If we think of rocks way out there in space as conscious, we imaginatively begin to intuit those rocks as objects of empathy, as having something of the vulnerability to which our lives are exposed, whereas we most likely resist regarding them as having such intimate powers as we associate with our own souls. There are, of course, quite many versions of panpsychism, in its long history in ancient cultures around the world and in the West from Empedocles onward. In the simple bare form in which I can consider it here, it is not taken to claim that all things are alive or that all things are so self-reflective as to bear moral agency in their movements with respect to themselves or to other things. Also, I set aside for present purposes metaphysical consideration of whether the panpsyche is one massive and universal consciousness or is composed of a virtually infinite number of local consciousnesses.

The notion of panpsychism is colorful as well as intellectually elegant. When I bring it to mind so as to look at the world through it, it feels like a plush, soft, very clean towel taken off a warming rack in a luxury hotel. It feels good all over me, drying anxieties, wiping off clinging problems, spreading the good feeling of living. This is one of its strengths, that it gives an account of the general or universal relationship among things by which things are interdependent. This relationship is summed up in a general way as *copia*: the abundance by which real things move forward in time, reproducing, representing, or re-establishing themselves from instant to instant. Living beings reproduce with variation, and all objects can endure solely by means of change. Every thing in the entire universe mirrors itself into the next instant or phase of each or reflects other things in ways we can reasonably call interdependent.

Another approach to the same idea comes from the claim that the universe generates itself—that everything incises itself into new existences through the mediation of materials, forces, and processes. Henri Bergson called this the creativity of reality, saying that if time is not creative it is nothing; and Gilles Deleuze, following him, made the idea of ramification, as

rhizomatous reproduction, central to contemporary thought. Surely this sounds like the interdependence of all things: that they are connected through creative consciousness, separate or central, by which they creatively act in concert. This abundance of reality is *copia*: a cornucopia of reproduction. We live in a universe the interdependence of the things of which causes its abundance of forms, events, entities, and properties. Everything ramifies into everything else in the course of reproducing and sustaining life, as tree roots and fungi do, as treetops and birds do. Such incomparable abundance is part of what a “universe” must be, if it is anything.

Of course, we do not yet know in any scientific sense if all things are conscious. But it is precisely the affordance of a panpsychist understanding of the universe beyond our current empirical reach to give rise to moral force that panpsychism can add to a purely natural knowledge of the interdependence of things. In a word, it is the religious tone of any such conviction that seems to extend our most reliable form of knowledge – that which is falsifiable by replication – into a normative sphere. It gives moral values a place in practical knowledge. Religious conviction has immensely strong moral force, as we see in the role of reliance on a higher power in personal transformations; and it is the patent or latent hope of many who are inclined toward panpsychism or other varieties of cosmopsychism (including pantheism and panentheism) that by its force science and the projects of making and pursuing ethical values in which most of humankind engages in most places and at most times might at last harmonize.

Panpsychism, even if it has this affective capacity to attract our aspirations, might, however, be just another of the unsophisticated and unsatisfying attempts made by some scientists to extract from facts the values they want, if it did not suggest a compelling power in reality, communicated to us by reverence for the sublime, which instigates in us submission to goods ends greater than those that satisfy our pride and yet also is tolerant of our survival and well-being. We can use empirical evidence of the consequences of behavior in such deliberation; and belief in divinity is not required, as we see in nontheistic religions that take such strong and deeply reasoned moral positions as we see Buddhism take. Whether the hope of panpsychism to unite science and spirituality will be fulfilled or must instead rely on faith in the end, the religious attitude is perfectly suited to addressing with profundity that for which we have little or no sensory evidence – that which is ontologically far away and yet practically and morally as near to us as our survival in an interdependent world. Recognizing the intimacy of the moral demand is the specialty of religion. It is, perhaps, its main point and purpose, except in the case of the salvific religions centered on personal redemption.

