

2. Unsocial Sociability

Overview: Unlike the bees or ants, human sociality allows a very high degree of autonomy and individual self-interest. The human dilemma here is captured perfectly by Rabbi Hillel's rhetorical question: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, what am I?" This chapter reviews the nature and limitations of human sociality: our aptitude for social existence; and it reviews some relevant findings from social psychology, sociology and anthropology that illuminate the nature and limits of our sociality. A paradigm of 'methodological relationalism' is introduced which takes entangled relationship (more than individual self-interest) as primary. We describe how personal identity develops to direct and buffer the interface between Self and society.

By "antagonism" I mean the unsocial sociability of men, i.e., their propensity to enter into society, bound together with a mutual opposition which constantly threatens to break up the society. Man has an inclination to associate with others, because in society he feels himself to be more than man, i.e., as more than the developed form of his natural capacities. But he also has a strong propensity to isolate himself from others, because he finds in himself at the same time the unsocial characteristic of wishing to have everything go according to his own wish. Thus he expects opposition on all sides because, in knowing himself, he knows that he, on his own part, is inclined to oppose others. This opposition it is which awakens all his powers, brings him to conquer his inclination to laziness and, propelled by vainglory, lust for power, and avarice, to achieve a rank among his fellows whom he cannot tolerate but from whom he cannot withdraw.

– Immanuel Kant¹

Kant is surely right about the "unsocial sociability" of human nature, but his explanation of it can be corrected and expanded today in the light of current knowledge. It turns out that human sociability is partly a biological given, already observable in newborns who know instinctively to mimic, make eye contact, and answer a smile with a smile. In effect, they are born knowing how to seduce the love and care they need from the adults around them; and these adults, for the most part, are wholly prepared and eager to be seduced in this way. At the same time, human unsociability lies rather deeper than the wish, by each of us, that everything would go their own sweet way. Human sociabil-

1 *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View, Fourth Thesis*, Kant (1784). Available on the Web at www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/kant/universal-history.htm

ity is indeed imperfect and incomplete, but not just for the reasons an 18th century philosopher could give.²

We can begin by recognizing that human *sociability*, the quality of being sociable as an individual with other individuals is limited by the ambiguous nature of human *sociality*, which is a feature of our biology. We speak readily of a sociable person, who enjoys the company of others and makes their own company pleasurable for them. Sociality, by contrast, is not a manifestation of individual temperament, but of the species – its relational or solitary lifestyle. Sociality is one aspect of a species' [extended phenotype](#) – the environmental and behavioural expression of its genes. Human sociability is limited and unreliable because human sociality is complex and ambiguous. With its combination of ultrasociality with extreme individuation and autonomy, it is, in fact, paradoxical. To update Kant's account of our 'unsocial sociability,' we must review what's known today about human sociality and its contradictions.

2.1 Human Sociality

We humans are classed as an [ultrasocial](#) species. That is to say, we carry group membership and division of labour to the extreme of working to feed others, parenting the children of others, and dying in the interests of our groups, in seeming defiance of an evolutionary imperative to compete and be 'fit.' To this extent, we resemble the social insects, like ants and bees and termites, for example.

But our sociality is very different from theirs. For one thing, it is not based primarily on [kinship altruism](#),³ the evolutionary strategy, followed by all the social insects, which accepts a cost to one's own prospects for survival and reproduction so as to enhance the reproductive success of close relatives carrying the same genes. Also, our sociality allows for very high levels of individuality and for endlessly diverse and flexible lifestyle and living arrangements – for human [culture](#), in other words. Human sociality is intense and far-reaching, but fundamentally limited by the personal autonomy of human individuals. How is this possible? How does it work?

Self-interestedness doesn't need much explanation. We are, after all, separate organisms who live and die alone. We feel pain and pleasure alone. We take food with our own mouths, digest it with our own stomachs, and expend its energy with our own bodies. We perceive the world with our own senses and our individual brains. We accumulate the experience of our own lives, and we pass on only our own genes. This being so, it's the complex versatility of human interdependence that need to be explained.

Communication connects us to some extent, but it takes some effort, and doesn't always succeed. Indeed, it rarely conveys all that we had hoped, nor influences others just as we had wished. There is always some discrepancy between the message we try to send and the message that is received and

² As will be summarized in Section 2.4 below.

³ Though [we appear](#) to have a portion of this too.

answered. Also, communication cuts both ways. Messages of hostility and aggression come at least as readily as messages of connection and co-operation. We see young children experimenting with both.

Given the basic isolation of our individual lives, [egoism](#) and the pursuit of personal self-interest are only to be expected. And they are just what we observe in young children, though they're by no means the whole story. Normal infants are also born with several traits that prepare and dispose them for social living; and in a loving, nurturing family, they learn the basics of social existence by the time they are four or five. These basics are only a beginning, but they lay an individualized foundation for all that follows. But the biological foundation is given in the genes, and it exists from the beginning.

Our hominist ancestors⁴ evolved at least six mechanisms to make a specialty of social existence:

- We are born for a prolonged dependency on the goodwill and care of others, and with a certain seductive charm ([cuteness](#)) to parents prepared to respond to this juvenile charm with nurturing behaviour
- We seem to mimic not just overt behaviour, but the intentions and symbolic meanings behind this behaviour. Through the phenomenon of [joint attention](#), we engage in three-way relationships with other individuals, and *simultaneously*, with some external object of mutual interest. In this way we come equipped to learn complex systems of behaviour, including language.
- We come equipped too with a rich palette of emotions (and [affects](#) – the physiological substrates of [emotion](#)), including several, notably those of shame and pride,⁵ which seem especially adapted for social relationships and hierarchies.
- We also come equipped with an elaborate complex of traits that dispose our mouths, ears and brains to learn, use and *play* with [language](#).
- Through our [tool-making](#) and the phenomenon of [stigmergy](#) (writing to-whom-it-may-concern messages on the environment, on which much more below), we offload great chunks of mindset to the external, physical world – thus suggesting complex thoughts and behaviours to others, *without direct contact*.
- Finally, we come equipped with a need and capability for the recognition and reflection to others of [pattern](#) and [meaning](#) – and with [a need to impose meaning](#) on the external world and on the raw sense data of direct experience.

4 'Hominist' is a convenient coined word for all the species (all but our own now extinct) which split off from a common ancestor with chimpanzees about 6 million years ago, taking the line that led to Homo sapiens. See Appendix C.

5 See my essay, [Affect Theory, Shame and the Logic of Personality](#), which includes a precis of Donald Nathanson's *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self*, itself based on the [affect theory](#) of Silvan Tomkins.

Together these features comprise and support a specifically *human* sociality, which leaves each member of this species with a high degree of personal autonomy, but allows him or her to participate in groups far more versatile and complex than those of other social creatures. The remainder of this section introduces these six features in more detail, and discusses the limited sociality that results.

2.1.1 Helplessness and Cuteness

The technical term is [neoteny](#): a prolongation of childhood, and a retention by adults of childish traits. The long human childhood creates habits of dependency and group living. It also affords time for joint attention and play (see below) and for the social learning of complex behaviour ([culture](#)). As compared with other primates, and even with Neanderthals, human features are neotenous through life – for example, showing a round face, a high forehead, big eyes, and a small nose and mouth. Most human adults are disposed to perceive young animals – not just human babies and children – as [cute](#); and this perception normally elicits nurturing behaviour and more social generosity (tolerance and making of allowances), than is normally granted to adults.

[Sexual selection](#) has arranged as well that human females are more neotenous (i.e. cute) in appearance than human males, and that human children appear especially ‘cute’ to nubile women. Experimental evidence suggests that juvenile cuteness motivates caretaking behaviour in adults, whether or not they are genetically related. It suggests too that children with more ‘adult-like’ facial proportions are more likely to experience physical abuse than those of the same age with less ‘adult-like’ features.

2.1.2 Imitation of Intentions and Joint Attention

Noticeable from earliest childhood, our species has a strong propensity to copy the observed behaviour of others. Such [imitation](#) is by no means distinctively human; we share it with parrots, dolphins and most primates – notably with monkeys, bonobos and chimps. But humans seem to imitate not just behaviour, but its underlying intention – the purpose for which it is performed and the outcome to which it leads. Also, humans engage in the related behaviour of [joint attention](#), in which two (or more) individuals share a mutual interest in some external event or object, and interact with each while doing so.

