

“A LEAF, A DROP, A CRYSTAL, A MOMENT OF
TIME,” AND THE DIVINITY OF NATURE:
EMERSON’S PROTO-PROCESS METAPHYSICS IN
HIS *NATURE* (1836)

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I offer reasons why we should use the tools and frameworks of process philosophy and clarify the metaphysics of nature present in Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836). Part of the reason for engaging his thought in this way is to return Emerson to philosophical status within contemporary philosophy and to deny the central theme of many Emersonian projects that he is primarily a poet and a writer. Instead, uncovering Emerson's ontological insights allow for us to develop a conception of philosophy that unites the poetic and the philosophical in the process of experiencing nature itself and discern exactly what he meant by discovering our original relation with the cosmos. Specifically, I discern that nature and spirit are a co-extensive dyadic structure that unfold in a structure very analogous to some elements in phenomenology and process thought. Next, the implication of this unfurling and proto-process philosophical framework helps explain the early moves Emerson made against traditional Christianity in *Nature* and simultaneously what our relation to both persons and the Divine amount to in his earliest systematic treatise.

KEYWORDS: Ralph Waldo Emerson; American philosophy; American religious thought; Process philosophy

INTRODUCTION

I want to start this essay by asking: what nature and divinity are in early Emerson? Let's note two quotes in Emerson's journals from the year 1839. The first comes from around November 1839. In this passage below, Emerson denies having a system in the sense like Aristotelian-Thomistic system or Rene Descartes's dualistic system. Such systems are a coherent set of propositions that express

logical harmony with each other, and these systems may be said to spell out what I see are the four basic areas of any philosophical system: (1) the nature of reality (metaphysics), (2) the relationship of the human being in that reality to all other entities (philosophical anthropology), (3) how such a reality in all its facets may be known (epistemology), (4) and what our values ought to be given the previous areas (value theory, which encompasses ethics, political philosophy and aesthetics). Let us see what Emerson then states,

I need hardly say to any one acquainted with my thoughts that I have no System...At last I came to acquiesce in the perception that although no diligence can rebuild the Universe in a model by the best accumulation or disposition of details, yet does the World reproduce itself in miniature in every event that transpires, so that all the laws of nature may be read in the smallest fact.¹

In this passage above, reality cannot be contained in any single model, and yet Emerson offers us a glimmer of a metaphysical belief. In discovering one coherent fact in an event, one can see the reproducibility of that event in reference to what laws of nature there are. In effect, there is an implicit commitment to an ontology of the event.

And the second passage from December 1839 indicates that there exists the possibility of system building.

In taking this P.M. farewell looks at the sybils and prophets of Michel Angelo, I fancied that they all looked not free but necessitated; ridden by a superior Will, by an Idea which they could not shake off. It sits there in their life. The heads of Raphael look freer certainly, but this Obedience of Michel's figures contrasts strangely with the living forms of this Age. These old giants are stull under the grasp of that terrific Jewish Idea before which ages were driven like sifted snow, which all the literatures of the world,—Latin, Spanish, Italian, French, English, tingle with, but we sleek dapper men have quite got free of that old reverence, have heard new facts on metaphysics, & are not quite ready to join any new church. We are travellers, & not responsible.²

In the above passage, there are “new facts on metaphysics” that contest Abrahamic religion—what some may see as Theodore Parker’s *historic Christianity*. So understanding Emerson’s rejection of Christianity and understanding his early metaphysics amount to the same thing. The “new facts on metaphysics” must at

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson* vol. 8, eds. A. W. Plumstead and Harrison Ford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 302-303 [60].

² Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 321 [88].

least be tending toward a system enough to inform both the positive answer to what nature and divinity are, as well as how that insight informs his rejection of historic Christianity. In other words, rather than think there is no system in Emerson, I am inclined to think that Emerson's provocative style is attempting to locate the reader in the very ambivalence of these two passages: between the lack of a system and the perception of new metaphysical insights about nature and divinity. In short, there is a system about nature and divinity if you look hard enough, especially when we turn our attention to Emerson's first work *Nature* (1836). Quoting from Samuel Coleridge in Emerson's *Encyclopedia*, to which also Emerson amended a shorter version in *Nature*, Emerson recorded these words,

The problem with which Philosophy has to solve according to Plato, this; *for all that exists conditionally* (i.e. the existence of which is inconceivable except under the condition of its dependency on some other as its antecedent) *to find a ground that is unconditioned & absolute & therefore to reduce the aggregate of human knowledge to a system.*³

While Emerson may intend as an author to disrupt the reader with his provocative style to yet imagine new forms through the symbolism of nature for the enticing beyond and relational nature of reality itself, Emerson's ambivalence to system (while aware of the search for that system since Coleridge) may also not exist for us reading Emerson. Like Coleridge, we want to find "a ground that is unconditioned and absolute." We are now in a position to use our contemporary frameworks and impose them upon Emerson's productive ambivalence to make greater sense of a clarified Emerson (or at the very least what we can take from him). In short, the tools of process philosophy may now be used to highlight what nature and divinity are in early Emerson.⁴ For some, this line of interpretation may seem reductive, and yet the purpose of putting Emerson in tension with process philosophy is to see what aspects of Emerson speak to us today rather than maintain some purist fidelity to Emerson's thought. While this may not entirely illuminate all areas of philosophical systems from 1-4 from before, I can

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson vol. vi*, Ed. William H. Gilman, Alfred R. Ferguson, Merrell R. Davis, Merton M. Sealts; Harrison Hayford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 202 [147].

⁴ In all my research I have only found similar Emerson scholars who take up something akin to Emerson's relation to process metaphysics. The two best examples are Branka Arsic's *On Leaving: A Reading of Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) and Russell Goodman's chapter on Emerson in his *American Philosophy Before Pragmatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

at least make greater strides at providing an interpretation of Emerson's early metaphysics that illuminates some aspects of 1 above. Let me specify what I do think it illuminates.

There are other reasons for reading Emerson for an answer to what nature and divinity are. Emerson's call for a new vision of poetry and philosophy that could bestow the United States with knowledge of "a spiritual life imparted to nature." In writing about Emerson, I wish to retrieve a conception of philosophy that is united with the aesthetic for us today and perhaps rearticulate a vision for American philosophy obscured by our inability to recognize the infinite beauty animating us to which Emerson recalled in his encounter with Plato, experienced directly in his descriptions of nature, and developed in his own processual thinking in arguably his most accomplished work—that is, *Nature* (1836).

Beyond the publication of *Nature*, there are reasons for the recognition of beauty in nature. In Emerson's words, "The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both."⁵ In effect, process and renewal of vision requires the unity of both philosophy and poetry that underlies a specific metaphysical vision—a vision of a relational process metaphysics rooted in our experience of nature. Thus, in my reading of Emerson, there are clearly established analogues between rejecting modern philosophical thinking that also undergird the reasons process thinkers advance a metaphysics of relations and to which neither the soul nor the world are clearly without relation. They do not stand apart as we will see. Next, like William James's rejection of a block universe, Emerson's nature is always becoming, always growing in constant motion between motion and rest, change and identity, or what we might call today Becoming and Being.