It is no bad thing, then, that, by seeking that construal of interdependence which is more than a concept or a fact and that has the moral force to move us to decide and to act in accord with our interdependence on other beings, we might take on the spiritual reverence that our possession in common of consciousness can inspire in us, as it inspired Thoreau. The Yanomami tribe in the northwestern corner of Amazonia, in Brazil, have a conception of interdependent existence that leads them not only to defend their forest but also to urge the rest of us to realize how grievously we are damaging Earth. They do this, fiercely and with great intelligence, on the basis of their conviction that all things visible and invisible are connected as a living force responsive to the activity of all its parts.³ But, more precisely, it bears the feature most important for the question we are considering: for the Yanomami, a creative intelligence, named Omama, made our world to be one in which beings constantly interact and have predictable responsibilities to each other.

The Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa exhibits the moral force that this cosmogony

3. It is not quite precise to call this panpsychism; it is, instead, best described broadly as cosmopsychism.

and cosmology give to an understanding of what is needed for survival for flourishing. He speaks in cities around the world both to protect his people in their homeland and to warn the rest of us about our peril by including absolutely everyone in the spiritual structure that shamanic work addresses in what Omama created and provided. In the remarkable text he compiled with anthropologist Bruce Albert to press his urgent warning, he says, “This is why I told the white people: ‘You often claim to love what you call **nature**. Then do not settle for making speeches, truly defend it!’”⁴ His spiritual position, religious in the broadest sense and placed in a world alive with spirit, even in dirt, leads him to work with other shamans to protect all people. His activity is an aspect of the living force of interconnected consciousness rather than a mere idea, virtue, or symbol.

Omama is quasi-theistic: not a being that our categories of matter and soul and of the earthly and the heavenly describe well, and not exactly a god, but a creator and moral guide. The strength of Kopenawa’s call to others rests on the strength of his commitment to the vision of the world Omama created as revealed by his shamanic practices, notably visions induced by the hallucinogen *yākoana* (the alkaloid DMT, related to LSD).⁵ His conviction of its universal moral purchase grew through these visions as well as in response to the murder and destruction that outsiders brought to his people. But Kopenawa’s accounts of Omama might little move anyone without these experiences or anyone who refuses panpsychism because of lack of verifiable evidence. It is always hard to generate a universal morality because we humans are such embedded people, loyal to our local emotional or spiritual topography. We who work from Occidental traditions do little better, however strongly argument fares in comparison with vision. Of course, argument often is much weaker than vision, and I am inclined to think that arguments are visions at heart. Nonetheless, rational arguments work in practical and repeatable ways that we find hard to set aside because they sustain life in its most immediate needs and also serve well our medium and even some long-term needs. Thus both scepticism and practicalities have more familiar claims on our time and efforts than panpsychism has.

Even if these constraints were not to dim the magic of the world the Yanomami see, it is a very hard and rare thing to turn people from what is closer to what is farther and less pressing. But here we have come to the second problem in moralizing interdependence that I listed above. In the tension between the diverse vectors of our ecocidal self-destruction and the feeling that life will just go on as it is, our desire that it should do so usually resolves the tension in favor of our little habits and routines that support our life and that of the more or less small platoon in which we live. As we seek to be competent actors in our own lives, training ourselves to be capable of grasping what we need and desire, we become reluctant to leave aside these satisfactions, which most often are hard won. We fear losing our autonomy. We struggle for decades, each of us, to achieve a pleasing homeostasis or to pursue continuing changes for the gratification they give us. We come to feel that we own our lives and that we are its authors, and are as well members of communities participating with other members to lead meaningful lives and to create a meaningful world. Indeed we are authors and creators, as individuals and in our collectives, in many very real respects. As the physicist Sir James Jeans once said, “Next to man’s ongoing for personal immortality, he longs to feel that his word is immortal and will

4. Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman*. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013), 323. “Nature” is in bold because it is not a word that the Yanomami have since they do not think of humans or anything else as separate from “the environment” but rather regard everything as a whole.

5. Kopenawa and Albert, *Falling Sky*, 492, fn. 15.

go on indefinitely as he has known it.”⁶ Yet death is often unexpected. Today profound crises that can cause our death are too patent not to expect.