Already, in their first few days of life, infants copy the facial expressions of others. Later they copy the gestures and mannerisms of care givers and siblings. They copy speech sounds with great precision; and in doing so, along with that trick of joint attention, they pick up the rudiments of language – perhaps of several different languages – before they are three years old. Well before that age, they also copy and play at the adult behaviours of every-day life: using a telephone, eating with utensils, trying to wash the dishes. Aptitudes for complex mimicry and mutuality along these lines must have been prerequisite for language, and probably evolved at least a million years before language it-

self. These aptitudes were obviously crucial for the development of sophisticated cultural patterns, and for human sociality in general.⁶

2.1.3 *Language*

It needs no argument that language is central to the biology of our species. When David Attenborough made his series about Life on Earth, he ended it with a film called *The Compulsive Communicators*, in which the development of language, art and writing play a central role in human behaviour. Nor do we need say much about the uniqueness of human language as a natural phenomenon. While [many species](#) communicate by emitting and recognizing *signs*, only [human language](#) supports utterance (and therefore thought) of arbitrary complexity by stringing *symbols* with some grammar. What does need emphasis in this book is that language is both a manifestation and a precondition for human sociality. Any language is pre-eminently the joint product of some particular human community. At the same time, it is a marker which differentiates that community from others, and a cognitive tool without which no truly human community could exist – and without which no individual is completely human.

While advanced social life and culture are possible without language (in fact, crafts, dance, martial arts and skills, in general, are better taught by close observation and copying than by explanation), we have only to read a book like Oliver Sacks' *Seeing Voices* to understand the difference that language makes. [Sign language](#) does as well as the vocal kind to share complex ideas and feelings, but with no language of either kind, children are seriously handicapped, and their development is stunted.

We would like to know how language – and the capacity for language – evolved. At least superficially, these present as two separate questions in chicken-and-egg relation to each other: How did the human throat evolve to produce subtle speech sounds? Given the capacity to produce speech sounds, how did the cognitive capacity for language evolve – semantically and grammatically sophisticated as human language is. It's hard to see how the anatomical changes that occurred in connection with vocal speech would have been advantageous before any languages existed. But it is also hard to see how the production and parsing of complex language evolved in a social world of cries and hoots and gestures. Though there is no question more interesting or more important about human evolution, we'll probably never know how this conundrum was solved because direct evidence of what happened does not exist. But there is quite a lot of indirect evidence, providing grounds for speculation.⁷

6 For a perspective on human evolution, see Appendix C.

7 For an excellent review of this speculation, see the [Origin of Language](#) article on Wikipedia.

2.1.4 *Affect and Emotion: the Pro-social Palette*

Emotion is an enormously complex topic in psychology, by no means fully understood as yet. On the other hand, much has been learned about it by now. For this discussion of “man’s unsocial sociability,” at least the following points are well-established and relevant:

- 1) Emotion is not a disturbance of rational thought, as was long believed. Rather it is the reason why things matter to us, and therefore the basis of all thought. Emotion is why we care about things, and why we care about them in the ways we do. Without emotion nothing – not even staying alive – could be important or interesting, and there would be nothing worth reasoning about.
- 2) Emotion is one aspect of human cognition, and as such it is culturally construed. People in different societies, and even in the same society, may respond very differently to (what we would see as) the same type of event or situation. At the same time, this diversity of emotional response has a physiological basis termed *affect*. Silvan Tomkins counted pain and pleasure separately, and recognized nine basic affects (with corresponding physical displays) apart from these:
 - *Enjoyment/Joy* (smiling, lips wide and out;
 - *Interest/Excitement* (avid attention, eyebrows down, eyes tracking, closer listening);
 - *Surprise/Startle* (abrupt change of attention, eyebrows up, eyes blinking, quick intake of breath);
 - *Anger/Rage* (frowning, clenched jaw, red face);
 - *Disgust* (lower lip raised and protruded, head forward and down, vomiting);
 - *Dissmell* (face wrinkled, head pulled back);
 - *Distress/Anguish* (tears and crying, rhythmic sobbing, arched eyebrows);
 - *Fear/Terror* (frozen stare, a pale face, coldness, sweating, erect hair);
 - *Shame/Humiliation* eyes lowered, head down and averted, body drooping, blushing).

This list may not be complete. The physiological substrate of emotion is a subject for intense investigation.

- 3) Affect and emotion are contagious to some extent, through mechanisms not yet fully understood. We sympathize and empathize with others. In contact with others, we catch prevailing moods – of laughter, excitement or panic, for example. Some sharing of emotion is learned; but some is innate and automatic. Some is a socially learned response to mutually understood situations and symbols. Some is a matter of linked rhythm. Some is a matter of chemical pheromones, linked with

- the sense of smell. Such sharing of emotion is obviously of great importance for group minding and mindset. Be it ebullience, enthusiasm, grief, panic or whatever, we know that shareholders at a stock exchange, crowds in a stadium or theatre, soldiers on a battlefield, diplomats, legislators and savants at a conference, are sometimes moved by gusts of shared emotion which prompt them to collective actions otherwise inexplicable.
- 4) For human sociality, several emotions – shame, in particular – are known to be especially important. Though different cultures handle it very differently, through a whole range of emotions from mild embarrassment to mortal humiliation, it's known that shame affect is highly developed in our species – presumably in support of our intensive sociality. [Jealousy](#) too is socially consequential. [Envy](#) (aka 'the evil eye') is highly developed in all humans, but feared more deeply in some cultures than others. [Moral foundations theory](#) posits six such sentiments which seem to be well-nigh universal in our species, though different individuals and cultures stress some more than others and handle them very differently: **Care** (the opposite of harm): the cherishing and protecting of others; **Fairness** (the opposite of cheating): rendering justice according to shared rules; **Liberty** (the opposite of oppression): a loathing of tyranny and arbitrary constraint; **Loyalty** (the opposite of betrayal): standing together in solidarity with your group, family or nation; **Authority** (the opposite of dissidence or subversion): the following of tradition and also of designated persons who have legitimate standing to pronounce on some matter; and finally, **Purity** or **Sanctity** (the opposite of indulgence or degradation): the abhorrence for disgusting foods, behaviours and things. In whatever cultural variation, these 'moral sentiments' seem to be recognized everywhere, playing their various roles in the existing social order.
 - 5) It's known that that pro-social capabilities and emotions are subject to various pathologies and failures. While the classification and diagnosis of psychopathologies and the personality disorders is debated,⁸ the disposition to such pathologies obviously plays a part in the composition and governance of human societies.

Withal, we can see that human-like creatures which had evolved an affect palette, moral sentiments and psychopathologies much different from our own would be a different species.

2.1.5 *Imposition of Meaning*

Humans have a remarkable tendency to discover meaning in events and displays of all kinds, even when no meaning is actually present. We seem to need

⁸ As I write, [DSM-5](#) is the standard classification and diagnostic tool of the American Psychiatric Association.

meaning; on everything our senses take in, we impose the most serviceable or pleasing meaning(s) that we can. In this way, [perception](#) itself is seen to be a process of active, instinctive attribution of meaning to the whole world as we find it. For the most part, these unconscious acts of cognitive appropriation are performed automatically. Without this automatic process, our senses would still tell us what the world is doing to our bodies (e.g. with light, sound waves, air-born chemicals, and direct mechanical contact) but nothing about the world itself. “There are no facts, only [interpretations](#),” just as Nietzsche said.

This automatic treatment of our bodily sensations as *suggestions* about things and events is something that we seem to have in common at least with the higher animals; how far down the tree of life it goes, no one can say as yet.

This automatic process is only the beginning of what humans do with meaning and interpretation. We look up at the night sky and see [constellations](#) – pictures of heroes and animals and common utensils. We see [omens](#), or look at [tea leaves](#), and we read the future. We hear stories or character descriptions or political statements in a piece of music. We learn and use conventional systems that assign abstract concepts to the sounds that come out of our mouths. We represent religious and political ideologies with graphic designs and images.

We don't yet know how symbolic '[meaning](#)' and the disposition to impose and work with it are grounded in human genetics and physiology. But we can be sure that this human need and disposition to impose meaning is one more definitive feature of our sociality.

