

17. Self and Other Subjects

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Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity of the other.

— Gadamer (1960, 97)

Life can be known only by life.

— Hans Jonas (Thompson 2007, 163)

Life itself

Bodyminds typically recognize one another as sentient beings. You probably feel that other beings *experience* (feel the presence of) a world to the extent that you feel a kinship with them. This feeling of instinctive empathy normally guides human interactions with other sentient beings, and helps to make human sense of their behavior. On the other hand, we don't usually assume that inanimate objects ("things") experience or feel anything. Yet anything which can be an object of a sign, or of our perception or attention, is related to us by semiosis – that is, by life. Every *thing*, even if we don't relate to it as an *experiencing* subject, another *self*, is still a subject of *qualities* which we recognize because they belong to our phenomenal universe (specifically to the universe of Firstness). This is why the whole universe is a communion of subjects.

Back in Chapter 12 we looked into the usage history of the

paired adjectives 'subjective' and 'objective.' Now let us consider the usages of the noun 'subject'. In the OED, the various senses of the word are divided into three main groups. The first group is essentially political: the subject is 'under the dominion of' (and inferior to) a monarch or other authority figure. The second group is more philosophical, consisting of 'senses derived ultimately (through Latin *subjectum*) from Aristotle's use of τὸ ὑποκείμενον in the threefold sense of (1) material out of which things are made, (2) subject of attributes, (3) subject of predicates.' The third of these Aristotelian senses is semiotic: the *subject* is the denotative part of a *proposition*, or what is denoted by it (as opposed to what is said *about* the subject, or predicated of it).

But the second Aristotelian sense ('subject of attributes') used the same word in reference to *real things* rather than signs. This ontological 'subject' is intimately related to the semiotic 'subject': we state *facts* about real things by using propositions to assert that those things, those *subjects*, really have definite attributes. 'What we call a "fact" is something having the structure of a proposition, but supposed to be an element of the very universe itself' (Peirce, as quoted in Chapter 9). What we suppose a fact to be about – i.e. the dynamic object of the proposition which represents it as a thing with attributes – is also a *subject*, just as 'the subject-matter of an art or science' (OED) is what that art or science is about. This brings us to the third main group of senses of the word listed in the OED. Some of these are no longer common in everyday English, but they are implicit in the observation that *all selves are subjects, but not all subjects are selves*.

In the philosophy of the Latin age, the word 'subject' was used for 'the substance in which accidents or attributes inhere.' Later writers such as Shakespeare sometimes used it in reference to 'a thing having real independent existence.' A 'subject' in that sense is a *real thing* as opposed to a figment of some other subject's imagination. Of course, bodyminds who recognize one another as other selves also relate to each other as subjects in this sense. But let us consider the minimal and essential qualities a subject must have in order for you (or anyone) to recognize it not only as real, but also as another feeling being, another *self*.

First, and most obviously: for anything to exist means that there is some *difference* between it and whatever else there is. For

instance, anything you see as an entity appears as a figure *against* its ground. But you are most likely to notice it if it 'stands out' not only in form but also in movement – if it appears to *act* autonomously, rather than being pulled or pushed around by physical forces external to it. Yet this self-mover and self-changer must also *remain the same* long enough for you to perceive it as an entity. A persisting sameness is perceptible as stability; and if a system keeps its identity while changing its behavior, we can call it *metastable* (borrowing another term from energetics). All systems we see as *alive* – which are generally the most interesting systems to us – have the habit of persisting as entities by adapting to changing conditions. They achieve this by transforming local energy flows to suit themselves, persisting by means of some internal homeostatic process, while drawing upon internalized energy sources to suit their behavior to circumstances.

These *self-organizing systems* (introduced in Chapter 3) represent the physical roots of selfhood. Among the “higher” organisms (i.e. the most complex living systems), individual embodiment is bounded in time by birth (or conception) and death. At other scales, the temporal boundaries are less definite. Bacteria do not inevitably die as multicellular organisms generally do, and when they divide to become two bacteria, which of them is 'born'? Ecosystems likewise go through life cycles to which the terms 'birth' and 'death' do not apply directly. In the usual pattern of *succession*, fast-growing pioneer species are the first to invade a new space; they are followed by slower-growing but more long-lasting species; gradually the life forms in the area grow more diverse and interdependent; in a 'climax' system such as a rainforest, the incoming energy from the sun is most thoroughly transformed into other forms and metastable processes, all of them colluding to reduce the difference between hot sun and cold space (and thus moderating the planetary climate). When an ecosystem is perturbed by changes that it can't assimilate, it may revert to an earlier, less mature stage in the cycle. This pattern of succession is something we can identify with, despite the difference in scale, because it has psychological and sociological parallels.

Depriving ecosystems of sufficient energy or upsetting their interconnected integrity decimates their

degrading capacities, physiologically forcing them back into states they had already grown out of.

Psychological regression in humans also is prompted by reduced energy or stress. When the energy available for the formation of complex systems is taken away, these systems revert to a more primitive level of function.

— Schneider and Sagan (2005, 207)

Another general pattern in all life cycles (Ulanowicz 1997, Salthe 1993 etc.) is that they proceed toward *senescence*. As systems consolidate their habits, they gradually lose the ability to change those habits and thus adapt to changing conditions. They become more 'brittle' and fragile; even their internal diversity becomes a burden as their components become more specialized. This too has a psychological manifestation. As a life matures and rounds toward senescence, niches within its meaning space grow narrower, more specific. Mature thinkers are therefore capable of greater conceptual precision than young ones, but their thinking tends to be less energetic and innovative, because new discoveries are increasingly outweighed by the pragmatic mass of the established habit-system. When memory itself begins to deteriorate, so does the metastable self-control of personality.

