

The Idea of the Self

(July 28, 2004)

For more than two thousand years it has been the standing assumption of the civilized European man that he has a *soul*, something which is the seat of his normal waking intelligence and moral character, and that, since this *soul* is either identical with himself or at any rate the most important thing about him, his supreme business in life is to make the most of it and do the best for it.

Socrates, A. E. Taylor, p 132

I know that I exist; the question is, what is this "I" that I know? (Descartes 1641)

The soul, so far as we can conceive it, is nothing but a system or train of different perceptions. (Hume 1739)

What was I before I came to self-consciousness? . . . I did not exist at all, for I was not an I. The I exists only insofar as it is conscious of itself. . . . The self posits itself, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it exists. (Fichte 1794 5)

The "Self" . . . , when carefully examined, is found to consist mainly of . . . peculiar motions in the head or between the head and throat. (James 1890)

The ego continuously constitutes itself as existing. (Husserl 1929)

Any fixed categorization of the Self is a big goof. (Ginsberg 1963)

The self which is reflexively referred to is synthesized in that very act of reflexive self-reference. (Nozick 1981)

The self . . . is a mythical entity It is a philosophical muddle to allow the space which differentiates "my self" from "myself" to generate the illusion of a mysterious entity distinct from . . . the human being. (Kenny 1988)

A self . . . is . . . an abstraction . . . , [a] Center of Narrative Gravity. (Dennett 1991)

My body is an object all right, but my self jolly well is not! (Farrell 1996)

Quotations taken from Galen Strawson's essay Models of the Self

<http://www.imprint.co.uk/strawson.htm>

Herewith some notes on the concept of *self*, taking ordinary usage and then what we call "the ecological paradigm" as a starting point. The task is to explore the implications of this way of thinking for the concept of selfhood, and for the life-long projects of self-definition and self-understanding. Along the way, we'll need to consider how we relate to the selves of others, and how we develop an *identity* and *personality* to do this. Our central purpose is to survey what the paradigm has to say about pathologies of the self and our approaches to their treatment.

1 Talk About Selves

What does it mean to have or be a *self*? Which verb is more appropriate? Is a self something that people *have* (like arms and legs), or is it just the thing they *are*? Already, we glimpse the ambiguities in this word. We tend to speak of

ourselves as being *souls* or *selves*, but as having *bodies*, *egos*, *identities* and *personalities*. We will continue to speak of our “selves.” However, if by the *self* is meant some metaphysical substance that survives the death of the physical body, our ecological paradigm rejects the notion as anything more than useful metaphor.¹

The concepts of *body*, *ego*, *identity* and *personality* are all subordinate to that of *self* – which, having all these other entities as attributes or mere components, is simply the totality of what you are.

But what are you? Notice. We are not asking “Who are you?” The answer to this other, very different question would give some information about your social identity, placing you in some historical and sociological context. Rather the present question is, “What are you?” – that is, what kind of being or thing?” We presume that you are a *self* – similar in many ways to the authors of this book and to all other humans, but also uniquely different. You are a *self*. Please stop and think what this means before reading on.

In its most basic sense, the idea of a *self* cuts the universe into an outside and an inside, and establishes a distinction against every *other*. In the last analysis, any organism survives by maintaining its inside in relative constancy, despite all changes happening around it. Even an amoeba is a self of this kind, since a creature’s efforts – for homeostasis and anything else – cannot be squandered on the whole world. In large part, then, the idea of self defines a boundary; and a theory of the self must be a theory of boundary management.² Self and world can be thought of as a dialectical pair – each reflecting and creating the other. Helping clients learn to manage their boundaries more effectively and wisely is a large part of the therapist’s job.³ A useful self theory should clarify the nature of wisdom in this context.

Let us take it, then, that we need a concept of the self that is rich and robust enough to anchor all issues of boundary management. Immediately, we are

¹ e.g. for that which remains of a life within the memories and practices of others. In this metaphorical sense, selves may indeed survive the body’s death for quite a time.

² See Dennett ??

³ We speak of clients rather than patients, and use those scare quotes in the last sentence because we don’t want to commit to a medical model. In some cases it seems appropriate to diagnose a personality disorder or mental illness. In other cases it does not. It will be seen that the ecological paradigm sheds light on this issue among others. If the self is an idea that we have of ourselves, then a question for therapist and client and others is, “Does it help to get this individual to think of him- or herself as sick, or simply as troubled? The idea of sickness implies some impairment of function and excuses from responsibility. Such an approach may or may not contribute to integration and growth in a client’s self.

compelled to note that for many species, but extraordinarily so for our own, a living creature's boundaries extend well beyond its body's surface to include defended territory, symbiotic relationships, and/or pair bonds or group affiliations with others of its kind. Thus, we might speak of the biological self (or bio-self, for short) when concerned with internal, physiological processes like homeostasis and the immune system. But we can speak of the ecological self or eco-self when the whole of a creature's personal habitat is intended. Deficits and disorders of the eco-self show up in therapy as boundary issues or attachment issues. There is a large therapeutic literature in both these areas.

We also speak of the self as a character in its own life-story – as the owner of certain attributes and appurtenances, as a thing that does things, and to whom things are done. As such, the self is especially an object of the attention and intentions of other selves. Thus, issues of self-presentation and relationship, feelings of distress and fear and shame, arise in connection with this further aspect of the self – the common theme being concern with the way that others see us and treat us. In this sense, an idea of self is associated with various estimates: of what the self can do, what it can accomplish, what it can expect. Correcting grossly defective estimates of this kind is another considerable segment of the therapist's practice.

Thirdly, we speak of the self as witness to its own life and author of its life story. In this sense the self is conceived as a locus of viewpoint, conscious experience and existential continuity – the abiding entity to whom a life happens. It is a centre of narrative gravity, as Daniel Dennett expresses this feature. A tension between the centre of narrative gravity and the bio-self is at point when presenting issues involve, for example, repression and/or dissociation. The self as centre of narrative gravity is at point when the presenting issue is low self-esteem. It is at point in journal work and narrative therapies, where the goal is to help clients in the re-appropriation and re-framing of their own stories.

In all three of these senses, the idea of self represents a principle of coherence and continuity over the course of a lifetime and beyond. When we say that Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon and marched on Rome with his army in 49 B.C. we mean a particular individual who did this and other things, **and will always have done them**. We mean that the responsibility, consequences and memory of all that person's actions remain permanently attached to him.

But the self is not, as folk psychology encourages us to imagine, a durable kernel of individuality given us at the beginning of our lives; and it is not a control centre of consciousness. It is three things really or, more precisely, a single very abstract and difficult concept with at least three distinguishably different meanings:

- First, the self is just the embedded individual as a whole – enmeshed

- synchronically in a web of habits, commitments and relationships, and diachronically in a life history. Your *self* is just you, the whole of what you maintain and defend as you, as distinguished, not always clearly, from what is not you. When we speak of the self without further qualification, it's usually this *whole self* that we mean.
- Second, the self is what Dennett calls a centre of narrative gravity – a locus for the stories that we and others tell about ourselves, (that is to say, our whole selves, in the first sense.) As a centre of narrative gravity, a character in various stories, the self is then the locus of sensations, feelings, desires, thoughts, intentions and behaviours because we remember and tell ourselves that we have had or done them. In a word, the self is a locus of conscious experience (by ourselves and others) of a whole self. It is a locus of *self-consciousness* as we say, based on our conscious monitoring of the whole self.
 - Third, arising partly from our self-consciousness, but partly from our sensitivity to the opinions of others, the self is an abstract self-concept that human selves entertain about themselves, setting a context for all other thinking. Like other concepts, it is one that individuals must form (and sometimes alter) based partly on their own experience, partly on the pre-existing ideas of others, but partly unconsciously and spontaneously, based on no discernable thing at all. Remarkably, this self-concept has a high degree of causal efficacy, in that it sets a context for our emotions, intentions and choices. Also it is this third aspect of self – the *self concept* – that is available for work in psychotherapy: the talking cure. That is **most readily** available, we should say, because, in time, significant changes in the self-concept will lead to changes in the whole self, the felt self-consciousness, and the responses and narratives of others.

To avoid confusion we must distinguish, as has just been done, between the *whole self* (the individual, including both bio-self and eco-self), the *self-consciousness* (by one's self and others) and the *self-concept* (which are just components of the whole self). When we speak of being strangers to ourselves, it is just this last distinction that makes such self-estrangement possible. Notoriously, it is the task of a lifetime to evolve a self-concept that corresponds to the experience that you or others have of yourself (the self-consciousness or narrative centre of gravity), or to reality (the whole self). But it is indeed a philosophical muddle, as Kenny says, "to allow the space which differentiates "my self" from "myself" to generate the illusion of a mysterious entity distinct from . . . the human being."

Commonly, we fall into this muddle in trying to speak about the mental aspects of the (whole) self. We draw an artificial distinction between mind and

body, and then indulge a fantasy that the mind could exist without the body – perhaps would be more truly itself without the vulnerable, libidinous body making constant demands. Free of its body, the mind would be self-sufficient and immortal! It could float anywhere, imagine anything, and make its wishes actual in the mere act of thinking them! In any case, the mind feels more “selfy” than the body. You can lose an arm or a leg, and still be you. You can imagine yourself transplanted to another body, or without a body altogether. But you cannot imagine yourself without a mind, or with the mind of someone else. You would no longer be yourself.

To avoid the muddle, we must give up the fantasy that minds can exist without their bodies, and be careful not to speak of an individual’s self when we mean his or her self-concept. If we do speak of the self for short, (as we will when there is little danger of confusion) we should at least remember that the self we are speaking of is a mutable concept, and not some unchanging essence. The continuity and durability of whole selves and self-concepts is already sufficiently anchored by their connection with a living creature and that creature’s remembered experience.

