

### Talk #3 The Power of Suggestion

The world may be viewed as a myriad of “To Whom It May Concern” messages.

– Norbert Weiner

But such pre-set signs are, of course, only a part of the communicative equipment of the dumb. Harpo Marx does not need them. And dogs and horses, hawks and elephants, also make themselves understood to those who are normally with them, whether members of their own species or human beings. And the human beings return the favour. “Making oneself understood” is an immensely wider field than “talking.” It supplies the context, and the only possible context, within which human talking makes sense.

– Beast and Man, Mary Midgley, p 234

**Thea:** Now would be a good time to tell me about “suggestion,” if you’re in the mood to talk. I know that’s a pet idea of yours.

**Guy:** I’m almost always ready to talk, as you know. And you’re right that suggestion is one of my pet ideas. I like it a lot.

**Thea:** Well, let’s start with the transaction that just occurred: I made a suggestion to talk about something. You accepted my suggestion. Now I’m making another suggestion about where to start. How does your notion of suggestion fit with the ordinary meaning of this word?

**Guy:** It’s the same, really – but generalized to cover all communication of whatever kind. It’s a convenient way to discuss the transfer of meaning, as distinct from all material transfers of matter, energy or force.

**Thea:** But not all communications are suggestions surely.

**Guy:** They are, you know, if you think of a communication in semantic terms, with regard to the meanings it conveys. Any message worthy of the name can be thought of as suggesting – not necessarily causing – some pattern in the system that receives it. The suggestion you just made to discuss the concept of suggestion raised it as a pattern first in my mind, and then in the conversation between us. Any sign or diagram or word performs a similar function. For example, just by saying the word “kangaroo,” I am suggesting that you think of a blue kangaroo, drawing upon whatever patterns now represent those animals in your mind and brain.

There. It worked, didn’t it? You wouldn’t have thought about blue kangaroos just now, if I hadn’t mentioned them. We use structured strings of words, to suggest patterns of thought to each other’s minds.

You are suggesting that there is some important distinction between suggestions and other types of communication. My counter-suggestion is that individual minds, inter-personal relationships, and society as a whole – can be conceived as self-organizing systems of suggestion – as cognitive ecologies of suggestion, in fact. By stretching this notion a little, and taking it as the primitive of all communication, Gregory Bateson’s great concept of an “ecology of mind” can be unpacked and realized. Minds, cultures even

whole societies can be conceived and studied as ecologies of suggestion.

*the power of suggestion*

**Thea:** But why suggestion, rather than message, sign or information? Why bring this new term into it? What's wrong with the words we use today?

**Guy:** Those words have their uses, but as primitive terms for a theory of communication, they misplace the emphasis: The word "message" stresses the physical entity and process of communication. Well and good; but a given message can be understood differently by different people – or by the same person at different times.

"Information" can be true or false, and is supposed to tell us what is the case. In the ordinary sense, information is pure description, without causal power or influence. Confusingly, the same word has a different, technical meaning as an engineer's term for the quantity of data stored in a file or sent through a channel – as a radio signal, for example. In this sense, information is meaning-less *per se*, until the correct interpretive key is supplied. It's just a measure of the amount of uncertainty that was present before the message was received as compared with the amount that remains afterward. It's a statistical concept, closely related to that of entropy in statistical mechanics.

**Thea:** But information is also used for control purposes. It's a cybernetic concept as well: a difference that makes a difference as your hero Bateson put it.

**Guy:** Bateson had the correct insight, but was not as careful as he needed to be about the meaning of his key term. "The difference that makes a difference" is not a piece of information. It's neither a pure description nor a quantity of data. To be precise, Bateson's "difference that makes a difference" is a suggestion. The suggestion is just precisely the difference that is made.

Besides, though suggestions may be carried by news of difference, they may be carried by sameness as well. Persistent cold carries the evolutionary suggestion that bodies should insulate better or burn their calories faster. Persistent dryness carries the suggestion to take up and use water more efficiently. Sameness often carries a suggestion to seek interesting novelty. That's what boredom means.

