

# **Social Construction on The Edge:**

***‘WITNESS’-THINKING and EMBODIMENT***

John Shotter

Taos Institute Publications, 2010

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— Foreword —

Some books invite you to pause and reflect on your practices; and their new language opens the door to new understanding. John Shotter's *Social Construction on the Edge* is such a book.

Knowing Shotter's work, I look forward to reading him and reacquainting myself with him in every book; to be fully open to his words and imagine how readers unfamiliar with his books might read them. Each book is not only a private conversation with the author, but a creation and discovery of each reader's own interpretations. His words offer a special *value* to all practitioners.

Shotter belongs to a group of social thinkers seeking a radical shift in how we view our world and the people who inhabit it. They question the classical world view, saturated as it is with theories about our lives and behaviors. Each of those theories describes categories, types and kinds of behavior; assumes a body of knowledge that's centralized, fixed, discoverable and re-discoverable; and reflects distant, dualistic and hierarchical relationships existing within static structures.

Practitioners with this world view are experts who carefully hone their insights about the human condition. But they often appear judgmental, pedagogic and patronizing in comments about how people live their lives or organize their practices and businesses.

In Shotter's world view, people are unique "individuals", actively engaged in developing knowledge rich in local relevance and fluidity. Language and words are highly contextualized and performative, relational and generative. His is a more inclusive, interactive approach.

But he doesn't simply follow the radical line. His books go further, inspired by the "specific *utterances* or *expressions*" of noted authors such as: Bakhtin, Garfinkle, Merleau-Ponty, Voloshinov, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein. In his books, Shotter allows us to us listen in on "conversations" he had with these authors' words over the years, and how they helped him understand and see things differently. Conversations, a generative process, that position him at the edge of social constructionism rather than at its center. Shotter's ideas, and their relational evolution, demonstrate critical theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome theory regarding the growth and transformation of ideas. I think Shotter might agree with editor Chrisopher Norris's (1989) comment that such bodies of work are "typically many years ahead of the academic disciplines and teaching disciplines that have obvious reasons of their own for preserving the *status quo*." (Practitioners like Shotter tend to be way ahead of mainstream theorists in terms of their practical wisdom and knowledge, acquired "in the trenches" of their practice while confronting unique situations, conditions and challenges that must remain abstract to theorists.)

*Social Construction on the Edge*, a collection of essays taken from

Shotter's presentations or revisions of his earlier writings, allows us to explore more deeply the notion of *witness* thinking, talking and acting he introduced us to in earlier works. It is dialogue, reflective interactions that celebrate *understanding* as a relationally responsive activity: always in process and never fully finalized. Such understanding arises organically from the relationship, what we do together.

Shotter organizes *Social Construction on the Edge* around six interconnected themes woven through each chapter:

1. "How we might come to know a unique other . . . *as unique*;"
2. "First-time, unique, irreversible changes, novelties, changes of a *qualitative* kind;
3. "*Developmental continuity*" and "*identity preserving*" as important characteristics of human beings;
4. The "chiasmic structuring of living meetings....when two or more living beings meet and begin to *respond* to each other;
5. What must be 'already there' in the "background of our meetings" that allows our "actions" to "have meanings intelligible to others;" and
- 6, "The nature of people's *initial stance or initial* attitude as they approach each other prior to their actual meeting . . . 'set the scene' . . . for how participants will react to everything occurring within *the event of their meeting*."

The threading may appear repetitious, but it is not. Each theme and its discussion occur within the context of a different account, a new exploration, a continued appeal for us to approach our practices in a way that attends to and includes the central focus of the book or its "edge:" the "spontaneous, expressive-responsiveness of our living bodies." That is, meaning-making and understanding begin in social exchange and are influenced by the background against which they occur. It serves as the glue that in Shotter's words, "holds us together in all our relationships, both to the other people as well as to all the other events occurring in our surroundings."

This is a book for practitioners, "for people who must work and act from within the midst of complexity, who must think in action, who must understand their world while moving around in it." It is a powerful summons to constantly reflect on our practices across diverse disciplines, contexts and cultures (psychology, management, education, writing or research etc.) and to craft them to better fit the expressed and unique needs of our clients and our consumers in this ever-changing world.

But Shotter doesn't set out discrete methods, techniques, pre-structured steps or strategies. He suggests a practical *way of being* in the world, which is based on a collection of what might be called values or principles or what he calls "sensitivities" and "sensibilities." These are particular awarenesses and understandings about us, others and our interactions with each other, and about the surroundings and circumstances in which these occur that

serve as “guides.” Not guides as in guidebooks or manuals, but as help for us to assume a particular attitude or stance with which we approach, meet, interact and make-meaning with "the other" and with our environments.

Practitioners can see themselves as experts who know how people should live their lives, what they should inquire into and how and what they should learn, for example. It is a hierarchical perspective. Shotter advocates a more equitable stance in which the practitioner is engaged, involved and responsive. He proposes that we pay attention to and learn from how we respond with each other in every day interactions: our spontaneous and responsive lifestyle. This can help us participate more fully and openly in our practice as active participants, and act more human.

It's about *preparing for participation* rather than just doing the practice. Getting ready is an extra opportunity to think about our world, the people in it and our relationships. Each interaction becomes more humane, both in our practices and our everyday lives and relationships. Preparing in this way, Shotter suggests, enables us to become more spontaneous.

Reading Shotter, I reflected on the growing body of practices that we consider collaborative, conversational, dialogical and open-dialogue--mine and others. Several interrelated characteristics resonate with the reader: The practitioner's way of being – a way of being *with* – talking with, acting with, thinking with and responding with -- versus doing, talking and thinking for, to or about. I suggest that this way of “being with” can entail

a) leaving behind (or at least being suspicious of) theory-driven techniques and methods;

b) spontaneously responding to whatever is unique to the occasion and what it involves, versus being deliberate and reacting almost by rote;

c) being, engaging and acting in the moment as opposed to superficially analyzing and knowing ahead of time;

d) identifying seemingly small or large “problems” not as problems but simply as life challenges that are dissolved in language as we take action, or at least plan it;

e) the practitioner learns about the client or customer and honors their preferred way of being and telling;

f) being a genuine interested and curious learner, as the practitioner's approach becomes contagious and leads to mutual inquiry;

g) through mutual inquiry, through the witness dialogical process, beginning to consider questions as starting points and ways of participating in a conversation;

h) encountering each person and their circumstances, even if familiar or similar, as if “for the first time;”

i) once in “for the first time” mode, turning the invisible familiar into the visible unfamiliar and allowing ourselves to notice and discover the difference and uniqueness of the other person and their circumstances;

j) generating what is being created within the witness dialogical

process, and not bringing it in from the outside by an expert knower; and

k) not seeing what is created as a solution, a product or an explanation, but rather something unique, appropriate and useful for the current situation.

Lastly, understand the importance of simultaneously being a courteous guest and host to the other. In my own work, I refer to this described way of "being with" as a *philosophical stance*.

I meet many practitioners and people they work with from various disciplines, contexts and cultures. All face the unavoidable complexities and challenges of a changing and shrinking world in which social, cultural, political and economic transformations take place every day. The internet and new media are decentralizing information, knowledge, and expertise. The call is for democracy, social justice and human rights; listening to the people's voice or voices; engagement and collaboration. People want to influence what affects their lives; many having lost faith in dehumanizing or manipulative institutions and practices. They demand more flexible and respectful systems or services.

Practitioners wonder how to stay relevant, and help create a more humane world in which everyone is treated with respect and dignity. I believe the witness dialogical approach described in *Social Construction on the Edge*, and its wider context, can free us from restrictive theories and offer hope of new ways of seeing, looking, listening and being in our professional and personal lives. And of course, responding relevantly.

Harlene Anderson  
Houston, Texas  
June 2010

P.S. Please do not skip the Prologue and Introduction: they *prepare* you for the reading.



## — Prologue —

“For more clearly (but not differently) in my experience of others than in my experience of speech or the perceived world, I inevitably grasp my body as a spontaneity which teaches me what I could not know in any other way except through it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p.93).

**L**ike my previous Taos Publications book (Shotter, 2008), this is a book for practitioners, for people who, like crafts-persons or sports-people, must continually shape or fashion their conduct in terms of the immediate allowances or opportunities for action afforded them by their circumstances, *whilst at the same time*, aiming at an overall goal of ‘bettering’ those circumstances and their performances within them in some way. What is distinctive about it is that the material in it, instead of being concerned with models or theories, with ways of thinking, is concerned with practices, with *ways of acting* and with the role of bodily events and happenings within our conduct of them.

As a consequence, the overall approach taken in this collection of essays is not wholly social constructionist, hence its title. They are ‘on the edge’ of it in the sense of not being closely related to those versions of social constructionism that are associated with Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, or Deconstructionism (see Gergen, 1999, pp.24-29, for an account), which in their turn, have been influenced by Saussure’s (1911) ‘structuralist’ account of language as a *self-contained system*. These approaches, which are often characterized as exhibiting a “linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967) or an “interpretative turn” (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987), ignore or preclude the spontaneous, expressive-responsiveness of our living bodies which, as we shall see, provides the ‘background glue’ holding us together in all our relationships, both to the other people as well as to all the other events occurring in our surroundings.

Our living, bodily embedding in this previously unnoticed background, and the ways in which events in it both ‘call out’ expressive-responses from us whilst utterly ‘disallowing’ or ‘repulsing’ others, exerts much more of an influence on our actions than ‘linguistic’ versions of social constructionism allow. It suggests what some have come to call an *ontological* version of social constructionism (Corcoran, 2009), to do with our coming to acquire certain “ontological skills” (Shotter, 1984) at *being* this, that, or some other kind of person as a result of coming to embody certain sensitivities and sensibilities in a certain sphere of practical activity or activities. Being a good organizer, a good listener, a careful reader, a good speaker, etc., are all to do more with our learning how to *be* in the world (ontology) than with our gaining knowledge of it

(epistemology)<sup>1</sup>. The overall approach, to the extent that it is to do with our self-authoring, *can be seen as* relevant to what in recent times has come to be called “the narrative approach” (White and Epston, 1990; Josselson et al, 2003) to psychological inquiry; but is especially close to Tom Andersen’s (1992, 1996) explicitly *embodied*, responsive orientation to psychotherapeutic events. For these are approaches which, as I hope to make clear in these essays, are much closer to our ordinary ways of inquiring into the affairs that matter to us in our everyday lives together, than those that we often still try to implement in copying the theory-driven practices of inquiry exemplified in the experimental methods of the physical sciences.

Indeed, in many spheres of life now, it is assumed that the *only* proper way to proceed is by the application of rationally agreed protocols or principles, etc., in guiding the practice in question. Thus, instead of being taught practical skills, within the context of their execution, practitioners are taught *ideal, generalized* models or theories in a classroom, in accord with the idea that to act skillfully is ‘to put a theory into practice’. But, as Gadamer (1975) remarks, this is “an awful deformation of what practice really is” (p.312). The upshot of this is to turn our practical reasoning – which requires both our ‘in touchness’ with the uniqueness of the situation we face, as well as our own imaginative and judgmental skills – into a technical matter, into the application of pre-given recipes or protocols. It also means that the growth of practical wisdom can no longer be promoted by informal personal contact and dialogue amongst practitioners within the context of their practices; instead, plans and strategies are discussed and argued over in committee rooms and seminar rooms prior to their (often inappropriate and ineffective) application in practice.

The shift, then, that I explore in this book, from inquiries and practices modeled on the experimental methods of the physical sciences to those of a more everyday form of inquiry, is a shift of massive proportions – and nothing is gained by minimizing it. In brief, rather than solving problems or proving general theories true, researchers (practitioner-inquirers) explore the particular possibilities available for next steps in their own current, unique, circumstances; rather than finding the one right answer for all time, they must open up multiple possibilities for multiple goals; rather than making measurements and determining quantities from a far, researchers (practitioner-inquirers) attempt to come to a ‘sense’ of the unique ‘inner nature’ of the other or otherness before them, by ‘inventing’ many different ways of dynamically relating themselves to ‘it’ – thus to allow, as Steiner (1989) puts it, “the ‘otherness’ which enters into us [makes] us other” (p.188).

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1. Let me issue a reminder here, that to make a distinction is also to make a relationship: it is only too easy to think that a focus on one side of a distinction amounts to a rejection of the other; whereas the other is always still there as a background to our foregrounding of the other.

Overall, then, this collection of essays, as the title indicates, is about a special kind of thinking that can occur when we allow the ‘otherness’ of the other to enter us and make us other – it is a kind of thinking that I have come to call ‘*witness*’ (*dialogical*)-thinking, to contrast it with the ‘*aboutness*’ (*monological*)-thinking that we have become very used to in our academic and intellectual lives in the West. As a style of thought, it was first suggested to me by a remark of Merleau-Ponty (1964b) about the way we look in relation to a painting, to a work of art: “I would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I look at a thing; I do not fix its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I *see it*” (p.164) – if the painting truly ‘moves’ or ‘touches’ us, it makes us other than we were. In other words, on some occasions at least, we look at something in accord, not with our own requirements (as in Foucault’s “gaze”), but ‘its’ requirements, as our two eyes spontaneously search for a joint focus and fixation as we survey it in all its details, an ‘it’ as a consequence comes to enter us as ‘an other’. And, as Merleau-Ponty (1964a) puts it, in such a circumstance there can be a *reversal* in the ordinary relationship that I have to objects; if I adopt a desultory (aimless), exploratory attitude towards the scene before me, then “the scene invites me to become its adequate viewer, [and] it is as if a different mind than my own suddenly came to dwell in my body... I am snapped up by a second myself outside me: I perceive an other” (p.94)<sup>2</sup>.