Hidden behind such life cycles but animating them all, according to some symbolic guidance (or 'belief') systems, is the immanent and eternal "Self" described in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*:

The world existed first as seed, which as it grew and developed took on names and forms. As a razor in its case or as fire in wood, so dwells the Self, the Lord of the universe, in all forms, even to the tips of the fingers. Yet the ignorant do not know him, for behind the names and forms he remains hidden. When one breathes, one knows him as breath; when one speaks, one knows him as speech; when one sees, one knows him as the eye; when one hears, one knows him as the ear; when one thinks, one knows him as the mind. All these are but names related to his acts; and he who

worships the Self as one or another of them does not know him, for of them he is neither one nor another. Wherefore let a man worship him as the Self, and as the Self alone. The perfection which is the Self is the goal of all beings. For by knowing the Self one knows all.

— Prabhavananda and Manchester (1947, 131-2)

Early Christian teaching, as exemplified in the *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Thomas*, also expounds a ‘vision of the perfected self’ (King 2003b, 33) as ‘the goal of all beings.’ The reference to ‘fire in wood,’ further explicated in Dogen’s *Genjokoan*, even hints at the thermodynamic or energetic basis of selfhood. But of course ‘all these are but names related to his acts.’ In the text above, ‘knowing’ seems to be essentially ‘know-how,’ consisting of ‘dispositions’ (Damasio 2010) rather than discursive knowledge. The ‘razor’ represents, in cognition, the ability to make distinctions; or in ontogeny, the ability to differentiate, and thus to develop, articulating the body ‘even to the tips of the fingers.’

Some belief systems refer to the “self” as an illusion, or a prison. But is this the same “self”? Or is there more than one kind of selfhood? We have already seen (in Chapter 4) the apostle Paul’s distinction between the *pneumatic* and *psychic* self; many belief systems distinguish between a higher and lower, or good and bad, or true and false self. Differences proliferate and grow more subtle when we turn to the “human sciences,” so that one anthology mentions ‘the cognitive self, the conceptual self, the dialogical self, the ecological self, the embodied self, the emergent self, the empirical self, the existential self, the extended self, the fictional self, the interpersonal self, the material self, the narrative self, the physical self, and so on’ (Gallagher and Shear 1999, xviii). This chapter will highlight two convergent theories of selfhood. One is the neuroscientific account of Antonio Damasio’s *Self Comes to Mind* (2010). The other is Peirce’s concept of the self as a sign, augmented by a semiotic account of the evolution of self-control, much of it drawn from the work of Frederik Stjernfelt (2014).

Self-control evolves

As systems grow, develop and evolve, they become increasingly *self-transforming*. We might say that a highly complex organism develops self-control by becoming a functional holarchy of selves, where the energy driving the lower levels is channeled and harnessed by levels of higher transformity to serve still higher purposes. The evolution of mammals, of primates, and of humans added new and more complex parameters of selfhood at each stage. Along this branching path of development, agents begin to recognize one another as selves and experiencing subjects, generating new dimensions of self-control, self-knowledge and subjectivity. The human brain is the biological host of one such holarchy of selves, and of human consciousness as a means of high-level self-control.

Damasio (2010) outlines the development of the human holarchy of selves in neuropsychological terms:

Conscious minds begin when self comes to mind, when brains add a self process to the mind mix, modestly at first but quite robustly later. The self is built in distinct steps grounded on the *protoself*. The first step is the generation of primordial feelings, the elementary feelings of existence that spring spontaneously from the protoself. Next is the *core self*. The core self is about action—specifically, about a relationship between the organism and the object. The core self unfolds in a sequence of images that describe an object engaging the protoself and modifying that protoself, including its primordial feelings. Finally, there is the *autobiographical self*. This self is defined in terms of biographical knowledge pertaining to the past as well as the anticipated future. The multiple images whose ensemble defines a biography generate pulses of core self whose aggregate constitutes an autobiographical self.

— Damasio (2010, 24)

The ‘autobiographical self,’ sometimes called the ‘narrative’ self, is sustained by those stories we tell, in both external and internal dialogue, which require a *protagonist* or central character. It makes

a name for itself by playing a social role, but only if the nameless 'core self' is fully functional. Edelman gives a similar account of its emergence:

An animal or a newborn baby will experience a scene in reference to a self but will have no nameable self that is differentiable from within. Such a nameable self emerges in humans as higher-order consciousness develops during the elaboration of semantic and linguistic capabilities and social interactions.

— Edelman (2004, 73)

The Freudian 'ego' with its need for "self-esteem" (and its tendency to be manipulative, status-conscious and self-interested) seems to be a development of the nameable self. Self-concept is greatly affected by social validation (or lack of it), which is internalized as an inner Judge, another layer of selfhood, Freud's 'superego.' These 'higher' layers are both biological developments and social (intersubjective) constructions (Tomasello 1999, Thompson 2001). When this process goes awry at any stage, and the self is for some reason misconstrued, we get pathologies such as autism and schizophrenia (Sacks 1995, Feinberg 2001, etc.). The construction process normally begins with the recognition of other subjective agencies in the world, but it is only when the *self* is reflexively recognized as one of these subjects that others can be called other *selves*. It is at this point that one can speak of experience as 'my' experience, or 'personal' experience – and we reach this point as soon as we begin to talk about *experience*. So the study of human selfhood is intertwined with the study of language use, which is 'both a cognitive and a social science' (Clark 1996, 24). Without social interaction – which in humans is thoroughly entangled with language – no animal can develop a self-concept; but then it also can't choose to identify its own interests with (or against) those of a wider community, and thus reach toward higher levels of ethical development.

In Damasio's model, the self is generated in the brain by means of 'a particular set of representations of the organism and of its potential actions' (Damasio 1999, 134). 'Just as death and life cycles reconstruct the organism and its parts according to a plan,

the brain reconstructs the sense of self moment by moment' (144). From this perspective, the permanence of the autobiographical self is an illusion, the personality a fictional character. The author of this fiction is the "subject of experience," while the character seems to be the subject of the story, the one it's all about; Damasio calls this creature 'the material self' or 'the *me*.' Which of these, the author or the character, is the subject when we speak in the first person singular? That's difficult to say, as J.L. Borges observes with great elegance in 'Borges and I.' But Damasio's psychobiological account helps us to see the difference and the connection between the two, by showing how brains have evolved to construct and reconstruct a sense of self.