Emerson posited that process and renewal were themes both for a distinctive American philosophical tradition. Out of the dry bones of the past, Emerson's criticism of previous metaphysical and theological frameworks of Protestant Christianity emerges. In *Nature*, he spells out those new beginnings needed for process and renewal, new grounds for speculation. In this way, Emerson is more than simply the American Nietzsche, a literary essayist, or poet. Our modern

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature" in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 2000), 29.

classification of literature from philosophy is a byproduct of our professionalism and academic culture. Our professionalism should not be the reason the literary and the philosophical, the poetic and the rational, are separated. Moreover, his thoughts concerning nature are not only a form of ecoliteracy or naïve call for American cultural independence as is typical taught in literature departments, but should be understood more profoundly on the deepest levels as the start of American metaphysics.⁶ “Deep calls unto deep” as Emerson so eloquently stated.⁷ For him, Christianity was like so many other ideas “a dry bone of the past” and Emerson urges us to ask in his words, “Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?” Instead, for Emerson, he calls for us to “enjoy an original relation to the universe” discoverable on our own terms and antagonistic to tradition. The fact of that original relation to the universe is a reason for thinking that these new speculations are an attempt that gets at a new proto-processive view—a new process orientation to American metaphysics that opens the door for both William James, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey.

⁶ Joseph Urbas’s *Emerson’s Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016) is, perhaps, the only exception and upends the recent tendency of atrocious postmodern readings of Emerson that repudiate America’s first metaphysician. Susan Dunston’s book *Emerson and Environmental Ethics* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2018) is the best book that shows ecoliteracy is part of the philosophizing about nature while also preserving attention to Emerson as a philosopher. Others have maintained the close connection of more standard readings of Emerson. For example, Russell B. Goodman maintains a standard reading of seeing classical pragmatism’s relation to Emerson’s romanticism. See his “Emerson, Romanticism, and Classical American Pragmatism” in *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19-37. Urbas inverts this tendency of literature first and affirms an ontological turn in New England Transcendentalism that gets glazed over in treatments of Emerson as a romantic literary figure. This work, however, cannot hold a candle to Goodman’s immortal *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991). Some of the most important articles dealing with Emerson’s metaphysics are listed as follows: Douglas Anderson, “Emerson’s Schellingean Natures: Origins of and Possibilities for American Environmental Thought” in *Cognitio* vol 8 no. 1 (2007): 13-22; David Dilworth has two articles worthy of careful consideration: “Elective Affinities: Emerson’s ‘Poetry and Imagination’ as Anticipation of Peirce’s Buddhisto-Christian Metaphysics” in *Cognitio* vol 10 no. 1 (2009): 43-59 and “Elective Metaphysical Affinities: Emerson’s ‘Natural History of Intellect’ and Peirce’s Synecism” in *Cognitio*, vol. 11, no. 1, (2010): 22-47 Consider Robert D. Richardson, Jr.’s “Emerson and Nature” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁷ Emerson, *Nature*, 37.

1. DEFINITION AND INTENT OF ESSAY

Before I proceed any further, let me give some brief attention to how I mean and intend “process philosophy.” Process philosophies consist of a difference in orientation that may best be characterized by Heraclitus’s famous phrase, “You can’t step in the same river twice.” Heraclitus’s phrase plays up the dynamic process of the flowing river, and this metaphor suggests an orientation to being. Process philosophy takes a view of being as dynamic (or Being qua becoming), and that the best account of reality in epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics is to take seriously the radical dynamism inherent at the heart of reality. The really-real is in process—that is, in becoming. “To be actual is to be in process.”⁸ In Alfred North Whitehead’s words, “the actual world is in process, and that the process is the becoming of actual entities.”⁹ In Emerson, the existence of the flux, the torrent, stream, and relationality are a form of proto-process philosophy. In that way, I do not mean a full identification with Whitehead nor Hartshorne, but imply that the theme of onto-relationality expresses an openness to interpreting Emerson’s co-extensive terms of nature and divinity with the dyadic relation of passive and active, formed stasis and generative forming that Emerson identified with nature. While I also recognize that scholars like Nicholas Guardiano and Joseph Urbas have contributed significantly to the general status of something similar to my claims about these proto-processive themes, I am locating this reading in one of Emerson’s earliest works. By locating this insight, my claims are more modest than speaking of the *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* as Guardiano does or Urbas’s bipolar ontology. These scholars speak of Emerson on a more general level. My question in this essay is how might those general features have started. If they can be located in Emerson’s *Nature*, then what do the first embers of his proto-processive thought look like in Emerson’s first book he ever published?

By contrast, Western metaphysics has preferred rather to think of reality, individuals, and being as static. While initially this generalization of Western metaphysics may seem heavy-handed, like a Heideggerian or Levinasian proclamation, the reader should see this as a sedimentation that constitutes an

⁸ John Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 14.

⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, (New York: Free Press, 1979), 22.

unreflective bias that comes to shape much of how metaphysics is done.¹⁰ In this unreflective bias of traditional metaphysics, the world is filled with individual substances, each distinct in its own right. With such individualized separate entities, mostly through substance ontology, a substance is what it is at any instant in time, an undifferentiated simple following in the steps of Parmenides rather than with Heraclitus. Put in more Jamesian fashion, “Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is *made*: and made by the relations that unroll in time.”¹¹ In this essay, I intend to find those parallels in Emerson that one could say reverberate in William James (a subject for a different time). In traditional Western metaphysics, the discrete substances and primary entities do not develop. They simple are. For example, the unmoved mover is a perfection. God’s essence is immutable. Plato’s Forms are a classical representation of a two-worlds-in-one theory in which the changing reality of appearances is dismissed for an abstract and immutable essence that undergirds the less important transient appearances of nature.

Given the preference of Western metaphysics to prefer the static for the really-real (and keep in mind that this pronouncement of Western metaphysics is meant as a general trend and departure point), philosophers must invent new ways of articulating the insight for a more limited view in which individuals are constantly in relation with each other, their own self, and the flux of the universe all at the same time, each varying aspect of our immediate experience unrolling in time into new manifest forms. Accordingly, Emerson’s poetry functions as a new way of inventing and articulating the insight of nature’s inherent dynamism. Poetry

¹⁰ More particularly and as footnoted in Nicolas Guardiano’s work, as it applies to Emerson, it may overlook his characteristic use of “intermediary concepts” (to use a phrase of Schelling’s, who also falls outside of a metaphysics of static being) and his sense of the “mid-world” (also a guiding principle of William James and Charles Peirce). Serious consideration, thus, should be given to Emerson’s way of featuring form within a processive universe, and hence his inclusive approach to being and becoming, the static and dynamic. On form in *Nature*, see its many references to natural forms, laws of nature, laws of morality, “unity in variety,” the Ideas of God, and other generals. Emerson spells out his comprehensive sense of being and becoming in later writings in such twin principles as “natura naturans and natura naturata” (“Nature,” in *Essays*; Second Series), “arrested and progressive development” (“Poetry and Imagination”), and the proto-evolutionary idea of “metamorphosis” (“The Over-soul,” et al.). Even with all that may be said of these themes, the dyadic structure of onto-relationality becomes prominent. While more prominent and silent in *Nature* (1836), my interpretation of Emerson here will have to address form in these essays listed at a later date.

¹¹ William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), [63] 229.

and its concern for the beautiful is but one side of the coin in Emerson's early metaphysical and mystic vision of the 1830s and 1840s.

Like Alfred North Whitehead, Emerson urges us to engage in speculative philosophy, but with a vision that is both poetic and philosophical since truth and beauty are two-sides of the same coin. More than that, at times, Emerson is an essayist who pulls from Plotinus, Spinoza, Kant, Swedenborg, Goethe, Schelling, and Hinduism to name only a few and thus the question of what his metaphysics is and what it consists in is a fascinating. All of these ideas come to fertile ground in Emerson. "There are new lands, new men, new thoughts" that call us to "demand our own works and laws and worship."¹² A new people, encountering the vast unfurling North American continent and wilderness, born out of immigration, the displacement of native persons, the enslavement of Africans and rebelling against its European heritage in search of itself sets the scene for the ongoing development of an American philosophy in Emerson's wake. For me, both "The American Scholar" (1837) and "The Divinity School Address" (1838) must be read through the opening trajectories inaugurated by Emerson's *Nature*. For Emerson, to do American philosophy is to sustain a view of the necessity of rupture of our collective cultural and shared experiences to anticipate the arrival of something new and dynamic.