It is this shift, then, away from ways of acting (looking, listening, thinking, doing, etc.) we ourselves direct towards ways of acting in which we allow the detailed features of our surroundings to ‘catch’ our attention, so to speak, that is crucial, for it is a shift away from relating to our surroundings in terms already familiar to us to allowing our surroundings themselves to ‘teach’ or to ‘instruct’ us in ways of relating to them.

We can call those ways of thinking, when we think in familiar terms, aboutness-thinking. For they work in terms of pictures and perspectives, in terms of frameworks and positions, repetitions and regularities, bodies of systematically connected knowledge, etc. of a kind already well-known to us. Witness-thinking is quite different, in that it is continually concerned with the unique, once-occurrent events of Being (to use a phrase of Bakhtin’s, 1993), events that just happen to one in the situation within which one is currently engaged. Such events, because they are of an ongoing kind, because they are continuously unfolding in time, because they can never be “finalized” (Bakhtin, 1986), i.e., brought to a final closure, do not give rise

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2. It is perhaps appropriate at this stage to apologize for the number of repeated quotes, other repeated turns of phrase, and general level of redundancy exhibited in this book. But the essays it contains were all written to be read as complete pieces in themselves, and I have thought it best to retain their overall wholeness.

at all to anything that can be accurately pictured or easily named; but they can and do give rise to shaped and vectored *feelings*<sup>3</sup> – feelings that can be immediately sensed as giving us, as practitioners, the guidance we need in the practical struggles we face every day in coping with the unique individuals or unique circumstances we meet in our practices.

I have only just recently become aware of witness-thinking as a distinct style in people’s “inner movements of thought” – although, as I shall recount below, in an implicit way, it has been ‘known’ to me for some time. Such a kind of thinking becomes available to us, I think, only as a result of our spontaneous responsiveness, as living-growing-embodied beings, to temporally unfolding events occurring around us, for, as living-growing beings, we cannot *not be* bodily responsive to these events in this direct and immediate, unthinking fashion.

For the moment, I will mention four important features of the living movements (more will be mentioned in the chapters below) in which such spontaneous responsiveness is manifested: 1) in their very occurrence, they ‘place’ us, bodily, *in one or another style or kind of relationship* to such events; 2) the bodily movements we exhibit in response to such events are *expressive* in some way to the others around us; 3) they are expressive of both *what* the relevant events ‘are’, and, in what way they *matter to us*, i.e., in being expressive in this way, they ‘point beyond’ themselves; and 4) they are what we might call *identity preserving* movements, in that the concomitant changes occasioned in us by their occurrence do not lead – as they might in a machine – to our ‘wearing out’ or to our physical degradation. In fact, just the opposite, they in fact lead to our becoming more able to ‘fit’ ourselves to our surroundings. Indeed, we could call all living activities *telic* activities in that they all aim, so to speak, at becoming in their activity more fully themselves.

As is perhaps now readily apparent, almost everything of interest in the study of such spontaneously responsive living activities, is apparent out in the *relations* occurring between such activities and their *surroundings*. Hence, perhaps surprisingly and unexpectedly, we end up being interested in the uncanny amazingsness of our living bodies, rather than in mysterious minds hidden inside people’s heads – the deep enigmas of our lives together lie in what is in fact *visible* before us, not in what is invisible and in what is hidden from us.

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3. By a *shaped and vectored* feeling, I mean a feeling that works not only as a ‘shaped standard’ against which to measure the success of one’s attempts to give it adequate linguistic expression, but which also provides a sense of ‘where’ one should next go, i.e., it is a feeling that ‘points beyond’ itself. In other words, we have a sense of how we *stand* and how things are *going* for us, of how we are *placed* or *positioned* and the *point* of our actions. We gain from such a feeling, not only an *evaluation* of how we stand, but also an *action guiding anticipation* as to where next we might move. It is, of course, in terms of such action guiding anticipations (as *second nature*) that we drive our cars, and continually monitor our ‘positioning’ on multi-lane highways.

As a foretaste of the strangeness of what, on the one hand, we must deal with here, but, on the other, its everyday familiarity, let me mention an example from Vygotsky's (1978) account of the importance of *play* and *playfulness* in our development as we "grow into the intellectual life of those around" (p.88) us: As he notes, for a child in play, "any stick can be a horse but, for example, a postcard cannot be a horse" (p.98), for while a child sitting astride a stick can respond bodily to a stick 'as if' it were a horse, *moving with it* as his or her 'imaginary horse' requires, a postcard would afford no such sitting-astride movements.

With Vygotsky's example in mind, if sticks can mean horses because they can be responded to some extent *like* horses, while postcards can't, how might we view Wittgenstein's (1953) claim that, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (no.43)? Perhaps we need to be prepared for people to put their words, at least sometimes, to quite strange uses – uses which we will be able to understand, *if* we can find a similar such responsive understanding of such uses within our selves.

Although this kind of playful involvement "is not the predominant feature of childhood," Vygotsky (1978) argues, "it is a leading feature... [For] in play, action is subordinated to meaning, but in real life, of course, action dominates meaning" (p.101). In other words, play provides a special realm within real life in which the child's spontaneous, impulsive reactions are suspended, and the child seems *free* (in one sense) to determine his or her own actions – that is, in the sense that in play, the child is free from any coercion by others. "But in another sense this is an illusory freedom," notes Vygotsky (1978), "for his [or her] actions are in fact subordinated to the meanings of things, and he [or she] acts accordingly" (p.103). This, as we shall see, is a comment with very far reaching consequences – in play, the child can develop and express her or his witness-thinking and witness-acting, while in *real life* aboutness-thinking and acting, i.e., operating in terms already shared by others, must prevail.

As will be apparent in the chapters of this book to follow, this kind of emphasis on people living out their responsive-expressive bodily activities in relation both to the things, *and* to the other people around them, is the book's central theme. Indeed, such topics as 'agency', 'responsibility', 'willfulness', 'play', 'spontaneity', 'creativity', and 'living change' have occupied my attention in my work since its inception. Some may see it as the old freedom determinism issue; but if so, they will find it set out here in terms quite different from the "either-or" way it was originally posed: As I see it, as living-growing beings, we can only be self-determining to a very limited, but very crucial extent. Indeed, the degree to which, and the importance of the fact that, we as individuals can be *accounted* responsible for at least some of our own actions, was the concern that marked the original point of departure for the work exhibited here (see Shotter, 1974).

I did not, however, come to this focus, or my focus on "joint action" and other such topics straightaway – even though I have been exploring the nature

of our living involvements in activities we perform along with others, for quite some long time now<sup>4</sup>. At first, my revolt was simply against a mechanical *cause and effect* psychology, against behaviorist psychology (again, see Shotter, 1974), which led, with a colleague, to a turn towards the study of “action” (see Gauld and Shotter, 1977) – to things people do deliberately and self-consciously for a *reason* – which lead on to a focus on meanings and interpretations. So for a while, the sharp distinction between what people themselves *do* and what merely *happens* to them was central for me.

However, it soon began to dawn on me that there was a third realm of activity in between these other two. And for a short while, I thought of it as “the penumbra in the middle,” because it was a region in which both just happening events *and* deliberately done actions were inextricably intermingled. For, on the one hand, things only came to pass in this sphere if participants exerted their *will*, so to speak, and deliberately paid attention in certain ways to these events, making use of their intelligence and judgment in so doing. But on the other hand, what actually happened, i.e., the outcomes of such activity seem to be beyond the control of any of the single individuals involved. But, without the intelligent, responsive engagement of each nothing happened; but even with it, people were unable to be fully knowledgeable, i.e., fully articulate, about what they were doing.

Indeed, in a non-Freudian sense of the term, people seemed to be unconscious of the details of the social inter-activity giving rise to such outcomes – they didn’t know ‘what led to what’. As I was later to discover, Foucault put the issue very nicely in saying: “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does” (pers comm., quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p.187).

In such inter-activity as this, what happens to people, spontaneously, over and above their wanting and doing is, in fact, more important than their wanting and doing, for it determines the possibilities available to them at any one moment for what, realistically, they can hope to achieve in their consciously executed acts. We can call it “the background.”

Around 1979-1980 I came to call this kind of inter-activity “joint action” (Shotter, 1980), but later, under the influence of Bakhtin’s (1981, 1984, 1986) writing, I started to call it the *dialogical*, and even more recently, under Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) influence, *chiasmic* activity, for involved in it is not just the dynamic intertwining of two or more voices, but the dynamic inter-relating of an indefinite number of stands of relationally responsive activity, and I have been mediating on the nature of this third realm of activity – and the kind of knowing and understanding we can develop to help us to conduct our lives within it in a less confused, more

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4. For something like the last 25 years (see Shotter, 1980).

well oriented fashion – in one way or another ever since.

It is very tempting to call what is produced in such dialogical or chiasmic exchanges, a complex ‘mixture’ of not wholly reconcilable influences – for, as Bakhtin (1981) remarks, at work at the same time in all dialogically structured activities are both inward, ‘centripetal’ tendencies towards order and unity, as well as outward, ‘centrifugal’ ones towards diversity and heterogeneity.

However, although we may have no trouble discriminating and identifying the strands, the tendencies at work in two or more *voices*, to call their intertwining a ‘mixture’ is a fundamental mistake. It is a ‘product’ word, suggesting a simple physical amalgam, the arithmetical sum of two or more forms. Whereas, in fact, when two or more living activities ‘rub up against’ one another, so to speak, a *completely new tendency* is created in the resulting dynamics, a new form of life emerges with its own *telos*, with its own special shape and direction of development. It is thus quite impossible to definitively and finally characterize the nature of dialogically-structured, chiasmic, joint activity: it has neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, a neither completely stable nor an easily changed organization, a neither fully subjective nor fully objective character. More than just a static kind of complexity, dialogically-structured activity has a dynamic, continually changing, oscillating, pulsating character, such that its structure at any one moment is very different from its structure at another. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that its very lack of specificity, its lack of any pre-determined order, and thus *its openness to being specified or determined yet further only by those practically involved in it*, is its central defining characteristic. No wonder that Wittgenstein (1980a) said about his own way of philosophizing, that when you are doing it, “you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there” (p.65).

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For a reason that was not, at the time, well understood to me<sup>5</sup>, in my attempt to forge an alternative to what I saw as demeaning and simplistic psychological theories, I felt drawn to reading the original writings of many ‘landmark’ psychologists and philosophers<sup>6</sup>. Although now ignored by those

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5. Although I now think of myself as blessed for spontaneously taking up this way of conducting my explorations – for as I will make clear at the end of this Preface, while we might find fault with their *theories* and *opinions*, with the supposed *content* of their utterances, others can exert powerful and crucial influences on us in their *saying* of their words.

6. One reason for this was that on a couple of occasions when I turned to an original text to check a quotation in a textbook, I found either the original text misquoted, or, so flagrantly ‘selected’ (‘cherry picked’, as the Americans say) that the original text had almost the opposite meaning from that claimed in the psychology textbook – textbook writers ‘interpreted’ classics according to their own aims. Much like the rest of us, they seemed to find it difficult to allow the original writers expression in their *own voices*.

on the ‘scientific edge’ of the discipline, such people, surely, must have had something impressive to say (I thought) for them to have been so ‘disturbing’ to the mainstream of their day. In doing this reading ‘off the beaten track’, so to speak, I spontaneously discovered – although I think I can now describe why this is so (see below) – that it was tremendously productive to carry on an ‘inner conversation’, so to speak, with a certain collection of writers who also – it seemed to me – had ‘worried at’ these same *interactive* issues. Vygotsky was the first, Vico and Wittgenstein came along a little later, along with Cassirer, G.H. Mead, Dreyfus, Dewey, Garfinkel, Goffman, Merleau-Ponty, Bohm, Bernstein, Charles Taylor, along with a number of conversational partners in the flesh, particularly Rom Harré and Ken Gergen. It was their voices, their *words in the speaking of them*, that was important to me, not the *patterns in their already spoken words*. It was, as I came to call it under Bakhtin’s (1986) influence, my relationally-responsive understanding of their words, their utterances – rather than a representational-referential understanding of them – that I found helpful. For they worked to create within me, different kinds of understanding shaped by different ‘attitudes’, ‘stances’, or ‘ways of seeing’.

For, the difficulty we face in our failure to understand our own involvements in constructing our own social worlds or realities *is* of the ‘fish being the last to discover water’ variety. In other words, we don’t quite know how to ‘orient’ ourselves towards our surroundings, our circumstances, towards our own everyday social interactions, in our inquiries into them. Thus, if we want to know our ‘way about’ within them better thus to ‘go on’ within in a more self-aware manner, as Wittgenstein (1980a) notes, “what has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect” (p.17) – a difficulty, as we shall see, more to do with how we might get ourselves ready to participate in the meetings of importance to us than with thinking about what *plans* to make.

I will discuss this issue more in the Introduction section below, but suffice it here to say that, again as Wittgenstein (1980a) remarks, the kind of work involved in coming to know one’s way about in a new circumstance, rather than learning new facts or pieces of information, “is really more a working on oneself... On one’s way of seeing things. (And what one expects of them)” (p.16).

This why I think the essays included in this book are especially apposite to those special students who are also themselves practitioners (therapists, social workers, managers of ‘people processes’). For the *ways* of thinking explored in them are, I think, of use to those of us who must, so to speak, think ‘on the hoof’, ‘from within the ongoing midst’ of complexity, or while ‘in motion’. They are especially apposite because these modes of thought – as I will make clear in these essays – work not in terms of static images or pictures, in terms of fixed shapes or forms that can be ‘seen’ to correspond to, or to be ‘like’, states of affairs out in the world, but in terms of another



kind of ‘likeness’ altogether. They work in terms of *felt* dynamic ‘likenesses’ that arise for us within sequences of unfolding ‘movements’, within the unfolding ‘interplays’ that occur when, in some sense, we *resonate with*, or move *in accordance with* the temporal contours another’s expressive ‘movements’ – as when, say, we are ‘taken up by’ a dance or piece of music.