In the elaborate brains of complex creatures ... networks of neurons eventually come to mimic the structure of parts of the body to which they belong. They end up *representing* the state of the body, literally mapping the body for which they work and constituting a sort of virtual surrogate of it, a neural double. Importantly, they remain connected to the body they mimic throughout life. As we shall see, mimicking the body and remaining connected to it serve the managing function quite well.

In brief, neurons are *about* the body, and this "aboutness," this relentless pointing to the body, is the defining trait of neurons, neuron circuits, and brains. I believe this aboutness is the reason why the covert will to live of the cells in our body could ever have been translated into a minded, conscious will. The covert, cellular wills came to be mimicked by brain circuitry. Curiously, the fact that neurons and brains are about the body also suggests how the external world would get mapped in the brain and mind.... when the brain maps the world external to the body, it does so thanks to the mediation of the body. When the body interacts with its environment, changes occur in the body's sensory organs, such as the eyes, ears, and skin; the brain maps those changes, and thus the world outside the body indirectly acquires some form of

representation within the brain.

— Damasio 2010, 41-2

Semiotically, the 'aboutness' of the brain, its intimate connection with (the rest of) the body, is its indexical function; the mapping is its iconic function; and the resulting representations *inform* the actions and interactions of the whole organism.

Information comes to us first as *feelings*. According to Damasio (2010), changes to body- or world-maps in the brain generate emotions and feelings, which in turn accomplish the separation between mental images that belong to the self and those that do not, by means of 'emotion-based signals' which he calls *somatic markers*.

When contents that pertain to the self occur in the mind stream, they provoke the appearance of a marker, which joins the mind stream as an image, juxtaposed to the image that prompted it. These feelings accomplish a distinction between self and nonself. They are, in a nutshell, *feelings of knowing*. We shall see that the construction of a conscious mind depends, at several stages, on the generation of such feelings. As for my working definition of the material me, the self-as-object, it is as follows: *a dynamic collection of integrated neural processes, centered on the representation of the living body, that finds expression in a dynamic collection of integrated mental processes*.

Semiotically, the integrated neural processes are signs whose dynamic object is the living body, and whose dynamic interpretants are the integrated mental processes. But if we ask who the *interpreter* is, we are attempting to make it the object of a higher-level sign, i.e. the subject of a *dicsign* or proposition which is both more developed and more abstract.

The self-as-subject, as knower, as the "I," is a more elusive presence, far less collected in mental or biological terms than the *me*, more dispersed, often dissolved in the stream of consciousness, at times so

annoyingly subtle that it is there but almost not there. The self-as-knower is more difficult to capture than the plain me, unquestionably. But that does not diminish its significance for consciousness. The self-as-subject-and-knower is not only a very real presence but a turning point in biological evolution. We can imagine that the self-as-subject-and-knower is stacked, so to speak, on top of the self-as-object, as a new layer of neural processes giving rise to yet another layer of mental processing. There is no dichotomy between self-as-object and self-as-knower; there is, rather, a continuity and progression. The self-as-knower is grounded on the self-as-object.

— Damasio (2010, 9-10, italics his)

Likewise, in self-control, the self-as-controller is grounded on the self controlled (Damasio's 'me'), which is both source and subject of its semiotic energy. This 'energy' is generated by the intersubjective interaction which we call semiosis. The 'continuity and progression' between the 'layers' of neural and mental processing, as described above by Damasio, resemble the continuity and 'growth' which Peirce ascribed to semiosis itself. We might say that Damasio's 'self-as-subject' (or 'I') is a sign of the 'self-as-object' (or 'me') to the interpretant 'self-as-knower,' which in the next moment of the process is a sign to another interpretant, and so on from 'I' to 'I'. A snapshot of a moment in this continuous process – as a static depiction in which the three roles of *object*, *sign* and *interpretant* are distinctly and interdependently marked – appears as an irreducibly triadic relationship constituting an instance of semiosis.

Elements of consciousness

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by all things. To be verified by all things is to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of the others drop off. There is a trace of

realization that cannot be grasped. We endlessly express this ungraspable trace of realization.

— Dogen, 'Genjokoan' (Okumura 2010, 2)

The *feeling* of semiosis is (in Dogen's words) 'a trace of realization that cannot be grasped' in a static model. Its 'endless expression' occurs at various levels of consciousness, which Peirce compared to 'a bottomless lake, whose waters seem transparent, yet into which we can clearly see but a little way' (CP 7.547), 'in which ideas are suspended at different depths. Indeed, these ideas themselves constitute the very medium of consciousness itself' (CP 7.553). These 'ideas' are continuous with what Damasio calls 'images' (above), which in turn arise from the 'primordial feelings' of the 'protoself.' These constitute the Firstness of consciousness, and the basis of iconicity in semiosis.

Yet the *difference* between 'self-as-object' and 'self-as subject,' which allows the latter to be grounded in the former (and not the other way round), allows the self to act as an *index* involving an icon, even as it constitutes the Secondness or *actuality* of self-consciousness. Here is Damasio's account of it, which refers to 'subjectivity' in its experiential sense (not its 'material' sense) as a 'new property':

Consciousness is not merely about images in the mind. It is, in the very least, about an *organization of mind contents centered on the organism that produces and motivates those contents*. But consciousness, in the sense that reader and author can experience anytime they wish, is more than a mind organized under the influence of a living, acting organism. It is also a mind capable of knowing that such a living, acting organism exists. To be sure, the fact that the brain succeeds in creating neural patterns that map things experienced as images is an important part of the process of being conscious. Orienting the images in the perspective of the organism is also a part of the process. But that is not the same as automatically and explicitly knowing that images exist within me and are mine and, in current lingo, actionable. The mere presence of

organized images flowing in a mental stream produces a mind, but unless some supplementary process is added on, the mind remains unconscious. What is missing from that unconscious mind is a *self*. What the brain needs in order to become conscious is to acquire a new property—*subjectivity*—and a defining trait of subjectivity is the feeling that pervades the images we experience subjectively....

