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In the Beginning Is the Relationship

As you read these lines, isn't it clear: *You* are the reader, *this* book is before you, and *I* am the writer. We have, then, three entities—you, me, and the book—each separate and distinct. But reconsider: As I write I am using words that are not my own; I am borrowing from countless sources and shaping them for you. Are these words, then, truly my own—a unique expression of me as an independent being, or are they someone else's, and in important degree even yours? The moment at which *I* the author specifically begins and ends is clouded. Consider as well that the words on this page are not the specific property of the book itself. The book does have some distinct characteristics—a unique title, chapter names, cover design—that suggest an independent identity. But all that *it* says—the important stuff—is borrowed from elsewhere—one might have said "from me" if only we knew where I began and ended. But hold on; precisely who are *you* in this situation? As these words crowd your consciousness are they not defining who you are at this moment; aren't they at this moment *your* words. Or were they yours already? At the moment of reading, then, the words belong to neither you, the book, nor to me. At the moment of reading there is no clear separation between me, the book, and you. Not only are we joined together, but we are wedded as well to a preceding world of language without evident end. And as you put this book aside and speak to others, so will we be carried into the future.

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My fifth grade geography teacher asked me to write an essay on Mesopotamia. I knew nothing about Mesopotamia, but dutifully began a library search. Ah, the encyclopedia was so full of wonderful information, orderly, coherent, and perfectly spelled. There were also colorful photos and a map. I took pencil in hand and slowly began to ponder. Everything I might wish to know or say about Mesopotamia was there before me. But I was supposed to write an essay in *my own words*. Virtually everything I could write would be taken from this book before me. How could my writing be *my own*? And when I converted these orderly perfections into my limited vocabulary, simplified grammar, and inventive spelling, would I not be disfiguring them? Soon my teacher would give me a grade for my degrading.

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Consider the way we teach children about the world. One points to oneself and says "Mama," and to another and says, "Dada." Later we might take the finger of the child and point, "There is a cat," and "See the dog." Each pointing is to what we consider a *thing*, a separate and bounded entity. And from this process we emerge with a world of things—secured for us by a world of nouns. This *book*, that *reader*, the *author* over there. Are we not enchanted by a world of nouns to believe in a world of separation?[1]

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What if there were no nouns? Would our world remain composed of distinct and separate things? What if our only language for describing the world were dance? The movements of the body are continuous, and it is difficult to separate the flow of action into discrete, noun-like entities; like waves of the ocean it is not clear where one movement ends and another begins. If we used dance to teach our children about the world, the world might not appear to us as separated entities. The child might discover a world of endless movement, not discrete "forms" but continuous "forming." The child might never ask if it were possible to separate the dancers from the dance.

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If there were no pronouns, would *you* and *I* cease to exist as independent beings? Would there be an *I* if there were no means of designating a separate being? To employ the words *you* and *I* is to create a world of separations.

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[1] Also see Gregory Bateson's argument for "stamping out nouns," in his *Steps toward an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1972.

And so it is with proper names. Would we have a unique identity in a culture that assigned no proper names?[2] When armies are bent on destruction of their foe—the villages, cities, and entire peoples—they do not make a roll call of proper names. *You* and *I* become individual selves only when it is socially useful. Utility precedes essence.

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In important respects "the individual self" is
not a state of nature
but of language.

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In these few remarks I have attempted to blur the commonly accepted boundaries between self and other, and to underscore the constructed character of bounded being. This is to prepare the way for an exploration of an alternative to this longstanding tradition. We begin in the present chapter by exploring a vision of insoluble connectivity. Thrust into presence is a process of relationship from which the very conception of separated entities emerges. After introducing this focal process of co-action, I explore its constraints and its potentials. This will lead to a concluding section in which we find reason to suspend the traditional assumption of cause and effect in explaining human relations. Here we consider human action within a relational confluence.

Co-Action and Creation

A simple but substantial question: Have you truly "helped someone in need" if the recipient detests your action? Can you "help" another without his or her affirming that it is help and not hindrance? Within this question lies an invitation to new adventure. In accepting the invitation, we shift our gaze from singular entities to conjunctions. We move metaphorically from the movements of individual dancers to the dance, from individual brush strokes to the emerging painting, from individual athletes to playing the game. More specifically, let us explore the potentials of a co-active process, in which "help" is located within a conjunction of actions. As I shall propose, all that is meaningful to us as human beings derives from this process. All that we take to be real, true, valuable, or good finds its origin in coordinated action.

[2]See also, Mulhauser, P., and Harré, R. (1990). *Pronouns and people: The linguistic construction of social and personal identity*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Once this process of co-action is made clear, we are prepared to revisit the idea of the individual self. In subsequent chapters we shall find that all those properties once attributed to individual minds are the outcomes of relationship. I shall propose that reason and emotion, for example, are not possessions of individual minds, but of relations. Figuratively speaking, they are not features of the individual pigments but of the larger picture of which they are a part. The horizon will then explode as we realize the relational base of virtually all "mental phenomenon." Memory, motives, and intentions will be incorporated into the relational process, along with our sensations of pleasure and pain. We move, then, from individual being to relational being.

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Let us begin simply. You pick up a novel and your gaze falls on a single word in the first line: "knife." Ah, adventure is afoot...but what is this all about; what kind of adventure; what is intended here? In fact, the word in itself provides no answers. What kind of knife, in whose hands, to what ends? To determine the meaning of "knife" you read further. Your eyes move to the beginning of the sentence. "He pressed the knife into..." Your intrigue now intensifies; you are perhaps bearing witness to a murder most foul. But clarity is still needed; pressing a knife means almost nothing in itself. So you read on. Now you find that the knife is pressing into "...a mound of soft butter." No murder mystery here...oh well, perhaps an interesting domestic drama is unfolding. But to determine whether this is indeed the case you must again read on.

As we find, the word "knife" has little meaning in itself. Blurt it to a passerby, scream it into the night, paint it on a billboard. All are meaning/less acts. The word alone lies fallow. It springs into life as it is placed within a context of other words. As one phrase is added, the word "knife" appears to be a murder weapon; with yet another phrase, we envision a mundane breakfast setting. Each additional phrase alters what we understand by the word. The meaning of a word is not contained within itself but derives from a process of coordinating words. Without this coordination, the single words within the novel would mean very little. If we attempt to understand a novel by placing all its words in an alphabetical list, we would find ourselves in limbo. The fun begins in the fusion.[3]

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[3]The concept of co-action owes a debt to Herbert Blumer's *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method* (1969, New York: Prentice Hall), and to John Shotter's writings (especially, Action, joint action and intentionality. In Brenner, M. (Ed.) (1980). *The structure of action*.