Another point is that "the difference that makes a difference" is stubborn and durable in a way that information in itself is not. Information can easily be negated. In transmitting a message, you can change a "1" to a "0" (or vice versa), or you can stick the words "no" or "not" into a description to reverse its meaning. But suggestions can only be deterred or discouraged in some fashion or opposed by alternative, competing suggestions. I can tell you that something is not the case; but a suggestion that you not think about something draws it all the more strongly to your attention. Don't think about blue kangaroos now! I forbid you to do so!

**Thea:** The "forbidden fruit" effect. Telling Eve not to eat the apple almost guaranteed that she would eat it.

**Guy:** Precisely. That story attests not to Man's sinful nature, but to our sensitivity to suggestions: the more sternly something is forbidden, the more vivid it

becomes and the more desirable it must be. You never forbid children to do what they are not inclined to do – what would never spontaneously occur to them.

- Thea:** As the Chinese said, when people lost sight of the Tao, codes of morality and justice were created.<sup>1</sup> What about signs? They behave more like suggestions in this respect, don't they?
- Guy:** Yes. A sign, like a suggestion, directs attention to what it signifies, and does so even when it tries to do the opposite. But the concept of "sign" is too narrow: While all signs are suggestions, not all suggestions are signs. The firing of one nerve cell suggests the firing of another to which it connects without being a sign of that next firing. Imitative learning works by taking the actions of a role model as important suggestions, though they are not signs of anything but themselves. Also, while we can usually observe what a given message suggests to a living creature (or to a robot for that matter), we can only guess at what it signifies.
- Thea:** If I understand you, the word suggestion focuses on the pragmatic content of a message, as those other words do not. A suggestion means what it tells its recipient to do.
- Guy:** Right – provided you recognize that thinking or imagining is also a kind of internal "doing," so that a suggestion to imagine having a beer is as "pragmatic" (in this sense) as the suggestion to actually have one. The distinction is a crucial aspect of education, however: art and literature suggest that we imagine many things that they may or may not suggest we actually do. They may suggest that we imagine something, precisely to suggest we not do it – although that does not usually work well, as we just saw with apples.
- By contrast, words like "message," "information" and "sign" step around the question of semantic content – the meaning of a communication to the person who receives it. This is unfortunate, because meaning is the central dimension of communication. In psychology and the social sciences, it's what we really want to talk about, and we need a word that gets at it directly.
- Thea:** Then why not just say "meaning"?
- Guy:** Because meaning is what we hope to understand, and because we need a word that points to its transmission. Also because, in ordinary language, the word "meaning" has too many ordinary meanings to make a good technical term. By contrast, at least to my ear, the word "suggestion" feels exactly right. On one hand, this word carries a connotation of free volition and autonomous judgment. The recipient needs to interpret a suggestion, and then decide whether to follow it. But at the same time, a well-framed suggestion seems to cast a little "spell." Usually this "hypnotic suggestion" can be rejected with some effort, but there is always some bias toward compliance. Other things being equal, it's easier to go along than to resist. It

---

<sup>1</sup> See the *Tao Te Ching*, translation by Brian Browne Walker.

is just because of this double connotation that the word suggestion is apt for our purpose.

No other concept I can think of carries the necessary weight, and none is sufficiently basic. A mother's touch or a lover's certainly communicate, but what they communicate cannot be called information.<sup>2</sup> They communicate mood or feeling, we would say. But no amount of information conveys a mood of calm, or a feeling of being loved. By contrast, the quality of a touch can certainly suggest calm or love – or their absence.

Similarly with signs and signification. A sign suggests an idea or concept (what philosophers call its sense); and it suggests some real-world feature (what they call its reference). It may also suggest some action to be taken. In this way what we call a sign is really two or three suggestions bundled together. Again, the way a mother holds her infant suggests a very great deal to him – first about the world he lives in and then about his mother's feelings; it cannot be called a sign at first, though it will acquire that status in short order.

