

10. Conclusion

Overview: This concluding chapter takes up the question of what is gained and lost, highlighted and submerged, in viewing groups as having minds of their own, and thus in viewing politics as a cognitive process. First, it considers some implications of this intentionalist perspective as a paradigm for social science. Its second section considers certain personal and political consequences of a central idea that our groups will inevitably dictate to us unless we can engage them in some dialogue. The third section concludes the book with a brief statement of the hominist achievement and tragedy, the dependent attachment of human creatures to social entities, mostly unchosen, which may or may not be worthy of their love and loyalty.

No man can surpass his own time, for the spirit of his time is also his own spirit.
G.W.F. Hegel

A fantasy: Imagine that somewhere in your body, a single cell (among the fifty trillion others) achieves a breakthrough of consciousness, coming to realize that the whole system that she is part of has a collective mind of its own. This 'awakened' cell (let's call her Susie) tries to explain her insight to her neighbours who, sadly, are all sure that she is insane. "How could it be?" they demand angrily. "We are autonomous beings, each one of us, acting with our own purposes within the conditions we find around us. It's true that sometimes we seem to be cooperating toward some larger purpose. But that is just a manner of speaking – an outcome of what we each are doing separately. How could all of us together (different as we are) want or know or intend anything that no one of us can even imagine?"

But the little cell is sure that she is right, and she sets out to prove her point, devising all sorts of statistical measures and running numerous opinion polls to study her world and its properties as a whole. What she quickly realizes, however, is that her problem is primarily a philosophical one: how to explain what it would mean for a group of individuals (with separate and semi-autonomous minds) to comprise a collective mind through their inter-relationships. Her problem is to define what it means to be a mind, and get the other other cells to accept her definition.

Well, what does it mean to have a mind or be one? We humans feel that the cells of our bodies really do weave a collective mind, and that Susie's suspicion is correct. But her question is still a difficult one. It turns out that 'mind' is not an all-or-nothing proposition – not the sort of thing that you

just have or lack. In fact, it's not a *thing* at all, but a process, as we have noted. We have several capabilities in mind when we speak of minds, with only the first one really necessary to be a mind of sorts:

1) We think of a 'mind' as acting on its own behalf, and in response to its world. Minds act with purpose and intention, driven by *reasons* and not just by mechanical *causes*. Mere things move because something pushes or pulls them. Minds move because they have some reason to do so, one that prevails over competing suggestions to do nothing, or do something else. But we should note first that even human individuals satisfy this criterion only some of the time.

All groups with minds – eight people on a committee, say, but not the mere bevy of eight people in an elevator – will have this faculty of collective intentionality;¹ and we have seen that interesting groups, from families to corporations, nations, and whole societies indeed do so, although their wisdom or sanity are different questions. Individual members of a group mind (like our friend Susie) will be guided and constrained in some way, perhaps without even knowing it, to participate in that mind's collective operations. The group mind somehow provides a *context* in which components find their places, do their individual jobs and experience some local version of the collective results. That context may be strict and rigid, or fairly loose. Up to a point: if the context is too loose, the capability for collective intention is lost.

2) The simplest minds take in whatever comes at them that they are equipped to receive and respond to. More sophisticated ones are capable of *attention* – that is to say, of allocating – perhaps of *voluntarily directing* – their resources for sensing, interpreting, and mustering intention toward some matter of interest. There will be a question for such minds of why some things are more interesting than others, and why anything is of interest in the particular way that it is? Humans have a special sub-system (the *affect* system) to recognize what is of collective interest to all those trillions of cells – for example, whether something is to be ignored or fought, fled from, eaten, or investigated further. Human groups rely partly on the affect systems of their individual members, partly on designated specialists who have been granted some authority to 'pay attention' on the group's behalf, and partly on certain further aspects of collective mindset to weigh, amplify and filter these individual responses.

Human groups can thus pay attention collectively, partly with specialized individuals – e.g. politicians, senior officials, journalists, academics, artists and 'public intellectuals' – to help them do it. They are strongly driven by collective emotions and moods which rustle through their institutional networks. They defend themselves from overload of feeling and inform-

1 On the intentional stance, and its application to groups (*group intentionalism* as we've been calling it), see Section 1.4.1.

ation, by clinging to blissful ignorance of matters they prefer not to know about. To a great extent, the collective intelligence and sanity of a group depend on how well its mechanisms of collective attention function: how well they distinguish what is important from what is trivial; how reliably they present what is important for decision and response.