Like other concepts, that of one’s *self* is comprised of recurring patterns in the mind. Like other concepts, it refers to various aspects of conscious experience: partly to a tangible thing (the physical body), partly to an abstraction – the mind, with all its feelings, thoughts and concepts (including, of course, the concept of the self),⁴ partly to the whole personal attachment system – the so-called *mitwelt* – beyond that. In this way, a perplexing circularity appears, one that we’ll have to live with. Inevitably, anyone’s self-concept includes that concept itself. Self-reference usually gives rise to paradox as the footnote to this sentence illustrates,⁵ and the self’s idea of itself is no exception.

What we understand by a self, then, is either some body/mind with its attachment system as a whole, or else an awareness and evolving concept of that system entertained by that system. For that organic system, such a self (i.e. self-concept) performs at least four biological functions:

First, it separates the organism’s world into an inside and an outside: To speak of a self is to distinguish what is part of the self from what is not – keeping in mind that there must be extensive traffic in both directions across a

⁴ We need not be concerned here with the metaphysical problem of reference – with what precisely it means to *refer*. But in using abstract nouns like mind and self and personality, we do need to bear in mind that these are not material things, though grammatical necessity compels us to speak of them as such.

⁵ *The information in this footnote is incorrect.*

defended, albeit fuzzy, border. In this sense, even very primitive creatures have selves, as we have seen.

Second, the self is the locus for almost automatic monitoring and internal representation of the organism's current internal and relational state. This representation is only more or less comprehensive and more or less accurate but, such as it is, it provides an organizing context for the creature's moment-to-moment behaviour. Most or all of the higher animals probably have rudimentary selves of this second kind.

Third, the self-concept also affords an organizing context for the longer-term plans of a language-using, time-binding creature. The illusion is created of teleonomic striving toward some willed outcome; but what really happens, according to the theory of neural Darwinism and the ecological paradigm, is trial-and-error convergence on a self-consistent pattern, guided by and becoming part of a causally efficacious self-concept. In a brain as in a jungle, the result is a somewhat unstable equilibrium, and an impression of purposeful adaptation. It is just this analogy that leads us to speak of an "ecology of mind." Indeed, it is just the point of our new paradigm that all open systems, including individual biological organisms and human selves are configured on ecological principles of dynamic equilibrium within some organizing context.

Finally, beyond its role as a provider of context, self-hood provides existential continuity and meaning for creatures (until now, only creatures like ourselves – so far as we know) with the capability to represent their self-hood as a working concept. For such creatures, a self of this kind is a biological need, along with nourishment and oxygen, since it can scarcely organize its activities without such a concept. The behavioural context of a social, time-binding animal includes a remembered past and an expected future, which are not just context for current actions and choices, but also "deep background" for attitudes, dispositions and long-range intentions and plans. As "sense of identity," a stable self-concept is also comforting – a defence against confusion and fear. Whatever we mean by "meaning" in life – Man's deepest need, as Viktor Frankl taught – it is this fourth aspect of self-hood that provides it.⁶

Thus, to say (e.g. with the Buddhists, or David Hume or Daniel Dennett) that the self does not exist must be understood as rhetorical over-statement to make a valid point: Human selves and self-concepts do indeed exist, in the sense that we can speak about them, and not appear to be talking nonsense when we do so. But the self-concept, though endowed with causal powers in a sense to be considered later, is not a "thing," in the same sense as a coffee mug, and it is nowhere near as durable or immutable as we may be tempted to think.

⁶ More on the biology of meaning below. ??

The self is always changing. It exists to be outgrown – connected beyond itself and transcended.⁷

If this is so, it follows that several of our most common ideas about the self are neither essential nor strictly accurate. At best, they would have to be considered ideal self-concepts, or self-ideals – useful enough for certain purposes but pathological if taken too seriously, or pushed too far. For what we find is that the witnessing self, the role playing self, and the agential, rational self are just three mental constructions: ideas we have of ourselves. It will be self-diminishing, even dangerous to identify too narrowly with any of these constructs.

First, consider the witness self. Though ancient texts like the Bhagavad Gita teach that impermeable witness is the self's essential property, and though disciplines like Zen meditation, teach practitioners to use the witness state, turning it inward or on the external world at will,⁸ the ecological paradigm would treat witness simply as a cognitive state, or as a kind of passive activity characterized by attention and consciousness. We speak metaphorically of that state as a kind of “centering” or as a quality of “detachment.” This quality can be advantageous – notably at times of strong desire, emotion or stress – and has been prized by many spiritual traditions, [including psychotherapy itself?]. It can also get in the way when immediate presence and action are called for.

But the detached state should not be conceived as what selves essentially are. When inappropriately or compulsively deployed, what we value as detachment becomes dissociation – a spontaneous, somewhat effective defence against trauma, but an unhappy way to live. >>.

Second, consider the agential, interest pursuing self – the self of the liberal philosophers like Locke, Adam Smith and Mill. Although we greatly admire effective selves of this kind, we feel that people should be more than this, though it is not so easy to explain in biological terms just why they should be more. But, at the limit we have a label for people driven too exclusively by naked self-interest. If they are not fairly clever and successful, we call them psychopaths, and lock them up. >>

Finally consider the role-playing self of Shakespeare and the sociologists. Here again, we value people who identify strongly with their roles, and prize virtues such as loyalty and dutifulness, associated with the role-playing

⁷ As the idea of “the ecological self” insists. See for example, ??
http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol2/ecological_self.html

⁸ Hence the affinity between swordsmanship and Zen for the Japanese samurai, and in some modern martial arts.

mentality. At the same time, the DSM has a category – Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder – for persons driven too exclusively by the need to do what is expected of them. >>

The upshot is that none of these notions, nor even the three of them together, affords an adequate basis for a complete self-concept. You are not just a witness of life's passing scene, not just a profit-seeker, and not just an actor on life's stage. The ecological paradigm suggests an altogether more complex notion of the self.

2 Rethinking Self-Psychology

Let's review that paradigm's main features: The body/mind is a self-organizing system – built and controlled from the bottom up, and not from the top down. Other than you yourself, your whole self as described above, there is no extra soul or spirit that runs your brain and does your thinking. The mind and brain are not two different things, but really the same thing from different perspectives. Having evolved through Darwinian selection, like every other feature of all living things, it is by no means a “blank slate.” On the contrary, the human brain has a distinctive architecture, with distinctively human propensities and limitations. It is not a general purpose learning-and-reasoning engine – although, when not starved or overloaded, it can fairly well approximate to such. More fundamentally, the brain is a Darwinian guessing device: a highly specialized heterarchical control system evolved to survive and transmit its genes.

This notion of *heterarchy* – control from the bottom up – must be the core of the new paradigm. Like the closely related notion of a self-organizing system, the notion sounds like a contradiction in terms until you get used to it. What is difficult to understand, because it goes so much against traditional thinking, is that bottom-up control is not the same thing as absence of control. All the complex systems we know, including brains, societies, ecologies and (very likely) the cosmos as a whole are organized in this fashion. Our problem today is to understand how such control can work – either on its own or in concert with coordinating facilities at various levels to approximate coherent intention and purpose.

What we know today is that a system can be highly structured, even pyramidal in its organization without being hierarchical in the strict sense of top-down control. It may be highly structured without possessing a command centre from which centralized decisions emanate. The body/mind would be an example of such a system working well. The democratic, capitalist nations of today would be examples of such systems that remain maladaptive in many respects. Heterarchical organization may be “Nature's Way,” but it is not a panacea. Typically, such systems are quite good at handling the sorts of

problems they evolved to solve, and very bad at others. We must get used to thinking of ourselves as systems of this kind.

The free-will problem⁹ can then be thought of as a question about the over-all governance of such a system: How is it possible for coherent choices to emerge in a self-organizing system? To what extent does heterarchical self-organization require and remain compatible with a degree of centralized coordination? To what degree can heterarchical self-organization approximate to rational purposefulness?

Finally, we have known for over a hundred years that *consciousness* is not nearly as important as was once thought in the body/mind system's functioning, most of which takes place outside of conscious awareness. Consciousness itself seems to be a kind of exception handling facility – evolved to deal with novel and/or difficult situations for which habit will not suffice. [Experimental work on coping with novelty??] What we experience as “stream of consciousness” is better understood as “remembered present,” a momentary time period [how long ??] in which selected features of a present situation, of relevant past and imagined future are brought together in a working buffer. The “stream” is an illusion – as in a movie, which is actually just a succession of static images presented at 32 frames per second. Thus, consciousness, our remembered present, is not like a searchlight that may be trained upon some object of attention (which we can do imperfectly, when not “distracted”), but more like a succession of “takes” on a changing scene. It is not a single, characteristically human, capability or function, and not an all-or-nothing proposition. Rather, it is comprised of several or many sub-systems or functionalities, some of which we share with animals, that one may have to varying degrees. It's clear that what we call “consciousness” can vary – in mode, texture, intensity, mood, focus, and other dimensions as well – over a very wide range.

To say it once again, there is no extra “self” inside you, controlling your mind or thinking your thoughts. Consciousness does not emanate from some “corner office” in the brain, where high-level reports are tabled and commands are issued. Rather, there “modules,” “work groups” or “agents” doing specialized jobs, and competing for influence at successively higher levels of integration. From these higher levels, there is a feedback of information to the lower levels and certain chemical context-setting functions as well. Crucial to this global context-setting are the mental phenomena of emotion. It turns out that feeling and emotion are utterly necessary to reasoned cognition, and inseparable from it. We see and understand things in relation to ourselves,

⁹ See ?? below.

always assimilating them to our previous experience of the same sort of thing. We do not see things as they are, but as we construe them. That is to say, we see things by assimilating them to some existing cognitive script,¹⁰ which always includes elements of remembered experience, including affect and emotion.

