First I would like to say how very much I appreciate that the organizers of the PAT-Net conference this year, particularly Dragan Stanisevski, so kindly arranged for me to have this time with you. It’s great to be back at the theory conference, to see old friends, and to have met some new members of the Theory Network, a community that Cynthia and I have always described as “the leavening of the field of public administration.”

My purpose here is to introduce you to the book that Michael Harmon and O.C. McSwite have just published with the University of Alabama Press. The title is *Whenever Two Or More Are Gathered*—yes, those words are attributed to Jesus—*Relationship As the Heart of Ethical Discourse*. Cynthia and I think that it was brilliant of Michael Harmon to propose doing this book, and we have come to believe deeply that it could make a significant contribution toward rescuing the field of administrative ethics from the dead end that it seems to us as having hit.

The first thing I want to say about the book is in appreciation of the cover art, done by Alain Lacroix. I have in the past regularly been amazed at how perceptive and deeply insightful cover artists at publishing houses for esoteric books are in capturing the essence of the complex content and often gongoristic style of specialized academic books. Of course, our book is an exception to this, especially the gongoristic part, but nonetheless it is profoundly heterodox and we feel blessed that the artist who made the cover for it understood and created a wonderfully evocative, indeed, provocative, image for its central message.

What the cover depicts, as you can perhaps see here, is a microcosm of the social world, with a variety of people, from young to old, of various social classes and occupations, going about their activities and moving down the
paths of their daily lives. They are all dressed rather conventionally, more or less homogenized. In addition, and this is a key point, their faces are effaced. That is, they are presented as having no distinguishing features. Indeed, the picture could have been made using nondescript plastic toy “play people” figures. Finally, the most important part is that each figure is depicted as contained with a closed circle, a definite personal space, that is linked to the spaces of others by “interaction arrows.” It all looks quite structured, organized, and mechanical.

The most impressive thing, to us as authors, is that the artist emphasized the idea of defined personal space as the essential basis for social relationship. This is a difficult idea, an unfamiliar idea, and yet the artist got it perfectly. Then, though, Alain Lacroix injects, as we see it, a bit of irony, perhaps critical irony, a provocative comment on the message of the book, by depicting the social world that the book prescribes as, to use the words already mentioned, homogenized, conventional, structured, controlled, and so on, where people must follow rules and arrows as they pursue their relationships with each other.

As excellent cover art does when it works, this image provides us a wonderful starting place for discussing the theme of the book, and in a way that we hope will entice you all and others to read and engage it seriously.

The cover image must be judged as an accurate statement of the theme of the book—at least as it might be taken if the reader reads it from within a frame set by the theoretical prejudices of 20th Century modernism. I’ll say more about this in a minute, but for now, if you’d care to look at the handout that I’ve passed around, I refer you to the diagram of the continuum that defines “Traditional Modernist Ethics.” The two ends of this continuum are “principles,” on the one hand and “discourse” on the other. (If you’re wondering, I would place Kantian duty ethics and rule utilitarianism on the principles end and relativism and egoism on the discourse end.) The theoretical prejudice of 20th Century modernism is this: people generally define ethics as the application of principles, and they generally dislike the idea of discourse, even though it has an important role to play in traditional modernist ethics. (And they know it, at some level.) What they don’t like about discourse is that it seems “relativistic” or too open on the one hand, meaning it seems to be just people talking back and forth about what’s right and wrong. And then on the other hand, if they know about structured
discourse—which is not just people talking back and forth, you have to follow rules—they view it as too closed, devoid of feeling, and so on. So we can see how astute and insightful the cover art it is. It captures this whole message pretty well and serves to invite discussion of its ironies and paradoxes. It sets up a space for the claim that relationship based ethics wants to make, namely that it has nothing to do with anything on the continuum that defines traditional modernist ethics.

At the same time, relationship based ethics can only declare itself from a difficult, trapped position. This is the double bind that every innovative perspective on anything is trapped in when it states its point of view. Nietzsche pronounced that people can only learn what they already know. We would revise this to say that people can only understand things in terms of what they already know. Consequently, even something that claims to be fundamentally new must be described as and referred to what already exists and be understood on that basis. This point holds with special force when the ideas being discussed are applied ideas, ideas that prescribe specifically what is to be done and said.

We say in the last chapter of the book that relationship based ethics has actually existed and been practiced in a variety of different forms throughout the 20th Century, as a counter tradition to the dominant modernist ethics. One of these forms, familiar to many, is the humanistic psychology movement, frequently parodied as the “What I’m hearing you say” movement. This parody depicts human relationships as being reduced to precisely the kind of image presented in the cover art I’ve been discussing. People are shown as talking “pod speak” and as looking and acting like the alien, devoid-of-feeling zombies that populate movies like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.