3) At least some minds, very sophisticated ones, have a faculty – or cluster of several faculties – that we speak of as *consciousness*, and do not yet fully understand. The crucial faculty, one that we probably share at least with other mammals, is what Damasio called, “the feeling of what happens.” Creatures who have this faculty are aware of themselves as existing in a world. They are aware of what is happening around them and to them. They are aware of some happenings in themselves. Even without an abstract sense of existence, but they nonetheless can suffer and feel good. It is ‘like something’ to be them. They may feel themselves, by turns, to be intent and purposeful or relaxed and drowsy. They may lose consciousness periodically and ‘go to sleep,’ for reasons still unclear.

Whether groups *collectively* have some faculty of consciousness is a moot question. How would we know? We have no direct access to any feelings but are own – not even the feelings of other people. Both to groups and other people *we can attribute feelings if we want to*; or we can withhold this fellow-feeling of analogous consciousness if we choose. We mostly refuse such empathy to our enemies, aliens and victims – to all persons we wish to exclude, for whatever reason, from our normal social relationships.

Accordingly, we can leave the question of group consciousness open. But it makes sense, at least, to attribute moods to some human groups (e.g. moods of fear or festivity, exuberance or boredom), and commonly we do so. Applied to features of nature, this has been called the '[pathetic fallacy](#),' and it might be argued that emotion is strictly a matter of individual physiology – that humans collectively are incapable of feelings. But a good deal of historical experience says otherwise.² We can cite occasions when groups collectively panicked, or acted in a fit of enthusiasm, or in a mood of anxiety, exhaustion or despair.

4) A different faculty, also associated with 'consciousness,' is that of symbolic representation: the capability to recreate a version of reality (with an image, a diagram, a word, a theory) when it is not physically present. Human groups quite obviously have this capability – already had it when we were sitting around campfires chanting and telling stories. For thousands of years we have had books and libraries. Large groups have specialized institutions for the purpose. Collective representation is a human specialty.

² Some of which we have reviewed in these pages, especially in Chapter 6 on the run-up to the First World War.

5) Both for groups and individuals, a further faculty – probably implicit in symbolic representation – is what Korzybski called 'time-binding': the capability to build a remembered past, a hypothetical future, a hallucinatory present, a whole imaginary world in 'the mind's eye.' Though human groups could not do this if human individuals could not, our tribes and business firms and nations 'bind time' much more conspicuously than human individuals can do. For one thing, such groups are potentially immortal. For another, they evolve collective representations – languages, archives, libraries, and now the Internet – far beyond what single individuals could do. Indeed, groups constitute themselves with such collective representations in the languages they speak, the icons they wave or bow down to or mark upon their bodies, in the stories they tell about themselves and their ancestors. Bringing together the diverse desires, experiences and learned skills of numerous individuals, human group bind time by their very nature and purpose.

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Once upon a time, it was thought that only behaviour could be studied scientifically – that mind as such could not be studied at all. Today the phenomena of 'mind' are being studied with rigour and brilliant success, but it becomes obvious too that the central question of psychology is not and never will be a purely scientific one. Before all empirical study, looms the philosophical question: What counts as a mind? Which minds will we recognize, and accept as such?

The whole drift of modern psychology (and also of computer science and science fiction) has been to broaden and muddle our concept of mind: to recognize many distinct capabilities or 'faculties' of *mind*, but no such 'thing' as a mind – only bodies, and also groups (like ant hills or bee hives), with or without a central control system, that go about their business. Such minds may be quite primitive, or may possess extraordinary sensitivity and responsiveness to the world around them.

For convenience sake, we still speak loosely of minds as entities, and will doubtless continue to do so. In doing so, however, it becomes necessary to accept that there are different kinds of minds – running on different types of 'hardware' and with different capabilities. It becomes natural, then, to accept that human families, tribes organizations and nations are minds of a sort, to the extent that they make collective plans and carry out collective projects toward some common benefit (real or merely alleged). These collective minds may not be wise, or clever or genuinely public-spirited, but they inform us, envelope us and sometimes devour us. Like Susie the cell, we live our lives and die within a context that they maintain around us.