Turning the heart to the good that exceeds private need or wants, choosing between honesty and profit, is always the value in moral force, which, just because its force is moral and not coercive, must always fall back on itself. Tradition helps boost its effect. A religious disposition can help. So, too, do grounding visions and arguments, such as creation myths and Kantian reason. But the will of persons always stands free, just outside the reach of arguments and visions, so that coercive force sometimes seems the only real morality. Force, on the other hand, meets arrogance and pride on their own terms. Surviving our own self-destructiveness is all the less likely when doing so requires the worldwide cooperation of humankind. We have never come close to such coordination. Environmental catastrophe, the danger of apocalyptic war, and the intensifying need now for broad social justice call for a level of sustained global focus that our pride has never yet admitted of. The interdependence of all things is exactly what requires this kind of harmonized effort; it is exactly what makes it possible; and it is exactly this that our pride rejects. It is there and is real; but we deny it except when faith, or reason, or ethics obliges us to see it; and yet even with these means, effective response to these challenges seems impossible.

Is there something in the interdependence of all things bearing a moral force that many people from many different ways of life, people with very different beliefs and desires, will accept? Something to which a number of people sufficient to move our institutions, politics, and societies to answer David Kopenawa’s question and demand will respond? This problem is the challenge for every effort to form a community, because even a people who seem close to one another will spat and fracture. Although the odds against our survival in a flourishing condition now look long, we have the strength we can derive from conceptual thinking with which we can start to build community.

We begin that process by using our powers of imaginative concept-making. The way that conceptualization benefits us is by its power of generalizing a truth over instances, people, and a future we have yet to encounter on the basis of the successful application of explanations in past practical experience. Concepts are oneiric, a mental forecasting force. As such, they cross the zones into which we divide time past from time future. They are in this sense matters of temporality, part of historical experience. The ethical value of this historicity is its sustainability across time and space. Concepts in moral terms enhance our agency, spreading it into greater communal awareness.

I suggest that we begin to think of a concept of community arising out of interdependence. We can theorize the moral force of a great universal concept such as the this deep interdependence in a way that both nourishes our agency, our ability, and our willingness to do something to address an existential threat, and yet also conforms to the limited perspective of the human condition that we cannot escape and the limits to our knowledge and abilities that we cannot or have not yet transcended. We envision it by thinking of interdependence as a conscious community of which we are responsible members, despite our limitations.

While it seems to many people that the factual interdependence of all things deletes the boundary between the human and the natural, I think that the answer to the hope for community lies in the opposite direction. Nature and we human persons are part of one whole, to be sure. But this whole is a very abstract universal notion since it includes every kind of thing. Just belonging to the same class does not put all members of the class on the same level in

6. From a lecture that Willa Cather heard and quoted, as cited in Woodress 1970, p. 266.

all respects. Thinking through a concept in order takes us to the next step is a uniquely human function. In this context, we must try to make interdependence serve our congenital human sociability as applied not only to other persons but also to the other-than-human.

All of us human persons have a kind of agency peculiar to ourselves. If other beings have this or something like it in their own way – I hope that they do – it is a capability that we must take specially and centrally into consideration once we discover it. When we do so, we are acting precisely as beings with such moral agency. We are doing so only in the specific manner available to us humans at our best: by thinking about what it means for us to respond to the needs of the others, human, non-human, and perhaps more-than-human, with whom we must actually live on the only world on which we actually exist. The answers lie in the direction of that agency, which is a capability of morally good action toward others. It must be taken into account in a way that the groundings of interdependence I have described do not. They lie in understanding that what moves moral obligation, if not something that transcends material space-time (as might be the case), is the transcendence across the time of generations, and the spaces of the Earth, and the otherness of other persons and beings.

To grasp this, consider that we must see the two aspects of interdependent life: the interdependence in which all things inhere and the interdependence in which humankind acts. The former is cosmic and is always there, and all things participate in it. But the latter is historical. It is in our hands. This means that sometimes we fail it because we do not properly or ethically rely on it and employ it. No less truly, it means that we are able to do something about what is not only a real force or part of the functioning of the known universe but also is our human condition, which comprises our ability to respond. Though limited, our ability to respond to urgencies is inescapable as a moral choice. Real decisions have real consequences in the real past and the real future of our history. If we do not respond, we nonetheless by passivity choose to let nature, or other entities, do so, with results that will not necessarily sustain our existence. However widely and tyrannically external matters condition me, every ethical problem presents a decision that I alone can make. My responsibility ought not to be obscured by the desire to offload this responsibility onto the same machinic systems that, aiming to squeeze the last dollar out of everything, repackage their exacerbations of our problems as shiny new solutions to these problems.