Let us turn from the book to our daily relationships. Similar to the first line of the book, I say a few words to you: "Gorgeous day, isn't it!" You walk on past, without even a shrug. What now is the meaning of my action? If you simply failed to hear me, then I have meant nothing. I might as well have remained silent or mumbled incoherently. It is when you take some action in reply to mine that my words commence their journey toward meaning. When you reply, "Absolutely, I sure wish I didn't have classes," you have touched my words with a wand of affirmation. Now my words have become a cheery greeting.

More generally, it may be said, there is no action that has meaning in itself, that is, an action that can be isolated and identified for what it is. There are no acts of love, altruism, prejudice, or aggression as such. In order to be anything at all, they require a supplement, an action by at least one other person that ratifies their existence as something. Of course, you may supply the supplement yourself. "I did greet her," you may say to yourself. But this supplement is the child of past relationships in which someone was present to confirm your actions as a greeting. In "knowing what you are doing" you are a stand-in for another.

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At the same time, your affirmation of my greeting is not an action in itself. This supplement comes into meaning only by virtue of my preceding action. You may go about the street muttering, "Absolutely, I sure wish I didn't have classes" to all who pass by. But they will regard you as mad. Your words bring my words into meaning, but without my words your words fall into emptiness. There is, then, a precious reciprocity. Both action and supplement alone lie fallow; only in coordinated action does meaning spring to life.

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As a writer I come to you with a deep sense of humility. I place these words in motion, but they mean little in themselves. I say nothing at

Oxford: Oxford University Press; *Conversational realities*, 1993, London: Sage), both of whom employ the concept of *joint action*. In Blumer's case the term was an attempt to extend G.H. Mead's symbolic interactionist views by pointing to the ways in which people align themselves with each other's actions through mutual interpretation. For Shotter the term has variously been used to emphasize shared intentionality, dialogically structured relations, and the unintended consequences of dialogue. Also relevant are Westerman's concept of *coordination* and Fogel's discussion of *co-regulation*. See Westerman, M.A. (2005). What is interpersonal behavior? A post-Cartesian approach to problematic interpersonal patterns and psychotherapy process. *Review of General Psychology*, 9, 16–34; and Fogel, A. (1993). *Developing through relationships: Origins of communication, self, and culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

all on these pages until you grant me meaning. With unstinting criticism you could reduce my words to idiocy. If more charitable, you bring me as an author into life. If enthusiastic you grant me wings. And yet, if I—or someone like me—had no words to give you, never addressed you, never positioned you to reply, what are you then to say? You stand inert. Indeed, how often is there anything to say or do until there is some form of invitation? It is when someone says, "what do you think of this?" that you are animated. Suddenly you are brimming with ideas, opinions, tastes, and values. We must both be humble; for neither of us is meaning/full except for the other. We come into life through relationship. We exist in a state of inter-animation.

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Co-action is far more than words alone. Speaking and writing are bodily actions, and in this sense equivalent to all other actions taking place while we converse—smiling, laughing, gazing into each other's eyes, shuffling the feet. All that has been said about co-action includes the entire coordination of bodies. Thus:

If I thrust out my hand and…you grasp it in yours,

I have offered a greeting.

　　　　　　　…you push it aside to embrace me,

I have underestimated our friendship.

　　　　　　　…you kneel and kiss it,

I have demonstrated my authority.

　　　　　　　….you turn your back,

I have been insulting.

　　　　　　　….you give me a manicure,

I am your customer.

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The distinction between verbal versus non-verbal communication is an artificial one. Rather, we should attend to unified acts of coordination, with words/movements/facial expressions forming a seamless whole. Remove the threads of any, and the cloth is undone…or it becomes part of a different garment.

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What is spoken is never, and in no language, what is said.

—Martin Heidegger

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It was January and I had agreed to give a series of lectures at the University of St. Gallen in Switzerland. Because the town is small and there were no rooms for the weeks of my stay, it was arranged for me to have a bedroom in the apartment of an 83-year-old widow. I was not happy with the accommodation; not only would my privacy be threatened, but the requirement that I be a "perfect citizen" on a continuous basis was daunting. The latter problem was intensified by the fact that Frau Ferlin spoke only German, and I suffered from a beginner's acquaintance with the language. We would have little means of verbal communication.

On the evening of my arrival, I was intent on "no entangling alliances" and walked past the dining room to depart for dinner. There at the table was Frau Ferlin. Two places had been set. She was lighting the candles. I had no choice but to take a seat. She chattered on, I understood little, but the food and personal warmth were nourishing. The next morning, I found she had prepared my breakfast. I attempted as best I could to indicate this was unnecessary, but my remonstrations were without effect. That evening I found my bed had been made, and the covers turned down. I went to thank her, and she offered me a glass of wine. We sat, again with her laughing chatter, and my attempt to catch the gist of her humor.

As the weeks bore on, I realized that St. Gallen closed its doors early; there was little life—save by the hearth with Frau Ferlin. There I found my linguistic skills slowly improving. I also found myself becoming increasingly fond of this woman. I invited her out to a local concert; she beamed. A few days later she began to meet me at the door before my morning departure for the university, to be certain that my clothes were appropriate for Herr Professor. To ensure my good appearance, she would steal my shoes away to polish them. I began to bring food and wine to the apartment. On one weekend I drove her to the countryside where she showed me her birthplace and childhood neighborhood.

On the week before my departure, I happened to look up one morning as I left the apartment building and saw her in the window

watching me. I waved a greeting and she waved in return. A daily
ritual had been born. Frau Ferlin refused to let me pay rent;
I reciprocated by bringing her several cases of her favorite
wine. On the day of my departure, we met at the door to say
"Auf Viedersehen," knowing full well that we might never
see each other again. No words were spoken. We both broke
into tears.

The Co-Creation of Everything

Let us expand the scope of the co-active process. A father takes his little boy
to the zoo; he stops before an enclosure, grasps the boy's finger, and points
to a shape. "See the zebra," he says. "Zebra ...zebra...that is a zebra."
The boy looks puzzled...stares ahead and mumbles, "horse." "No," the
father says, "not a horse. That is a zebra." Slowly the boy burbles, "Zeeba."
"Not quite, replies the father, "ze*bra*." "Zebra," responds the boy, to which
the father says, "right, now you have it, zebra...see the stripes." This
little adventure in co-action is not trivial. Indeed, for the child it has cre-
ated a new world, one now inhabited by zebras. Before the co-active
steps of coordination—the initiating father, the responding child, the
correcting father, the echoing child, and so on, the child's world was
replete with horses, but no zebras. Through co-action Zebras have now
been born.