In the past, we have been used to working with spatial images, with pictures, with representations, with finished shapes and forms that can be depicted out in the world in objective terms and talked about. This concern with movement-forms or time-forms, takes us into a different realm altogether, the realm of subtle bodily feelings that can exert, as they unfold in time, a distinctive and intricate *guiding* or *directive function* in our actions, and especially in the words we *use* as we voice our utterances in our speech. Indeed, it is precisely the function of such directive and guiding feelings that Wittgenstein (1953) explores in what he calls his “grammatical” investigations (no.90) – his explorations of the way in which all the small details at work in this, that, or some other quite particular situation can work to determine precisely what it is appropriate for us to say within it. Or, to put the issue differently, he is concerned with investigating those situations in which, to repeat Merleau-Ponty’s (1964b) way of putting it above, we look at, or listen to something *according to*, or *with* a certain way or manner of looking or listening that we have learned in our previous encounters with similar such circumstances.

This, then, is the topic of this book, and I will turn first, in the Introduction, to the strange, chiasmic nature of “the background” within we live our lives together. About it, Wittgenstein (1980a) remarked: “Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning” (p.16), and also: “When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there” (1980a, p.65), so we need to be ready for some rather, perhaps, unexpected claims as to its strange nature.



## — Introduction —

## The Dynamic Background: Its Chiasmic Structure

“You really could call it [i.e., a work of art], not exactly the expression of a feeling, but at least the expression of feeling, or felt expression. And you could say too that in so far as people understand it, they resonate in harmony with it, respond to it. You might say: the work of art does not aim to convey *something else*, just itself” (Wittgenstein, 1980a, p.58).

“Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one might think” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.527).

“I begin to understand a philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher. In fact, every language conveys its own teaching and carries its meaning into the listener’s mind... There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a *thought in speech* the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.179).

**I**n what follows below, I want to explore how we can, from rare, unrepeatable, unique, fleeting, and utterly particular experiences, learn something general, something that we can carry across to other circumstances to look or to think *with*. Let me open my exploration by introducing six themes: As was perhaps already apparent in the Prologue to this book above, a central theme running through the whole of the work contained in it, is to do with how we might come to know a unique other or otherness *as unique*, as who or what they are *in themselves*. How can we ‘enter into’ *their* world in a way which acknowledges and respects their otherness, and allows them to express themselves to *us* in *their* terms? Or, to put it another way: How is it possible for a person (or a company, a situation, or whatever) to express his/her own unique individuality within a language made up, seemingly, of only a limited number of repeatable forms... or, for a work of art, to teach us a new way of looking at, or listening to, the world around us, a new *way* or *style* of looking or listening, a new sensibility?

This question is connected with another, a second theme, to do with how

we might understand *change*: We are very used to talking of change as something that can be explained in terms of principles, rules, or conventions, changes that can be *caused* to happen *within* a reality already well-known to us, with what we might call *ordinary* changes. Central to it is our answering it is our acknowledgement of our own spontaneous, bodily responsiveness to events occurring in our surroundings, and our being prepared to start with the qualitatively distinct nature of these responses – the fact that at least in a global, qualitative sense our bodies ‘tell’ us of the character of the situation that we are in. This means that what becomes of concern to us is, as Gadamer (1989) puts it, “not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing” (p.xxviii). Thus it is that I want to talk about surprising changes, changes that can happen spontaneously, unexpectedly, that can strike us with amazement or wonder, *extraordinary* changes, changes in the very character of what we take our reality to be. In short, instead of changes of a quantitative and repeatable kind, I want to talk about first-time, unique, irreversible changes, novelties, changes of a *qualitative* kind – changes that Bakhtin (1993) calls “once-occurrent events of being.” Indeed, the account of witness-thinking outlined in what follows in this book is aimed at our becoming more self-aware of how our responsive feelings of being at first confused in such new, once-occurrent or first-time situations, can lead to our gradually coming to ‘know our way about’ within them.

A third theme of importance in all that follows is one which (strangely) focuses on something quite novel in our study of our own human affairs, a topic that, although it is quite well-known and familiar to us in an everyday sense, has not yet aroused in us any distinctive acknowledgment of its very special nature. This new topic is simply “life” or “livingness,” the properties, characteristics, or *aspects* of living, growing bodies, of organic forms as enduring, self-maintaining, self-reproducing, *structuring structures*. Thus, in all living activities, there is always a kind of *developmental continuity* involved in their unfolding, such that earlier phases of the activity are indicative of at least the *style*, the *physiognomy*, i.e., the unique living identity, of what is to come later. Thus, just as acorns only grow into oak trees and not rose bushes, and eggs only produce chickens and not rabbits, so all living activities, it seems, give rise to what we might call *identity preserving* changes or deformations – their possible ends are already ‘there’ in their beginnings. In other words, in each living moment in all living processes there is an *anticipation* of what is next to come.

A fourth consideration – arising out of the special nature of living things – is that everything of importance to us in this realm of spontaneous, living activity, occurs in *meetings* of one kind or another. Something very special occurs when two or more living beings meet and begin to *respond* to each other (more happens than them merely having an *impact* on one another).

As Wittgenstein (1953) puts it: “our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different” (no.284). But more than this, there is the creation in such meetings of qualitatively new, quite novel and distinct forms of life, forms of life which are more than merely averaged or mixed versions of those already existing (see comments in the Preface), but which express quite unique, never-before-realized, *chiasmically* structured forms of dynamic unfolding.

Given all these themes so far, let me try to sum up their influence by saying that, running through everything I have to say below, is a focus on the way in which *spontaneous, living, bodily, expressive and responsive activities* arouse *anticipations* in both the doer and those who witness a living being’s activities:

- *spontaneous*, because it is immediate and not pre-mediated;
- *living*, in that it has its existence only in a *continuous* responsive and adjustive relation with events occurring in its surroundings;
- *bodily*, in that it is not hidden inside individual people’s heads;
- *expressive*, in that it is a kind of activity that moves others to respond to it;
- *responsive*, in that it occurs spontaneously in response to events having their source in the activities of the others and othernesses in its surroundings; and *anticipation* arousing, in that there is a developmental continuity in all living processes.

The power of living expression is that people can, in their living activity, ‘call out’ a response from those around them, and in so doing, inaugurate a meeting and thus begin a new language-game. “The origin and primitive form of the language game,” says Wittgenstein (1980a), “is a reaction; only from this can more complicated forms develop. Language – I want to say – is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’ [quoting Goethe]” (p.31). “The primitive reaction may have been a glance or a gesture, but it may also have been a word,” he notes (Wittgenstein, 1953, p.218). “But what is the word ‘primitive’ meant to say here?” he asks, (Wittgenstein, 1981). “Presumably that this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought” (no.541).

Now all these new foci of concern – understanding the unique otherness of the other; the power of extraordinary changes; the special nature of the “livingness” of some entities; the chiasmic structuring of living meetings; and the power of our living expressions – raise for me a fifth concern, a

concern that seems to me to be of the utmost importance. It is to do with our taking into account what must be ‘already there’ in the background to our meetings, to make it possible for us to ‘go on’ with each other, to ‘follow’ each other without being misled, becoming disoriented or confused. It is this concern with the very present “background” that determines what it is possible for us to want and do, that takes us to the very edge of current versions of social constructionism. It is the nature of this background that I will turn to in just a moment as the central topic of this introduction. But first, let me mention a final theme: the importance of what we might call the *will* as distinct from the *intellect*.

This, then, is my sixth and perhaps most important theme: Having focused on the importance of events occurring in our *meetings*, it is also necessary to focus on the nature of people’s *initial stance or initial attitude* as they *approach* each other prior to their actual meeting. For these ‘set the scene’, so to speak, the ‘relational dimensions’, the ‘style’, the ‘way of going on’ for how participants will react to everything occurring within *the event of their meeting*. It clearly makes an enormous difference if we approach another person on meeting him with a clenched fist ready to strike, or with an open hand ready to shake his. And this initial approach is up to us, a matter of our choice, of our will. And by working on ourselves, we can *choose* to go out towards others, say, oriented towards allowing the feelings actually aroused by what they say to guide us in our responses to them, or oriented towards what we think they mean by what they say. Indeed, as the interaction unfolds, if we use our judgment and allow ourselves to be appropriately responsive to their expressive movements, then there is a chance that we can ‘go on’ with them in an unconfused, straightforward manner.

In other words, as I made clear in the Prologue, Wittgenstein (1980a) draws our attention to the fact that there are *two* very different kinds of difficulties that we can face in our lives, difficulties to do with not quite knowing what next to do for the best in our current circumstances: those of the intellect that we can formulate as *problems* and *solve* by reasoning, and those of the will that we experience as being disoriented or confused, difficulties that can only be overcome by *resolving* on a line of action. Our ways of proceeding, our methods, or the steps we must take in relation to these two quite different kinds of difficulty, prior to acting, are also quite different, almost the opposite of each other in fact: For a difficulty to be called a *problem*, it must be possible to describe the initial state of affairs in such a detailed way that it can be fitted into an already well-known process of reasoning, thus to ‘work out’ a clear *solution*, that is, a clear set of links or connections between the initial conditions and the desired outcome. But a relational or orientational difficulty presents itself as almost the reverse of this situation for it is only *after* we discover a *way of relating* ourselves to our surroundings, a *way of organizing* or *orienting* ourselves to attend to certain aspects of our surroundings rather than others, that a situation that

was initially bewildering comes to take on a more well structured form. Our concern is with *resolving* on a line of action is thus similar, in this sense, to bringing a blurred image into a clear focus – the higher the ‘resolution’ of the lens, the more the light gathered.

But the reference to light and to focusing, etc., here may be misleading. For Wittgenstein (1953) describes these kinds of *orientational difficulties* as giving rise to an experience within us of being ‘lost’: “I don’t know my way about” (no.123), where such difficulties are *not* overcome, he notes, by our being able to say, “Now I see it” (i.e., the solution to the problem), but by our being able to declare to others, “Now I know how to go on” (no.154). For, to ‘see’ something is simply to assimilate it to an already existing and well-known category – which in most practical situations means seeing it in relation to a pre-defined *ideal* and discounting all its small departures from that ideal. But to discount the often small deviations from what is already well-known to us, is often to discount what makes it the unique situation it is, thus to discount what we really need to attend to if we are in fact to come to know our way about within it.

Wittgenstein (1953) criticized the seeming requirement we impose on ourselves prior to our investigations – for an *ideal* plan, theory, framework, or way of thinking (ideal in the sense of only detailing what is thought to be essential) – thus: “The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a *result of investigation*: it was a requirement.)... We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (no.107). In other words, what some may think of as unimportant details, i.e., those who want to analyze a situation into its *countable* elements and to talk of its general nature intellectually, others, i.e., those more interested in its unique nature and its articulation into a ‘landscape’ of inter-related features thus to know their ‘way about’ within it, find to be of crucial importance.

Thus overcoming the difficulties we face in relating to the others around us in ways appropriate to us all working together effectively are of a quite different kind to those we face in doing science: While scientific objectivity requires us to talk of things in our surroundings as having a life of their own *independent of us*, our aim here must be to explore what is involved in things having a life of their own *in relation to us*. But how can we relate ourselves to them, how can we make the appropriate choices and judgments that make such a relation possible?

## The Background: Chiasmic Interweavings

A first step is to try to understand the kinds of things our individual bodies automatically *do for us*, so to speak, without our having to exert much choice or intellection in the matter. Consider first just the simple activity of looking over, visually, the scene before us – with the aim in mind of readying ourselves to move about within it. As our eyes ‘flick’ from one fixation point to the next, looking at a distant point to the right, next at a near point to the left, with our two eyes working like the autofocus in an automatic camera – giving us a sense of ‘depth’ as they automatically find for us, at each moment, both a common point of fixation *and* a clear focus. Thus as our eyes dart about, we nonetheless get the sense of a seamless whole, an indivisible ‘something’ that is not just ‘there’ before us as a picture, but which is there before us as a set of ‘invitations’ and ‘resistances’, as a set of openings and barriers to our actions – in relation to our present ‘position’ within ‘it’. And furthermore, in such involvements as these, we can *all* – more or less – see the same whole, the same landscape, the same face, etc. So that, although I might look from the door on the left to see the window on the right, and you might look from the window on the right to see the door on the left, from within the overall time-space we both share, everything is similarly ordered. Thus if there are some disagreements over exactly what it is before us, we can make use of what we do agree on, to discuss the features we see differently.

And perhaps it is worth adding here, for future reference – as it will not have escaped notice that so far I am talking only of individual activities – that I can see the man over there looking over the same room or landscape as I. I can see the direction in which his head is pointing, I can see him turn it this way and that, I can see his concentration in his tense stance, I can see that he has seen me as he waves his hand towards me. That is, his responsive activities are in large part expressive for me. His seeing expresses something of his interest in the room or landscape to me. I approach him: “Beautiful isn’t it?” I say. “What captured your attention?” “Oh, this is where I used to live,” he says, “I was looking at the changes!” Clearly, he can see ‘more’ than I. Perhaps he can tell me what he sees that I cannot.

What, then, is special in many of our individual bodily activities (but not in all), is that their responsive sequencing is expressive – not so much of how *we* order them – but of how a ‘something out there’ *requires* us to order them. If the separate elements we encounter in responsively relating ourselves to our surroundings unfold, not just haphazardly, but according to their own *character* or *style*, then they can give rise in all who encounter them, i.e., prior to any thought or deliberation on their part, a *shared* (or at least *sharable*) background sense in terms of which our individual actions can, in such circumstances, have meanings intelligible to others.