2.1.6 Stigmergy: Externalized Intelligence

Human sociality has yet another remarkable feature. The mode of indirect communication termed [stigmergy](#)⁹ is by no means unique to our species, as the ants and termites certainly used it before we did. In our own species, though, stigmergic communication is not instinctively programmed. Rather, it is learned skill that different cultures use in different ways. With humans, huge quantities of knowledge and cognitive capability are off-loaded to external artifacts of all kinds: to maps and diagrams etched in sand or wax or clay, to books in libraries or websites on the Internet, to specialized tools for every purpose, and to increasingly intelligent machines. The basic idea is that semi-durable markings, 'written' onto the environment, can provide suggestive guidance on a to-whom-it may-concern basis to the individuals who encounter and 'read' them. All the social insects use this type of communication to organize their nests and hives; humans, albeit with much greater individual autonomy, use the same technique to build huge cities. It's no exaggeration to think of stigmergy as the key to large-scale collaboration: a means through which the activities of arbitrarily many individuals can be coordinated. The easiest way

⁹ This term, from two Greek words, *stigma* (sign) and *ergos* (energy), was coined by Pierre-Paul Grassé, a French zoologist who studied termite colonies and their elaborate mounds.

to understand how it works in general is to review how it is used by [ants](#) to organize and run their colonies. My account here is over-simplified, but does convey the essentials.

In search of food the worker ants of a colony forage around at random, without direction from any boss-ant or central office. When they find a bit of food they carry it back to their nest, leaving a chemical ([pheromone](#)) trail that other ants can smell and follow. Many ants conducting such random searches jointly create a network of trails connecting their nest to the different sources of food; and with these trails laid down, the ants no longer need to search at random. Following the trails, stimulated by their pheromone scent, they can go directly from their nest to a known food source, returning with what they can carry and reinforcing the trail as they do so. The pheromone trail grows stronger as more and more ants make a successful round trip, and this strengthened trail attracts more ants to the same route. In this way, the newly discovered food source is efficiently exploited for the colony's benefit.

Because the pheromone trail to a good, nearby source quickly becomes much stronger than those to more remote sources, the nearer site is 'mined' the more intensively until it is exhausted. With no more food to carry back, the pheromone trail to this location is no longer reinforced, and the existing trail soon evaporates. The foragers, no longer driven to make their way to this now depleted food source, now go toward other sources where the 'smell of success' is stronger. When all the nearby sources are used up in this way, they must again search at random, farther afield. The other chores of ant-life are coordinated in a similar way. By these stigmergic means, the ant hill collectively achieves a group intelligence far greater than that of any individual ant. With no central direction at all, it feeds itself, maintains its tunnels, gets rid of waste products, and nourishes a 'queen' ant (who does nothing but lay eggs to make more ants).

Now consider how humans use this type of communication. We are much more intelligent and versatile than the ants, of course, and have much greater autonomy as individuals. But we use the same trick of stigmergy to drive our own cooperative associations; and like the ants, we mark our environments just by living in them, whether we mean to or not. Criminals leave clues for the police to find. Ancient hunters walking through a forest, and modern people walking in the park wear down the vegetation and leave trails for one another as they pass. To this day, railroads and highways are built along routes that caravans once travelled, and that stone age hunters travelled before the caravans. Cities grew up where trails and water routes met or crossed each other. When gold was discovered in California, an army of settlers beat their way across North America, blazing trails to the new source of wealth, then building railroads to travel faster. With these main lines of track and then some branch lines, they opened the whole continent.

Writing, diagramming and the graphic arts are stigmergic media *par excellence*. By these means, leaving signs for each other, we give directions and to

issue specific instructions to unknown others who encounter them; and the knowledge thus accumulated fills libraries and gets posted on the Internet to be consulted as desired by individual human beings.

The physical artifacts of a culture – its tools, its buildings and its infrastructure – can also be seen as stigmergic markings. Whatever function some given object has, it also carries suggestive freight as to its possible uses and methods of use. A hammer suggests that we hold it by its long handle, and hit things with its heavy head. No one holds it by the head and hits things with the handle. A house, or just the picture of a house, suggests a whole lifestyle. Streets and roads suggest places to go and ways to get there. A gun suggests that we kill animals and people, or sometimes that we kill ourselves. Whether or not it comes with an instruction manual, every artifact provides directions on how it may be used. Predictably, it will be used for everything it can be; and, just from this experimentation, some uses become habitual and popular.

Science and technology work much like ant hills in using stigmergic direction without a central command centre. Working alone, often at home or in a garage workshop, someone makes a discovery. This success attracts others to further research and then to business enterprises in this field, which thus grows and specializes until it is exhausted – until there are no further great discoveries or inventions to be made, and no further windfall profits. Then the whole field settles down just to business-as-usual, or else it is supplanted by more recent discoveries.

In time, such messages fade away. Pheromones evaporate. As ants no longer forage where the food source has been exhausted, humans now direct their explorations to the area where something new, exciting and profitable has been found. In just this way, the accumulation of papers in any field triggers an updating of textbooks and of research projects, as scholars drop a question that has been mined to exhaustion and scurry to explore a novel area. For us humans, as for the ants, collective learning for a whole group¹⁰ occurs as its stigmergic environment (and thus, collective behaviour) adapt, and are kept in alignment, with the group's ambient world.

The conclusion, then, is that quite a large part of what we take to be our own knowledge, skill and capability has been 'pre-written' for us as a stigmergic feature of our habitat. All this knowledge is not personally our own, except as we are part of the group that shares it. It is public knowledge that we take up, profess and make use of for our individual purposes. Like the chemical trails of ants and termites, the patterns of this public knowledge may fade and vanish eventually – as ideologies and theories change, as technologies become obsolete, as artifacts wear out and as language alters. But while the markings last, they are relatively stable features of their users' collective mindset.

¹⁰ For our discussion of collective learning, see Chapter 5.

2.1.7 *Competitive Ultrasociality*

Pace Kant in the passage taken as this chapter's epigraph, the conclusion is that what we observe in young children – and in most adults, for that matter – is not a propensity to isolate ourselves when things don't go our way. On the contrary, we see a propensity to join with others and recruit allies who may further our wishes. Already in early childhood, human behaviour is plastic, collaborative and socially manipulative in ways that foreshadow the complex social behaviours of adult life.

Also, we know today that human sociality is less a personal wish than a tropism and specialization of the whole species. The fact is that human infants come equipped with a whole range of instincts that predispose them for social living *along specifically human lines*. And while we do indeed try to get our way where we can, this does not move us toward isolation but toward a competition for influence and status: at the limit, toward absolute power and autocracy. The propensity is to form and participate in congenial groups with like-minded others. Self-isolation, where attempted, does not stem from a desire to get one's way, but rather from a need that some persons feel to defend their autonomy against encroachment by others.

There is a caveat, however. As Mancur Olson argued,¹¹ the collaboration of like-minded people to further their common interests is not automatic. Especially in large groups, individuals have an incentive to free-ride on the work of others, and not contribute actively themselves. For this reason the production of public goods usually requires some efforts of enforcement, if only the expressed disapproval of shirkers by active participants. At the other extreme, a vast system of administrators, police and prisons¹² will be needed to collect the taxes of a state. And [political entrepreneurs](#) will be needed to organize and mobilize groups to work for common interests. More on this below, in Section 3.2.

2.2 **Communication and Relationship**

Social animals that we are, we readily learn from each other, and from the groups that we belong to; we enter readily into relationships with others, and thereby form or join groups; and we take on roles and identities within these groups. Quite a lot is known about how we do this: about the different modes of communication and relationship, and the types of group that result. This section and the next one review some intrinsic features of human communication and relationship beyond the generic concepts of Chapter 1.

2.2.1 *The Relationalist Approach*

When we imagine two persons interacting in some way, we tend to think of them as autonomous, self-interested individuals engaged in some kind of *game*, which distributes rewards and punishments ([payoffs](#)) to these players

11 [The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups](#) (1965).

12 An [extraction/ coercion system](#), as political theorists call it.

depending on their choice of moves. As a paradigm of social interaction, this approach is called ['methodological individualism](#) (MI, for short).¹³ Its basic principle is that all social phenomena must ultimately be explained by showing how they result from the beliefs, desires and self-interested choices of individual human actors.

