Shadowing the Anthropocene: Eco-Realism for Turbulent Times

Adrian Ivakhiv

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ENGAGING THE ACT: WHAT A BODYMIND CAN DO

Returning to immanence

Going beyond, or remaining here: that is the decision-point of every decision, the openness at the heart of every becoming, the difference that differentiates each repetition from the same. How to remain here and go beyond at the same time.

Here we come to the paradox of the immanent. The word “immanence” has become a slippery signifier in continental philosophy. In a work examining four currently influential French philosophers of immanence—Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, Michel Henry, and François Laruelle—John Mullarkey notes that “Immanence is everywhere, but its meaning is completely open: that is our problem.” He then provides four “lexical definitions” of immanence: “Existing or remaining within; being ‘inherent’; being restricted entirely to some ‘inside’; existing and acting ‘within the physical world’.”

Immanence here, and most commonly, is counterposed against transcendence: either the world accounts for itself, needing no further explanation, or we must appeal to larger forces—God or gods, spirits, the Cogito, Being, Ideas, the tran-

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Scendental consciousness, non-material forces of one kind or another, and so on—something that transcends the world and gives it its dynamism, its reason, or its meaning. In religious, and especially monotheistic, thinking, a theology of transcendence provides the background of all thinking. (Which, ironically, makes it immanent to all thinking.) By contrast, a theology of immanence is one that posits that god(s) or spirit(s) are not relegated to some heavenly realm from which access is closely guarded, but that, if they are to be found at all, they will be found in the world, in matter, and at the heart of every moment. (In the reaching.)

Putting it this way suggests the terms are always relative: if there is transcendence, it is because we have restricted the immanent to a certain domain—materiality, or physical law, or something else—and thereby rendered it insufficient. But if the world is unbounded, then its immanence is always open. That is the leap of faith in the philosophies of Deleuze and Whitehead, to name two philosophers of “immanent transcendence.” At the heart of the world, and of things, is an openness that breaks apart the causal dependencies that would otherwise lock the universe into stasis.

All four of Mullarkey’s thinkers of immanence are process philosophers of a sort: they seek “process truth (for Badiou); process vitalism (for Deleuze); process theoretics (for Laruelle); process phenomenology (for Henry). In each case,” Mullarkey continues, “there is a focus on how immanence relates to change.”2 Deleuze differs from the others in his insistence that there are two “worlds” within the immanent: an actual world that is conditioned by a virtual world, for which repetition always comes with difference. The immanent, for Deleuze, is itself the source of novelty. Creativity, or creative repetition, as it is for Whitehead, is at the core of becoming; and becoming is all that there is. This suggests not that there is no transcendence, but that transcendence is of the immanent, that it is the openness at its heart. Or as Deleuze puts it in one of his last writings, entitled

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2 Ibid., 21.
“Immanence: A Life,” the transcendent precedes “the world of the subject and the object,” and immanence is itself a “transcendental field,” an activity that can only be ascribed to the sheer indefiniteness of “a life”:

A life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects. This indefinite life does not itself have moments […], but only between-times, between-moments.4

Whitehead, likewise, writes:

The only intelligible doctrine of causation is founded on the doctrine of immanence. Each occasion presupposes the antecedent world as active in its own nature. […] We are in the world and the world is in us. […] The body is ours, and we are an activity within our body.5

Taking issue with the common translation of Descartes’ “Cogito, ergo sum” as “I think, therefore I am,” Whitehead writes:

I find myself as essentially a unity of emotions, enjoyments, hopes, fears, regrets, valuations of alternatives, decisions — all of them subjective reactions to the environment as active in my nature. My unity […] is my process of shaping this welter of material into a consistent pattern of feelings.6

There are three elements making up this “unity”:

4 Ibid., 29.
6 Ibid., 228.
If we stress the role of the environment, this process is *causation*. If we stress the role of my immediate pattern of active enjoyment, this process is *self-creation*. If we stress the role of the conceptual anticipation of the future whose existence is a necessity in the nature of the present, this process is the teleological *aim* at some ideal in the future. This aim, however, is not really beyond the present process. For the aim at the future is an enjoyment in the present.⁷

Life, he continues, “is the enjoyment of emotion, derived from the past and aimed at the future. […] Each occasion is an activity of concern, in the Quaker sense of that term. It is the conjunction of transcendence and immanence.”⁸

In a time of AnthropoCapitalist turbulence, how might we take this enjoyment of the present and hurl it into an objective engagement with the things that concern us deeply?

**A time of suffering**

There will be death and dying and weeping there, and gnashing of teeth. There will be suffering.

To point to something like this today is to risk discrediting the finger one points with. Suffering is, suffering will be: such was the message of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, twenty-five centuries ago. Saying that in a world of apparent plenty sounds quaintly doomish. Is the universe a universe of (only) suffering? Does the extent and quantity of suffering outmatch

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⁷ Ibid., 227–28.
the extent and quantity of hope, of joy, or of the satisfaction (however temporary) of desires, projects, and pursuits? On a cosmic scale, how could we even begin to know the answer to that calculus? Is it not a bit comical to ask it today?

In times of catastrophe, the only genuine question is what to do now. This is not because of the catastrophe. If the calls of catastrophe turn out to be false alarms, the question will still be what to do now. To an eventologist, that is always the question.

When Siddhartha Gautama developed an analysis of the fundamental dissatisfaction at the heart of human existence, he (or his followers) characterized it according to a medical model, with a diagnosis, an etiology, a prognosis, and a prescription for treatment. His Four Noble Truths denote four fundamental facts attested to by the Buddha: the fact of dukkha, or existential suffering; the cause of it, which is craving for and attachment to that which passes; the possibility of eliminating that cause; and the path toward that elimination.9

Following a similar model today, we might try to diagnose something that is specific and unique to our time. Let us call it the excess suffering attributable to the processes of the AnthropoCapitalocene. Its four truths run roughly parallel to the Buddha’s.

1. The Existence of Excess Suffering: We all hunger, thirst, experience misfortune, get sick, witness others’ deaths, and die ourselves. But some get sick more often, experience more misfortune than others, and die more often (metaphorically speaking, but also statistically) for reasons that are not “natural,” but that are political and economic in origin. While such suffering has gone on for as long as humans have had the polities and economies that generate it, its quantity has taken a measurable upward curve in

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9 Buddhism includes a vast philosophical tradition, and even summarizing something as simple as its “Four Noble Truths” is tricky territory. For those interested in Buddhist philosophy’s intersections and differences from major western philosophical positions, I strongly recommend Jay Garfield’s Engaging Buddhism: Why It Matters to Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
recent times. In conditions of the A/Cene, it is likely to continue increasing. It constitutes a new turbulence within the fabric of socio-ecological relations on this planet.

2. The Cause of Excess Suffering: This uneven distribution of environmental benefits and risks is produced by a particular system of relations, a system that works through extractive capitalization, or the rendering of more and more of the world into ownable resources, tradable commodities, exchangeable labor markets, and opportunities for economic profit. (Capitalization can proceed comfortably even under labels that reject the term “capitalism,” as in so-called Communist China or the Soviet Union.) By rendering buried and stored carbon deposits into industrial fuels, this system created the most productive and, at the same time, most destructive civilization in human history. Fossil fuel capitalism in its various forms has created great abundance, but at the price of high health risks, toxic by-products, large-scale disruption of ecosystems, and impending global climate change, with potentially suicidal intensification of risks to humans and nature.¹⁰

These costs have usually been deflected outward, off-loaded, rather than being accounted for internally. This is a kind of misrecognition by the system of its own nature, a misrecognition Nicholas Mirzoeff has called “auto-immune climate-changing capitalism syndrome,” or AICCCS (which rhymes with “aches” and is accompanied by pains).¹¹ It is a state of “dis-ease,” but also

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¹⁰ This argument has been made (with numerous variations) by an expanding cadre of sociologists, geographers, economists, and others. For a few perspectives on it, see Jason W. Moore, Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital (London: Verso, 2015); Tim di Muzio, Carbon Capitalism: Energy, Social Reproduction and World Order (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); and R. Scott Frey, Paul K. Gellert, and Harry F. Dahms, eds., Ecologically Unequal Exchange: Environmental Injustice in Comparative and Historical Perspective (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

a form of self-protection for the system as it slowly destroys the basis on which it thrives.

This self-protective deflection of reality has been aided by two “bubbles.” The first is a very long-term real estate bubble: the 12,000 year Holocene Bubble that humans and our companions have flourished within, but which now is bursting. As it bursts, the “established patterns and regularity of Holocene phenology” are “unraveling,” in Glenn Albrecht’s words. They are likely to be followed by a “new abnormal” in which “life will be characterised by uncertainty, unpredictability, genuine chaos and relentless change. Earth distress, as manifest in global warming, changing climates, erratic weather, acidifying oceans, disease pandemics, species endangerment and extinction, bioaccumulation of toxins and the overwhelming physical impact of exponentially-expanding human development will have its correlates in human physical and mental distress.”12

The second bubble is a shorter term, more intensive perceptual (and political-economic) bubble, a Bubble of Willed Ignorance. This is the real or pretended ignorance about interdependency and global injustice that is perpetuated within systems of media paid for and dominated by the classes that benefit most from the A/Cene regime.

3. The Healing of Excess Suffering: It is possible to eliminate this excess socio-ecological suffering in at least two related ways: by internalizing the costs, or the “bads,” so that they are factored into the production of the “goods”; and by spreading the goods and bads much more justly and evenly. The first is a form of industrial ecology, requiring the transformation of systems of production and consumption from open and debt-bearing ones into closed-loop, regenerative ones; it is mostly a technical task. The second is a form of economic (but not only economic) democ-

racy: it would democratize decisions over what to produce and how to produce it; this is a mostly political task.

Astrobiologist Adam Frank has suggested that energy-intensive planetary civilizations like ours can expect to face a “sustainability bottleneck” once we begin to use up the stored carbon of millennia.13 The fact that the universe apparently generates the conditions for the emergence of such civilizations (we are, in fact, here) tells us that, to the best of our guesses, we are part of a game of chance and of skill, a kind of cosmic evolutionary process, which in turn gives us a realistic hope that we might make it through. (Or not.) Realistically speaking, our chances are somewhere between abysmal and possible. So it makes sense to try.

4. The Path Forward, or the Nimble Path of Liberation: Pooling together what we know from a range of efforts to understand environmental issues scientifically, social-scientifically, and humanistically, it is reasonable to conclude that the path forward requires at least the following four elements.

Technical knowledge: We need scientific data gathering, which remains the main source for our knowledge about the state of the Earth’s biogeophysical systems. We also need the engineering know-how for addressing specific technical challenges — in energy production, food production, infrastructure, ecology, and many other areas. Where scientists often consider this knowledge to be the main requirement, humanists would respond that we have plenty of it to work with, but that it alone is simply far from enough.

Institutional Capacity: Addressing problems requires having the organizational, institutional, and functional mechanisms for doing that at all levels, from the local to the regional, national, and transnational. We are beginning to develop institutional capacities locally in select places, and globally through interna-

tional institutions. There are examples of communities, cities, and nations taking the lead on developing policies to facilitate transition to a more just and sustainable relationality. But there is a long way to go. If, on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 as the goal, our knowledge (the first of these four elements) has achieved a 7 or 8, our institutional capacity is hovering down somewhere around a 3 or 4 at best.

Coherent, integrative, and motivating images and narratives: We need images and narratives that could reframe people’s awareness of their place in time and in space toward one that is more enabling of the radical actions that are called for. While scientists often think of the arts and humanities as a handmaiden for communicating scientific knowledge (the first element) to the broader public, humanists and artists insist that there be a two-way movement between the two realms, and that working with image, discourse, and narrative is both more complicated and quite autonomous from anything generated by science. This area is, rightly, where the critical and creative work of the eco-arts and humanities is focused; its lessons frame the background of this book.14 But it, too, is not enough.