This claim, that *the sequencing* of our individual human activities is not just formless, that not just anything can follow or be connected with



anything, is clearly connected with Wittgenstein's (1953, 1974) claim, that most of our activities on investigation seem to have a "grammar" to them. It is this – our creative seeing in accord with what is 'out there', not the constraints passively imposed on us externally by a physical reality – that makes it impossible for us just to talk as we please: "Grammar is not accountable to any reality," he claims, "it is grammatical rules that determine meaning (constitute it) and so they are not answerable to any meaning and to that extent are arbitrary" (Wittgenstein, 1974, no.133, p.184).

In other words, because it is to an extent a matter of our *will* as to how we look over and choose to inter-relate and to respond to certain features of the scene before us, on the one hand, while on the other, we can only look *according to* the opportunities for looking afforded us by our surroundings, there must always be a *grammar* in our looking.<sup>7</sup> Due to the needs of our two eyes as we scan over a scene – the achievement of common points of fixation and focus – we cannot just look as we please. Yet we can adopt – as, for instance, with the well known faces-vase ambiguous figure – different *ways* or *strategies* of looking, so that as we scan from one point to another, we look with different sequences of anticipation and expectation in mind, e.g., we look down from what seems like a 'nose' region with the expectation of next seeing a 'chin', or, we look down from a seeming 'stem' region to an expected 'base' region of a vase. And to the extent that our expectations are satisfied, we see what is before us *as* a face, or *as* a vase. In other words, the grammar is 'there' in our living relations to our surroundings prior to any linguistic expressions we might apply there, yet due to our choice and judgment in the matter, the grammar in question is still, as Wittgenstein notes above, to an extent arbitrary.

Now to many, this may seem as outrageous a claim as the claim that there is no prior, already fixed and categorized physical reality to which to appeal in adjudicating the worth of our claims to truth. But it has at least the implication that, prior to any of the claims as to the nature of things and events in our surrounding that we might as individuals address to those around us, all such claims must be couched in a certain *shared style*. If they are not, then they will not be properly understood by those to whom they are addressed; they will be confusing or misleading. In other words, although there may be no prior criteria to which to appeal in judging *the truth* of a person's claims – for their truth must be investigated in terms of their entailments – there are criteria immediately available as to *their intelligibility* in the context of their utterance. These criteria arise out of the fact that all the elements involved are mutually determining, interwoven, or inter-related with each other in a certain way, according to a certain style or grammar.

In choosing the term chiasmic, I am following Merleau-Ponty (1968),

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7. How it comes to be a *shared* grammar is a question for later consideration.

who called the second to last chapter of his book *The Visible and Invisible* – Chapter 4 *The Intertwining – The Chiasm*. But let me also add, that it is important that both he (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968) and Gregory Bateson (1979) take binocular vision as paradigmatic of the special nature of our living relations to our surroundings. To quote Bateson (1979): “The binocular image, which appears to be undivided, is in fact a complex synthesis of information from the left front in the right brain and a corresponding synthesis of material from the right front in the left brain... From this elaborate arrangement, two sorts of advantage accrue. The seer is able to improve resolution at edges and contrasts; and better able to read when the print is small or the illumination poor. More important, information about depth is created... In principle, extra ‘depth’ in some metaphoric sense is to be expected whenever the information for the two descriptions is differently collected or differently coded” (pp.68-70).

In other words, very much more is happening here than the mere blending or interweaving of separate constituents which remain identifiably separate even when complexly interwoven. In our looking over a visual scene, in accord with the demands of the scene, *something utterly new and novel is being created within us*, something to do, not merely with our general knowledge of the things about us, but of their particular meaning for us in relation to our actions in a particular situation at a particular moment in time.

Thus something quite radical is entailed, as we shall see, in the recognition of the fact that our relations to our surroundings are not just simply relations of a causal kind, or of a systematic, logical or rational kind either, but are *living*, dynamic relations. In fact, although it may perhaps seem surprising to say it, I don’t think that we have made a proper attempt at all – in either our ways of thinking and talking, or in our institutional ways of relating ourselves practically to the others and othernesses in our surroundings – to acknowledge the fact of our *livingness*, and the fact that we live in surroundings that are *also living*. We still simply pre-suppose a non-living world of earth and rocks, of oceans and gases, to which we must simply adapt or die, a world which is just ‘there’ independently of our living participation within it, and to which we relate, officially, in only a dead, mechanical way.

The nearest we have got to taking life and living being seriously, is in our concern with “cognitive psychology” and a “philosophy of mind.” But even here, as you now all well know, we have assimilated our “mental lives” to the activity of digital computers, of dead mechanisms. While extremely clever and ingenious, however, this work is far from convincing. Most of us, despite the vehemence of the arguments presented to us, still feel far from spontaneously compelled, on entering our places of work in the morning, to greet our computers as we greet our colleagues – certain *responsive and expressive qualities* still seem to be lacking *in the movements* of their ‘bodies’. It makes no sense at all to talk in this responsive and expressive way of computers as having “bodies” at all.

## Living Expression: a New Vocabulary of Terms

Indeed, in everything that I have to say here, I shall want, either explicitly or implicitly, to assume the *spontaneous, living, expressive responsiveness of our bodies*, i.e., our ability to immediately and directly affect or ‘move’ the others around us, bodily in a meaningful fashion, and to be affected by them in the same fashion. And we can immediately note here, the *chiasmically organized nature* of the expressive-responsiveness of our bodies: for example, as I speak, you can see my body moving in synchrony with my voicing of my utterances, my hands in synchrony with my intoning of my words, my eye movements with my pauses, and my facial expressions with certain of my linguistic emphases – I shall use the word ‘orchestration’ to denote the unfolding structuring of these intricately timed, creative intertwinings and inweavings of the many inter-related participant parts or ‘bodily strands’ of our responsive-expressions.

1) *Orchestration*: But this term ‘orchestration’ – the attempt to capture in a form of words the whole notion of the chiasmically organized, *expressive-responsiveness of our bodily movements* – is just one of the new expressions we will find we need as we begin, seriously, to focus on life and on the activities of living beings. Indeed, I shall want to introduce to you a whole raft of radically new expressions to do with the nature of living responsive expressiveness.

2) *Physiognomic expressive*: Straightaway, let me add another: Instead of the kind of movements or changes we are used to – in which a set of separate elements of reality take up a sequence of different instantaneous configurations or positions in space at different instants or moments of time – we must recognize the existence of self-sustaining, living unities, enduring through time. Such unities, rather than undergoing changes of place or position in space, exhibit expressive or *physiognomic* changes, dynamic changes within the boundaries of their growing and developing, self-sustaining bodies, short-term changes (as in facial expressions and bodily gestures) as well as long-term ones in overall *style* which, as we will discover, are *expressive* in some way of events of importance in their life. Indeed, although such physiognomic events are bodily events occurring out in the world observable to all, it is events of this *physiognomic expressive* kind that we take as indicative of a living being’s ‘inner’ or ‘mental’ life.

3) *Chiasmically-organized meetings*: But, to return once again to what seems to me to be the most unusual concern I want to introduce here: the importance of what occurs in the meetings between two or more individual forms of life, and the chiasmic organization of such meetings. For the complex, dynamically intertwined character of the living unities to which

they give rise, cannot (as we shall see) be wholly captured in subjective nor in objective terms; neither are they wholly orderly nor wholly disorderly; nor need they in fact be constituted wholly from living components but may incorporate dead and inert parts in certain regions too.

Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty (1968) notes with respect to the nature of our chiasmically organized perception of our surroundings, that: “Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes – even more, every displacement of my body – has its place in the same visible universe that I itemize and explore with them, as, conversely, every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is double and crossed situating of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable” (p.134). Their relations to each other must be played out dynamically, over time.

In other words, to repeat the point made above, that the complex dynamic realities which here we are calling chiasmically organized, are not constituted from causally related parts, nor from any rationally related parts either, nor are they formed by an kind of mixing or blending or averaging we can imagine. The concept of chiasmic relations thus introduces a uniquely novel quality into our thinking of a previously unencountered kind.

4) *Primordial unities*: For these reasons, such living unities are best called *primordial*, not in the sense of being old or being located in the distant past, far from it, but in the sense of being the more richly intertwined origin or source from out of which we can differentiate our more focal concerns (our concerns with language and speech, for instance) – while at the same time also attending to the developing web or network of chiasmically intertwined relations, usually ignored in the background, within which our focal concerns actually have their being.

5) *New starting points or points of departure*: We can also call such meetings *primordial* in the sense that they are the basic units, the starting points, the living contexts within which we can situate everything that we take to be of importance to us in our inquiries below.

This claim has resonances for me with Wittgenstein’s (1980a) claim, already mentioned above, that “the origin and primitive form of the language game is a reaction” (p.31). Where, as we already noted, what he means by the word “primitive” here, he notes elsewhere, is that “this sort of behavior is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of

thought” (Wittgenstein, 1981, no.541).

But it has resonances also with Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) search for a new, non-metaphysical starting point for philosophical inquiry: “If it is true,” he says, “that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudices what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been ‘worked over’, that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both ‘subject’ and ‘object’, both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them” (p.131).

Indeed, as we continue, we shall find that many of our central, taken-for-granted concepts – especially those of space, time, matter, and motion (Capek, 1961) – will need re-consideration. All these issues and more will arise within my discussion of the new topic in western thought – of life and living beings. But for a moment, let us look at our current Cartesian assumptions.

### **The Classical World: Spatial and Divided into Separate Parts**

Why have we failed to acknowledge the distinct nature of life and living processes? Because, I think, to the extent that we have attempted at all, we have attempted to take account of life and living processes by trying to *formulate scientific theories of them*. But this failure is not an intrinsic weakness or deficiency within the very idea of forms of inquiry aimed at achieving publicly shared and tested understandings, but – for reasons which will become apparent very shortly – to do with the requirement that such inquires into the nature of life and living processes be conducted in terms of *theoretical representations* of them. As Hertz (1956) put it, it is a process in which, “in endeavoring... to draw inferences as to the future from the past, we always adopt the following process. We form for ourselves images or symbols of external objects; and the form that we give them is such that the necessary consequents of the images in thought are always the images of the necessary consequents in nature of the things pictured” (p.1).

What Hertz sets out in detail here, then, are the general features of scientific *theories* – they are concerned with establishing repetitive patterns in formal structures, where the formal structures in question are set out in terms of instantaneous configurations of separately existing elements, which change by being reconfigured, instant-by-instant, into new configurations according to formal rules, laws, or principles. But it is impossible to do justice to living beings and living activities within such constraints.

For what we (or most of us) sense as distinct in life and in living phenomena, is to do with what is directly manifested within unfolding

temporal relations occurring in events of a *physiognomic expressive* kind, and not at all to do with what can be argued from concatenations of instantaneous configurations of an otherwise unrelated collection of particles. Life is something that immediately ‘strikes’ us as such, not something some of us have accepted as an opinion, supported by arguments. Indeed, it is because all the approaches that count for us as *scientific* approaches to these problems inevitably allow *only* for what I am calling a Cartesian notion of change – a conception of change that inevitably, despite all our best intentions, ‘captures’ and ‘re-colonizes’ all our new ideas, and sets them back yet again within the old, dead and static world that we have tried to leave behind – that I want to discuss all these issues here today. For, embedded in our everyday ways of talking and conducting our relations with each other and the rest of our surroundings, are certain abstractions, certain concepts – in particular, as I indicated above, those of space, time, matter, and motion, inherited by us from the Greeks, but sharpened up for scientific purposes in the 17th century, particularly by Descartes – it is these concepts of which we must now ‘cure’ ourselves.

Wittgenstein’s (1953) plaintive remark in this respect is well-known: “A *picture* held us captive,” he lamented, “and we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (no.115).

Thus the kind of progress he sought, was of a kind quite different from what many still see as scientific progress – if, that is, it must be conducted in *pictorial* terms. But it can be said that he still sought *enlightenment* (in Kant’s 1784 sense) as a process that releases us from a state of ‘immaturity’, in which we are led by the authority of someone else’s opinions, when the use of our own capacity to reason is called for. To release us from our ‘bewitchment’ by Cartesian opinions, as to the proper ‘foundations’ for our claims to truth, he sought to re-introduce us, not to “any new information, but [to remind us of] what we have always known” (no.109). This is done, not by training us in any new “methods” of science, but by provoking us into adopting a “new attitude” towards our surroundings – where, by a “new attitude,” I mean here a new way of relating or orienting ourselves towards the others and othernesses around us. Rather than distancing ourselves from them, with the aim of mastering and possessing them, our new task is that of being merely *participants* in a larger whole. Our new attitude thus presents itself to us both as a task and a question, the question as to exactly what is the nature of our belonging. A bit, no doubt, what it was like for the Greeks to be involved in what they called an *ethos*.

In his new task, then, Wittgenstein (1953) saw enlightenment as simply noticing and acknowledging – and offering for our acknowledgment – a whole range of inter-connected phenomena that had not before been noticed. And one thing he brought to our notice is that there is something very special about living, human bodies. In exploring the question: “What

gives us *so much as the idea* that living beings, things, can feel?" (no.283), he went on (here and in other explorations) to fix on our spontaneous, unthinking, bodily reactions to events occurring around us as basic, our being 'struck' by something, as the crucial points of departure for the new philosophical methods he wanted to introduce to us – methods aimed at releasing us, as mentioned above, from authorities external and prior to those relevant in the circumstances of our current involvement. What should we notice about the difference for us between dead and living things? "Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead," he notes, "is not the same. All our reactions are different" (no.284).

And they are *really* different. Here, Wittgenstein's (1953) insistence on the primacy of our spontaneous, unthinking responses to events occurring around us comes to the fore. Whether we see something as a living thing or not, was not, for Descartes, a matter of our immediate bodily response to it, but a cognitive matter, something we had to 'work out'. As he suggested: "If I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves... Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? *I judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind" (Descartes, 1968, p.21)<sup>8</sup> – whereas later, we will explore Wittgenstein's insistence that, instead of with speculative theories, we must begin with our actual reactions and responses to living events and to living activities, if we are to discover from within them how ultimately to respond more adequately.

