Psychology Faculty Works   Psychology

2009

Relational Being: Beyond Self And Community

Kenneth J. Gergen
kgergen1@swarthmore.edu

PROLOGUE

TOWARD A NEW ENLIGHTENMENT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Textual Companions

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

The Social Science Legacy

Paramount among my "textual friends" is a family of innovative social theorists whose writings span more than a century. In my graduate school days, imagined conversations with the classic work of William James,[3] Charles Horton Cooley,[4] and George Herbert Mead[5] were especially important. Each of these theorists painted a picture of the person as one whose self-understanding depended upon the views of others. The concepts of "the social self," the "looking glass self," and symbolic interaction formed a major challenge to the dominant view of the mind as a self-contained entity. For these theorists, one's sense of self was not so much a personal possession as a reflection of one's social existence. In my later graduate years, I had the good fortune of working with the social psychologist John Thibaut. For Thibaut the mental world took on a more rugged cast, with the maximization of personal gain viewed as the major goal. However, as

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

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

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

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

After graduate school I had the good fortune of teaching in Harvard's Department of Social Relations. It was here that I discovered the revolutionary work of the Russian developmentalist Lev Vygotsky. His writings also challenged the dominant view of isolated minds.[7] As he proposed, at least for the higher mental processes, everything that is in mind is first in the social world. In this sense, individual psychological functioning is a cultural derivative. These ideas also informed the work of numerous other theorists whose work has since been a deeply nourishing. John Shotter has been a dialogic companion for many years, and there is little in this book that has not been touched in some way by this cherished relationship.[8] Similarly, Jerome Bruner,[9] Rom Harré,[10] Richard Shweder,[11] Jaan Valsiner,[12] and Michael Cole[13] offered lively conversation in addition to their stimulating writings in cultural psychology. In all these works, the cultural context is celebrated for its impact on mental function.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perhaps the next major watershed in deliberations on relational being issued from feminist theory. I owe my education here largely to my wife and feminist scholar, Mary Gergen.[17] Our friendship with Carol Gilligan[18] was also significant, and her challenge to Kohlberg's cognitive view of moral decision was the subject of many engaging conversations. Here, one could discern most clearly the political implications of shifting from an individualist to a relational conception of the person. The works of Jean Baker Miller,[19] Judith Jordan,[20] and their colleagues at at Wellesley College's Stone Center greatly expanded the relational vision. From their perspective there is a natural yearning for relationship. In order for this yearning to be fulfilled, one must experience growth-fostering relationships in which mutual empathy and empowerment are central.

I have also drawn continuing stimulation from writings in the therapeutic tradition. For me, the work of socially oriented psychiatrists such as Erich Fromm[21] and Karen Horney[22] had always seemed more relevant to my life than Freud's rather hermetic conception of psychological process. Both saw culture and mind as fundamentally interdependent. Mental conditions were reflections of our social institutions, and in turn, our institutions were byproducts of our personal needs and desires. These views were resonant as well with Harry Stack Sullivan's interpersonal approach to psychiatry,

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

[16]New York: Wiley, 1968.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

Philosophic Inheritance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

movement, spearheaded by Amitai Etzioni and his colleagues.[34] Here the strong emphasis is on one's obligations to the community as opposed to claims to individual rights. The work of political theorist, Michael Sandel,[35] and philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre[36] add important conceptual dimension to this movement. They draw attention to the deep lodgment of the individual in relationships, and find the idea of the unencumbered, free agent seriously flawed. These various works have been invaluable sources of illumination for me. However, I have been less content with the valorization of community favored as the alternative to individualism. There is not only the problem of determining the boundaries of what constitutes one's community. There are additional complications resulting from the very drawing of these boundaries. Communities are also bounded entities and create the same kinds of conflicts that attend our viewing persons as fundamentally separated. In the case of communal commitments—including the religious and political—the consequences can be disastrous.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Engaging the Writing

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

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

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

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

Challenges of Language

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

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

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

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

The Unfolding Narrative

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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