While the MI approach works well in many areas (when the stakes and motives of the situation are obvious and unquestioned; when the notion of 'rational self-interest' is clear), it fails to explain how human actors come to hold the weird beliefs and motives that they do. One example will do for all that might be given: The [Skoptsy](#) were a notorious sect in Tsarist Russia who practised castration and radical mastectomy to eradicate sexual lust. Though we might think they were a little mad, for them it was a matter of self-interest. If pain and sexual abstinence in this life earned eternal bliss in the life to come, then self-castration would be quite rational. Similarly with terrorists enticed to seek jihadist martyrdom by the delightful prospect of those 72 virgins. Rational self-interest clearly! But how could anyone come to hold such beliefs without hard evidence for them?

It might happen this way: Suppose conditions were so bad that many people came to feel that their chances of finding ordinary human happiness in this life were negligible. Suppose some pumped-up, mutilated individual arrived on the scene who claimed to have a special relationship with God, and sought to win a following by preaching such a doctrine. If he did, in fact, attract a few followers, a competition for status would arise among them. Men and women would be eager to demonstrate their faith and piety by doing as prescribed – with astounding eagerness, moreover. The Japanese [recruited kamikaze pilots](#) through this approach, in the last months of World War II. I have actually seen a group of teenagers behave this way – admittedly, in a much milder form – competing for social brownie points by offering to make each other's beds.

Accordingly, this book works from a very different paradigm that I will call *'methodological relationalism,'* (MR). Where MI puts self-interested agency at the root of sociological explanation, MR takes social relationship as fundamental. Where MI works by taking the [intentional stance](#) toward individuals of known beliefs and motives, MR works by considering the relationships to which the persons of interest are committed. It complements the MI perspective by viewing individual actors as products of their life histories of relationship and membership. It anticipates the behaviours of individual actors by considering the demands of relationships to which they are already committed – alongside of, sometimes well ahead of what we might take to be their rational self-interest. In this way, it can offer explanations of the peculiar desires and values that individuals actually pursue – as rational-choice theory cannot.

13 See also the much more comprehensive [article on this topic](#) in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Actually, in our day-to-day thinking, we use a relational stance all the time, at least as much as we use the intentional one. I pay my rent every month because, by signing a lease, I have contracted with my landlord that I will do so. The arrangement is mutually advantageous most of the time, but a situation may arise in which one or the other of us might prefer to break it. Until the lease is up, it's this contractual relationship, not pure self-interest, that controls our respective actions, and the situation as a whole.

The relational stance can be as simple and ordinary as that; and [role theory](#) works from a crude version of it by assuming that the individual agents, like actors in a play, are pre-assigned and committed to the [roles](#) they play.¹⁴ But now let's consider a more interesting case: Why does a woman get up in the middle of the night to nurse her baby? Why did she have that baby in the first place? Surely not because she had some obvious personal interest in doing so – in accepting the sacrifices and responsibilities that motherhood entails. (To speak of 'reproductive instinct' here, does not at all explain the complex, conflicting emotions that parents actually feel). In accounting for the mother's strange behaviour, MI is not very helpful. To be sure, this woman wants her baby to thrive. She knows that either she or someone else must give it breast or bottle. We, as onlookers, can see that for this commonplace relationship, role theory has much more explanatory power: If we begin by assuming the woman's pre-commitment to mothering this infant and the infant's need for mothering, then we can predict that mothers will feed their babies – though the mother has no clear self-interest in waking up to do so, and the infant has no clear 'self' as yet.

But role theory, in turn, cannot explain the evolution of a parent-child relationship as the growing child turns into an adult. Obviously, the 'game' and its stakes change over time for both participants. The respective roles in their relationship are negotiated on the fly – in real time, even as they are enacted. Their whole situation evolves over time, from the succouring needed by and given to a helpless infant, to the mature relationship between two adults, older and younger, strongly linked by their intimate history. Of course, self-interest will be involved on both sides, but other feelings can be more important. In this as in so many other relationships, neither the stakes and motives nor the roles are given once and for all. Both must change over time, pursuant to what we might call 'the logic' of the relationship itself.

2.2.2 Entanglement

At this point, I want to introduce a concept of '*entanglement*' – entangled relationship – to characterize those interpersonal connections which transcend the current desires and wishes of the parties concerned, and also their static roles. In fact, we see this situation all the time. My daughter continued to love and care for her three-year-old son, even when she was furious with him – even

¹⁴ Though role conflicts may arise – e.g. when a policeman catches one of his own kids smoking dope.

when he was being a thorough brat. Conversely, the little boy continued to love and trust his mother even when she refused to give him what he wanted – even when she scolded or punished him. Of course, she is his mother, and they both knew it, even at that time. But that mothering role was noticeably different from what it had been a year ago when the child was two. It is different next year and the year after, as the child becomes four, and then five. Mother and son are diachronically entangled with each other, beyond all superficialities of role and current self-interest.

The term 'entanglement' here is borrowed from quantum physics, where it is known that particles continue to share certain properties, even at a great distance, even across time, once they have interacted.¹⁵ Analogously, though we have many superficial relationships of many different kinds, we become *entangled* only with a special few, in something like the way that quantum particles behave. As I write this, I feel myself entangled with my daughter and my grandchildren, and through my daughter with her husband (my son-in-law) and her mother (my ex-wife from whom I've been divorced now for about 40 years). I am entangled with my father and mother though they've been dead for 25 years. I am entangled too with a very few close friends, and with a former lover now living in a distant city, with whom I'm no longer even on speaking terms because she has entanglements of her own which seem to exclude relationship with me. In all these relationships, considerations of role or rational self-interest are almost negligible.

These '*entanglements*' differ from ordinary relationships in two ways: First, like entangled quantum particles, they seem to be unaffected by time, by distance and by death itself. We continue to feel entangled with key figures who loved and shaped us, to whom we remain somehow connected all our lives. We feel a loyalty to such persons, and a desire that they would think well of us, even when they are not around to think at all. We have internalized these people, as a shrink would say. They have become, some-how, a part of our identities.

Second, these entangled relationships are not wholly intelligible to ordinary rationality – to any normal cost/benefit interpretation. Often enough, individuals have been known to fall in love with a person, an art, a political cause, an ideology, against all rational self-interest and against the counsel of their more 'sober' advisors. They may feel overwhelmed and 'conquered' by an attraction (or whatever emotion) that they know is madness, but that they feel powerless to resist. In fiction, the love story of Romeo and Juliet is one paradigmatic example of such entanglement. Captain Ahab's obsession with Moby Dick is another. The intensity and self-destructiveness of some relationships go far beyond both role and rational self-interest.

15 For the source of the metaphor, see www.davidjarvis.ca/entanglement/ and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantum_entanglement.

2.2.3 *Theory of Mind and Binocularity*

So far as I know, Gregory Bateson was the first to point out the lovely analogy between the two-fold cognition of a working relationship, and the binocular vision of normal eyesight. Looking out on the world with its two eyes, a creature is literally '[seeing double](#),' because the eyes receive their light from slightly different angles, and send slightly different pictures to the brain – except that instead of seeing two different pictures, what we normally see is an extra dimension of depth, because our brains automatically combine the two flat pictures into a single [stereoscopic](#) image. Similarly, the relationship of two individuals creates a single new system with minding properties of its own, which exerts context pressures on its individual participants, even as their interaction creates that relationship and its context. One consequence of this loop is a new '[binocularity](#)' in the system: a new dimension, as it were, that had not previously been available: Where there is good communication between the parties, any disagreement between them (resulting from their different perspectives, life histories or personal interests) get blended into a joint, composite perception which includes the parties' separate perspectives, renders their differences intelligible, and reconciles these to the extent possible. In such relationships, the parties may feel frustrated by their differences – by their inability to reach agreement – but they will be enriched cognitively as well; and they may be wise enough to appreciate that fact. In a close friendship, for example, the common traits and interests may be what draw two individuals together, but it is their differences which make for complementarity and mutual stimulation.