The implications of these ideas are radical in some ways yet, at the same time, leave things fundamentally unchanged – just as the sun continued to rise and set after Copernicus published his theory. The world went on as it had before, though we had come to see it differently. In some respects, a new way of seeing, a new style of interpretation makes no difference at all. The realities of life remain just the same; indeed, this is how we know they are realities – that they must be explained one way or another, whatever paradigm one uses. So we want to ask: What is altered, and what remains the same when the ecological paradigm is taken on board? Where and exactly how must our ideas change? The remainder of this paper seeks to address these questions in a series of notes on specific questions:

- the question of self-knowledge: What is Man? In light of our best current knowledge, how are we now to understand ourselves? Where do we come from? To what (if anything) do we belong?
- the nature/nurture dispute: How do genes, life experience and culture interact to produce “healthy” mental functioning, and sometimes mental pathology? What can we learn from evolutionary psychology about culture, society and the social order? What can we learn about our mental “blind spots” and vulnerabilities to self-defeating behaviour, both personal and collective?
- the role of consciousness and the unconscious: What can we know of our unconscious mental life, and how should we relate to the unconscious? What significance has the unconscious for the therapist?
- the question of authenticity: “To thine own self be true?” If we abandon the idea of “the essential self,” what does authenticity mean? Where do our values come from? Is man naturally evil or naturally good?
- the problem of agency: To what extent is it correct to think of ourselves as morally responsible agents endowed with free will? In what ways (if any) does this idea require modification?
- the problem of meaning: Where does “man’s need for meaning” come from, and how is it satisfied? What is meant by a “spiritual life?” How is it possible to practice a spiritual life without falling into superstition?

¹⁰ For example, there is evidence that we respond to a picture of a frightening situation with fear, before we become aware of what we are seeing. ??

Each one of these questions deserves a book, or at least a full-scale essay to itself. Here we'll attempt no more than merely to sketch the kinds of answer that seem to be emerging, and to estimate the shifts that must result both in psychotherapeutic theory and in ordinary self-understanding when the ecological paradigm and its clear consequences are taken on board.

What Is Man?

In public consciousness, human self-understanding remains about where it was when Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy*. Heaven and hell are mostly gone, the cosmic geography has changed, but people still tend to think of themselves as boundless minds and spirits trapped in finite, mortal bodies. This dualist paradigm was explicitly spelled out by Descartes in the 17th century. By the end of the 19th, however, the mind was being studied as a purely natural phenomenon, e.g. by William James and Sigmund Freud, and their followers. For science-minded folk, at least, the old "spiritualist" or dualist paradigm became quite obsolete, to be replaced by what we might call a naturalistic paradigm. In these circles, it came to be taken for granted that a mind is what a brain is doing, or that mind and brain are the same system considered, respectively, from 1st and 3rd person perspectives.

The new ecological paradigm of mind begins by taking the naturalistic perspective in full seriousness: Mind and body are not different things, but rather the same thing from different points of view. This warns us right away that the boundlessness of the mind is something of an illusion. Plainly, each mind is shaped and constrained by its body in many ways, of which mortality is only the most dramatic. [current research ??]

While this scandal, superbly discussed by Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death*, is real and very important for human psychology, the sense of outrage at human creatureliness results from a fantasy of cognitive omnipotence that is grandiose to begin with.¹¹ In fact, as discussed above, we can now see that

¹¹ After Freud and Otto Rank ??, Becker stands almost alone in his unflinching recognition of the fundamental insanity of man's state. While it became (and still remains) a psychoanalytic cliché that all men and women are more or less neurotic, Becker is pre-eminent in his analysis of why this is so: As an imaginative, symbolizing intellect, man conceives himself as totally free, potentially immortal and unlimited in his powers. As a naked ape who knows that he must die, who must labour incessantly to keep his body alive for its brief span, and who is driven by a feverish sexuality over most of this span, he never gets the chance to develop to anything like his full potential and must deny his basic absurdity in order to function at all. Accordingly, all human culture and human personality itself can be seen as a futile attempt at such denial. We waste our lives in heroic efforts to evade or sweeten a bitter truth that is already obvious to any child at the "Oedipal" age of four. The closure and crowning achievement of the psychoanalytic tradition, I believe, lies in this profound diagnosis.

The Denial of Death was written in the early 'seventies, as its author was himself dying

the dualist meta-psychology of mind and body as different substances was always a philosophical confusion. Though the mind/body distinction is useful, and too deeply ingrained in language to be easily escaped, for strict accuracy we ought to have one word for the system as a whole. A body without mind is meat, while mind without a body is just wishful fantasy.

The ecological paradigm conceives of man – this body/mind – as one self-organizing system, embedded in nature through a triple evolutionary process. Each self – indeed, each living creature – exists, as we now see, within a network of relationships known as the eco-system or ecology. For a human creature, this network exists on three levels, and at three different time scales – biological, social, and personal. To approach the full being of any human self, we must keep all three of these levels in mind.¹² On all three levels, the patterns of relationship are as much subject to the Darwinian logic of imperfect copying and natural selection as the evolving entities themselves.

On the time scale of genetic change, there is an evolution of biological relationships that drives and is driven by the evolution of distinct species. The creature engages in relationships – e.g. as predator, prey, mate, offspring and parent – for which its genes prepare it, and as its situation offers; but the selection pressures on these genes are a function of the relationships in which the organisms engage. When the creature's environment changes, offering or imposing relationships for which the creature is ill prepared, there are selection pressures favouring some genetic combinations at the expense of others. The crucial conclusion is that evolution, though not guided by any plan or purpose (other than the purpose of living creatures to thrive and reproduce), is somewhat less haphazard than may at first appear. Though the mutations and re-combinations of genes are unpredictable, each species (including our own) does not evolve just at random, in any direction at all. Rather it co-evolves with other species, pursuant to selection pressures resulting from its existing relationships and capabilities. In this sense (but this sense only), Lamarck was right all along. Giraffes' necks do get longer over many generations because the animals want to reach leaves on trees.

For the human animal, on the historical time scale, we also find an evolution of economic, political and social relationships driving and being driven by the

of cancer. We shall allude often to Becker's work as the baseline for the present effort. We take him to represent about the zenith of philosophical psychology as it was before the great paradigm shift toward sociobiology (also known as evolutionary psychology), neuropsychology and neural Darwinism began to produce important results. ??

¹² This section's discussion follows the last chapter of Christopher Badcock's *Evolution and Individual Behaviour*. ??

evolution of memes and whole cultures.¹³ >>

Finally, on the time scale of the individual life, we see an evolution of personal values, beliefs and skills that drives and is driven by the evolution of that individual's economic, political and personal relationships. >>

We come, then, to a view of the self as triply embedded in webs of evolving relationships on three utterly disparate time scales. Significant human genetic evolution is measured on scales of the order of tens of thousands to millions of years. Until quite recently, cultural evolution could be measured in time scales of the order centuries and millennia; but now things happen rather faster than that. Significant personal change, over the course of a lifespan lasting at most a century or so, is typically measured in months or years.

From this perspective, the familiar Freudian division of mind into *id*, *ego* and *super-ego* takes on a new, evolutionary significance: In Badcock's words: the ego [can be seen as] an Executive and Governing Organization (EGO for short) charged with responding to the Inclusive-reproductive-success-maximizing Demands (ID for short) of the organism. The super-ego would then represent cultural software acquired by identification and other forms of internalization, and could be seen as a Supernumerary Executive and Governing Organization (or Super-EGO for short).¹⁴ In this way, Freud's tripartite mind – and Plato's charioteer myth, for that matter – can be re-read as glimmerings of a complex evolutionary story.

Re-thinking the mind along these lines must entail some revision of our thinking in many areas, of which the following strike us as the most urgent or salient:

- What make selves the sort of selves they are? How do the genes together with environment and upbringing create a self? How should we combine or choose between physiological or cognitive treatments for a pathology of the self? This is the old nature-nurture debate. The ecological paradigm seems to give a handle on it.
- How does “unconscious mind” relate to the self and to the mind in general? If mind and body are to be thought of as a single system, we are compelled to re-think the notion of “unconscious mind” (oxymoron that it seems), and to own it as part of our identifies. We may no longer think of

¹³ Memes are defined (by whom ??) as units of cultural transmission. Culture, in a somewhat loose usage is here taken to mean the totality of memes lodged in a given individual's brain, or prevalent in some identifiable population.

¹⁴ Badcock, p 277

consciousness as an executive self, controlling the mind's unconscious processing – except for certain pathological portions that get out from under control. Instead, we must get used to the idea of ourselves as largely *unconscious* minds, of which only certain portions make it to consciousness.

- What are the goals of personal or spiritual development, which may or may not include psychotherapy, if there is no such thing as an essential self? What remains of the ideals of authenticity and self-actualization? Ethics (understood as the philosophy of value and “the good life”) will need to be placed on a pragmatic foundation. We’ll suggest that there is not and cannot be any single master value for life in general, but that wisdom, understood as integration and balance is an appropriate goal for psychotherapy.
- If there is no essential self inside you, thinking your thoughts, having your desires and forming your plans and intentions, then there is likewise no agent doing your deeds. So who does the things you do, and who is accountable for them? The answer is that we do them, just as before. Only, just as the thoughts themselves are the thinkers, so we discover that we are participants more than agents in our actions. “Life is what happens while you’re planning something else.”
- What is the meaning of life, if there are no gods to say what we are supposed to be doing here? Many believe that human life would be meaningless with no immortality to hope for, and no exacting gods to obey. For us, the ecological paradigm seems to confirm that the meanings of life must be sought in activities that feel worth doing for their own sake – that induce the cognitive state that Csikszentmihalyi calls *flow*.

In the remaining sections of this paper, we’ll discuss these points in greater detail.

The Nature/Nurture Dispute

As Steven Pinker documents in his recent book, *The Blank Slate*, the contribution of our genes to “human nature” is still a matter of hot dispute. In society at large, the prevailing view is that our genes affect the mind very little. The mind is a “blank slate” – a generalized learning and reasoning facility. Human instincts are few and weak; human infants are much alike.. What we become as adults is determined by the accidents of biography, and by the culture(s) in which that biography unfolds.