In keeping with this idea, the decisive step in the making of consciousness is not the making of images and creating the basics of a mind. The decisive step is *making the images ours*, making them belong to their rightful owners, the singular, perfectly bounded organisms in which they emerge. In the perspective of evolution and in the perspective of one's life history, the knower came in steps: the protoself and its primordial feelings; the action-driven core self; and finally the autobiographical self, which incorporates social and spiritual dimensions. But these are dynamic processes, not rigid things, and on any day their level fluctuates (simple, complex, somewhere in between) and can be readily adjusted as the circumstances dictate. A knower, by whatever name one may want to call it—self, experiencer, protagonist—needs to be generated in the brain if the mind is to become conscious. When the brain manages to introduce a knower in the mind, subjectivity follows.

— Damasio (2010, 10-11)

But if the self is a *phenomenon* (appearing as an object of someone's attention), the elements of the self are the elements of the *phaneron*, Peirce's three 'modes of being.' The Secondness or otherness between *experienced* and *experiencing* self is the *actuality* of the phenomenon, which is as elementary as the Firstness which is its *possibility*. Equally elementary is the Thirdness which, in Dogen's terms, is the 'endless expression' which connects them. But there can be no connection, or expression, or phenomenon such as Damasio's *protagonist*, without an *agon*, a clash, conflict or contest of some kind. Genuine

Thirdness inherits its *reality* from the actuality of Secondness.

Actuality is something *brute*. There is no reason in it. I instance putting your shoulder against a door and trying to force it open against an unseen, silent, and unknown resistance. We have a two-sided consciousness of effort and resistance, which seems to me to come tolerably near to a pure sense of actuality. On the whole, I think we have here a mode of being of one thing which consists in how a second object is. I call that Secondness.

— Peirce, CP 1.24 (1903)

Actual self-consciousness being a two-sided self/other consciousness, it sets the self *against* the other in reaction. Heraclitus put this ‘brute’ basis of selfhood in mythic terms: ‘War [πόλεμος] is father of all and king of all, and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free’ (D.53, Kahn LXXXIII). Reasonableness mitigates the conflict, however, as reason may resolve or mediate it. Even as War sets beings against one another, the counter-movement of Love will, as Peirce put it, ‘draw them into harmony.’

Interacting with other subjects (things or selves) leads naturally to the most direct feeling of something independent of your will, and thus to recognition of your limitations. It is these limitations that make your existence meaningful: with nothing *obstinate* to push against, how could you form intentions or goals? Challenges are necessary for engagement and the feeling of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi 1990); these would be impossible for an omnipotent or omniscient being to whom reality offered no resistance. Yet you must *push* the envelope of limitation in order for its contact with reality to be experienced. While engaged in pushing the envelope, you are free of inhibitory self-consciousness, but in the aftermath of the *flow* experience, self-esteem arises (Csikszentmihalyi 1993, 195). Enaction brings out more of the ‘true self’ – or as Dogen puts it, ‘To be verified by all things is to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of the others drop off.’

The self remains a cage or prison only so long as you are

content to be contained in it. If you are a *sign*, though – a mediator between your past and everybody’s future experience – the element of Thirdness predominates. This is characteristic of anticipatory (future-oriented) systems.

Five minutes of our waking life will hardly pass without our making some kind of prediction; and in the majority of cases these predictions are fulfilled in the event. Yet a prediction is essentially of a general nature, and cannot ever be completely fulfilled. ... the mode of being which *consists* in the fact that future facts of Secondness will take on a determinate general character, I call a Thirdness.

— Peirce, CP 1.26 (1903)

This aspect of Thirdness has a deep biological connection with selfhood. According to Llinás (2001), ‘self is the centralization of prediction’ (23). ‘Prediction, almost continually operative at conscious and reflex levels, is pervasive throughout most, if not all, levels of brain function’ (22); ‘prediction begins at the single neuron level’ (25). At higher levels, the generality of prediction enables self-control, because it enables one to take on, modify and drop off habits. If self is a prison, its walls are made of petrified habitation. Dialogue with other selves, or with nature (as in genuine inquiry), breaks down habitual boundaries and type-casting, by forcing you to change your habits and adapt them to something beyond yourself. Sometimes dialogue means peaceful co-operation with others, but sometimes it means ‘wrestling with the angel’ – who, if you refuse to let him go, will bless you with a new name and destiny, like Jacob in *Genesis* 32.

The most spontaneous and elusive element of the self is its Firstness, its basis in the monadic Self to which there is no Other – the primal self.

Jesus says: ‘I am the light that is over all. I am the All. The All came forth out of me. And to me the All has come.’

‘Split a piece of wood – I am there. Lift the stone, and you will find me there.’

Jesus here speaks for (and as) the primal person, but also says in *Thomas* 108 that ‘He who will drink from my mouth will become like me,’ and the *Gospel of Thomas* tells us from the very beginning that the seeker who does not give up the quest will be ‘king over the All,’ or as the *Upanishad* (above) puts it, ‘Lord of the universe.’ This is another face of Firstness: the *primal* is ἀρχη, archaic source, ‘origin’; the *primary* social position is ἀρχον, monarch, the ‘power’ to which others are subject. Whatever else this connection may signify, it means that the entire content of your experience is there *for you*, and – since the world is inside out – in a sense it *is* you. Your ‘primordial feelings,’ which are ‘spontaneous reflections of the state of the living body,’ are ‘the primitives for all other feelings’ (Damasio 2010, 108). This is a physiological account of the Firstness of the *phaneron*, ‘the All.’