If you’re expecting now that I’m going to pull some clever trick and evade this image, you’re incorrect. No, I own it straight out. The relationship based ethics we discuss in the book can be based and sometimes is based on just this sort of pod speak. And it does seem to efface and depersonalize people and their interactions. And it does create defined, limited personal space and require that people keep within it. Therefore, any reader and any cover artist, has good reason to read it as saying this. But, as you no doubt guess, this is not the message that we want our book to be taken as sending.
So how do we get out of the trap? The answer to this question begins with the assertion, one that cannot be emphasized too much, that the book is based in a different paradigm than the one that underpins traditional administrative ethics. I should note that we mean the word paradigm here in its true sense, as a framework incommensurable with others. We elaborate this point in Chapter One of the book, where we discuss the shift from what we call the object based to the energy based paradigm for thinking about the social world.

Here though, in this venue of oral discourse and discussion, I want to take a different tack in approaching the matter of describing how the relationship based idea of ethics avoids falling into the trap of creating a social world like the one depicted, as I’m reading it, by the cover of the book.

I take this approach because Cynthia and I decided that the kind of confusion most likely to attach to the relationship theory of ethics is that it is simply a version of discourse theory, for the reasons I have just sketched out. People see that relationship based ethics is opposed to traditional modernist ethics, so they place it in the category of discourse. Certainly, relationship based ethics does stand opposed to the principles end of the traditional modernist continuum. Perhaps I should note that what we consider as having been subsumed under the term “discourse theory,” are such things as participation, consensus oriented discussion, and a lot of other things. The underlying or shared idea is that people talking together can make better ethical decisions than can be obtained by applying principles. To us, though, this whole issue is profoundly off the point.

What I want to do today is to characterize traditional modernist ethics as a continuum and then contrast it with a second, entirely different continuum on which we situate relationship ethics. The schema I will follow in sketching this picture is first to set out the paradigmatic assumptions of each, then describe the poles of the continuum that each paradigm entails, then describe the dynamics by which each operates, then contrast, and this is the payoff point, the type of meaning that each ethical approach produces.

Let’s take traditional modernist ethics first. Its source paradigm is familiar to us. It is the paradigm that frames the kind of mind that human beings have developed as the era of modernism has progressed. It defines the external world as constituted of objects, from such things as planets on down to buildings that house government agencies, people that work in the agencies,
the brains of these people, and the elementary particles that make up these brains and all the rest of it. As such, it sees this world as operating in a more or less orderly manner that can be described by causal physical laws. As a result, this kind of mind tends to abhor randomness and catastrophe and instead to assume that reality can be stably adapted to through understanding. This type of mind, further, wants to deny that it has limits, that its operation ever reaches a point of aporia, of self contradiction. Last, it—necessarily, I would say – seeks to avoid or finesse the question of whether or not and how human beings have agency, the capacity for generating uncaused actions. At the operating level, it assumes that language can carry standard and stable meaning because words do connect directly to external reality, which constrains how they can be used.

The continuum that forms out of this paradigmatic mind set is the one I have already mentioned, the one on which relationship ethics does not reside. This is the continuum of principles and discourse.

The poles of this continuum are not opposed in any final way, but are susceptible to synergistic synthesis. The truth of how they operate, in other words, lies in the middle. The opposition of principle to discourse, then, is in the end complementary. If one is going to operate from the object paradigm, a synthesis of the two poles must be created. (This is what Hugh Miller and Charles Fox sought to do in their impressively thoughtful and innovative work aiming at a new form of democracy and democratic public administration.)

I can use the case of legal process to illustrate how this is so. Our legal system is, of course, based in the tradition of common law. But what I am going to say holds just as well with other forms of legal code. On one end of the continuum we have the formal institutional structure, the written principles and accepted precedents of law. These function as master signifiers, the anchors of meaning to which ambiguities are referred for resolution. In order for the formal system to function in this manner there must be an underlying institutional ethos. This is formed by requiring that all parties identify themselves as functioning as “officers of the court,” sworn to behave in a manner that supports and maintains the integrity of the principles on which the legal system is based.

At the other end of the continuum we find the dynamics of the matter, the messy specific situations that come into dispute or question under the
umbrella of the formal legal structure. This is where discourse plays a role. The messy reality of historically specific events must be confronted and resolved into a form that fits and can be governed by the principles of the formal structure. In order to do this the law is opened to the participation of citizens as jurors. Their role is to attend to a discourse structured by procedural rules enforced on the parties contending in the case. The purpose of the rules is to create, as much as possible, a cleanly descriptive picture of the physical and psychological facts of the case. This accomplished, the judge instructs the jurors as to how to carry out their deliberations, and they are sent away to accomplish this. In the end, a verdict is pronounced, a conviction and sentence, or an acquittal, is issued, and justice is produced.