Both process and renewal situated the idea of a new American experience. Embedded in a moment of striving for something beyond which failed us and with America as a new land of cultural experience, Emerson promises a rupture with the old for something new. "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close." Americans, Emerson warns, "cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests."¹³ In this essay, I articulate what that *something new* means. This *something new* entails, perhaps, two things: 1) a process relational *metaphysics of nature* that ruptured the old understanding of the Divine and 2) how such a view animated Emerson's accurate assessment of Christianity in some of his early works. In so doing, we can find the stale and moldy setbacks of 21st century American Christianity impeding once again our shared lack of cultural awareness with respect to nature

¹² Emerson, *Nature*, 3.

¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar" in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 2000), 43.

and the boundaries of its own doomed ethos.¹⁴ We should understand what Emerson meant when he proclaimed, “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul.”¹⁵

I write about Emerson not only that we may understand his philosophical motivations with respect to nature and divinity, but also with the question of application to the current stream of American experience. To be sure, Emerson cannot fathom the necessity that such rupture must bring in his own lifetime, but only that such rupture is necessary as it occurs out of growth, becoming. “A man is a bundle of relations, a knot of roots.”¹⁶ From his vantage point, we must begin somewhere in order to assess what will not work for us. So the question remains: What are we beginning anew in the promises to be had in Emerson’s wake? America as an idea is a process of renewal and transformation within nature and experience. From the earliest times, America was seen as a new land, a land of promises to be had, the new shining city on a hill. To think of America as this shining city (or land of promise) is to associate new beginnings with the promises of new experiences. This idea of America is already embedded in the process metaphysics underway in Emerson.

One unnamed critic called my strategy a “backwards-looking hermeneutic strategy” and a narrow strategy to engage Emerson’s *Nature*. Emerson wrote his works to be encountered and read. As a philosopher confronting ideas in texts that challenge our shared understanding of the horizon of the culture on which we as Americans inherit Emerson’s legacy, I will not be a purist. My scope is narrow on purpose. My efforts are part of a larger project that begin here on exactly how Emerson promised the new experiences of a new culture who had the possibility to bear witness to the onto-relationality of all in its scope. Within that promise, America exists as an idea in the very generation of what it is

¹⁴ We should realize how deeply related we are to nature since I write this with the entire country entering pandemic social distancing in light of the COVID-19 virus in March 2020. With revisions made now in January 2021 and now December 2021, nobody can doubt our shared vulnerability. Our shared vulnerability to something so small as a virus is a dark reminder of just how enmeshed and ontologically-related we are to the whole of nature.

¹⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, 3.

¹⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 2000), 129.

¹⁶ We should realize how deeply

becoming. America is a struggling collection of aggregate experiences that teems at the brim of itself ready to rupture and overflow again and again, and as America carries along into the 21st century, many identities and agendas have come to shape it even when that “shaping” is constituted by domination, imperialism, oppression, genocide, and slavery. To lose the conception of rupture is to settle for the conformity that Emerson warned us about in “Self Reliance” (1841).

Rekindling this lesson of process is important to our shared American philosophical history. The story of American philosophy is nothing short of a philosophical retrieval of those Emersonian meditations that sought to rupture tradition by uniting the poetic and the philosophical. In uniting the philosophical and poetic, Emerson generates a call for renewal by meditating on the active soul’s call for a new understanding of nature to be experienced and a new possibility of divinity gleaned within nature. As William James noted in his “Address at Emerson Centenary,” nature and its “Divinity is everywhere.” Continuing, James cites Emerson, “Other world! There is no other world. All God’s life opens into the individual particular, and here and now, or nowhere is reality.”¹⁷ In this new understanding of Emersonian nature, we find the first articulations of a proto-process philosophy that will underlie the future pragmatists and thinkers like Charles Hartshorne and Alfred North Whitehead.

2. THE SEVERAL NATURES

Let us take our point of departure and analyze the several ways in which nature can be cognized and given to us in experience. At the outset, I should say there is a tension between the literary Emerson and poet and the nearly two hundred years that separates us. Like any scholar, I bring a philosophical disposition and set of assumptions of both pragmatism and phenomenology to my hermeneutic encounter with Emerson, and these ways of proceeding mediate my encounter with him. Hence, I see the purposes of nature as *modes of givenness set in relation* to the person, and it is through phenomenology that I will talk about these modes

¹⁷ The cusp of this passage almost reaches the height of James’s awareness of process and the overall onto-relationality I am urging you, dear reader, to see as everywhere in Emerson’s *Nature*. William James, “Address at Emerson Centenary” *The Writings of William James* ed. John McDermott (New York: Random House, 1967), 385.

of givenness to which Emerson explores and posits despite criticism that Emerson escapes the boundaries of phenomenology.¹⁸ At the outset, however, I will only make analogies to some phenomenological elements.

More precisely, I do not intend to be pure in phenomenological description, nor do I intend to impose upon Emerson what any other phenomenologists and pragmatists apart from Emerson means by “original relation.” Instead, I hold no formalism about phenomenological methods any longer, but instead embrace John McDermott’s proclamation, “Phenomenology has taught me to take things, attitudes, ambience, and relations straight up, with no excuses.” Fair enough, though McDermott continues on a point I have struggled against for nearly a decade. He writes, “I pay little attention to the Husserlian bracket, which seeks for a pure essence of things, for I regard such efforts in his work and those of his followers as a form of epistemological self-deception, a result of the rigid science it deplores in a fruitless search of true objectivity.”¹⁹ Following McDermott, then, I am now transitioning to a Jamesian constraint to describe, but to allow for the leaks in experience, which such Husserlian formalism cannot capture. From that lesson, I will attempt to stand in the stream and render Emerson’s own account of nature and divinity within the horizon of how the text of *Nature* develops these themes concomitant with his own philosophical and poetic vocabularies. In the background, I will keep in mind the overall relationality posited in his own words in which poetry and philosophy are united,

Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing. I see all; the currents of Universal Being circulate through me, I am part and parcel of God.²⁰

At first glance, the imagery of nature, the integrity of impressions is in constant motion, and from this example alone, the experience of nature is descriptively

¹⁸ See Herbert W. Schneider’s “American Transcendentalism’s Escape from Phenomenology” in *Transcendentalism and its Legacy* ed. Myron Simon and Thornton H. Parsons (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967): 215-228.

¹⁹ John McDermott, “Experience Grows By Its Edges: A Phenomenology of Relations in an American Vein ” in *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 142.

²⁰ Emerson, *Nature*, 3.

rendered in what I call a theopoetic rhapsody.²¹ Whatever “Universal Being” is, it circulates through me; it takes me whole swallowing my entire ego. This circulation comes after descriptions of the stars that shine and cause reverence in me, the sun in summer and the seasons yielding harvest. In effect, poetry opens us up to the intuition of nature’s self-contained generativity and the unfolding dynamic relation it has to me as this person to which nature alone cannot produce, “but in man, or in a harmony of both.”²² Nature is not fixed nor statically given and yet it is the very place to which being is born and becoming. The power of this circulation is activity, generation, unfurling movement, and growth, yet it is a growth in relation to persons. This power provokes our imaginative response to analyze both the life of our own interiority and the relationality implied by how such interiority gives rise to action. For Emerson, nature can only be *given in process* and the *purpose to which we assign that process breathes life in our comportment towards nature and other persons*.

