


Relational Being

Beyond Self and Community


KENNETH J. GERGEN

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First to Mary
my relational inspiration without equal

To my friends and colleagues of the Taos Institute
for opening doors unimagined

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for their photographic and graphic gems

To Bernard Stehle
for his caring and catalytic advice

To my friends, family, and colleagues throughout the world
for sustaining the generative flow

To all those scholars—past and present—
who invited me into the dialogue

And to Julian my dog
for being a teddy-bear

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PROLOGUE

TOWARD A NEW ENLIGHTENMENT

How should I describe myself to you at this moment? You would scarcely be surprised if I told you that I am now at my desk, absorbed in thought. I entertain an idea, consider its shortcomings, play with another, extend its possibilities, and slowly I am moved to write. I try fitfully to transform these fleeting states of mind into words, hoping that these pages will allow you, the reader, to understand my thoughts. Doesn't this sound quite reasonable?

Consider again: How does this commonplace passage define me as a writer? And in defining me, what does it tell us about our conceptions of being human? In important respects, we find here a picture of me as an individual thinker, dwelling in an interior world of consciousness that is all my own. And by implication, isn't this to say that we are each alone in our inner worlds? We have no direct access to each other's thoughts, and it is often difficult to translate thoughts into words. It is a world in which you can never plumb the depths of my mind; you will never fully understand me. And too, your private world will always be a mystery to me. In effect, this common account is one that defines us in terms of alienated beings.

"So what," you may respond. "It is simply a fact that we are separate individuals, each living in a private consciousness. That's just life." Or is it? If we accept this view of ourselves as bounded beings, the essential "me" dwelling behind the eyeballs, then we must continuously confront issues of separation. I must always be on guard, lest others see the faults in my

thinking, the cesspools of my emotions, and the embarrassing motives behind my actions. It is also a world in which I must worry about how I compare to others, and whether I will be judged inferior. This view pervades our schools and organizations, where individual evaluation haunts our steps from the first moment we step into a classroom to our ultimate retirement. And thus we compete, tooth and claw, for ascendance over others. Self-esteem continuously hangs in the balance; the possibility of failure and depression is always at the doorstep. Under these conditions, what is the value of other people? Are they not primarily instruments for our own pleasure or self-gain? If they do not contribute to our well-being, should we not avoid or abandon them? If they actively interfere with our well-being, are we not justified in punishing, incarcerating or even eliminating them? This same attitude of me versus you insinuates itself as well into our views, nature and other cultures. It is always a matter of whose welfare is at stake.

Again, you may resist: "Yes, I can see there are problems, and sometimes we do take steps to correct them. At the same time, however, competition is also valuable. And winning is one of life's great pleasures. Besides, we are speaking of human nature here. So stop complaining and pull up your socks." Yet, is this human nature after all? As historians report, the view of the individual as singular and separate, one whose abilities to think and feel are central to life, and whose capacity for voluntary action is prized, is of recent origin. It is a conception of human nature that took root only four centuries ago, during a period that we now view as the Enlightenment. It was during this period that the soul or spirit, as the central ingredient of being human, was largely replaced by individual reason. Because each of us possesses the power of reason, it was (and is) maintained, we may challenge the right of any authority—religious or otherwise—to declare what is real, rational, or good for all. It is this Enlightenment view that has since been used to justify the institutions of democracy, public education, and judicial procedure, among others. It is by living within such institutions that we come to accept the conception as "the natural condition of being human."

Anthropologists largely concur in this conclusion. As Clifford Geertz, a doyen of the discipline, once wrote:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible

it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.¹

In effect, this common view of bounded being and its realization in individualist forms of life is one that we have collectively created. And if this construction is delimiting, oppressive, and destructive, we may also create alternatives.²

It is the challenge of the present work to search beyond the traditions of the Enlightenment. My attempt is to generate an account of human action that can replace the presumption of bounded selves with a vision of relationship. I do not mean relationships between otherwise separate selves, but rather, a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self. My hope is to demonstrate that virtually all intelligible action is born, sustained, and/or extinguished within the ongoing process of relationship. From this standpoint there is no isolated self or fully private experience. Rather, we exist in a world of co-constitution. We are always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone. Further, as I will suggest, the future well-being of the planet depends significantly on the extent to which we can nourish and protect not individuals, or even groups, but the generative processes of relating.

Although the central challenge is that of bringing the reality of relationship into clear view, I do not intend this work as an exercise in theory. I am not interested in creating a work fit only for academic consumption. Rather, my attempt is to link this view of relationship to our daily lives. The concept of relational being should ultimately gain its meaning from our ways of going on together. By cementing the concept to forms of action, my hope is also to invite transformation in our institutions—in our classrooms, organizations, research laboratories, therapy offices, places of worship, and chambers of government. It is the future of our lives together that is at stake here, both locally and globally.

The reader must be warned. This proposal for a relation-centered alternative to the traditional view of self will be discomfoting. A critical

¹Geertz, C. (1979). From the native's point of view: On the nature of anthropological understanding. In P. Rabinow and W. M. Sullivan (Eds.) *Interpretive social science*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (p. 59).

²Excellent overviews of the historical shifts in the Western understanding of the self since the Enlightenment are contained in Taylor, C. (1992). *Sources of the self, the making of modern identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; and Seigel, J. (2005). *The idea of the self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

challenge to the self has broad ramifications. We commonly suppose, for example, that people have effects on each other. As we say, parents mold their children's personality, schools have effects on students' minds, and the mass media have an impact on the attitudes and values of the population. Yet, this common presumption of cause and effect is at one with the tradition of bounded being. That is, it relies on conception of fundamentally separate entities, related to each other like the collision of billiard balls. In the present work I will propose that we move beyond cause and effect in understanding relationships. Nor, by bracketing the presumption of cause and effect, do I mean to celebrate determinism's alter, namely free will. The view of a freely choosing agent also sustains the tradition of bounded being. The vision of relational being will invite us, then, to set aside the freedom/determinism opposition, and to consider the world in terms of relational confluence.

This is not to say that I wish to destroy the traditional views of self, causality, and agency. I am not proposing that these traditional views are somehow false, that our traditions are fundamentally mistaken. Such assumptions are neither true nor false; they are simply human constructions around which we organize our lives. For example, we cannot ask whether the concept of justice is true; however, we may live or die depending on whether we believe a law is just or unjust. It is the fact that we live our lives within these understandings of independent selves, freedom, and determinism that make them worthy of serious reflection. And, if human connection can become as real to us as the traditional sense of individual separation, so do we enrich our potentials for living. Our traditions do have value; they are worth sustaining. However, such traditions should be treated as optional as opposed to defining the limits of our world. It is the development of a new alternative to which the present work is dedicated.