Here, however, I must go more deeply into the Cartesian concepts still unnoticed and unremittingly active in the background to everything we currently do and say, not only in our everyday activities but also in our intellectual inquiries – even when we think of ourselves as being especially vigilant. Let me highlight here the one I take to be central. Promising deep and effective knowledge of the natural world, Descartes' philosophy held out the great hope that: "...knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all other bodies that surround us... we should be able to utilize them for all the uses to which they are suited and thus render ourselves masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes, 1968, p.74).

In other words, instead of victims, we can become masters of our fates. Prior to Descartes, everything in the cosmos was characterized by greater or lesser degrees of value, of perfection according to a hierarchical scheme

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8. "But can't I imagine that the people around me are automata...?" Says Wittgenstein (1953), "Say to yourself, for example: 'The children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism'. And you will either find these words become quite meaningless; or, you will produce in yourself some kind of uncanny feeling, or something of the sort" (no.420). Clearly, Descartes felt no such linguistic difficulties as these, as one doesn't, so to speak, in talking solely to oneself.

with matter at its foot and God at its summit. By excluding values and reducing everything tangible to matter in motion according to mathematically expressible laws, Descartes destroyed the older notions of the cosmos. God is no longer present in the world, nor for that matter is man, in the sense of having any obvious place assigned there for his own self. As a mind, quite separate from the world as matter, the role of man himself can only be that of dominating his surroundings and becoming master and possessor of the natural world, utilizing it for all the uses to which it is suited. And that world itself, containing as it does only matter in lawful and orderly motion, becomes, as we shall see, both a timeless and lifeless place.

If we are ever to study ourselves without emasculating ourselves in the process – without destroying our own ability to transform ourselves – it is Descartes' account of our being in the world (his ontology) and the accounts of how we came to know its nature (his epistemology) that we must replace<sup>9</sup>. For, although we may have had quite a number of very new thoughts about the creative, constructive nature of our relations to the others and othernesses around us, it is still in terms of the same basic concepts of space and time, and of matter and motion, inherited from Descartes, that we have been trying to express these new thoughts.

We can get a sense of what these basic concepts are from Descartes' (1968) own account of our world in his view. He sets it out as follows: "In order to put these truths in a less crude light and to be able to say more freely what I think about them, without being obliged to accept or to refute what are accepted opinions among philosophers and theologians, I resolved to leave all these people to their disputes, and to speak only of what would happen in a new world, if God were to create, somewhere in imaginary space, enough matter to compose it, and if he were to agitate diversely and confusedly the different parts of this matter, so that he created a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine, and afterwards did no more than to lend his usual preserving action to nature, and to let her act according to his established laws" (p.62).

In other words, Descartes sets out here, not a living world, not a growing or developing world, existing in the cosmos as a complex, internally inter-related, indivisible unity with continuously emergent, uniquely new aspects and characteristics, but a world made up of a fixed number of separately existing particles of matter in motion, which, at any chosen instant in time, can simply take on a new configuration.

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9. Quoted from Shotter (1974, p.53).



### **Towards an Orchestrated, Indivisible World of ‘Invisible Presences’**

In other words, as I mentioned above, to the extent that it contains nothing else but a *limited* set of particles of matter in orderly motion, such a world is both lifeless (as matter cannot be created *ex nihilo*), and, because it is possible for such a limited amount of matter to reappear in the same configuration – to repeat itself, so to speak – a timeless place. Indeed, in such a world, as Laplace (1886) realized, an intellect that was vast enough, could, by knowing the position and velocities of all these basic particles, “embrace in the same formula the motions of the greatest bodies in the universe and those of the slightest atoms; [and as result] nothing would be uncertain for it, and the future, like the past, would be present to its eyes.” In such a world as this, all change would only be of a quantitative nature, changes of configuration; there can be no qualitative changes, no creation of novelty, no unique, first-time occurrences, and no events which could, like works of art (Wittgenstein, 1980a, p.58), have their unique meaning *in themselves*.

Here, then, we have a basic set of concepts – of space and time, and of matter and motion – in terms of which we in fact conduct almost all our daily enterprises. This the *picture* currently holding us captive, for this is what lies in our language and what we repeat to ourselves inexorably, in our ordinary daily activities, in our institutional and administrative practices, and in our intellectual inquiries. Indeed, it is a picture of the world *as a picture* (a ‘pointillist’ picture, in fact) – “we are indicating by the very choice of the word its most significant feature: its *pictorial* character” (Capek, 1961)<sup>10</sup>.

Indeed, we can now see why those versions of social constructionism which leave this Cartesian picture in place, raise so much anxiety over their deconstruction of everything that seems fixed and solid within it<sup>11</sup>. For a background that has been decomposed into “a chaos as disordered as the poets could ever imagine,” cannot exert any structured or guiding influence of a shared kind on those immersed in it.

But notice its origins, note Descartes’ relation to his surroundings from within which he fashions this ‘view’: he fashions it as a thinker, and as a deliberate, self-conscious actor. He is not a participant in any ongoing

10. See also Heidegger (1977), *The age of the world picture*. As Heidegger remarks there, the term “world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture” (p.129).

11. “All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face.. The real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men” (Marx, MER, 475-76, quoted in Berman, 1982, p.21).

practical action, concerned to engage with and make himself understood in the action, to the others around him; he never acts spontaneously, in responsive reaction to events occurring around him; he is acting alone, deliberately concerned with being the master and possessor of nature.

Indeed, whatever the movements of those he observed “crossing the square,” he is unmoved or untouched by them. Should one of them turn to catch sight of him at his window, how would he react, how would he respond? For, the meeting of people’s eyes, our eyes with those of animals... the spontaneous “interplay of gaze and expression” (Sacks, 1985, p.8)... is something very basic in our lives. Spontaneously, we sense ourselves as in contact with more than just a dead body in motion; we have become involved with a being that has a soul, an ‘inner life’; and we know straightaway if they have that same attitude towards us. As Goffman (1967) points out, ours and other people’s sense of offense is direct and immediate if we feel those around us are not properly honoring their “involvement obligations.” “My attitude towards him,” says Wittgenstein (1953), “is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul” (p.178).

If we attend, then, to the kind of meeting occurring between Descartes and his surroundings, the relations between them, we find them somewhat distant. The surroundings that concern him are ‘over there’; it is an ‘external world’; he is not himself *a participant* within it – he is merely thinking of himself as ‘viewing’ it. Thus in this ‘thought-view’<sup>12</sup>, space holds a privileged place, and it is treated as an immutable, unchanging, homogeneous, causally inert, empty ‘container’, a place in which separate ‘particles’ of matter may occupy different ‘positions’. Time is secondary to space, and often thought of as a fourth, ‘spatial’ dimension. As such, it too is an empty, neutral, unchanging ‘container’. While instants *of* time are differentiated by their succession, time is prior to change: changes occur *in* time. As unchanging containers, both space and time are there for things to happen in them. The only changeable stuff is matter, not within itself, but in its location; it may change its position in space – hence our feeling that what is of central importance for us, are static *structures* – or our linguistic *representations* or our ways of *picturing* such structures in language – in making sense between us of what counts for us as our world.

But let us note again, that this kind of world is not the world that contains us as active *participants* within it, the world in which we, along with the others and othernesses around us, have our being within a dynamic interplay involving us all. It is, to repeat, the world of an individual who has withdrawn himself from such shared participatory involvements, and who has turned himself instead only towards the aims of mastery and possession. Thus for such an individual, this is an ‘external world’, a world in which

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12. In actual vision, we do not see *separate, independent, elements of reality*; in fact, in ‘pointillism’, dynamic *chiasmic* relations emerge as we look over the points of paint to create ‘luminous’ effects.

time has been ‘spatialized’ as merely another spatial dimension, i.e., as an already existing dimension of reality in which the future positions of the particles making up configurations ‘await’, so to speak, occupation. It is thus ‘natural’ in such a reality, to think of motion as following a path in space, a space in which ‘there’ is both before and after the motion.

But in the dynamic time of life and living, in irreversible time in which things grow and develop, internally articulate and refine themselves, flower, blossom, and reproduce themselves in others of their kind, and then die, in this kind of time, movement and motion cannot simply be a change in position in a pre-existing space. Motion is to do with the creation of novelty; it is *physiognomic*, in that it is an “organic deformation” (Whitehead, 1975, p.160), or “coherent deformation” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p.91), i.e., a qualitative change *within* a living whole. Such changes can, then, in their physiognomy, in their global expressiveness, exert an influence on us that has a unique and distinctive quality, qualities that can sit there within us as an unchanging standard against which we can measure the satisfactoriness of all of our attempts to explicitly express their meaning for us. This is what is so special about all such living wholes – even such entities as paintings, pieces of music, or written texts. For, just like the other persons around us, they can have *agency*; they can exert an influence on us through their *expressions*; not the direct impact of a physical force, but the kind of influence an other can exert on us by, for instance, calling our name, the kind of influence that plays upon our inescapable responsiveness as living beings to events of concern to us occurring in our surroundings. It is in this kind of world in which we live and participate.

### The ‘Agency’ of Real but Invisible Presences

But how shall we talk of it, how shall we – not *picture it or view it*, for that again will lead us back into all the difficulties of timelessness we must avoid – but, *express a sense of it* in some way? And what does it mean to say that such a world is populated with *agencies* over and above the individual agencies of the individual people around us? How can something like a text – that seems to be a dead thing in itself – exert an invisible influence upon us? What does it mean to talk of the *real but invisible presences* influencing the *style* of our lives at the moment, to talk, say, of the current ‘grammar’ of our language, or of what it is like to have to live, currently, in what we might call ‘the age of money’?

Well, strangely, there is no shortage of familiar, everyday activities, *which only take place over time*, to which we can refer as paradigms in orienting ourselves as to what is entailed in identifying the nature of *felt understandings*, what it is to have a *shaped and vectored sense* of a circumstance without in fact having a visual or pictorial image of it. Consider, for instance, the simple activity of another asking a question to us; or listening to a piece of music.

Let us take the last example first, consider a simple melody unfolding in time: The first point to make, is about its *successive* nature, and the sharp distinction between the *internal relations* involved in an unfolding temporal succession and the *external relations* constituting a structure formed by juxtaposing a set of parts in space. As long as its ‘movement’ continues, the musical expression remains incomplete. At each particular moment a new tone is added to the previous ones, or more accurately, each new moment is constituted by the creation of a new musical *quality*. A picture, a spatial array contemplated at any given instant is complete, it is a *static* structure with all its parts given *at once*, simultaneously. Our experience in listening to a piece of music is very different. In spite of the irreducible individuality of each new tone, its *quality* is ‘tinged’ or ‘colored’ by the whole preceding musical context into which it ‘strikes’, and which in turn, retroactively changes by contributing to the emergence of a new musical quality.

The ‘building’ or ‘construction’ of a musical phrase over time is thus very different from the construction of a structure in space. Even the most complex of ‘man-made’ systems, machines for instance, are constructed piece by piece from objective parts; that is, from parts which retain their character unchanged irrespective of whether they are parts of the system or not – this is what is meant by saying that they are *static* structures constructed from *externally* related parts. Such structures only have their character when they are complete: we put in the last engine part, switch on, and drive away; any attempt to drive a car before all its parts have been installed is to court disaster. But in something like a piece of music, all its ‘participant parts’ all have a *living* relation with each other; that is, as we noted above, they constitute a *dynamically* emerging or *growing* structure, a *structuring structure* one might say. As such, they develop from simple, already living individuals, into richly structured ones – they do not have to wait until they are complete before they can express themselves. They develop in such a way that their ‘parts’ (if we are still justified in using such a term?) at any one moment in time, owe not just their character but their very existence both to one another *and* to their relations with the ‘parts’ of the whole at some earlier point in time. In other words, their *history* – i.e., where they have come from and where they have been headed – is just as important as the instantaneous logic, in their growth.

Consider again a piece of music: as we have noted, while the individual tones are not externally related units from which the melody is additively built, their individuality is not simply absorbed or dissolved in the undifferentiated unity of the musical whole. Each individual tone matters, it makes a difference to the whole while being related to the whole. Thus, the musical phrase is a *successively differentiated whole* which, remains a whole in spite of its successive character, and which remains differentiated in spite of its dynamic wholeness. In other words, as a dynamic whole, it resists description in terms of any one *single order of connectedness* – hence my comment above, that we might designate such living wholes as *primordial*, in the sense of being the

richly intertwined origins or sources from out of which we can differentiate our more ordered concerns – while at the same time being able to attend to the web of chiasmically intertwined relations within which they have their being.

The pressure to form *theoretical pictures* (as in Hertz's account of the proper way of proceeding in science) leads us to forget the essential difference between the juxtaposition of parts in space, and the unfolding succession of qualities in time, and to reduce the differences between the past, present, and future to simple *differences of position*: 'past' events being symbolized by positions lying to the left of the point representing the 'present', while 'future' events lie to the right of the same point on an already existing 'time line' drawn in space.

Turning to our first example, consider now the possible (somewhat over complicated) exam question: "What are the differences between Gergen's and Shotter's versions of social constructionism, considering that Gergen developed his version in an American background in objection to experimental *social* psychology, while Shotter developed his in a British context, not only in objection to the experimental approach to *developmental* psychology, but also in objection to the whole idea that human behavior could ever be likened merely to computation and understood in *formal*<sup>13</sup> terms?"

Before attempting to articulate what is involved in our answering such a question, let me introduce a piece of orienting material: George Mead's (1934) claim that: "The mechanism of meaning is present in the social act before the emergence of consciousness or awareness of meaning occurs. The act or adjustive response of the second organism gives to the gesture of the first organism the meaning it has" (pp.77-78). I quote this to make the point, already made by Wittgenstein above, that meaning begins with our spontaneous responsive reactions. Such reactions can be thought of as beginning a sequential process of differentiation, of specification, of making something within a still undifferentiated array of possibilities clear and distinct – while still, of course, embedded within that same array. We can now turn towards what might be involved in our attempts to 'answer' the question.