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Consider the energetic first grader, moving, jumping, infinitely curious.
The teacher is annoyed; the movements are disrupting the class. She speaks
with a counselor who offers the teacher a new phrase, "attention deficit
disorder." "Well," she says, "he doesn't pay attention, and surely this is a
deficit ...But I wouldn't quite say it is a disorder." Yes, says the counselor
authoritatively, it is a well-known disorder, and there are very good drugs
on the market that will cure him." "Uhmmm," mutters the teacher,
"I guess you may have something...I will speak to his parents about treat-
ment." In that brief interchange, attention deficit disorder becomes the
teacher's reality. Soon it will become the first grader's way of life, and most
likely, for a very long time.

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When my children grew up, there was nothing called attention
deficit disorder. Some kids were more active than others, and a few
required special attention. Today there are over 500 authoritative

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books on the subject, over 900,000 websites featuring it, and the drug, Ritalin, is a multi-billion dollar business.[4]

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Consider the game of baseball. We see batters and fielders; we observe fly balls, foul balls, and home runs; we note that a runner is left on first base, and we thrill when the winning score crosses home plate. All these exist for us. Yet, until there is co-action there is no world of baseball. It is only when we jointly affirm that "this is baseball," "that is a run," "the team with the most runs wins," and so on, that the world of baseball acquires a dramatic life. Consider now the communities that have brought forth the worlds of chemistry, physics, mathematics, biology, economics, psychology, and other worlds of knowledge. All such worlds are the fruits of co-action.

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The critic wishes a word, "Are you trying to say that nothing exists until there is some kind of relationship? There is no physical world, no mountains, trees, a sun, and so on? This just seems absurd." In reply, this is not precisely what is being proposed here. We should not conclude that "nothing exists" before the moment of co-action. Whatever exists simply exists. However, in the process of co-action whatever there is takes shape as *something for us*. It comes to be "mountains," "trees, and "sun" in terms of the way we live. Whatever exists does not require distinctions, for example, between Europe and Asia, men and women, or health and illness. It is in the process of co-action that these become distinctions around which our lives are organized. We cannot specify what exists before there is co-action, because the moment we try to enumerate these fundamentals we are indulging in the fruits of co-action.

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With the process of co-action now in place, let us turn to the tradition of bounded being. The world of *you* and *I* is not unlike the worlds of balls and strikes, protons and neutrons, or trees and mountains. To speak of you and I is to enter a communal tradition, like baseball or physics, in which these words have developed significance. Outside this tradition, they may be meaningless. In the world of atomic physics there are no individual selves. Even when we are speaking of human beings, we do not always recognize the existence of individual selves. One is seldom struck by the reality of individual selves when policy decisions are made about crowd control, illegal workers,

[4]See Wallwork, A. (2007). Attention deficit discourse: Social and individual constructions. *Journal of Critical Psychology, Counseling and Psychotherapy, 16,* 69–84.

the Right Wing, the student body, the Lutheran Church…or collateral damage.

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> Independent persons do not come together to form a relationship;
> from relationships the very possibility of independent persons emerges.

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Let us be more concrete. Consider that:

- If a policeman says "Stop where you are."…you become a suspect.
- If a salesperson says, "Can I help you?"…you become a customer.
- If your wife says, "Can you give me a hand, honey?"…you become a husband.
- If your child says, "Mommy come quick."…you become a mother.

Others call us into being as a suspect, a customer, a husband, a mother, and so on. Would we be any of these without such callings?[5]

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Consider as well one's personality, the sort of person one is. Tom passes his business colleague, Jenna, in the hall and remarks:

"Wow, Jenna, you really look great today."

What kind of person is Tom? Consider Jenna's possible replies:

"Thanks Tom...you have made my day."

"Are you trying to flirt with me?"

"Do you think you can just bury the past with a superficial remark like that?"

"You need glasses...I've been up all night with a fever."

"Gee, I thought you would never notice."

"Haven't you ever heard of sexual harassment?"

In the moment of co-action Tom takes on character. He becomes "a morale boosting colleague," a "harmless flirt," an "insensitive male," a "clumsy idiot," an "attractive male," or "a chauvinist pig." Before Jenna spoke who was he?

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The critic is aroused: "You seem to be suggesting that I have no existence outside of relationship. But I spend hours every day alone. I take a shower,

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[5]Social scientists have called it many things: "interpolation," "alter-casting," and "positioning" among the most common. See Harré, R., and van Langenhove, L. (Eds.) (1999). *Positioning theory: Moral contexts of intentional action*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. The important idea is that when others speak to us or act toward us in a given way, so do they define us. They call us into being as this or that kind of person, cast us in a particular role, or thrust us into a self-defining position.

brush my teeth, have breakfast, take a walk...all of this alone. In what sense am I engaged in relationships? I am my own person in all this...no co-action to it. Just me, doing my thing." Surely, many of our actions are carried out alone, without others present or privy. But in what sense are these actions "our own possessions," uncontaminated by relationship? To take an obvious case, I sit here alone writing, but my actions are essentially entries into a conversation. They issue from previous conversations with others and they press these conversations forward with you, the reader. That you are not physically present, and I am not speaking the words out loud, is merely a problem of logistics. In reading the newspaper or watching television by myself I am again participating in a conversation, in this case as the recipient of words and images to which I might sometime respond.

Let's take some less obvious cases. If I were to cook for myself, am I not simply taking on the role of another person...acting, for example, in the place of my mother or my spouse as the chef? If I wash my shirts, am I not preparing myself for meeting others? The same may be said for taking a shower, combing my hair, or shaving. I may be alone, but my actions are deeply embedded in my relationships. Or, let us say, I go camping for a week, ride my bicycle for an hour, or gaze into the sunset—all alone in each case. However, I only go camping because it makes sense to do so; the same may be said about biking or watching the sunset. They are all "good things to do." Yet, the fact that we have common names for these activities— "camping," "cycling", and "watching the sunset"—along with the common value we attach to them—is a demonstration of their relational origin. The same may be said for "hiking," "whistling," "flushing the toilet," and so on. To act intelligibly at all is to participate in relationship.

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Consider the implications: Can you carry out any action that is not in any way sensible, that would not be recognized as "something people in our culture do?" Stand on your head, do a belly flop into a pool, speak gibberish…all are sensible in some context. Perhaps you can think of an action that is total nonsense. But would this not be an action chosen because of your relationship to me in which I have challenged you with the question? In effect, all meaningful action is co-action.

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To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed,
to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person
participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips,
hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds.
—Mikhail Bakhtin

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Let us consider the co-active process in more detail. Three issues are particularly important.