10.1 On the Grounding of Social Science

As it stands today, [social science](#) is more a family of disparate academic disciplines³ than a unified field of study. As such, these disciplines are thoroughly inter-twined and connected by their general field of interest, but divided as professional specialties by their disparate areas of focus, their methods and their terminologies. No blame, of course, because their research problems are very different, and because each field was developed within its own specialized culture, along its own trajectory – by people who were far too busy keeping up with their own fields to keep fully up-to-date on what was happening elsewhere. Still, all these fields are studying various aspects of one subject – human society and our social existence – and it would be good if there existed some common paradigm and language in which these specialties were grounded and their findings shared. The separate disciplines would keep their methodologies and technical languages, but would attempt as well to show a common face to one another, and to the educated layman and the general public. Doing so, they would show, at least, where scientific consensus exists, and where the problems and controversies remain.

I think the elements of such a paradigm are now in place, and have sought to articulate and summarize them in this writing. The following then are main features, as I understand them, of an emerging paradigm for social science. Few of this book's ideas are original;⁴ nearly all are just my paraphrase of ideas found elsewhere.

10.1.1 Human Sociality

1) *Suggestion* (attempted influence) is the basis of meaningful communication. What we call 'mind' (or better, 'minding') is suggestion processing, guided by a mindset evolved biologically (at the species level), culturally (at the social level) and experientially (at the individual or personal level). As a substructure of mindset, minding systems may construct and maintain *identities* – systems of suggestion on how to understand and present themselves, and deal with the world around them.

2) 'Mind' is an abstract concept that we can play as broadly or narrowly as we wish. My preference is to define it in the broadest sense that's useful, and then distinguish different kinds of minds by their peculiar capabilities and characteristics. We can say that any system with a mind will have the three properties of [irritability](#), [purposefulness](#) and [autonomy](#). That is to say, it will actively respond to its environment based on desires which it seeks to realize and beliefs about how to do this. In doing so, it will act on

3 Notably including [psychology](#) and [social psychology](#); [sociology](#), [anthropology](#) and [archaeology](#); [human geography](#), [demography](#), [economics](#) and [political science](#); [linguistics](#), [jurisprudence](#) and [history](#).

4 For what may be somewhat original, see Section 3.1 on Edwin Hutchins account of '[distributed cognition](#).'

its own behalf – influenced, perhaps, but not directly controlled by external signals, nor by any program that some other mind wrote.

3) We find it useful to attribute minds to some human groups for the same reason as we do for ourselves and others. There is really no such thing as a mind, because a mind is not a *thing*. But the attribution of mind helps us make sense of a system's choices and behaviours by opening the [intentional stance](#)⁵ as a mode of explanation. It allows a mentalist language of beliefs, desires and reasoned purposes to explain what the system has done, or to anticipate (not predict) what it might do in the future.

4) When people work together, or just spend a lot of time with each other, they create a pool of '[transactive knowledge](#)' which no one holds on their own, which may not be written down anywhere, but which they contrive to share between them. The application of transactive knowledge in a group's minding is called [distributed cognition](#). In loops of participation,⁶ the individual activities of these persons create a group, even as that group shapes or creates them. See Section 9.2.2 below on *Social Embedding*.

5) While we cannot *predict* the future (due to butterfly effects in the social process), we can *anticipate* relative likelihoods and prepare against them. We can identify the key issues of a situation – questions which overflow the existing institutions for learning and decision, and thus require the evolution of new institutions.

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

- We are born with great seductive charm ([cuteness](#)) to parents likewise prepared by evolution to respond with attention and care.
- We mimic not just overt behaviour but the intentions behind that 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.
- We come equipped with a palette of emotions (and [affects](#) – the physiological substrates of [emotion](#)) which include several (notably pride, empathy, shame and guilt) which directly subserve our sociality. Smiling and laughter too facilitate social interaction at least by signalling that “This is play!” and probably in other ways as well. We also come equipped with several traits which dispose us to learn, use and *play* with [language](#).

5 See Section 1.4.1.

6 See Section 1.1.3.

- Through the phenomenon of [stigmergy](#), communication by writing to-whom-it-may-concern messages on the environment, we offload great chunks of mindset to the external, physical world.
- Finally, we come equipped with needs for [pattern](#) and [meaning](#), and with [a need to impose these](#) on the external world and on the raw sense data of direct experience.