Interdependence is also, therefore, a problem for me, for each of us, for all of us, in the historical situation of technologized and financialized capitalism as well as in our position amid the cosmos. The symbol I have adopted as a tattoo should place me in the situation in which I confront the capability that I have or any human has to act on a natural phenomenon out of our self-consciousness of freedom and responsibility. We must grasp this capacity in order to avoid the sense of powerlessness that the overwhelming fact of interdependence combined with the forces in our current social systems that siphon our energy into destructive activity and to replace powerlessness with the willingness and generosity that the project of forming a moral community of interdependent beings requires.

Our sense of freedom is really a sense of capability to deliberate and to act in this arena. We moderns feel that there are no essences that require our action, that there is no transcendental ground that justifies action, and even that the traditions or the goals that provide the framework of obligation are now vacated or insufficient. This, we feel, enhances our freedom, as a compensation for all the loss of security and self-regard that these changes both spring from and cause. Yet with this freedom even the threat of extinction of our species has not strength adequate to move us to act, for our instinct for survival seems to be failing. We buy junk, eat junk, inform our minds by junk, conform our minds to junk, all of which supports the

massively self-destructive social, economic, and technical systems to which we feed ourselves. This is how we abuse our freedom. But this does not use up our freedom. What is left over is our responsiveness.

This remains because it is our human condition. We are both always limited and yet always in excess of our limitations, both those of our bodies and those of our social bodies, which we impose upon ourselves. Responsiveness becomes responsibility. But it does not do so because it is the property of humans as the owners of the world. It does not require us to be little kings, sovereign lawgivers for ourselves and proprietors of our terrestrial, cosmic, and spiritual homes, as Kant thought. Instead, responsiveness becomes responsibility by taking us beyond ourselves. Our responsiveness makes us responsible to others who form a community to which we belong, not one that we control. Control makes us want more; power seeks to grow through ownership into domination. In place of control, responsiveness and responsibility lead to reciprocity. They call us to remember and to understand those causes and conditions that call us to respond to what is pressing us now, also to what past persons created and suffered, and to what our descendants, who must survive our responsiveness or lack of responsibility, will face. We might have no grounding rational nature or stable inner essence, but our condition nonetheless is to be continuously, eternally responsive and open across years and ages. This is the openness that contingency signifies: not totalized determinative causality but the context giving us our free ability to seek and to create meaning.

Responsiveness can generate moral force because it exactly corresponds to our interdependence with other bioforms and all objects, which we do not own and can but partially, minimally in truth, control. Interdependence is physical, social, epistemic, cultural, technical, and psychic. We are stuck in it and in the crises that it currently brings us and that we have visited upon the Earth system. We are like the people Walter Benjamin observed facing the deteriorating and dangerous world between the World Wars:

A generation that had gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars now stood in the open air, amid a landscape in which nothing was the same except the clouds and, at its center, in a force field of destructive torrents and explosions, the tiny, fragile human body.⁷

We too face interdependence as a new perilous situation, an overwhelming danger as well as support to our frail and fearful selves. Despite and along with our vulnerability, our very presence amidst the storm is a sign of responsive interdependence. For what is interdependence but the effect of each upon all? Each thing responds to all the rest. In each of the many modes of human experience, conceptualization, and expression we are responding to the universe. We can do so, of course, solely from our position and with the faculties we actually have. But one particular faculty that few, if any, other known bioform has is that of converting responsiveness into mutual responsibility by recognizing and codifying the consequences of our action. Even being heavily determined creatures and even being caught in a web of forces vastly more powerful than we are—a condition not very different from that of every other being and entity in this universe—we, as all the others do, respond to what comes at us. These responses become parts of the mutual destiny of all other members of the universal web. Interdependence is the sum of mutual reactions, yet in our hands it becomes response and not mere reaction.

