

Technology and the Self: From the Essential to the Sublime

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Psychological essentialism - adherence to view that individuals possess specifically mental processes or mechanisms - has long served as a pivotal feature of the Western cultural tradition. Already in Aristotelian philosophy there was an elaborate formulation of the workings of mental life. Platonic theory of knowledge, and its central concern with the reality of pure ideas, was also forged from a preliminary belief in the preeminence of the psychological interior. Such offerings from the Greek cultural world, when coupled with the Judaeo-Christian conception of the soul, lent a solid palpability to the presumption of an inner world - identifiable, ever present, transparent and central to the understanding of human action.

As variously elaborated over the centuries, such early speculations have undergone significant change. As medievalists such as Augustine and Aquinas and expanded on the concepts of soul, sensation, and the emotions; as rationalist philosophers such as Descartes and Kant extolled the capacities of pure reason and a priori ideas; as empiricist philosophers such as Locke and Hobbes emphasized the significance of experience in the generation of ideas; and romanticist poets, novelists, and philosophers explored the mysterious terrain of the passions, creative urges, evil inclinations, genius and madness, so have we become a tradition in which the presumption of an inner life - as real and possibly more important than the external, material world - has become firmly fixed.

The discourse of the individual interior has also provided the major rationale for many of our central institutions. Religious institutions have long been devoted to educating and purifying the soul. Educational institutions are dedicated to the enhancement of individual mental functioning, families are centrally concerned with building the character of the young, democratic institutions are founded on the belief in independent judgment, and courts of law could scarcely operate without the concepts of intention, memory, and conscious knowledge firmly in place.

Placed in this light, we also find that one of the major effects of 20th century social science is the objectification of the psychological world. Whereas philosophers, priests, and poets of previous centuries were largely confined to a rhetoric of symbols - of written and spoken language - the social sciences were (and continue to be) additionally armed with a rhetoric of observation. That is, the social sciences - derived as they are from the combined logics of rationalist and empiricist philosophy - promised, at last, to ground theoretical speculation in the observable world. Whether it be in the introspective methods of the early mentalist psychologists, the experimental methods of the laboratory psychologist, the phenomenological methods

of the humanist investigator, the attitude and opinion measures of the survey researcher, or the qualitative measures of the contemporary interpretativist, the promise has been to furnish empirical substantiation for propositions about psychological and social life. This has been strikingly clear in the science of psychology - from mentalism to present day cognitivism, from Freud to the DSM IIR. It is also the prevailing tendency in communication theory and research - whether treating attitudes, intentions, or ideologies, or attraction, subjectivity, or self-reflexivity. In each case the theoretical account bolsters presumptions of the reality of mental life. Through research practices the array of mental predicates is subtly reified.(1)

It is this long tradition of psychological essentialism, supported by the major institutions, and justified by a century of social science, that provides the basis for the day to day processes we index as self understanding and self realization - for the various ways we have of questioning, evaluating, and exploring the self ("I must be depressed." "Is this love or infatuation?"); for the manner in which seek others' reactions, support, or nurturance for our interior being ("She misconstrues my intentions." "He doesn't appreciate my needs."); and for our modes of justifying and reasoning about our actions ("I thought it over, and decided..." "It would violate my moral values."). It is this same tradition that provides the individual with enormous and compelling reasons for treasuring personal identity. To have an identity is indeed to be capable of laying claim to an interior life: to one's own reasons and opinions, to existentially defining motives, personal passions, and core traits. To lack such psychological resources would be the equivalent of erasing one's identity. Failing to possess reason, emotion, morals, intentions and the like would be an empty existence, without human significance, and possibly possibly lacking a rationale for continued existence.

As I shall propose in what follows, as we approach the 21st Century, psychological essentialism is undergoing a subtle but increasingly discernible erosion. And, as beliefs in an identifiable, knowable, and significant world of the personal interior decay, so are we witnessing (and will continue to confront) a progressive emptying of the self - a loss in the credibility of subjectivity, agency, the "I" at the center of being. As I shall also propose, one of the chief forces at work in the dismantling of self, are technological. With the profusion of technologies specifically designed to increase the presence of others, we obliterate the conditions necessary for sustaining belief in the obdurate interior. Although there is much to be said about the consequences of this obliteration, I shall only touch on the possibility of single successor to psychological essentialism, that of relationalism. To illustrate its potentials, I shall attempt to make intelligible the contours of a relational sublime.