Yet when we *actually* split a log or lift a stone, we have direct experience of the *otherness* of things. This brings us round to the Secondness of the *phaneron*, the feeling of resistance of things to our will and their impact on our senses. This goes double for other people, as we experience not only the Secondness of their bodies as physical subjects, but also their subjective agency as selves. In the ‘thought-experiment’ of solipsism, as Husserl called it (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 173), we can imagine that they are figments of our own imagination; but our own embodiment tells another story in expressing the Thirdness of the phenomenal self.

Body loops and empathy

Think of yourself as a sign. What do you mean?

Selves, human or nonhuman, simple or complex, are outcomes of semiosis as well as the starting points for new sign interpretation whose outcome will be a future self. They are waypoints in a semiotic process.

— Eduardo Kohn (2013, 33)

Selves are temporary stops along the lifeline, except that they don’t stop. They continue making their path by walking it. What seems a

point on the line of the history of the universe is really a *part* of the line of semiosis. Zoom in on the lifeline of a self and it appears as an attractor in the state space of a dynamic system which incorporates meaning cycles such as action-ception loops. Some of these loops are wholly internal to the body-brain connection. Damasio calls one of them the 'emotion-feeling cycle,' in which emotion is the enactive side and feeling the perceptual side of a meaning cycle.

Emotions are complex, largely automated programs of *actions* concocted by evolution. The actions are complemented by a *cognitive* program that includes certain ideas and modes of cognition, but the world of emotions is largely one of actions carried out in our bodies, from facial expressions and postures to changes in viscera and internal milieu.

Feelings of emotion, on the other hand, are composite perceptions of what happens in our body and mind when we are emoting. ... While emotions are actions accompanied by ideas and certain modes of thinking, emotional feelings are mostly perceptions of what our bodies do during the emoting, along with perceptions of our state of mind during that same period of time....

Seen from a neural perspective, the emotion-feeling cycle begins in the brain, with the perception and appraisal of a stimulus potentially capable of causing an emotion and the subsequent triggering of an emotion. The process then spreads elsewhere in the brain and in the body proper, building up the emotional state. In closing, the process returns to the brain for the feeling part of the cycle, although the return involves brain regions different from those in which it all started.

— Damasio (2010, 116-18)

Another kind of internal cycle is exemplified by what Damasio calls 'as-if body loops' (2010, 110). These enable the brain to simulate body states and thus to anticipate the effect of one's own

movements on them, which helps to economize on energy use. A special development of these was brought to light by the discovery of 'mirror neurons' (Thompson 2001, 9; see also Gallese in that volume). This class of neurons was first discovered in the premotor cortex of macaque monkeys, when a researcher noticed that a motor neuron whose activity he was monitoring fired whenever a specific type of action was performed, whether the monkey herself or someone else in her view was performing it. Doubtless this same functionality is at work in the brains of humans and other primates, interacting with emotion-feeling cycles, enabling us to empathize and 'identify with' other selves, and supporting all our abilities as social animals, including language and self-consciousness. Thomas Metzinger adds that the 'development of a capacity to *control* the mirror system, that is, to successfully decouple it from the actual executive structures of the motor system, is a necessary precondition for achieving voluntary control' (Metzinger 2003, 376). Once again, self-control is inhibitory, arising from an ability *not* to immediately act out an intention while mediately experiencing its actual form.

Evan Thompson (2007, 165) speaks of empathy as 'a multifaceted experience rooted in the spontaneous and involuntary resonance of two living bodies with each other ... widened beyond the human sphere to ground our comprehension of the organism and our recognition of the purposiveness of life. Empathy in this sense encompasses the coupling of our human lived bodies with the bodies of other beings we recognize as living, whether these be human, animal, or even ... bacteria.' Recognition of other selves is not an inference from logic, but a prerequisite for logic, and for science too (Thompson 2001; but we have already heard this from Peirce). Its biological basis has evolved along with the capacity for both empathy and self-control, grounding in turn the dialogical basis of mind.

What drives genuine dialog is the tension between the closure of public meaning space and the closure of private (experiential) meaning space. Every person is an instance of *mind* with his or her own integrity, but 'two minds in communication are, in so far, "at one," that is, are properly one mind in that part of them' (Peirce, EP 2:389). Dialogue creates and sustains a community, as long as its various members speak *from* experience *toward* consensus. If

consensus establishes itself as an external guidance system to which the members are expected to conform, there is always the risk that its collective perceptions and conceptual belief system will seal itself within a cognitive bubble cut off from the Big Current, overriding more direct experience of the reality beyond. Consciousness of this danger amplifies the tension between individual and community.

“Whatever be the ultimate purpose of [human] life, one thing is certainly requisite to it, outward communication of mind” (Peirce, MS 835). Moreover, whatever be the ultimate nature of the human mind, one thing is absolutely essential to it, inward control over itself. Thus, to be human is to exist in the tension between solitude and solidarity—the tension between the inward depths of the human spirit and the outward expressions of those inward depths.

— Vincent Colapietro (1989, 119)

Some ‘outward expressions’ of the human spirit take the form of external guidance systems such as religions, in which solidarity is a prime virtue. ‘Truly Allah loves those who fight in His Cause in battle array, as if they were a solid cemented structure’ (*Qur’án* 61:4, Yusuf Ali). Yet the divine unity can also be manifested in a single person who, guided by spiritual experience, represents it for others, becoming a guide toward higher levels of community, becoming a waypoint who points the Way. In the kabbalistic tradition such a person was called the *Tsaddik* or ‘Righteous One.’ ‘For one *Tsaddik* was the world created.... For the world was only created because of the righteous, who are counted as one – for they unify themselves with all the levels, and by their means all the levels ascend’ (Scholem 1976, 135, quoting Nahum of Chernobyl).