Affective preparedness: No matter how much information, institutional capacity, and “storied imagery” there is, people will not move into action until they are affectively prepared for doing that. And until circumstances create an opening for it. Those circumstances tend to be rapid events: eco-disasters, political shock waves, or revolutionary situations that emerge unpredictably, revealing business-as-usual to be inadequate and calling forth rapid and responsive action. They tend to be Events, which

are unpredictable in their genesis and in the trajectories they make possible. Artists are often more sensitive than others to this affective level. But what needs more thinking today are the critical connections between it and the infrastructural — social media, organizational links between diverse groups around the world, and so on.

More crucially, developing a sense of agency adequate to the demands of the A/Cene requires the cultivation of a kind of engaged Anthropocenic mindfulness (or bodymindfulness, bodymind-heartfulness, bodymind-soulfulness). This means an ability to act with the full awareness of how our actions play into the aesthetic, ethical, and political-ecological dynamics of the A/Cene. Those dynamics include multiple legacies of social and ecological violence rooted in colonialism, racism, sexism and heterosexism, classism, inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalry, and other forms of oppression and strife. But they also include multiple desires and visions for collective betterment, which are in turn rooted in real experiences of wonder, transcendence of personal limits or fears, and empathic embrace of others (including nonhuman others). The complexity of both the “negative” and the “positive” kinds of relations is difficult to come to terms with in one’s own life; doing the same with one’s interactions with others is all the more difficult. It requires skillful practice.

Where do we begin finding this sort of affective preparedness? In what follows, I will try to suggest a few tools for doing that. They are not meant to replace others — variations of psychotherapy, spiritual or somatic practices, or collective activities of one kind or another, from religious ceremonializing to political organizing to direct action. But I hope they can supplement the other kinds of strategies. They are intended to do that by making process-relational insights more approachable, experienceable, and “intuitive,” such that the others are seen as examples within an underlying process of “process-relationalizing.”
Situating ourselves

Before one can act to change anything significant, anything that requires determination and resolve, it is important to be able to account for one’s situation. That means being able to take it on and embrace it as one’s own, with one’s full existential capacity.

If the global predicament as I have described it rings true to any significant degree, then genuine understanding of that predicament — the sort of understanding that can inform effective action — can only occur through understanding one’s own situatedness within it. That means that this predicament will be a different one for a migrant farm laborer, an Asian or African textile worker, or an aids sufferer or forced prostitute than it will be for a university professor, a Hollywood actor, or a bank executive. Some have great difficulty extricating themselves from precarity; others have little direct experience of it.

If you are reading this book, you are likely to be in the class of people with the luxury to read such books — which means somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, though likely closer to the top, on a global scale, than to the bottom. This means you are either capable of feeling the predicament in some of its daily, embodied dimensions, or at least able to imagine those dimensions from reports, literary or cinematic depictions, or other forms of cultivated empathy. Those dimensions might include experiencing daily anxieties — ranging from eating disorders to chronic depression to lesser or greater degrees of trauma-induced stress stemming from the competitive pressures of consumer-capitalist industrialism, systemic racism and sexism, and the like.

To be sure, we may all be alienated (as Marx described) from our work, or from our places of residence, or from those around us. But many of us also feel a sense of possibility: we have career options we can choose from, products or gadgets we might buy that could enhance our enjoyment of life, physical or other kinds of practices we could try on for size, places we could visit, foods we could eat. The global middle class is that class for whom the world may be its oyster, but the oyster shell weighs
more or less heavily on our backs at least part of the time (if only in our dreams and nightmares).

If we think of our personal feeling of that predicament as a form of Peircean *firstness*, then gauging our capacities for action is the entry point to *secondness*. What can I do about the world from where I am? What are the hinges or action-points from which I can act? How can I act, or who could I *become* in order to be able to act effectively? With whom, and in what contexts of collective endeavor? Effective or satisfying action is likely to involve some modification of our habits — habits of perception, of interaction, and of understanding. (Those will be explored momentarily.)

Finally, *thirdness* would relate to the larger vision that might draw forward such action, to which it would contribute and which it would enable. Some variation of the account offered in the preceding section (“A time of suffering”) may suffice to provide a working understanding of the global predicament. (Consider it an example, then write your own.) To be effective, a Peircean approach would insist that any such vision be triadic: it should convey a *sense of the reality* of the day-to-day and excess sufferings of the A/Cene; a sense of the *possibilities for responding* to those sufferings creatively; and a *vision* of how those possibilities might figure into the longer-term crap-shoot of an open-ended cosmic process. Put differently, these are: a *feel* for the situation, a *method* for action to overcome or transform that situation, and an *aim* or rationale for why it should be bothered with at all.

A Peircean approach insists that each of those three steps is necessary. (I challenge you to propose a variation that fails to include one of the three, and then to make that variation viable.) Much of what will follow will continue to reiterate this triad, so we might as well line up some terms to help us think it:
Firstness | Secondness | Thirdness
--- | --- | ---
Feeling | Action | Realization
What | How | Why
Object(ivation) | Method | Subject(ivation)
Aesthetics | Ethics | Logic
Quality | Resistance | Representation

But first, as always, we must start with the moment.

**Philosophy of the moment**

In the shadow of the Anthropocene, philosophical speculation is best applied to life so as to change that life. Not (necessarily) because of the possibility of doom, but simply because that is the only task allowable to a process-relational realist. This may not be the common understanding of what philosophers do today, but it has arguably been at the heart of philosophy since ancient times.

Philosophical historian Pierre Hadot has been the most articulate recent proponent of this view, finding the notion of “philosophy as a way of life” — accompanied by rigorous spiritual practices — in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Cynics, the Neoplatonists, and numerous other ancient and (less frequently) modern philosophers. A similar model held among many of the philosophers of ancient India, China, and elsewhere. It has held also for many in the American pragmatist tradition of Peirce, James, and Dewey, and has been revived not only in popular books like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or in Philosophy Now magazine, but also in the thought of influential Continental philosophers, from the existentialists to Deleuze, the later Foucault, and Peter Sloterdijk. Michel Foucault's late focus on the “aesthetics of existence” and the “arts of the self” almost singlehandedly aimed to revive this tradition.\(^{15}\)

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To the extent that there is a loose consensus within the process-relational tradition on what constitutes a philosophy of life, its core would likely include two shared intuitions. The first is a trust in life process, or as Gilles Deleuze calls it, a “belief in this world,” which he explains is also “a link between man and the world.” Elucidating Deleuze’s phrase, Lars Tonder notes that “to believe in this world” is “to perpetuate life, to affirm its cracks and dissonances as sites of undisclosed potentiality.” The second intuition is a willingness to experiment — an openness and even eagerness to engage in things decisively so as to see where they will go, and a willingness to change directions when it becomes evident that they aren’t going where they might better go.

These are not universally held intuitions. Among many Buddhists, for instance, life process is sometimes seen as unreliable to the point of being illusory. (Here is where it’s worth distinguishing between life-affirming and life-escaping wings of the twenty-five century tradition of Buddhist thought.) But both of these views make clear why the focus of any process-relational practice is on the present moment.

The present moment is our most direct foothold in experience. The moment is also the basic unit of experiential coherence, and the locus of whatever agency is to be had in experi-

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ence. Analogous to what in a film would be a “scene,” moments attain toward a unity within the multiplicity of elements that make them up and the ambiguity of those elements’ involvement in them (since those elements usually precede the moment and continue on after it has ended). Moments occur at a mesocosmic level—they are neither the kind of entity Whitehead called the “actual occasion” nor the event that I have called an “Event.” They are something more experientially tangible than either.

Understanding a moment of experience is useful for the bearer of it insofar as it allows one to get a handle on what is happening here and now and what one can do within the possibilities on offer. Isolating or slowing down a moment allows us to analyze what our range of action is. It also enables us, ultimately (with dedicated practice), to begin to see the nature of experience as a dynamic flow characterized by the mutual co-arising of subjectivity and objectivity. In turn, a more accurate understanding of the nature of reality contributes to more effective engagements with that reality.

Following our Peircean-Whiteheadian approach, we could characterize a moment in two primary ways. The first analyzes it into its *firstnesses*, or things in their “in-themselfness,” their thusness; its *secondnesses*, or existential action-capacities—the living edges of firstness grappling against each other in the motion of effortful engagement; and its *thirdnesses*, or significances taking account of such encounters of secondness.

Walking in the woods with my young son on my back one afternoon, I heard sounds that struck me in their sonic distinctiveness, simply as they were; I responded to these sounds with an affective thrust—a quickened heartbeat, a prick of the ears, a sudden stop, an unpremeditated gesture to my son to listen or look in *that* direction; and I recognized some of the sounds via thoughts like “There’s that thing I heard before, which sounds like a woodpecker, and I wonder what sort of woodpecker has made its way over here this week,” and “It’s a beautiful spring here this year, isn’t it?” While my hearing the sounds was already a *second*, the sounds in themselves (apart from any perception of them) were *firsts*; the reactions were *seconds*; and the
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thoughts or meanings arising from and accompanying those reactions were *thirds*.

Alternatively, a moment can be characterized by the dynamic co-arising of subjectivity (which is a thirdness), objectivity (in and through secondness), and withdrawal or perishing. The first of these co-active elements, *subjectivation*, is what occurs when I recognize sounds and make some sense of them: “I wonder what sort of woodpecker that is” and “It’s a beautiful spring this year” contribute to the narrative timeline I have of living where I do, in northern Vermont; of recognizing birds (as poorly as I do) and noticing their comings and goings over time; and of living (and constructing) my life in the context of seasonal changes, moments and conversations with my son, public debates over global warming, and much more. At the same time, my gesture to my son becomes an invitation for *his* subjectivation; and my stopping and listening to the bird becomes an invitation to *that bird’s* subjectivation, wherein it might notice me and sing in some particular way in recognition of a new listener.

The second element, *objectivation*, is the *other* thing that happens when I recognize sounds and make some sense of them: that sound becomes “*that* woodpecker,” a sequence of seeings and hearings becomes “this spring,” and so on. Things become pinned to labels (verbal or other kinds) whereby they can be stitched into a fabric of habitual responses, incorporations, harnessings. They, like any commons, can be “enclosed” into the narrative fabric that comes to constitute a “self” and a world.

And thirdly, there is the *withdrawal* of these others even as I have pulled them into these semiotic arrangements. The sound ended, the bird flew off, the moment passed. All the other firsts that I failed to notice or to capture in my webs of meaning—all are gone to me, swift as a shadow disappears when a light is switched on. Withdrawal constitutes the imperceptible background of the moment. It becomes lost to experience, or to future experience (though these are not identical destinies).
Let us now build up a more sophisticated methodology for accessing the present moment.

The easiest way to do this is to begin with the feeling of one’s self: Who or what am I, you, us? How are we, and where are we? Where and how do we arise and find ourselves — in the midst of what actions, what becomings? And finding ourselves, what can we do with ourselves?

We arise at decision points, poised at new folds in the fabric of eventness. The “we” that do this are everyone: humans (sort of), mitochondria (sort of), single-celled organisms (sort of), and whatever else does anything with some sense of the doing. Generalizing about this range of doings is difficult, so it makes sense to start from our own experience and then to speculatively branch outward. What is it that we can do at all?

To find out how we in fact do anything, how our machinery works, it is helpful to have a rigorous practice of self-observation based on some language or map of the possibilities. Maps of the psyche are a dime a dozen, but some are more phenomenologically informed and time-tested than others. To continue with our Peircean triadism, it makes sense for us, writer/readers of this book, to look for triadic models. As it turns out, there are several that fit this bill. In what follows, I will propose a map of doings that distinguishes between a series of three sensory modalities (because we are sensory-perceptual creatures), three relational categories, and three orientations. Because the senses provide an easy foothold into our experience, and because there exists a simple but effective model for classifying them, let us start there.