Conditions for a Creditable Self

To appreciate the dynamics of self-deterioration in the present century, it is first essential to consider the conditions necessary to sustain the supposition of palpable interior. That is, how have participants in Western culture managed to maintain their

beliefs in a specifically psychological world? We cannot (with Descartes) justify the vocabulary of the inner world on the basis of its simply being there, transparent and self-evident. And to be sure, there are many other cultural beliefs that have waxed and waned in credibility over the centuries - for example, beliefs in Olympic deities, a Ptolemaic universe, ghostly presences, and the communion of souls. Although the durability of psychological essentialism poses a challenging and complex question, let me suggest that such essentialism - whether in the social sciences or the culture more generally - is importantly dependent on forms of discursive homogeneity. In effect, I am doing nothing more here than providing a socio-linguistic spin to the traditional view that opinion commitment is socially anchored. The greater the agreement among one's consociates - here within one's discursive ethos - the more intelligible, agreeable, and ontologically palpable the supposition. Given this general orientation, let us consider several forms of discursive homogeneity specifically relevant to sustaining commitments to an identifiable and pivotal psychological interior:

Ontological Configuration. At the outset, the world of the interior acquires its creditability from ambient agreement in the categories of existence: the basic distinctions necessary for describing or explaining mental conditions. Without such a vocabulary, there simply is nothing to describe or explain. And without reasonably widespread agreement over the terms, ambiguity prevails and doubt is invited. Thus, for example, we can speak with some confidence about the emotions of fear, anger, and sadness, because these terms are constituents of a widely shared vocabulary (of approximately a dozen "emotion" terms) employed with a high degree of frequency within the culture. To admit ignorance of such feelings or to declare them to be absent from one's makeup - would be to render doubt about one's membership in the human species. Would a person be altogether human if he/she could feel no anger or sadness? Other psychological predicates, shared by smaller and sometimes more marginal groups within the culture, fail to command such credibility. Terms like existential anxiety, post traumatic stress disorder, spiritual awareness, flow, and channeling command respect in various pockets of the culture, but for vast numbers may be discounted as jargon or cult language. More extremely, to claim oneself to be overwhelmed with *acidia*, a term popular in medieval monasteries; suffering from a strong bout of melancholy (a term of great interest to 19th century poets and novelists); or seized by *mal de siècle* (a term that moved many to suicide less than a century ago) would probably raise queried looks among one's companions. What precisely is the individual be talking about; is he/she speaking metaphorically, is this a joke? In effect, without a chorus to render one's claims agreeable - to say in effect, "yes, I know what you are feeling," one can scarcely claim certitude of psychological existence.

Modes of expression. Confidence in a particular ontology of psychological states is further enhanced by homogeneity in accepted modes of expression. To the extent that there is broad agreement that certain actions are the outward manifestation of specific internal processes, mechanisms, traits and the like, then we can continue securely in the belief that the vocabulary of the internal world is referential. One can be certain

there is a process of rational thought, for example, when there is broad agreement that certain modes of speaking (e.g. using proper grammar, complex sentence structure, a rich vocabulary) are indicative of underlying intelligence, or that certain performances (e.g. in mathematics, chess playing, or engineering design) are obvious manifestations of superior cognitive functioning. Should we fail to agree on what constitutes a proper expression of a given process or state, we should become suspect of its underlying existence. It is an interesting fact that in most scientific accounts of human emotions the concept of "love" fails to appear. Among the dozen or so emotions about which scientific knowledge can be accumulated - emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness - love fails to be included.(2) This is largely so, I would suggest, because the term has been used to index so many different and varied actions over the century - from adoration to avoidance, suicide to homicide, the trivial to the profound - that it has lost candidacy for scientific respectability. If virtually any action - along with its opposite - can be an expression of love, there is no way to identify it or to test propositions about it. It may be thus be discarded from the realm of "real knowledge" and dismissed as cultural mythology. *Context of Expression. Mental predicates acquire further palpability by virtue of broad agreement in contexts of usage.*

This is to say that we identify mental states in part by the conditions in which their putative expressions are manifest. Tears shed at a funeral are indicative of sadness; we interpret the same tears at a wedding or the presentation of an award as indicators of joy. In effect, it is not the behavioral manifestation alone to which we attend, but the also context of expression. And to the extent that there is homogeneity in the context of expression, belief in the underlying, psychological source is enhanced. Thus, for example, we may readily agree that anger exists, primarily because its "manifestations" are frequently found under conditions of conflict, frustration and/or injustice. If relevant expressions were randomly distributed over contexts - occasionally bursting forth in the midst of quiet contemplation, a Brahms concerto, or a wedding ceremony, it would be difficult to interpret them. So extraordinary would they be to the circumstances, that we might consider the actor as physically or mentally deranged. Our belief in the existence of anger as a psychological state, then, is significantly dependent on its expressions being circumscribed by a reliable set of contextual parameters.