**Thea:** I think I see where you're going. Even in its ordinary, non-technical sense, information just tells what is happening in the world. Signs point (or suggest) in two directions at once, and thereby link a "signifier" with its "signified" as Saussure told us. Instructions command. They flatly tell you what to do. But a suggestion acts directly on the individual who receives it while respecting his autonomy at the same time. It raises a possibility and prompts toward it, without necessarily making it so. It carries a certain influence without direct causal power.

**Guy:** You've got it. In general, a suggestion is not a command and not a control-signal. It raises a value-laden possibility, in competition with alternative possibilities (raised by other suggestions). It proposes an idea, and gives it weight and flavor against others. It casts a kind of "spell," as we said before, in that absent suggestions to the contrary, it's easier to go along than to resist.

**Thea:** So for example, if I start casting "suggestive" glances, you'll take them as a suggestion to make love – and I hope you'll find the idea difficult to resist. But those glances are more than just information about what is happening in your world, and more than just signs that your woman is available tonight. They are not just suggestions to believe something – namely, that expressions of interest will be welcome – but direct triggers that (I expect) will arouse you, unless there are stronger suggestions from elsewhere to the contrary. They are all of the above together, wrapped in my very own brand of witchcraft.

**Guy:** And a very good brand it is. But maybe we should wait until after dinner?

**Thea:** Oh, by all means. I don't want to break up the conversation just yet. I'm just suggesting an example of what we're talking about.

---

<sup>2</sup> Except perhaps in a sense so vague as to distort the concept of information.

**Guy:** And a most suggestive example it is.

**Thea:** OK. Let's get back on track here. If I understand, you want to make suggestion a central notion in communication theory and in the theory of culture. I've heard you say that the world is more like a flow of suggestions than "to whom it may concern" messages.

**Guy:** Exactly. From every angle I can think of, suggestion looks more serviceable as a core concept for communication theory than any of the other candidates: All signs suggest, as we said earlier, but not all suggestions signify. Information reduces uncertainty about what is going on in the world (or what to do about it), but is always relative to some pre-established coding scheme or system of conventions (such as a language) that determines a relationship between the message and what it is "about." It depends too upon some pre-existing alphabet of possibilities – whether discreet or continuous. In itself, information is as meaningless as the array of ones and zeros in a database. Or like the dots in a connect-the dots puzzle from which the numbers have been removed.

**Thea:** That's true. Raw information, whether in its mathematical sense or even its ordinary language sense, does not yet have meaning. If I start reciting statistics – on suicide, steel production, the weather or whatever – I would certainly be giving you information, but it would mean nothing, and you would wonder why I was doing it.

**Guy:** Just so: Basing communication theory on the concept of information leaves us unable to explain how meaning arises in the first place, since information in itself is meaningless. Only when information suggests some thought or course of action does it become meaningful; and then it is the suggestion, not the information per se, that carries meaning.

The conclusion must be that the notion of suggestion is upstream of information. Information may or may not be meaningful, but suggestion is pure meaning and a pre-condition for information. The meaning of anything at all – from a tool or a word or a situation to the whole world and life itself – is always relative to some individual: to what it suggests that person feel or think or do – with it or about it.

**Thea:** The suggestion, you would say, is the meaning of a message to its recipient?

**Guy:** Yes, but I would define meaning in terms of suggestion, not the other way 'round: I would make suggestion the undefined term and say that the meaning of any thing or event is what it suggests we do about it.

**Thea:** On that definition, I could ask about the meaning of your concept itself. What does the idea of suggestion suggest one do with it?

**Guy:** With the beginnings of a solid grip on "meaning," we get a handle on the concept of "mind." If the meaning of a thing is what it suggests to us – what it suggests that we feel or imagine or do – then a "mind," can be thought of as a whole system of such suggestions, with the suggestion processing involved. Clearly, we are such systems, but many other creatures and entities also evaluate and respond to suggestions. Thus we can talk with

some rigor about non-human minds. We can avoid the question of whether plants, or insects or robots have true minds by speaking very generally of “suggestion processors” – or “suggers,” as I’ll say for short.

**Thea:** So human minds are really just suggestion processors. Is that what you’re saying?

**Guy:** Not quite. Human brains are suggestion processors. Or, more correctly, suggestion processing is a function of the whole nervous system – actually, of the whole creature. What we call “mind” is the processing itself, or the ecology of suggestions as they are processed.