Westerners typically think of the senses as being five: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and the vague and overburdened category of “feeling,” which others would distinguish into more nuanced subcategories like moving or kinesthetic feeling, gut

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feeling, and others. Helpfully, a model exists that reduces these to three and that maps out well against a series of other “maps of the mind.” This model happens to be a perceptive distillation of centuries of quasi-scientific introspective practice associated with Buddhism — primarily Theravada Buddhist practice (especially the Vipassana tradition of mindfulness), with Japanese Zen, Tibetan Vajrayana, and several other reference points. This is a model developed by contemporary meditation teacher and Shingon Buddhist monk Shinzen Young. (It is a model that I encountered through a series of experiential retreats that Young led in Vermont several years ago, and which he has developed into new formats since.19 Henceforth I’ll refer to Young as “Shinzen.”)

Shinzen’s system describes human subjective experience as phenomenologically distinguishable into three primary fields, spaces, or elements20: the visual, the auditory, and the bodily-felt. Each of these is characterized as either internal or external in its orientation, and is labeled with a single word when observed within mindfulness meditation practice: “See” or “Image” for the visual; “Hear,” “Sound” (if it is external), or “Talk” (if it is mental-internal) for the auditory; and “Feel” or “Touch,” for the bodily-felt. The last of the three includes tactile, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic, visceral, affective, and emotional functions, which are grouped into “Feel-Out” for those experienced as external in their source (the first four), and “Feel-In” for sensations that are “internal” to the bodymind (the last three).


20 He uses these terms somewhat interchangeably. The account that follows draws in particular on personal conversations and guided exercises conducted between 2010 and 2014.
These three modalities can be conceived as developing somewhat autonomously over the course of human evolution and over the course of individual ontogenesis. First, we learn to feel with our bodies — in the oceanic mix of feelings and sounds that occurs in the womb. Then, once born and tasked with the need to make sense of visual experience, we start to see things as distinct entities. Finally, we learn the words and the linguistic-discursive constructs that come to shape both our subjectivities and our conceptual worlds for us. Learning to hear is, in this sense, a two-stage process. For the infant in the womb, and perhaps for early humans in the evolution of our senses — ontogenesis and phylogenesis, respectively — distinguishing sounds evolved as part of the repertoire of feeling: kinesthesia, tactility, hapticity, and the like. So it could be treated as an element of “Feel” up until that time when it becomes distinctly linked to verbal and linguistic awareness.

In practice, of course, these three are usually thickly mixed and highly interactive. And over time the three kinds of elements become tangled and knotted into emotionally laden force fields. Distinguishing between them is, in any case, a matter mostly of convenience; they serve as hooks onto which mindfulness practitioners can hang their impressions, sensations, and perceptions as they observe them arising and passing. Sensory blurring and interaction occurs all the time in human experience, but as we are familiarizing ourselves with what our bodymind does, it makes things easier if we can bring some order to it.

There is a provocative correlation to be made between these Buddhist-derived phenomenological categories and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s tripartite analysis of the psyche, with its distinction between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. For Lacan, the Real represents a kind of nondual state of nature, one from which we become alienated as we learn to assume the qualities of socially defined subjective experience. The Imaginary represents the image-based world of self-other relations and fantasies that emerge through the “mirror phase,” with its recognition of the body that appears in a mirror as the same one that others see when they see “me.” Finally, the Symbolic is
the language- and narrative-based world that “interpellates” or “hails us” into being the kind of subject that finds its uneasy fit in the social world. The first is correlated with bodily feeling, the second with image, and the third with the textualized sound of language. With the movement from the first to the third, the emergent human subject undergoes a rupture between the non-dual, felt-bodily experience of infancy and the subjective constitution of the “self.” This rupture plays out differently in different socio-historical conditions, with the characteristic insecurities and pathologies of a society laying themselves onto the subject more or less violently (according to Lacan), but with some sort of rupture or gap being a basic condition of human social existence.

Another model that resonates with Lacan’s and, albeit loosely, with Shinzen’s is neurophysiologist Paul McLean’s triune brain model, which subdivides the brain into three complexes: the reptilian, which accounts for instinctual behaviors connected to aggression, dominance, territoriality, and ritual displays; the paleomammalian, or limbic system, which supplies the emotion and motivation related to feeding, reproduction, and parenting; and the neomammalian, or neocortex, which enables planning, abstract thinking, and language. While the correlations are imprecise, one could easily connect the first with “feeling” and the Real, the second with “seeing” (insofar as it pertains to the soci-

ality of groups) and the Imaginary, and the third with “hearing” (specifically that of language) and the Symbolic. Of course, neither this nor any other model should be taken as scientifically accurate maps of the brain, even if McLean’s was originally intended that way. The carving up of this landscape is best considered somewhat arbitrary, but some kind of carving is necessary, if only to break practical experience down into more workable bits. And this particular tripartite analysis is suggestive in its evocation of sensorily-bound force fields.

Let us assume a loose correspondence between Lacan’s and McLean’s models. Consider the “rupture” (gap, sevrage, “basic fault” in psychoanalyst Michael Balint’s terms) that is experienced between the felt (reptilian) Real, the phantasmic (paleomammalian) Imaginary, and/or the linguistic (neocortical) Symbolic. Freudian psychoanalysis works at mitigating the effects of such rupture through its “talking cure,” a lengthy (and costly) process that comes with risks of transference and counter-transference and no guarantees of success. Wilhelm Reich built on Freud’s insights to develop a physical form of therapy that worked directly with patients’ bodily “armoring,” that is, with psychosomatic blockages built to prevent the Real from overcoming the Symbolic and/or Imaginary self (allowing for a some hasty overgeneralizing here). Buddhist Vipassana meditation arguably works at the same “rupture” by allowing for the patient accumulation of observations and insights via trained introspection of a kind that “settles” the mind to a lower-level reactivity, such that the basic patterns might become directly evident. Zen Buddhism, in its classic form, does the same through a kind of methodically applied psychological sleight-of-hand that is highly dependent on a good teacher and setting (and subject to more particular pitfalls because of this). Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, in turn, works at it through a kind of “repatterning” using various tools of sensory, bodily, emotional, and linguistic-imagistic practice; but this takes time and carries its own risks. Jungian analysis can be seen as a mix of the psychoanalytic talking cure and the Vajrayana-style multi-modal approach. Hermetic and esoteric forms of magical practice offer
combinations of one type or another. Each of these takes place within a social context that, over time, can become encrusted with its own institutional misdirections and derangements, so frequent modification and renewal might be recommended in order to keep things operating more or less as they were intended.

A more modern approach like Shinzen’s provides a toolbox and “playbook” that lets users experiment on their own, with guidance available but not required. The point is that through regular practice one can gain leverage points into the dynamic structure of subjective experience, and, with guidance, to work toward untangling that structure and peering “beneath” or “behind” it to the underlying nature of things. A related method, Russian-Armenian spiritual philosopher G.I. Gurdjieff’s, stressed practices of “self-remembering” and self-observation informed by a similar model of a “triune brain” and a startlingly Peircean, if independently developed, “Law of Three.”

The first methods taught in Shinzen’s system are typically those of “Focusing In,” whereby one learns to note and distinguish between internally produced feelings (Feel), sights (See), and sounds (Hear), and “Focusing Out,” which does the same with sensations, images, and sounds in or of the world around us. These three sets — Feel-In and Feel-Out, See-In and See-Out, Hear-In and Hear-Out — respectively make up the internal and external coordinate spaces of subjective experience.

Normally the “internal” ones come packaged in tightly woven, momentum-driven flows, and often — such as when they matter most — in rapid onslaughts. The stories we tell ourselves,

22 The resonances between Gurdjieff’s and Peirce’s triadisms are fascinating, but we must leave them for another time. The same, incidentally, goes for the Christian trinity, the Hindu trimūrti, and other trinitarian deities, with their diverse interpretive permutations over the centuries; comparative triadistics is yet to be developed as a serious research field. On Gurdjieff, see Jacob Needleman and George Baker, eds., Gurdjieff: Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teachings (New York: Continuum, 2004); on the Law of Three, see Basarab Nicolescu’s chapter in that book, “Gurdjieff’s Philosophy of Nature,” 37–69.
the images and internalized voices of our parents, siblings, spouses, children, friends and enemies, bosses and co-workers, all come to us wrapped in affective adornments, muscular tightenings, bodily armorings, and the like. But the practice of noticing, acknowledging, and focusing in on the pieces of these emotional entanglements allows us to build spaces between them and, over time, to begin disentangling their knotted webs. As Shinzen has put it (I’m mostly paraphrasing), it’s the “undetected micro-emotional experiences” that drive the parade of horrors known as human history; and it is these that mindfulness practice allows us to observe, gain insight into, and over time begin to neutralize. Beyond that, his additional methods of “Focusing on Rest” (finding the restful states between active states, such as the spaces of silence between bits of “mental chatter,” and resting in those spaces) and “Focusing on the Positive” (generating positive states) offer two more variations on traditional contemplative practices such as meditation using mantras, Metta or “lovingkindness” meditation, Christian “centering prayer,” and the like.

It is the fifth and final of Shinzen’s “Five Ways” that makes things yet more interesting. This is what he calls “Focusing on Change” or on “Flow,” where we watch things coming, going, transforming, scintillating, undulating, vibrating, expanding and contracting, winking in and out of existence, and ultimately disappearing down the cosmic rabbit hole (and taking us with it, for a little while at least). He describes this as a way of attuning to the “wave” as opposed to the “particle” structure of reality, with the eventful winkings in and out being sourced in a “fountain of energy” out of which everything comes and to which it all returns. Shinzen’s language here uncannily resembles not only the traditional Chinese cosmo-physiological tradition of Qi with its emanating energy flows and Yin–Yang polarities, but also Whitehead’s ontology of “actual occasions,” with their bipolar structure of co-related subjectivation and objectivation.

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23 See Shinzen Young, “Five Ways to Know Yourself.”
But let us first mine the riches of the model before complicating it with the fact that things aren't things at all, but different forms of flow. (At this point, it would be useful to spend some time practicing the exercises suggested here. Specific practices related to this and other sections of Part Two can be found in Appendix 3.)

Relatings

To put these three sensory fields—feeling, hearing, and seeing—into the context of everyday life means making them more than something to observe while sitting motionless on a meditation cushion. There is a more primary categorization of activity that should provide a better starting point, and it is directly related to Peirce's categories.

For Peirce, again, there is (1) that which there is at all, and which precedes any doing on our part (which becomes the object-pole of our doing); (2) that which we do in response (the relational prehension); and (3) that which is realized in and through the doing (which becomes the subject-pole, momentarily, only to offer itself up as object for other doings to come). And insofar as these are categories for noting what is happening—noting firstness, secondness, and thirdness—we can also add a zeroness for those things that occur without our conscious awareness. So we have four categories:

0. Free Activity: This is bodymind doing what it does, as it does, on its own. It is a kind of primordial flow—things arising spontaneously as responses or results of previous arisings—which captures the world prior to the cut made by a new agent. We could think of this as our base-zero, "nonconscious" state of functioning.