The purposes to which nature may be set and humans relate to it are the manner in which we on the side of persons can relate to nature and include how nature may be given to persons from the object pole. Emerson points out four purposes of nature. “Whoever considers the final cause of the world will discern a multitude of uses that enter as parts into that result.”²³ Uses are relations containing both parts and the result simultaneously. These relations are four: 1. Commodity, 2. Beauty, 3. Language and 4. Discipline. First when pointing these out, we must recall his earlier pronouncement that his descriptions of nature’s purposes are from the givenness of nature to the person. They are described primarily from this angle. He described this as “the integrity of impression” and that “all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to

²¹ Unlike John T. Lysaker, I do not wish to secularize Emerson and suggest that we sacrifice our own becoming on the part of the divine. See his *Emerson and Self-Culture* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008). The tension in Lysaker is a self-becoming in cultural ways that depends on nature, but yet draws a distinction between the dependency on the divine. Lysaker argues to do away with the latter. In Emerson, however, nature is the divinity, so it’s hard to see how Lysaker extricates the one from the other. In effect, you cannot. However, Lysaker is saved because of the personal engagement with Emerson. His book is not about getting Emerson right, but retrieving an Emerson he sees as relevant for our contemporary 21st sensibilities.

²² Emerson, *Nature*, 4.

²³ *Ibid*, 7.

their influence.”²⁴ When we reflect upon the integrity of the impression of a stick of timber, what’s revealed is that which distinguishes between the wood-cutter and the tree of the poet. Mere practical use is not poetic. Poetic rhapsody of natural processes opens us up to the generativity of nature. Let me explain by transitioning to our first meaning nature can acquire in our relation to it as described by Emerson.

3. ON COMMODITY

Under commodity, nature is seen in terms of its pure instrumentality. Such “a benefit is temporary, mediate, not ultimate...and is the only use of nature to which all men apprehend.”²⁵ In the most practical sense, persons understand when beasts, fire, stones, water, and corn all serve us. In this way, nature is given as practical use, the referential totality of in-order-to relationships that characterize the practical coping we engage with in our being-in-the-world quite regularly. We know the fire is for cooking meat once the beast is grown and brought to slaughter. From there, the food is used to sell at market and so forth. The ongoing nature of these instrumental relations turns everything, if we are not careful, into a marketable good and we value such goods only for the uses they engender. All things become tainted with the danger of immediate use and amplification of self-asserting-self-interest. In this way, the danger of capitalism surfaces nearly two centuries ago in Emerson’s warning to us,

All the parts incessantly work into each other’s hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man.²⁶

Each part is one thing in reference to all other things, and nature can be *given as* purely that which nourishes man, yet there is a hint of divinity in nature even here for Emerson where the enframed mind of Heidegger’s critique of technology would not see it. The imagery of circulation is present here as in the passage

²⁴ Emerson, *Nature*, 3. Moreover, does this not resonate with his “The Transcendentalist” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 2000) when Emerson states, “Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors” (83).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

before and points directly to the interdependent relations of nature. The “endless circulations of the divine” are the interdependent relations of nature, and nature is identified as divine. Emerson does not object to man using nature for his benefit; it cannot be his sole benefit in encountering it, however. For Emerson, the all-encompassing danger of profit is a danger *only if* that’s the only way in which nature can be experienced. For this reason, Emerson immediately transitions to beauty giving little time to the sense of commodity and sees beauty as a more *nobler want*, indicating that beauty is of a higher rank than commodity and more fully capable of discerning the divinity in the circulation of Universal Being.

4. ON BEAUTY

Next, Emerson contemplates beauty. Originally, the Greek term *kosmos* meant beautiful. For Emerson, “the constitution of all things...as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal give delight *in and for themselves*.”²⁷ The intrinsic beauty is expressive of a value one can glean mostly in solitude. Taken further, this solitude is an attempt to describe that original relation to which nature can be enjoyed in its primordiality. Primordially, nature is active. In this way, nature evokes and provokes due to its form and its endless activity; it is never form alone in Emerson that gives rise to beauty but the activity of natural forms. “To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds, every hour a picture which was never seen before and which shall never be seen again.”²⁸ Acknowledged in the stricken and suddenness of beauty is the manifest and alluring process of inherent growth and becoming, the movement between form and the process of the new and ongoing more. This becoming of beauty in nature is the contingent arrangement of factors as it is disclosed to us in its own becoming as a *something new*. According to Emerson, “this beauty of nature... is seen and felt as beauty,” evoking the phenomenological sense of language that Emerson will explore in this next meaning of how nature manifests to us through language. More than that, however, there is a stronger interpretative possibility. Nature is intrinsically beautiful in every single manifestation. That intrinsic beauty calls to us, and it evokes some meaning between being and becoming,

²⁷ Ibid, 8. Italics belong to Emerson.

²⁸ Ibid, 10.

stasis and change.

Beauty evokes a twofold relationship in persons. First, beauty relates to virtue and aids in the will for recognizing goodness and being good. Beauty facilitates our personal becoming in the wholeness of the universe (interpersonal) such that our pursuit of moral perfection then lends itself to the second sense of beauty relating to thought (intrapersonal). In essence, Emerson is describing two sides of the same coin. On the one hand concerning virtue, “in proportion to the energy of his thought and will, he takes up the world into himself” and in recognition of beauty, “The beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.”²⁹ Nature is given in terms of beauty of active manifesting forms and then these active manifesting forms kindles in us the recognition of *the same* sentiment, which can be described as either moral or religious sentiment.

In Emerson, both moral and religious sentiments seem identical. While I do not have time to argue for that identity claim here, I will assume it without argumentation for the rest of the essay. In being identical, these sentiments are related and incapable of being teased apart completely. “The intellectual and the active powers seem to succeed each other, and the exclusive activity of the one generates the exclusive activity of the other.”³⁰ In the person, we are stirred, even when beauty is intellectual in nature, and like a pragmatist, an idea of such intellectual beauty immediately generates an action in us. In other words, the perception of a particular beautiful phenomenon as form stirs feeling, and in our exploration of what that value means to us results in action recalling how ultimately the parts and results run together in all uses of nature. In action, persons join the circulation of the harmonies of nature. When persons take the world into themselves, an affect is produced and in possessing that form, persons are inspired to move and act. In possessing beauty persons come to recognize the call of values that urge them to act.

One takeaway from Emerson in *Beauty* is to rekindle and awaken ourselves to the theopoetic rhapsody in relation to nature-as-beautiful. In other words, this re-awakening depends upon a controversial reversal of one’s metaphysics based

²⁹ Ibid, 12.

³⁰ Ibid, 12.

on aesthetic feeling. For Emerson, aesthetics determines the metaphysical, not the other way around. We catch raptured glimpses like Merleau-Ponty's sparks of a fire. Just as there is no complete phenomenological reduction, the overwhelming givenness of nature falls through our hands like sand. We grip only a tiny bit when we can. The rest flows and escapes. According to Emerson, the poetic opens us up to the givenness of nature, and then out of that theopoetic rhapsody, we catch the glimpses of processes of what truly is. The processes of nature must first be beautiful to be found at all. A form elicits and brings us into the fold of yet another unfolding. In this light, metaphysics is poetry with concepts, and this finding of nature and the relation to which we experience is, in part, constructed out of the response those initial aesthetic feelings convey in us. In fact, the entire world is thus constructed for us to find beauty in it. On this Emerson writes,

The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire for beauty. This element I call an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression of the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All. But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of the inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must stand as a part and not as yet the light and highest expression of the final cause of Nature.³¹

In the passage above, beauty is not an ultimate end, but merely a constitutive fact of one rung higher on the ladder of Universal Being. For this reason, this passage supports a reading that beauty is instructive of this ascent, but not in itself an intrinsic part of all nature that stands independently of me as a property. Such a determination would support a realist interpretation of beauty as a concept to stand apart as if were a thing independent of the mind that relates to it. If beauty is then an intrinsic feature, then it exists only in relation. Let me explain.