Our freedom, then, amidst the troubling conditions that interdependence lays upon us, is the responsibility our awareness of our limits and needs creates. We do not fully grasp the interdependence of all things, nor can we reckon it all into logical and epistemic certainty, nor can we ever know all that could be necessary to handle these our cosmic circumstances. And yet

7. Walter Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," In *Selected Writings 1931–1934* (vol. 2, part 2), edited by Marcus Bullock, Michael Jennings, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 731.

our existential condition is this awareness and openness, from which we respond and by which we then eventually perceive and apprehend responsibility. If we were able to understand it all, rather than being unable, we would be less interdependent, if we were to any degree at all. Our inabilities cause our need to respond. The inability inherent in our human condition drives us, often waywardly but potentially wisely. It is the correlate of being interdependent. If interdependence is mutual effect and interaction, the force of moral responsiveness is our human way of being interdependent.

We operate in the hiatus between stimulus and our response and between moral call and moral action as part of our condition between past and future and between what we have in hand and what we reach to that is beyond us. The Greek rhetorician Protagoras who said that “man is the measure of all things” (not as a philosophical claim but as a persuasive trope) also is said to have been the first Occidental to distinguish conceptually among the tenses.⁸ We can, then, use this concept of the universal significance of humankind not because it argues for our supreme and central importance but rather because it pinpoints the measure of responsibility we must take from the passage of time through our mortal selves, balancing past and future and stretching ourselves between history of the urgent present with its pressing future. This measuring of time and the universe has moral valence. It can lead to domination and destruction, or it can lead to kindness and compassion. To neither direction is it reason or knowledge alone that leads us .

Concepts do not cause us to care. Our mortality insures this heedlessness, unless something else intervenes in our self-absorption in the face of finitude.

Even though I die, the universe continues. That does not console me if I am anything other than the universe. If, however, the universe is, as it were, another body to my soul, my death ceases to have any more importance to me than that of a stranger. The same is true of my sufferings. Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body, what the stick of a blind man is in relation to his hand. His sensibility no longer resides in his hand, but at the end of the stick.⁹

Simone Weil wants people to decenter their attention from their selves, so that each person's self would become, under such guidance, directed toward other selves. This is not to deflate our moral agency but to enhance it, despite her associating it with “decreation” of individual personality. It also did not entirely dispense with inwardness, of which she was suspicious. Marx, on the other hand, called the natural world

...man's *inorganic body* – nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself the human body. Man lives on nature – means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous intercourse if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.¹⁰

This is a statement of our dependence on nature and not of our interdependence with the non-human. The sphere of Weil's interest was solely, or at least principally, the human as well. But to care for other beings and even for all other things is to oppose the oppressive necessity of the fallen world as Weil saw it and of that destructive and inhuman capitalist (and now hypercapitalist) world which Marx saw. If we take nature, along with our own minds and bodies, as our organon, abandoning the immune and impermeable self, the emperor our ego

8. Protagoras in *Early Greek Philosophy*, vol. 8, edited and translated by André Laks, et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), fragments D20 and D23.

9. Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, translated by Arthur Francis Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), 319.

10. Karl Marx, “Estranged Labor,” in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, translated by Martin Milligan (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2007), 74.

wants us to be for its desperate and doomed effort to survive, we would lengthen our moral agency. We would multiply it by historicity through time, as far beyond our limits as our selfishness contracts it. We would extend our moral agency in the stream of universal *copia*, rather than condense it like an ice cube. We would form community.

This project is very far from expecting interdependence to activate itself as a motivation for us, from accepting interdependence as self-explaining guide to good action, and from merely trumpeting a too-easy allegiance to fashionable virtue. The moral force of interdependence arises, instead, from consciously forming a community with other species within and for our common past and future. We can use our responsiveness to conceptualization, imagery and song, and to other stimuli to extend our sociability to those beings with whom we are interdependent for survival, or for flourishing, or for moral integrity, or for all of these. Perhaps if it be enclosed within a panpsyche, our sociability would lead us to respond to the world beyond our customary limits through the moral needs of which our thinking and our creativity make us aware over time. Just as we best treat others when we view them as whole persons, rather than as they were at one time or for what they might be in the future, or as one or another aspect of their identity or of their personality, so also we would best treat all life and maybe even all things if we holistically view them as our community. This is the work that builds moral force out of facts.