Valued Goals. Finally, a firm sense of psychological states is tied to homogeneity in views over the goals served by the ontology and the associated assumptions of expression. Our agreement over whether X exists, is in part dependent on what we take to be the consequences of that presumption. If such agreement leads to bitter ends, we may wish to give up the presumption; if there is broad agreement that good outcomes result from the presumption, then we may continue in our confidence of its existence. To illustrate, if psychological powers of sorcery are used to justify burning individuals at the stake, whether I will accept powers of sorcery as truly existing will importantly depend on whether there is agreement that such executions are a social good. If we decry these methods, I will begin to cast aspersions on the ontology, raising questions about such capacities, and search for alternative explanations. I

might ultimately fashion a vocabulary of "mental illness," because of the broad agreement that nurturant treatment is more humane than execution. Homogeneity in the language of value, then, buttresses commitment to a given ontology.

Technologies of Self Expression

I propose that for the better part of the last three centuries - and owing importantly to the Enlightenment discourses of the 17th and 18th century - there has been substantial homogeneity in the discursive ecology - agreement concerning the primary ingredients of the psychological self, the modes of its expression, the contexts under which expression is appropriate, and the ends served by such expressions. The presumption that there are rational processes, for example, as opposed to emotions; that there are characteristic manifestations of these two modes of psychological activity; that there are conditions appropriate to their expression, and that certain cultural values are served by these existents" have been supported by an enormous number of scholars, writers, poets, artists, politicians, clergymen, jurists, and so on. But what of the present century? Why should we begin to doubt these verities; in what respects is the culture changing that the conditions for continued belief are eroding? Although there are many possible answers to this question, I wish here to lay special emphasis on the technologies of human relatedness, those technologies that expose us to an ever broadening array of others; that expand exponentially our potentials for significant relationship; that bring others closer, more often and in greater detail than ever before. Consider, for example, the following:

- A century ago there were fewer than 100 automobiles in the U.S. By the 1990s, there were over 123 million cars in use, with over 6 million new cars produced annually.
- At the turn of century, there was no radio; at the present time 99% of the households in the U.S. have at least one radio, and more than 28 million new radios are sold each year.
- Air transportation was virtually unknown until the 1920s; there are now over 42 million passengers a year in the U.S. alone.
- Television was virtually unknown until the 1940s; at the present time over 99% of American households have at least one tv set - a percentage that exceeds that of households with indoor plumbing.
- Personal computers were virtually unknown until the 1970s; there are now over 80 million in use.

Today we find new technological "breakthroughs" - in microchip technology, computer software, telecommunications, image transmission, mobile computers, multiple channels, multi-media - almost daily occurrences. Certain effects of these technologies seem clear enough. In every way we become increasingly engaged in a world with others - a socially saturated world (Gergen, 1991). We know more, see more, communicate more, and relate more than ever before. However, the more subtle issue - and that which most centrally concerns us here - is that of psychological

essentialism. How does this confluence of developments affect our commitments to a specifically mental world, a world in which a viable self can (and should be) established, and which our cultural institutions should continue to support? To answer this question we may return to the discursive conditions for sustaining belief, as previously outlined. For in my view, these technologies operate as a group to undermine the conditions of homogeneity on which such commitments rest. Let us reconsider then, the sustaining conditions for a belief in a psychological self as they are affected by the incremental consociation of the present century:

Multiple Ontologies. With the proliferation of communication technologies we are first exposed to an ever-expanding vocabulary of being. No longer do we dwell within the boundaries of a single geographically contained community, a region, an ethnicity or even a culture. We have not a single satisfying intelligibility within which to dwell, but through the process of social saturation, we are immersed in a plethora of understandings - the psychological ontologies of varying ethnicities, class strata, geographical sectors, racial and religious groupings, professional enclaves, and nationalities. We are exposed to the argots of the streets, the laboratories, the drawing rooms, the brothels, and so on, each with their particular and peculiar turns of self-expression. Further, because the technologies enable otherwise marginal groups to locate the like minded - from across the country - and to articulate and publicize (if not proselytize) more broadly, one encounters well articulated ontologies reinforced by large and determined numbers. Consider for example, the proliferation of terminologies offered by the mental health professions alone. Prior to this century one could not meaningfully experience a "nervous breakdown," an "inferiority complex," an "identity crisis," an "authoritarian" personality tendency, "chronic depression," "occupational burnout," or "seasonal affective disorder." Now these and a virtual multitude of additional candidates are offered as candidates for ontological status. From the point of view of the mental health professional, the common psychological terms are mere folklore. As argued from lectern and scholarly text to pop magazine and television, the technical vocabulary of mental illness should replace such crude and naive terms as "the blues," "infatuation," and "rattled." To this professional vernacular we must add the many terms resuscitated from our cultural history, for example by religious groups describing various afflictions of the soul and states of grace, terms imported from other cultures ("karma," "no-mind"), and additional terms invented by newly developing sub-cultures (consider the New Age vocabulary of ecstasy, communion, and centeredness). In effect, through the various technologies of social saturation, there is an explosion in the vocabulary of the interior. And this explosion brings to a virtual close an age of relative homogeneity. We slowly lose our sense of assuredness in "what there is," - for example, whether there is in fact any mental disease, any real creativity, free will, moral sentiment, superior aesthetic taste, and so on. As the candidates for the interior region continue to accumulate - spinning now into the several thousands - doubt is slowly cast on the referential base, the belief that there is indeed something special, palpable and identifiable to which such terms refer.

Contested Expressions. As we are immersed in multiplicitous modes of life, the

relationship between expression and psychological origin also becomes increasingly blurred. Not only do differing groups claim that a given psychological condition is manifest in markedly different ways, but what stands as an expression of one state for certain people often indicates quite something else for another. Thus, in the first instance, a state of "love" may be properly expressed for many people by attentive and adoring actions; can this be the same state that other groups find expressed in sadism, masochism, or self-destruction? And to these candidates for expression we must add the myriad attempts of television and movie makers to locate non-hackneyed forms of expression, to press beyond the culturally acceptable expressions for dramatic purposes. Thus we confront psychologists who despair of the existence of love, popular books that tell us in 50 different ways what love is, and the crooner who despairs that "You don't know what love is." In contrast, there are many actions, the psychological sources of which are variously contested. Criminal activity is of singular significance, but what is such activity an expression of? The technologies again furnish myriad answers: a manifestation of an under-developed conscious (psychopathy or sociopathy), greed, need, esteem seeking (among one's peers), achievement motivation, class hatred, racial revenge, and so on. At times, contested interpretations may be intense. For example, is performance on an intelligence test truly a sign on innate psychological capacities, as many psychologists maintain, or of cultural learning, as many sociologists are likely to argue? Is child molesting a product of depravity, psychological illness, or the child's imagination - each position championed by one or another highly vocal and articulate group within the culture? Again, as we fail to locate means of settling such issues, we slowly reach to brink of skepticism. If there is no means of determining what an action is an expression of, there comes a point at which we begin to doubt that actions are expressions ("outward pressings") at all.

Appropriated Usage. Further breakdown in homogeneity stems from the deteriorating constraints over the contexts of expression. One is increasingly unable to identify the psychological source by virtue of its context of expression. This is largely so by virtue of a continuous tendency toward sub-cultural appropriation.(3) That is, as various groups are exposed to other's modes of life, they frequently locate forms of action that can be appropriated for local use. These patterns are ripped from their typical contexts of meaning and played out in conditions that ambiguate or destroy their traditional signification. Thus, for example, religious groups borrow romantic and rock idioms for expression in religious music, thus clouding the meaning of "religious expression" and by implication, suggesting a resignification of both the romance and rock idioms. Expression of love are removed from intimate relations and placed on car bumpers to declare commitments to anything from modes of exercise to geographic locales. Spiritual expressions are extricated from the church, their religious connotations removed, and then reconstituted in New Age rituals of communion with nature, sunsets, waves, and dolphins. Expressions appropriate to athletic events are replayed within political contexts; expressions typical of parent-child relations are recast in the confines of therapy. And as the technologies facilitate the continuous admixtures of expression and context, the context ceases to be a key to psychological condition. In effect, the expression

becomes a free floating signifier without a specifiable signified.