With this said, the reader may be willing to reflect with me as well on the utility of other assumptions and practices consistent with the tradition of bounded being. In the following pages I will also call into question the reality of mental illness, the significance of the brain in determining human behavior, the presumption of Truth, and the importance of educating individual minds. Questions will also be raised concerning the ultimate value of community, of democracy, and individual responsibility. Again, my attempt is not to judge the truth or falsity of these traditions, only their implications for our lives today. But consider: By presuming that people are "mentally ill" we obliterate more hopeful interpretations; by presuming the brain determines our actions, we fail to see that the brain is a servant in our quest for meaningful lives; by embracing Truth we eliminate the voices of all those who do not view the world in the same way; by stressing the education of individual minds we obscure the dependence of knowledge

on relationships. Further, when we prize the community we invite ruptures between communities; by viewing the individual as the basis of democracy we suppress the importance of dialogue in fostering critical deliberation; and in holding individuals responsible we obscure our own contribution to untoward outcomes. We can do better.

Textual Companions

It should be clear that I do not embark on this journey into relational being as a lone thinker. Mine is not the first attempt to articulate a relationship-centered alternative to the tradition of bounded being. Indeed, it is largely to an array of textual companions that the present work owes its existence. I carry with me myriad voices, supportive, challenging, inspiring. It is appropriate to acknowledge this debt. In doing so the historical location of the work will become more apparent. Of equal importance, this précis will illuminate the major ways in which the present work deviates from the past. Scholars from the social sciences and philosophy have been especially important companions.

The Social Science Legacy

Paramount among my “textual friends” is a family of innovative social theorists whose writings span more than a century. In my graduate school days, imagined conversations with the classic work of William James,³ Charles Horton Cooley,⁴ and George Herbert Mead⁵ were especially important. Each of these theorists painted a picture of the person as one whose self-understanding depended upon the views of others. The concepts of “the social self,” the “looking glass self,” and symbolic interaction formed a major challenge to the dominant view of the mind as a self-contained entity. For these theorists, one’s sense of self was not so much a personal possession as a reflection of one’s social existence. In my later graduate years, I had the good fortune of working with the social psychologist John Thibaut. For Thibaut the mental world took on a more rugged cast, with the maximization of personal gain viewed as the major goal. However, as

³James, W. (1890). *Principles of psychology*. New York: Henry Holt.

⁴Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. New York: Charles Scribner.

⁵Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. For more on the early development of thought on the social mind, see also Valsiner, J. and van der Veer, R. (2000). *The social mind: Construction of the idea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Burkitt, I. (2008). *Social selves* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Thibaut and Kelley proposed,⁶ individual maximization cannot be cut away from the relationship in which one is engaged. One's outcomes are intricately linked to processes of bargaining and negotiation. The mental world and social worlds were inextricably linked.

After graduate school I had the good fortune of teaching in Harvard's Department of Social Relations. It was here that I discovered the revolutionary work of the Russian developmentalist Lev Vygotsky. His writings also challenged the dominant view of isolated minds.⁷ As he proposed, at least for the higher mental processes, everything that is in mind is first in the social world. In this sense, individual psychological functioning is a cultural derivative. These ideas also informed the work of numerous other theorists whose work has since been a deeply nourishing. John Shotter has been a dialogic companion for many years, and there is little in this book that has not been touched in some way by this cherished relationship.⁸ Similarly, Jerome Bruner,⁹ Rom Harré,¹⁰ Richard Shweder,¹¹ Jaan Valsiner,¹² and Michael Cole¹³ offered lively conversation in addition to their stimulating writings in cultural psychology. In all these works, the cultural context is celebrated for its impact on mental function.

The Department of Social Relations also offered me the good fortune of working with the sociologist, Chad Gordon. It was through Chad that I also became intrigued with the writings of Harold Garfinkel and other ethnomethodological scholars.¹⁴ These works were enormously stimulating as they shifted the focus from the psychological world to the interactive processes responsible for mental attributions. Erving Goffman's presence at

⁶Thibaut, J. and Kelley, H. (1959). *The social psychology of groups*. New York: Wiley.

⁷Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind and society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

⁸Shotter, J. (1993). *Cultural politics of everyday life: Social constructionism, rhetoric and knowing of the third kind*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press; (2008) *Conversational realities revisited: Life, language, body and world*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.

⁹See, for example, Bruner, J. S. (1990). *Acts of meaning: Four lectures on mind and culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Bruner, J. S. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁰Harré, R. (1979). *Social being*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (Also, issued in 1993 in a 2nd edition by the same publisher).

¹¹Shweder, R. (1991). *Thinking through cultures: Expeditions in cultural psychology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹²See, for example, Valsiner J., and R. Van Der Veer, *op cit*.

¹³Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁴Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. See also Coulter, J. (1979). *The social construction of mind: Studies in ethnomethodology and linguistic philosophy*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield.

Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania generated an enriching collegial relationship extending to his death in 1982. His work also shifted the focus from the individual actor to the plane of relationship. For Goffman human action was largely social performance, and thus, the self was a byproduct of the theatrical conditions of the moment.¹⁵ Much of this early work was ultimately collected in an edited volume, with Chad Gordon, *The self in social interaction*.¹⁶

Perhaps the next major watershed in deliberations on relational being issued from feminist theory. I owe my education here largely to my wife and feminist scholar, Mary Gergen.¹⁷ Our friendship with Carol Gilligan¹⁸ was also significant, and her challenge to Kohlberg's cognitive view of moral decision was the subject of many engaging conversations. Here, one could discern most clearly the political implications of shifting from an individualist to a relational conception of the person. The works of Jean Baker Miller,¹⁹ Judith Jordan,²⁰ and their colleagues at Wellesley College's Stone Center greatly expanded the relational vision. From their perspective there is a natural yearning for relationship. In order for this yearning to be fulfilled, one must experience growth-fostering relationships in which mutual empathy and empowerment are central.

I have also drawn continuing stimulation from writings in the therapeutic tradition. For me, the work of socially oriented psychiatrists such as Erich Fromm²¹ and Karen Horney²² had always seemed more relevant to my life than Freud's rather hermetic conception of psychological process. Both saw culture and mind as fundamentally interdependent. Mental conditions were reflections of our social institutions, and in turn, our institutions were byproducts of our personal needs and desires. These views were resonant as well with Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal approach to psychiatry,

¹⁵See especially, Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday; Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Bolton, MA: Anchor.

¹⁶New York: Wiley, 1968.

¹⁷See especially her volumes, *Feminist thought and the structure of knowledge*. New York: New York University Press, 1988; *Feminist reconstructions in psychology: Narrative, gender & performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.

¹⁸See Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁹Miller, J. B. (1976). *Toward a new psychology of women*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

²⁰Jordan, J., Kaplan, A., Miller, J. B., Stiver, I., Surrey, J. L. (1991). *Women's growth in connection*. New York: Guilford; Jordan, J. V. (1997). *Women's growth in diversity: More writings from the Stone Center*. New York: Guilford.

²¹Fromm, E. (1941). *Escape from freedom*. New York: Rinehart.