Co-Action and Constraint

Co-action is first a process of mutual constraint. Inherent in the process of coordinating is an ordering. Over time the actions of the participants typically become patterned, anticipated, and dependable. Spoken language is a good example. As languages develop and become useful to a group of people, so can they be characterized in terms of rules, both formal and informal.[6] Words are sensible only by virtue of one's acting according to the rules. You can say the "cat chases the mouse," but to announce, "the chases cat mouse the" is to step out of a tradition of coordination. In this sense, early socialization is that process by which the developing child is enabled to participate in the traditional patterns of a culture or sub-culture. Without the capacity to coordinate in this way, our actions are rendered unintelligible. "To be a person" is not to exist in a fundamental state of freedom, but of constraint. One may be "born free," but the mother's first caress is an enticement to a vitalizing enchainment.

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Let us press further: As I converse with you, my utterances are candidates for meaning. However, these candidates are not my possession, but the byproducts of a relational history. Without this history of constraint, I would have nothing to say. At the same time, provided we share in a tradition of conversation, my utterances and actions carry a *pre-figuring* potential. That is, they indicate a domain of what is possible for you to say and do. Simply put, if I ask you a *question*, it is intelligible for you to give me an *answer*. If I ask, "Do you know the directions to the turnpike," you are virtually obliged in our tradition to reply with an answer. "Yes, you take the right fork…" or, "No, I'm sorry I don't live around here," will suffice. You can reply, "Autumn is coming," or "I am so hungry," but I will be puzzled. Nor can you be "knowledgeable" without my having asked a question. For you to approach a stranger and say, "Yes, you take the right fork…" will invoke suspicion.[7] It is not an answer until there is a question… It is only in the context of what has been said to you that your actions acquire

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[6]We do not act according to the rules, that is, by following rules "inside the head." Rather, we generate patterns of coordination, and later, extract what seem to be the rules.

[7]See Craig, R. T., and Tracy, K. (Eds.) (1983). *Conversational coherence: Form, structure and strategy.* Sage Series in Interpersonal Communication. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

their particular meaning. In effect, my question pre-figures your possibilities for action.

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Yet, the process of constraint moves in both directions. In responding to me, there occurs a *post-figuring*. Without acknowledgement of some kind, my utterances cease to be candidates for meaning. They are sounds signifying nothing. The supplement post-figures my words as having a particular meaning—not this, but that. This is demonstrated in the many ways Jenna responded to Tom in the illustrations above. In her various responses, his personality was created. Tom was not free to be Tom; the "fact of his personality" was constrained by Jenna. In a broad sense, all of us are constrained in our actions by having to prepare them in such a way that they may be ratified as meaningful.

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Consider the news analyst bent on locating the strategy behind the President's policies:

The President Promotes:	The News Analyst Interprets:
More funding for the military.	A strategy to secure veterans' votes.
Programs for inner-city schools.	An attempt to lure black voters.
A new social security program.	A tactic to secure the elderly vote.

The President wishes to be sincere, but in the hands of the analyst there is no sincerity—only instrumental strategizing. When the analyst interprets "the real reason behind the words," authenticity is turned to sham.

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Can we ever be authentic unless others are willing to accept us without question? The moment our motives are thrown into doubt, our sense of authenticity is jeopardized—possibly even to ourselves. We may protest that our motives are pure, but how long will purity stand if others claim we protest too much? One cannot be authentic alone.

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Thus far we have only treated the simple act/supplement relationship. One speaks, another responds, and in the interchange meaning is born. However, life moves on and the simplicity of the moment is soon subverted. What has been termed the supplement in these examples does not remain so. It functions twice, first serving to define the other's action, but second as

an action that stands itself to be supplemented. For example in the preceding illustration, the news analyst is not the final arbiter of the President's meaning. To propose that the President's words are merely strategic is a supplement that is also an action open to supplementation. Should the President point out that the news analyst is just a spokesman for the conservative press, the analyst's words now become "mere instruments of persuasion."

Further, any turn in the conversation may be used to supplement any previous action in such a way that its meaning is altered. For example, the analyst might respond to the President's defense by failing to address it (thus discrediting it as meaning/full), and return to a critique of the President's initial proclamation to demonstrate its fallacies. Or, one may return to one's own early actions, and supplement them in a way that alters their meaning. The President might, for example, return to the initial proclamation to demonstrate its impeccable logic. Thus, at any point in a conversation, preceding actions by either party may be discarded, modified, or redefined in their meaning.[8] The actions of the participants are increasingly inter-knit, with meaning always in motion.

Multiplicity and Malleability

If there is no intelligibility outside traditions of constraint, are we forever bound to existing tradition? Can we never escape the existing rules of relationship, possibly established before our birth? These are pessimistic conclusions. And clearly, we do abandon tradition; our ways of life are continuously unfolding. The world is awash in conflict between those clinging to tradition versus those careening toward the new. Yet, if there is no intelligibility outside constraint, how are we to account for change? The major answer lies in our movement from one relational context to another. As we move from the home, to the office, to a visit with friends, to the sports field, and so on we carry with us patterns of speaking and acting. These practices are now inserted into the new contexts, and supplemented in new ways. The words and actions now acquire different functions. They become increasingly meaning/full.

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The metaphor of the game is useful here. Let us say that every tradition of coordination forms a particular kind of game. There are the various

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[8]Relevant is Harold Garfinkel's account of conversation as a process of "ad hocing" in which one can never be certain of what is possible until after the fact of another's utterance. See Garfinkel, H. (1984). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Malden MA: Polity Press/Blackwell Publishing (first published in 1967).

formalized games, such as chess, checkers, bridge, soccer, Monopoly, and so on. There are also informal games, such as "how my father and I argue with each other," "how we play with our children." However, the border between games is porous. Very often the actions generated in one game are borrowed and inserted into another game. The act of crossing a goal line with a ball is thus shared across the games of American football, rugby, and Australian football. In everyday life the demarcation among games is far more ambiguous. The potential for borrowing and inserting is enormous. We borrow the embrace as a signal of endearment from, let us say, our relation with our mother at bed time, and place it in the context of our relations with, for example, an intimate partner. Yes, the act retains something of its initial significance (or pre-figuring power), while simultaneously acquiring additional potential. It no longer signals "it's time to go to sleep," but begins to suggest, "it's time for us to go to bed together." As we borrow and insert, so do the "rules of the game" become increasingly ambiguous. Consider, for example, the way in which the word "love" has traveled across contexts. The word may be used in relations with parents, partner, and children, along with relations to artists, ice cream, your shoes, and God. When we use a word like love, then, it is never fully clear what game is being played, from the superficial to the profound. In this sense, most conversations are akin to playing a multi-dimensional game in which any move on the part of any participant can be treated as a move in several other games.[9]

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Every conversation is a potentially open field: A friend greets you in the morning and says, "You look tired." Among other things, you can define this as an expression of sympathy, or as a criticism of the way you look. Let's say you respond with, "You just don't know what I have been through." Is your friend to treat this utterance as a friendly invitation to inquire further, or possibly a criticism of his lack of sensitivity? He responds, "So, tell me, what's been happenin'" You wonder, is this an expression of sincere interest or a breezy indication of disinterest? In effect, there is a continuous bleeding of traditions into each other. Actions may constrain, but because they are ambiguous the constraints are soft. The range of intelligible supplements may be vast; the permutations and combinations in any co-active sequence is without number. With each new combination

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[9]As linguists put it, the meaning of most words is *polysemous*, carrying the semantic traces of many contexts of usage.

lie the seeds for transforming tradition. Or, one might say, in the multiplication of constraints lies the possibility for infinite transformation.