Although this human sociality is very strong, it also has severe limitations:⁷

- it is limited by our inability to feel the needs and pain of others, by the need for special empathy and imagination to do so, and by the relative weakness of imagination against the vividness of individual experience and feeling;
- it is limited by our variations of temperament and by our different aptitudes for the learning of social behaviours;
- it is limited by damage done to us in childhood by toxic parenting and schooling;
- it is limited by [akrasia](#), our weakness of volition and clear intentionality; and, of course,
- it is limited by the games we play, and by our private interest in their stakes.

Withal, we have the basic paradox of our species: the unsocial sociability that Kant pointed out, as we reviewed in Chapter 2.

10.1.2 The Social Embedding

The social embedding of individuals persons in society works on at least four levels:

- we are embedded through the requirements of *membership*, in families or tribes, and/or in large, formally organized groups (like nations and business corporations);
- we are embedded through the existing artifacts and infrastructure, and through our whole stigmergic environment;
- we are embedded through the transient suggestions in circulation, including rumours and current mood; and finally,
- we are embedded through the identities that we develop – the internalized sense of ourselves as individuals, engaged with other identities in a social world.

A *'person'* is an embedded human individual with an individual mindset and an identity. It's this [identity](#) (more than the organism as such) which can be said to think and to exist.

⁷ As discussed in Section 2.4.

10.1.3 In the Ecology of Mind

Mindset on every level has some properties of an ecology as Gregory Bateson and Richard Dawkins pointed out. It can be seen as a co-evolving structure of '[memes](#)' – packets of activity and ideation – which recombine and adapt to one another. In this ecology, memes become frequent in competition with their rivals simply because they are good at doing so, whether or not they are intrinsically valuable or good for their human hosts. The mindset of society – this co-evolving structure of memes – is one theoretical approach to what anthropologists have called '[culture](#).'

A science of society should begin with some idea of what it hopes to study: with some idea of what a society *is*. Well, we know what a society looks like: It looks like a lot of people doing things, making things, trading things, and sometimes getting angry and fighting with each other. It looks like people communicating with each other, partly through body gestures and speech, and partly through artifacts made for some purpose – or just made and left inadvertently, as a by-product of some other activity. This is how societies appear to us – as a matter of common sense, as we lead our daily lives. But they can also be seen as minds in their own right, that process and respond to suggestions much as we do, and that form their human participants in accord with their values and beliefs and purposes.

Why would we want to do this? Before answering this question, it bears repeating that we, as human 'individuals,' are composite minds comprised by billions of cells, engaged in primitive minding of their own. As persons, all of us are collective mindsets of our cells; and our lives are their collective minding. As distinct entities immersed in their fluid bath, the cells process suggestions and communicate with one another much as we do. In doing so, they somehow constitute our sentience and our humanity; and we are beginning to understand how they do this – as a purely physiological process, with no supernatural add-ons needed.

If billions of cells can group together into a conscious human person, it's plausible that the billions of human individuals on this planet also constitute a collectively minding entity, once it is established (as we have done) that this entity has attributes of mindset, and that it engages in the collective processing of suggestions. However, there remains an obligation to justify this effort of imagination. I will suggest five reasons why it can be worthwhile.

1) *Explanation*: A first point is that groups do things for reasons, not just for causes. To understand why a group behaved (or is behaving) in a certain way, we need some concept of collective motivation to explain why one policy prevailed against the possible alternatives. We need the intentional stance to understand why the group's motives together with its existing mindset led it to intend and act as it did.

As a paradigm for the social sciences and social life, this intentionalist approach complements [methodological individualism](#). This complement is

needed, because the latter leaves unexplained how the individual players came to hold the beliefs and desires that we attribute to them. All that is emergent in a group's behaviours is lost from sight when we treat its process as a game among self-interested individuals. We are not going to have a real social science, a real understanding of human social behaviour, until we get beyond the game-theoretic level (important as this is) to a level at which the mindsets of the various players are accounted for as personal responses to the collective mindsets of their respective groups.

2) *Anticipation*: Though we can never really predict what groups or individuals will do a year from now, or in a given situation, we can use the intentional stance to anticipate what they are likely to do – to avoid being taken by surprise.⁸ This stance affords the same advantage with groups that it does with individuals. Seeing the politics of a group as a kind of thought process allows us to speculate on how that process would function in any given situation – how it would perceive and respond to some given change or event. We can articulate this speculation in the same vocabulary of beliefs, desires, intentions and conflicted issues that we use with individual persons. In this way, we can form plans and intentions of our own to meet those of the group(s) that we are dealing with.