To begin with, we clearly hold the question 'in mind', so to speak, as 'point of orientation' as we try mentally to assemble the landscape within which we are going to attempt to answer it. While not being able to articulate its influence in any detail, we keep 'hearing its voice' and 'answering to' its calls. It works as both a provocation and a guide. In the jargon I have been using currently, it provides us with a shaped and vectored sense of the landscape in which we must make our 'moves' if we are to respond to the questioner as he or she already anticipates and expects. For there is in the very asking of the question a veritable grammar determining what will count

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13. An early (1969) unpublished, mimeographed paper of mine was called: "Objections to the idea that everything essential to the understanding of human behavior can be formalized," available on: <http://pubpages.unh.edu/~jds/OBJECTIONS.htm>

as an acceptable answer to it or not as the case may be. In other words, prior to us having any clear conscious awareness of events our surroundings exerting specific, describable influences on our conduct, such influences are there (as Mead puts it) “before the emergence of consciousness or awareness of meaning occurs,” and we crucially need to take note of this.

### Conclusions

What I have been arguing above, then, is that previous accounts of social constructionism have been nowhere near radical enough. Embedded in the background against which many of the arguments in their support are formulated, is an unexamined Cartesianism. As a consequence, although they have directed our attention away from supposed events occurring in people’s heads and towards events occurring out in the world between them, they did not overcome the idea of our social realities being composed of a limited set of separate “elements of reality.” As a result, in many what I will call *linguistic* versions of social constructionism, it seems as if there are no prior connections or relations between the elements that might go into a construction. Hence the relativistic claim that ‘anything goes’.

However, if what I have argued above is the case, then there are shared, foundational, “forms of life” to be found *within* our meetings. So, although we can agree that there need be no fixed forms of understanding prior to our meetings, the fact is that a shared background structure of feelings of anticipation and tendency can be created in those moments when one living being acknowledges the presence of another. If it were not so, then there could be no shared judgments in terms of which to form agreements at all. And this is clearly not the case.

But, what exactly is the reality in which we live? Like St Augustine, when asked about time, we know perfectly well in our everyday practices what it is, most of the time – else we would spend even more of our time in chaos and confusion than we do – it is only when we try to formulate its nature that we run into trouble. From what we have discovered above, we know that it cannot be pictorial, i.e., it cannot be made up of patterns of static forms that can be visibly put down on a page. Here, due to recent new understandings of the nature of language provided to us by Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, Voloshinov, Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, etc., we are coming to grasp the nature of our own, self-generated confusion. We now realize, for instance, in our study of language, that as soon as we shift our attention from our actual experience of “words in their speaking” to the *patterns* of “already spoken words,” the static shapes and forms we put down on a page – that is, we shift our attention from the living movement of a temporally developing whole to its static, *pictorial representation* – such self-generated confusion is inevitable. Disciplined to think logically, in terms of static forms and patterns, to think that geometry and arithmetic and other forms of calculation are the only properly disciplined

modes of thought, we have given ourselves over to the authority of single, hierarchically structured forms of disengaged thought.

Here, however, I have begun to explore what is involved in disciplining ourselves to think in a different, engaged, fashion – in a way which follows the contours, so to speak, of the shaped and vectored sense one has of the particular situations in which one might find oneself embedded *in one's meetings with others*.

*Dynamic chiasmically-organized wholes:* Like any dynamic whole, the *reality* created within such meetings will exhibit a synthesis of unity and multiplicity, of continuity and discontinuity; but it cannot be the unity of an undifferentiated, instantaneous spatial whole, nor can it be a plurality of merely juxtaposed units. Further, although it has continuity, it lacks continuity in the mathematical sense of infinite divisibility (for many of the phenomena important to us are only realized over a certain period of time), but it certainly doesn't have the discontinuity of self-contained, rigid, atomic particles. Its continuity is of a chronotopic kind, of a time-space kind, but quite what that *is* remains, perhaps, open to further articulation – in other words, I cannot claim here by any means to have given a definitive account of chiasmically organized realities.

*Languaged realities:* The positive significance of our “turn to language” in social constructionism, is not just in the way in which it has released us from the need to give prior (foundational) justifications for all our claims, but for the ways in which it has begun to orient us towards our experience of *word use*, and in particular, towards our detailed sensing of the temporally unfolding experience of the *chiasmic* interweaving of our voicing of our words in with the events occurring at the moment of their voicing. This has led some of us right away from abstract theorizing, to the discovery of the *nonvisual dynamical patterns* actually occurring with us as we speak and listen. Thus, rather than merely gaining a sense of that reality over there from a set of pictures that we might view in an art gallery without ever going out into the actual world at large, the *nonvisual dynamical patterns* that we can come to embody, in following Wittgenstein's methods, can help us in actual fact to come to be more ‘at home’ in our own human world.

*Living, embodied, expressive-responsiveness:* we must not ignore the *spontaneous, living, expressive-responsiveness of our bodies*, i.e., our ability to immediately and directly affect or ‘move’ the others around us, bodily in a meaningful fashion, and to be affected by them in the same fashion. Our living, bodily embedding in this previously unnoticed background, and the ways in which it both ‘calls out’ expressive-responses from us while utterly ‘disallowing’ or ‘repulsing’ others, has been too much ignored in all our approaches in Social Theory, social constructionism included. As I noted above, it is the *chiasmically organized nature* of the spontaneous, expressive-responsiveness of our living bodies that is the ‘background glue’ holding us together in all our relationships. And it is the ‘orchestration’ of these

intricately timed, creative intertwinings and inweavings of the many inter-related 'strands' of our responsive-expressions that we must study – for it is 'in' their interweaving that we can find the new openings, the new possibilities we need to discover, if we are to develop our relational abilities further.



— Part One: —

## The Practices of a ‘Social Poetics’

A major theme in this book is to do with how we can, from rare, unrepeatable, unique, fleeting, and utterly particular experiences, learn something general, something that we can carry across to other circumstances. But this is connected with another central theme: to do with how we can come to know a unique other or otherness *as unique*, as a being ‘with a life of its own’. In the three chapters below, then, I begin to explore how we can ‘enter into’ *their* world in a way which acknowledges and respects their otherness, and which allows them to express themselves to *us* in *their own* terms? These two themes are connected because it is precisely in our being ‘struck’, or ‘moved’, or ‘touched’ in some way by a *unique other*, that can begin to give us a sense of its nature as a qualitatively unique, unitary whole, with its own distinctive *style*, or *character*, or *personality*. Its otherness can enter us and make us other than we were previously. Although the idea of a social poetics is not introduced until Chapter Two, it is implied straight away in Chapter One, in which a number of cases are reviewed in which therapist’s clients come to realize that they have entrapped themselves within a single system, or logic, or story, or whatever, of their own devising. Their therapy consists not in the therapist as expert ‘setting them right’ as a mechanic might repair an automobile, but in the two of them – client and therapist – creating between them new ways of talking, new images and metaphors, and other ways of talking, that give the clients new ways of attending to the details of their own past and own life now, that they can re-arrange them, re-collect them, now in new ways more appropriate to their own future projects.



## — Chapter One —

## Making Sense on the Boundaries: On Moving Between Philosophy and Psychotherapy<sup>14</sup>

“The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notions of the sound human understanding” (Wittgenstein, 1967, p.157).

“The work of a philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.127).

“A new word is like a new seed sown on the ground of discussion” (Wittgenstein, 1980a, p.2).

**T**he aim of the series of lectures in which this talk was given (to quote the invitation I received) was: “to enhance the effectiveness of [among others] mental health practitioners... by illuminating the philosophical in these activities: and to advance philosophical theory by making the phenomena of psychiatry and clinical psychology more accessible to philosophers.” And I will do my best to fulfill this aim here. There is, however, a word within the statement above that bothers me: it is the word ‘theory’. In the past, we have been very used to both distinguishing between, and valuing, theory over practice, with philosophers (and pure scientists) supposedly finding correct theories, and practitioners, like shop floor workers, supposedly applying the theories handed down to them. Thus, in these more financially stringent times (the invitation seems to suggest), philosophy really ought to pay its way a little more by orienting its ‘theories’ to, perhaps, more practical issues. For example, instead of talking of sticks ‘bent’ by water, or ‘unicorns’, or of ‘morning and evening stars’, a few more meaty ‘human problems’ in the exemplification of philosophical problems – to do, say, with distinguishing between mental and bodily pain – might provoke philosophers to the production of theories of greater relevance to life as it is actually lived by many of us. The shop floor workers

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14. In A. Phillips-Griffiths (Ed). *The Royal Institute of Philosophy Series: Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 1995

might be helped out a little, with a few theories of a less abstract kind, more obviously relevant to their concerns.

As I see it, this whole way of thinking about human activities – in terms of practitioners putting theories arrived at by professional experts into practice – is radically flawed. It assumes that the only kind of worthwhile knowledge is that arrived at by science, or by methods that in some way imitate those of science. This, I think, is a very inadequate view of the nature of human knowledge.

Thus a part of what I want to do tonight, in exploring relations between philosophy and psychotherapy, is to explore another kind of knowledge altogether: that which ‘floats’ around in an uncertain way within the everyday conversational background to our more orderly, institutional and disciplinary activities, in the boundaries or zones between the separate disciplines. It is a special kind of knowledge that, I think, has not yet been properly identified and described. I call it knowledge of the third kind. It is not theoretical knowledge (a “knowing-that” in Ryle’s 1949, terminology), for it is knowledge that is only present to us in our everyday social practices; but it is not simply knowledge of a skill or craft either (a “knowing-how”), for it is a joint kind of knowledge, knowledge-held-in-common with others. It is its own kind of knowledge, *sui generis*, that cannot be reduced to either of the other two. It consists in forms, or ways, or ‘tools’ of communication that we create and sustain all unawares amongst ourselves, as a cultural group. Rather than to do with us relating ourselves to our physical surroundings, it is primarily to do with us – even when all alone – relating ourselves to each other as members of such a group and coordinating our actions together. Thus, it is a kind of knowledge one has *from within* a social situation, a group, an institution, or a society, and which exists only in that situation. We might call it a “knowing-from-within<sup>15</sup>.” It determines what at any one moment we anticipate will happen next within any situation we are in, not just what will surprise us and what we will merely find familiar, but also what we will find disgusting, frightening, as well as delightful and want to celebrate, what we will count as objective and what subjective, what real and what unreal, what ordinary and what extraordinary, and so on.

Richard Bernstein (1983) has called the everyday, social knowledge involved in doing this, “practical-moral knowledge,” and he relates it to

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15. It is the kind of knowledge one has, not only *from within a social situation*, a group, or an institution, and which thus takes into account (and is accountable within) the social situation within which it is known. It is also knowledge that one has *from within oneself as a human being and as a socially competent member of a culture* – hence I know ‘from the inside’, so to speak, what it is like to be involved in conversation. So, although I may not be able to reflectively contemplate the nature of that knowledge as an inner, mental representation, according to questions asked of me (by myself, as by others), I can nonetheless call upon it as a practical resource in framing appropriate answers. Wittgenstein (1953) clearly makes use of this kind of ‘dialogue with oneself’ in his investigations, in which he makes many such remarks as “Let the use of words teach you their meaning” (p.220).

Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, which is, as Bernstein puts it, "knowledge not detached from our being but determinative of what we are" (Bernstein, 1992, p.25) – where who we are must, of course, accord with ways of being others find morally acceptable. In being not detached from our being, but continuous with it, and determinative of who and what we are, rather than 'in our minds', it is more properly called *embodied* knowledge. Indeed, it is not unrelated, of course, to what we call our common sense: for it is to do with the 'shape' of the (socially sharable) feelings of anticipation and expectation that we have at any one moment in time in a social situation, and the part these feelings play in our conduct, especially in influencing what we feel is appropriate in any conversational context to say. It is the nature of this kind of sensuous, embodied knowledge – and the moment by moment task we face of making prudent use, both of our past experience, and, of our sense of the possibilities realistically available to us in our present situation for future action – that I want to explore here tonight.

Indeed, this is what I mean by my title – "making sense on the boundaries" – for as I see it, it is at that uncertain moment, when a first person has finished speaking and a second must respond in accord with the set of possibilities made available to them by the first, that people between them make sense of their exchange. It is in the tense or tension filled boundaries between different people, where they cannot not respond to each other's actions and people must cope with novel 'circumstances' as they occur, that new and unique meanings are made. In this view, people as much 'act into' a set of future possibilities as 'out of' a set of past actualities, and in doing so, find their actions influenced just as much by the actions of the others around them as by their own interests or desires. Thus in *joint activity* of this kind (Shotter, 1984, 1993a & b), novel possibilities for action are created beyond those available to any individual acting alone. Hence the aim of bringing different people and different groups of people into contact with each other is an important one: for there is always a possibility that, due to their differences, they might be able to fulfill in each other what singly they lack.

So what I want to do then, is to direct your attention to aspects of what might be involved in us helping each other – either philosophically, therapeutically, or both – to come to a sound or healthy understanding of our conduct of our everyday conversational activities. For although what we do within such activities is done so spontaneously and unthinkingly that we tend to call it 'natural' or 'instinctive', as our knowledge of other cultures mounts, we realize that this cannot be so: for it is done quite differently by different people. For instance, instead of 'seeing' their past as behind them, as we do, the Dinka of Southern Sudan (at least as recorded by the anthropologist Lienhardt, 1961), 'see' it as in front of them, with their future behind them – for after all, you can't *see* anything as such if it hasn't happened yet, can you? Or: instead of their *memories* (as we would say)

being 'in their heads', they think of their 'surroundings' as containing and retaining all kinds of active influences from the past, influences that come back from time to time 'haunt' and frighten them – just as presently we see our 'times' as being to some extent 'troubled times', as 'infected' with disturbing tendencies somewhat out of our control. Thus, as 'natural' and 'instinctive' they may seem to be, a people's ways of making sense of, and acting in their circumstances, are clearly in some way constructed in boundary regions or zones between them. And what we have lacked until recently, is any way of studying these otherwise taken for granted forms of communication critically, and asking ourselves whether they are in any way misleading.