In young children, this binocularity facilitates development of their (so-called) [theory of mind](#) (ToM) which makes it possible for them to function as [persons](#) in a world of other persons. ToM develops gradually (and may only go so far) because it is one thing to recognize that other people have different beliefs and wishes than your own, but quite another to become comfortable with that fact – and still another to feel that one's own world is enriched by such differences with others. At its lowest levels, ToM can make the difference between the tantrums of a two-year-old and the relative poise of a child of four or five. At its highest, it can make the difference between normal adult sociality, and the wisdom of a sage or saint. Conversely, in pathological relationships, this social binocularity can fail, with lethal consequences. In group settings, there may exist political interests for its denial or abandonment. In debate, all evidence and arguments for the other side's case are best kept off the table. In war, all feelings of kinship with the enemy must be repressed. In such adversarial relationships, ToM takes a negative, strategic form in which that sense of kinship or symmetry with the other is deployed merely to anticipate and counter their moves.

2.2.4 *The Modes of Social Interaction*

Alan Fiske, a professor of Anthropology at UCLA, has argued that just four fundamental patterns exhaust the whole range of social interaction – that all human relationships involve some combination, of these four types:

1) There is the pattern of *Communal Sharing* (CS) which treats all members of a group as equal, and tries to distribute both tasks and goodies on an equal basis. Examples might be people who share the use of a commons, a couple in love, a tribe that shares its food and takes revenge indiscriminately on any member of the enemy group to avenge a wrong. For group cognition, the CS pattern suggests consensual decision-making – a ring of equals, sitting around a camp fire or conference table, putting their heads together and coming to some agreement.

2) There is *Authority Ranking* (AR) which recognizes asymmetric status in a hierarchy where subordinates owe deference, respect, loyalty and obedience to their superiors, who in turn accept responsibilities of leadership and care for the subordinates. Again for group cognition, AR suggests command and the hierarchical structure of a pyramid. It depends on some rough matching or alignment between brute power and cognitive authority. Where this breaks down, legitimacy goes with it and the AR system is in danger of mutiny or rebellion. Examples are military and bureaucratic hierarchies, ancestor worship and/or filial piety, and status systems based on wealth, ancestry, or whatever other criteria.

3) In *Equality Matching* (EM) relationships people operate on a tit-for-tat basis, or “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours.” This requires that they keep track, roughly, of a balance among the participants, and know what is required to restore the balance. Examples would include gift-giving between equals, the turn-taking of most sports and games, exchanges in baby-sitting and child care co-ops), and most systems of restitution or punishment. Most significantly for group cognition, EM is the basis for [political machines](#),¹⁶ for party politics, and for power structures every-where. When bosses cannot command, they can trade favours to gain supporters and allies, who then call in their ‘markers’ when they need some help. They can offer support to gain support in their own areas of need.

EM can be a basis for trust, but for a wary mistrust, as well. One drawback is that EM depends heavily on the expectation and mutual desire for enduring relationship.

4) Finally, in *Market Pricing* (MP) relationships, people trade goods and services at a negotiated ratio of exchange which may or may not involve some form of money. Market pricing can be seen as an important special case of equality matching, in which the pricing is exact and the transaction self-contained (in the sense that no further transactions are implied). As with EM, MP relationships are also *quid pro quo*, but they are much less personal. Typically

16 Like the famous [Tammany Hall machine](#) that basically ran New York City from the 1790s to the 1960s.

with MP, there is a market in which goods are offered at some definite market price. Or there may be bidding and/or bargaining, with buyer and seller agreeing on the price before a sale occurs.

As a cognitive device MP leads to organized markets, and to the “[invisible hand](#)” of the marketplace. It is compellingly simple and makes for efficient self-organization of society, as Adam Smith pointed out. It is, however, subject to some well-known imperfections, e.g.

- the [external costs and benefits](#) of the MP transaction;
- the [tyranny of small decisions](#); and
- the (sometimes violent) competition for [rental income](#).

MP is also subject to various abuses – e.g. monopoly, deceitful advertising or the marketing of dangerous products – which must be curbed by political (AR) action.

2.2.5 Politicious Relationship

The relationships of individuals and groups are almost never purely cordial or purely hostile. Rather, we should understand that all human relationships are *politicious*, meaning that they always involve some mix of common and conflicting interests. Trade relationships provide some benefit to both parties (or they would not take place), but they are also adversarial in their negotiations of terms and price. Even the relationships of violent conflict, warfare, tend to have some common interest in limiting the violence, sparing children and non-combatant civilians – at least, in leaving the survivors with a world that they can live in and rebuild. Intimate relationships of marriage and family, are the most politicious of all. When a murder is committed, the surviving spouse is always among the first suspects, because marriage is a love-hate relationship by its very nature – as the crime statistics show.

There is a general principle of systems theory at work here. In a book called [One Plus One Equals One](#), John Archibald, professor of bio-chemistry and molecular biology, describes how living systems evolved and now build themselves, step-by-step, from their chemical components. When one system combines with another system, no matter how this relationship occurs, the result is always just one new system. I’ve heard a Zen master explain the same idea. Its importance stems from two facts:

- first, that the new system will exert context pressures – contextual influence – on each of its components; and
- second, that there is no way for two people, or systems of any kind, *not* to communicate (and thus form some sort of relationship) when they are in close proximity.

The moral, if you want one, is that unless you can withdraw entirely from a relationship, you need to make the system that develops as good as possible from your own perspective, because you are going to have to live with it. It’s

all very well to contend for advantage and try to get your way, but it is dangerous to over-win – win too much – because the outcome of conflict is never simply the winner’s ‘way,’ but a politicous relationship of some kind in the new system that is formed. It was with this principle in mind that the victorious United States helped to rebuild both Germany and Japan after the Second World War, mindful of a need for strong allies against Soviet Russia.

2.3 Identity

Like other creatures, every human organism has a *biological identity* to draw the necessary distinction between that system and its world, collecting and digesting what the system needs and defending it against invasion: This biological identity defines the homeostatic attractors of the organism¹⁷ and keeps the system alive by tracking and maintaining these parameters. Through its *immune system*, it also defends the body against invasion by alien proteins, controlling what the system takes in and what it pushes out.

Wholly distinct from this biological identity, the human individual also maintains and projects a complex *social identity* – to defend against adverse suggestions, among other functions. Social identity is *not* uniquely human. The anthropoid apes show some of it. So do our dogs and quite a few other creatures including some birds and certain insects.¹⁸ *Kin recognition* evolves quite commonly both for parent-offspring recognition and as a defence against *inbreeding*. Yet the social identity of humans achieves a sophistication and complexity far beyond any species that we know. It supports the operation of cities, nations and multinational corporations. It provides, on one hand, what T.S. Eliot spoke of as ‘a face to meet the face that we meet.’ It also supports our strong sense of group affiliation: our concept of who is ‘Us’ and who is ‘Them.’

Solitary animals need hardly any social identity. Animals that *mate for life* (e.g. gibbons and swans) may need only enough to be recognized by their mates and offspring. But humans, specialists that we are in social arrangements and social learning, need very complex social identities that take years to form and refine.

It is through this abstract sub-structure that the individual and social aspects of a mindset are reconciled – in some individual way, and to some extent. For this reason, the concept of ‘identity’ has special relevance for this chapter, and for the book as a whole.

2.3.1 The Functions of Identity

Toddlers do not yet have a coherent social identity, or even the beginnings of one. Most older children already do. The question is, why do they develop one? Why is this abstract structure needed? What functions does this ‘identity’ serve?

¹⁷ Body temperature, *blood chemistry* and so forth.

¹⁸ See *Kin Recognition* (1991), edited by Peter Hepper

A general answer might be that the need for such a structure is felt as the child comes under pressure from others, and from life itself, to take responsibility for its actions, to make and keep promises, to meet the expectations of others (or pay the price of not doing so). As an individual, the even the very young child begins to form its own desires, beliefs and intentions. As a social being, it must enlist the cooperation (or, at least, the acquiescence) of some others (notably the parents) in its plans and projects; and to do this, it must earn some degree of respect and trust. To earn this sort of regard, it must develop coherence and self-control: show others that it can make plans and keep promises – control its immediate desires and impulses, and thus make good on its commitments to other persons who matter. What we call ‘identity’ is the substructure of mindset that we need to do this.