1. Sensing (See, Hear, Feel): Sometimes I see it happening. If I only saw it and resisted the impulse to act, I would be here, observing, noting. Like the trained Buddhist meditator, I can watch what arises, moment to moment, and gain a feel for what is there.
This can be aided by mentally labeling, categorizing, and classifying — at which point I have moved onto the next two phases, those of acting and interpreting, but for purpose of learning what is going on it is worth distinguishing between passive sensing and intentional acting. So, when I hear a sound — say, an airplane engine in the sky outside my window, or thumping music from a passing car — I can label this “Hear-Out,” to indicate that I have noticed a sound that is “out there” in the world. Its point of origin is not just outside my window, but outside of the psycho-physical system I identify as “myself.” And when I hear a sound “in my head” — say, my inner voice saying “This is boring” — I can call that “Hear-In,” to indicate that it has originated inside my internal mental field.

The same with images, which can be somewhere in my gaze (See-Out) or inside my mind’s eye (See-In). And the same with feelings, smells, kinesthetic sensations, and everything else: “Feel-Out” refers to things that originate outside of us, “Feel-In” to things that originate inside us (such as the breathless feeling when we suddenly remember something important we had just forgotten to do, or that complex mix of angry and depressive impulses that take us over when we realize the love of our life has betrayed us). Humans being complicated creatures, we probably have more of the “In” things to note than most creatures, but in principle any actual occasion is responding to something arising outside itself or inside itself. (Let us set the ambiguities aside for now.)

To be consistent with Whiteheadian, Peircean, and Shinzenian interpretations, this sensing or noting should also be considered a “feeling”: one notes what has arisen, feels or “tastes” it, and then allows it to go on its own course without attaching anything of “self” to it. Here we have added a step to the normal course: a very small step — mere (feelingful) observation — but an important one. Most forms of the first category of meditation mentioned above fall into this category of (minimal) action. But calling everything, including a sound or an image, a “feeling” takes away from some of the precision of the analytical scalpel we are wielding with our experience. So let us instead take the
words “image” and “sound” to be as emotional or feelingful as they need to be.

2. Intervening (Show, Sound, Touch): Action may be what I am doing most of the time — and what many forms of meditation aim to stop or at least slow down — but this category is meant to indicate intended action. Some things, and perhaps most things, I do unthinkingly. Important things — speaking significant words to a loved one, driving to the hospital in an emergency — I do intentionally. Intended action involves responding to stimuli, resisting them, replacing one stimulus (external or internal) with another, or even cultivating specific states or modes, for instance, through mental exercises with specific goals in mind. Again, we can distinguish between actions whose intended locus is outside of what we conventionally think of as ourselves — the movement of my body as I push open a door, the clearing of a throat to let someone know of my presence — and those whose locus is internal to our mental or emotional space, such as my visualizing of tomorrow’s meeting with a boss or a lover. In place of the Feel-Hear-See triad, let’s call these Touch, Sound (as in sounding or making a sound), and Show (for action with respect to a visual observer).

3. Realizing (Map, Convey, Move): This is the upshot of action, the result or realization of actions upon the external-sensory-bodily (“out”) and internal-mental (“in”) fields. The labels refer to the modalities through which the action is accomplished: seeing and showing become “mapping,” hearing and sounding become “conveying” or “speaking” (as in “it speaks to me,” auditorially or verbally), and feeling and touching become “moving” or “being moved.” Those with a locus of realization that is internal to the bodmind are labeled “in,” while those external are labeled “out.”

Adding numbers here makes this schema consistent with Peircean phenomenology, at least as a first approximation. It is true that Noticing may already involve a turning of the mind toward the firstness of what’s arising in the mental-perceptual
field. To the extent that this “turning” is already an encounter between one thing and another — mental contents arising, and a mental observer that is produced through the action of observation or “turning” — it becomes, or is always becoming, a form of secondness, not a pure firstness. But the point is to try to get as close to firstness as possible. If the observation affects what is being observed (as arguably always occurs), then the injunction is simply to “observe that, too.” It is the orientation toward the arising firstness that makes it “Noticing.”

Analogously, Action or Intervention, in this system, is an intentional response to something, which involves a turning to what is there and an action upon it or in response to it. Alternatively, it may be an action replacing what would normally arise: for instance, the recitation and focusing of one’s mind upon a mantra so that the mental field will not be taken over by other habitual activities. The goal may be to cultivate particular states of mind, as in meditative or trance states of one kind or another, or states valued for their positive valence in a particular religious or cultural tradition (such as a devotional, compassionate, or solidaritous state, identification with a deity, and so on).

Finally, Realization in the sense meant here also involves the intention of making sense of the activity in question.

Each of these has its common or “normal” forms as well as the specific, cultivated (or cultivable) forms they take within meditative, yogic, or psycho-spiritual training of some kind. Furthermore, to say that action or interpretation is “intended” is to beg the question “intended by what or by whom?” One’s answer to this — for instance, “by me,” “by the self,” “by the process of conditioned arising that envelops a mental-bodily field,” or something else — already depends on an onto-epistemological interpretation of what arises. If you believe there is an active “self” behind everything your mind does, then you are already committed to a subject-object duality that process-relational philosophy (and Buddhism) rejects.
How to make a bodymind flow, or, deconstructing experience with Reality

This is where things get interesting. For most process-relationists (and most Buddhist philosophers), subjectivity and objectivity are not static conditions or polar categories holding up the universe. Rather, they are results — outcomes, however temporary and ultimately insubstantial — of a less differentiated, more constructive, and more flowing activity. Shinzen Young simply calls this activity “flow,” while other metaphysicians — from Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu to Whitehead, Bergson, James, and Deleuze — analyze it at more microscopic or rigorously conceptual levels.

What this means is that our categorization of things as internal or external to the bodymind is inaccurate. It doesn’t hold up, at least not for long. But it feels as if it does, so we might start by paying attention to those points at which it slides into something less clear. Shinzen refers to many phenomenological “flavors” of flow — as expansion and contraction, undulation, vibration, tingliness, percolation, electricity, and so on — but also to flow as the experience of the ontological fact of impermanence, or anicca (in Pali). Flow is partnered with vanishing, for which Shinzen uses the notational label “Gone.”

So, on the one hand, “flow” is indicative of the fact that all things pass, and, on the other, of the ebullient energy of their continual arising. This corresponds with the ontology of percolating creativity described by Whitehead, which I have built on to posit that there is a circulatory undulation — a movement between the subjectivation and the objectivation that constitutes every moment or actual occasion — which gives rise to all form. (There is a second movement, which is the difference and deferral I referred to as described by Peirce’s semiosic process.) If we can learn to pay attention to this movement as it arises, we can get a feel for its many flavors, and as a result “subject” and “object” begin to soften and melt into dipolar acts of becoming.

When the arisings of subjects and objects come to crystallize around certain formations over time, getting habituated into “grooves” or “channels” dug into a socio-mental landscape
through repetition, they come to take the form of—that is, to geomorph, biomorph, and anthropomorph as—stable entities such as one’s “self” (seen from within), “the world” (seen from a situated subjective perspective), “selves like me,” “others unlike me,” and everything else that appears to exist, as seen from any perspective possible.

Each social regime produced over the course of human history digs its channels a little differently, creating different kinds of individual and collective “selves,” in-groups and out-groups, networks and relations, and all manner of entities by which to populate its world. These are analogous to the “collectives” Bruno Latour has written about, some of which “mobilize ancestors, lions, fixed stars, and the coagulated blood of sacrifice,” while others “mobilize genetics, zoology, cosmology and hæmatology.”

Modern western society has come to produce specific kinds of selves and social units as well—most commonly, “rational, self-maximizing individuals,” nuclear families, more or less sovereign nations, and so on, but with a wide latitude for variations in the overall mix. As Latour argues, these things aren’t social constructions so much as they are relational co-productions, made up of matter/mind stuff, that is, of material and semiotic relations that are fully real in their effects, even if they are ultimately insubstantial—empty (as Buddhists insist) of self-subsistent being.

Critiquing one’s own social milieu is an important part of one’s liberation from circumstances. The primary goal of mindfulness meditation practice, however (in Shinzen’s account), is to bring oneself into greater contact and resonance with Reality, which means to bring one out of the hardened categories we have put in Reality’s place, and into the flowing percolation that constitutes both those categories and the category-making process itself along with everything else. When we add this category of Flow—the rippling and percolating interactivity that constitutes and produces all things, which is also the elusive but

tangible background hum of the universe — we get a set of possibilities that looks like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUT</th>
<th>IN</th>
<th>FLOW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.</td>
<td></td>
<td>(Free activity;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>nondual flow)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. SENSE</td>
<td>Sense Out</td>
<td>Sense In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ACT</td>
<td>Act Out</td>
<td>Act In</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. REALIZE</td>
<td>Realize Out</td>
<td>Realize In</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each of these categories, we could further distinguish between feeling, seeing, and hearing, and combinations thereof, to get the following possibilities.

0. **Free activity**: This is simply the ongoing arising of phenomena without a “self” or watcher intervening or even witnessing. It *precedes* what a bodymind can do.

1. **Noting, Sensing, or Observation**: *Sensing-Out* refers to the pure awareness of external phenomena, or of what goes on in the world. It can also be the casual observation of behavior or a more hypnotic merging with the observed; or it can be the controlled merging of “absorptive” forms of sensorially-based meditation. *Sensing-In* is the pure awareness of internal mental states and phenomena. It can be done casually and without particular intention, as in the observation of dream or hallucinatory phenomena, or it can be done with meditative discipline, as in Vipassana (insight) meditation. And *Sensing-Flow* is the pure awareness of flow states, for instance, of the rippling-flowing arising of subject-object circulation as things arise and pass away. This kind of flow state can and does arise spontaneously. It is perhaps the most “natural” state of mind in some sense — a form of nondual flow where the observer and observed are more or less merged, both present and not clearly separated. This is also where intersubjectivity — the relational field encompassing oneself and
others — is experienced from within (or, technically, across the border separating within from without). In its meditative form, Sensing-Flow is nondual awareness of the present moment.

2. Acting, or Intervention: Acting-Out is equivalent to “acting in the world,” which names most of what we do when we are recognizably doing anything that affects the surrounding world. It includes speaking, moving, arguing, making love, building and destroying things, and all the rest. Technically, it means the intentional response to, resistance against, replacement of, or cultivation of, external states of activity. In its meditative or yogic forms, it includes all types of physical activities such as rituals and devotional actions performed for a particular spiritual or religious purpose, such as for the benefit of all beings or to please a deity. Its paradigm cases are Karma-Yoga (action performed as yoga) and the performance of “good deeds.” Acting-In is the intentional response, resistance, replacement, or cultivation of internal states. This is what we do when we visualize scenes “in the mind’s eye” while listening to a story or reading a novel, or when we train ourselves to learn a poem or a language. (To the extent that we are focusing on the meanings of words, they are being treated as mental objects rather than mere shapes seen on a page.) In its meditative or yogic forms, Acting-In includes all those traditional practices that involve the generation of imagery, sound, feeling, or mental and emotional activity, such as Metta or “loving-kindness” meditation, mantra meditation, and deity meditations of one kind or another. (Many and perhaps most of these qualify under Shinzen’s “Focus on the Positive” rubric.) Finally, Acting-Flow is the realm of intersubjective action, that is, action that emerges and is carried out collectively, characterized by blurred boundaries between oneself and others — for instance, by “emotional contagion” and some degree of shared awareness. We can catch a flavor of it in special kinds of events, such as revolutionary events, which is why those events leave such a strong imprint on their participants. In its meditative form, Acting-Flow is nondual action or what Daoists call Wu-wei, action that effectively “does itself,” effortlessly, with
one’s own “self” being merged with and in the action. It is what the phrase “going with the flow” is intended to convey. It is an important part of what many of the more this-worldly spiritual systems (such as Daoism, Tantrism, Mahayana Buddhism, and certain forms of Paganism) aim for.