We shall find ourselves bound by this moral and spiritual force only by living through it. This means work of many kinds. A more intimate relationship with other species can be built solely on greater understanding of their experiences of existence, which are their historical characters. This is understanding as well as knowledge; and, as our intelligence is not modular, understanding cannot be acquired and inserted but comes to us only through our own historical experience of our common life. This is all the more true of our relations with far away bioforms and with the non-organic things filling the universe. In short, we must develop community with it all. Community is built on sympathy and compassion and on careful inquiries after truth. Being part of a community brings responsibility to others, but also we often start with a responsibility that then helps to build community. It is like building a raft in the middle of the ocean. This requires long, hard work, often on small parts of just one of many problems that just be solved.

None of this can be forced on us, except at dreadful cost to ourselves and to the relationships we aim for. Moral obligation has a perfectionistic structure that demands confrontation with and opposition to the loves, desires, hopes, activities, and loyalties that make our personal lives meaningful. The tendency of moral obligation toward confrontation and opposition can demand so much of us that, as for those who hold the moral law as a weapon of conquest or oppression, it can derange us. Humility in truthful and trusting recognition of our limits as our authentic situation, for better or for worse, will help is to modulate the infinite demands of interdependence with an virtually infinite number of other beings and things. It is work that will build the ethic we need.

Our limitations create the possibility of excellence in this regard. Could we hurry, we should not then learn, feel, and understand the community of mutually sustaining life by taking it into our hearts and minds. Being hasty, we would try to dominate, rather than to empathize; and dominative knowledge and technology always produce the opposite of close and intimate communities. Failure is our hope. Inability to know it all is part of our human condition, just as the need to exceed specific knowledge and progress toward authentic relations is our deepest need. The interdependence of all things is the possibility of moral responsibility, not its certainty – at least for us, such as we perhaps have always been and as we certainly now are.

We first seize this possibility out of cold fact by the exercise of our human capacity for response to the lives of others. And then we undertake the long experience of understanding the language, history, feelings, reasons, desires, and lives of others. Community thus built is the means by which we gradually, sincerely enter into their moral community, and not simply the biological or material community, of the interdependence of all things.

My back tattoo, like any talk of humans wishing themselves into submission to a theory of interdependence, can be a shtick or even an attractive lie. If it is, instead, a task, it must be an *aporia*, for we all cannot know the correct directions to the goal. We are just starting on this road toward the reciprocity the task demands of us, if it can even be truthfully called a road (*poros*) rather than trackless (*a-poros*). Community does not easily or quickly come into being. It is the infinite task assigned to us finite sociable beings. If I fear the aporetic, finding it too stressful and uncertain, then my only path is to shut down the inquiry. Then, in place of discussion, we should say merely that we need not embark on the path of inquiry because we know enough about our ignorance to stop at it and to go no further.

What I did decades ago was to start to pose a question to myself by inscribing it on myself. It becomes an obligation as I work on the concept it symbolizes in my philosophical writing, as in this essay, and in my citizenship. If we are so haunted by apprehension of the arduous path because we prosecute ourselves for being merely human, or repress the question, or seek solely to flatter ourselves by fashionable virtue, we shall make the ancient error of demanding finality and certainty. But none of us owns her life or enough of the world to have lasting certainty. We must ask simply but perseverantly to advance toward abundant understanding, slowly and deeply acquired. And we must resist being hurried by an illusion that the moral force of the fact of interdependence intuitively and without friction directs right action. I myself have only nearly posed the question during the thinking of three decades. I now know that our future with our living things (and perhaps other kinds of things as well) is in the slow, hard work of building community with them. Therefore we ask: Does humankind have enough time to work at finding ways to do this? Will we ceaselessly work for it?