Coherent identity is needed to present an intelligible ‘face’ to others – to win their respect and trust, if possible and, in any case, to manage their expectations for our own purposes. Children experiment with different identities, and mostly settle on a pattern that works well for them. Rehearsed so early and so thoroughly, the identities that we form in childhood become habitual to a large extent, and depend strongly on the kind of parenting we received: on the features and peculiarities of those big people’s identities. In this way, pathologies of identity get passed down the generations; and they are not just possible, but very common. We may even cultivate false, deceitful identities as spies must do. In any case, we try to present a ‘face’ that shows us off to best advantage, in the best ‘light’ we can arrange.

As a child grows up, as issues of relationship and boundary control become increasingly complex, it will no longer suffice to confront and solve problems on an *ad hoc* basis. Accordingly, we form identities for the same reason that we group similar objects together under class names, and build theories to explain the data of a science. Such generalizations – and *over-generalizations* – are one crucial way that humans reduce the bewilderment of lived experience to recognizable patterns that they can handle.

Young children need the rudiments of identity – a stable, coherent compromise between the inner self and the social person – to get along with parents and siblings at home, and then with caregivers and teachers and peers at daycare and then at school. In the long run, older children and adults need identities to be intelligible and predictable to themselves and others; to be capable of making promises and commitments, and then living up to the expectations these create. They need identities to make and carry out long-term plans: to complete a training program, hold a job, raise some children, pay off a mortgage, write a book.

* * * * *

Broadly, then, we can think of identity as a substructure of mindset developed to solve the problems of being human in a given milieu – to manage the interface between that individual and their world. Thus it is inherently two-faced in

nature: On one hand, an identity engages the world and is engaged by it as “a face to meet the faces that you meet,” a dramatized presentation of the Self as it wishes to be seen by others.¹⁹ But on the other, it is the self-awareness and self-knowledge that accumulate over the course of a life-time -- a personal theory of the Self for the individual to live up to and actualize, to the extent that he or she can.

We can break out some specific functions that an identity must serve; and I will mention six of these, just with the warning that they overlap somewhat, and that some other functions might be added:

1) To begin with, identity serves a function of *adaptation*. It has been seen (greatly oversimplified) as a structure of tacit *rules*, evolved to guide the individual in dealing with the external world – with other people, in particular. It includes, first of all, a mastery of one's own little body: the skills one must acquire to get around in the world and manipulate its local features so as to live in it. It includes the social skills, including that of language, which must be acquired and practised both to assert oneself as a person, and to get along with other persons. Eventually, it must include some way of making a living. In general, then, it must respond as best it can to a sequence of issues, such as those articulated by Erik Erikson, which arise in the course of its development.²⁰ It must rise to the challenges posed by the individual's environment – in particular, the social environment, itself a collective response to the physical conditions.

2) Identity also serves a dramatic function of *self-presentation* – including not just the presentation to others, but also the person's reflexive self-presentation to him- or herself. It is "a face to meet the faces that we meet," but also a face that we maintain to recognize and manage ourselves. Loss or damage to this '*face*' is unbearably painful, and people will typically die to keep their presentations intact. Japanese samurai used to slit their bellies open in the ritual of *seppuku*, rather than endure the shame of lost 'face.' In this way, the function of self-presentation turns inward too, as a function of self-understanding.

3) Identity is strongly shaped by, but also organizes and serves the person's system of *affiliations*: the other persons and groups that he or she belongs to, or (as we say) 'identifies' with. It specifies the types and levels of investment (or loyalty) that support a person's connections and memberships. Through these affiliations, the embedding of individuals in their respective groups, societies and cultures leaches into their souls (so to speak), and forms them as the persons they become.

4) But conversely to affiliation, identity also serves to direct and organize the person's resentments, antipathies and their constellations of anger or indignation – their *hostilities*, in a word. The point is: enmity and strife are also formative for identities. We must adapt (see above) to deal with them – emulating

19 On this aspect of identity, see Erving Goffman's classic account, [The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life](#).

20 Reviewed in Section 2.3.3.

our enemies, as we do our closest friends – to counter any advantage they may have.

5) As a substructure of mindset, identity also serves a function of selective [filtration](#), accepting some suggestions that the individual receives while rejecting others. For example, it determines why we respond to some advertisements but not to others. In this way, it is not just a subset but a core of mindset, providing the basis for continuity-in-change and for such stability as we enjoy. Identity changes gradually as we grow and mature and gain experience. It can be changed abruptly by circumstances (through illness or accident) or by a [rite of passage](#). It can change abruptly (though usually after long and gradual preparation) through some [conversion experience](#), not necessarily religious.

6) Last but not least, identity includes devices for self-comforting, self-stimulation, self-entertainment. We can call this a function of [masturbation](#) – again stretching a word beyond its usual meaning. We all have ways of stimulating ourselves for fun and pleasure when there is opportunity to do so, of comforting ourselves when we are upset, of relaxing and soothing ourselves when we need rest. A baby sucks on a rubber nipple. I re-read Nero Wolfe mysteries or Robert Parker's stories in the 'Spenser' series. My father listened to music. Some people drink too much alcohol, or use other recreational drugs. These devices too are crucial for identity, and solitary sex is only one of them.

Should we include dreams and fantasies, the life of the imagination, under this last heading? If not, then identity serves a seventh function – that of *transcendence* (including possibly [self-transcendence](#)), a detachment or separation from the realm of fact to dwell in a realm of the [counterfactual](#) like James Thurber's [Walter Mitty](#) character. Such imaginative transcendence of current reality allows to look at a stone and see a knife or hammer: a tool for cutting or smashing. It is the faculty that made us human and is still doing so.

Identity serves all these functions and whatever others, and must evolve the features needed to do so. In this way, it represents one specific solution, out of all those that might be possible or conceivable, to the problem of being human in some particular environment. As a solution to the human condition, and to one's own, individual condition, identity is partly a function of the world in which it forms, but also something more than that – a creatively selective uptake from the known possibilities, and sometimes a departure into the untried unknown. At the minimum, it affords what Nero Wolfe somewhere calls "a foothold on the cliff of existence." In sum, identity is a sector or substructure of mindset, defined most briefly in Prufrock's phrase as "a face to meet the faces that you meet" – you yourself being the first and (usually) most important of these faces.

2.3.2 *Anchors of Identity*

Identity evolves over the course of a lifetime, from the rudimentary personality structure of a still largely impulsive child to the elaborate, responsibility-laden structure of a mature adult, to the diminished, but perhaps more individuated structure of an aging senior. Abrupt changes may occur as we have seen, through some trauma, or conversion experience, or flash of personal insight. Yet such transformations are rare, if they occur at all. Barring such events, identity remains fairly stable, anchored by various factors that discourage change and provide the sense (most of us have) of existential continuity.

Thoughts are free; and one has only to watch young children playing to realize that, in principle, identity is free as well. Even adults can still dress up and play with their identities – at a Saturnalia, at carnival, at a masked ball, on Halloween. In make believe, you can be anyone you like. In real life, this is not so easy, though actors are said to ‘become’ for a time the characters they play, and [numerous impostors](#) have had notable careers (for a time, at least) as people they were not. Men pretend to be women, and women to be men. With the techniques of modern medicine, individuals can actually change their sex, to align more closely with the identity they feel. Actors and spies play games with their identities – making a living, or actually staying alive by deporting themselves convincingly as people that they are not.

But in real life, at least six factors work together to keep adult identity as stable as it usually is. These might be named:

- biology,
- sociological context,
- learned capabilities,
- entanglements,
- habituation, and
- ideation,

and thence described and studied, each on its own terms, as follows:

Biology

To begin with, identity is anchored in the biology of a specific organism – which is itself the outcome of a specific genome. Included are all the physical features of this human individual: its anatomy, physiology and ‘[temperament](#)’ (features of mindset which are functions of body type and physiology, and thus innate rather than learned). The two most conspicuous biological influences on identity are [gender](#) and [state of health](#), both of which are strongly influenced by the learned culture as well.

Sociological Context

After biology, identity is anchored in a specific historical and sociological context. Each of us is born into specific groups of family, language, political affiliation and culture, long before we acquire much individuality to speak of. This sociological context expresses itself first in a specific style of parenting

and a specific native language (or languages), both very difficult – or downright impossible – to change. Identity is thus developed, first in the [attachment system](#) of the baby and young child, but later in the vital attachments – for work, family and friendships – of the mature adult.