Controversial Goals. Finally, confidence in the inner domain is challenged by the increasing controversy over the use to which such discourse is put, the values served by various assumptions of mental operation. As the technologies enable increasing numbers of people to communicate with each other, and to voice common cause (e.g. feminists, blacks, Asians, the elderly, the crippled, homosexuals, native Americans, etc.), such groups bring critical attention to the taken for granted vocabularies of the culture and their oppressive implications. In each case their critiques begin to foreground the strategies, if not manipulative purposes, served by specifically mental predicates. In this vein, minority groups have raised significant questions with the presumption of general intelligence quotients, feminists have criticized the androcentric biases underlying the prevailing conception of rationality, ex-mental patients have banded together - joined by scores of family therapists and guidance counselors - to disclaim the existence of mental disease, and many scholars from non-Western cultures challenge the imperialistic ramifications of exporting the Western conception of psychological science and its particular vocabulary of mental functioning. As the mental terminologies are brought under attack, as they are increasingly questioned as indicators not of psychological conditions, and their ideological and political implications made apparent, it becomes increasingly unclear whether such terminologies indeed have referential value. If all psychological propositions are ideology in masquerade, then what is the ontological status of mind?

In summary, as the technologies of human interchange increase in number, efficacy, and prevalence, so are we exposed to an ever expanding array of alternative intelligibilities. And as differing intelligibilities are intermingled, so do new waves of discourse and transformation in social pattern emerge. With these changes, the accepted vocabulary of the mental world is challenged, the common modes of expression contested, the contexts of expression ambiguated, and the ends served by such assumptions thrown into critical relief. With this confluence of changing conditions, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine precisely what the contents of the psychological self may be, what actions constitute their expressions, where and when they occur, and what social purposes may be served by one's continued belief in such occurrences. Why, then should one invest so heavily in knowledge, care, and training of the inner world, or identifying one's being in its terms? At some point the very credibility of an "inner world" is colored by suspicion, the existence of a subjective center of being is rendered problematic, and the institutions justified by such assumptions brought into critical focus.

Beyond Nihilism: Toward Relational Realities

I am not suggesting that people in large numbers are abandoning the psychological essentialism so long characteristic of the culture and central to its tradition. Rather, I am outlining what I see as a slow but profound change taking place over the present century - one that is indexed in a broad array of occurrences - for example, in the

academic intrigue with the deconstruction of the self (Derrida), the disappearance of the author (Foucault), the individual as a terminal in a network of circulating images (Baudrillard), and the woman as cyborg (Haraway). In the culture more generally we see the change manifest in the slow replacement of real persons with electronic impulses (for example in carrying out friendships on computer networks, being entertained or intrigued by television, or achieving sexual gratification through telephone services); the ready replacement of limbs, organs, skin and so on with technological devices; the avid enthusiasm for virtual realities, cyberpunk, and the chaotic flow of MTV images; and with the broad skepticism of psychiatry and the replacement of "talking cures" with the multi-million dollar business of psychopharmacology. I detect now a broad ambivalence regarding the reality and importance of the inner world. It is an ambivalence that will, one may anticipate, giving way to a generalized skepticism. The next obvious step would be psychological nihilism - a step that may be avoided now primarily because of the specter of a bleak and empty existence. If there is nothing there, then who am I, what is my worth, why should I live? It is better to remain absorbed with the avalanche of incoming impulses than to ask such daunting questions.

At the same time, I think we may pull short of this whimpering end. The proper comparison may not be between a full self - replete with psychological resources - and an empty one. Rather, the more promising contrast may be between self (whether full or empty) and relatedness. If we do not prove to have palpable centers within the head - autonomous and self-sufficient - then can we not turn our attention to the reality of relatedness - to forms of interdependence rather than independence? Here would be a cultural shift of Copernican magnitude - from presuming a self at the center of the social world to seeing relationships as the enduring reality of which the self is an integral part. Is the reality of relatedness simply an idle speculation - a rabbit drawn from the hat of postmodern despair? I don't believe so. I believe there are myriad indications of a sensitivity already well in motion. To illustrate the possibility and its potentials, it is useful to consider one significant movement presently unfolding in the scholarly domain, and then to open a conceptual space that seems resonant with widespread tendencies within the culture more generally. In the former case, there has been broad scholarly discontent with the cultural ramifications of holding the self to be the fundamental atom of social life - the central unit of description and explanation in the social sciences, and within our institutions of education, law, religion and the like. As it is variously reasoned, this abiding emphasis on the self-contained individual lends itself to an ethos of narcissism (a "me-first" orientation to social life), promotes competition of all against all, discourages attempts at understanding others (whose mental worlds are defined as remote and inaccessible), reduces relationships to a secondary status (artificial constructions of the more basic elements of single identities), and fosters a sense of ultimate isolation and despair.⁽⁴⁾ As it is reasoned, the ideology of the self-contained individual is unserviceable in a world where the technologies of communication bring us increasingly into a state of interdependence. We can ill afford the luxury of such an ideology in a context where little that we do is without social consequence.