²²Horney, K. (1950). *Neurosis and human growth*. New York: Norton.

and Carl Rogers' humanist theory and practice.²³ Similar to the Stone Center feminists, both saw the development of individual well-being as fully dependent on relationships. The Stone Center group also drew heavily from the writings of object relations theorists in psychiatry.²⁴ Abandoning Freud's emphasis on pleasure seeking, the emphasis was placed instead on the individual's attachments with significant others. Early patterns of attachment (and rejection) laid down tracks of life-long consequence. This work has been extended by the fascinating work of Stephen Mitchell and his colleagues to provide a relational account of the therapeutic process. On this view, the meeting of the client and therapist is the inter-twining of two complex and dynamic, relational histories.²⁵

This rich history of social science writing poses a significant challenge to the individualist tradition. Why is it necessary to add yet a further treatise? What does the present work offer that is not already in place? For me the major agitation derives from the inability of most of these formulations to separate themselves sufficiently from the individualist tradition. There are three significant residues that can be found in one form or another in most all these formulations. First, for many there is the continued focus on a mental world in itself, a world that ultimately functions as the source of individual action. It is variously a world of symbols, experience, cognition, emotion, motives, and/or dynamic processes. In each case attention is directed to an inner region, one that is importantly influenced by the social surrounds, but significant in its own right. The strong sense of a psychological center of action remains solid. My attempt in this work is to remove the reality of a distinctly inner or mental world. This is not to replace it with a behaviorist view of "everything on the surface." Rather, the attempt is to eliminate the very distinction between inner and outer, and to replace it with a view of relationally embodied action.

Second, there is strong tendency in many of these writings to theorize in terms of separate units, the self and other, the person and culture, the individual and society. Relationships on this account are the result of distinct entities coming into contact, they are derivative of the fundamentally

²³Sullivan, H. S. (1953). *The interpersonal theory of psychiatry*. William Alanson White Psychiatric Foundation. Reissued by Norton, 1997; Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

²⁴For an overview, see Mitchell, S. (1988). *Relational conceptions in psychoanalysis: An integration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. See also, Curtis, R. C. (Ed.) (1991). *The relational self: Theoretical convergences in psychoanalysis and social psychology*. New York: Guilford.

²⁵See for example, Mitchell, S. A. (1993). *Hope and dread in psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books; Pizer, S. A. (1998). *Building bridges: The negotiation of paradox in psychoanalysis*. New York: Analytic Press.

separate units. My attempt here is to reverse the order, and to treat what we take to be the individual units as derivative of relational process. Closely related, there is a strong tendency within many of these writings to employ a causal template in explaining human action. Thus, there is a tendency to speak of the culture, society, family, or intimate others as “influencing,” “having an effect on,” or “determining the actions of” the individual. Again, such an analytic posture sustains the presumption of independent beings, and defines relationships as their derivative.

With this said, however, there are passages, metaphors, and insights within these traditions that will make their way into the present work. My attempt here is not to abandon this rich and significant work so much as to stretch its implications to the point that a more fundamental paradigm shift can be take place. As Brent Slife would put it, many of the existing attempts represent a weak relationality, or social inter-action; the attempt here is to generate a “strong relationality,” one in which there is no condition of independence.²⁶ In this respect, there are other social science scholars and practitioners whose writings are more immediately congenial with the proposals of the present work. Their writings, and often our conversations, play an integral role in the emerging thesis, and will later be acknowledged.

Philosophic Inheritance

From the early writings of Descartes, Locke, and Kant to contemporary discussions of mind and brain, philosophers have lent strong support to the reality of bounded being. In many respects, the hallmark of Western philosophy was its presumption of dualism: mind and world, subject and object, self and other. Yet, the field of philosophy also thrives on disputation. Thus, while the individualist view of human functioning has been dominant, there are significant defectors. In developing the proposals for relational being, a number of these have made lively textual companions. An early enchantment with existentialism lead me, for one, to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although placing individual consciousness at the center of his writings, Merleau-Ponty also argued for a consciousness that was deeply inhabited by the other.²⁷ One’s perception of the other, he proposed, contains within it a consciousness of being perceived by the

²⁶Slife, B. (2004). Taking practices seriously: Toward a relational ontology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*. 24, 179–195.

²⁷cf. Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

other. As one observes the other during a conversation, for example, one is simultaneously conscious of being observed. The two forms of consciousness are inextricable. Or again, the consciousness of touching another also embodies consciousness of being touched by another. As we caress another, we are also conscious of what it is to be caressed by another.

Closely related was the work of Martin Heidegger. Like Merleau-Ponty, much of Heidegger's analysis treats the phenomenological world of consciousness. At the same time, Heidegger attempted to subvert the traditional subject/object dichotomy, in which there are conscious subjects contrasted with a separate world of objects "out there."²⁸ For Heidegger, consciousness is always consciousness of something. Remove all objects of consciousness, and there is no consciousness; remove all consciousness and objects cease to exist. Thus subject and object are fundamentally co-existent. The insertion of dashes between the words of his pivotal concept, Being-in-the-world, functions as a visual illustration of the conceptual breaking of the traditional binary. Although emerging from the soil of American pragmatism, the work of John Dewey and Arthur Bentley resonates with Heidegger's binary-breaking innovation. As they saw it, there is a mutually constituting relationship between the person and the object (mind and world).²⁹ Thus they argued for replacing the traditional view of inter-action (independent objects in causal relationship with experience), with the concept of transaction.

Although fascinated by these attempts, they do not take me far enough. Again, they begin with the presumption of a private space of consciousness, and through various analytic strategies, attempt to escape. My hope, on the contrary, is to begin with an account of relational process and derive from it a conception of individual consciousness. Further, to appreciate the works of these philosophers one must crawl inside a highly complex and exotic world of words. The major concepts acquire their meaning largely from the way they are used within the philosophic texts. There is little exit to social practice, a concern that is central to my efforts.

I have also drawn significant inspiration from a number of moral philosophers whose work blurs the boundaries between self and other. John MacMurray's *Persons in Relationship*³⁰ was of early interest. Here the chief concern was the preeminent value of relationship or community as opposed to individual well-being. For MacMurray special stress was placed on individual sacrifice to the communal good. Echoing this latter view is the more

²⁸Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. New York: Harper & Row.

²⁹Dewey, J., and Bentley, A. F. (1949). *Knowing and the known*. Boston: Beacon.

³⁰MacMurray, J. (1961). *Persons in relation*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

widely known phenomenological work of Emmanuel Levinas.³¹ For Levinas, individual subjectivity is not independent of others. Rather, personal consciousness is constituted by the existence of the other (metaphorically, “the face of the other”). In this sense one is fundamentally responsible for the other; ethics and consciousness are co-terminal. Perhaps the most significant contribution to the present work is Martin Buber’s volume, *I and Thou*.³² Buber distinguishes between two modes of consciousness (phenomenological states), in terms of one’s relation to the other. In the most common mode (I–It), the other is an object, fundamentally separate from self. Sacred for Buber, however, is the I–Thou relationship in which the other is encountered without boundaries. In this sense there is a mutually absorbing unity; the conceptual distinction between persons disappears.