Again, these group affiliations can be changed, but not so easily. Entanglements remain (on which more below), and the past may come to reclaim us when we least expect it. For this reason, identity as we know it, derives from an accumulating life history of interpersonal connections.

Learned Skills and Capabilities

Starting with the [infant's gradual mastery of its own body](#), later with eating behaviours, toilet control and language, children acquire an impressive array of physical skills and capabilities long before they are ready (by age seven at the latest, in most cultures) to begin some formal schooling. They go on to learn whatever selection of the concepts, skills and specialized competencies that their society values and draws them into. With time, these can be expanded in some fashion, or they can go unused and be (to some extent) forgotten. Even so, because new learning and forgetting do take time, one's skills and knowledge too are anchors of the adult identity. Children can change identities just by [make-believe](#). For adults, it is not so easy.

Entanglement

We introduced the concept of entanglement in Section 2.2.2 above, seeing it as a special type of relationship, not wholly intelligible to self-interest and ordinary rationality. Here we can look at it again, from a somewhat different perspective as a fundamental source and anchor of identity. It too can change with time. Certainly the content and flavor of an entangled relationship can change. But entangled relationships, by definition, are 'internalized' somehow, and can survive every kind of transformation by re-figuring themselves in some fashion. My relationship with my father, my daughter's relationship with me: Both have changed profoundly over the years, yet for all three of us, these entanglements have been permanent . . . and permanently stabilizing features of our identities.

Ideation

Like skills and capabilities, a person's concepts, paradigms and general [worldview](#) are surely formative for identity. They surely evolve over a lifetime, but can also be changed abruptly through some conversion experience, as when Saul the Pharisaic Jew became Paul the Apostle of Jesus on the [road to Damascus](#). But it is unfortunate here that such identity-changing events are nearly always discussed in theological terms, as a sudden access of faith. For the loss of faith is also a conversion which may be triggered by some experience. And some dramatic changes of ideation and identity may not involve religion at all.

A person's worldview, their ideation in general, are crucial features of identity typically acquired rather automatically at first, without much reflec-

tion or resistance, from a group to which one belongs. But ideation need not remain this way, and for some persons it doesn't. With experience and reflection, some people change their minds – and may make themselves unpopular in doing so. The difference between a loyal dissident who hopes to change their group in some way, and a traitor who has become its enemy may not be easily seen by others, or may not matter to them. In any case, however, a person's ideation and worldview exist in dialectic with their group(s), and remain key aspects of identity. Whether one wins a Nobel prize or gets burned at the stake (or gets burned first, and wins a prize posthumously later), what we can say for sure is that progress of any kind has always depended on persons who took the risk of thinking for themselves.

Habituation

Finally, our identities are stabilized, kept consistent and continuous with themselves, by sheer [habit](#): the ways of perceiving, thinking and behaving which have been grooved into our neural pathways to become almost automatic. Habits are formed and perfected by repetition and feedback, from the body itself and from its environment. They are packets of cognition and behaviour, often highly complex ones, performed swiftly and without premeditation in response to some eliciting stimulus. The way you walk, the way you speak with other people, are two examples of identity-forming habit patterns. They exist to serve your conscious purpose, but are largely unconscious in themselves. They have their variants, for different physical and social situations; and they change with age – as the body itself changes. They affect how others see you, and how you see yourself. With training and practice they can be altered, but not immediately or easily.

* * * * *

Identity is probably anchored by some other factors as well, but these suffice to explain its known properties: how it can change, why there is so much continuity when it does change significantly, and why it usually changes so gradually. By the time adulthood sets in, identity, is usually a relatively stable system, evolved to serve the functions described above, and to inform us of who we are to the extent we understand it. Self-knowledge may take a lifetime if it comes at all, but along the way, whether consciously or not, identity does its work of holding us on some relatively steady life-course toward some imagined goals.

It represents, as we have said, a personal solution to the problem of being human in a particular situation. It also represents the on-going management of the dilemma between liberty and rigidity, analogous to the [liquid state](#) (which makes life possible) between a gas and solid. In the gas state, molecules have too much liberty to form a stable arrangement. In the solid state, they are locked in place (relative to each other) and are unable to move. The liquid state is a happy compromise, a [Goldilocks condition](#), with sufficient liberty to

adapt and move around, but sufficient constraint to maintain stable relationships. For individuals and groups alike, this dilemma is perennial; and, in each case, identity can be seen as the system's way of handling it.

2.3.3 *On the Trajectory of a Life*

Driven partly by the biological clock, partly by social interaction, partly by the cognitive rhythms of learning and maturation, and partly by sheer happenstance, identity develops gradually, over the course of a lifetime, through a kind of [bootstrapping](#) process. We form our identities day-by-day, through the games that we elect to play, the relationships we enter into and the choices we make. It is only in the later stages of this self-lifting process that we could be said to do this with some consciousness. Even as adults, our identities continue to elaborate and change, but only partially in ways that we could be said to choose or intend. For this reason, it seems more accurate to ask how an identity *emerges* than to ask how it is constructed or built. We cannot claim credit for the overall shape of our identities nor for more than a fraction of the intentions, choices, efforts that were made in forming them. Rather, we must think of identity as an [emergent](#) of its input factors, with some amount of guidance by a self-creating volition.

Identity Emerges in Stages

Beginning with the way our mothers hold and feed us, and with the names and clothes we were given, identity is partly assigned to us by others, well before we can invent and project identity for ourselves. Starting just with its DNA, the human organism acquires mindset and identity through the interplay of social inter-relationship with the innate temperament, and with some conscious choice and self-invention. The process has a certain logic to it; and it follows a fairly stable trajectory, with room for infinite variation, over the course of a human lifespan.

From the very first days of life, the infant will be busy working out the terms of its relationship with its nurturing mother and/or with other immediate caregivers. Is it loved or resented? Handled tenderly or brusquely? Like a little boy or a little girl? Apart from genetics and anatomy, it has no gender yet to speak of, except that which others attribute – but attribute they certainly will. I was astonished, when my daughter was born, at how quickly and spontaneously I found myself relating to her as an infant female and not an infant male. I made the same discovery again, many years later, with my little grandson.

Identity typically evolves in recognizable, [psychosocial stages](#), such as those identified by Erik Erikson in his classic *Childhood and Society*. Each stage represents a working through and partial resolution of some issue or dilemma which arises first or most critically at a certain age, but is also lifelong and chronic. For example, consider Erikson's first psychosocial crisis of trust vs. mistrust. The quality of parental care is especially critical during the first year of life as John Bowlby's [attachment theory](#) makes clear. But the psycho-

logical strengths of confidence, hope and trust which may (or may not) emerge at this stage are not once-and-for-all achievements, but permanently dubious ones, constantly threatened by the vicissitudes of life and fortune. What is [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD), if not a shattering or collapse of trust and hope in the face of some assault or insult to existential confidence. Such insult can occur at any time, not just in infancy. Recovery from it will require an overcoming of the same vital doubt which must assault infants who do not reliably get fed when they are hungry.

And so for Erikson's second stage of development. Issues of autonomy are surely characteristic and critical for the toddler stage of development, when children begin to explore the world, try to do things for themselves, and acquire enough volition of their own to say '**no!**' to their still-powerful mothers (who were, at first, **all**-powerful). But autonomy too can be threatened at any age, and may be overwhelmed by feelings of shame and doubt. Again, the impulse control issues of this second stage are really a life-long dilemma: to maintain self-control without rigidity or loss of self-esteem. It's not just toddlers who must resist temptations, without becoming overly inhibited or anxious.

The same point goes for Erikson's six later stages: Each becomes critical in a certain phase of life, but may do so again at any time – meanwhile hovering as a chronic issue in the cognitive background:

- the four- and five-year-old's crisis of *initiative vs. guilt* – where the capability to plan and initiate activities with others is ridden with anxiety for whatever reason;
- the schoolchild's issue of *industry and competence vs. inferiority* – where one is challenged to learn specific skills or make specific efforts that are demanded by society;
- the young adult's crisis of *identity vs. role confusion* – where socially assigned tasks and responsibilities do not match the person's sense of who they are;
- the somewhat older adult's issue of *intimacy vs. isolation* – where the emotional costs and opportunity costs of closeness exceed the costs and pains of distance; where one feels *squished* much more than loved (to quote a former lover in my own past);
- the typically midlife crisis of *generativity vs. stagnation*, where one either dwells often and recurrently in the state of [flow](#) that Csikszentmihályi described, or spins one's wheels in frustration; and finally,
- the older person's dilemma of *ego integrity vs. despair* – when an individual contemplates their life with doubts that it was worth living, or with feelings that it was meaningless, or unendurably painful.