The points I want to emphasize about this system are:

1. It takes for granted the idea that language is grounded in some sort of master signifier and that it can carry and transmit standard meanings.

2. Its validity and authority depend on an explicitly stated institutional ethos, a shared commitment to explicit substantive and procedural values through which the master principle of justice is expressed.

3. Its process depends on discourse structured by rules of talking much like the rules of the “what I hear you saying” movement mentioned earlier.

By contrast, let’s look at the relationship based ethics model. At the level of paradigm, it sees the world as constituted of energy rather than objects. Energy, from the point of view of the object paradigm, is mysterious. Probably the best metaphor we have for discussing it is quantum physics—versus the so called standard model based in Einsteinian realism—coupled with Darwinianism. Energy works in mysterious, impossible ways, as quantum experiments, such as the double slit, entanglement, and others, demonstrate. Taking the metaphor of energy to the level of life, as in Darwinian natural selection, what we see is a world where every form of life is adapting simultaneously to every other form of life and also to random changes in the physical environment. The world seen in this way is not stable and not predictable in the usual sense of the term; it is more or less chaotic. Human beings to a degree resolve this chaos through the representational power of language, but they can have only an ambivalent relationship to language, since to submit to its representations completely is to give up all possibility for agency, which is, of course, invaluable to the
adaptive process. Hence, language can be used only up to a point. It cannot ever comprehend reality completely and thus cannot produce completely reliable predictions that can be trusted to last over time.

The continuum produced by this paradigm is formed on one end by the idea of the social bond. The idea of the social bond is analogous to the notion of principle and its promise of institutional ethos based on shared values. The social bond, though, is paradigmatically different in that it is, as it must be, formed at an entirely implicit level of social relationship through the unconscious transmission of affect. Following the example of the legal process I have been using, we can recall the recently deceased Harold Garfinkel’s seminal study of jury decision making. He documented that jurors, in their deliberations, did not, in practice, rely primarily on the formal instructions given by the judge. Rather, they relied on a set of generic, completely implicit rules that enabled them to accomplish the creation of a stable social process that could produce a verdict.

More and more is being understood about how the implicit process of creating a social bond works, and as we learn about it, it is becoming clear that it is a natural process that has evolved because it has powerful survival value. It is a connection that people make prior to and beneath explicit agreements such as constitutions, contracts, and commitments to principles.

At the other end of this continuum is structured encounter, again, analogous to the principle-discourse continuum, structured by linguistic rules. The overlap, in fact, is great. Learning how to listen, how to create empathy, how to provide feedback and all the rest of it is pretty much like learning how to talk as an attorney does during a courtroom trial. There is a huge difference though, and it is this. The rules of discourse are oriented toward what is considered to be a possible Truth or Justice as determined by principle and the facts of the case. Consequently, the rules must be taken seriously and as final. We follow legal procedure so as to define, close in on and thereby attain, a real Justice.

By contrast, we follow the rules of structured encounter for the opposite reason. First, I should note that we only follow them tentatively. They are a guide, never final. They may indeed become superfluous at some point in a relationship. This is because what the rules do is not to make something happen, but to get language out of the way so that something new, i.e., the creation or deepening of a social bond, can occur. Then, as the social bond
forms, new possibilities emerge, and new actions, new forms of justice, come into being. As such, we can say that structured encounter is the venue through which true human agency operates. This is not justice that conforms to a fixed ideal or principle, but justice that responds to a situation where a working social bond is at work and where the people involved in the bond form a context where something can happen that otherwise could not be even imagined. (Here we might recall the archetypal story of the stone soup, where a stone creates a nourishing stew—and, perhaps the story of the loaves and fishes.) This is how the social bond works. It provides the foundation for the social construction of reality. The justice that emerges from it is a justice of possibility. Rather than limiting, which is what language does when it is seen as based on a master signifier and as carrying standard meaning, language enables the creation of the new. It becomes an expression of human agency.

The critical thing to note here is that the principles-discourse continuum is founded on the linguistic theory of what is often called legal positivism and its axiom that words can have definite and final meanings. By contrast, the relationship continuum is founded on the linguistic theory of what might be called intrinsic aporia (or, if you want a more common label, the Chomskian view) and its assumption that language in the end fails to connect, consistently, completely, and directly to external referents. The impossibility of meaning, and ultimate contradiction, in this theory, serve as a positive, indeed invaluable, final stop or “referent” that legitimates the idea that the true purpose of language is open, ongoing discourse among people.