3) *Politics as Thought*: More specifically, group intentionalism requires us to understand politics as a thought process.⁹ As groups are often conflicted and almost never completely unanimous, there is no way that a group could be said to have collective desires, beliefs and intentions without regard to a political process and its resulting dispensation.¹⁰ A group discusses its current situation, frames and debates its current options, selects one or more leaders among the contenders vying for power, chooses and implements one option and shuts down its alternatives. Through such a process, collective mindset evolves and current business is handled by processing the suggestion that it presents. Group minding is always a political process, and by definition so, to the extent that members differ in their interests and preferences. As, in practice, and beneath the veneer of appearances, they always do.

Conceptually, we must distinguish the collective volition of a group from the volition and commands of its leaders, because these do not always coincide. We must recognize that the working dispensation need not be tranquil and harmonious, much as we prefer and hope that it be so. We must admit that the political process can become irrational and self-destructive, and that this often happens when group mindset is so seriously conflicted and/or out of touch with its reality that it becomes dysfunctional.

4) *Competence, Sanity and Ethics*: This stance of group intentionality allows us judge a group's perceptions, desires, beliefs and choices, its com-

8 See Section 7.1.2.

9 As discussed in chapters 4 and 6.

10 As discussed in Section 1.4.2.

petence, its sanity and its ethics, by the same standards that we apply to ourselves and other people: What does that system want or hope for? What does it need that it doesn't have? What has it learned to fear? What beliefs and general worldview shape its perceptions? What obsessions, passions and current moods distort its judgments? What institutions and skills afford and limit its capabilities? What internal conflicts detract from its coherence? What ethical feelings and guidelines (if any) set a limit to its pursuit of desires.

The perception of human society and its groups, as collective minds raises questions about our *relationship* with these minds, but in a modern, non-superstitious way. At the highest level, with regard to the whole context of life, it is no longer a question of asking favours, offering gifts and flattery, or seeking release from sin. But it is very much a question of how one listens and responds to a social mind which is by no means neutral or passive about one's personal hopes and fears and plans.

While such a worldview gives no political guidance, it may suggest a few existential conclusions about self-creation and a worthwhile human life: the value of a firm but flexible identity informed by history but not enslaved by it; with an alert responsiveness to changes in the fabric of society; with a willingness to respect and be informed by the beliefs and values of honoured ancestors without accepting to be saddled with them.

5) *Dialogue*: Finally, this intentionalist approach lets us to perceive our groups as mindful, self-interested interlocutors, that engage us in a kind of dialogue. Our groups tell us what they want from us, and we respond somehow. We either make ourselves into what is expected, or we rebel against the expectations. Or we invent some creative compromise or evasion tactic of our own – and sometimes a novel pathway or direction. We build and maintain identities, not just to meet significant other people, but to function successfully (or acceptably, at least) in significant groups.

The idea of groups as minding interlocutors thus deepens our relationship with them – opening questions like, “What are they saying to us?” and “How should we answer back?” The people who make great contributions (or do great harm, because it works both ways) are attentive to a suggestion that something is missing in their world. They hear a big message and act upon it. People who make small contributions are sensitive to what is missing in their families or neighbourhoods or work groups. To feel that life has meaning, the scale of a person's contribution matters much less than their sense of being called to something larger than themselves – if only to close relationship with another person. What Viktor Frankl called ‘*meaning*’ stems from a recognition that something is absent and needs to be found or supplied, or that something is wrong and needs to be repaired. We find that sense by listening well and then responding to suggestions of this kind.

10.2 Political Implications

Coming to the end of this long essay on group minding, the reader may be wondering (as I am myself) about the political implications of its central argument. Our conclusion has been that we are mistaken to think of ourselves as individuals who, *all on their own*, learn to function and cope with a physical and social environment. Innately, we are nothing of the sort. Rather, we are born as human organisms who gradually learn to function as acceptable persons, who then *may* become increasingly individuated, as a social environment teaches us – and gives us opportunity and permission – to do so. We are formed in a group mindset, which we largely follow and re-enact. But we also individuate to some extent – as we are moved to do so, and as best we can. Why does this matter? How does it make a difference to ourselves, and to the groups that we belong to?