According to the Baal Shem Tov, as quoted by Scholem (1976, 128), a person who embodies the role of ‘leader of the generation’ connects others with God, by connecting himself first with God, and then with the others – for ‘the leaders of the generation and their contemporaries have a common root for their souls.’ Yet this common root is the very autonomy of each, which comes to the fore when some revelation calls a person to lead others in new

directions. At first the new path may look foolish to them (or even to the new leader), and only a firm grounding in one's own integrity can give a person the strength to risk making a fool of himself. Such a risk is often necessary if one is to overcome both received opinion and self-deception by learning from experience, and thus to 'study the self.' Life is risky because a lifetime is limited.

An ancient said:

Two-thirds of a lifetime has swiftly gone.
On the spiritual foundation not a single speck
has been polished.
While indulging, life randomly passes day
after day.
If you are called but do not turn around, what
can be done?

— Dogen (quoting Xuefeng) in *Tenzo Kyokun* (Leighton and Okumura 1996, 46-7)

Whose turn is it, if not yours?

Leaving home

A revelation can launch a new religion, which will change the way people read older revelations. Likewise 'each scientific revolution alters the historical perspective of the community that experiences it' (Kuhn 1969, xi). But the *experiencing* which interacts with symbol systems to form human meanings is *felt* at the scale of the human body, and the web of community itself is woven of connections between its individual members.

It is, after all, people and not societies who think. Mental images, concepts, trial solutions to problems, abstract orderings of the world are the proximate result of physiological processes that go on inside particular human beings. At the same time, of course, the social and natural world in which those beings are embedded are conditioned by and condition those

individual thoughts. The formation of an idea is the individual transformation of a social condition by a material organism that is itself the product of individual and social conditions.

— Richard Lewontin (2001, 92-3)

But we could equally well (or better) say that the material organism is only the material cause of such a transformation, while the formal causes are semiotic. The general forms of semiosis, the 'conditions' that make it possible for anything to function as a sign, govern all these individual transformations, while current circumstances determine the details. According to Peirce, our reasoning works the way it does because evolution follows 'the logic of events' and sentient beings have evolved to embody that logic. 'For we must remember that the organism has not made the mind, but is only adapted to it. It has become adapted to it by an evolutionary process so that it is not far from correct to say that it is the mind that has made the organism' (NEM 4, 141).

As a 'product of individual and social conditions,' you play different roles in different social contexts; this is what Goffman (1959) called *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. But *presentation* is also *becoming*: 'We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be' (Kurt Vonnegut's protagonist in *Mother Night*). As in the meaning cycle, theory and practice feed forward and back into each other. Pretending becomes intending, which in turn guides further practice. The performances we put on for each other, playing roles expected of us, turn out to be our very lives, as determined by what Wegner (2002) calls 'the circle of influence.'

The way in which groups and cultures move along, changing their expectations of each other and themselves, produces an odd situation we might call 'the suggested society.' People become what they think they are, or what they find that others think they are, in a process of negotiation that snowballs constantly.

— Daniel Wegner (2002, 314)

Conformity to 'the circle of influence' can sometimes override salient aspects of actual experience, cutting off the guidance system

from its grounding in reality. Getting out of this squirrel-cage, and thus recovering authenticity, may require cutting conventional ties to family and community, becoming what Buddhists call a 'home-leaver.' The *Gospel of Thomas* makes the point almost violently:

Jesus says: 'Whoever does not hate his father and his mother cannot become a disciple of mine. And whoever does not hate his brothers and his sisters (and) will not take up his cross as I do, will not be worthy of me.'

— *Thomas* 55 (5G)

This, the only direct mention of the cross in the entire *Gospel of Thomas*, does not describe the crucifixion as a unique sacrifice by the only 'son of God,' but on the contrary emphasizes that whoever follows Jesus should act like him. If the stress on 'hate' in this saying shocks us, perhaps it's because the familiarity of the cross as a symbol has numbed us to its implications. But the synoptic gospels also acknowledge the violence implied in the call to abandon family, home and social convention. All of them have some parallel to *Thomas* 16:

Jesus said, 'Perhaps people think that I have come to cast peace upon the world. They do not know that I have come to cast conflicts upon the earth: fire, sword, war. For there will be five in a house: there'll be three against two and two against three, father against son and son against father, and they will stand alone.'

— (Patterson/Meyer)

According to 5G (46-8), this pattern was typical of 'early Christian radicalism.' Even Paul, who was always urging the members of each Christian community to love one another, also explained in his letters how family life can hinder your deeper spiritual life, for instance by causing anxiety about pleasing your spouse (*1 Corinthians* 7). Metaphorically at least, life on 'the Way' is itinerant, while the home-bound life is a virtual death; so the follower of Jesus is challenged to be radically homeless.

(1) Jesus said, "[Foxes have] their dens and birds have

their nests, (2) but the child of humanity has no place to lay his head and rest.”

— *Thomas 86* (NHS)

Since ‘child of humanity’ (or ‘son of man’) translates a term widely used for the generic human being, you could read this as saying that for humans, as opposed to other species, homelessness is the natural condition (Valantasis 1997, 166). If we don’t see it that way, perhaps it’s only because we are so domesticated. In any case, the same saying is attributed to Jesus in *Matthew 8:19-20* and *Luke 9:57-8*, as his reply to someone who says to him, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ The next verse again challenges would-be followers to sever their social ties:

But another said to him: Master, permit me first to go and bury my father. But he said to him: Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.

— *Q 9:59-60* (Robinson et al. 2002, 97)

To this *Luke* adds another example of the pattern:

Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’

— (RSV)

The home-leaver may retire from ‘the world’ into solitude, just as Jesus withdrew into the desert for 40 days; but the ultimate result is the regeneration of community (or the founding of a new one) on more authentic principles. The prophet, or the bodhisattva, does not leave the world to save himself from it, but to save all selves from being ‘hidebound with habits.’ He is ‘born again’ to head off communal senescence. Nor is the ‘saved’ community only projected into the future: it is here now for those who walk the Way.