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Let's return to the construction of the self. Through co-action we come into being as individual identities, but the process remains forever incomplete. At any moment there are multiple options, and self-identity remains in motion. Consider the interchange between a client and her therapist:

> CLIENT: "All day I seem to boil in anger. I sit at my desk and take orders from a really horrible guy. For one, he is stupid, and half the time makes mistakes in what he tells me to do. He barks at me...sort of like a marine sergeant. And then I find him staring at me...no, leering is a better word..."
>
> THERAPIST: "Yes, authority is difficult to deal with. I wonder how long you have had this kind of problem. Let's talk a little about your relationship with your father."

The client has offered what could be seen as a definition of herself as a victim, and the therapist has subsequently defined her in terms of her "problem with authority." Yet, the client now has the floor. She may allow the therapist's utterances to stand. Or, as an alternative, she might say:

> CLIENT: "No, I want to tell you some more about the guy...he is such a jerk..."

The client effectively disregards the therapist's words; his position as authority is challenged. The client might also say:

> CLIENT: "I resent your trying to say this is 'my' problem. That's so patriarchal...sort of protecting the power structure where men are on top. Look, this guy is a crumb, and if you can't explore this with me, we might as well call it quits."

Here the therapist is positioned as "part of the problem." If he does not find a way to recast either his words or hers, the relationship will end. He may say:

> THERAPIST: "Oh, please don't misunderstand me...I'm sure this guy is just as bad as you say. It's just that I want to explore some alternatives to just being angry."

And now the therapist waits...for precisely how he has defined himself at this moment is now in the hands of his client.

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Human beings are constituted in conversation.
—Charles Taylor

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We do not own what we say or do. As our words are absorbed by the continuing process of co-action so are we transformed:

The phone call thrust me into mystery. It was unusual to receive calls in my location at a small German university where I had agreed to several weeks of lecturing. More important was the voice, that of an exotically accented woman. She asked for an appointment, but would only tell me that I might find it interesting. As to her identity, she simply said, "Although you do not know me, I know much about you?" On the appointed day of her visit, I was indeed restless. Later that morning, the heels of her shoes, clicking against the marble hallway, heralded her arrival. Her appearance matched her voice, a black sweater and long black skirt suggesting mystery on the verge of revelation. And soon the revelation was unleashed: I was responsible for transforming her life! How could this be?

Ulrike had been married to a professor many years her senior, and been all consumed by a cerebral life. Everyday life revolved around books, ideas, and endless discussions. As part of her continuing education, she had attended a lecture I had given at a nearby university two years before. The crowded room was stifling, and I had removed my jacket during the lecture. As she described the event, my recall was instant: My shirt tails were too short. Thus, each time I reached out to scribble something on the blackboard my shirt front began to pull away from my trousers. With one hand I would write, and the other tuck. While I was engaged in this ritual, Ulrike related, her attention was drawn to my navel. When my shirt would begin to pull away, she could often catch a brief glimpse of it. She became mesmerized; my words ceased to be interesting; the only important question was whether she would be offered another glimpse of my belly-button. And, as she began to ponder her obsession, she also began to realize the way in which her marriage was failing. It was imperative now to restore its zest, to live fully again! Her marriage was transformed, and she wished to express her deep gratitude for "all I had done" for her!

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Relationships move on, carrying with them the identities of the participants. An infinite unfolding over which no *one* has control. Like an ocean

wave, the "I" may appear for a frozen moment to be itself alone. Yet, as the moment passes the wave disappears into the endless undulations from which it is inseparable.

Relational Flow: Failing and Flourishing

We have now scanned the ways in which the process of collaborative action is constrained, and as well its potential for infinite malleability. Any viable relationship will simultaneously require both these processes, the first essential to the creation of any meaning at all, and the second ensuring a sensitivity to the shifting context. Let us envision, then, a process of *relational flow* in which there is both continuous movement toward constraint, on the one hand, and an openness to the evolution of meaning on the other.[10] In the process of relational flow, we generate durable meaning together in our local conditions, but in doing so we continuously innovate in ways that are sensitive to the multiplicity of relationships in which we are engaged. Ideally, if there were no impediments to the relational flow, there would be a full and creative sharing of meaning from the immediate face to face relationship, to the local community, to the surrounding society, and ultimately to the world at large. In each relational moment we would resonate with our surrounds, absorb its potentials, create new amalgams, and return them to the larger flow of relations in which we are constituted.

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The reeds give
way to the
wind and give
the wind away

—A.R. Ammons

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Let us press this vision forward. Our daily lives are replete with tensions and alienated relations; everywhere there are the scarcely tolerated, the disliked, the disreputable, the despised, and the despicable. And in the world more generally these same conditions turn deadly. If there is harmony, it is often within closed doors, behind residential gates, or protected by fortified borders.

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[10]Relevant is Bakhtin's distinction between *centripetal* and *centrifugal* forces in language, the former toward unification and the latter toward disorganization. Bakhtin, M. M. (1982). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

This concern with alienated relationships will be central to later chapters of the book. As a preliminary, however, it is useful to consider distinctions among forms of relational flow. In particular, I wish to distinguish between relational processes that are ultimately *degenerative* as opposed to *generative*. The former are corrosive; they bring co-action to an end. The latter are *catalytic*; they inject relations with vitality.

To expand, consider your response to such common utterances as:

I think you made a mistake.

You are dead wrong.

How could you possibly think of something like that?

I don't think you did right by him.

I don't think you are fair.

By common tradition, each of these comments may be seen as an attack on the intelligibility of your behavior. And, given our traditions of supplementation, chances are you will defend your actions. You may question the person's right to comment as they have; you may criticize their judgment; you may even respond with a biting attack. With each of these supplements you move toward a condition of alienation. By common standards the sequence is perfectly normal, but the effect on the relationship is corrosive. Arguments are often of this form, as are expressions of mutual indifference. At the extreme of degenerative exchange is mortal combat. Sequences of attack and counter-attack may be highly coordinated, but the trajectory is toward mutual annihilation.