Yet, while these works have been inspiring, they still retain what for me are problematic vestiges of the individualist tradition. Although the community is ultimately prized by MacMurray, it is achieved through the voluntary acts of individual agents. For all their concern with relationship, the works of both Levinas and Buber still remain allied with the phenomenological or subjectivity-centered tradition. Moral action is ultimately dependent on the voluntary decision of the actor. Further, it is not clear in these cases what kind of action is entailed. In Levinas’ case, a strong emphasis is placed on self-sacrifice. However, the landscape of relevant action is never made apparent. For Buber, the I–Thou encounter is the exception to the common condition of I–It separation. However, if moved by Buber’s analysis to embrace the sacred posture of I–Thou, it is not clear what follows in terms of action. What is it, exactly, to encounter another as Thou? In contrast, my hope is to link the vision of relational being to particular forms of social practice.

There is also an enormously important line of scholarship stemming from sociological and political theory. This work is especially important in its critique of liberal individualism, both in terms of its influence on cultural life and its adequacy as an orientation to civil society and politics. In terms of the injuries to daily life, the volume, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, by Robert Bellah and his colleagues, was pivotal in its significance.³³ This work revealed in touching detail the insidious implications of individualist ideology for human relationships. This volume also resonated with the initiatives of the communitarian

³¹Levinas, E. (1985). *Ethics and infinity*. (R. A. Cohen, Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

³²New York: Free Press, 1971. (Original English edition, 1937).

³³Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., and Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individuals and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

movement, spearheaded by Amitai Etzioni and his colleagues.³⁴ Here the strong emphasis is on one's obligations to the community as opposed to claims to individual rights. The work of political theorist, Michael Sandel,³⁵ and philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre³⁶ add important conceptual dimension to this movement. They draw attention to the deep lodgment of the individual in relationships, and find the idea of the unencumbered, free agent seriously flawed. These various works have been invaluable sources of illumination for me. However, I have been less content with the valorization of community favored as the alternative to individualism. There is not only the problem of determining the boundaries of what constitutes one's community. There are additional complications resulting from the very drawing of these boundaries. Communities are also bounded entities and create the same kinds of conflicts that attend our viewing persons as fundamentally separated. In the case of communal commitments—including the religious and political—the consequences can be disastrous.

In the pages that follow, there will be echoes of these important works. However, there are other philosophical writings that are more congenial to the present undertaking. Foremost are the latter writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. His textual companionship has been of enormous significance, and without his *Philosophical Investigations*,³⁷ I suspect the present undertaking would never have gotten under way. The literary theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, is also a prominent voice throughout this work. Although never fully severing mind from action, his multi-hued concept of dialogism has been richly stimulating.

At the same time, there is one important difference that separates the present work from all the preceding theorists (save Wittgenstein). These various philosophers have labored in a tradition concerned with establishing foundations, that is, grounding accounts of reason, truth, human nature, ethical value, and so on. Sometimes such accounts are called "first philosophies." In contrast, the present work holds no such aspirations. Although the form of writing may sometimes suggest the contrary, my aim is not to articulate what simply is, or must be, the nature of human nature. My aim is neither to be true nor accurate in traditional terms. Rather, my hope is to offer a compelling construction of the world, an inviting vision,

³⁴See, for example, Etzioni, A. (1993). *The spirit of community: Rights, responsibilities and the communitarian agenda*. New York: Crown.

³⁵See, for example, Sandel, M. (1996). *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

³⁶See especially, MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

³⁷Wittgenstein, L. (1978). *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

or a lens of understanding—all realized or embodied in relevant action. The account is not a set of marching orders, but an invitation to a dance.

Engaging the Writing

Challenging traditions always carries risks. Even when our traditions are flawed, at least they are comfortable flaws. Change invites fear of what follows. These are also my experiences in writing this work. With the slow unfolding of this vision of relational being, I have also come to reflect critically on my own ways of being in the world. One comfortable convention targeted by my critical gaze was my practice of professional writing. As I came to see, traditional scholarly writing also carries with it strong traces of the individualist tradition. It is a genre that separates the knowing author from the ignorant reader; it positions the author as the owner of his or her own ideas; it often portrays the author as one whose mind is fully coherent, confident, and conflict free. I will have more to say about this tradition in Chapter 7. Yet, one's form of writing is also a medium that carries a message, and in the present work it is a message that undermines the relational thesis I wish to advance.

My aim in the pages that follow is to explore a form of writing that more fully embodies the relational thesis. How is this so? As you will find, the writing proceeds as a series of “punctuated layers.” The layers will also embody different traditions of communication. At times, my scholarly voice will dominate; at other times I will write in a way that is more congenial to practitioners: I also include personal experiences relevant to the subject at hand. In addition to these layers, I have added aesthetic voices—art, poetry, photography—and even touches of humor. At times I will weave into the mix the expressions of friends, both textual and personal.

There are several ways in which I hope this form of writing serves to convey content. First, the use of multiple voices makes it more difficult to identify who I am, as the author. Without a single, coherent voice it is more difficult to define the boundaries of my being. Further, as the thesis unfolds I will characterize persons as embedded within multiple relationships. Who and what we are is constituted quite differently in many of these relationships. Thus, we all carry many different voices, each born of a specific history of relationship. By using multiple “voices” in the text, my hope is that the reader will come to appreciate the many relations from which “I as author” have sprung. Moreover, in using these various voices, my hope is to open a relationship with a broader range of readers. In writing for a single audience—for example, scholars, practitioners, or students—I strengthen the walls between groups in society. By using

multiple genres perhaps a step can be taken to cross the existing boundaries, and to invite more inclusive dialogue. Finally, in contrast to traditional writing, the attempt is to relinquish some control over how the words are to be understood. By juxtaposing mixed genres, my hope is to avoid distinct closure of meaning. A space is opened for the reader to generate new associations and images.

Challenges of Language

In addition to the form of writing, a preliminary note on issues of language use will be helpful. First, I had a strong urge in writing this book to use the phrase, *relational self*, as opposed to *relational being*. This would have placed the volume more clearly in the long and estimable tradition of writings on the self. However, the term “self” carries with it strong traces of the individualist tradition. It suggests again a bounded unit, one that *interacts* with other distinct units. Further, the “self” is a noun, and thus suggests a static and enduring entity. However, the term “being,” ambiguously poised as participle, noun, and gerund, subverts the image of a bounded unit. In being, we are in motion, carrying with us a past as we move through the present into a becoming.

The second issue of language use is more complex. Central to this work is a view of relationship that is not defined in terms of two or more persons coming together. Rather, as I will propose, the very idea of individual persons is a byproduct of relational process. But how can I describe this process without using a language that inherently divides the world into bounded entities? To be more specific, by relying on common conventions of writing, I will invariably rely on nouns and pronouns, both of which designate bounded or identifiable units. The very phrase, “I rely on you....” already defines *me* as separate from *you*. Similarly, transitive verbs typically imply causal relations, with the action of one unit impinging on another. To say, “He invited her,” or “she treated him nicely” again creates a world of separation. Try as I may to create a sense of process that precedes the construction of entities, the conventions of language resist. They virtually insist that separate entities exist prior to relationship.