To our groups, and to society as a whole, the person's potential for individuation poses a chronic dilemma. Primarily, a group wants members that it can trust to serve it, in the various ways that it demands to be served. It wants loyal, compliant, biddable members who will obey its rules and customs, follow instructions and help to further its collective projects. It may value initiative and individual creativity, but never when they 'rock the boat.' It will socialize and educate its children in this direction, to make them citizens of this kind.

In good times, when the group (and its leaders) feel secure and confident, it will tolerate a certain amount of dissent and dissidence. It may even build political institutions around the concept of a 'loyal opposition,' that disagrees with legally established policy but goes along until this can be changed. But when it feels threatened, it will 'circle the wagons,' and become far less tolerant. It will organize some form of '[witch hunt](#)' or [inquisition](#), as has happened from time-to-time even in the 'freedom-loving' United States. In the 1950's, there was the hunt for communists and homosexuals organized by [Joe McCarthy](#). [There are fears](#) that something similar is happening again today, as I am writing, under Donald Trump.

Even in good times, even without such episodes of panic and persecution, the dissident who hopes to help his group by teaching it something is still a dangerous person, likely to be treated as such – marginalized and harassed to some extent, if not actually imprisoned or killed. No group can easily distinguish between the loyal dissenter and the traitor – and for two simple reasons: First, the loyal dissenter may easily harm the group without meaning to – may easily give 'aid and comfort' inadvertently, to enemies who are also their own. But second, the loyal dissenter insults their group, undermines its collective self-esteem merely by implying that it is incomplete or deficient in some way – merely by insisting that it has something to learn. Modernity itself, with all its honoured scientists and thinkers, has been permanently offensive in this way, just by admiring critical thought,

coveting the fruits of novelty, and teaching a habitual, *prima facie* suspicion of faith, tradition and established authority to its children.

In sum, our situation is that real individuation enriches a group's collective mind, but also threatens it with a dilemma between stagnation and chaos. To the extent that a group suppresses individuality, it cannot learn and thus adapt to new conditions. No one can say that anything is wrong. No one can suggest how something could be better. But if a group welcomes individuality without restraint, it invites chaos. If eccentricity and novelty are always welcome, there can be no norms – no standard way of doing anything, which everyone expects, unless there's some intelligible reason to do otherwise. Back in 1951, Arthur Clarke wrote a [short story](#), once required reading for an industrial design course at MIT, to make this point. It told of an arms race in which the more advanced side is defeated because none of its weapons are ever perfected, nor given the chance to become fully operational before being replaced with something better.¹¹ And we might note that this dilemma exists not just in human societies but for biology itself, as natural selection could not work without generally established species traits on which occasional genetic copying errors will operate. Our modernizing, globalizing, high-tech world has not yet learned to manage the disruption and resentment of rapid change in ideas, technologies and lifestyles – which have actually been getting worse as the changes come faster and faster.

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For socialized persons, individuation will require effective resistance to context pressures from their ambient groups, and will entail a different dilemma. The group presents its own suggestions for what its 'normal' members will feel and do, and these will have to be resisted by anyone who intends to follow their own star and their own tastes. The dilemma, then, is between safety and ordinary comfort as against the discovery and indulgence of one's authentic inclination. You can live as a sheep or as a stubborn goat; and there will be costs and risks either way. You can "go along to get along, or "do your thing" come what may.

Typically, the choice is not so stark, although sometimes, it really is. Typically, we have our interests, our own beliefs and values and tastes, but also need to keep at least some minimal acceptance from a group to which we belong. Typically, life will require some compromise of our own proclivities with the demands of acceptable belonging. We'll need to keep on minimally good terms with our groups, while trying to be authentically ourselves. What follows is that persons and individuals will have a stake, not just in keeping on good terms with their groups, but in maintaining their groups as social systems with which good terms are possible. When we allow our groups to seek too much conformity from their members, we

11 The full story, entitled *Superiority*, can be found [here](#).

narrow our own range of choice: we cut our own possibilities for individuality and self-expression. We want our groups to be viable, effective and prosperous, but we also want them to be free. And we want to keep them able to learn from their own experience – and from individuals who have something valuable to offer. We want them capable of marginalizing dangerous dissidents – while leaving them their freedom to dissent.