While true enough that, over the course of a human lifespan, there will be times when one or other of these issues is especially at point – in crisis, even, to use that word – it's also true that each of these issues is chronic to the hu-

man condition, and more or less in question from beginning to end. Even the last issue, which can scarcely be articulated prior to the appearance of a fairly solid adult identity, may exist tacitly in childhood. Despair and failure of ego integrity can certainly be felt by adolescents, as the statistics on [teen-age suicide](#) suggest.

The upshot is that identity evolves to solve the problems of a specific human animal, trying to exist and thrive in its encountered world. If identity is adequate to this task, this organism lives and thrives. When identity cannot cope, the organism perishes – as it will do eventually in any case. Its identity may linger posthumously in the memory of others, and in certain artifacts perhaps. But, whether remembered or not, we remain for-ever the persons that we were. In this sense, at least, we do enjoy a kind of immortality.

The Investment of Self

Humans do not just *belong* to their groups. We are not just moulded and shaped by them. We do not just accept their influence passively. On the contrary, we invest heavily in certain groups – in our families, ethnicities and religious groups, for example, and in our work groups and sports teams and nations. We offer love, attention, time and energy not just to individual persons, not just to causes or to charismatic leaders, but to the groups themselves. We give ourselves to group interests and group causes. Sometimes we even die for them. And although some of this happens cynically or ironically, or simply because it is the ‘done thing’ that everyone else is doing, more than a few persons do it with real devotion.

Why do we do this? Why do we use our groups as templates for the ready-made identities that can be taken from them? After all, it’s one thing to join and participate in a group to enjoy the benefits of collaboration and the pleasure or stimulation of social interaction. It’s something else entirely to define oneself primarily through one’s membership in a certain group.

Our innate sociality²¹ must be one part of the answer. We fear isolation, ostracism, banishment for reasons which must be partly instinctive and partly a carry-over from infancy and childhood. A second reason, suggested by Ernest Becker in his great book on [The Denial of Death](#) (written while he himself was dying, and destined for a posthumous Pulitzer Prize), may be the need for meaning in our little lives: for meaning that can out-live our mortal bodies. Kant, in our epigraph, suggests a third, pragmatic reason: that in society the individual finds a tremendous extension of “his natural capacities” and “feels himself to be more than man.”

I see no need to choose among these theories; all of them seem to be in play; and personally, I like Becker’s point about the human need for meaning, seconded by Viktor Frankl in another famous book.²² Whatever exactly ‘[meaning](#)’ is, the easiest way to find at least the illusion of it is to join a group and/or put yourself under some charismatic leader who seems to have it on of-

21 See Section 2.1 above.

22 [Man’s Search for Meaning](#), Viktor Frankl (1946)

fer. I think Becker exaggerates the fear of death somewhat, though he is probably right that it plays some not insignificant role. But “man’s need for meaning” seems to be stronger than his fear of death: We need meaning to construct identity, without which life is empty and pointless.

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We know quite a lot by now about the 'hard-wired' instincts and pre-dispositions of the generic human being. We know a lot about human learning, developmental schedules and common psychopathologies. What we still lack, however, is a clear understanding of men and women as individuals-in-society – as bearers of a personal identity which mediates between Self and society, and which is typically experienced as more vital, and of higher priority, than life itself. What *is* a human person, fundamentally? What different kinds of people are there? And how did you become the particular person that you are? I don’t think we have a satisfactory answer yet. So far as I’m aware, a comprehensive [ontology](#) of the human individual is still to be written.

As noted at the beginning of this section, social identity has special relevance for this book because it is through this abstract structure that the individual and social aspects of a mindset are reconciled to the extent they can be. This reconciliation is never be perfect; there is no way that it could possibly be; and human sociality is flawed as a result. It’s mostly true, as Kant noted, that each person would like to have everything go according to his own wish, but peace and human connection are values in themselves, only to be achieved at the cost of some autonomy. There remains, as we will see,²³ a permanent tension between the volition of individual members and of their group as a whole.

2.4 Conclusion: On the Limitations of Human Sociality

Human sociality is powerful; but it is limited too, not just by individual self-interest and autonomy (as Kant suggested), but by some other factors as well:

- 1) If all commodities and goods were in infinite supply and freely available to everyone, there would be no objective need for conflict about anything. As it stands, since all life lives at the expense of other life, we are compelled to play some [zero-sum games](#), in which compromise, sharing and the attitudes of “live and let live” do not come easily. From earliest times, hominists evolved with a strong pre-disposition for tribal bonding and solidarity – which politicians count on and make use of. We naturally organize ourselves into rival teams, playing against each other for the sheer sport of it, with stakes that are purely symbolic. When the stakes are high enough, death or sheer exhaustion may be the only natural limits on the viciousness and duration of conflict. In general, groups bond together more closely when at war with other groups. From individual self-interest, solidarity always declines when there are

²³ Especially in Section 4.1 and in Chapters 8 and 9..

no such conflicts; and for this reason, external conflict may sometimes appear to be a good thing in itself.

2) [Empathy and sympathy](#) are constrained in several ways: by limited information and imagination, by our imperfect sharing of other people's pains and fears, and, on most occasions, by the not unhealthy concern for 'Number One.' We can and do weigh the interests of others with our own, but effective concern for others remains limited in these ways. If we were fully telepathic, and really felt the pains of others as our own, the world would be a very different place.

3) The intentional stance itself is constrained not just by imperfect communication and empathy, but by conflicting motives including sheer human laziness. I do not always do what I know I should do, or even what (on some level) I really want to do. In this way, I may want to help you but do nothing really useful, because something useful would cost too much or just take too much effort. For individuals and groups of every kind, 'all aid short of help' is thus an all-too-common policy.

4) Humans are, in general, an ultrasocial species with a strong pre-disposition for social learning. But this disposition is unevenly distributed. [Sociopaths](#) appear to have a specific deficit for feeling or learning empathy. People on the [autism spectrum](#) have a specific deficit for learning [at least the subtler features](#) of [Theory of Mind](#). Other genetic variations, and differences of family environment will conduce to different aptitudes for social learning, and thus to different attitudes and moral dispositions. As it takes two to have a fight but only one to start it, it follows that small variations in the temperaments of protagonists may lead to huge discrepancies of social outcome. Small differences of desire or belief may be over-looked at one extreme, or start a war at the other.

5) The cuteness of children is not always enough to win for them the care and loving attention that they need. Some babies are difficult to love, and some parents respond to the new arrival in much less than an ideal way. Childcare is often stressful, and not all parents are well-positioned to handle the stresses on their attention or family finances – of a child . . . or *another* child. The upshot is that not all children get a decent start in life. Some grow up with social learning deficits (see point #4 above), unable for what ever reason to win the parenting that would lead to decent social learning skills – and thus, eventually, to an acceptably socialized adult.

Most of what we'll have to say about human [socialization](#) and social control will be found in Chapter 9 which reviews some features of our embedding, as individuals, in groups with minds of their own. But the problem must be introduced here because it lies at the core of this chapter's topic. We are neither 'born good,' but corrupted by the evils of society, (as Rousseau thought), nor

blighted from birth with the evil of [Original Sin](#). Both these theories have it wrong. Seen as the product of our species' evolution, we are creatures, as natural as any other, with genomes which predispose us for social living. However, as we've discussed, this dis-position has some serious limitations.²⁴ Rather than make us good or evil, it equips us to be either, and to learn the skills of both. In that loop of participation (discussed in Section 1.1.3 above), we shape ourselves as social and moral beings. In an imperfect social world, the human genome and the mechanisms of social learning avail only so far to make us very-well-sociated animals.

24 See also the article at Smithsonian.com, [Are Babies Born Good?](#)