The soul seeks beauty out, and for Emerson, this feature of beauty-seeking is a process inherent to what souls do in their activity. No reason can be given for why this is so, but only that it is the constitutive feature of our souls. Beauty is a sign for something more; it is so constituted that it signifies in being a part that there is a relation to other parts. In this way, "nature is not ultimate," but provokes us as a "herald of the inward and eternal beauty." The beauty reflected within

³¹ Ibid, 13.

one's experience points to its onto-relationality of discovering it without. For Emerson, the soul experiences nature and in that process of recognition, the soul seeks to participate and be so transformed in that participation. In that participation, the person experiences revelation of nature herself in its divinity. For this reason, *participation is one side of the ontological relation*. One stands amidst *the process realizing* that one is among many. One becomes, as it were the "not as yet" but enjoined as one expression amongst many in the "final cause of Nature." In fact, "the final cause of Nature" is one in which we are in tension as if a rupture of current parts breaks unity only to reestablish and aspire to unity again. Let me explain. Such a transition is fitting because we are about to transition to our discussion of Language.

5. ON LANGUAGE

The use of poetry in Emerson can be likened to the use of phenomenological language. At this point, my commentators may bring up Herbert Schneider's "American Transcendentalism Escape from Phenomenology." While this canonical piece of writing in Emerson scholarship is too large to focus on, there are two points to bring up where I am not caught by Schneider's criticism against phenomenology.

First, Schneider's denunciation of Emerson not focusing on a Husserlian transcendental ego but "the empirical focus of the world of intentions and final causes" misses me since earlier I had quoted the commitment to describing the stream of experience in McDermottian fashion with less formalism than Husserlian transcendental phenomenology.³² I am still describing the onto-relational dyadic structure of experience Emerson is disclosing, but my descriptions are not guilty of what Schneider regards as the work of phenomenology. Let me explain. For Schneider, phenomenology consists in "the phenomenological stance of observing objective essences from the standpoint of the transcendental ego."³³ By contrast, Emerson's "personal perspective is not a mental structure that is imposed upon an alien world" but suffused with Schneider's proclamation that "it is a thoroughly practical philosophy." Emerson's

³² Schneider, "American Transcendentalism's Escape from Phenomenology," 218.

³³ *Ibid.*, 219.

“building his own world in poetic imagination is at the same time his practical appropriation of the real world.”³⁴ In other words, poetry is more a taking up the world in pragmatic and concrete terms than the disclosure of essences. This leads to the second mistake.

Schneider’s second mistake is that the phenomenological disclosure of language is fundamentally playful. It is not stringent in terms of taking up Husserl’s method of bracketing and description from static phenomenology. Static phenomenology is when the phenomenologist takes up the intentional relation for description and let’s the phenomenon appear from itself to show itself as it is without any temporality in mind—what Schneider calls “orthodox phenomenology.” Genetic phenomenology describes the phenomenon as our participation of the experience unfolds with it. In this way, Schneider reads Emerson as a moment of historical transformation from New England transcendental idealism into pragmatism’s embrace of a realism based “on the consciousness of man’s involvement actively moving in a world of action and reaction.”³⁵ Schneider’s interpretation of Emerson is compatible with what I claimed previously. Regarding beauty, the soul seeks to participate and be so transformed in that participation. Schneider states that this movement from the New England transcendentalism to a realism in Peirce’s philosophy constitutes the escape from reducing all too quickly any part of Emerson’s philosophy. So when Schneider praises Peirce that “phenomena are not merely given or seen” as they would be for the static phenomenologist, “but taken and manipulated; the mind is not merely an eye but an operator”³⁶ as one would embrace in genetic phenomenology as easily as these tenets of Peirce. A pragmatic phenomenology would be as empirical as James’s radical empiricism and hold that the only things that truly exist are the very relations that make up self-and-world and thought-and-thing.

The road that led from New England Transcendentalists to Peirce is not one of escape, but one way that Emerson escapes the clutches of being reduced to one variety of Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. Schneider and those that favor him desire to read American philosophy in terms of its own history without

³⁴ Ibid, 218.

³⁵ Ibid, 221.

³⁶ Ibid, 222.

noting the heavy-handed reductive approach of reading *Nature* as opening the gateway into process thought, and yet that is exactly the route Schneider has taken. The anticipated realism of James's radical empiricism and Peirce's triadic notion of experience are methods with phenomenological overtones but more importantly are examples of process thought.³⁷ Schneider's insistence on a reading of Emerson on his own terms is fine. It is a protective measure against wrongful identification and oversimplified reductionisms that deprive Emerson of complexity, but Schneider's escape cannot become an excuse not to put Emerson into contact with parallel themes in other philosophical traditions.³⁸

For phenomenological language, the power of language is in the disclosure of how experience is undergone in its very onto-relationality (hence the embrace of genetic phenomenology and pragmatism together); it is a return to *the personal sphere* that suffers all modes of experience and apprehension beyond the fixed nature of any epistemic point of view and to which no proposition seeks to describe in the natural attitude. Poetry can disclose and suggest insight that cannot be stated directly. In the words of the poet Mary Oliver, "I learned from Whitman that the poem is a temple—or a green field—a place to enter, and in which to feel."³⁹ More specifically for Emerson, the use of poetry opens us up to the processes of nature; it forces us to restore a phenomenological orientation to the world for the discovery of nature to take place—what Emerson calls "The American Scholar" is this very orientation in which nature *qua* processes open up the intuition much like James's use of the fringe. Nature is more than which appears but is also bound to the appearance in experience. The poet can make

³⁷ Consider candidate articles like Carl R. Hausmann's "Charles Peirce's Evolutionary Realism as Process Thought" in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* vol. 38, no. 1/2, Essays in Honor of Richard S. Robin (Winter-Spring 2002): 13-27 or J. Edward Hackett's recent but brief article "Radical Empiricism as Process Philosophy" in *Process Perspectives* (Winter 2020): 7-8.

³⁸ Here, I have in mind Stanley Cavell's famous interpretation of Emerson's epistemology of moods, which seems to reduce the ontological work Emerson does to the epistemology that Cavell would make him do, but yet to which Emerson does not, in fact, do. When Joseph Urbas interprets Emerson as a metaphysical realist, Urbas emphasizes that Emerson does not reduce metaphysics to epistemology. As my discussions with Greg Pappas over the years have confirmed that this is a move to which both of us see in James and Dewey as well. The ontologies of experience fix what it is possible to know because of the onto-relationality at the heart of experience, and so I find in Emerson's published essays a favorable trend towards Urbas and not Cavell.

³⁹ Mary Oliver, "My Friend Walt Whitman" in *Upstream: Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 12.

us see this much like the phenomenologist attempts description of what has been undergone, will be, and is happening in the very relation of experience.