In contrast, it is useful to envision forms of generative process, those in which new and enriching potentials are opened through the flow of interchange. A successful teacher, for example, may engage students in such a way that their taken for granted assumptions about the world are suspended, and delight enkindled in new worlds of possibility. In the sciences, the generative challenge may be one that introduces a theory contradicting or suspending the commonplace assumptions of a discipline in such a way that new forms of inquiry are stimulated.[11] In day-to-day relations, generative challenges can make the difference between boredom and excitement. It is when life as usual is disrupted by humor, irony, thoughtful reflection, a compelling fantasy, and the like, that we avoid the slide into deadening repetition.

Generative processes stimulate the expansion and flow of meaning. Ultimately they may be an important key to our future well-being. Many of the rock-solid meanings by which we carry out our lives are lethal in

[11]For further discussion, see Gergen, K. J. (1994). *Toward transformation in social knowledge* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Your fear is contagious
        Your anger spreads like weeds
                Your joy moves with the speed of good news.
As you speak with me you create the world.

REGINE WALTER, ARTIST

their potential. We find it "just natural" to seek revenge, and enjoy the downfall of the victim. We are deeply satisfied when those who threaten us are imprisoned. Many advocate the torture of terrorists. Tit-for-tat struggles of attack and revenge may be sustained for centuries. Here we can appreciate the enormous importance of the generative challenge. Such challenges may open reflection on our destructive habits and open discussion on alternatives. We stand each moment at a precious juncture, gathering our pasts, thrusting them forward, and in the conjunction creating the future. As we speak together now, so do we give shape to the future world. We may sustain tradition; but we are also free to innovate and transform. Future chapters will be devoted to the practical challenge of such transformations.

From Causality to Confluence

The challenge of transforming traditions raises one final issue relevant to the forthcoming chapters, the question of cause and effect. We inherit strong traditions of understanding people's actions. In particular we inherit two major forms of explaining "why" people behave as they do. On the one hand there is *causal* explanation, favored by most social scientists. People change because of external forces impinging on them. As commonly said, for example, people can be "influenced," "educated," "rewarded," "threatened," or "forced" to change their behavior. On the other hand there are explanations lodged in the assumption of *voluntary agency*, favored in our daily relations and in courts of law. For example, we say that people are free to choose between right and wrong, or to decide what they want to do in life. Yet, in developing a relational view of human action, we find that neither of these traditional explanations is satisfactory. Both sustain the tradition of bounded being, and neither recognizes the fundamental significance of co-action in human affairs. In effect, an alternative way of explaining human action is invited, one that places the co-active *confluence* in the center of concern. In what follows, I shall first elaborate on the shortcomings of causal explanation, and then turn more briefly to voluntary explanation. This analysis will give way to a discussion of confluence explanation.

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At the outset, it is difficult to deny the obvious reality of cause and effect. We observe that the flame on the stove brings the water to a boil, we step on the gas pedal and the car accelerates, we ask a friend to "please pass the salt," and she places the shaker before us. Is it not clear that the boiling water, the accelerating car, and the passing of the salt are the direct result

of their antecedents? And without such antecedents, these events would not have occurred. This view of causal relationships—if X then Y, if not X then not Y—has ancient origins. Aristotle termed it *efficient causation.*[12] Centuries later, under Isaac Newton's influence, one could indeed begin to conceive of the universe as "one great machine," with each of its components causally related. For every event there is a cause, and to imagine an "uncaused cause" is to step outside the realm of science. This *mechanistic* view of human behavior still remains pervasive.

To illustrate, in the social sciences we observe behavior we call aggressive, altruistic, or delinquent, and we are concerned. In the service of bettering society, how can we bring about more of one and less of another? Concern gives way to the question: "What causes these behaviors?" What forces, influences, factors, or life situations bring them about? The question of cause then sets in motion mammoth programs of research. And from this research we reach such conclusions as, aggressive models cause children to act aggressively, the promise of rewards will increase altruism, or peer group pressure causes delinquency. As often proposed, social science research should be directed toward increasingly accurate prediction of human behavior, and thus, enhanced control over the future. If society can gain control over the causes of prejudice, hatred, crime, and so on, we move toward a better world.

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For centuries philosophers have debated the concept of causal explanation. In recent decades, as quantum physicists have abandoned causal explanation in favor of field theoretical accounts, such debate has waned. Remaining unsolved, however, are major questions concerning the nature of causality. Most prominent among these, how can one event "make happen" or "produce" changes in another? We see the flame on the stove, and then we observe the boiling water. But how did the flame "make" the water boil? If you ask me to pass the salt, what if anything determines that I will pass the shaker? We are left in mystery. As many some propose, we should abandon the idea of causal force. Rather, we should simply confine ourselves to prediction. We can predict rather reliably what will happen to a pot of water placed on a flame, or a request for salt at a dinner party. The concept of causal determination is an unjustified and unnecessary addition.

[12]Aristotle distinguished among four kinds of causation, of which the prevailing view of *efficient* cause is only one. A contrasting form of causality for Aristotle was termed *final.* A final cause is the purpose or end that is served by an action. Thus, we say, the person purchased the gift *because* he wanted to please his parents. Generally, however, we now view final causation as a way of talking about freely chosen actions. Freely chosen actions are, in turn, viewed as uncaused.

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Note our temptation to think of nature as divisible into discrete happenings, each of which has one "father" (cause) and one, or several "sons" (effects). This way of looking at the world leads to bewhiskered questions.

—Norwood Russell Hanson

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There is further reason to bracket the concept of cause and effect. In significant ways the concept contributes to the ideology and institutions of bounded being. When we search for causal explanations for a person's actions, we begin to split the world into independent entities. There are causal conditions on the one hand and their effects on the other. Thus, we treat acts of aggression, altruism, and prejudice as effects, and search for an independent set of conditions that bring these about. In effect, we define the individual as fundamentally separated from the surrounding world, alone, and subject to its vicissitudes. In the case of social interaction, the presumption of cause and effect case is even more damaging in its implications for social life. As ventured in the preceding chapter, the ideology of bounded being places primary value on the self and its development; simultaneously we become suspicious of others and the constraints they may place on our lives. It is an ideology that invites us to see ourselves as uncaused causes. On this view, we wish to see ourselves as origins of others' behavior, but not as pawns to theirs.[13] Thus, the question hovers over every relationship, "Am I in control, or is the other controlling me?" We resent those who wish to exert control over us, and we lose respect for those over whom we have control. As I heard a philosopher once remark, "Whenever I meet another philosopher, the most important question is whether I can defeat him or he can defeat me." Where control is an issue, threat is ever at hand.

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In a world of cause and effect, everyone clamors to be a cause.