This view is roughly correct, but only roughly so. Human cultures and life situations do vary greatly. Human beings are extraordinarily malleable, and able to learn from experience, and to adapt the cultural memes they are exposed to for their own use. Hence, there is no scientific justification for the idea that our children, or we ourselves, are the mere products of our genes. At the same time, we know that genes do make a significant contribution to a brain/mind's development. There is every reason to suspect that genetic differences account for part of the variance in the way our brains are wired up, just as they account for part of the variance in other aspects of human anatomy. We don't want to make too much of these genetic contributions to human mental life but should not overlook them either, because doing so has at least two unfortunate consequences:

First, ignoring the biological unity of the human species deprives us of a basis for cross-cultural comparisons and value judgments. Admittedly, such judgments must be made with great caution, and often amount to nothing more than rationalized prejudice. But they are necessary all the same, however much tact and discretion they may require. It is impossible to live sensibly in a multi-cultural society if we cannot compare and choose between alternative lifestyles – and reason about our choices, based on some judgment that one culture is more successful than another in meeting human needs. Cultural relativism, the doctrine that all cultures can be judged only on their own terms, precludes such reasoning. Only by recognizing the biological unity of the species does such reasoning become possible.

Second, ignoring the contribution of the genes makes it impossible to understand the individuality of the human infant or young child, before culture and personal life experience have had much chance to work. Experienced mothers have always insisted that each baby is different – that each has some personality of its own at birth – and we must take account of the infant's genetic legacy to understand why this so, what consequences are likely to follow, what kind of parenting (or medical intervention, perhaps) will be needed.

We know today that the genes do not function like a blue print, specifying a configuration toward which the growing organism develops. They are more like a recipe book, providing step-by-step instructions on what to do – which proteins to grow – in given physiological situations. More precisely: What the genes (at the time of this writing) are believed to provide are a set of templates for growing some thousands of different proteins, along with switches for turning the cells' protein-growing capabilities on or off. Thus, to ask whether a given trait is due to "nature or nurture," to inheritance through the genes or to the influence of the environment is to misunderstand what is taking place. To any "nature or nurture?" question, the answer is always: "Both." It's always the

detailed working out of a growth process, as guided by the genes, but always within a succession of local environments, that determines which traits develop. Without a “good-enough” environment, the embryo – and later the infant, child or adult – could not develop, or even survive. Moreover, the features of this environment will influence, sometimes dramatically, just how development occurs. But the genes determine what development *can* occur: which proteins can be made; which types of cell will grow; which existing cells will survive or die; which anatomical structures and physiological processes will result.

All this is as true in the brain as anywhere else, and as true for human brains as for those of any other species. Growing brains configure themselves – wire themselves up, so to speak – partly in accord with the organism’s genetic legacy, as replicated in each individual cell, and partly in accord with local neural conditions. Since the “local neural conditions” are – are evolved to be – extraordinarily sensitive to the whole organism’s current threats and opportunities, the result is an organ specialized for cognition and control of the activities of this specific type of creature – an organ that resonates electro-chemically with its current situation, and triggers appropriate actions in response. The same is true for birds and bats and cats and people. Thus flying and (usually) migrating, and building and tending nests are in the nature of a bird, while walking on two legs, elaborating language and culture and demanding that life have “meaning”¹⁵ are in the nature of a human.

In this way, new branches of cognitive science open up. The field known variously as sociobiology or evolutionary psychology or genetic psychology (??) want to ask not just how the leopard got its spots, but how it got its stalk, its pounce and its contented purr: how genes favouring the development of specific behaviours came to prevail in a particular gene pools, what genetic variations are found, and what effects these variations have on the individuals concerned. These sciences are still in their infancy, but it is clear that both the commonalities and differences of behaviour within a given species are significant and worthy of study, that the genes have a significant cognitive role to play, for the human species as for any other, and that the inter-relationship between “nature” and “nurture” – between an individual’s genotype and his life experience – is never a simple either-or, but one in which the bio-physio-chemistry of learning and its purely cognitive aspects are closely intertwined. There is no clear picture as yet, of the role of the human genome in human behavioural pre-dispositions – in human sexuality, aggressivity and sociality, for example – but it is much greater than was once believed. It is quite clear by now that the human mind is not a “blank slate.”

¹⁵ See below. ??

Now, the speculations of evolutionary psychology cut in two directions. On one hand, they can be used as an excuse: I do this vicious or self-defeating thing because my genes compelled me, because this is the sort of animal I am. Whether or when the excuse is valid is debatable, but we must expect to hear it raised. On the other hand, these same ideas open a space for self-doubt and self-interrogation, reminding us that we are not quite the rational creatures we pretend to be, and identifying proclivities for self-defeating behaviours that may once have had reproductive value for our hominid and paleolithic ancestors. What we can do with this knowledge in the long run remains to be seen. Much will depend, probably, on the extent to which a creature with the brains we know ourselves to have can guide itself with conscious, responsible choices. The problem of the unconscious and the limits of responsible agency must be discussed next.

Consciousness and the Unconscious

That a great part of our mental life occurs below the level of consciousness was well known both to Freud and to William James, by the end of the 19th century. The recent research has only confirmed that we often perform actions without conscious intention, respond to stimuli that were never consciously perceived, are influenced by knowledge, beliefs and feelings we were not aware of having. The fact is still difficult to grasp, however; and we have not yet learned to acknowledge the unconscious as a part of ourselves, nor to listen respectfully when it clamours for attention. Usually, we attend to it only when it causes trouble, which it can do in a variety of ways: e.g. through psychosomatic ailments, troubling dreams, fantasies and associations, and through impulses and habits we would prefer to be without. Indeed, for the most part this is as it should be. Consciousness is a kind of serial processor that deals with what is presented to it one chunk at a time. The unconscious, by contrast, is a parallel processor that seems to work simultaneously on a great many different problems and with all the information present. There is no way an organism conscious of all that information could function in real time – that is to say, no way it could keep itself alive. On the other hand, many organisms seem to get along quite well without any consciousness at all.¹⁶ In fact, consciousness seems to be a very late evolutionary development; and we need to ask not only how it works, but what evolutionary advantage it confers? That understanding, in turn, might from time to time suggest advantageous reallocations of our resources for conscious processing: to make ourselves conscious of what is not

¹⁶ So far as we can tell, at any rate. ??

conscious, or vice versa.

But this is not the place for a discussion of consciousness, nor of the present state of knowledge regarding it. For that matter, much about it is still not known, though a few points are fairly clear: The first of these is that consciousness is not an all-or-nothing faculty; and it is nothing like a spotlight, to be aimed, focussed, brightened or dimmed under the self's control. Consciousness can control itself to some extent (as when we try to focus or concentrate), but it is usually governed by unconscious processes in competition for its resources. That is to say, it is mostly not governed at all in the traditional hierarchical sense. Rather it is ordered and stabilized (to the extent it is) through a sort of bottom-up governance, as the concept of ecology suggests.

I like the definition of consciousness as *remembered present*, which equates the “consciousness” of any system with its ability to construct a cognized world in its working memory. The richer the content of its working memory, the richer that creature's existential reality. For normal, adult humans, this working memory contains not only a present, but a past and future as well. Human beings are “time binders,” in Alfred Korzybski's phrase. Our idea of events since the beginning of the universe, and our fantasy of our own futures and of the ages to come may influence what we do in the here-and-now.

The power of human consciousness, the advantage it confers to make it worth its physiological costs, lies in the extraordinary flexibility this feature affords. Following Dennett, we can say that to have a mind is to be moved by reasons as well as causes. We can ascribe a sort of mind to any system that can be said to have purposes – to any system for which the “intentional stance” can be appropriate. But, to have a *conscious* mind is to have reasons for one's reasons. One's purposes themselves can be adjusted to better align with some prior purpose. The purposes of a *conscious* brain/mind are not merely caused – not merely implicit in its design or hard-wired by its evolution – but are susceptible to change for its own good reasons. A conscious mind has some capability to modify or reject its own purposes when it has reason to do so!

If a creature is to modify its own purposes, it must be able to estimate and compare the likely consequences of actions taken in their accord. This, in turn, requires that it be able to remember past experience, imagine future outcomes, and reflect on counter-factual possibilities. In other words, it would need a capability to construct alternative hypothetical time-streams of purpose, action and outcome as narrative, and then to compare these narratives for over-all desirability in a capacious working memory with the time-binding capability that Korzybski identified. And both the definiteness of choice – the uniqueness of one's present actual world – and the seriality of narrative would seem to require the sequential, one-thing-after-another representation in this working memory

that we associate with consciousness. We live in the world one conscious moment at a time, with one conscious thought at a time. But in humans, these thoughts carry an extraordinary freight of memory, expectation and sheer fantasy. And most of the processing needed for the construction of such conscious thoughts and moments goes on in an unconscious background – of which the conscious mind has access only to selected results.

Thus, even the Freudian picture of a conscious mind from which certain contents are repressed, or otherwise excluded, is not correct. Our actual situation, rather, is that most of the brain's processing is not available to consciousness, just as most information processing in a large organization never makes it to the conference room on the top floor. Rather, in both cases, stories and proposals compete for access to consideration by a co-ordinating faculty. In both cases, it is wrong to identify the organization as a whole with the intentions and choices on the top floor; and, so far as we can tell, the coordinating faculty of a human brain is rather less centralized and pro-active than that of a modern corporation.

Allowing our self-understanding to be modified by this insight must have profound consequences. As it stands, we tend to alienate – attribute to alien sources – the ideas and impulses that come to us. If we approve them, we call them “inspirations,” and credit them to muses, angels and gods. If we disapprove, we blame them on imps and demons. The stories are sometimes pretty and sometimes terrifying; but, either way, they allow us to evade self-knowledge and honest ownership of our feelings, actions and impulses. This practice must get in the way of authenticity – understood as self-transparency – to be discussed in the next section.