It is tempting here to experiment with new linguistic forms that might erase the troublesome boundaries. Both Heidegger and Derrida have done so, the first by placing hyphens between words, and the second by striking through them. However, there is a danger in abandoning the common conventions of communication; the major thesis may be thrust into obscurity. My choice, then, is to retain the common usages, and to rely on the good will of the reader to appreciate the dilemma. I will thus write of

relationships in the traditional way—of this person's relation to that, of her relationship to him, of this organization related to another. However, the reader may also benefit from a heuristic I found useful in writing, namely a *logic of placeholders*. When I write about the individual, the person, myself, I, me, you, and so on I will use the words in the conventional way. However, I will hold out a place in which they can be understood as emergents of relationship. For example, I may write of "Ronald's relationship to Maria," as if they existed independently. The convention helps me to communicate with you as reader. However, as I write I also hold a place for realizing that both these names are constructions created in a relational process that preceded the names. Further, even the common separation we make between one physical body and the other, are constructions born of relationship. The belief that the skin marks the separation of the body from the world is a useful fiction that we have developed together. Yet, the moment I try to describe what a word like "together" means, the language will grasp me by the throat. I will speak as if two physically separate entities were meeting. I can only hope that you can join me in being aware that we are holding out a place in which we can understand the very idea of "physical entities" as a byproduct of relational process.

The Unfolding Narrative

In the choice of layered writing, the reader may sometimes lose the over-arching logic of this work. Thus, a guide to the unfolding tale may be useful. In the initial chapter I hope to make clear why the search for relational being is so important, why this is not an exercise in theoretical gymnastics, but an invitation to explore new and more promising forms of life. Here I am joined by many scholars who share in their discontent with the individualist tradition. The initial chapter will assemble many of these voices into a "chorus of critique." With the chorus in place, we can then embark on the exploration of relational being.

I will use the next three chapters to introduce the concept of relational being. Chapter 2 will focus on the pivotal concept of co-action, or the process of collaborative action from which all meaning is generated. Or in general terms, it is from co-action that we develop meaningful realities, rationalities, and moralities. It is in this process that a world of bounded entities is created, and through which alternative worlds may be established. This argument also prepares the way for Chapters 3 and 4, in which I will revisit the vast vocabulary of mental life so central to the individualist tradition. If all meaning issues from relationship, then we may include the very idea of mental life. Unlike Descartes, individual reason is not the

source of human action; rather, the concept of individual reason is an outcome of relationship. In these two chapters I will thus attempt to recast the vocabulary of the psychological world in relational terms. I will develop the thesis that terms such as “thinking,” “remembering,” “experiencing,” and “feeling,” do not refer to events inside the head of the individual, but to coordinated actions within relationship.

In the two chapters (Part II) that follow, I begin to shift the focus from theory to practice, and particularly to matters of everyday life and death. New conceptual territory will be opened, but with a sharper eye to its implications for action. In Chapter 5, the pivotal concept of multi-being will be developed. As an outcome of immersion in multiple relationships, I will propose, we emerge as rich in potential for relationship. However, the realization of this potential can also be radically diminished in any given relationship. This discussion will give way to a concern with the art of coordinating action. In Chapter 6 the issue of social bonding will become focal. While social bonding can be deeply nurturing, my particular concern in this case is with the destructive repercussions. This treatment will invite a discussion of dialogic practices for restoring relationship between antagonistic parties.

The next four chapters (comprising Part III) are more specifically devoted to societal practices. If our sense of bounded being is fortified by existing practices, what kinds of changes are necessary to appreciate the power of relationship? In my view, there is a sea change taking place across many professions, in which the focus on the single individual is being replaced with fostering effective relationships. These chapters will bring many of these offerings into concert. In Chapter 7 the focus is on knowledge as a relational achievement. Replacing the heroic accounts of the individual discoverer, I will propose that what we call knowledge emerges from the process of co-action. I will then consider three relevant sites of practice—the creation of disciplines, the act of writing, and the practice of social science research. In each of these instances, there is a need for replacing fragmentation and conflict with productive coordination. This discussion will prepare the way for an extended treatment of education in Chapter 8. If knowledge is achieved through relationship, then educators should shift their attention from the individual student to the nexus of relationships in which education occurs. In this discussion I will focus most particularly on pedagogical practices as they are fostered in relations between teachers and students, among students themselves, between classroom and community, and between classroom and global communities.

Therapeutic practices take center stage in Chapter 9. Here I suspend the traditional focus of therapy on the individual and replace it with a view of therapy as relational recovery. If human anguish is born within the

process of collaborative action, then collaborative process should serve as the central focus of therapy. This does not demand so much an abandonment of traditional therapy, as a rethinking of the way these practices contribute (or not) to relational well-being. This discussion of relational recovery prepares the way for the subsequent treatment of organizational life (Chapter 10). Traditional organizations are viewed as collections of single individuals, each hired, advanced, or terminated on the basis of individual knowledge, skills, and motivation. In this chapter I replace this view with relational process as the critical element to effective organizing. Within this context I will take up specific practices of decision making, leadership, personnel evaluation, and the relationship of the organization to its surrounds.

In the concluding chapters (Part IV) I step back to reflect on broader implications of relational being. In Chapter 11, I consider the moral consequences of these deliberations. There is a strong relativist message that follows from the view that all moral values emerge from relational histories. Must relativism be our conclusion? Here I make a case for relational responsibility, that is, the shared responsibility for sustaining those processes out of which moral values are generated. In the final chapter, I take up issues of spirituality. Can a bridge be formed, I ask, between the secular account of relational being developed and traditions of spirituality? A bridge to dialogue between these traditions is found in the ultimate impossibility of grasping the nature of relational process. This same inability is also found in numerous theological attempts to locate the nature of the sacred. There is a space, then, for appreciating the sacred potential of collaborative practices. Daily life takes on spiritual significance.

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I One

From Bounded to Relational Being

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Bounded Being

If I ask you to tell me about your childhood years, how will you respond? Chances are you will talk about your mother, your father, a brother or a sister or two; you may tell me about your house, your dog, and so on. Nothing remarkable here. But consider again: the world of your description is filled with separate or bounded beings—yourself to begin, and then there is mother, and then father, sister.... What lies between these commas, each insuring that we understand these as individual beings? What is it, for example, that separates you and your mother? Skin and space you might venture....

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When you were very young and tried with crayons to depict the world, chances are you began with bounded beings. This stick figure is “my mommy,” “that blob is “my house,” and so on. Each may be clearly delineated...perhaps with the unmistakable force of black crayon. For young children the individual figures simply float in empty space. For older children a background may be recognized—vast splotches of green or blue or yellow. There are first the bounded beings; the remainder is irrelevant.

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Is daily life not understood in just this way: me here, you there, a space between?

For us it is a world of fundamental separation.