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I am joined here by many other critics of causal explanation as applied to human behavior.[14] However, it is at just this point that we begin to surmise

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[13]See DeCharms, R. (1976). *Enhancing motivation: Change in the classroom*. New York: Irvington.

[14]See, for example, Taylor, C. (1964). *The explanation of behavior*. New York: Humanities Press; Harré, R., and Secord, P. (1967). *The explanation of social behavior*. Oxford: Blackwell;

the problems with the major alternative to cause and effect philosophy, namely voluntarism. For humanist scholars in particular, there is strong resistance to any account of human action that denies our voluntary agency. For them it seems so obviously true that we can decide on our actions from moment to moment.[15] If you ask me to pass the salt, I can choose to do it or not. More importantly, if we allow the assumption of causal determinism to prevail, and the concept of "freely chosen action" is demolished, we undermine the basis for moral responsibility. If we understand that all our actions are the result of causes beyond our control, then we cannot be held responsible for what we do. That we rob, rape, and torture is beyond our personal control. Yet, the debate continues. For determinist scientists such voluntarist complaints are unhelpful. To say that a man robbed a bank because he chose to do so is circular. It is to say no more than he robbed because he robbed. Nothing is discovered or learned that might help us discourage such actions in the future. All one can do is punish the robber for his choice. If we want more promising futures, it is argued, we must discover the conditions that influenced him to engage in such behavior.[16] More generally, to admit voluntary agency into the social sciences is to conclude that human behavior is not lawful. One could always choose to disobey the law. If the scientific principle predicts that I will be aggressive, I can choose otherwise. Thus, prediction and control are unreachable goals for the social sciences.[17]

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The debates between advocates of determinism and voluntarism are long-standing and interminable. However, I propose that we simply set the debate aside, put it on the shelf of history. Why? For one, if the concept of cause-and-effect is abandoned, as suggested here, then so is its antagonist, voluntarism. In large measure, the concepts of determinism and agency draw their meaning from each other. One cannot champion determinism if there is nothing against which it can be contrasted. If I propose that the entire cosmos is composed of granite, there can be little opposition without

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1967). *The structure of behavior*. Boston: Beacon Press; Rychlak, J. F. (1977). *The psychology of rigorous humanism*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.

[15]The self-evidential grounds were indeed sufficient to form the basis for the development of existential philosophy.

[16]See, for example, Skinner, B. F. (2002). *Beyond freedom and dignity*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

[17]For further discussion on this debate and a relational alternative, see Gergen, K. J. (2007). From voluntary to relational action: Responsibility in question. In S. Maasen and B. Sutter (Eds.) v *On willing selves*. London: Palgrave.

a concept of what is not granite. Thus, to dispense with either side of the antinomy, is to foreclose on the other.

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Without injustice the name of justice would mean what?

—Heraclitus

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Most important from the present standpoint, the concept of voluntary agency is similar to the concept of cause-and-effect in its support for the ideology of bounded being. For the voluntarist, we are the sole origins of our actions. We function as gods in miniature, the originators of our futures. Thus invited are all the ills outlined in the preceding chapter.

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The critic is agitated: "Yes, there may be problems in the idea of free agency, but we are still left with the problem of moral responsibility. After all, we need to hold individuals responsible for their action. If no one was responsible for anything, then it is a world of anything goes." This is an important critique, and deserving of close attention. For the moment, I will simply point out that the tradition of holding individuals responsible is not without its problems. For example, the individualist view of moral and legal responsibility reigns supreme in the United States. We punish those who step out of line. Thus, it is not surprising that while the nation possesses only 5% of the world's population, it houses 25% of the world's prisoners. Over 7 million people in the country are either imprisoned, on probation, or on parole for their freely chosen crimes. No other nation, no matter the size, holds so many in detention. Alternative views are needed. In the next chapter I will introduce a relational view of agency. And in Chapter 11, I will take up the issue of moral responsibility from a relational standpoint.

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How could we replace the traditional explanations of causality and agency? Is there an approach to explanation that would more fully reflect a relational view of the world? To sketch the contours of possibility, let us return to the concept of co-action. As I proposed, it is through collaborative action that all meaning emerges. Thus, the very idea of causality and agency are children of relationship. They are historically and culturally specific, and the battle between them is essentially one of competing traditions of meaning. How does the concept of co-action take us further?

Consider again the causal account of behavior. On this view, people are like billiard balls, striking against each other to bring about effects. Each ball is independent until it is struck by an alien. And yet, how can we identify a cause in itself, seperated from an effect? Without something we call "an effect" there is nothing to be called "a cause," and vice versa. Cause and effect are mutually defining.[18] Let us expand through illustration: You are walking by a park and see a man throw a ball into an open space before him. An aimless activity, you surmise, scarcely notable on a summer's day. Now, consider the same action when the ball is thrown to someone wearing a catcher's mitt. Suddenly the individual's action can be identified as "pitching." In effect, there is no pitching until there is catching, and no catching until there is pitching. We look further to find that there is a man with a bat, bags that form a diamond shape, men holding mitts in the field, and so on. At this point we might justifiably conclude that this is a "baseball game." What we traditionally view as "independent" elements—the man with the bat, the bags, the men in the field—are not truly independent. They are all mutually defining. A man standing alone in the field wearing a mitt would not be playing baseball, nor would the bags constitute a game. Alone they would be virtually without meaning. It is when we bring all these elements into a mutually defining relationship that we can speak about "playing baseball." Let us then speak of the baseball game as a *confluence*, a form of life in this case that is constituted by an array of mutually defining "entities."[19]

In attempting to explain and predict human action, let us replace the metaphors of billiard balls and unmoved movers with the metaphors of baking or doing chemistry. The concern now shifts from isolated entities to the combination of ingredients. With a combination of flour, butter, eggs,
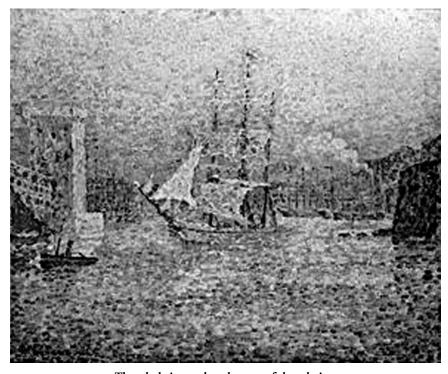
[18]We are accustomed to saying that the cause precedes an effect. However, from a relational standpoint there is a sense in which the order is reversed. Normally we designate a behavior that we want to understand, and we seek its cause. However, we can only discover as a cause that which makes conventional sense as a cause. If we see acting aggressively, we ask why. However, the cause must be something that enables us to sustain the definition that we have made of the behavior, namely that it was aggressive. Thus, we cannot say it was caused by "a lucky break," as it is senseless to say that good luck causes aggression. We must search for a cause that justifies aggression, such as "bad luck," or frustration. In this sense, once we have designated an effect, we have also determined the cause. The effect, then, precedes the cause.