But owning the unconscious is something easier said than done. With or without the help of a therapist or guru, it is bound to be a difficult and time-consuming process – with insurance companies not eager to pick up the tab. I see three closely inter-connected difficulties, but can do no more than indicate these here, since the whole subject needs and deserves a full-scale treatment:

The first issue here is that several kinds of mentation take place below the threshold of awareness. To begin with, most of the body's physiological processing – heartbeat, the peristaltic movements of digestion, numerous glandular secretions, etc. – do not normally register in consciousness, and cannot be influenced by consciousness except with a great deal of training, if at all.

As well, many familiar activities and decisions are carried on automatically, with no conscious intervention, or with such intervention only at the uppermost level of control. Driving, eating and drinking, playing a musical instrument, catching a thrown object are familiar examples. Listening and looking, hearing

and seeing are as much so. We tend to think of such activities as mindless and mechanical, but they may be very complex and subtly modulated – never exactly the same twice. They are mindless only in the sense that the skills involved, and the knowledge backing those skills, have been practiced to the point that one need no longer be conscious of all the thinking involved, and where the movements are performed so rapidly and smoothly that there could be no time for conscious thinking anyway. At this level, we say that the master has forgotten what he knows; but, of course, we do not mean that he has literally forgotten it. Rather his knowledge has become so much a part of him – of his body/mind system: his whole self – that he is only conscious of it when he wants to change some aspect of his performance, or explain it to somebody else.

And then too, a vast amount of experience and verbal knowledge is somehow written into the brain; and here again, we are normally unconscious of all this material. By and large, memories come into consciousness – the remembered present of working memory – on an associative, as needed basis. Or there may be inhibitions in place against such recall, from what is called “repression” or “cognitive dissonance.” But, as Freud realized, the fact that a memory is barred from consciousness does not mean it is inert – that it plays no part in the individual’s mental life. To the contrary, may cause no end of mischief.

In all, we have to get used to the fact that the unconscious is much more than an oubliette for repressed material. Most mental processing, most of the time, takes place without conscious awareness and would only be impeded by such awareness. Consciousness must be thought of as special feature – a kind of exception handling facility – over a largely unconscious base. What is remembered, what is recalled, and how the process works is not yet well understood. But it is quite clear that the bulk of our mental processing goes on below the threshold of awareness and beyond any possibility of conscious control. Not only is “unconscious mind” not an oxymoron; we must get used to the idea that the mind – human mental processing or mentation – does most of its work without the supervision or direction of consciousness. Quite the contrary: what gets to consciousness is what the unconscious processes send up there. If we liken the mind to some magnificent ice cream concoction, our consciousness is just the cherry on top.

Second, to own the unconscious, the individual must develop a tolerance for ambivalence and (what might be called) ambi-cognizance – the mind’s competing and mutually inconsistent “takes” on its world. If one expects coherence and consistent purpose of himself at all times, and feels ashamed on noticing some feeling or fantasy that isn’t socially acceptable, or feels

inadequate when “of two minds” about something, then it is scarcely possible to identify with the unconscious – for which conflicts and indecent thoughts are a matter of course. “*Die gedanken sind frei*,” as a German song has it: thoughts are free. We can hold ourselves and each other responsible for what we do, not for what we think. Nor can we be surprised that thoughts run off in mutually inconsistent directions.

Elsewhere, I have argued that for questions of interpretation – almost all questions, as it turns out – the public “truth” is not a flat statement but a structure of argument.¹⁷ This turns out to be as true of intra-personal thinking as of the public, inter-personal kind. It’s in the nature of thought, whether internal or external, to explore divergent possibilities and evaluate these for possible costs and benefits. Decisions and actions have to be single-valued, but interpretations, cognitive “takes,” strategies for sense-making, can be as many as anyone pleases. There is no real need to decide amongst them until resources – including the body’s own resources of energy and attention – need to be committed behind one version of reality or some other. At that point, a difficult choice has to happen, and the better possible choices will probably reflect the various conflicting “takes” in some balanced fashion. Ecological systems tend toward some dynamic equilibrium. In ecological systems, as Bateson said, “Too much of anything is toxic.” (??)

In this way, our new understanding of the brain/mind system points toward a version of pluralism. Acceptance of the unconscious mind’s promptings as fully one’s own, requires a willingness to live with dialectical tension within the self – with the pull upon that whole system of opposing feelings, ideas and impulses. In this acceptance there is both stress and relief: The extra stress is to know that everything is thinkable, that nothing can be regarded as settled once and for all, that one always has a choice with consequences with which one will then have to live. The relief is to understand that one can be accountable only for what one does, and not for what one feels and thinks. Free will, agency, strength of character, accountability, belong to the category of action, and not of thought. To the extent these notions are meaningful (as, within certain limits, we shall find they are), they apply only insofar as we can construe ourselves as coherent agents, capable of weighing alternatives, arriving at a reasoned decision, entrusting one’s future to it, carrying it out.

Just here we arrive at a third issue – the real sticking point as regards full ownership of the unconscious. This is the concept of neural Darwinism, our paradigm’s central feature, which asks us to recognize that we are not the

¹⁷ *Sharing Realities: Toward a Philosophy of Conversation*, Richard Ostrofsky ??

absolute masters of our minds and bodies – indeed, that there is no metaphysical Self to be such a master. What we call the self – the locus of agency and narrative gravity – is a cognitive construction, arrived at (like any other such) as a pattern in a self-organizing brain/mind system.

Now, the logic of this system, to the best of our present knowledge, is essentially the Darwinian logic of trial-and-error: What we call the self – the whole self, the agential self, the morally and legally accountable self – is a system that understands and directs itself through a Darwinian process of imperfect replication and selection, subject to constraints by genotype and environment as described above. This pill is the really difficult one to swallow: In general, Darwinian theory turns our view of nature upside down, converting a top-down, designed world into a bottom-up, self-organizing one. The primacy of the unconscious and neural Darwinism, taken seriously, have just the same result for the self-concept, asking us to think of ourselves as bottom-up systems, driven by competing promptings of the unconscious – not as masters in our own skulls, running the show. We are not nearly as much “in charge” as we like to think we are – as we need to pretend to each other that we are. We try to “hold our shit together,” but may be surprised by ourselves at any moment.

This liability to surprise, possibly to unwelcome surprise, but also possibly to creative novelty, is just the core of the new paradigm.

Is it possible to think of ourselves in this way – as automatic information processing systems, supporting a conscious “remembered present” that evolved rather as an afterthought? Surely yes. We have just been doing so, and with practice it could become a habit. Is anything gained by thinking of ourselves in this way? The answer, so far as I can see, is yes and no.

Most of the time, the unconscious can be ignored. Evolution, by and large, has decided what we need to consciously think about, and who are we to argue? That which needs to be conscious is eventually noticed. That which need not be conscious is handled automatically. Usually, we can assume – and have to assume – that the “gatekeepers” to consciousness are doing their job well. We respond to instinct, follow habit, go with the intuition. . . and trust we will not be led astray. There are important exceptions, however. Sometimes the unconscious goes its own way – takes us somewhere we would have preferred not to go, or fails to take us where we had intended to go. We should at least be aware that such things can happen – and get to know how far the unconscious can be trusted, and in what kinds of situation it is not to be trusted. Part of knowing yourself – one of the most difficult parts, surely – is discovering what Wayne Dyer called the erroneous zones. In large part, psychotherapy aims, first, at making the acquaintance of these zones and,

second, at learning how to work around or compensate for them.

Creative activity, including art, philosophy and the practice of psychotherapy, also requires access to the unconscious. >>

The relationship between conscious and unconscious is a bit like the old chestnut: Does the dog wag its tail, or does the tail wag the dog? We have been accustomed to think of consciousness (the dog) as doing the wagging. Now it turns out that the suggestion to wag originates mostly in the unconscious tail, while the conscious dog either gives in to the wag, or tries to suppress it. How important is this to our self-understanding? No doubt the new paradigm's insistence on the primacy of the unconscious represents a blow to the conscious ego. At the same time it offers a sense of connection to something much greater: the innate energy and wisdom of the organism; the trans-personal sources of human vitality and desire.

Ideally, perhaps, there should be no sharp division between the conscious and unconscious. Ideally, they should work harmoniously together, reconciling internal conflicts as they arise, in such a way that all parts take turns at doing their respective "things," and getting their needs met. A Zen fable of such ideal integration is given in a series of drawings and verses known as The Ox-herding Pictures, or "Ten Steps in the Taming of a Bull,"¹⁸ and the fifth and sixth bear closely on our discussion: The fifth, called "Taming the Bull," with its accompanying verse, suggests double nature of psychotherapy, or any serious integrative practice: on one hand, to liberate the energy of the unconscious; on the other, to tame and domesticate that energy. The sixth, called "Riding the Bull Home," shows a man sitting on a bull's back playing his flute, as the animal wanders homeward. No guidance is needed. The bull can find the way for both of them. Here we have the image of perfect wholeness, perfect integration of mind and body, conscious and sub-conscious, no longer quarrelling, but in harmony. The aim is to transcend, somehow, the problem that Freud pointed to in his famous pessimistic essay, *Civilization and its Discontents*; and the Zen masters believed this to be possible. In fact, they taught a way of doing it.

The over-all suggestion of these and the other Ox-herding Pictures is that psychotherapy has a much larger ultimate goal than "mental health" – than the relief of mental suffering and/or dysfunctional behaviour. Its ultimate goal, in fact, as some of its pioneers understood very well, is to assist its clients toward a secular equivalent of "salvation," or "enlightenment." It is unlikely that "the talking cure" can accomplish this by itself. For one thing, some body work and

¹⁸ These pictures are easily available on the Internet and in books about Zen. For example, see <http://www.zen-mtn.org/zmm/gallery3.htm>. The drawings there are by Master Jikihara; the verses by Master K'uo-An.

group work are almost certainly needed. For another, protracted one-on-one treatment is economically prohibitive for all but a wealthy few. For both reasons, some kind of group practice, along the lines of yoga, martial arts or zen with talking sessions as needed, seems a more likely approach. But there is no reason why psychotherapy should not construe itself as a science of human integration and transcendence, and not just as a science for the healing of diagnosable disorders, covered by insurance. One result of the ecological paradigm is to afford scientific endorsement for such a project, and to place the quest for effective means of self-integration within a solidly scientific context.