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If I ask you to tell me about yourself—what drives your actions in life, what motivates you—how will you proceed? Chances are that you will tell me about the way you think about life...and possibly death. You will describe your desires, what you want from life, what you hope to achieve. And if comfortable with me, you may tell me about your feelings, your love, your passions, and your repulsions. Your inner world is bursting with content. Some slips out in your words and gestures, the remainder lies hidden from view...perhaps, you think, even from yourself. Such accounts suggest a profound separation. What is most important to us, we believe, lies buried within—in thoughts, feelings, desires, hopes, and so on. You are there within your shell, and I am here within mine. We proclaim good fortune when we sense the sharing of these inner worlds.

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In this chapter I wish to grapple with the impact of these boundaries. At this point in Western history we take them for granted. The sense of self as fundamentally independent is tissue to our daily lives; it pervades our private moments; it is insinuated into our daily relationships; it is inscribed in the objects about us; it is secreted within our institutions. We have no difficulty in speaking of “my thoughts,” “my decision,” “my love,” “my experience,” “my needs”.... and we seek to know the “intentions,” the “true feelings,” and the “personal values” of others. Indeed, we are comfortable living within our crayoned lines. But should we be?

In what follows I wish to confront some of the liabilities. When we take these boundaries for granted—simply as the way things are—what are the results for our lives together? What is invited and what is denied in our lives? In my view, there are enormous costs entailed, costs that we have also come to take for granted. We can no longer afford such complacency. As I shall propose, there are important ways in which the presumption of persons as bounded units now emerges as a threat to the well-being of the world more generally. Such concerns are voiced within a significant corpus of writing that attacks what is characterized as the individualist tradition.¹ Much of this writing will be echoed in the present account.

¹See, for example, Gelpi, D. L. (1989). *Beyond individualism, toward a retrieval of moral discourse in America*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press; Hewitt, J. P. (1989). *Dilemmas of the American self*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press; Bellah, R. N. et al. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Heller, T.C., Sosna, M., and Wellbery, D. E. (Eds.) (1986). *Reconstructing individualism, autonomy, individuality, and the self in Western thought*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Capps, D., and Fenn, R. K. (1998). *Individualism reconsidered, Readings bearing on the endangered self in modern society*. New York: Continuum; Lasch, C. (1978). *The culture of narcissism*.

Yet, my present critique is not an end, but a beginning. It establishes the groundwork for the major challenge of this book, sketching an alternative to the tradition of bounded being. This vision, relational being, seeks to recognize a world that is not within persons but within their relationships, and that ultimately erases the traditional boundaries of separation. There is nothing that requires us to understand our world in terms of independent units; we are free to mint new and more promising understandings. As the conception of relational being is grasped, so are new forms of action invited, new forms of life made intelligible, and a more promising view of our global future made apparent. No, this does not mean abandoning the past; the traditional view of the bounded individual need not be eliminated. But once we can see it as a construction of our own making—one option among many—we may also understand that the boundary around the self is also a prison.

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I divide this critical inquiry into three sections. In the first I take up issues related to the daily characterization of ourselves, and the deadening weight we acquire through the discourse of a bounded self. I then turn from the sense of self to the corrosive impact of bounded being on our daily relations. Finally, I take up the broader character of cultural life. What happens to the general patterns of living when we accept the tradition of independent individuals? To be sure, my account will be selective. I focus exclusively on the unfortunate fall-out of a longstanding tradition. But my attempt is not inclusive; there are still further critiques that are absent from this essay. There is also good reason for critique without apology. So deeply hallowed are the ideals of autonomy, individual reason, personal conscience, liberty, free competition, and self-knowledge—all companions to bounded being—that isolated doubts are seldom heard. If there is to be transformation, these dissenting voices must have their day.

Self as Abuse

Conceptions of the person are children of cultural history. Prior to the 16th century, there was little doubt in the West that the holy soul was the central ingredient of the self. This conception made it intelligible to seek absolution of sin from God's representatives on earth. Self-conception and the institution of religion walked hand in hand. As the conception of soul has gradually been replaced by its secular counterpart, conscious reason,

so has the influence of the church been undermined. Yet, what are the results of our enlightened sense that we are the self-determining agents of our actions? Consider first the dimensions of personal life. I focus in particular on concerns with isolation, evaluation, and self-esteem.

Fundamental Isolation

We gaze into each other's eyes with hopes of glimpsing the wellspring of action. I know that somewhere within you dwells the thoughts, hopes, dreams, feelings, and desires that center your life. Your words and deeds may give expression to these internal undulations, but imperfectly so. Yet, if what is most important about you lies somewhere inside you, then you shall remain forever unknown to me. The essential "you" is not before me, available to my gaze, but somewhere else—lurking behind the eyes. I can never penetrate the shield of the face to know what is truly there, what you truly think, feel, or want. Even in our most intimate moments I cannot know what is behind your words of endearment; I can never grasp their meaning. We remain fundamentally estranged. And you are identically placed. My private world is unavailable to you. What is essential to me is "in here," a private space that neither you nor anyone else can enter. I exist in a garden of good and evil to which there are no visitors. And so here we are, you in your world and I in mine. I was born alone, and shall die alone. It is the fundamental condition of human nature.

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Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing,
Only a signal shown, a distant voice in the darkness;
So the ocean of life, we pass and we speak one another,
Only a look and a voice, then darkness again and silence.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

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If we understand ourselves as fundamentally isolated, then living alone is a natural act. Almost half the adults living in the United States now live alone. Closely related is the fact that in 2004 the average American had only two close friends in whom they could confide on important matters. This was down from 1985 when the average was three such confidants. The number who said they had no one they could confide in jumped from 10% in 1985 to 25% in 2004.² Thus the prevalence of loneliness should come as

²McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., and Brashears, M. (2006). Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades. *American Sociological Review*, 71(3), 353–375.

little surprise. There are now over two million websites devoted to the challenge of loneliness in contemporary life. Loneliness is viewed not only as a deficit in itself, but is associated with dangerously elevated levels of blood pressure,³ and to depression and suicide.⁴

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We suffer a lot in our society from loneliness. So much of our life is an attempt to not be lonely: “Let’s talk to each other; let’s do things together so we won’t be lonely.” And yet inevitably, we are really alone in these human forms. We can pretend; we can entertain each other; but that’s about the best we can do. When it comes to the actual experience of life, we are very much alone; and to expect anyone else to take away our loneliness is asking too much.

—Ajahn Sumedho

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Nor should it be surprising that many therapists, scholars, and theologians describe what they feel is a distinct loss of meaning in people’s lives.⁵ There is a failure to locate something truly significant—worthy of a life commitment, a compass for concerted action, a reason to remain alive. Yet, we also celebrate autonomy, the “self-made man,” the individual who resists social convention and marches to his own drummer. Is it this very celebration that lends itself to the loss of meaning? When asked about what is truly meaningful to them, many people speak of love, family, and God. Yet, what is the origin of such investments? Could they ever be discovered in solitary? What if we could understand all that we call thought, fantasy, or desire as originating in relationships? Even when physically isolated we might discover the remnants of relationship. We would invite a renewed appreciation of self *with* others.