The disciples said to him, ‘Your brothers and your mother are standing outside.’ He said to them: ‘Those here, who do the will of my Father, are my brothers

and my mother. They are the ones who will enter the kingdom of my Father.'

— *Thomas* 99 (5G)

(1) "Whoever does not hate [father] and mother as I do cannot be a [disciple] of me, (2) and whoever does [not] love [father and] mother as I do cannot be a [disciple of] me. (3) For my mother [gave me falsehood], but my true [mother] gave me life."

— *Thomas* 101 (NHS)

Saying 101 repeats 55 (above) but adds a new line at the end, which is damaged in the manuscript but seems to have the 'encratic' cast which DeConick (2007a) finds in many of the 'accretions.' We might also read it as showing how 'hate' is an expression of a higher love. Perhaps Dogen's discourse on home-leaving, 1200 years later and on the other side of the world, pointed in the same direction: 'If you must care for tender feelings, treat them with compassion; to treat them with compassion means to resolutely relinquish them' (Kim 1975, 20). The way to serve or 'save' others is not to conform to their expectations, or to require conformity of them, but 'to let the body and mind of the self and the body and mind of the others drop off' while challenging them to seek out the Way and live the time.

Such a challenge is difficult to hear from someone you are too familiar with.

Jesus said, 'No prophet is accepted in his own village;
no physician heals those who know him.'

— *Thomas* 31 (Lambdin)

In the same vein, Wallace Stevens remarked that 'No man is a hero to anyone that knows him' (Stevens 1957, 174). The gift of life can only be brought by a stranger. Perhaps all healing is faith-healing, in a sense, and such faith can only be placed in the unfamiliar, in the genuinely *other*. One does not leave home merely to find another, more comfortable home, but to challenge oneself and others, as Dogen did.

Dogen held from beginning to end that 'homelessness'

was the ideal possibility or model of rightly transmitted Buddhism and transcended both the monastic's and the layperson's lives in their ordinary senses.... Dogen held up the monastic life as a challenge to his Buddhist contemporaries as well as to the secularists of his time. The monastic life was not a withdrawal from the world, but a protest, an invitation, a recommendation to the world.

— Hee-Jin Kim (1975, 43)

Synechism and synergy

When you leave home, you abandon the comforts of self in quest of another self, a new identity – perhaps a bodhisattva who has dropped the delusion of selfhood. As we have seen in Chapter 8, this aspiration is the heart of ‘the Buddhisto-Christian religion’ as Peirce saw it, and of the *synechistic* philosophy – as opposed to *dualism*, ‘the philosophy which performs its analyses with an axe, leaving as the ultimate elements, unrelated chunks of being’ (EP2:1-2).

In particular, the synechist will not admit that physical and psychical phenomena are entirely distinct,— whether as belonging to different categories of substance, or as entirely separate sides of one shield,— but will insist that all phenomena are of one character, though some are more mental and spontaneous, others more material and regular.

Nor must any synechist say, ‘I am altogether myself, and not at all you.’ If you embrace synechism, you must abjure this metaphysics of wickedness. In the first place, your neighbors are, in a measure, yourself, and in far greater measure than, without deep studies in psychology, you would believe. Really, the selfhood you like to attribute to yourself is, for the most part, the vulgarest delusion of vanity. In the second place, all men who resemble you and are in analogous circumstances are, in a measure, yourself, though not

quite in the same way in which your neighbors are you.

There is still another direction in which the barbaric conception of personal identity must be broadened. A Brahmanical hymn begins as follows: 'I am that pure and infinite Self, who am bliss, eternal, manifest, all-pervading, and who am the substrate of all that owns name and form.' This expresses more than humiliation,—the utter swallowing up of the poor individual self in the Spirit of prayer. All communication from mind to mind is through continuity of being. A man is capable of having assigned to him a rôle in the drama of creation, and so far as he loses himself in that rôle,—no matter how humble it may be,—so far he identifies himself with its Author.

— EP2:2-3

When the 'barbaric conception of personal identity' is thus 'broadened,' we see that one who devotes himself to communication 'loses himself' only to a higher Self with Whom he thus identifies. The self 'lost' or 'dropped off' in this way is the small self, the ego, the one obsessed with fame or gain or permanence. The more completely you place yourself at the disposal of a bigger Self, the more you lose your distinction from it, and thus you identify with the Author of the Universal Play, since your will does not differ from that Will. The Vedic expression of this is that *atman*, the self inside, is ultimately *brahman*, the Universal Self. In a monotheistic idiom, the mystical expression is 'I am God,' meaning that I am aware of all things (my world, myself and my words) as nothing other than God's self-expression.

This is not a typically religious attitude; indeed mystics who proclaim it in public are often at odds with the religious authorities of their time, sometimes ending up as martyrs for their presumption. If intimacy with others tends to be subversive of the social order (Goffman 1967), intimacy with God is even more so. Besides, some arrive at such unity with Big Self by a philosophical route rather than a religious one; Schrödinger called it the 'grandest of all thoughts.' But as Buddhists have pointed out for centuries, the Big Self may turn out to be a mere inflation of the

ego. Most schools of Buddhism confront this danger directly with their doctrine of *anatta* ('no-self'), which denies the immortality of any Self, including *brahman*. To realize your own buddha-nature is to realize that even Buddha-nature is impermanent or empty – or rather, as Dogen said, it *is impermanence*: all beings *are* Buddha-nature passing through infinite semiosis.

The Buddha said, “All things are ultimately unbound.
There is nowhere that they permanently abide.”

— Dogen, SBGZ ‘Sansuikyo’ (Tanahashi 2010, 159)

There’s nobody home: Here Comes Everybody. The delusion of a permanent Selfhood is avoidable by ‘identifying with the Author’ of all lives in *practice*, not in grand thoughts or exalted states of mind. *You have been selected* by nature and culture *for a secret mission*, but your view of that mission is a player’s view, from the inside, not a God’s-eye view. None of us knows what kind of meaning space it takes to provide a niche that a whole life can occupy. Maybe you can only ‘know’ your mission by executing it, by turning the meaning cycle beginning and endlessly. This may be what Peirce (as pragmatist and synechist) was driving at, and what Gandhi said even more succinctly:

Our duty is to strive for self-realization and we should
lose ourselves in that aim.