3. Realizing, or Interpretation: Realizing names the process of making sense of or effecting change in the world, with a realization being a “completed event,” as it were. Realizing-Out does this in the external, outwardly observable world. In its mental forms (See, Hear), it generates knowledge or understanding in others — which, for instance, is what all types of science and education, at their best, aim to accomplish. In its physical (feeling) forms, it generates physically felt change. Realizing-In is the same with states internal to the observer and actor. It includes the interpretation of the workings of one’s own mental or emotional states. Realizing-Flow in its “normal” variants consists of the kinds of things that process-relational theory aims to do: to make sense of the process-relational, nondual nature of all things. In its meditative or yogic variant, Realizing-Flow becomes the free, unobstructed flow of subjectivation-objectivation: perceiving and being-perceived, doing and being-done-to, understanding and being-understood, all co-arising and passing in the continuous percolation of one moment after another. We can think of this as meditative or nondual praxis, or as a kind of “enlightened Thirdness.”

If the latter sounds like the “free activity” that characterizes the zero-level (the Zeroness that precedes Firstness), that is because it is very much the same — it is a return to free, unobstructed activity — but with continuity of awareness added. That continuity of awareness, according to Dzogchen and related traditions of Buddhism, is everpresent but obscured to start with. The difference here is that now “I,” the “self,” has also opened up to that recognition, which means that this “self” is no longer an obstruction to the flow of recognition (clear awareness, effortless action, understanding). The arising of the self has become
part of the arising of world that is being observed, acted (and acted upon), and realized.

It is tempting to distinguish this final activity of meditative praxis or “enlightened realization-flow” by granting it a further level—a “fourthness”—since it both encompasses and expands upon the previous three levels. It is a synthesis of Sensing, Acting, and Realizing, mediated over time into an ongoing recursive praxis. Peirce would have advised against calling it “fourthness,” since according to his phenomenology any term beyond a third is merely a third of a third. Thirds do not exclude firsts and seconds; they include and transcend them. Realization in this sense always includes some form of both observation and action. Shinzen refers to the “complete experience,” which is equivalent to the realization of a momentary “enlightenment” insofar as the latter is considered a quality of experience and not a permanent state.

There is a combination worth commenting on further. The combination of Acting-Out, Realizing-Out, and Realizing-In (or processing those actions and their results)—that is, of changing the world according to an analytical understanding of how it ought to be changed—is what most forms of “critical social theory” or “critical educational praxis” aim for. In less coherent forms, they are what people’s lives, at their best, tend to be most about: doing things, reflecting on what we have done, and learning in the process to do things better. The movement between these is a continuous one between observation, intervention, and theorization.

Religious or spiritual practices usually combine more than one of these as well. The generation of positive mental states, for instance, is typically accomplished not only through mental discipline, but through physical change in the world—such as through the creation, maintenance, and use of sanctuaries, temples, meditation rooms, altars, sand mandalas and tangka paintings, retreats and spas, and the like. Political practice, in turn, can be more than mere outward “action” and “realization”; it can include the cultivation of mental states and the institutionalization of practices of working, relating, and cultivating.
Rather than a set of individual options or “slots” into which observations or behaviors would be classified, all of this is understood to be a more flexible sort of tool—a game-board, as Shinzen calls it, that can be used in various ways. For instance, one could focus on one or a few sets of options at a time (such as Hear-In, Touch-Flow, or Note-Out). Or one could focus on dynamic relations or interdependent “constellations” connecting different modalities: for instance, on the ways that external sounds give rise to internal feelings, or how bodily touch elicits both internal feelings and external impacts on someone else whom one is interacting with (such as during physical or sexual play).

If taken up as “bodymindfulness practice,” the choice of what to focus on can range from being fully predetermined for a given length of time—as is the case in fairly typical meditation practice where one might focus exclusively on the sound of a mantra or the feeling of one’s breath—to being an open-ended, free-flowing form of mindfulness, akin to Vipassana “insight” meditation but applied to all mental, sensory, bodily, social, and interactive activities and phenomena. The goals of this practice, as with the mindfulness practice taught by Shinzen, are three-fold: they are to develop sensory, mental, and emotional clarity (a practice related to firstness); to develop attention (a practice related to secondness, as it involves the effort of attending); and to develop equanimity in the face of life’s exigencies (a practice related to thirdness, involving the cultivation of an attitude and an understanding).

At its most complete, then, this becomes a fully conscious mode of living. The goal here is not necessarily to bring everything that is un- or pre-conscious to consciousness. Rather, it is to serve as a practice by which consciously chosen aesthetic, ethical, and logical principles are established within one’s bodily and mental habits for living in the world.
The bodymind Rubik’s Cube

Let us summarize what we have so far. This system of interpretive practice might best be visualized in the form of a Rubik’s Cube, with three rows, three columns, and three levels intersecting with each other to create nine domains, along with the variable relations between them. The three sets classify the following strata:

1. **Sensory modes (See, Hear, Feel):** Sensations and perceptions are grouped into three modalities: the visual; the auditory; and the bodily-felt, which includes the tactile, olfactory, gustatory, kinesthetic, visceral, affective, and emotional. The latter group is further distinguishable into the “felt-out” (the first four) and the “felt-in” (the last three) based on whether the sensations refer to relata that are “internal” or “external” to the bodymind in question (see #3 below). These three sensory modalities may develop somewhat autonomously, but they get blurred and interactive in practice. Distinguishing between them does not follow any universal or essential triadism; it is just a useful heuristic.

2. **Relational categories (Sensing/Noting, Acting, Realizing):** These are based in Peirce’s triad of categories: there is the sensing of firstness, the acting upon secondness, and the realization of thirdness. A *first* is something in and of itself, and perception of a first is perception of it simply as it is, a noticing of it in its purity, insofar as this is possible. A *second* is an actual, existential interaction with something. As an interaction, it is an *action*, with conscious or unconscious intent and with a resistant (to one degree or another) object of that action. A *third* involves the grasping of a second (an interaction) through some form of mediation, which generates a semiotic relationship: a meaning or significance, an interpretation, a pattern, a habit, a regularity — which we are together defining here as *realization*.

3. **Orientations (In, Out, Flow):** On the surface, “In” and “Out” distinguish between whether the second — the object perceived in the
case of perception, the object being acted upon in the case of action, and the object generated in the case of realization — is internal or external to the referencing bodymind. In sensing/noting (firstness), they are distinguished according to their immediate source; in acting (secondness), they are distinguished according to their intended goal or destination; and in realization (thirdness), according to their achieved direction. Whether realization has actually been achieved outside oneself — say, in a listener, a viewer, or an audience — is a matter of speculation or approximate knowledge. In a Peircean understanding, realization is always on the move toward a truth that is logically conceivable, but practically elusive.

Distinguishing between “internal” and “external,” however, implies a dualistic ontology—a separation between subject and object, perceiver and perceived—that process-relational ontologies reject or transcend in one way or another. Such an ontology corresponds to what foundational Buddhist metaphysician Nagārjuna called “conventional truth,” and what Tiantai Three Truths doctrine affirmed as the “provisionality” of existent and impermanent things. By contrast, “flow” states, where the boundary between internal and external is breached or suspended, acknowledge nonduality, or what Nagarjuna called “ultimate truth” and Tiantai doctrine referred to simply as “emptiness,” though its understanding of this “emptiness” is not at all empty, but dazzlingly lively.

A word here on Buddhist metaphysics is in order. Nagarjuna’s Two Truths doctrine underpinned Madhyamaka philosophy which, with its main sparring partner, Yogacara philosophy, informed much of the Mahayana Buddhism that spread across wide swaths of central and eastern Asia in the first millennium of the Common Era. Upon their arrival in China, these ideas met and mingled with an extant Chinese preference for a pragmatic realist metaphysics, as found in Confucian, Daoist, and related schools. The most philosophically sophisticated synthesis that emerged from the encounter was arguably the Tiantai metaphysics developed by sixth century Chinese Buddhist philosopher Zhiyi (Chih-i), with its doctrine of Three Truths, which
contemporary Tiantai philosopher Brook Ziporyn translates as the truths of Provisional Positing (jia), Emptiness (kong), and the Center (zhong). The first two are equivalent to Nāgārjuna’s conventional and ultimate truths, while the third, “Centrality” or “the Middle,” insists on the necessary “intersubsumption,” or mutual dependency, of the first two. In doing so, it simultaneously affirms the contingency of all things as the reversible and accompanying precondition of their ultimate reality. Subject-object duality is thus not denied but realized in nondual flow, and vice versa. Let us look more closely at Ziporyn’s articulation of these Three Truths.25

The first truth is that of “conventional truth,” “local coherence,” or “provisional positing,” which means that a thing really is what it appears to be: sky is sky, an arrow is an arrow, a slap on the face is a real slap on a real face. The second truth is that of “ultimate truth,” “global incoherence,” or “Emptiness,” which understands an object alone as utterly empty of self-subsistence, meaning that it is nothing outside of the context of its relations. This also means that the object is, at the same time, everything that it appears not to be. Not only is the arrow not really a simple arrow — since its arrowness is but a factor of its material body, the motivations that shaped it and its present motion, and all of the things that went into producing them — which are ultimately all of the things of the universe up to this moment, and which by now (however many moments later) no longer exist as they appeared to then. The arrow is also the non-arrow that will kill (and therefore not kill) the (not) me when it pierces me through the (non-) heart. All of these are “empty” in their complete and utter non-self-subsistence. There is nothing intrinsic to them except for the directional flow that continues in and through them, which, even a second later, is already gone beyond, already something different, differing and deferring as it goes.

25 Ziporyn’s most complete accounts of Tiantai philosophy are Emptiness and Omnipresence: An Essential Introduction to Tiantai Buddhism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), and Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).
While Two Truths theory had acknowledged the validity of both of these “truths,” its built-in tendency was to privilege the ultimacy of “emptiness” — that is why its second truth has come to be known as ultimate truth. Tiantai rejects this apparent privileging and insists on the “reversible as-ness” of the two truths, according to which it is the synthesis of the prior two that makes them both and neither what each of the two claim. As with Peirce’s thirdness, this “both and neither” is irreducible. The latter insight is the goal of Zen and Chan enlightenment practice, where the body, the house, the arrow, and all other things are seen to really be all those things and, at the same time, to be empty of any such substance as we ascribe to them, since they really do “intersubsume” all other things in order to be anything at all. Tiantai further posits that the Three Truths are nothing if they are not used, and that the means of using them, in Ziporyn’s translation, is by “opening the Provisional to reveal the Real.” That is, once the provisional reality of any one thing is “opened” and seen clearly, it is revealed not merely as emptiness, but as simultaneously (1) provisionally itself in its uniqueness; (2) globally not itself at all, but “intersubsumptive” with everything else; and (3) irreducibly both at the same time.

Shinzen Young’s concept of Flow captures an essential element of this “irreducibly real and not real at the same time” nature of things, with an emphasis on the “at the same time,” which is always not “at time X” but in the perpetual time of simultaneous becoming and vanishing. Flow can be classified into a few different types. First, there is cross-modal flow, which crosses between the sensory modalities, as in experiences of “Hear-See Flow,” “Touch-Sound Flow,” “See-Sound-Move Flow,” and so on. In themselves, these are not nondual flow states except to the degree that they also are, or become, one of the next two forms of flow. But they can be a focus for mindfulness practice, and in that context are helpful for providing a feeling of flow. Second, there is cross-directional flow, which refers to the blurring, movement between, or achieved unity of the internal (“In”) and external (“Out”); by definition, this is, or includes, nonduality. And third, there is evental–processual flow, which is the category
consisting of flow experiences characterized by change over time (temporal flow) or variability in nature and sensation (textural flow): for instance, arising/passing (which Shinzen labels “Here!” and “Gone!”), vibratory, undulating, and so on.

