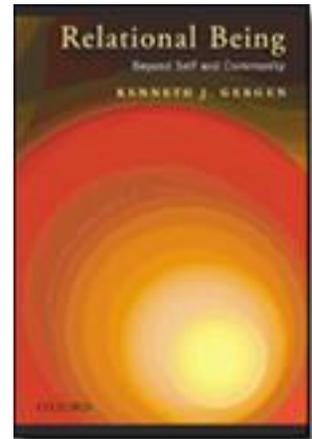


Kenneth J. Gergen, **Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 418 pp., \$40.31 (hardcover).

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Kenneth Gergen aptly added the phrasing *Beyond Self and Community* to the title of his 2009 work, *Relational Being*. In the era of networked media, reflexivity, and late modernity, it behooves us to think beyond these two terms that have long defined how we understand individual autonomy and dependence, identity and belonging, atomicity and connection. Identity and community present focal points of inquiry for social scientists interested in how we express ourselves and connect with others. And yet, the two terms frequently lead us down a path of inevitable dichotomies that rarely do justice to the reality of our everyday experiences. Thus, we analyze individualist versus collectivist tendencies, we understand autonomy as independent of community, and we view solitude as the opposite of sociality. The reality is, of course, that individualism is informed by collectivity, that autonomy means little when exercised in the absence of community, and that solitude is part of sociality, because to co-exist with others we must first learn to be at peace with ourselves. Instead, if we understand the self as the intersecting node where many relations meet, we realize how these relations begin to define the self and the subsequent feelings of belonging that may be experienced. For social scientists, the vantage point shifts, no longer focusing on the individual as the fundamental atom of social life, but on relations as defining the complexion of the individual self. As a result, we evolve beyond individualism to understand societies as webs of relations rather than as assemblages of connected or disconnected individuals. This approach is compatible with the contemporary emphasis on networks, which seems to have colonized, but also connected the natural and the social sciences.



In his earlier work, the seminal *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, Gergen had anticipated some these developments. He talked then about technologies of social saturation: media that connect but also overpopulate the self with potential for expression and connection. Published in 1992, the work described how postmodern individuals connect to others through a vortex of self-referential and reflexive media narratives. It also foresaw the opportunities and challenges for publicity, sociality, and privacy that would emerge at the next iteration of net-supported, interconnected online media. Gergen used the term *technologies of social saturation* to describe media that provoke a form of performative incoherence by populating the self with multiple, disparate, and even competing potentials for being. These potentials reflexively support a form of pastiche personality, as each self contains an ever-increasing multiplicity of others, or voices, which do not inherently harmonize, presented as they are in contexts that frequently lack situational definition (Meyrowitz, 1985). Understanding these multiple potentials requires constant and intense self-reflection. Self-monitoring thus becomes a preferred strategy for the mutable self that emerges—a self that evolves beyond the fixity of the self as object to the liquidity of self as process. This line of thinking aligns with Giddens’ theorization of the ongoing project of the self

or with Bauman's interpretations on the conditions of liquid modernity. The constant self-reflection, however, potentially leaves the self in postmodernity slightly more narcissistic and styled as a result (Gergen, 1991; Lasch, 1979).

Self-reflection, self-awareness, and reflexivity are amplified by the affordances of online media. Gergen suggested that, confronted with the multiple potentials for being, self-presentation frequently evolves from play into the foray of carnival, which permits the individual to strive for an authentic and coherent narrative of the self that will support multiple potentials. However, carnival also permits the individual to acknowledge and poke fun at the incredulity inherent in trying to align so many discordant potentialities for identity. Consequently, self-reflexivity, irony, and play become core strategies in performing the self across realities that are relational. These observations attain new gravitas in the context of networked media, which frequently collapse and converge public and private boundaries. As individuals make decisions about how to traverse the converged context of social media, they find themselves weighing opportunity against risk associated with the multiple selves that these media afford. Conditions that Castells has described as "timeless time" and the "space of flows," amplify *ersatz being*, affording the possibility to both reconcile multiple potentials for identity and also connect them to yet further mutations of those potentials, advancing a form of networked individualism (Castells, 2001; Wellman, 2001). Alternatively, we might interpret these tendencies as supportive of a networked sense of self, sustained through sociality performed to a network of relations via a network of relations. These performances of sociality are driven by a polysemy that serves multiple selves and multiple audiences without (ideally) losing narrative coherence.

It is precisely these conversations that *Relational Being* informs, offering an explanation for what happens next and an enlightened guide for inserting meaning into the dispersed, yet interconnected and simulated existence of networked selves. Simply put, Gergen asks: If this is the sense of self that is afforded, then what does this mean for the lives we live, and the lives we might aspire to live? *Relational Being* responds to this (impossible) question. The book presents a contemporary and inspiring response to questions about being, spirituality, and the practices and relations of everyday life. Gergen's approach avoids moralistic undertones and dense theorizing to provide a simple philosophy for everyday, postmodern life.

Gergen begins with a discussion of the transition from bounded to relational being. He highlights the balance necessary between narratives of the self and narratives of belonging, so that these narratives support relations as organic and not as constructed. Popular discourses frequently present relationships as artifice that must be worked on, developed, or fall apart as a result of actions of the self. Gergen emphasizes that relations happen and are primary, not artifacts. The self stands as the connecting point of a myriad of relationships, or as "the whole that is equal to the sum of relations" (p. 55). Individual autonomy then implies being at ease with, but not dependent on the sum of relations embedded within one's own sense(s) of self. Turkle (2011), in response to the social saturation with which online media infuse everyday life, frequently suggests that to be with others, we must learn to be alone, and if we do not learn to be alone, we can only be lonely. Similarly, Gergen places relations at the center, inviting social scientists and individuals to view the multiplicity and malleability of relations as inherently and

ultimately liberating for the self. As a result, social science may evolve beyond rigid paradigms of causality to paradigms of confluence, which interpret relations as interconnected to other relations via the self.

Scholars of the Internet will find meaning in the vocabulary Gergen uses to describe contemporary processes of expression and connection. The language of multiplicity and malleability of relations connects to the possibilities for sociality, publicity, and privacy afforded by networked media. The emphasis on confluent rather than causal relations is compatible with the tendencies and tensions that are formative of networks. Gergen's discussion of the body as a relationship reminds us how our bodies frequently limit our ways of relating. Consequently, much of the expressive labor performed by living with, or in media (Deuze, 2010), revolves around growing out of the expressive constraints that the materiality of our existence imposes. The emphasis on relations helps media scholars to think beyond the (tired) vernacular of audiences and publics, toward what Gergen presents as emerging hybrids of relations, agency as relational action, and relating to individuals actual or imagined—what Mary Gergen has termed "social ghosts." Gergen's discussion of writing as relationships resonates with scholars interested in the liberation and entrapment contained within affective labor, or *playbor*.

Gergen wraps up the volume with an emphasis on education, theory and well-being, and an inspiring discussion of the spiritual transcendence from moral to sacred and, I would add, from mortal to sacred. What is striking about this discussion is the reconciliation of science with morality to propose a path to personal autonomy that evolves out of interpersonal relations. Therein lies the pedagogical contribution of the volume, which is ultimately about finding space for ourselves in our relations by learning to find ourselves through those relations. For scholars of networks, science, and technology, this means that we examine the ego through shifting our vantage point to relations. The Internet and the many platforms it supports is not just a site of investigation, but also a vantage point from which we are permitted to gaze upon old problems from a point of view that generates a different vista (Katz, 2010). And perhaps through this approach, we find a place for technology in our lives that does not saturate the self, but enriches relations that support the self instead.

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