[19]The setting off of "entities" in quotation marks is to indicate that it has no independent identity, only an identity in relationship. As outlined in the Prologue, anything we consider an "independent entity" is a placeholder. In a more extended analysis, the entity would itself be considered a confluence.

The whole is equal to the sum of the relations.

At the turn of the 20th century an artistic movement called pointillism emerged. Pointilist painters used tiny specks of paint to create the subject matter of their painting. The subject was never painted in itself. Indeed, one might say that there was no "in itself," as the subject emerged from the juxtaposition of the points of paint. Paul Signac's painting of the harbor at Marseilles is illustrative.

milk, and a griddle, we bring about a pancake. By compounding hydrogen and oxygen we have water. From this standpoint, a lighted match does not cause the combustion of gasoline; rather the combustion is the achievement of a particular combination of flame and gasoline. In the same way, what scholars might define as an intellectual attack does not cause another to argue; the argument is achieved only when another responds with a defense.

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Each thing, including each person, is first and always
a nexus of relations.

—Brent Slife

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Mary and I once puzzled over the fact that every Christmas time we labored to decorate the house. The decorating cost us time and money; there was no obvious gain. Nothing dire would befall us if we failed to do so. Why, we asked, do we do it? We now see this as a misleading question. We decorate neither for a reason that lies somewhere inside, or pressures from the outside. Rather, we decorate because we exist within a confluence—an array of mutually defining relationships with each other and our surrounds. When the season is upon us, such actions are obvious ways of going on; they are congenial within the confluence. If we were at a dinner party we would eat, if we were at a concert we would applaud. We do not do so for reasons of private origin, or because someone "makes us do it," but because we are participants in a confluence of relationships in which these are intelligible actions.[20]

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The critic takes notice: "This suggests to me that you as a physical person have no will of your own. Your actions matter little; it is the confluence that counts. Doesn't this view stifle our motivation for change? Doesn't it favor the status quo, suggesting that an individual's efforts are futile?" Not at all. You will certainly import into any situation a set of preferred performances. They don't represent "will power," so much as a set of relationally established trajectories. And they can be enormously important when injected into a given confluence. Consider the power that even a single word or phrase may have in a given context: "You are fired," "I quit," or "we are finished." The same holds true of one's movements: a raised fist, a derisive laugh, an embrace. Even one's physical presence may alter the confluence. Depending on the circumstances, simply standing there as an observer, a demonstrator, or a mourner may all change the definition of the situation. And we must also consider the objects that are present. A vase of flowers, a menorah, a dog, a weapon on the wall…all are subtle means of shifting the potentials of the situation. To be sure, it may be useful to

[20]There is a family resemblance between the concept of confluence developed here and Pierre Bourdieu's account of *habitus*. However, for Bourdieu, habitus was a system of individual dispositions acquired from determining structures of family, education, physical location, and the like. In this sense Bourdieu's account carries significant traces of both a mind–world dualism and cause–effect explanation. See Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline for a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Philosophical writings on *contextualism* are also relevant, maintaining as they do that all word meaning is dependent upon context. If extended, such a view might suggest that whatever a thing comes to be is dependent upon the way it functions within a context.

These moments of delight cannot be carried by any single element in the photograph. Delight emerges only within the confluence.

Courtesy: Anne Marie Rijsman

distinguish between constituents of a confluence that are central to its form as opposed to peripheral. But people can also be enormously flexible and creative in sustaining a given definition of the situation as various people, objects, and actions shift over time.

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The critic remains skeptical: "Practically speaking, I don't see where this idea of confluence takes us. What about scientific prediction? Are there any advantages here over the old mechanical model?" In response, there is nothing about the confluence orientation that rules out prediction. As pointed out, the process of co-action will tend toward reliable or repeated

forms of relationship. Take the game of golf. We can rather perfectly predict what most players will do after they hit their ball into a sand trap, or when they find their ball is several inches from the cup. You can know in advance rather well what Mary and I will be up to next Christmas season, or at a dinner party or concert. The advantage of the confluence orientation, however, is that we do not depend on independent factors or variables to make predictions. Rather than looking at "the effects" of income, education, and father absence on the child's school performance, for example, the concern shifts to the condition of relational life in which the child participates. Ethnography takes precedence over experimental manipulation. We shift from influence to confluence.

A confluence orientation also opens new horizons in long-term prediction. The social sciences are notoriously weak, for example, in predicting adult behavior from early childhood events. The parental treatment of the child has but scant predictive value in terms of the child's well-being as an adult. Programs like Head Start are not able to confidently predict positive futures for low-income children. From the standpoint of confluence, however, we are drawn to issues of coherence across time. We may view home life with parents or within a Head Start program as a confluence. Life within these settings may have little to do with life outside. If one is concerned with creating positive futures, concern should be direct to *relational pathways*. How can forms of confluence be linked, such that the pathway from one to another leads in a positive direction. For low-income children, can life in the home be more closely linked to life in school, a continuity be built into life at school across the years, and school life be connected more fully with higher education and to promising employment?

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Finally, it must be asked, why should the social sciences place so much value on the traditional practice of prediction? If we are concerned with human well-being, why examine present patterns to speculate about the future? As noted above, transformation in patterns of co-action is common. Today's research is about today; the conditions of tomorrow's world may be vastly different. If we wish to generate more promising futures, the major challenge is that of collaboratively creating new conditions of confluence. How can we draw from our relational histories in such a way that new and more promising confluences result?

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The best way to predict the future is to invent it.

—Alan Kay

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Understanding in terms of confluence is never complete. Unlike the misleading promise of scientific certainty, we must remain humble. This is so, in part, because what we take to be a confluence owes its existence to we who define it as such. One might say that a confluence is essentially "an action" for which our supplement is required in order to bring it into being. Every attempt to identify the confluence will issue from a particular tradition of relationship. Thus, we may commonly identify a baseball game, and explore what is required to bring it into existence. But within the traditions of physics or physiology, baseball games do not exist. Thus, whatever we say about a confluence is forever dependent upon the tradition in which it is explored.

Humility is also invited by the fact that the confluence is not bounded. We may identify a baseball game as a confluence, but in doing so we have arbitrarily cut it away from everything else. Would there be a pitcher without food, water and air; would there be a "home run" without a fence? In effect, to define anything as a confluence is temporarily to blind us to the broader context of which it may be a part. One may imagine here an ultimate confluence through which all existence comes into being, including our own. This ultimate confluence is beyond description. We are rendered mute, and possibly awed. I will return to this latter sensibility in the final chapter.