Currently, however, a whole new movement of thought – much influenced by Wittgenstein's writings – that calls itself *social constructionism*, is now emerging to study issues of this kind (Coulter, 1979, 1983, 1989; Gergen, 1982, 1985; Harré, 1983, 1986; Pearce, 1994; Sampson, 1993; Shotter, 1984, 1993a & b). Instead of focusing simply upon how individuals come to know the objects and entities in the world around them, it studies how people first create and sustain among themselves, certain *ways* of relating themselves to each other in their talk, and then, from within these ways of talking, make sense of their surroundings. Where, as I said above, the ways of talking in question, can be thought of as 'tools' or 'instruments' *through* which they make contact with each other and their circumstances, like blind people make contact with their circumstances through their sticks and through the patterns of sounds they hear. Words can work as 'instruments' in this way (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), not in terms of their meaning or content, but by drawing our attention to aspects of our situation we would not otherwise notice: Stop! Look! Listen! Notice how she smiles when he speaks! Etc. Our ways of speaking can work, however, not only to reveal – and to limit and constrain – the kinds of things there can be in 'our' world, but also – in revealing and constraining the possible ways in which we might deal with them – reveal and constrain who and what 'we' (ontologically) can *be*, our ways of being in the world (Shotter, 1984).

It is in this sense, then, that our lives are rooted in our conversational activities; for us, they are foundational. We make use of such activity in all our claims as to what things 'are' for us. It is what makes our world peculiarly 'our' world, the world that we sense ourselves as being 'in'. It is as if this conversational background itself, as a kind of judge, *decrees* what is natural or ordinary for us: hence, for us, its peculiar, pre- or extraordinary, relatively undifferentiated nature; its openness to being determined this way and that by those within it; and the impossibility of saying ahead of time what its character *must* be. Indeed, this is why we cannot simply turn it around into an object of thought, to be explained like all else in our world in terms of a theory or model. For, it is only as we specify and constitute our (background conversational) world in one

particular way (rather than another), that we can justifiably link any of the ‘theories’ or ‘models’ we might produce to what they are meant to be theories or models of. Thus, as it constitutes the very ground of us having any theories at all, knowledge of this kind is utterly inexplicable in theoretical terms.

How might we explore ‘it’, then? Indeed, is it an ‘it’, such that we can anticipate or expect results from our investigations similar to our investigations of other ‘its’? For, as I began to make clear above, ‘it’ is not to do with us knowing about objects, things, or entities external to ourselves. ‘It’ is to do with, not only with our own continuously changing anticipations and expectations, desires and aims, as we conduct our own practical activities in a social context (actual or imagined), but also, the changing anticipations, expectations, desires, and aims of the others in that context, and the relation between our expectations and theirs. Thus, whatever ‘it’ is, ‘it’ is something both *internal* to ourselves, *and*, to our social circumstances. In short, whatever ‘it’ is, it is something really peculiar, something we cannot visualize as an object, something that we cannot ‘picture’ mentally, something that cannot be ‘grasped’ within the head of a single individual; it is quite unlike anything with which we are familiar.

Yet it need not remain wholly rationally-invisible to us. There are ways in which we can draw our attention to important aspects of ‘its’ nature. And the provision of an appropriate set of methods for such investigations, is Wittgenstein’s achievement: he calls them ‘grammatical’ investigations, or investigations in ‘philosophical or logical grammar’. Why? Well, recall my comments earlier, upon the ‘shape’ of our feelings of anticipation and expectation that we have at any one moment in time, and the part played by these feelings in our conduct, especially in influencing what we feel it appropriate to say. What Wittgenstein realized was, that although we cannot *say* what these feelings are, to the extent that they do shape our conduct – what we do and what we say – then those feelings of tendency<sup>16</sup>, of expectation and anticipation, are *shown* by the expectancies and anticipations in our conduct in quite precise ways. They are shown in why we say this rather than that; why such and such ‘feels’ the right things to say, while so and so evokes feelings of surprise and awkwardness; in, why saying: “From what he says, that seems to be his intention, but I doubt it,” raises no problems, while saying: “From what I say, that seems to be my intention, but I doubt it,” does. We find such utterances senseless. We do not know how to respond to them, how to anticipate the behavior of the person speaking, how to coordinate our actions with theirs. Some one says to us: “I really mean every word I say, but please don’t take me seriously.” The anticipations raised by the first part of the utterance are dashed by the

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16. Here I am using an expression of William James (1890, p.254).

second; it is the logical grammar that is all wrong.

This is what Wittgenstein (1953) means when he says: “Grammar tells us what kind of object anything is” (no.373); only here, the ‘object’ is not anything like a physical object as such at all, but some ‘thing’ momentarily ‘within’ both us and our circumstances, to do with anticipating what next might be a ‘fitting’ continuation. Thus, what kind of knowledge should we expect from such investigations? What should our requirements be, and how might they be satisfied? Our requirements cannot be satisfied by the provision of a theory (with a “knowing that”), nor with a merely practical technical knowledge (with “knowing how”). What we require is a clarification of that third kind of knowledge of the “order of possibilities” (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.97) available to us at any one moment “from within” our circumstances. Thus, instead of being concerned with *explaining* (in theory), say, ‘How did we get here?’ (with the aim of being able to control such an outcome, causally and deliberately, to repeat it or not as desired), our concern is merely with that of *describing* the kind of practical circumstances conducive to us saying: “Now I know how to go on’...” (no.154). Then, one knows how ‘to go on’ without being at odds with oneself, so to speak, and without giving others confusing indications as to what one’s next actions might possibly be.

Such investigations are aimed, then, mostly, merely at describing the use of words, at describing their use in bringing about certain anticipations and expectations. Why is this important? Because, at the moment, Wittgenstein would say, we have a wrong ‘picture’ of the nature of language: we tend to treat it, not primarily as an instrument for use in constructing social relations of various kinds, but as a neutral medium saying things about the world. In this ‘picture’, the only mistakes we can make are ones of accuracy, that is, what we say does not correctly represent the facts. But does this mean that ‘getting a correct inner picture’ is *always* involved in understanding what a person says? Sometimes describing it like that does seem appropriate, sometimes it doesn’t; it depends upon circumstances whether the description is a ‘right’ one or not, whether talking about them in that way allows us to anticipate aright what the people in those circumstances will do next.

What such a way of talking does do though, is to divert our attention away from the fact that what we ‘see’, we see according to how a certain way of talking influences to what in our circumstances we pay attention, and, what we ignore. That ‘picture’ of language as a neutral medium for either representing facts or expressing ideas, draws our attention away from some of its other uses. The descriptions that are important to us, then, says Wittgenstein (1980b), “depends on whether what one calls a ‘wrong description’ is a description which does not accord with established usage – or one which does not accord with the practice of the person giving the description. Only in the second case does a philosophical conflict arise,” (I,



no.548). Only when one's ways of talking are not continuous with, or determinative of who and what we present ourselves to others (and to ourselves) as being, are we in trouble. We think our primary task in the world is that of us, as individuals, making a proper and correct contact with it; but the way we 'picture' ourselves, our language, our knowledge, and our relation to our world, leads us to 'forget' our task of at least sustaining (if not creating anew) the 'tools' in terms of which we make such contacts.

Thus, Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations are not like scientific investigations, concerned with finding the supposed reality hidden behind appearances, with finding the supposed causes in the past that will explain the occurrence of present circumstances. While he might be interested in what a person might possibly mean by saying: "I really mean every word, only don't take me seriously" (let me commit myself totally to these views while I investigate them, but don't you bank your life on them yet), he would not be interested in what might have caused them to say it. We may feel tempted, he suggests, always to search for such causal explanations, for it is a part of our current embodied being as Western individuals. "We feel as if we had to *penetrate* phenomena," he says, "our investigation, however, is directed not towards phenomena, but, as one might say, towards the '*possibilities*' of phenomena. We remind ourselves, that is to say, of the *kind of statement* that we make about phenomena... Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such investigations shed light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between forms of expression in different regions of language..." (no.90). We need to make ourselves aware of what, socially (and, in fact, morally and ethically), we are doing in our talk.

But how can this be done? What is involved here? Is there a method? Well no, there does not seem to be a single, complete, sure fire method that we can set out ahead of time for solving all the problems of this kind that might arise. The kind of mistakes we can make are as various as life itself. But what Wittgenstein has done for us is, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, to *show* us how we might proceed: He "demonstrate[s] a method, by examples... Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem," he says. "There is not *a* philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (no.133), and a 'toolbox' full of an indefinite number of 'tools' will be required. But of what kind? What might such 'tools' be? Why, ones very similar to those used in the first place when we were learning our ways of talking and how to be persons in our culture: merely, different *ways of talking*. That is, we can use just those selfsame ways of talking that work to influence and shape our behavior – words like 'Stop!', 'Look!', 'Listen!' and so on; more complex forms of talk that draw our attention to aspects of our circumstances and our own behavior that would otherwise go unnoticed, like 'Have you looked in the

closet for it?', 'Look out for your dress as it brushes past the plants!', and so on. As philosophers *and* therapists, we can use those same ways of talking to draw attention to features in our ways of talking themselves. Where, to remind you once again, it is to what we both anticipate *and* recollect in our ways of talking, that we want to pay attention. Indeed, let me now turn to some concrete examples of a therapeutic kind, to explore what Wittgenstein's claims – especially his equating of his kind of philosophy with therapy – might mean in this sphere.

1) A thirty-year old man, Bill, a so called 'revolving door treatment failure' who has been hospitalized on many previous occasions as a supposed paranoid schizophrenic, is asked by his new therapist: "What, if anything, could your previous therapists have done differently that would have been more useful to you?" The form of his reply (which I will not give in full here) is quite revealing: "That is an interesting question," he says. "If a person like you had found a way to talk with me when I was going crazy... at all the times of my delusion that I was a grand military figure... I knew this [delusion] was a way that I was trying to tell myself that I could overcome my panic and fear... If you could have talked with the 'me' that knew how frightened I was. If you had been able to understand how crazy I had to be so that I was strong enough to deal with this life threatening fear... then we could have handled that crazy general" (p.25).

What I have cut from the conversation (that I will mention in a moment) is what Bill says about why previous attempts at therapy with him only made him feel even more panicked and frightened. But now, at last, it seems, he feels involved in a conversation that has some chance of helping him in a way that 'touches' him. But what is it in simply that one brief question that allows him to sense the whole changed relation between him and his therapist? What is special about the character of the therapist's talk *this time* that talk at the other times lacked? This time, presumably, he feels that the conversation is open, so to speak, to his anticipations and expectations. No matter how bizarre and strange they may be, they can nonetheless play a part in 'shaping' its outcome. Thus, not only is *this* a conversation he is 'in', but his expectations and anticipations are 'within' it too. In other words, he experiences it as a conversation continuous with his being, a conversation in which he can be 'touched' in his being in the world, and thus, potentially, capable of helping cope with his madness. Bill's talk *shows* that he can sensibly discriminate between such responsive talk, and talk of other kinds.

2) Talk of this kind can influence one in one's being, deeply. It is not just mere talk, but talk that can change your whole life. Let me illustrate the *depth* of what is involved here with another story, one from Oliver

Sacks' (1985) *Man who mistook his wife for a hat*. In it, Sacks tells of Witty Ticky Ray, a 24 year-old New Yorker, almost incapacitated by Tourette's Syndrome, a virtuoso jazz drummer, a brilliant ping-pong player, but someone who was continually fired from his job due to his tics. Sacks first tried him on a minute dose of Haldol – a dopamine antagonist that works to suppress the effect of neurotransmitters at the synapses of our nerves – Ray became virtually tic-free for a two hour period. So Sacks sent him away on an appropriate three-times a day dose for a week. The results were disastrous. His timing of his movements, his way of being in the world was completely upset; he would jump from catatonia and Parkinsonism to Tourettism and twitching, and back again, without any happy medium. The trouble was, Ray said: "Suppose you *could* take away the tics – there'd be nothing left." He seemed to have little sense of his identity, who and what he was, except as a ticquer. You can almost imagine him saying: the trouble is, doc, I don't know how *to be* an ordinary person!

On a grand scale, he must have felt something like, perhaps, we feel when at first, say, we try to cut our own hair in the mirror, and our hands just will not seem to move in the directions we intend. Indeed – as an aside – now we can interact with computer generated virtual realities, and it will soon be possible to alter at will the character of our 'hook up' to our surroundings, and to explore for ourselves 'strange new worlds' such as Ray's.

That aside: Sacks, feeling that nonetheless Ray *did* have the possibilities within him to be cured, the possibility to be moved from his strange world into ours, suggested that they meet for three months or so to explore the ways in which he could be ordinary: "This deep exploration was exciting and encouraging in itself and gave us, at least, a limited hope," says Sacks. "What in fact happened exceeded all our expectations and showed itself no mere flash in the pan, but an enduring and permanent transformation of reactivity. For when I again tried Ray on Haldol, in the same minute dose as before, he now found himself tic-free, but without significant ill-effects – and has remained this way for the past nine years" (p.94).