Also, your phrase “really just” is a mistake, I think. That implied reductionism is not necessary. In fact, it detracts from what’s being said. There are different strategies of perception and understanding, suggested by this concept or that one. They are not mutually exclusive, and what suits one purpose may not suit another.

Daniel Dennett gets this right in one of his early books:<sup>3</sup> We can take what he calls a physical stance, and see ourselves (as the surgeon and neurophysiologist do) as very complex organic machines, as meat-robots of a human type. We can take the design stance and see ourselves as (what we are calling) ecoDarwinian suggers – suggestion processors. We can take what he calls the intentional stance, and see ourselves as we ordinarily do – as human selves who form purposes and take actions in keeping with our beliefs and desires. These views do not preclude, but rather complement one another. In particular, the anthropologist, and other social scientists may find the design stance useful as organizations and whole peoples can also be thought of as “suggers,” possessing collective “minds” of a sort. Even a clinical psychologist like yourself may find the design stance useful on occasion. A client with existentialist leanings may be asking something more than just “Who am I?” – a question about his social identity. He may be asking the much deeper question: “What am I – what kind of thing?”

**Thea:** I’m not happy with the position you are taking. It will be asking a lot to expect my clients to accept that their precious selves are just different ideas that they have of themselves. And I can’t imagine how any of them would find it liberating or therapeutic to regard themselves as “suggers.”

But let’s leave this complaint aside for now. Finish telling me what advantages you see in a suggestion-based communication theory before I start in with objections.

**Guy:** Well, here’s another point. If we think of the mind as a suggestion processor, we get a handle on the so-called “unconscious.” In turn, this helps make sense of inner conflict, where a mind is divided against itself. It sounds paradoxical to claim that we can know something without knowing it, or that we can do things “against our better judgment.” By contrast, it makes perfect sense to say that we can be influenced by suggestions that we are not aware of, driven by competing suggestions that are mutually exclusive, or actuated by suggestions that do not come from our best selves.

It’s well known that most of the suggestions we take in are handled

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Intentional Stance.*

automatically. For example, the processing needed for the visual tracking of objects, or for balance correction in walking, is inaccessible to consciousness. There's nothing paradoxical about such unconsciousness. Nor about the well-confirmed hypothesis that minds are all the time making suggestions to themselves that may not be consistent with one another – most of which never reach consciousness. A conscious mind tries to be coherent – rational and consistent – in its plans and choices. The mind as a whole need not be and isn't.

**Thea:** You know, therapists are still confused about the unconscious.

**Guy:** That's my impression too, but what do you mean?

**Thea:** We've never agreed on what the unconscious is, and we don't know what to make of it. That over-states it a bit perhaps but, broadly speaking, it's about right. For Freud, the unconscious was a seething cauldron of unfulfillable wishes and fantasies, and a dumping ground for repressed feelings and memories. For Jung, it was more like a reservoir of trans-personal wisdom. Present-day clinicians mostly ignore it. The gestalt psychologists pay attention to the quality of moment-by-moment consciousness, but don't say much about the unconscious (which, however, is known to play a large role in determining the quality and focus of consciousness). We know the unconscious is there, and we know it's important – but then what? The problem, perhaps, is that all of us – clients and therapists alike – identify too strongly with the conscious self at the expense of the unconscious. Mostly, we think of mind as the conscious ego and tend to forget there is anything else.

**Guy:** And there's a price for that, isn't there?

**Thea:** Quite a steep one sometimes. When you identify too strongly with the conscious mind, then anything from the unconscious is experienced as intrusion from an alien being. If it's something we like, we attribute it to a god, an angel, or a muse. If it's something bad or frightening, it becomes a case of witchcraft, or demonic possession, or contamination by evil influences. In each case, we fail to recognize the mind's richness – that it contains multitudes, in the most literal sense.

