

## Features of a Relational Ontology

Brent D. Slife, Brigham Young University

- Relationality is less a system of thought and more a loose framework or even an anti-system for understanding engaged, situated activity (practice).
- Relationality can be distinguished into its strong and weak forms.
- Weak relationality assumes that all things occur as self-contained, purely local entities that influence one another causally across time and space. The identity of these things stems from what is incorporated “inside” this self-containment from the outside.
- Strong or ontological relationality assumes a mutually constitutive, holistic relation in which all or most of the qualities of things stem from their relationship to other things. Identity is thus simultaneously individual, as a unique nexus of relations, and communal because all things have a shared being.
- Strong relationality allows for instantaneous relations and influences that are sometimes considered “nonlocal” or “formal causal.”
- The historical legacy of moving from a strong, more animistic relationality to a billiard ball causality among self-contained inertnesses has resulted in the free will/determinism and mind/body problems.
- Ontological relationality (hereafter, relationality) is best contrasted with ontological abstractionism where abstractions, such as theories, principles, natural laws, and propositions are considered the fundamental realities of the world – i.e., what’s “behind” or “above” everyday appearance, with practice as an extension of more fundamental abstractions.
- Abstractionist frameworks typically value contextlessness, atomism, and thinness of explanation and method, whereas relationality frameworks typically value contextuality, holism, and thickness of explanation and method.
- Abstractionist frameworks yield the “punctual self” as a kind of isolated point of consciousness and will, separated from and standing over against its context.
- Relational frameworks yield a “shared being” as a unique and mutually constituted nexus of historical, situational, interpersonal, and moral contexts.
- The “other” is almost irrelevant to the abstractionist because the individual self is in spite of the other, whereas the other is pivotal to the relationist because the other is constitutive of the self.

- Abstractionist frameworks imply that community and relationship originate from common abstractions, such as common beliefs, theories, principles, and values.
- Relational frameworks imply that we are, in an important sense, already in community and must not deny and live out this ontological relationality.