In Emerson, this is a form of agonism, yet agonism is a deep constitutive feature of human life that no earthly wisdom can deny. No matter the coping mechanism or sophistication of technology, like the existentialists, strife and conflict are ever-present. For nature awakens the sacred as feeling of value here and now but also connected to that which lies beyond the boundaries of experience. Nature as process evokes in us the continual presence of the more. The American Scholar “then learns that going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds.”⁴⁰ That feeling opens us up to awaken the imagination to construct meaning by the recognition of beauty in private experience and to frame such glimpses in poetic language for all to feel and behold. This discovery has a serious and theoretical consequence for religion. *Since moral and religious sentiment are identical, then religion comes out of human imagination; it is a form of poetics to encompass the vast circles that are awakened by natural process.* “All spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. The same symbols are found to make the original elements of all languages.”⁴¹ Read this way, religion is driven first and foremost from the aesthetics of the sacred since only poetry can open us up to the interrelated process of the All as the All is mediated through symbols and thus rendered sublime. Nature becomes symbolic for Emerson and our way of preserving that awareness of its symbolic order, he argues, is to see the inherent beauty in its forms. Poetry is, then, the most direct way into obtaining the proper relation to nature. It is the means by which we enter into relation with beauty. Poetry preserves this awareness while philosophy may be more driven to organize the symbolic order into a workable interpretation.

When we distort and reify these constructions of the natural symbols beyond the meaning-making that such processes invite, then we are being religious in the wrong way by turning away from the sublime. In doing so, such retreat involves elevating one way at the expense of the many ways in which the poetic can take form. In other words, the danger is in thinking that metaphysical descriptions are ever complete, nature is static, and that religion is more than a construction of

⁴⁰ Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 53.

⁴¹ Emerson, *Nature*, 15.

human need to make sense of the anticipated *more* in appearance and that which we have faith in beyond it. “Every natural fact is a symbol for some spiritual fact.”⁴² We are stuck making sense of our symbol filled nature with faith that what is symbolized is more than we can understand, and notice that Emerson does not claim precisely what those spiritual facts are. Instead, he outlines, the process-rich condition of the agonistic relationality we undergo. “Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind, and that state of mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture.”⁴³ Emerson anticipates relational process philosophies right here in that all natural appearances correspond to some state of mind or as a phenomenologist we would say that every mental act intends an object. Cornell West somewhat agrees, “the basic nature of things, the fundamental way the world is, is itself incomplete and in flux, always the result of and a beckon to the experimental makings, doings, and actions of human beings.”⁴⁴ However, Emerson is moving beyond the phenomenological. He is proposing to move beyond the appearance since the natural fact of those very same appearances belies a transcendental spiritual order in its becoming. The trouble comes when making sense of this two-sided coin of the natural order *qua* spiritual order.

For Emerson, persons are stuck within the space of the symbol. The symbol mediates our understanding of nature. Language is imprecise in its ability to render what truly is and the fact that we struggle to attain clarity about the glimpses of natural appearances we have attests to this dearth of precision. “Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance.”⁴⁵ Language is the very medium that must describe the more than what appears by being bound by what

⁴² Ibid, 14.

⁴³ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁴ Cornell West, *The Evasion of American Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 15. I said “somewhat agree” since rather than explicating Emerson’s metaphysics of nature, West focuses on power and how this relationality will establish a hierarchical notion of persons with respect to race. West is not wrong that the democratic experimentalism at the root of pragmatism in Emerson is an experimentalism of unique and gifted geniuses. The problem is that these geniuses are not yet a philosophy that can be inclusive of Blacks, so the Emerson that opens up abolition purports a less than generous view, so we who find Emerson uplifting must embrace the tensions of that thought and propose a more inclusive metaphysics of nature and soul to which we all as persons are contained.

⁴⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, 13.

appears. As an art form, poetry renders *the more* than what appears by borrowing from the material analogy of the world.⁴⁶ Emerson writes,

It is easily seen that there is nothing lucky or capricious in these analogies, but that they are constant, and pervade nature. These are not the dreams of a few poets, here and there, but man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed at the center of beings, and a ray of relations passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man.⁴⁷

In other words, Emerson's ontology is clearly processive and fully ontorelational. The analogies reflect the ontological limitation constitutive of all experience. We can describe *the more* with analogies taken from nature to posit what nature must be like. We cannot definitively say what it is truly like. For this reason, these analogies come from our imaginative struggle and the conflict to make sense of the world as beings bound to sense amidst a reality in flux (hence the agonism). The only metaphysical truth that Emerson describes is that trying to make sense while being bound to sense also means that we exist in the very process of making sense while being bound to sense. Immanently creating and interpreting the whole of experiences means we catch only glimpses of it, and so we turn to our imaginations. Persons, like anything in nature, are stuck in the process of making sense while being bound to sense. That's our center where the ray of relations passes from me to the not-me, from me to all objects in a nexus of dynamism. That's where universal being circulates, and where "the great principle of undulation in nature" shows itself as "desire and satiety" and "ebb and flow of the sea."⁴⁸ In this way, persons are in constant unfolding relation cosmically and that ray shines out of us and is refracted back with every intended object within the All. Accordingly, Emerson is America's first proto-process metaphysician who understands that the person is in creative tension with the opening of uncertain "manly contemplation of the whole" that evades us but all the while is felt deep down in the marrow of our embodied being where both

⁴⁶ If you wish to take this insight and concentrate on the fact that there is a transcendental feature of beauty inhering within nature rather than focus on the metaphysical aspects of Emerson, then one should consult Nicholas Guardiano's *Aesthetic Transcendentalism in Emerson, Peirce and Nineteenth American Landscape Painting* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

⁴⁷ Emerson, *Nature*, 13-14.

⁴⁸ Emerson, "The American Scholar," 51.

nature and spirit are co-extensive.⁴⁹

6. ON DISCIPLINE

Discipline is the name Emerson gives to our process-relational conception of agency and the disclosed meanings in relation to the uses of nature and the disciplined effort of such uses. According to Emerson, “meaning is unlimited.”⁵⁰ For Emerson, the disciplines include the entire process-relational parts and wholes that encompass in the aspects already described in Commodity, Beauty, and Language. In effect, the discipline to understand nature includes mediating all the possible symbolic forms that can be given to us in experience.

Within this unlimited capacity for meaning, the most important feature of our own agency are the names of faculties that Emerson distinguishes at the beginning of this section. For Emerson, both Understanding and Reason instruct us. The Understanding is the faculty bound to the material and the senses, or more put by Emerson, “every property of matter is a school for the understanding...[it] adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds nutriment and room for its activity in this worthy scene.”⁵¹ In this way, the understanding is the raw manipulative power of the empiricist. By contrast, reason is the deeply intuitive power of our soul to unite what appears as material through the senses with the beyond of thought. “Reason transfers these lessons [of what is added, divided, combined, and measured] into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.”⁵² Emerson will elevate the intuitive over the material, and even urge us to accept a sophisticated idealism later on. I call it a sophisticated idealism since by my urging to see Emerson as a proto-process philosopher, the ontology of relation carries more weight than thinking Emerson a Platonist that accepts the divide between the natural (physical and sensible universe) and spiritual facts (the mental and conceptually-laden universe).

For now, Emerson is cultivating in the reader an awareness of nature as that which instructs us. Such instruction presupposes the very relationality through

⁴⁹ Emerson, *Nature*, 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 19.

which that instruction takes place. The poetic quality to nature, its spiritual nature, is the very givenness of value revealed through nature. Moral sentiment and religious sentiment scents the air and impregnates the water we find in the world. “The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him.”⁵³ Our relational position is one of influx. These relations encompass being that very center of undulating ray of relations described earlier,

Herein is especially the unity of Nature—the unity in variety—which meets us everywhere. All the endless variety of things make an identical impression. Xenophanes complained in his old age, that, look where he would, all things hastened back to Unity. He was weary of seeing the same entity in the tedious variety of forms. The fable of Proteus has a cordial truth. A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world.⁵⁴

This impression is one part and parcel of a universal being’s circulation. It is ebb and flow. When I encounter it, experience it, relate to it, I am meeting a part of the whole, an endless variety of things. These varieties embody an interrelatedness to which our intuition receives from nature given that we all experience the sameness of this variety. In this way, our experience assents to a unity of what we see in that part that sparks within us a feeling of the whole, or maybe a partial unity which we feel and to which Emerson puts poetically over and over throughout this work and others.

