A Theory of Relational Reproduction: Definition and Ethical Principles

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Abstract

This paper introduces relational reproduction as a distinct object of ethical theory. A relational subject persists across time not by preserving memories, objects, or narratives, but by continually reproducing the relational structure of its shared history. We define relational reproduction as the joint practice through which a relational subject reproduces, reorganizes, and transforms that structure, thereby preserving the possibility of its own continued becoming. We then state five ethical principles governing just reproduction: generativity, co-reproduction, non-exploitation, counter-power, and subject preservation. The principles form an ordered architecture answering, in turn, why reproduction matters, how it must proceed, what it may never do, how it stays open, and what it must never sacrifice.

1. The Object of the Theory

Relations endure. Two subjects who have shared a history remain, in some sense, the same pair years later, even as every particular between them shifts. The question this paper addresses is what exactly is carried forward when a relation endures, and under what conditions its endurance is just.

The intuitive answer names memories, photographs, stories, shared possessions. This answer is inadequate. A photograph is not relational wealth. A story is not relational wealth. A remembered quarrel is not relational wealth. Each of these is inert in isolation. What matters is how they are bound together into a structure that constitutes who the relational subject is.

We therefore locate the object of reproduction one level above the individual experience. What is reproduced is the relational structure of shared history: the pattern of connection, weighting, and meaning through which isolated events become a single ongoing subject. Events are continually reconnected, reinterpreted, and reweighted. That living structure, and not its material traces, is what a relation carries forward.

This move aligns the theory with dynamical systems, with historical materialism, and with the theory of the relational subject. In each, the unit of analysis is a structure under continual transformation rather than a store of fixed contents.

2. Definition

Relational reproduction is the joint practice through which a relational subject continually reproduces, reorganizes, and transforms the relational structure of its shared history, thereby preserving the possibility of its own continued becoming.

Four commitments are compressed into this sentence.

The practice is *joint*. Reproduction is carried out through the participation of the relational subject as such, not through the action of one party upon another.

Its object is a *structure*, the relational structure of shared history, rather than a set of discrete experiences.

Its modality is *transformative as well as conservative*. Reproduction sustains the subject or transforms it; both are internal to the concept.

Its aim is the *continued becoming* of the relational subject. What is reproduced, in the last analysis, is the relational subject itself.

That last point deserves isolation, because it is the central proposition of the theory.

Relational reproduction is not the reproduction of memories, objects, narratives, or emotions. It is the reproduction of the relational subject itself.

Joint travel, joint aesthetic experience, jointly facing suffering, jointly narrating a history, jointly interpreting a tradition, jointly creating a work: these are species of one practice. They share a single set of ethical principles, to which we now turn.

3. The Ethical Principles of Relational Reproduction

Five principles govern just reproduction. They are stated axiomatically and ordered so that each presupposes the one above it.

I. Principle of Generativity

Relational reproduction should preserve the possibility of the continued becoming of the relational subject.

The requirement is not that becoming continue, but that its possibility remain open. A reproduction that forecloses the future of the relation fails this principle even if it preserves the relation's present form intact.

II. Principle of Co-reproduction

Shared experience should be reproduced through the participation of the relational subject rather than through the unilateral determination of one party.

Shared experience may not be unilaterally interpreted, unilaterally defined, or unilaterally revised. The authorship of the shared past is itself shared. Where one party alone fixes what the past was, the reproduction is defective at its source.

III. Principle of Non-exploitation

Relational reproduction should never rely upon the instrumentalization or sacrifice of one subject for the benefit of another.

This is the floor. A reproduction in which one subject bears the whole ethical cost, so that the other may grow, violates the principle regardless of any benefit produced. The demand that all growth accrue to one party, and all cost to the other, is the paradigm case of its violation.

IV. Principle of Counter-power

Every reproduction of shared experience generates interpretive power; a just reproduction must simultaneously preserve the capacity to question, revise, and renegotiate that power.

Reproduction is never neutral. Each act of reconstructing the shared past confers interpretive authority. Justice therefore requires that the same act preserve the standing capacity to contest and renegotiate that authority. This is the principle that prevents history from freezing.

V. Principle of Subject Preservation

No good relation may achieve unity through the elimination of the other as a subject.

Union is not identity. Agreement is not the ethical goal. A relation that purchases its unity by dissolving the otherness of one party has destroyed the very thing that made it a relation. Difference is preserved, and the other is preserved as a subject, precisely so that reproduction can continue at all.

4. Architecture of the Principles

The five principles are not a list but a descent. Each answers a distinct question, and each depends on those above it.

Generativity

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Co-reproduction

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Non-exploitation

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Counter-power

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Subject Preservation

Generativity answers why reproduction matters: to keep the relational subject becoming. Co-reproduction answers how it must proceed: jointly. Non-exploitation states the floor beneath which no reproduction may fall. Counter-power specifies how reproduction stays open rather than sedimenting into fixed authority. Subject preservation names what may never be sacrificed under any condition, the standing of the other as a subject.

Read downward, the architecture moves from purpose to method to limit to openness to inviolable ground. Read upward, each principle secures the conditions under which the one above it can be satisfied without collapsing into domination.

5. Recap

Relational reproduction is not the reproduction of memories, objects, narratives, or emotions. It is fundamentally the reproduction of the relational subject itself, understood as the living relational structure of a shared history.

The theory identifies a single object beneath a wide range of practices, from joint travel to joint mourning to the joint interpretation of a tradition, and subjects them all to one ordered set of ethical principles. A relation is just in its reproduction when it keeps its own becoming open, proceeds jointly, exploits no one, preserves the power to renegotiate its own past, and never dissolves the other as a subject in the name of unity.