I would like concretely to illustrate these huge abstractions with one easily comprehensible real world program, one that currently exists: the restorative justice movement. As we all know, the dominant model is retributive justice. In it, the justice process seeks through a process of competition between prosecution and defense to identify and punish criminals, putatively on the idea that this prevents further crime. Restorative justice by contrast seeks through a process of collaboration among criminals, victims and officers of the justice system to restore the injury that a given crime causes. This may be done in a variety of ways, and it often produces positive, healing psychological effects for both victims and criminals. One hallmark of this approach to crime is that sentences are not standard and instead are tailored to the specific facts of given cases, as researched by social workers and other professionals.
In restorative justice we see the potential of human agency, of people actually creating the new through a collaborative process. It seems that the only possible venue for such a process currently is public administration. Think about it: the two arenas constituting government are politics and administration. Are we going to get the kind of thing I have been talking about, a creative structured encounter supported by a social bond, from politics? Not if present trends continue.

This point leads us into a further illustrative aspect of the contrast between relationship based ethics as contrasted with traditional ethics. This point has to do with the form of meaning that each system produces. It is, by the way, very well illustrated in the book that has just been published by Janet Malcolm about the trial and conviction of a woman in New York for arranging the murder of her ex-husband. Malcolm makes the point that the judicial process in this case is an excellent example of what I want to call melodrama and melodramatic meaning. What I mean by this is that the literary form of melodrama is defined by its characters’ universally being flawed. No one in a melodramatic story is in a position to judge finally anyone else. Soap operas, of course, are prime examples of this. They go round and round through a continuing stream of gossip and intrigue. (This is obviously true in the case Malcolm reports, right down to the judge.) No matter what the issue in the story line of a melodrama is, its meaning is felt to reside in the rackety gossip and mutual recrimination that goes on among the characters. What makes melodrama work is that an exaggerated form of closure is finally reached and the “villain” is punished. (However, note: the only way melodrama can define a villain is through exaggeration, as in the popular melodramas of professional wrestling.) Melodrama is silly and pointless, but it keeps us going. This is the best that can be said for melodramatic meaning: it at least gives us a sense of stability and order. The only trouble is that this sense is, from another more comprehensive perspective, illusory.

By contrast, the meaning created by restorative justice, and more broadly by relationship based ethics, is a narrative meaning. The difference between it and melodrama is that it is an open ended meaning, a meaning that promises only that the future will have to be engaged in an open way, a way that will demand that the question of what is justice be answered over and over again in new forms, forms that fit new situations. The classic Japanese drama Rashomon is perhaps the best example of this (other than all of Shakespeare). The play, which tells three highly plausible but conflicting
versions of an alleged rape, concludes with the interlocutors deciding to believe one version because, “It has the ring of truth”—meaning, of course, that the only truth that can be found in life emerges from continuing authentic engagement with the here and now in a context grounded in human contact.

The contrast I have suggested here, between melodrama and narrative, provides backdrop for my final summary and overarching point. This point addresses the question of why relationship based ethics, if it is a superior form of ethics, and if it has been present as a counter tradition to principles ethics all along, has not made more headway in replacing principles ethics. This question is made especially acute because the critique of principles ethics, provided especially by Michael Harmon, has been incisive and devastating.

The answer we propose is that the version of meaning that traditional ethics creates, melodramatic meaning, became hegemonic in modern culture. As such, it became the standard baseline for our stories. As with the style of food in a culture, it seemed to be the only way to eat, the only form of feeling or moral life possible.

Now, though, this has changed. Melodrama is losing its appeal. We’re becoming fed up with the hollow, brittle and overly simple conclusions its stories offer us. “What I hear you saying” may at this point still seem artificial, but we’ve learned that the rapport that such language can create provides a deeper and more open narrative meaning on which we can create a future different from our melodramatic past.

Our surmise, indeed, is that were we to commit ourselves to the further development of relationship based ethics, whole new forms of social connection would evolve. It would not be necessary to circumscribe or regulate because we would have rebuilt the social bond. We would then have moved into a whole new narrative world, open, exciting, and meaningful in ways that are scarcely possible to imagine from inside the bleak house of melodrama in which we’ve been living in the era of modernism.
The Contrasting Continua of Ethical Systems: Traditional Modernist Ethics and Relationship Based Ethics

Traditional Modernist Ethics

Style of Literary Meaning:
Melodrama

“Discourse”
“Stop” is specific
historical context
as defined by application of
principles by institutions

“Principles”
“Stop” is master
signifier as expressed
by institutions based
on values, ethos,
contract, covenant, etc.

Product:
Justice, Rule of Law

Paradigmatic Foundation: Reality is objects, related by causes;
human agency does not exist

Relationship Based Ethics

The Social Bond

“Stop” is mutual regulation
created by contact

Style of Literary Meaning:
Narrative

Product: Continuing
Adaptation, Viability,

Structured Encounter

“Stop” is rules of social relations process

Paradigmatic Foundation: Reality is energy, moves acausally;
human agency emerges from collaboration