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³Hawkey, L. C., Masi, C. M., Berry, J. D., and Cacioppo, J. T. (2006). Loneliness is a unique predictor of age-related differences in systolic blood pressure. *Psychology and Aging*, 21, 152–164.

⁴See, for example, Stravynski, A., and Boyer, R. (2001). Loneliness in relation to suicide ideation and parasuicide: A population-wide study. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 31, 32–40; Hafen, B. Q., and Frandsen, K. J. (1986). *Youth suicide: Depression and loneliness*. Evergreen, CO: Cordillera Press.

⁵See, for example, Frankl, V. (1985). *The unheard cry for meaning: Psychotherapy and humanism*. New York: Washington Square Press; Krasko, G. (2004). *The unbearable boredom of being: A crisis of meaning in America*. New York: Universe.

I once embraced the heroics of lonely isolation. These were the days when I thrilled to the writings of Sartre and Camus, liberally laced with doses of Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg. In this world I was the master of my fate; each moment was a choice-point at which the authentic act could be fundamentally redeeming. I was Sisyphus in a meaningless world. In my daily decision to painfully push the boulder to the mountaintop, I became a hero. I needed no one; I laughed at their conventional ways....until one day I became conscious of the fact that such heroism was not itself born in isolation. The image of the isolated hero was a cultural tradition. My heroism was but a performance in search of vicarious praise from my heroes.

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The meaning of one's life for most Americans is to become one's own person, almost to give birth to oneself. Much of this process ...is negative. It involves breaking free from family, community, and inherited ideas.

—Robert Bellah

Unrelenting Evaluation

If I am fundamentally alone, the origin of my actions, then what is to be said of failure? To be sure, there are events outside my control, but by and large, my failures are of my own doing. In this sense, any inadequate performance, impropriety, or public failure throws the essential “me” into question. All insufficiencies in behavior are potentially expressions of an internal lack. To explain, “it wasn’t my fault,” “my parents neglected me,” or “I had no knowledge of the consequences,” is to defend against the dreaded accusation: you are inferior!⁶

The possibility of personal inferiority begins as early as a child’s first experience with competitive games. “My failure” is not taken lightly. Upon entering school, the “self in question” becomes institutionalized. From that day forward the individual exists in state of continuous evaluation: “am I good enough,” “will I fail,” “how will I be judged by my teachers, parents, and classmates?” “have I sinned?” The stakes become higher as one’s career is on the line. There are the SATs, IQ scores, GREs, MCATs, LSATs....And then the college graduate enters adult professional life to find semi-annual

⁶As Karen Horney proposed, within the United States, the threat of self-insufficiency is virtually a national neurosis. See Horney, K. (1937). *The neurotic personality of our time*. New York: Norton.

performance evaluations, promotion evaluations...a life replete with threats to one's worth.⁷

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Arriving at Yale was a harrowing experience. At the time, the dominant culture was New England prep, and entering as a scholarship boy from the South I was already *déclassé*. Everywhere I turned there were threats to my shaky sense of worth. There were the rich to remind me of my impecunious origins, the super-cool to illuminate my lack of sophistication, the world travelers to reveal my parochialism, the super-jocks to diminish my athletic skills, the superbly handsome to remind me of my average looks, and the dedicated scholars to suggest my shallowness. There were days that I wondered whether I had anything to offer. By what fluke was I ever accepted? Yet, there were also late night bull sessions with dorm-mates: a Jew from Florida, a Catholic from New York State, and a playboy from Connecticut. Slowly revealed through our quips and light hearted debates was the fact we all shared an over-arching sense of apprehension. And, in spite of our differences, there were important moments in which we assured each other that we just might be OK.

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The number of ways in which we can fail is skyrocketing. As contemporary technologies bring us into an ever-expanding orbit of relationships, so do the criteria of self-evaluation multiply. Every acquaintance can remind us of some way in which we may be inadequate. A friend from California may remind you that you are not relaxing and enjoying life enough, while a successful associate from Ohio suggests that if you aren't working at least 11 hours a day you are wasting your talents. A friend from Boston reminds you that you are not keeping up with all the wonderful literature now being published, while your colleague from DC implies that your knowledge of world politics is inadequate. A visitor from Paris gives you the sense that your clothing is without style, while a ruddy companion from Colorado implies that you are growing soft. In the meantime the media confront us with a barrage of additional criteria of personal failure. Are you sufficiently adventurous, clean, well traveled, low in cholesterol,

⁷As research indicates, the apprehension of evaluation may indeed reduce one's performance. Fearing failure, one begins to fail. See, for example, Steele, C., and Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 797–811.

well invested, slim, skilled in cooking, odor-free, burglarproof, family oriented? Every social gathering raises questions of one's popularity; every remark can carry hints of one's failings; and every utterance, article of clothing, or bodily blemish risks sundry and subtle forms of derision. What damage is inflicted on society's youth when it is only "Number 1" that counts?

Unrelenting evaluation is not an inherent dimension of social life; it is specifically an outcome of presuming a world of bounded beings. If we did not understand the world in terms of separated individuals, each acting according to ability and state of mind, neither failure nor blame would belong to any ONE. For a Buddhist the challenge of life is not that of struggling to avoid failure and achieve success; it is to transcend the very structures that deem the struggle significant. Such an insight invites the exploration of relational being.

The Search for Self-Esteem

If I am fundamentally alone, and confronting continuous threat of evaluation, what is my fundamental goal in life? Is it not my own survival? I can trust no one to care for me; they cannot know me; and I am always under threat of evaluation. Thus, caring for the self is paramount. In spite of my shortcomings, I must learn to love, accept, and prize myself.

So common is this form of logic that many social scientists believe it is essential to human makeup. For the eminent psychotherapist, Carl Rogers, most problems of human suffering are caused by a lack of self-regard.⁸ Self-regard is natural, argued Rogers; it is there from birth. However, our problems stem from living in a world where others' regard is always conditional. "I love you *only if* you do..." In a world where conditions are placed on our value, we come to evaluate ourselves conditionally, proposes Rogers. The result is constant self-doubt, an inability to be open and loving with others, and the erection of numerous defenses. The therapist's task is primarily that of giving the client unconditional regard. By prizing the client in spite of failings, he or she will be restored to fullness.

Much the same message is evidenced in the longstanding interest of psychologists in self-esteem. The number of research studies on self-esteem now numbers in the thousands.⁹ The primary concern of this research has

⁸Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person, a therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin (1967 – London: Constable).