**Guy:** I wonder if the language of suggestion might help people to understand that fantasies and wishes are merely expressions of possibility, and not yet subject to requirements of decency, ethics, judgment, or consistency. As suggestions only, our thoughts and wishes may easily contradict one another. Certainly they may conflict with what we like to think of as our "better selves." We hold each other responsible, and must try actually to be responsible, for what we do – not for what we think.

**Thea:** Quite right. Therapists spend a lot of time helping people to accept their inner conflicts and inconsistencies. Our culture spends so much time teaching people to have self-control and to be responsible that it mostly forgets to teach us how to know, accept and keep faith with our own feelings, without doing harm to others.

**Guy:** Just so. We expect of others, and even of ourselves, a coherence that does not exist a priori, but only as a construct: “a face to meet the faces that we meet.” Rather than think of ourselves as coherent “selves,” or “souls” by nature, we might learn to think of ourselves as suggestion processors who strive to be coherent “selves” with only mixed success.

**Thea:** You know, the family is another entity for which coherence does not exist a priori, but only as a great achievement. In couples counseling and family therapy, we also find situations where a certain amount of conflict – a competition of suggestions, as you would say – is the normal state. Today, the language of cybernetics gets a lot of play in analyzing family interactions. But the cyberneticist’s idea of control doesn’t hit the spot. A family does not literally control itself or its members in the same sense that a space probe is controlled by electronic signals from Earth, or from its on-board computer. It negotiates issues as they arise, hopefully with some love, mutual understanding and more or less adequate communications skills. You raise kids with good and trusted suggestions, not with control signals. If your suggestion theory helps to draw a clear distinction between healthy influence and pathological control it would certainly be a contribution.

*guidance and control*

**Guy:** I agree. It was partly that objection to cybernetic psychology that led me to the idea. Fruitful as the cybernetic approach seemed, both information and control felt wrong as explanatory principles of human behavior. I wanted a notion of loose guidance, compatible with the autonomy of the system guided. The concept of suggestion meets that requirement.

**Thea:** Can you say exactly why your notion of suggestion grants more autonomy than cybernetic control? Of course, “suggestion” sounds a lot looser, but it would be nice to have that spelled out.

**Guy:** A control signal commands. It flatly tells a system what to do, with an expectation that it will be obeyed. Commands may be incomplete or they may be garbled by noise in the communications channel, but the notion of control does not contemplate an active weighing of alternative commands from other sources by a system with the capability to reconcile and/or choose amongst them – except perhaps in a mechanical, pre-programmed way, according to some higher-level command. By contrast, a suggestion (usually in combination or competition with other suggestions) prompts a system to *construct* an appropriate response from its repertoire of basic possibilities.<sup>4</sup> It raises a weighted possibility, that must compete with alternatives.

Of course, some suggests have richer repertoires and more autonomy than others. Some suggestions, perhaps, are so powerful that they amount to compulsions; and these may be acted upon almost on reflex as if they were control signals. But conceptually, the distinction is very simple. When you drive the car, rotating the steering wheel clockwise is more than just a

---

<sup>4</sup> Systems that do this are called *production systems* – having been designed or evolved to behave autonomously along certain lines when they receive a sufficient trigger (of suggestions) to do so.



suggestion. You are commanding the car to turn right, and controlling it in doing so; and you want as little doubt about the car's response as possible. But if I, sitting next to you with the map, tell you to turn right at the light, that is only a suggestion – which you might go along with or override for a dozen different reasons.

**Thea:** So it is the multiplicity and potential for conflict among suggestions that distinguishes suggestive guidance from cybernetic control? You would treat control as a limiting case of suggestive guidance?

**Guy:** When, and only when, the autonomy of the system being controlled is negligible. In general, a relatively autonomous production system constructs a suitable response to the mixed suggestions it receives. For it to do something, it is sufficient that there be a preponderance of suggestions to do it over suggestions not to. Thus, "It seemed like a good idea at the time" is always a sensible explanation. One may not be able to push it further, and explain just why it seemed like a good idea.

When it seems worthwhile, we can distinguish between the suggestive message and the suggestion itself for extra clarity. Various suggesters may receive the same message but draw different suggestions from it. A message is suggestive or meaningful to a given suggester because it prompts that suggester toward doing something. Whether and how that suggestion is followed is another question. It's in the suggester's discretion (as we say) how the suggestion is understood, whether it is followed and precisely how it is followed.