We feel this unity in the aspiration of the many becoming one in nature’s activity. Not only do “a leaf, a drop, a crystal, [and] a moment of time . . . relate to the whole,” but also each one “partakes of the perfection of the whole.” All nature is tending toward higher perfection. For Emerson, this higher perfection is an ascension into unity and yet it slips constantly away from us as finite experiencers. This unity in human life is living a life of purpose and value. Emerson’s proto-process metaphysics then have a tint of Platonism in which strife is given purpose and yet it achieves that unity while transitioning again into fragmentation. The many partake to become one only to be themselves again. In human life, this is

⁵³ Ibid, 22.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 22.

the individualism of genius. This unity is interdependent and linked with all things such that one can see the microcosm in the smallest particle reflect that unity in the macrocosm at large. The macrocosm also breaks down in individuals to mirror itself in a person's individualism. At the heart of *Nature* is this rupture of the new, a constant breaking away and reassembling of parts into wholes.

Though this breaking away and reassembling activity of nature is in ebb and flow, our glimpses do yield insight. The processive dynamic unity of nature, "so intimate that it is easily seen." These rules are laws of organized activity and in being so easily seen these laws and rules lie "under the undermost garment of nature."⁵⁵ These laws and rules pervade thought and what Emerson also calls the Universal Spirit yet are revealed in the very givenness of nature. The two-sided coin of reality is, in truth, one whole that moves in relation to us and through us. In this way, there is a processive unity of creative advance and novel becoming in Emerson such that learning one truth implies the activity of the processive whole of an almost monadic Leibnizian quality. "Every universal truth, which we express in words, implies or supposes every other truth."⁵⁶

If we revisit now the earlier pronouncement that: "Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul."⁵⁷ We can understand that when natural processes become known in the activity of being so recognized by our own intuitive insight in Reason and united with the Understanding, *what becomes* is part of nature in another part of nature. The ray of relations refract from one pole (the soul) into the other (nature), and nature organizes itself in thought as spirit. Universal spirit is the coherent structure revealed in the activity of becoming—the processes of reality as a whole. In this way, nature and spirit are co-extensive, two-sides of the same unfolding whole. With this claim, I am now in a position to say that there is support for an idealistic interpretation of Emerson's thought in this early period, and it is also to *Idealism* and *Spirit* to which Emerson turns next.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 23.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 23.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 3.

7. IDEALISM AND SPIRIT

Emerson defined Idealism versus Materialism in his 1843 article, “The Transcendentalist,” which was printed in *Dial*. There is seven years difference between how idealism is used in *Nature* (1836) and the definition here. In “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson offers a precise definition. This precision is what we needed him to do in *Nature*. In *Nature*, Emerson defined idealism as “a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry.”⁵⁸ Failing to be precise in *Nature*, let us see how he articulates idealism that lurked under the surface of that text.

According to Emerson, Idealism is the metaphysical thesis that “perceives that the sense are not final, and say, The senses give us representations of things, but what are things themselves, they cannot tell.”⁵⁹ In other words, nature’s symbolism, while mediated, is a hint, a glimmer of something more beyond how materialism is defined as being founded on sensory experience and associated with the animal wants of our humanity. In this way, idealism embodies a spiritual conception that can allow for the processive revealing unity and subsequent becoming of a deified nature and it is for Emerson also monistic. There is *this* and *only this unified whole* to which all are in relation to everything else. We might call it an onto-relational idealistic monism.⁶⁰ The materialist is found wanting for his inability to show that things are as the senses present them.

Most process philosophies are physical monists concerning the natural world. There may be higher or lower forms of organization. In this way, through Emerson, idealism finds its place as a guarantee of higher nature of reality (of a higher nature of Nature), yet by reducing the complexity of everything to thought, to consciousness, a person may assent to a view that finds static perfection in the

⁵⁸ Emerson, *Nature*, 32.

⁵⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Transcendentalist” in in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Random House, 2000), 81.

⁶⁰ Ralph. B. Perry makes note of this tension between monism on the part of Emerson and the pluralism in James. “For William James, Emersonian truth consisted essentially in the vision of a deeper unity behind multiple appearances. Even the individualism or nonconformism of Emerson...was not pluralistic. If he separated one individual from other individuals morally, it was only to unite them all on their cosmic side. This teaching is allied to James’s teaching of the unique preciousness and valid claim of each individual however obscure or despised; but it is a different teaching, divided by all that separates monism from pluralism” (38) in his *The Thought and Character of William James* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948).

consciousness of nature, or that the material world is so insignificant, that the generativity of process is lost in the fetishizing of the Absolute Unconditioned Mind, Absolute Spirit, or whatever heavy-loaded term metaphysicians have on hand to reify process with any idealistic monism. In my interpretation, Emerson is aware of what I call these dangers of naïve idealism in *Nature* as supposed to a different account of a sophisticated idealism. Sophisticated idealisms sustain a view of both processive relations and generation of being in time and the permanence of laws to which we know some now and remain ignorant of currently, but also allows for the open-ended becoming of what appears to us. Strictly speaking, the becoming of what appears to us could undermine the harmony of alleged laws since the unified whole may change how and what laws operate. In what remains of this essay, I interpret Emerson as beginning to advocate a sophisticated idealism over a naïve idealism with onto-relational overtones. The elements are there and then end some thoughts on what possible future efforts are inaugurated by reading these process philosophy themes back into Emerson.

We can first see the naïve idealism when Emerson reviews what he disapproves of in Christianity. Naïve idealism denigrates nature and matter. Such a naïve idealism accepts the permanency of laws in the same way as sophisticated idealism does. However, naïve idealism also arrives “at a certain indignation towards matter.”⁶¹ This indignant regard sets up a retreat from accepting the onto-relationality of spirit with bodies and matter. Similarly, this naïve idealism in its denigration of matter and belief in spirit underscores Christian asceticism that we find also problematic in Nietzsche’s Emersonian inspired meditations on metaphysics and Christianity. Both Emerson and Nietzsche on this point are attacking “a popular faith” of Christianity with its Neoplatonism of Plotinus, too.⁶² This simpler version of naïve idealism replaces one substance for another all the while accepting the ontological separation of those metaphysical orders. In other words, the naïve idealist elevates all spirit at the expense of the materiality and processive generativity of nature. The concrete implication is that “religion [and an ethics informed by religion] puts nature under foot.”⁶³ Emerson

⁶¹ Emerson, *Nature*, 30.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

finds this naïve idealism unsatisfying. “Yet if [naïve idealism] denies the essence of matter, it does not satisfy the demand of spirit.” The demand of spirit is, then, the onto-relationality revealed in the soul’s experience as one pole conjoined to some particular event within and part of nature as its other pole.

A sophisticated idealism does not forget the soul and nature are a continuity of constantly unfolding relations with these two poles always in relation to the other. By contrast, naïve idealism accepted by religious orthodoxy embraces the full ontological separation of the world from my thoughts. Sophisticated idealism is, then, one that preserves nature and spirit locked together in the dynamism present in the interpretive reading I am explicating here.⁶⁴ On this interpretation, Emerson writes,

...all in one, and each entirely is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound, it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches.⁶⁵

In this passage, the revealing facts are threefold. Spirit, at first, looks as if it is indeed separate but present. The qualification is given with the phrase “not compound.” Universal being of both nature and spirit are not two separate metaphysical orders. Then, notice that it does not come “from without...but spiritually through ourselves”—an onto-relationality of the soul in relation to nature. As Emerson aptly described in “The Transcendentalist,” thought and nature are identical. “His thought—that is the Universe. His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded center in himself, center alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Center of him.”⁶⁶ Finally,

⁶⁴ Relevant to Emerson’s “onto-relational idealistic monism” or “sophisticated idealism” is his reprisal of, in his own Transcendentalist way, aspects of Spinoza’s pantheism, Schelling’s ideal-realism, non-dualist theologies of Hinduism, and Neoplatonist emanation cosmology. While I do not have room to note these influences here, a historical essay should mention these eclectic origins and original applications on the American scene of Emerson’s metaphysics. Their synthesis comes together in a processive metaphysical way here.