It is from the soil of critical appraisal that new attempts now spring to life, attempts to reconstitute the psychological terrain as a social one. Such work is inspired in part by Vygotsky's thesis of higher mental processes, and in some degree by post-structuralist literary theory. In the former case Vygotsky makes a strong case for mental processes as being social processes simply re-located: One carries out a mental process we might call "thinking" in the terms of the community into which one is socialized. Thought, on this account, is more radically conceived as participation in relatedness - a view which Bruner (1990), Wertsch (1985) and many others are currently exploring. At the further extreme, much post-structuralist theory places a strong emphasis on symbol systems, the collectivity of semiotic practices through which meaning is generated and sustained. These systems are genuine cultural manifestations, and precede the individual. "To mean" on this view, is to participate in a set of patterned relationships - again placing relatedness before individuality.

More recently, and most directly to the point, social constructionists, discourse analysts, and communication theorists have begun the task of reconstructing the various processes once believed to be "within the psyche" of the individual as constituents of relationships. For example, as investigators such as Middleton and Edwards (1990), a process such as memory - often viewed as a biologically based and universal function within the individual - is more profitably considered a form of social action - an outgrowth of social processes of negotiation, collusion, and cultural rule following. Similarly, Potter and Wetherell (1987) propose that attitudes - long held to be the basis of action - are actions themselves, and more specifically, discourse positions occupied within conversations. In the same vein, Billig (1987) shows how "thinking" can be seen as a participation in the social process of argumentation, and depending for its efficacy on rhetorical skills. And in work with Mary Gergen, we demonstrate how emotions are necessary constituents of broader scenarios of interaction (Gergen and Gergen, 1988). Without the scenario, an elaborate form of social dance, what we call an "emotional expression", would cease to make cultural sense.

Toward a Relational Sublime

These various writings begin to point the way to a palpable sense of relatedness. With effective articulation, we must believe that relational being could become at least as compelling as our traditional beliefs in a psychological self. It is in this context that I wish, in this final section, to take the liberty of exploring, through evocation, the edges of articulation. That is, I wish, by drawing on scholarly, literary and poetic traditions, to carve out a semiotic space, enabling us further to index and elaborate our activities in terms of a fundamental relatedness. I realize this is not a mode of scholarship traditional to the social sciences, but as we move into the world of "interminable semiosis," as we begin to challenge the boundaries of disciplinary modes of expression, it is also clear that our longstanding traditions of discourse truncate our own modes of relating with each other. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, our languages form the boundaries of our relational worlds. So I hope my idiosyncratic impulse can be indulged momentarily, in hopes that new discursive and relational

ground can be broken.

What I wish to do, specifically, is to resuscitate and re-signify a concept that has been part of the Western tradition for at least 18 centuries, which has resurfaced at different intervals in our history - with differing meanings and differing formations. In my view, this concept of the sublime can again be revived, and play an important function in our contemporary world. Although variously understood over the centuries, the sublime was consistently used to refer to a power or force that was both beyond and prior to the human capacity for rational articulation. Thus, in the first century writings of the Greek critic, Dionysus Longinus, the concern was to locate the source of "great writing", that which "brings power and irresistible might to bear" (1.4) in the written (or spoken) word. The source of great writing, then, was not the words themselves, but an ineffable something in authors which they carried or expressed. This was the power of the sublime - a power which Longinus traced to the "inward greatness of the soul" blessed by nature.