Considering all of these as forms of “flow” and taking them as intersecting with the other two orientations (“in” and “out”), the following set of possibilities is generated (Table 1). In each category, I am including examples taken from ordinary experience, indicated by “O,” and examples taken from mindfulness/meditation or spiritual practice, indicated by “M.” (See Appendix 2 for a more complete rendition of the cube.)

It is important to remember that this map tells us nothing specifically about the things encountered in life—the others, which, for humans, could include other people, animals, dream semblances, or stars. Rather, the map is intended to be used for orienting oneself from the inside of one’s own experience. One could use it in any of the following ways: as a classification of types of experience, and of types of meditative and spiritual experience in particular; as suggesting the relations between these different types of experience; as a map of the territory traversable during insight or “open monitoring” styles of meditation, both in traditional sitting practice and during active participation in everyday life; as suggesting what a complete system of human developmental education might include; and as a mandala-like object of contemplation that would help one habituate one’s thinking into a triadic, process-relational style.26

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26 Overviews of research on mindfulness meditation techniques and how they affect their practitioners include Kirk W. Brown, J. David Cresswell, and Richard M. Ryan, eds., Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice (New York: Guilford, 2015); Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience 8, no. 1 (special issue on mindfulness neuroscience); Claire Braboscz, Stephanie Hahusseau, and Arnaud Delorme, “Meditation and Neuroscience: From Basic Research to Clinical Practice,” in Integrative Clinical Psychology, Psychiatry, and Behavioral Medicine, ed. Roland Carlstedt, 1910–29 (New York: Springer, 2010); and the classic study by Antoine Lutz, John Dunne, and Richard Davidson, “Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness,” in Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness, eds. Morris Mosco-
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>OUT</th>
<th>IN</th>
<th>≈</th>
<th>FLOW</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>≈</td>
<td><em>O: Free activity</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>M: Nondual flow</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>SENSE OUT</td>
<td>SENSE IN</td>
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<td>SEE–HEAR–FEEL OUT</td>
<td>SEE–HEAR–FEEL IN</td>
<td></td>
<td>See–hear–feel flow</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>O: Absorption in sensory activity,</em></td>
<td><em>M: Sensory-ab- sorptive meditation</em></td>
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<td>“pure” sensing</td>
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<td>ACT OUT</td>
<td>ACT IN</td>
<td>≈</td>
<td>ACT FLOW</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>O: Action in the world, doing (of any kind)</em></td>
<td><em>M: Active meditation,</em></td>
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<td>“spirit possession”; Karma Yoga,* “good deeds”</td>
<td><em>M: Visualization,</em></td>
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<td>REALIZE OUT</td>
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<td>MAP–CONVEY– MOVE OUT</td>
<td>MAP–CONVEY–MOVE IN</td>
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<td>Map–convey–move flow</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>O: Science, logical reasoning (about external world)</em></td>
<td><em>M: Integral science?</em></td>
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Table 1
With practice, as one begins to get familiar with these modalities in one’s own experience, one also begins to experience the flow that connects them, and us, to all the other sentient beings (and beyond) making up the universe. That, at least, is the promise offered by such practices.

**Dark flow, or the great sucking sound at the heart of things**

But all of that still sounds too smooth, too graspable and tame; it disguises the harshness of Reality. For there is always the great sucking sound at the heart of all things: that of their withdrawal.

The image of “dark flow,” described in a *New Scientist* article as 1400 galaxy clusters streaming toward the edge of the universe at blistering speed in the ongoing “afterglow” of the big bang, has haunted me ever since I first read about it. Caused “shortly after the big bang by something no longer in the observable universe,” and possibly by “a force exerted by other universes squeez[ing] ours” (a force doing *what*...?), I can’t help thinking that astrophysicists are arriving at the point where the known universe is being bounded and taking its place amidst a more mysterious space of otherness, where we have no clue — indeed, cannot have a clue — about what goes on. 27 So it becomes the realm of poetry, of dreams and nightmares, of haunted imaginings, like the deep sea, beyond the reach of sunlight, that still fascinates us, but even more deep, dark, and vital.

Einstein famously said that “as our circle of knowledge expands, so does the circumference of darkness surrounding it.” Perhaps recent events and their reflections in popular culture — terrorist incidents, refugee emergencies, economic crises with their Ponzi schemes, bank machinations, and the West’s growing interdependence with poker-faced and unreadable nations (like North Korea), gradually accumulating reports about

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vitch, Philip Zelazo, and Evan Thompson, 497–549 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
climate change, and films about forthcoming apocalypses, zombies, and vampires—all are conspiring to make things seem more curious, more spooky, and more surrounded by a kind of lingering, lumbering darkness.

Slavoj Žižek’s account of the Robert Heinlein novel *The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag* includes a lovely passage where Žižek equates the Lacanian Real, the unassimilable kernel around which subjectivity is formed, with the “grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life” that emerges at the boundary of the known world and the unknown, outside a traveling couple’s car window. Buddhist accounts of emptiness generally lack the Lacanian spookiness conveyed here (though it’s hardly foreign to the Tibetan tantrics, with their nighttime graveyard meditations), but, to the goth-loving nature hound, these make a comforting addition. The passage is worth reproducing in detail. “At the denouement of the story,” Žižek writes,

Hoag invites Randall and his wife to a picnic in the country. He tells them that he has at last become aware of his true identity: he is actually an art critic, though of a peculiar kind. Our universe, he says, is only one of several, and the masters of all the universes are mysterious beings who create different worlds, including our own, as experimental works of art. To maintain the artistic perfection of their efforts, these cosmic artificers from time to time send into their creations one of their own kind disguised as a native, to act as a kind of universal art critic. The mysterious committee members who summoned Randall are representatives of an evil and inferior divinity attempting to corrupt the work of the cosmic artists.

Hoag informs Randall and his wife that, in the course of his visit to this universe, he has discovered one or two minor blemishes which he intends to have put right during the next few hours. Randall and his wife will notice nothing; but on the drive home to New York, they must under no circumstances open the windows of their car. They set off, and the journey is uneventful until they witness a road accident. At first they ignore it and continue on their way; but when they
see a patrolman their sense of duty prevails and they stop to report the accident. Randall asks his wife to lower her window a little.28

Here Žižek quotes from the original Heinlein novel:

“She complied, then gave a sharp intake of breath and swallowed a scream. He did not scream, but he wanted to. Outside the open windows was no sunlight, no cops, no kids — nothing. Nothing but a grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life. They could see nothing of the city through it, not because it was too dense but because it was — empty. No sound came out of it; no movement showed in it. It merged with the frame of the window and began to drift inside. Randall shouted, “Roll up the window!” She tried to obey, but her hands were nerveless; he reached across her and cranked it up himself, jamming it hard into its seat. The sunny scene was restored; through the glass they saw the patrolman, the boisterous game, the sidewalk, and the city beyond. Cynthia put a hand on his arm. “Drive on, Teddy!” “Wait a minute,” he said tensely, and turned to the window beside him. Very cautiously he rolled it down — just a crack, less than an inch. It was enough. The formless grey flux was out there, too; through the glass city traffic and sunny street were plain, through the opening — nothing.”29

“What is this ‘grey and formless mist,’” Žižek continues, “if not the Lacanian Real — the pulsing of the pre-symbolic substance in all its abhorrent vitality?” This substance “irrupts on the very boundary separating the ‘outside’ from the ‘inside,’ materialized in this case by the car window.”30 Like the car window, from which “objects in the mirror are closer than they appear” (and

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
through which our starting objects flew out, in Part 1), this car window creates a discontinuity between the world as known and that which is typically mere backdrop, but which here is something altogether different. Žižek writes:

> It is as if, for a moment, the “projection” of the outside world has stopped working; as if we have been confronted momentarily with the formless grey emptiness of the screen itself, with the Mallarmean “place where nothing takes place but the place.”

David Lynch’s Red Room (from *Twin Peaks*) comes to mind as well.

> Continuity and proportion are not possible because this disproportion, the surplus of inside in relation to outside, is a necessary structural effect of the very separation of the two; it can only be abolished by demolishing the barrier and letting the outside swallow the inside.

This “excess” of the inside is “the fantasy-space — the mysterious thirteenth floor, the surplus space which is a persistent motif in science fiction and mystery stories.” It is at this point that we wake up from our dream, like Chuang Tzu, not knowing if we are Chuang Tzu having dreamt we were a butterfly (or Žižek dreaming he was a black widow spider) or vice versa: if the spider is dreaming of this reader and viewer carried along by a text toward oblivion.

That oblivion, at the macro level, is the window out of which we ourselves disappear into the darkness, the quiet whimper of our world flushed out into the heat-death of the universe. Philosophers can debate whether the flushing out is balanced by an equivalent in-flush or “reflux” elsewhere, with the whole

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31 Ibid., 13.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
constituting a closed system, or one redeemed by God, or if it is final — an asymmetrical vector where departure is for good. Randall and his wife witness the rippling flow speeding back down the rabbit-hole, to the source from which it and their entire world arose and to which all things return in the end, or perhaps now. Spiritual traditions often color this flow as bright, full rather than empty (full of light, for instance), but it seems more reasonable to propose the image of Dark Flow as the cosmic Real, the shimmering atomic structure of things behind the structured object-world we (think we) see. Dark Flow is the wave-like spirit-energy that Buddhists call “emptiness” only because giving it a more substantialist term would already be a way of trying to contain and claim it. This Reality is unclaimable and uncontainable. If astrophysicists hadn’t “seen” it, we would have had to invent it. (I mean we, invent, it.)

The apophatic, inside-out twist

Žižek’s articulation of the Real provides a nice backdrop for what we might call the Quaker, or apophatic, shift in our bodymind mapmaking. (Apophatic, ἀπόφασις, refers to something obtained through negation or denial; something like our crossed out Real.)

Quakers, or the Religious Society of Friends, are the ones within the Christian tradition whose practices have been most shaped by the idea of silence. Quaker “silent worship” cultivates a receptivity to the “voice of God within,” which is taken to precede the ability to live “in the light” of that quiet voice, a voice felt “in the heart.” We could just as well refer here to the cosmic immensity of Vishnu (or Cthulhu, for that matter), where even the heart is rendered elusive in the light of what is beyond it. The point is that there is an opposite move to be made with each of the forms of positive noting indicated by Shinzen’s system of practices. There is something, yes, but there is also the nothing that surrounds it, from which it arises and to which it returns.

If our game-board is a Rubik’s cube, the apophatic game-board is that cube twisted inside out, or, better, entered into,
as if we were entering the Red Room at the heart of all six sides of our triply-cubed cube. Inside out, the game-board’s three dimensions appear as follows:

1. Behind all appearance — all sound, all image, all feeling — there is the void: the Emptiness beyond feeling, the Silence beyond hearing, the Darkness beyond seeing. There is that which withdraws from appearance, which is the place from which appearances arise and to which they return. It is dark matter, the ocean of being, the zero state of appearance.

2. Behind all action — all touching, sounding, and showing — is the rippling tenderness felt by the heart, from which action arises and to which it returns: the palpitating Tremor of flesh at the origin of feeling and touching; the tremulous Murmur of sound at the origin of hearing, sounding, and speaking; the radiant Flicker of light at the origin of sight and of showing. It is unbounded feeling, the ocean of becoming, the zero state of relationality.

3. And behind all realization — all movement, all communication, all mapped understanding — there is the unfathomable Mystery, the “cloud of unknowing” that precedes knowing and that engulfs it in the end: the Immovable, the Unspeakable, and the Invisible and utterly Unknowable. It is the shadowy presence that withdraws from realization, from which all realization arises and to which it returns, realization in its zero state, the realization that is non-realization.