⁹See, for example, Wylie, R. (1976). *The self-concept: Theory and research on selected topics*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press; Hewitt, J. P. (1998). *The myth of self-esteem*. New York: St. Martins; Branden, N. (2001). *The psychology of self-esteem*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Mruk, C. (2006). *Self-esteem research, theory, and practice: Toward a positive psychology of self-esteem*. New York: Springer.

been to demonstrate the numerous problems in life associated with low self-esteem, and to locate ways of boosting self-regard. The impact of such research has now reached societal proportions. School programs for enhancing self-esteem, support programs for adults, and self-help exercises have become a major cultural staple. The National Association for Self-Esteem—dedicated to “integrating self-esteem into the fabric of American Society”—offers posters, games, books, toys, clothing, and tapes to help children raise their sense of self-worth. At present there are over a million websites offering materials relevant to increasing self-esteem.

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Eva Moskowitz writes:

We live in an age consumed by worship of the psyche. In a society plagued by divisions of race, class, and gender we are nonetheless bound together by a gospel of psychological happiness. Rich or poor, black or white, male or female, straight or gay, we share a belief that feelings are sacred and salvation lies in self-esteem, that happiness is the ultimate goal and psychological healing the means...All the institutions of American life - schools, hospitals, prisons, courts—have been shaped by the national investment in feelings. ..The intense concern with the psyche is unique historically as well as culturally. No other nation in the world puts so much faith in emotional well-being and self-help techniques.¹⁰

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There is also a darker side to this clamor for esteeming the self. For we are also aware that self-love is a close companion to the less admirable characteristics of narcissism, conceit, vanity, egotism, selfishness, and arrogance. Where is the line to be drawn? We are well aware of this darker demeanor in our relations with others. Very special conditions must prevail before an acquaintance can speak of his or her accomplishments, wondrous personality, or outstanding choices without our turning cold. We may glow when our children take pride in a job well done, praise them for their self-confidence, and encourage them to be a “take charge kind of person”... until that point when they turn and say, “Don’t tell me what to do...”¹¹

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¹⁰Moskowitz, E. S. (2001). *In therapy we trust, America's obsession with self fulfillment* (pp. 1; 279). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹¹As research indicates, people with high self-esteem do not thereby gain the esteem of others. See Baumeister, R. et al. (2003). Does high self-esteem cause better performance, interpersonal success, happiness, or healthier lifestyles? *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 4, 1–44.

Many scholars view this emphasis self-esteem as an invitation to social callousness. Even in the early 1800s, Alexis de Tocqueville commented on what he saw as a major flaw in American individualism:

Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself...individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness."¹²

Almost 200 years later this same theme is echoed in Christopher Lasch's critique, *The culture of narcissism*.¹³ As he argued, the "me first" attitude dominating contemporary life reduces emotional relationships and sexual intimacy to trivia. They become vehicles to "make us feel good." In essence, "I love you because you give me pleasure." By the same token, scholarly research is transformed from an inherent good to "good for my career." The demand to "publish or perish" does not favor the birth of new knowledge so much as the tenuring of new professors. Political activity is not so much concerned with achieving the public good as ensuring that "my party wins." When "me first" is an unquestioned reflex, political gridlock should be no surprise. More unsettling are the effects of believing one is superior to others. Research suggests, for example, that this sense of superiority is linked to violence. Violent criminals often characterize themselves as superior; their victims "deserved what they got." Street gang members and school bullies also tend to regard themselves as superior to others. Most radically there is the Holocaust, a tragic outcome of identifying oneself as a master race.¹⁴

I am not proposing that we abandon the multitudes suffering from an impoverished sense of self-worth, anguished at the challenges of normal life, or drawn to escape through suicide. My concern is with the possibility of an alternative future. Why must we unthinkingly sustain a tradition in which the primary site of evaluation is the individual self? Why must the prizing of one's individual mind serve as the essential ingredient of the good life? When we cease to think in terms of bounded beings, we take a step toward freedom from the ratcheting demands of self-worth.

¹²de Tocqueville, A. (1945). *Democracy in America* (p. 104). New York: Vintage.

¹³Lasch, C. (1979). *The culture of narcissism*. New York: Norton.

¹⁴Baumeister, R. F. (2001). Violent pride. *Scientific American*, 284, 96–101; Baumeister, R. F., Smart, L., and Boden, J. (1996). Relation of threatened egotism to violence and aggression: The dark side of self-esteem. *Psychological Review*, 105, 5–33. See also Crocker, J., and Park, L. W. (2004). The costly pursuit of self-esteem. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130, 392–414, and Leary, *op cit*.



"You have to be sensitive to the fact that other children are inferior to you."

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Self and Other

In his classic work, *Celebrating the other*, Edward Sampson proposes that we sustain our self-esteem through "self-celebratory monologues"—stories about how good we are, how successful, how righteous.¹⁵ To sustain these monologues, however, we require others who are less than good. We thus construct worlds in which others are irrational, unthinking, sinful, and so on. There is the close relationship, then, between our presumption that we are "self-contained" and the quality of our relations with others. We now amplify this concern with a focus on issues of distrust, derogation, and imposing artifice.

¹⁵Sampson, E. E. (2008). *Celebrating the other, a dialogic account of human nature*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.

Distrust and Derogation

We seek others' acceptance to ensure our worth as individuals. That is our cultural logic. Yet, how much trust can we place in others' expressions of support or love? Are they just being polite, trying to make us feel good, wanting something in return? Are we being manipulated? In trying to answer such questions we confront a profound challenge: Comprehending the other's *inner world*. As our tradition tells us, people's actions issue from these internal worlds. To understand another's actions one must grasp the other's underlying reasons, motives, or desires. Yet, how are we to penetrate the veil? Interestingly, in spite of several hundred years of inquiry on this topic, no scholar has yet been able to provide an adequate account of how such understanding can be accomplished. All we have are "outward" expressions of an inner world, never access to this world itself. I will return to this issue in later chapters. However, for now it is enough to underscore the impenetrable ambiguity of others' actions. The cranium will never open to reveal the secrets of the soul. What, then, do we ever truly know about the other? When we presume boundaries of being, we are thrust into a condition of fundamental distrust. We want to believe the sincerity of others' appreciation; we try to convince ourselves that the love is authentic. Yet, at base we also know that we do not know. The bounded mind is forever elusive and opaque.



Distrust is deepened by the prevailing assumption that self-gratification is the fundamental human goal. This is also an assumption to which the scientific community has added a chorus of confirmation. Freud spoke directly to the point: The primary drive of individual behavior is animal pleasure and it is present from birth. Indeed, so powerful is this energy, argued Freud, that the person must establish neurotic defenses to prevent its full expression. In more recent years socio-biologists have given Freud's pleasure principle a genetic twist. As they propose, the fundamental motive driving human action is to sustain one's own genes. Freud's emphasis on erotic desire now becomes the desire to reproduce oneself. Thus, proposes the socio-biologist, in fulfilling their genetic destiny, men are *naturally* polygamous.¹⁶ Should we accept these scientific speculations as truth? Only if we are willing to grant that scientists such as Freud and the socio-biologists can somehow pierce the interior of human minds, that they can

¹⁶For more on the social science rationalization of self-gratification, see Wallach, M., and Wallach, L. (1993). *Psychology's sanction for selfishness*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman; and Schwartz, B. (1986). *The battle for human nature*. New York: Norton.