Longinus' writings were rediscovered in the 17th century, and gave rise to a broad number of disquisitions on aesthetics, typically a discourse of the "superhuman" - of vastness, awe, and in the case of Edmund Burke (1790), of pure terror. For Kant (1791), attempting to resist the imperious threat of a materialistic empiricism, the sublime was a particular state of mind - one in which the imagination grappled with "the unattainability of nature as a presentation of [reason's] ideas." (p.99) For later romanticists - Wordsworth, Coleridge, Schiller - the sense of the sublime was evoked by the extremes of nature - the grandeur, power and horror - in which conventional meanings were challenged. One sensed some transcendent order of meaning behind the moment and the taken-for granted. And for American authors, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841), the sublime is an extasy of release, in which the author allows the "ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him; then he is caught up into the life of the Universe."(p.210)

Perhaps these phrases are sufficient to call forth a possibility - the glimmering sense of something beyond our words that grants them force, something beyond reason that causes reason to leap up. And if there is a power that gives shape to our words, to all that is intelligible, then this power is beyond all that we "know to be the case." For everything we propose to exist is itself constructed in language. It is language that furnishes the capacity to distinguish this from that, me from you, up from down, in from out. "There is..." is a move in linguistic space. And if all that we take to exist, cannot be derived from a world independent of language, then how are we to understand the forms taken by our by our understanding? We confront the unnameable in this case, a "force" a "power," a "telos" that is beyond articulation. We confront the sublime.

Yet, although this realm of the sublime cannot be captured in language, we can appreciate its dimension. How are sounds and markings converted to what we take to be language? For how does language acquire its intelligibility? Here we must envision primordial processes of relationship - the pulsing coordination of

movements and sounds - that slowly turns the amorphous into the meaningful. For what is it that gives language its meaning outside a relationship? Thus, if we are struck with the power of a given passage of writing, it is not the "inward greatness of the soul" (with Longinus) that we should credit, but the process of relatedness which enable such passages to carry us with them. Likewise the source of "awe", "inspiration," or "terror" is not to be found in nature (with Wordsworth), or in the person (with Emerson), but within unfathomable processes of relatedness which make meaning possible. The capacity to give life to words, and thus to transform culture, is not usefully traced to internal resources, but to relatedness - which serves as the source of all articulation, and which simultaneously remains beyond its reach. We confront then, the possibility of a new order of sublime - suited to the technoworld of the postmodern - a relational sublime.

Can consciousness of the relational sublime live outside the world of letters? I believe so. There are already myriad cultural artifacts that subtend its presence. Consider the movements in the sphere of popular culture: There is first the plethora of television and film depictions of families (The Waltons, Beverly Hillbillies, Bill Cosby, The Simpsons, Married with Children) and the emerging genre of so called "buddy films" (Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Trading Places, Thelma and Louise, Mambo Kings, White Men Can't Jump) - treating the close interdependence of two individuals - of the same or opposite sex. However, the horizons of relationship have broadened considerably, such that the single protagonist - the hero or the heroine - is frequently replaced by film and television stories of small groups (Enchanted April, The Summer House, City Slickers, Cheers, Hill Street Blues) and indeed, entire communities (Do the Right Thing, Gilligan's Island, Love Boat, Northern Exposure). As research on women's magazines also reports (Prusank, Duran and Delillo, 1993), articles in the 1950s and 60s were directed at taking care of either the relational partner or the self. In the 1970s and 80s a new vision is found in which "the relationship" is created as an object for the readers.

Further, I believe the sense of the relational sublime is increasingly present in our daily experience. When concert goers experience the power and ecstasy of their common immersion in rock and pop music, when city crowds gather to shout their welcome their championship team, when the throngs gather on the Washington mall to chant their cause, and when gays join the annual parade in San Francisco, they know they are participating in an event of that eclipses the importance of any single participant. I believe the relational sublime hovers close to consciousness as we click into the vast network of the computer bulletin board and add our entry to the unending conversation. It begins to make itself manifest in collaborative classroom activities, cooperative scientific projects, and community watches. Further, as multinational organizations grow in scope and size, regions of Europe and North America join in trade accords, and national governments become increasingly dependent on international opinion, we confront the potential inherent in the relational sublime. If we succeed in losing the self, we may be prepared for a conjoint reality of far more promising potential.

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Footnotes

1. For a more complete detailing of the process of mental reification, see Gergen (in press).
2. For further elaboration of the history of emotional discourse see Gergen (in press a).
3. For more detailed description of sub-cultural appropriation of symbols, see Fiske (1989).
4. For illustrations of this critical dialogue see Sampson (1977), Bellah et al.(1985), and Lasch (1979).