**Thea:** When you ask me to do something, you are not telling me how to do it, nor in any way causing me to do it. But you are informing me (or suggesting that I believe) that it would please you if I did it.

**Guy:** Yes. The cybernetic paradigm of control leads us to think of suggesters as more coherent and less autonomous than we know them to be.

A request is a suggestion to do something, combined with a suggestion that the person making it will be pleased or displeased depending on whether its recipient complies. A command in that word's ordinary meaning is a suggestion to do something, combined with a suggestion that consequences will follow if the recipient does not comply. A statement is a suggestion to believe something. Even a question can be thought of as a suggestion that a correct answer is possible and desired. Or, one might think of the question as a suggestion that useful suggestions on this matter are wanted. But suggestion itself is a primitive notion – too basic to allow of definition. In general, a suggestion just raises a possibility, giving it weight and flavor and value against other possibilities raised by other suggestions.

**Thea:** I see what you mean. When you ask me to bring you a coffee, you are not actually controlling me. You don't tell me exactly how to do it. You don't tell me which mug to use, or whether to bring it in a cup and saucer. And you assume that I know how you take your coffee – and would be surprised if I asked.

**Guy:** And if you told me we were out of coffee and asked what I would like instead, I wouldn't feel you had gone out of control. This point is

important: In the work world, managers don't actually control their workers, and don't want to. They need to rely on their workers' intelligence and active contribution to the purposes at hand. When they need to give specific orders for every little detail, the organization is in trouble. That's why a work-to-rule strike is effective.

**Thea:** All right. I see the distinction you want to make; and I see why you want to make it. Where do we go from here?

**Guy:** Well, I'm suggesting that we discuss the minds and activities of suggesters, especially human suggesters, in terms of suggestive guidance rather than cybernetic control – so as not to forget the autonomy they retain, however strongly they are influenced.

**Thea:** Do you mean, so as not to forget their “free will?” That's the last idea I would have expected coming from you.

**Guy:** It's not a question of “free will.” I certainly do not believe that our thoughts and choices stand outside of Nature and causality – though in this area too I agree with Dennett that free will, as such, is not a coherent idea, and that we have all the varieties of it worth wanting.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, consciously or not, we weigh and choose between alternative suggestions – some put to us by other people, some arising in our own brains, and some of these originating in our very genes. The weighing and reconciliation of suggestions happens spontaneously – which is why we speak of ecology – but unless we feel compelled by some irresistible desire or impulse, the choices we make feel like our choices. In any case, others will attribute those choices to us and hold us responsible for them and for their outcomes. Indeed, our expectations that they will do so, and the training we have had in taking responsibility for our actions are sources of suggestion that we factor against our desires in actually making the choice. What we mean by free will is more accurately called functional autonomy – an attribute of any system with the capability to decide and act on its own behalf, for its own reasons.

*re-suggestive structures*

**Thea:** You still haven't told me what you mean by a cognitive ecology, and you're pinning an awful lot to that idea. Just what is that supposed to be? What “species” comprise an ecology of that kind?

**Guy:** The “species” are mental patterns: patterns of feeling, thought and behavior that propagate and get reproduced reliably as needed. Included too are the material artifacts that suggest and subserve our mental patterns. We may think of them as “structures of re-suggestion” (or as re-suggestions or suggestive structures, for short) because whenever they are confronted or engaged or utilized, they tender suggestions to the persons (ourselves and others) who are doing so.

Some re-suggestions – for example, a word, an article of clothing, or a recipe – are fairly narrow and specific. Others – like a language, a branch of

---

<sup>5</sup> See Dennett's discussions of the free will issue in *Elbow Room* and *Freedom Evolves*, previously cited.

science, or a style of cuisine – are broad and abstract. Like biological species, these structures exist in dynamic balance with one another, and co-evolve through the same processes of self-organization that we discussed the other evening. To understand the social world and the patterns we live by, we need to understand just how competing suggestions “gel” or “curdle” into re-suggestive structures.