These can in turn become focal points for one’s bodymindfulness practice in three ways that reverse the terms of the previous. First, where Sensing (or Noting) practice typically pays attention to what is going on, “Reverse Sensing” involves paying attention to the background from which “what is going on” arises and to which it returns, that is, to the silence, the darkness, the emptiness, the void. Second, where Action practice typically pays attention to what one is doing (in interaction with others), “Reverse Action” involves paying attention to the background from which “what one is doing” arises and to which
it returns, that is, to the heartful flicker, murmur, and tremor within and out of which all relational engagements unfold. And third, where Realization practice typically pays attention to “what is realizing” from one’s actions (or from intersubjective activity), “Reverse Realization” involves paying attention to the background from which “what is realizing” arises and to which it returns, that is, to the mystery that is unknowable, invisible, unspeakable, and immovable.

Things start to sound Zen-like and paradoxical at the point that one undertakes these shifts. This triad of Emptiness, Heart, and Mystery pertains to context, or to the dark absence that surrounds what is emerging into presence. It is the shadow of the original triad (Sensing–Acting–Realizing), the Triad of Absence to that Triad of Presence. It is the penumbral Real that surrounds all things in their irreality and ungraspability. It is also an indicator of how we might shadow the “reality” of the Anthropocene. (For practices associated with this apophatic shift, see Appendix 3.)

Returning to the things themselves, differently

Maps like the one presented here make it sound as if the goal of such bodilymindfulness practice is to accede to the “top,” which is the level of complete thirldness, complete Realization in and as Flow. But then, you might ask, why do meditation systems most commonly gear their practitioners toward the lower levels of this diagram, especially the observation of mere internal or external experience?

The reason for this is that by the time we get to the stage in our lives at which a rigorous meditative or spiritual practice comes to seem useful, the world has for us become so pre-interpreted and predigested, its meanings and thirldnesses so settled and overburdened with habit that a return to the basic building blocks becomes necessary. (It’s true that, for Peirce, habit is in the nature of all things, and always on the increase, but it is always habit shot through with chance and infinitely revisable. It is habit raised to the level of meaningfulness and reasonable-
ness, in the best sense of these words.) It is precisely because self and other, subject and object, interior and exterior, are so settled — and at the same time so shot through with dissatisfaction — that one must go back to firstness (and then secondness) with an eye for unsettling them. This enables seeing that things are not what we think they are, but rather, that they are a flow that overflows the boundaries in which we have contained them all along. Once this flow is observed in experience and lived in action, it can be realized as “complete experience.”

Observation is therefore the first step of a disciplined program for learning what the bodymind can do. But this observation — if it successfully notices the process-relational nature of all things, including self and world, subjects and objects — becomes a movement with what is observed. There is no halting the process at firstness or secondness. Insofar as attending to what is before us is a choice, a movement on our part, we can say that conscious firstness is secondness. Similarly, conscious secondness — intentional, reflexive responsiveness to that which moves us to response — is thirdness, or realization. And conscious thirdness is completion in the moment, which impregnates the next moment with its novel possibilities. As always and ever moving, we (bodyminds) enter into relations with other bodyminds — entities or processes characterized both by mentality and physicality — which are all moving in their own ways, and which are ultimately never quite “their own.”

Even if one follows an object-oriented metaphysics here and opts for thinking of these as entities that ultimately withdraw or withhold something from all relationality, that withdrawn essence, in a process-relational view, is always a withdrawing-to: it is never simply a withdrawing-into, that is, a withdrawing into something stable, steady, and predetermined called “oneself.” What the withdrawal withdraws to is the source of the flow that gives rise to it, which is the destination for the dark flow of the universe, and which is always — if we follow Deleuze and Whitehead — becoming different from itself. It is, in a word, elusive. The stream moves as we speak, as Heraclitus suggested and as Derrida, in his wordsmithy ways, demonstrated. (Derrida
demonstrated it only for words, but we can take the next step, with Nāgārjuna, to the deconstruction of experience itself.)

Toward a logo-ethico-aesthetics of existence

If there is process both at the heart of every “eventity” and folded into, and unfolding through, the capacities that are actualized in every moment, then we are at the core of the crystallization of every moment in our experience. But, then, who we?

We are those who attend, act upon, and realize. To the extent that something — anything — is capable of noting, responding to, and realizing something, of subjectivating in relation to objectified facts so as to create a new realization, a living effect that is added to the universe — to that extent it is a real agent. (And to the extent that our agency is intimate only to ourselves, we are secret agents. We become public through recognition by others, but our own experience always retains its secrecy. Not only that — it always dissolves from us when we attempt to still and to grasp it. Its secrecy retains its own secrecy.)

Agency is an event in the sense that its realization eventuates, at which point it is turned into grist for the mill for future events. But if there is continuity from one event to the next — which there is for anything that works to maintain some stability of identity over time — then it is a real entity that can be said not only to act, but to note and to realize. This is the Peircian contribution to how we understand agential things. The simultaneous “folding into” and “forking out of” that sense of our own agency is what makes us up, and in the unfolding of triads — of noting, acting, and realizing — there is continual flowering. (It is a

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rhizomatic flowering, always on the move. But its aroma is real, knowable, tastable, for the moment that it lingers.)

Another Peircean triad that plays a particularly acute role in the moments of decision by which entities (or “eventities”) like us become, is the triad referred to by Peirce under the deceptively technical label of “normative sciences.” Unlike phenomenology, which for Peirce inquires into phenomena as they appear (that is, in their firstness), and metaphysics, which inquires into reality as it really and ultimately is (in its thirdness), the normative sciences examine phenomena in their secondness — that is, in the ways they act upon us and we in turn act upon them. It is with these that we find our opening to act and affect the world, to respond to it creatively, and to renegotiate and reframe our own and others’ potentialities for future action.

The three normative sciences, for Peirce, are aesthetics, ethics, and logic. As entities capable of acting both upon others and upon ourselves, we are, for Peirce, called upon to cultivate habits by which we can manifest the ethically good, the logically true, and the aesthetically beautiful — or at least to decide upon how we would define our own “good, true, and beautiful,” to be tested out in action within our lives. Insofar as they are mat-

ters of cultivation, the normative sciences are as much science as art. They are akin to Michel Foucault’s “techniques of the self” or “arts of existence”\textsuperscript{36} — arts by which we cultivate habits that allow us to appreciate and manifest the beautiful or admirable (aesthetics), the just and virtuous in our relationships with others (ethics), and the truthful in our understanding of the world (logic).

A “logo-ethico-aesthetics” is in this sense not mere study, but always an appreciation (being aesthetic), an action (that is ethical), and a commitment to learning alongside others into the indefinite future (which is logic, as conceived broadly by Peirce). With his focus on the cultivation of habits, Peirce strove in his ethics, in Aaron Massecar’s words, “not to advocate for one ideal over another, but to ensure that the ideals that one is already striving for are actually worthy of admiration.”\textsuperscript{37} Aesthetics, here, involves the capacity to appreciate the admirable; ethics, the capacity to pursue it through action; and logic, the pursuit of it through thought.

It is through the cultivation of new habits of mind and body that we can modify our behavior in coordination with our beliefs, so as to test whether those beliefs ought to be accepted or rejected. Aesthetic habits concern firstness, the “quality of feeling” of a phenomenon, and so an important supplement to aesthetics will be the cultivation of “habits of feeling” that allow us to appreciate the “admirable.”\textsuperscript{38} Ethical habits concern secondness, or reaction and relation, such that ethics relate to “the deliberate formation of habits of action consistent with the


\textsuperscript{37} Aaron Massecar, Ethical Habits, 139.

ethical ideal” and with the “deliberately adopted aim.”39 Logical habits concern thirdness, or mediated representation, pattern, and law. The goal of logic is to discover the “habits of inference that lead to knowledge, including positive knowledge” (supposing there is a reality to a given phenomenon), and “to such semblance of knowledge as phenomena permit (supposing there is no perfect reality).”40 While logic is about truth and falsity, and ethics is about “wise and foolish conduct,” aesthetics is about “attractive and repulsive ideas” and more generally about “expressiveness.”41 Let us examine each of these further in light of process-relational thinking.

Aesthetics. An aesthetic of firstness, for Peirce, was not merely about our appreciation and evaluation of things that appear to us, such as art or physical appearance. It is also about our comportment toward those appearances: about the ways we allow things to appear to us and the ways we cultivate the appearance of things to us. This aesthetic of appearances concerns perceiving and cultivating something like the beauty in things. “Beauty” is a risky term here, since it is culturally variable. Peirce found it inadequate, preferring the Greek terms kalos and agamai, since they accommodated the unbeautiful within their scope, and Peirce acknowledged that aesthetic goodness is hardly encompassable within our perception of what is pleasant or not.42

Like Peirce, Whitehead prioritized aesthetics as an essential and primordial facet of all experience, more fundamental than either ethics or logic, and from which the latter two are at least in some measure derived. For Whitehead, the production of beauty was in fact the telos of the universe. In Adventures of Ideas, where it figures as one of five qualities of a civilized

39 This phrasing is Beverley Kent’s, from Charles S. Peirce, 165, 133.
40 Ibid., 170.
42 Kent, Charles S. Peirce, 154–55. Similarly, Whitehead spoke of the value of Discord for the development of Beauty (terms that he capitalized in Adventures of Ideas, 252ff.).
society, Whitehead defined beauty initially as “the mutual ad-
aptation of the several factors in an occasion of experience,”43
but then qualified and complicated this by discussing “major”
versus “minor” beauty (the former produces intensity through
novel contrasts, while the latter merely exhibits harmony among
factors), and by insisting on the importance of dissonance or
discard in prompting “adventure.”

In his theory of aesthetics, Whitehead distinguished the more
conventional form of perception “in the mode of presentational
immediacy,” with its vivid, focused sense percepts, from “per-
ception in the mode of causal efficacy,” which perceives through
feeling-tones disclosing the wholeness, interrelatedness, and
background texture surrounding events in time. Causal efficacy,
Catherine Keller writes, “is the underworld of actuality: the past
energetically decomposing as the very ground of the present’s
composition.”44 The two modes combine into the hybrid form
of perception Whitehead called “symbolic reference,” which he
thought was able to render the focal percepts of the first mode as
poetic evocations of the flow of time, with its “perishability” and
“tragic beauty.”45 Steve Odin compares Whitehead’s “poetics of
evanescence” with the use of images found in Romantic poetry
(which Whitehead often quoted) and in Japanese aesthetics. In
his last book, Modes of Thought, for instance, Whitehead quotes
Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poem “Hellas”:

World on worlds are rolling ever
From creation to decay,
Like Bubbles in a river,

43 Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, 252.
44 Catherine Keller, “Psychocosmetics and the Underworld Connection,” in
David R. Griffin (Northwestern University Press, 1989), 141.
45 Whitehead’s most extended treatment of aesthetic perception comes in
Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect (New York: Fordham Unviersity Press,
1927/1985). Steve Odin’s Tragic Beauty in Whitehead and Japanese Aesthet-
ics (New York: Lexington Books, 2016) provides a detailed exegesis of the
later Whitehead’s axiological “process aesthetics” with its focus on “beauty
as perishability.”
Sparkling, bursting, borne away.46

Aside from being an effective evocation of Whitehead’s entire ontology, a quote like this demonstrates the kind of “tragic beauty” that is the culminating note of Whitehead’s 1933 book *Adventures in Ideas*:

At the heart of the nature of things, there are always the dream of youth and the harvest of tragedy. The Adventure of the Universe starts with the dream and reaps tragic Beauty. […] The immediate experience of this Final Fact, with its union of Youth and Tragedy, is the sense of Peace. In this way the World receives its persuasion towards such perfections as are possible for its diverse individual occasions.47

In Steve Odin’s exegesis, this provides a key to Whitehead’s “aesthetic of perishing,” which resonates with the Buddhist-Lacanian perception of “dark flow” articulated earlier and with Peirce’s sense of aesthetics as the capacity for perceiving the arisings of firstness in the world. Odin compares it also to Dōgen Zenji’s thirteenth century Zen Buddhist metaphysics of “reality as *genjokoan*,” with its emphasis on the “presence of things as they are” in their perishability and impermanence.