— Gandhi (1926, 86)

This comes from Gandhi’s commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita*, perhaps the greatest of all Vedic classics, in which Krishna convinces Arjuna that engagement in the world, and not renunciation of it, is the true path of service to the divine – even though in Arjuna’s case it means fighting a war against his own kin. Gandhi himself set an example of engagement by non-violent confrontation against injustice. In these terms, ‘to strive for self-realization’ is to realize that social systems (like natural systems) are works in progress, and that the function of consciousness is to enable us to change our habits. The Creator’s work is never done, and our choice is whether to participate willingly in that work or not. We ‘lose ourselves’ by serving greater purposes than we imagine ours to be.

Dissolving and resolving

No organism is isolated; all are energetically connected. What we think of as an undissociable 'individual' can be broken down and integrated into a group. Its genes and cells can be taken up by larger flow systems. Rerouted energy flows can put severe pressures on individuals dependent on those flows. In humans this has unsightly political repercussions. Individuals and their freedoms are destroyed as collective dictatorial or market-based organizations are built. Life is a complex energetic system, not a paragon of virtue. The tendency to conform and belong, to subject and integrate oneself into a larger whole, has roots beyond totalitarianism or human ideology, in the energetic roots of stressed biological systems.

— Schneider and Sagan (2005, 295-6)

A system complex enough to have a sense of self has to be both open and closed; the tension between energy flow and integrity can reach no resolution in life, because it *is* life, a teleodynamic process powered by 'reciprocal synergy.' We are held in this ruthless life-grip of striving and suffering until it is done with us, and we get recycled, just as we have helped to recycle other forms and dissolve other differences. Some part of us, despite our selves, must be longing for release from this treadmill, for a short-cut to equilibrium. Perhaps this is at the bottom of Freud's 'death-wish' and the self-destructive impulse that drives the suicide, the addict and the party animal in their quest for oblivion. Political, religious and corporate cults also offer the means of escape from the rigors of an authentic *ethos*.

Newberg et al. (2002, 85) even speak of 'the neurobiological need of all living things to escape from the limiting boundaries of the self.' For an organism, extinction is its compensation for suffering existence; or from a more detached point of view, death and dissolution resolve the problem of selfhood, providing retribution (atonement, absolution,) for the injustice of living a

separate life. The ultimate state of peace, justice and equality would be a universally uniform state of total equilibrium. Entropy represents the physical ‘pull’ toward that ideal, and maintaining one’s own existence far from equilibrium always means some compromise with that ideal – some strife, injustice or inequality.

This view was anticipated in the 6th century before Christ by the Milesian philosopher Anaximander, who said that all existing things ‘pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of time’ (Kirk and Raven 1957, 107). The origin of all things, for Anaximander, was τὸ ἄπειρον, the ‘unbounded,’ the ‘infinite,’ or (better) the ‘indefinite.’ All things also return to the *apeiron*, origin and return ‘occurring in cycles’ just like the energy flows of nonequilibrium energetics. At roughly the same time in China, Lao Tzu was saying much the same thing, for his *tao* or ‘Way’ seems to be defined mostly by vagueness or indefiniteness. ‘The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth. The named is the mother of ten thousand things.’

If that is the mother of all things, then strife or ‘war’ is their father, as Heraclitus said. We might also say that the concept of energy flow, or the energetic order, has evolved from the πῦρ ἀείζωον (everliving fire) which constitutes the cosmos of Heraclitus (Kirk and Raven 1957, 199). And this cosmos, its boundlessness in constant tension with its ongoing self-definition, is reconnected to the psyche by another fragment of Heraclitus:

You would not find out the boundaries of soul [ψυχῆς πείρατα], even by travelling along every path: so deep a measure [βαθὺν λόγον] does it have.

— D.45, Kahn XXXV, Kirk and Raven (1957, 205)

We can read the ‘everliving fire’ of Heraclitus as not only self-guiding but also a precursor of self-organization and *autopoiesis*: he speaks of it as ‘kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures’ (Wheelwright 1959, 37, 141). If equilibrium is equitable, and difference an injustice, structural determination (from cell wall to self-will) is both crime and punishment in the form of imprisonment. As dissipative systems we are far from energetic equilibrium, and as sentient beings we are far from psychological equilibrium, thanks to the creative tension between

self-making and self-merging. Clinging to things, or to notions of permanence (especially of a permanent selfhood), is the prison itself. As Leonard Cohen sings (in 'Stories of the Street'), 'you are locked into your suffering and your pleasures are the seal.'

One way out of this prison is called by Buddhists *nirvana* (often translated as 'extinction') and by Sufis *fana* ('annihilation'). The selfless state can be directly experienced by the living, according to the testimony of mystics, but their accounts of it naturally resort to metaphors – intoxication or illumination, springtime or dying, virginity or orgasm, emptiness fulfilled, the coincidence of opposites. Where explication fails, we fall for intimations. Anyone who has an inkling of this can identify with the voice in that same Cohen song: 'one hand on my suicide, one hand on the rose.' As we all know, the rose blooms on the cross with its crown of thorns.

On the other hand, this 'selfless state' is but the inverse side of the realization that the universe is nothing other than OneSelf.

To seek to know the self is always the wish of living beings. However, those who see the true self are rare. Only buddhas know the true self. People outside the way regard what is not the self as the self. On the other hand, what buddhas call the self is the entire earth. Thus, there is never an entire earth that is not the self, with or without our knowing it.

— Dogen, SBGZ 'Yuibutso-yobutsu' (Tanahashi 2010, 879)