**Thea:** “Gel”? “Curdle”? Those are not very scientific terms!

**Guy:** Coin your own word if you don’t like them. The idea is that, in a given area of experience, the suggestions (usually distributed across many persons and occasions) can evolve or self-organize into fairly durable artifacts, habit patterns and concepts that will themselves serve as reliable sources of suggestion. The design of a building or a new product are good examples. So is the writing of a book. A writer gathers suggestions from people he meets and speaks with, from his own life experience and his very flesh and, of course, from other writers. In his mind and on the page, all these suggestions work themselves together somehow into a manuscript – a tangible artifact. Once published, these written words become a text: a new source of suggestive influence on whoever reads it, and a contribution to the discourse from which it stemmed.

**Thea:** But surely that’s a deliberate act. The author writes the book.

**Guy:** From one perspective, of course he does. But to understand how his mind works, we need to cut a little deeper. We need to remember that his thoughts must have been suggested to him by something or other. We need to think of these suggestions as co-evolving into patterns that rubbed against one another and became mutually compatible – hopefully, in some interesting and valuable way – like co-evolving species in the natural world. From that perspective, the “author” is just a warm body in which the suggestions did their thing – forming themselves into structures. The process is called “thinking” – but what the writer is actually doing, mostly, is staring at his laptop screen, or out the window.

**Thea:** So the thinking just happens somehow in the circuits of his brain. Do we know how that works?

**Guy:** We’ll come to that question later – what is known about it today. We’re not ready yet to discuss the parsing, weighing and recombination of suggestions at the neural level. Let’s consider a more tractable question: “What do our thinking processes produce?” What re-suggestive structures get built to populate our subjective worlds?

**Thea:** If I understand what you’re saying, these must be all the familiar features of the world as we construe and understand it. All our ideas – all our cultural artifacts and “mentifacts” – must be fairly consistent sources of suggestion just to the extent they are familiar to us, and that we know what to do with them.

**Guy:** Very good. To say that something is familiar is precisely to say that we know how to relate and cope with the suggestions it puts to us – what looks good (or bad) and possible from where we stand. Thus we can say that all familiar situations, all the things we recognize and interact with, are configurations of re-suggestion, acting as fairly coherent and reliable sources of suggestion to us each time that we encounter them. Daily life might then be imagined as a kind of dance, to “chords” of suggestion (analogous with musical chords) drawn from the structures of re-suggestion around us. A date with a friend, a family meal, a business transaction and whatever else gets organized by these suggestive structures that make it the sort of occasion it is, and instruct us on the appropriate behavior.

**Thea:** Your musical metaphor is rather neat. Those reverberating chords of re-suggestion become the rich world as we experience it.

**Guy:** We can push it one step further, perhaps. Those structures of re-suggestion correspond to printed notes in an orchestral score that suggest how the musicians can recreate the same (or very similar) music each time they play the piece. Then we might liken the subliminal processing of unconscious mind to the harmonics or “overtones” that give a musical chord its texture.

**Thea:** Your structures of re-suggestion are like Norbert Weiner’s “to whom it may concern” messages. They need not have the same meaning for everyone.

**Guy:** No, of course not. There may be areas of agreement, but also of disagreement on the suggestions put by a given item. A tree may be a source of valuable building material to one person, a source of firewood to another, a lookout post to a third, a source of shade or a purely aesthetic object to a fourth. It suggests the same class label – “tree” – to each person; yet is a different kind of thing for each. We must always wonder to what extent a given thing is consistent in the suggestions it puts, as no two people will see it in exactly the same way.

**Thea:** What you are saying agrees well with the object relations theory of child development. It may take the infant some time to recognize that the “good mother” who satisfies its wishes, and the “bad mother” who frustrates it are one and the same person.

**Guy:** Not only do people become coherent, identifiable sources of suggestion for one another as they connect to each other in relationships. The types of relationship, reified into cultural institutions like Marriage, or Motherhood, become powerful structures of re-suggestion too. People seem to need the orientation that such institutions provide. Lacking specific instincts to situate us in our life-worlds, we cannot live without such cultural structures.