⁶⁵ Emerson, *Nature*, 33.

⁶⁶ Emerson, “The Transcendentalist,” 83.

nature is not created via a Supreme Being that “builds up nature around us.” Instead, Spirit effuses and permeates nature from within since both nature and spirit animate it in a relation to my center. Spirit is in relation to nature in me and through me, expressing the very onto-relationality that makes Emerson approach if not become identical to a process philosopher.

Accounting for these processive relations is the responsible reading of Emerson’s metaphysics rather than promoting a naïve idealism or a materialism that looks at the soul and nature as two separate orders. Emerson’s sophisticated idealism has the advantage of preserving a view to these relations. Consider,

The advantage of the ideal theory over the popular faith [of Christianity] is this, that it presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind. It is, in fact, the view which Reason, both speculative and practical, that is, philosophy and virtue, take. For seen in the light of thought, the world is phenomenal; and virtue subordinates it to the mind. Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions, and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity for the contemplation of the soul.⁶⁷

In light of this passage, Emerson regards Christianity as presenting a false picture and deviated everything we and Emerson have claimed up to this point. Seeing the world in God is how reason sees it as an encompassing onto-relational whole through parts of that totality relate together. In this way, Emerson has claimed that there is an *original relation* that he’s uncovered in his meditation that differs significantly from his process-oriented sophisticated idealism. If you recall how we started this essay, we now know why Emerson rejects the Abrahamic religions in light of new metaphysical facts. His rejection has to do with accepting what at the time in philosophical history of Western thought did not yet exist—a type of process philosophy that takes its point of departure from tradition by insisting on onto-relationality of the subject and the object, the soul and Nature, or Spirit of the Whole and the Particular aspects of Nature. What’s more onto-relationality unfolds in a type of immanent timelessness to which our soul may contemplate. We get this insight from the phrase “instant eternity.” The temporal subject experiences the unfolding relation instantly, and yet the intelligibility of

⁶⁷ Emerson, *Nature*, 31.

that insight comes from a spiritually organized totality. Only an onto-relational view can explicate such a structure. Moreover, the fact that Emerson sees this as the most desirable of the mind brings to light that this conclusion almost falls on the heels of a type of pragmatism, a desirable will-to-believe that also can explain more intricate conception of reality as a whole than neither the naïve idealism, popular faith of Christianity, or materialism contend.

Nature manifesting always in the particular event is lost in the passivity to which Christianity stirs us. Christianity accepts the divide between nature and spirit all too readily “as it is found in the pure and awful religion.”⁶⁸ In forgetting this uncovered “original relation” (to recall a turn of phrase that began *Nature*) of the two poles of the soul-nature relation, we become alienated from one side of this relation or the other. If we side readily with materialism, we miss the higher complexes of meaning. If we side too readily with naïve idealism, we miss out completely on the onto-relationality of experience and the metaphysics implied by that onto-relationality. Thus, the perfect middle between these two extremes is where Emerson pitches his speculative metaphysics as a proto-process philosopher.

One could very well object. Why do people not see the vast “all in one” of the soul-nature relation? Emerson’s reply is simple. The fact that many cannot discover the all-in-one is that “man is disunited with himself.”⁶⁹ Christianity and other metaphysical systems that do not take this onto-relationality seriously present man as disunited with himself and proffer a deep structural problem. Being Christian means that one “has not yet extended the use of their faculties” to discover this onto-relationality.⁷⁰ Instead, they see the world only through Understanding. The Understanding is bound to the senses only. In effect, one cannot understand his criticism of Christianity without positing the onto-relationality I am explicating resides in Emerson’s early work. Being bound to the senses, Christians cannot observe how this manifestation of nature calls and provokes us to imagine a greater unknowable unity of that original relation, a fact in which the process philosophy interpretation of Emerson explains. In this way, Nature is but one end of the relation; it overwhelms us in aesthetic, ethics, and

⁶⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 38.

religious sentiment to feel Spirit. “So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes.” Instead, we should realize that “Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, molds, and makes it.”⁷¹ In being persons of spirit, we are awakened and provoked within reason (and its sub-faculty imagination) to create meaning as part of Nature itself. Such awakening of our agency is enabled by an onto-relational idealistic monism at the heart of Emerson’s early thought.

8. CONCLUSION

A deep exploration of Emerson’s *Nature* (1836) suggests that there are powerful hints that a sophisticated view of nature as divinity can be expressed only by attending to the themes of onto-relationality and that there are versions of idealism that sustain an awareness to the flesh of the world as well as to the consciousness relating to it. The proto-process philosophy here is the first hallmark of what can and will develop between later American philosophical formulations of how Being and Becoming should be understood in the empirical side of James and the pragmatic idealism of Royce. Future work of mine should explore those connections deeper.

As I am only dedicated to suggesting this onto-relationality interpretation in relation to the 1830s and 1840s, the exploration has generated questions as to how much of these views continue in thematic explorations of Emerson’s later writings and how primordial the “original relation” is to a coherent metaphysics. I side with Urbas in thinking that there is a unified metaphysics. One can find the themes onto-relationality of nature in both the essays in both the First Series and Second Series he publishes and I accept Urbas wonderful exposition of the ontological turn in New England Transcendentalism from the 1820s into the 1850s.

Needless to say, I have also remained silent on Urbas’s causationist account of Emerson in his *Emerson’s Metaphysics: A Song of Law and Causes* (2016). Since I am reviewing and have yet to receive his latest book on *The Philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (2020) from the publisher, I have been silent on fully weighing his account given that I know his views are probably now more nuanced than his *Emerson’s Metaphysics* may suggest on its own. The problem herein is a matter of interpretive

⁷¹ Ibid, 39.

emphasis. Do we side with Frédéric Tremblay's account that Urbas may be pushing too much on the fact that causal relations are not the only relations? Tremblay says "not all relations are causal."⁷² There are a few possibilities. First, the vagueness of the use of "cause," "connexion," and "relation" may be interchangeably used to the point we mean the same thing by what I mean as onto-relationality. On this view, Emerson's vagueness is the reason we have been called to interpret him systematically and why I suggest a proto-processive view. On a whole, Emerson always speaks about that which is static and in movement at the same time. The activity of causation generates growth to become being. Being and becoming fold together in dynamic and dyadic movement, but in some creative novelty there is a short time of rest before movement once again—some expression of Being and Becoming held together as onto-relationality. The poetry of process and activity causes silent rest in contemplation of what should be seen as active and in relationship to something more than simply what is apparent. In this way, are Urbas and I saying the same thing or is one part of the dyad lost in his interpretation to which my focus on relationality may then rescue what is true in part of Urbas's analysis? This question in Emersonian metaphysics needs answered. What is the ontological nature of the dyad that folds together in constant rhythm and does this onto-relational monistic idealism set the stage for the development of American idealism in religious thought?

⁷² See Frédéric Tremblay's "Book Review of *Emerson's Metaphysics: A Song of Law and Causes* by Joseph Urbas" in *The Pluralist* vol. 12, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 120-124. Here I cite 123.