For individuals who find themselves in a more rigid or hostile group – one which has no use or tolerance for their ideas or deviant suggestions – there is another political conclusion: While it is good to offer what you can to others, there is nothing shameful about necessary camouflage, and even less in prudent silence. Galileo made the right choice to recant before the inquisition when the alternative was to be burnt alive. Those cardinals did not deserve (and no one ever deserves) the privilege of killing a greater individual than themselves. So: speak your mind, but never give an audience more than it can tolerate; [live like a ninja](#) for the rest. The truth needs time much more than it needs martyrs.

10.3 The Hominist Achievement and Tragedy

Mirandola's [Oration on the Dignity of Man](#), delivered in 1486, has been called the manifesto of [Renaissance humanism](#). Its central statement, spoken by “God the Father, the Mightiest Architect,” goes as follows, and is worth quoting at length:

We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very centre of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.

It is a glorious vision of capability and moral freedom, and it can still inspire. Unfortunately, considered literally and in detail, it is a vision we can no longer share. Specifically, in light of what is known today, at least five of its assumptions must be rejected or revised:

- instead of a Creator God, we find a self-organizing cosmos;
- instead of living “at the very centre of the world” with a dominion over Nature, we find ourselves in a vast impersonal cosmos which

- always has the last word;
- lacking the absolute moral freedom that Mirandola imagines, we know today that human nature includes some definite instincts and proclivities, however vague and unspecific; and
 - we are not “neither of heaven nor of earth” but beings of matter and imagination both, and in chronic tension between them.

On the other hand, the splendid humanism of the passage still speaks to us, and the joint potential that it speaks of, for the angelic and the brute-like, is a feature we know all too well. At present, it looks most likely that human-kind will either [transcend itself](#) in some way, or inflict some form of [technological catastrophe](#) upon itself and the whole planet. Its collective mind now meditates both possibilities, and which it will decide for we cannot know. My guess is that it will be some unimaginable mixture of those possibilities.

Meanwhile, it seems clear that the story I've been telling here is essentially a tragic one. On one hand, we know:

- that there can be no human self at all without the sufferance and support of a natal group, and without the language and culture of a whole society.
- that without cooperative labour and a just sharing of goods, the lives of most individuals are precarious and nasty.
- that there can be no advanced society or civilization without a great number and variety of *public* goods, and without the organized governance that these require.

But on the other hand, we also know:

- that the production of complex and extensive public goods requires intensive organization administration, and the extraction/coercion cycle of stable government.
- that the persons who strive for high office must be expected to love power more than tranquility and peace, due to the nature of their work itself, which is inherently competitive, stressful and potentially lethal.
- and finally, that politics is a blood sport, ethically challenging and challenged (to refrain from saying outright that the persons who engage in it are often liars and thieves). A brute fact is that the game of politics is only secondarily about public service. More fundamentally, it is about the distribution of wealth and power, and about the prerogatives that follow.

The tragedy of our social existence – and of this social species itself – arises in this clash of facts about the human condition: On the one hand, we are required both by 'human nature' and self-interest to evolve and bind

ourselves into functioning groups which, in their claims to our loyalty and to the bounty of Nature, will be successfully competitive against their rivals. On the other, we also know that groups readily form collective beliefs, interests and intentions which may be toxic for many, or even most of their human members – for all but an elite ruling cadre that can pay an army of relatively privileged overseers to keep the rest in submission.

On this note, my account of group minding comes to an end. Human sociality, and the logic of interpersonal association being what they are, relatively benign and functional oligarchy may be the best that we can hope for in our present state – if we can find some way to hold that oligarchy accountable and prevent it from becoming unacceptably self-serving. But the rule of such an oligarchy is itself a tragedy to the extent that peace and happiness are purchased at the cost of great human ideals – of Christian love, of Mirandola's humanism, of Jeffersonian notions of democracy. Dostoyevsky presents the tragedy perfectly in Ivan's fable of [the grand inquisitor](#) as told to his brother Alyosha in Book V, Chapter 5 of [The Brothers Karamazov](#). He leaves its question open, and so will I.

We cannot know how biological and social evolution will ultimately resolve the contradictions of “Man's unsocial sociability,” but there is no reason to think that hominist evolution is at an end.¹²

12 See this [National Geographic article](#) on the future of evolution. See also the [Scientific American issue](#) of August 2014 on this topic and the [Future Human Evolution](#) website.