Authenticity

The contrast between the classical and modern tempers is often framed in terms of virtue vs. authenticity:¹⁹ The ancients, it is said, subscribed to an ethic of virtue – an ideal of manliness (or womanliness) and right conduct that each was to live up to the best of their ability. We moderns, by contrast, subscribe to an ethic of authenticity as proclaimed, for example, by Shakespeare in Polonius’ speech to his son.²⁰ As such it has been a major goal of psychotherapy for therapists and clients alike: Therapists are supposed to model authenticity; clients are to be helped achieve it. And/or to “self-actualize,” another name for almost the same concept. Indeed, the profession has sometimes been criticized²¹ for over-commitment to the ideals of authenticity and self-actualization at the expense of more social and communitarian values. Never mind that much of this criticism is far from disinterested, and sometimes more than a little hypocritical. There is a serious point to consider – especially if it turns out that the therapeutic ideal is incoherent on a closer look.

Insofar as authenticity means following and keeping faith with one’s essential nature and self, this whole idea is undermined by our ecological paradigm, which rejects the idea of an “essential self.” The creaturely self encoded in the genes and studied by evolutionary and genetic (??) psychologists is perhaps as “essential” as one could wish, but few would want

¹⁹ See Lionel Trilling’s little book, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. In what follows, the word *ethics* is used in its original meaning as a branch of philosophy concerned less with obligations toward others (or even toward one’s self) than with the nature and conduct of the good life. So understood, the shelves of self-help books in any bookstore are ethical treatises, and psychotherapy itself is an ethical science and art.

²⁰ “This above all: To thine own self be true; and it must follow as the night the day, thou can’st not then be false to any man. Hamlet ??”

²¹ notably by Phillip Rieff in a book called *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*. ??

to leave it the sole determinant of human values or ethics. It's probably true, as well, that individuals are permanently shaped by the experiences of early life, and by habitual memes taken on board in childhood and youth. But apart from these pre-disposing factors, where would one look for an essential self – and why should these factors be granted an over-riding ethical claim? “The good life,” if this phrase has any meaning, is something each individual must invent for his- or herself over the course of a lifetime – influenced, to be sure, by the genetic heritage, and by the cultural and experiential heritage of early life, but surely not wholly determined by these, either as ideal or as fact. Part of a good life, surely is the freedom to make what one can of it. But, *a priori*, how could we recognize the authentic self until we create it, and then decide that it is *authentic*?

The ideal of virtue runs into a similar problem of essentialism – this time, on the social rather than the individual level. The notion of virtue depends on a notion of the essential Good that men and women try to live up to. Invariably, such a standard weights too heavily in favour of some abstract and finally arbitrary vision of collective good, and against the values of individualism and liberty.²² Converting all difference into deviance, this ideal has seemed to justify rigid social controls leading, in many cases, to real cruelty. Not to mention absurdity and outright hypocrisy, as men and women felt compelled to pretend to “virtues” they did not possess.

By contrast, the ethic of authenticity – developed in revolt against oppressive virtue – liberates society from such hypocrisy but seems to weight too heavily in the opposite direction – with visible results for the statistics on mental illness. [Research correlating mental illness with social conditions ??] Probably, we could do with some greater attention to collective good, these days, if the price were not too high in personal freedom. An ethic for today's world probably requires some middle way between virtue and authenticity that avoids the essentialism of both.

The concept of authenticity can be stripped of its essentialist baggage at the price of changing its meaning. We could re-define it to mean “keeping in touch with, and acting in accord with, the unconscious mind discussed in the last section.” We could then say, as we actually do, that someone is behaving inauthentically when strong feelings, desires or beliefs are not taken into account, or factored into consciousness at their true weight. We could say that a person is inauthentic if chronically out of touch with him or herself in this way. But we could never decide what would be **the** authentic thing for a given person to do in a given situation. We cannot “self-actualize” in the sense of

²² This point is already clear in Plato's *Republic*. ??

bringing to pass what was always essentially there. Rather, we are always inventing ourselves from an inventory of components, with more or fewer spare parts left over for which no use is found. Authenticity, then, would be a quality, but not a lodestar. It includes values of self-transparency, self-acceptance and ingenuity, and an authentic life is certainly no mean achievement, but it is not a true course toward some pre-established destination.

To our minds, the ecological paradigm – with its Darwinian suggestion that inner competition and conflict are just normal and to be expected – points toward an ethic of self-transparency and wisdom, and toward the need for a kind of emotional seamanship. If coherence, integrity, responsibility etc. are not the norm but high-order achievements of an impulsive and ambivalent creature, then “seamanship” is needed to navigate successfully in the shifting currents of one’s own mind. Self-transparency and balanced judgment are required if one is to live with some integrity and confidence amongst one’s own ideas and values pulling incoherently in directions that are not mutually compatible.

The problem, in every case, is to find a satisfactory balance amongst competing needs and claims. What wisdom means in practice, needs always to be worked out within the individual, and between the individual and his community because the claims are partly internal but partly social in origin. There are skills for working out such conflicts, just there are skills to handle a small boat in rough water. We learn (and mis-learn) these integrational, “seamanly” skills as children, and may find them inadequate as adults – either because our skills are defective, or because the emotional waters are too rough, or for both reasons together. Here the therapist comes in: a kind of professional friend, who contributes a trained ear and external perspective to the client’s troubled processing, and who may offer remedial training in emotional seamanship.

There are two points for our profession here, beyond the present writing’s scope:

First, the idea that ambivalence and inner conflict are our normal state suggests an alternative to the medical model of psychotherapy. On its telling, the therapist is not so much a healer as a kind of mediator. “The talking cure” is not a “cure” at all, but a facilitation of obstructed or tangled thought processes, when needed balance is lacking. It becomes easy, then, to understand why work with a therapist may be helpful – even when there is no “pathology” to be “cured.” The medical model makes sense when physiological processes need chemical rebalancing. It may be useful when clients need to forgive themselves (or be forgiven by society) for actions beyond their control. Luis >>

Second, dismissal of the notion of an essential self with acceptance of inner

conflict as the normal condition seems to demand a replacement of authenticity by wisdom as the ideal and goal of psychotherapy. Luis >>

Agency

Perhaps the central result of our ecological paradigm is to remove the agent from our concept of agency. Since there is no self other than the body/mind system as a whole, there can be no agent as such. People sometimes construe themselves as agents, and agency often happens, in the sense that things get done. Sometimes people do them; sometimes, as Lao Tzu anciently noted, it seems more apt to say the things did themselves. But, in either case, the agent as Westerners have tended to conceive him is merely an abstraction – sometimes useful, sometimes confusing. In nature, there are no agents with clear desires and intentions, eyes on the ball, focussed exclusively on the task at hand. There are distractible, multiply motivated people doing things, who sometimes put themselves into agential mode – more or less successfully. We engage in agency; we may think of ourselves, or of one another, as mere agents; but we are not really agents, and only think of ourselves in that way to the extent that we confuse ourselves with our roles, or with what we happen to be doing. “One would say the child is playing with the ball, were it not equally true that the ball is playing with the child!”²³

The point is more than a verbal quibble because, when an individual construes him or herself as an agent at the performance of some task, there are significant cognitive and emotional consequences. And these are lost from sight, and thence from conscious discretion and judgment, if it there is a core belief assumed that the self is an agent, just waiting to be put to work. Indeed, there are people who construe themselves as agents so unreservedly that they feel empty until someone gives them a job to do. And there are people who use agency as a defence against more urgent personal business that they would prefer to dodge or postpone.

Again there are two points in need of further development. The first is that *doing* is a much smaller idea than *being*; its possibilities only a subset of what is possible. Of course, there is always work to be done, and you can construe yourself as an agent to get it done, but there are many other options: You can be a curious child, playing with a toy for the joy of doing so; a voluptuary, basking in sensual pleasure; a sufferer of misfortune, whether deserved or not; a pilgrim in the universe, praising the powers that made you; a buddha, watching the grass grow, and contemplating the suchness. None of these possibilities involve significant agency; they are aspects of what we are, and not

²³

As the Master says to Eugen Herrigel in *Zen and the Art of Archery*.

of what we get mobilized to do.

The second point is that agency itself is a more complex notion than is usually understood. It involves something more than exerting effort to get a task accomplished. We can act upon and alter situations to some extent, but they also act on us. Sometimes things come out as we want; sometimes we have to reconcile ourselves to the way things are. Sometimes agency miscarries, and the outcome is unexpected. The trick is always to figure out which way the energy is flowing and then add a little something to make things go your way. In fact, our concept of agency puts too much emphasis on the uses of autonomous power and not enough on those of responsive engagement and suasion. Among therapists, of course, it is a truism that clients are helped mostly through empathetic listening and not with good advice. Yet for the labourer too, there is a skill to using tools correctly so that they do as much of the work as possible. Most obviously, for the executive and the statesman also, leadership is a matter of working with other people's energies and not against them. As much as possible, people are to be dealt with in harmony with their own interests, inclinations and capabilities. Above all, effort and power must not be squandered because, expended in one area, it will not be available somewhere else. Demonstrations of power are apt to backfire. And even a victory may prove impossible to sustain.