**Thea:** Religious systems provide such guidance. From that perspective, the question whether their teachings are true is really beside the point. They would be understood in your terms as structures of re-suggestion that suggest a certain way of understanding oneself, orienting oneself in the world, and relating to others as a person.

**Guy:** All human culture serves such purposes. Religion purports to do so at some ultimate level that ordinary experience cannot reach. But even on a purely secular level, our political and economic institutions tell us which games to play and how to play them. Our tools and artifacts tell us how to use them to get things done. Our signs and symbols tell us how to think. All these structures are mutually inter-dependent, mutually supportive; and from this ecological system, escape is scarcely possible. We can question, evade or rebel against specific suggestions of culture, but further suggestions and re-suggestive structures always provide the means for doing so.

**Thea:** Your notion of re-suggestion sounds a lot like what I was trained to call a script – a thoroughly familiar concept in psychology today. We speak of sexual scripts and interpersonal scripts – scripts for all the roles we play in our daily lives. As children we learned scripts for using the toilet, and for tying our shoelaces. We have scripts for all sorts of things. Does your concept of re-suggestion really add anything?

**Guy:** *Script* is a somewhat narrower concept. You would not call the Statue of Liberty a script, nor a cathedral, nor a song, nor the English language as a whole; yet all of these are powerful re-suggestive structures. A script tells you how to behave in a certain situation. Re-suggestive structures may suggest specific thoughts, feelings and behaviours, but most of them do not guide your activities in any direct, step-by-step fashion, like the script for a play or movie. They are just sources of suggestion, persistent and durable enough to suggest roughly the same things from one person and one encounter to another. A script is one kind of re-suggestion. Certainly, the two concepts are closely related; and I have no objection if you stretch the more convenient word script for what I call a re-suggestion or a suggestive structure. I may do that myself sometimes.

*culture as a guidance system*

**Thea:** Then personality, scripts of various kinds, and culture itself can be seen collectively as a re-suggestive guidance system that we take on board to orient ourselves in the world and cope with it. For other creatures, the re-suggestive structures are mostly hard-wired into their nervous systems as what we call their “instincts.” But what is instinct, anyway?

**Guy:** As you say, instinct is defined as behavior that requires no learning, but there are gray areas where it is not so simple. For example, some birds, when raised in complete isolation, will not learn the songs typical of their species. On the other hand, allowed minimal contact with adults, they need very little cuing to learn their songs correctly.<sup>6</sup> Roughly the same observation can be made on human children in connection with walking and language. Kids are not born knowing how to do these things, but have extraordinary aptitude and drive to learn, with only minimal cuing from adults. So, in general, what we call “instinct” is partly innate, but partly a pre-disposition to learn. It’s misleading to think of instinct as wholly unlearned and involuntary. Humans have very few behavioral

---

<sup>6</sup> See *The Symbolic Species*, Terrence Deacon, p 228. See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bird\\_song#Learning](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bird_song#Learning).

predispositions that need no learning or practice at all, and that cannot be suppressed voluntarily. On the other hand, it's undeniable now, that there is such a thing as "human nature."<sup>7</sup> There are many behaviors that come easily to us and others that are very difficult.

At the same time, without suggestive guidance from elaborate cultures and personal relationships, we are extraordinarily helpless in most respects. In fact, it's possible to see human biology and the human life cycle as organized around our need to elaborate and extend the vague, generic patterns that evolution has given us. We take our cues from artifacts, from language, from the culture's "conventional wisdom," and from the social roles that we assume – especially in work and family life – finding ourselves under great pressure to perform our roles coherently and "responsibly," so that others can perform theirs. When we say that a teenager needs to "get a life," it's the absence of all this guidance that we're noting.

**Thea:** When someone asked Freud what healthy people could do that neurotics could not, he answered, "Love and work." For most people, that means a job and a family – just the stabilizing roles that teenagers don't have.

**Guy:** No – not for a few years yet, most of them.

---

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of human nature see Steven Pinker's book, *The Blank Slate*.