Summarizing, we can say that to the extent that all perceptions arise in relational contexts, aesthetic perception as such involves perception of a thing against and in relation to its background—a perception of the wholeness of what appears in the clarity of its appearance, but always framed by the background of its arising and its passing. This also means an awareness of its emergence into being (firstness), into interactivity (secondness), and into meaning (thirdness). In the context of our everyday lives, this suggests expanding our capacity to perceive and appreciate the nature of things—to see them not just as objects,
present-at-hand (*Vorhanden*) or ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*), but as processual enactments and achievements with a fragile and distinct integrity of their own, set against the background of their disappearance.

**Ethics.** The tradition of ethical thought associated with process-relational theory is longstanding and rich. The core of such thought commonly rests on a disavowal of the fact-value distinction, wherein values are considered to be separate from the concrete particulars of existence. At the foundation of a Whiteheadian ontology, Brian Henning posits, is the rejection of “independent existence”: “every entity,” Whitehead wrote, “is only to be understood in terms of the way in which it is interwoven with the rest of the Universe.”48 With his understanding of creativity as the “universal of universals,” Whitehead simultaneously affirmed the particular and the universal, the individual “actual occasion” and the solidarity of the whole to which it is responding and contributing. At the same time, it is not the abstract judgment but the concrete, relational act that is central in his account. As Whitehead wrote, “in the case of those actualities whose immediate experience is most completely open to us, namely, human beings,” he writes, “the final decision of the immediate subject-superject, constituting the ultimate modification of subjective aim, is the foundation of our experience of responsibility, of approbation or of disapprobation, of self-approval or of self-reproach, of freedom, of emphasis. This element in experience,” he continues, “governs the whole tone of human life.”49 Beyond any causally constitutive determinations of any action, in other words, there is always the decisive act by which subjectivation occurs, the act by which subjectivity, responsibility, and effectiveness is constituted. Biologist Charles Birch and theologian John Cobb have influentially advanced the

argument that Whiteheadian theory advocates the “liberation of life,” at all levels at which decisions-making are made, “from the cell to the community”—which Cobb has argued must extend today to that of the planet.\(^5\)

Judith Jones has proposed an ethic based on Whitehead’s notions of attention and intensity, wherein agency is reconceived as “the organ of attention to reality.”\(^5\) For Whitehead, she writes,

> Each moral event, in its quest for intensity of feeling, stands forth as the locus of our moral being. The moral significance of our existence cannot be relegated to some dim ‘other’ time, for we pervade all times by virtue of our very immediacy. Any given individual experience bears not only on the cumulative history of our past, but also on the real potentialities of our future.\(^5\)

What endures, in all cases of our action, “is the character of the present achievement, not a self that can disown it or ‘make up’ for it.”\(^5\) Ethical action is therefore not a matter of living up to a standard, but a matter of acting in a way as to yield beauty, a beauty conceived as the “intensity of feeling” arising from the patterns of experience that are possible among the subjectal arisings akin to this one, and those that are conceivable as contributing to the greater beauty of the whole in which we find ourselves.

The ethical imperative, conceived in this way, is also about cultivating ways of responding to others such that we sympathetically recognize their positioning in their interactions with

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52 Ibid., 181.

53 Ibid.
us. If ethics is the cultivation of skillful action in response to others, and if self and other are perceived as dynamically interactive forms arising out of patterned relations, then ethics is a matter not of rules and injunctions, but of motivated action amidst encounter. Ethics (a second), for Peirce, builds on aesthetics (a first), just as logic (a third) builds on both. An aesthetic of process-relational ethics is a cultivation of empathic relations, relations amidst subjectal arisings—self-semioses (since the self, as understood by Peirce, is a sign) that we know arise independently of us, yet are in some sense analogous to our own subjectivation. Those encountered become not mere objects for our admiration or judgment, but elusive strangers, whose faces beckon to us even as they decline to reveal themselves fully. Each relation places us at risk that out of it we may emerge no longer ourselves, but other.

**Logic.** Finally, informed by the aesthetic (in-habited feelings and percepts) and the ethical (in-habited action), logic is also something different from the rule-based form of reasoning that is commonly counterposed against the failings of illogic. It is, for Whitehead and for Peirce, more akin to what we might call ecologic, a skillful understanding of relational emergence (appearance), interaction, and generality. An *ethico-aesthetics* of ecologic—an eco-logo-ethico-aesthetics—involves recognizing, and in turn cultivating, the vitality of the systemic connections that sustain a whole, which means a cultivation of skillful understanding that emanates as *praxis*, since it enfolds action and perception within itself.

Each of these three aesthetics I have outlined—of appearances, of relational encounters, and of ecology—is a selective response to a broader array of possibilities that encompass beauty alongside ugliness, good alongside evil, justice alongside injustice, and systemic cohesion alongside disorder and collapse. Being attentive to these options, and acknowledging their viability even as one opts for one of them over another, means recognizing that chaos or injustice, for instance, are not necessarily “bad.” In given circumstances one might even decide that
it is right to cultivate the beauty and truthfulness of the chaotic, or the dissonance of justice.

Such a logo-ethico-aesthetics, in other words, is not prescriptive in advance of a situation. It is a method of movement through situations that recognizes the dependence of thirdness (logic, ecology, pattern) on secondness (ethics, action, actuality), and of both on firstness (appearance, aesthetics, qualitative potency).\(^5^4\) It involves a continual “thickening” or “deepening” of the moment, with its arisings and passings, to receive its “soulful” call to us for action and response in light of their background of flow and transitoriness.

If there is an essential action here — a kind of primal gesture of process-relational awareness — it is a movement that proceeds from (1) careful attending to (2) “widening” and “deepening” to (3) motion or action, which in turn realizes the valuative capacities presented by those widened and deepened contexts. That is, one begins by attending to that which is there (whatever it is we are encountering); expands that attention through a simultaneous widening of contextual relevances and a deepening of valuative feeling; and responsively moves with and in relation to the object or matter at the center of our concern. Through that movement, the contexts and values are “played,” as it were, in a kind of echoing or rippling of the resonant harmonies set off by the responsive action. (For an exercise related to this “gesture,” see “Widening and deepening practice,” Appendix 3, Exercise 5.)

In attending respectfully to what we encounter and opening ourselves to the perception of what in it is admirable, we learn to master the art of firstness, or the aesthetic. In valuing

\(^5^4\) Peirce’s thinking on beauty and ugliness, good and evil, and coherence and incoherence, retained some ambiguity right through to the end of his life. For instance, he wrote: “Man comes to his normal development only through the so-called evil passions, which are evil, only in the sense that they ought to be controlled, and are good as the only possible agency for giving man his full development” (cited in Kent, Charles S. Peirce, 155). Evil is, in this sense, “perfection in God’s eyes,” but while people can move toward a God-like vision, they have not at present (if ever) attained that vision.
and contextualizing the significances of the situation, we do the same with the art of thirdness, that of logic. And in acting according to the valutative resonances enabled thereby, we exercise ourselves in ethical secondness. (The order of the categories, as you see, is not linear; they interact at every level and in each direction.) This “triple gesture” involves a willingness to consider the multiple factors at play in a given situation, to weigh them out in terms of the intensities they make available and the opportunities for producing beauty in any resulting synthesis, and to seek always to “go beyond” any given synthesis as one reaches toward a future that remains open and pregnant with further possibility. To act logically, in this sense, is to give sustenance to the flowering of an open and dynamic universe.

Praxis. Any such ongoing effort when turned into a logo-ethico-aesthetic praxis, if it is to be effective, ought to become embodied and in a sense “ritualized,” so that it can sediment within the “in-habited” bodymind of its practitioner. Doing this requires developing some set of iterative techniques, with ritualized ways of taking account of how one is doing. In his later years, Peirce seemed to be moving toward an elaboration of techniques for this cultivation of habits — an elaboration that Aaron Massecar classifies into nine steps by which aesthetically derived “ideals” are adopted, tested, and embodied as habits aimed toward the growth of what Peirce called “concrete reasonableness.” Fortunately, examples of how such practices can be incorporated into one’s life are found much more widely than this, scattered as they are across the world’s religions and their respective traditions of “self-cultivation,” from those of Stoic, Neoplatonic, Daoist, or Confucian philosophers to Christian, Jewish, and Sufi mystics, to those practiced by Neo-Pagans, ritual magicians, and other psychospiritual explorers today. I will not elaborate on these except to say that in almost all of these traditions, a daily regimen has been recognized as particularly helpful.

A morning practice, for instance, might include the ritualizing of concepts and images guiding one’s current practice, embodied in some physical and psychological gestures, movements, and reflective practices that prepare one for the day ahead. An evening practice might include a retrospective overview of the day, its challenges, one’s responses to those challenges, and the action-points at which those responses themselves might be tweaked in future iterations. The larger triadic point with these is that the practices are taken on deliberately to cultivate one’s capacities for reflective action in the service of desired goals. The goals are not always known in advance; they may be shaped in part by a level of trust, either in the communal institutions that aid one in these practices or in the “images” that guide them (and to which we will turn in a moment).

A logo-ethico-aesthetics built on these understandings situates us as active respondents in the midst of matters of concern, and nudges us toward perceiving these matters as relational in ever widening contexts. At a time when these contexts raise urgent questions about our relations with a thickening and expansive array of others—all of those others implicated in the climate changes and ecological disruptions industrial humanity’s actions are producing—such a practice of “integral ecology” (if you will) becomes far more than a mapping of scenarios, a strategy of containment or crisis management. It becomes a cosmopolitical project, an active and ongoing logo-ethico-aesthetic practice whose ends we cannot foresee or forestall.

As we are all caught amidst matters of concern, minding our matters and mattering what we mind, and as our interrelations become ever more conjoined—agonistically, yet always with a promise of reaching new perceptions and understandings—so we grasp toward a cosmopolitics that brings ever more of us together. With the prospect of a radically altered cosmos, the “us” that is called into being is open-ended, never pre-determined, and will ultimately take us beyond any “us” we might imagine.

It is in this sense that Michel Foucault may have been correct when he described the figure of “man” as “a recent invention” that, with a shift in structural relations, might “be erased,
like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”56 The time of the Anthropo(s)cene is a time of recognition that this figure of Man has drawn its imprint upon all the sands surrounding all the seas of the earth. But it is a figure not of humanity, but of a particular constellation — of “man” as written by a certain caste of men, and of capital, and of petrochemicals and other allies — that in denying its dependencies is also denying its ultimate survivability. Sand, salt, and sea will outlast the figures we draw in them, but the figures to come will need to be of a different order than those marking the appearance and imperium of this figure of “man,” the Anthropos of the present Scene. All will depend on how we respond to the others with whom we share our predicament.

Process-relational aesthetics, ethics, and (eco-)logics begin not from the ontological task of describing what the universe and the things in it are, but from specifying what matters concern us and how we might come to mind, attend, and respond to them. As subjects of concern, we then raise such questions as “who are we?”, “who are the others who bring these questions to us?”, “how do we meet with them in coming to grips with these concerns?”, and “what abstractions — what ontological fabrications and abductive guesses — might help us to do this creatively and satisfyingly, for all those concerned?” This means starting from where we are not merely out of expediency but because we — all of us in this universe — start from there, from the matters of concern in which we find ourselves, which means from our relations. It is there that we can find our commonalities. From such a start we might build a more common world. Let us turn to that task now.