The question of free-will is also relevant here, but the upshot of neural Darwinism on that issue is not what is often feared. It's a philosophical error to worry that understanding of the brain/mind system (let alone bare recognition that it is a system) would deprive us of our freedom as sapient beings. Daniel Dennett, has devoted three whole books²⁴ to this matter – obviously one of his real concerns about the consequences of his ideas. His broad conclusion has been that “the varieties of free-will worth wanting” are not diminished by a naturalistic account of the brain/mind system with the Darwinian, self-organizing processes we find there. In effect, he resolves the free-will problem by drawing a distinction between metaphysical freedom and functional freedom (though these are our terms, not his). We are not free in the absolute, metaphysical sense that our behaviours have no antecedent causes. Indeed, Dennett is at pains to show that such metaphysical freedom could not provide the moral responsibility we need. However, most of us are free in the pragmatic or functional sense of being capable of doing things for intelligible reasons – “because it seemed like a good idea at the time.” *Cause* and *reason* are not mutually exclusive, but simply alternative modes of explanation – just as

²⁴ Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting, The Intentional Stance, and Freedom Evolves. ??

Aristotle thought.²⁵ Not everyone is convinced by this analysis [examples ??], but to us it seems correct. As Hume saw long ago, causality in the material universe (including the human brain) is quite compatible with that brain's ability to make choices for its own good reasons. One need not posit a "ghost in the machine" to make room for the autonomy we want and need, and for the moral responsibility society needs.

Dennett sees personal coherence and responsibility – and would see agency itself, for that matter – as memes that society encourages or enforces, and that individuals take on board, for excellent practical reasons. As very young children most of us learn that it will not do to function and present ourselves to others simply as bundles of competing impulses, even if that is what we most fundamentally are. We get more of what we want, first from our doting caregivers and, eventually, from the world at large, if we can learn the skills of pursuing one thing at a time, accepting delays in gratification, putting up with frustrations, living up to norms, expectations, promises and agreements – and, generally, if we constitute and present ourselves to others as coherent, responsible persons. Just how complex these skills are is measured by the number of people who fail to master them. But the point for now is that most people do gain sufficient mastery of these skills to keep themselves out of trouble. As Dennett puts it, "The self is a system that is *given* responsibility, over time, so that it can reliably be there to *take* responsibility, so that there is somebody home to answer when questions of accountability arise."²⁶ The political implication is that responsibility and accountability are values we teach each other. If we fail to teach them to our leaders, we must not be surprised if they don't have them.

In light of all this, it might be best to recast the discourse of agency, free-will and moral responsibility in different terms entirely. For one thing, the brain has been said to have "free won't" more than it has free will. It receives suggestions from various quarters and gets to say yes or no to these. Its powers of creativity are largely unconscious and combinatorial, while the ability to consciously generate really new images, metaphors and ideas is very rare if it occurs at all. (For example, our experience of writing is largely a matter of blurring ideas onto the page, then editing out the garbage and polishing up what's left. The thought processes involved, insofar as they are conscious, are rather more negative than positive. This may be why most children lose their wonderful creativity as they acquire the skills, knowledge and experience

²⁵ In ?? Aristotle speaks of four types of cause. His "final causes" are what we now call "reasons."

²⁶ *Freedom Evolves*, Dennett p 287 (author's italics) ??

necessary to place that creativity in a public context, and render it meaningful to others.)

Rather than agents, it might be more accurate and, in the long run, more productive, to think of ourselves as *participants* in the situations that we seek to understand and influence. A great deal of human experience points in this direction, and our new paradigm agrees: The idea of the agent doing things is, at best, a useful abstraction, but often a misleading one. The body/brain/mind engages with larger systems, and resonates with them. Work gets done, but there is no agent-self to do it.

Meaning

The Darwinian theory is a scientific theory, and a great one, but that is not all it is. The creationists who oppose it so bitterly are right about one thing: Darwin's dangerous idea cuts much deeper into the fabric of our most fundamental beliefs than many of its sophisticated apologists have yet admitted, even to themselves ... There are vigorous controversies swirling around in evolutionary theory, but those who feel threatened by Darwinism should not take heart from this fact. Most- if not all- of the controversies concern issues which are "just science"; no matter which side wins, the outcome will not undo the basic Darwinian idea. That idea, which is about as secure as any in science, really does have far reaching implications for our vision of what the meaning of life is or could be. Daniel Dennett, Darwin's Dangerous Idea, Evolution and the Meanings of Life

Man's deepest need is for meaning, Victor Frankl told us, and he is probably correct. Without meaning there is no action; and without action there is no life. One needs a reason to get up in the morning; one needs a reason to get out of bed. The mainspring of all activity must be an implicit value judgment that a possible future state – the one desired and worked toward – is preferable to one's current state. Such judgments can be directly physiological, as when one salivates at the smell of dinner or jerks one's hand away from a hot stove; but in man it is usually mediated by symbolic forms. Like kindergarten children, we work for "gold stars," more than for monetary gain, and use a good part of actual income to purchase token satisfactions of our need for self-esteem. As Becker and others ?? have pointed out, the inability to strive for purely symbolic satisfactions puts us at risk for clinical depression. For what is depression, finally, but the inability to exert oneself for rewards that life has to offer – in face of the fact that all rewards are symbolic after material needs are satisfied. The bare continuance of life can scarcely help but seem "weary, stale, flat and unprofitable," if not rendered meaningful by meaningful activity.

The odd thing is that our propensity to work for symbolic satisfactions should have evolved – since this trait, at first sight, might not seem conducive to the creature's inclusive fitness. Yet it must have been; and it is not hard to

imagine how: Trophy mates and numerous offspring have usually been sources of social status and self-esteem, and would have to be to justify the effort involved. For every Tamino and Pamina – every shaman, priestess, artist or philosopher who sacrifices or limits their reproductive career, abandoning the genetic game to compete more intensely in the memetic one – there are, and have always been Papagenos and Papagenas by the hundred who draw status and pride from their families. And, at least until very recently, even the Taminos and Paminas of this world probably gained inclusive fitness in providing cultural services to their genetic kin. Thus, the human willingness to work and sacrifice for purely symbolic satisfactions has more Darwinian logic than may first appear.

That the sense of meaning is a necessity of life was understood long before the ecological paradigm emerged. Rather, that paradigm's impact is to undercut some traditional ideas about life's meaning and suggest some new ones.

First, like almost every other major development in science since the time of Copernicus, its effect is to further erode the sense of an anthropocentric, mythically organized universe. Indeed, for Aristotelian, Christian or Muslim world-views, neural Darwinism and the theory of self-organizing systems are the last straw, leaving no room for a Creator God, divine purpose, the immortal soul, or justice in the hereafter. This life is all we have – to make of what we can. Nor do we have complete freedom even in this, for we are creatures of a certain kind shaped by our own biological natures, and by a world as we find it – a social world, in particular, that has evolved so quickly as to be no longer a suitable habitat for the human organism. But that's the world we have to cope with somehow. That is the bad news.

But it's also the good news. The self-creating world discovered by science is by far the richest and most interesting creation story ever told, telling us more about ourselves and our habitat than any scripture, and offering many more suggestions for creative activity. The new story's conclusion is that the world and we ourselves are ours to shape – subject to the constraints of our own biological and cultural horizons, that world's own nature, and other people pushing for something different. Given those limitations to work within, we have to make what we can of life, live with what we make, and learn what we can from this for our own or our children's benefit. We are as much a part of the natural world as any other creature. We have much right as any other to try to live and thrive according to our nature. Since this nature is highly versatile, but not infinitely so, our existence is open-ended in a way that can be said of nothing else.

We are neither intruders in nature's innocent garden, nor spoilers of a divine plan. We are, from our own perspective, just what this corner of the universe

has gotten to so far: no more and no less. We need feel no shame or guilt for being here.

Conclusion

Where does this ecological paradigm take us? How are we now to see ourselves? If the self is not to be thought of as a metaphysically durable entity, then what is it? What constraints delimit the autonomy of a self, to make it the kind of self it is? What are its prospects and possibilities? What can it hope for?

Though language compels us to name the self as if it were some real thing distinct from the body/mind system that it inhabits, the word does not name a separate entity within the brain or mind, but just the whole functioning system and process. To say it once again, your self is just you, all of you, the whole body/mind system. As such, we can see it as comprised of biochemical and physiological sub-systems that have collectively the extraordinary properties of being *alive* and *mindful*. It is itself participant in various higher-order systems, notably: the biosphere of the Earth, this blue-green planet; the “socosphere” of human relationship and history; the “ontosphere” (so called to emphasize the sheer wonder of its *Being*) of a physical universe that appears to self-organize at every level. The point is not to reduce the self to “just a soup of chemicals,” but rather to naturalize the amazing thing we know ourselves to be – to see the strange, unexpected properties that a soup of chemicals can take on, and to reveal how these occur, how they are possible.

Surely the oddest thing about the human self-process is that it forms and sustains a concept of itself – amongst all the other feelings, concepts, beliefs etc. that its brain/mind sub-system can entertain. Like any other concept, that of the self must be evoked in a remembered present – the mind’s consciousness – sometimes with greater intensity and detail, sometimes with less. This self-concept is influenced partly, of course, by the individual’s own experience (of his or her whole self), but partly also by suggestions received from others. Constantly subject to such modifying influences, it must constantly be defended and lived up to since others set high value on coherence and consistency, even if the individual does not himself do so. To meet these requirements, the self-concept tends to work as a context of broad policy against which values are organized and specific choices made. Actual decisions are taken, largely automatically, by the whole self, not by the conscious self-concept. There is no extra *self* inside the self; and none is needed.

The self-concept is an idea, a pattern in the mind. In this respect it’s just like all our other ideas, though more influential and strongly held than others. We can think of the self-concept as an interpretation, as the individual’s

strategy of understanding for his or her self. As with any other matter for which multiple perspectives are possible, the self-concept cannot be a flat Aristotelian truth, but a whole structure of argument amongst competing viewpoints. There are better and worse ways to understand one's self, more or less truthful ways. It is entirely possible to be deluded about one's self, and many people are; but there is no plain truth to tell about it. Since experience is constantly unfolding, and perspectives constantly shifting, we spend a lifetime discovering what we are. One thing to hope is that we may actually succeed in doing so.

At issue here is just the contribution of neuropsychology and its ecological paradigm to the individual's self-concept. This will depend, of course, on the extent to which that paradigm is taken on board. Both therapists and their clients will make what they want of it – as with any ideas that come along. We can only suggest where these ideas may point.

We learn, then, that the largest part of the self is not conscious, since much of it is not accessible to the remembered present, and much that could be is seldom or never called. We learn that double-mindedness and inner conflict are the normal state; so it is only to be expected that people will sometimes feel pulled in different directions, and have difficulty reaching the decision they prefer to live with. We learn that the self's ability to carry through on long-term projects, deliver on its promises, live up to its own ideals or abide by law, is more fragile than we tend to think. What we call *integrity* – the moral responsibility of a well-integrated self – is not a given of human nature but a great achievement that depends on upbringing and moral luck²⁷

We learn that the self is a biological organism, a functioning physio-chemical system, whatever else it is. But as such, it is richly connected to the world outside its own skin. As an organism, it is the outcome of some millions of years of primate evolution and before that, of the whole history of life on Earth. The mind generated through its functioning is furnished with cultural patterns also developed by a kind of evolution. As an individual person, it is thus embedded in, and, in some sense, continuous with, or actually the same kind of thing as the whole world it lives in. It exists in and through the network of its relationships – above all, because it is the changing pattern of relationship that drives all processes of evolution by setting terms for evolutionary selection. The rapidity of our cultural, as compared with biological evolution is due to the extraordinary freedom that humans have, much more than any other creature, in forming and altering our patterns of relationship.

The creative principle of our world – call it name like *God*, if you wish –

²⁷ The concept of *moral luck* is worth a footnote. ??

should not be thought of as a kind of super-person, calling the universe into being by ordaining that it be so. There are no sky hooks, as Dennett says. There is no heavenly Daddy who loves you. There is, however, a lovely resonance between the self-organization of the universe, and that of the brain/mind and of society. The ancient principle of “As above, so below” is vindicated remarkably by fractal theory, but there is nothing mystical about it. It seems that the boot-strapping principle of self-organization is much the same at every level. We truly are a part of the universe around us; and to best of present knowledge, we truly do seem to mirror in our own lives the same principle that formed everything else.

As a species we should understand ourselves as a work in progress – not as a perfect creation sadly fallen from grace. We are wonderful and wretched at the same time, mostly because not well adapted to the society we’ve created: clever primates, well suited to hunting-and-gathering in bands no larger than a few hundreds, who now must master the complexities and anxieties of a post-industrial world. How many of the disorders that therapists treat are caused or sustained by the endemic stresses of that world? How many of these stresses derive from pathological attitudes and habits of leaders who themselves should be in therapy – if not locked away in asylums? [research on public mental health??] Obviously, such questions belong more to political theory than to clinical psychology. Their relevance here is merely to point at the constraints of history and social structure on the development of the self.

Finally, we have a self-understanding that accords neither with the absolute groundedness of traditional religious world views, nor with the radical freedom of the existentialist philosophers. For the first time, there is a context for the human story, grounded not in religious “revelation” but in well-established science – specifically in Darwinian sociobiology and the theory of self-organizing systems. For those who care about the difference, there is plainly no comparison in the comprehensiveness and rigour of the story that can now be told. At the price of giving up some pleasant myths, we now have some real knowledge – admittedly not complete – of what we are, and how we got here. Actually, we need not even give up the myths – and probably should not, since it is impossible to understand our tribal histories without them. But it is at least necessary to recognize them for what they are, and withdraw from them their self-proclaimed authority. At their best, they are good stories with some human wisdom in them. Nothing more.

Unsurprisingly, the present, biological story confirms and continues a trend toward pluralism that began in the age of Copernicus when the Earth ceased to be the centre of the universe, and became just one planet among the others. Secularism is a corollary: Community of belief can no longer be a basis for

human society because there can be no master narrative through which a uniform conception of the human self is justified and grounded.. The story of self-organization is not a master narrative in this sense, since it operates on too vast a scale to be useful for human purposes. We cannot know where the process is going, nor does it following any plan. For practical purposes, on any conceivable human time scale, anything is possible. Some things are more likely than others; some things more feasible; some things more conducive to human welfare and happiness. That is about all we can say, but it is the sufficient and appropriate basis for public policy.

At the same time, we cannot accept the radical, existentialist vision of pure self creation in a moral vacuum. The human creature is not a blank slate. We are born with the pre-disposition to live – and to live by some variation on distinctively human themes. A few million years of primate evolution, a few thousand years of cultural evolution, and the sheer happenstance of being born to certain parents in a certain place at a certain time situate each individual within some definite horizon of physical and cognitive possibilities. With such insight as we can muster to frame a serviceable self-concept, and with such functional free will as we possess to weigh our choices as they come up, we do indeed create ourselves – but always already thrown into some pre-existing situation, not of our making, that we must build on, as best we can.

Over-all, it will be seen that a major result of the ecological paradigm is to bring an ancient idea of the Chinese Taoists – the self-so, that which happens by itself²⁸ – into the mainstream of Western thought. In contemporary terms, what Lao Zi calls self-so we would think of as [the state of] a self-organizing system. What he calls the *Dao* (literally, the Way or Path), we would describe as the meta-stable trajectory of such a system. For Lao Zi and classical Chinese thought, the concepts of *Dao* and *zi ran* (self-so) take the place of what we Westerners have thought of as “the laws of nature.” The difference in these metaphors marks the watershed between the Oriental and Western traditions of thought about nature and human life.

For Westerners, from Plato’s time almost until the present, it was taken for granted that “the laws of Nature” were edicts of God, and that creatures and things in nature were imperfect imitations of God’s pre-existent ideas. Thus, Western thought has been characterized, for better and for worse, by an orientation from the top downwards – a *devolution*, one might say, from the realm of pure ideas to the material and secular, with a corresponding aspiration to ascend the chain of being and reach heaven. Only with Adam Smith and

28

The Chinese is *zi ran*, literally ??

Darwin did Western people begin to speculate that organized form might compose itself from the bottom up. And only within the last 30 years or so have we begun to apply this concept of the self-so, of bottom-up self-organization, as a fundamental approach to science – e.g. in chemistry and physics, in embryology, neuro-psychology, and psychology, in cultural anthropology and in political theory. We are concerned here with the implications of this idea of self-organization – the self-so – in psychotherapeutic theory and practice. And we can begin to see now how this new way of thinking is revising a number of our basic concepts, and re-directing our vision.

If Platonic Idealism was an error, it was a remarkably fruitful one in many ways. The achievements of classical philosophy and science speak for themselves. But for the state of knowledge today, especially for the relatively young sciences of life and mind, the top-down Idealist perspective is less than illuminating – offering no explanation of why the laws and forms of things are as they are beyond the unhelpful, “That’s how they’re supposed to be!” For the intellectual and practical problems on our plates today, it no longer suffices to explain the world as the result of divine will and deviations therefrom – however divinity is conceived. The new paradigm seeks for cybernetic and ecological explanations grounded in logical and tautological necessities of the system in question, and in the contingencies of its history. For the present case, the human self, that must mean something like the triple evolution we have described.

Where does the psychotherapist come in? His business is to help clients make sense of the human condition and become less mysterious and more friendly to themselves, but he is not a priest or a guru. He is not in the business of teaching his world view to his clients, but rather of helping them to work out and come to terms with their own. Nonetheless, he can and will make suggestions as he feels appropriate, and has little choice but to do so. And in writing about his practice, he will find himself having to ground it in some world view and paradigm. So long as psychotherapy chooses to ground itself in brain/mind science, then something like the ecological paradigm will come to underlie its practice whatever uptake these ideas find in the society at large. This is predictable so long as the concept of self-organizing system continues to dominate modern science – as it does today, even in physics and cosmology.

Science notwithstanding, but just considered as a meme in society at large, uptake of the ecological paradigm is mixed. Some people find its ideas repugnant. Others find them liberating and very beautiful. What is clear is that Darwinian thinking flatly overturns the ancient Platonic, Aristotelian and Judaeo-Christian foundations of Western thought.

Organized complexity needs neither a designer to conceive its pattern, nor a manager to bring it into being and keep it going, neither a God in Heaven nor a

metaphysical *self* in a human skull. A great many people find this idea both counter-intuitive and deeply disturbing; and, for this reason, the scientifically-trained therapist will need to be extra cautious in sharing his thoughts with his clients. In the long run, however, he can scarcely help but do so – just as science can scarcely help but follow the evidence wherever it leads.

Across the board, the post-modern world is having a love-hate relationship with science, and therapist find themselves in the cross-fire. All over the world, people who wish to gain the advantages of modernity without revising traditional beliefs and customs are in a pickle of the soul that can be resolved only by finding acceptable ways to accommodate the values of modernity and its ways of thinking. Accordingly, outside the consulting room, the underlying philosophy and goal of psychotherapy is a matter of some dispute. Where precisely does the profession stand when society itself is conflicted in its core beliefs?

From one perspective, the psychotherapist is well positioned to help his clients sort out these conflicts when they become biographical issues. The discourse of science is supposed to be value-neutral. That of religion claims to be grounded in eternal truth. The therapist can treat these warring discourses as mutually complementary, because he draws his mandate from both. Drawing on the scientific tradition, he bases his practice on the strongest knowledge we have of human nature and the human condition. As heir to the shamanic and religious traditions of soul healing and spiritual awakening, he can reflect on and suggest values – as science cannot – without resort to the authority of allegedly “revealed,” eternal truths. But when the whole of society is deeply conflicted on some matter, the therapist must contain the turmoil in his own mind – if only by learning to live with it – if he is to help his clients.