What had happened here to produce that 'transformation of reactivity' of which Sacks speaks? Like a lover – Max Scheler speaks of that special attention that lovers pay to loved ones, in noticing small 'hints' of new possibilities in their ways of being, and suggests that, in effect, 'lovers say to the loved one, become in actuality what you are in design' – Sacks sought out such 'hints' in conversations with Ray. And, in "three months of deep and painful exploration, in which (often against much resistance and spite and lack of faith in self and life)," he says, "all sorts of healthy and human potentials came to light: potentials that had somehow survived twenty years of severe Tourette's and 'Touretty' life, hidden in the deepest and strongest core of the personality" (p.94).

But why should mere *talk* in relation to these potentials make a difference? After all, the potentials, as Sacks says, were already there in him somewhere, weren't they? Seemingly, what Sacks and Ray did in the talk between them was not, perhaps, to go so far as to construct an explicit 'town plan' of Ray's potentials. But at least, by talking over their nature and possible interrelations, their meaning and use in everyday practical contexts, Ray got 'a feel', for whereabouts within himself they lay; he got to know in Wittgensteinian terms 'his way about' inside the potentialities of his own being.

But can such talk really influence the action of drugs upon the nervous system – mind over matter? Yes, I do think that mere talk, that other people's and our own speech, can influence the effects that not only drugs, but many other aspects of our material surroundings, can have upon us. But it is not mind over matter. It is just that kind of talk to which Wittgenstein wishes to draw our attention, and to point out that we will completely mystify ourselves if we talk about the power of our talk in that way: for, if we think of matter as one kind of stuff and mind another, we might expect them to affect each other like billiard balls of two different kinds of material affect each other – by bodily impacts, by clashing up against each other. No matter how effective that way of thinking has been in other contexts, in this one, it is a way of thinking that *prevents* us from seeing the solution that Sacks saw to Ray's problem.

What led Sacks to anticipate, to hope, that by mere talk he could help Ray to develop a certain kind of knowledge of himself, an understanding of a way around inside of his own ways of being and talking, I don't know. But somehow, he seemed to understand that Ray was at odds with himself, that he intended an outcome and somehow it turned out other than he had expected, and he didn't know why and that a problem of this kind, deep within a person's being, could be solved through talk.

But where might we start such an investigation as this? What are the landmarks that we must first recognize, if we are to avoid becoming disoriented, and getting lost in linguistic labyrinths of our own devising? What 'is' the problem to be kept in sight? This first step – the location or identification of the root 'dis-ease', the basic 'dis-harmony' between our talk of what we *expect* of ourselves and our world and the *outcomes* of our actual practical activities – is, perhaps, to an extent, illustrated by my third and last story: 3) Ronald Fraser, the British oral historian, has written a fascinating book about his own problematic childhood – in which he grew up, between 1933 and 1945, on an English country estate, as the child of an American mother and a British, rather blimpish father, while being loved and looked after by a German nanny Ilse – where he interweaves this story with an account of his own psychoanalysis in later life.

On entering analysis, he tells the analyst that he wants "to consign – no, to recreate an uncertain past... [pause] with sufficient certainty to put it behind me" (p.4). And he goes on to describe the dis-ease within him, his conflict with himself, as follows:

*Fraser*: It's not surprising, perhaps, because there were two worlds, two houses within those same walls... Two Manors, under different roofs... the old at the rear... where servants, nanny and children [Ronald and his brother Colin] lived; and the superimposed and imposing new Manor at the front, which belonged to the parents... I belonged without yet belonging (pp.4-5).

That, at least, is the first, general formulation of his problem. But as the analysis progresses, it becomes clear that his conflict is rooted in a quite *specific feeling*, one which he *at first* formulates as follows, of 'his mother as having abandoned him':

*Analyst*: You've never forgiven your mother for leaving you with Ilse [the German nanny], have you?

*Fraser*: No! I've never forgiven her for not being the kind of mother I wanted – an island in the sea from which a child can set sail on its own, always sure there's a refuge to which to return to (p. 97).

It is the identification of this 'feeling' of deep disquietude, this instability, this disturbance at the centre of Fraser's being, that I think is one of the crucial aspects of all therapeutic processes, either philosophical or personal.

It is this 'feeling', this dis-ease with himself that prevents Fraser from feeling at one, so to speak, with his own, practical, everyday ways or forms of life. He is a writer, but "how can one write about one's past," he says, "without an 'I' as the focus?" (p.90). But *is* 'that' his problem? How should he talk of it to himself?

This is another crucial element of the process. For as we are now only too acutely aware, it is in our talk of things, the words we use in speaking of them to ourselves, that we influence our anticipations and expectations in relation to them: In our daily lives we see what we call a *chair*, we can expect to sit in it, or a *book*, we can expect to read it. Similarly, when Fraser says to himself *I feel split because my mother abandoned me*, he expects he would be alright if only she had not done that; or *I am split*, he expects to feel bad; or *once split always split*, he feels that this 'past' is useless to him and that he must get rid of it. These seem to him to be the 'facts' of the matter. Indeed, his image of himself 'makes sense', but it offers no non-split possibilities for the future. He somehow just does not belong: "on the one hand, objectively a member of a privileged class I was," he says, "on the other, unable subjectively to fill the role into which I was born" (p.91), he says.

But, to repeat, all these images, all these ways of talking, give a form, one possible form among many, to this deep feeling; and they each influence how he anticipates the future significance of his actions. Thus, in talking of himself as split between the alternative values open to him, but in shuttling

uneasily between them, he feels a traitor to them all – and to himself. In talking of himself as ‘living between two worlds’, he feels ‘dislocated’, not actually ‘in the world’, but located within a past that has ‘deformed’ him. The persistent expectations and anticipations implied by these ways of talking to himself about himself, are embodied within him; they are a part of who and what Fraser ‘is’ to himself; they affect him in everything he does, every move he makes.

As I said, the first form Fraser gave this feeling of disquiet at the very centre of his being was of himself as *having been abandoned by his mother*. But, if we follow his analysis through to its end, we find that this ‘first formulation’ comes to be grasped as indicative of a much deeper feeling of insecurity and of ‘not belonging’ than that of merely having been abandoned by his mother. But how is Fraser ‘moved’ to an acknowledgement of this fact? The crucial analytic exchange in which a new way to formulate his past is ‘discovered’ goes like this:

*Fraser* (Thinks: Since [my mother’s] death I have hardly thought of her, and says [to the analyst]): ‘I mustn’t tell Ilse I love my mother [Janey] for fear I may lose her, Ilse... Does that make sense?... What’s it mean to be looked after by someone who isn’t your mother while your mother is actually there?’  
(long pause)

*Analyst*: Having two mothers, I suppose... The words strike me with great force.

*Fraser*: ‘Two mothers! Split between each, neither sufficient in herself. Why have I never seen this?...’ ‘Two mothers and I’m torn between them...’

*Analyst*: ‘... you split them – into the good and the bad mother.’

*Fraser*: ‘Oh...’ (long silence) ‘I split them! Not they me...’

What the analyst does here, is to ‘move’ Fraser to confront himself with the objective fact that although his mother didn’t help him as much as she might have done, and that, in fact, others on the Estate looked after him much better, they too placed demands upon him to judge her: and that in response to these demands, *he* split Ilse and Janey, not they him. The analyst’s remarks draw Fraser’s attention to facts that are at odds with Fraser’s own initial conviction that he is merely a victim of circumstances.

This, to repeat, is the beginning of his ‘cure’, the overcoming of his failure properly ‘to know his own way around inside himself’: the beginning of his recognition of the degree to which he, and not others, has been the

author of his own past. In the analysis, the feeling that he had formulated as being 'split', as him as 'having been abandoned', as 'being a traitor', as being 'disformed' by a past now out of his agency to control, is brought back into a special, conversational realm of human interaction. This is what is common to all three cases – Bill, Ray, and Fraser – in being brought back into the conversational arena within which they had their being in the first place, they all experience the kind of language used as continuous with their being.

And Fraser's analysis ends with his 'feeling of emptiness' and 'dislocation' becoming transformed into a feeling of the people he has known "gathering, coming together, until they fill the emptiness around me... like people in books you can return to time again" (p.186). His inner resources now, as a result of his 'cure', instead of leading him into activities in which he feels at odds with himself, which are discontinuous with his being, so to speak, in which he is entrapped, are now of such a kind that they feel continuous with who he is. He feels more 'at home' in his world. It is now as if he 'belongs' – he not only knows his way around inside it, but he finds it presents him with a rich realm of useable resources for use by him in many ways. The 'security' offered by a single, useful, but imprisoning way of making sense of his life, prevented him from seeing all the other possibilities available to him.

But let me emphasize again what I think is crucial for us to recognize here, and that is Fraser's focus upon *this feeling* as being central to the source of his deep disquiet with himself, to his inability to feel 'at home', so to speak, in any of his own forms of life. And the beginning of his 'cure' – and here we begin to make contact with an activity common to all three of these cases – is the bringing of this 'feeling' back into that special, conversational realm of human interaction, in which it had originated, and in which now, new possibilities for its formulation, new ways in which it can be talked about, can be formulated.

This is what was different about the talk that Bill got, for instance, from his therapist this time, that made it special. So, what was the kind of talk he had encountered previously that seemed to prevent this? Some words of his that I omitted above can give us a clue here. What else he said was, that "rather than talk with me about this [his panic and fear], my doctors would always ask me what I call conditional questions." To which the therapist inquired: "What are conditional questions?" And Bill replied: "You [professionals] are always checking me out... checking me out, to see if I knew what you knew rather than find a way to talk with me. You would ask, 'Is this an ashtray?' to see if I knew or not. It was as if you knew and wanted to see if I could... that only made me more frightened, more panicked." Such a form of talk, of course, did not have the loose-jointedness, the playful openness, of ordinary conversation. It was the means-ends, problem solving talk of professionals intent upon applying their 'theories', and, on the basis

of their ‘observations’, of coming to an accurate ‘picture’ of Bill’s supposed ‘inner mental state’. Where, it is hoped, of course, that the possession of such a ‘picture’ will provide the knowledge of what ‘caused’ his mental state, thus to re-cause it in a new and better configuration. But it is a form of talk external to Bill’s involvement in it, in which he had no constructive part to play in creating any of the new possibilities for being that might become available within it; if any new possibilities did come into existence at all, none felt continuous with his being, none were linked to any of his expectations or anticipations. It was a professional or scientific knowledge that was being sought.

Indeed, if the aim of therapy was the gaining of knowledge of a professional or scientific kind, this would be the kind of knowledge desired: knowledge to do with the prediction and control of objective events (as it is usually stated) by those who are separated, external, uninvolved observers of them. While this kind of knowledge may increase an external observer’s powers over others, it leaves such observers within themselves quite unchanged. Indeed, to return to Fraser a moment: This is clearly not how his analysis ended. It did not come to an end with an accurate location of the past causes of his dis-ease; with a proper assignment of the blame; with him, on the basis of this kind of knowledge, gaining a mastery over the conditions supposedly controlling his life, thus enabling him, this time, to produce a better result. It is precisely *not* knowledge of this kind that is of any use either to Fraser, or to Ray, or to Bill. They do not want to know how to master and possess any of the ‘things’ in their surroundings, things external to, or separate from themselves; their aim is ontological not epistemological. They want to know how *to be* people who feel ‘at home’ with themselves and with their surroundings, who know their way around, practically, within themselves and their world. Rather than in an external relation to themselves, to their capacities, and to their surroundings, they want to be in a relation to them of quite a different kind, one which makes these entities, somehow, continuous with their being, as I said before, an internal relation. And, as we have seen, a relation of this kind is achieved conversationally, not scientifically.

So, let us now attempt to draw some conclusions: What we have been exploring here, then, is the special nature of our everyday, conversationally sustained activities, and why, in our study of ourselves, they deserved to be brought into the forefront of our investigations. For, a grammatical study of our conversational activities (as Wittgenstein calls it), reveals that we *show* in their conduct, the influence of a special third kind of sensuous, embodied knowledge of our own linguistic inventions – a knowing from within, that only reveals itself in those joint, social activities – that provides the foundations for everything else we do and know as individuals. For we use what we do and say in relation to the others around us, “as an indicator of *future actions*” (Mills, 1975/1940, p.162). And in using it in different ways,



we can construct different patterns of relation between ourselves, different forms of life (in Wittgenstein's terms), and from within such forms of life, as individuals, we can reach out, so to speak, to make all kinds of different forms of contact with our surroundings – of an artistic, scientific, technological, and social kind. But it is not *this* knowledge – the knowledge of our surroundings that we as individuals can acquire from within a form of life – that is of interest to us here. That is secondary, and depends for its significance upon what I have called knowing of the third kind, the strange kind of knowledge we have between us, not within us, but on the boundaries between us. The knowledge we *show* to each other in our actions and speakings, the knowledge that allows others to sensibly coordinate their actions with ours, because it reveals what it is proper to expect of us in the future.

It is this kind of knowledge that only shows up in the boundary zones between people, that Wittgenstein wished to question, criticize, and somehow, 'put right'. But what is involved here? We don't seem to want to know any new facts about either the world or ourselves. Problems of this kind "are, of course, not empirical problems," he says, "they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in spite of* an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known" (no.109) – just as, we might add, Sacks and Fraser's analyst helped Ray and Fraser to do in coping with their problems. In their 'therapy', they learnt no new facts; what they already knew was 're-arranged', so to speak, in a new way. In their own different ways, Ray and Fraser had felt driven to act in worrisome ways by certain urges or persistent torments deep within them; this was the nature of their 'illness'. Their 'cure' consisted in them becoming changed in their being, in them coming to experience themselves as living within a different structure of passions and feelings, so to speak, thus to 'orient' them in different ways both towards the future and the past.

Wittgenstein (1953) views his aim in philosophy in the same way: "The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness" (no.255) – where the aim of the treatment is, not so much to *solve* problems, as to dissolve them, to make them "*completely* disappear... [to give] philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question... [Where in those discoveries] there is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (no.133). "The work of a philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose" (Wittgenstein, 1953, no.127). For our task is – as I said at the beginning of this chapter – that of both anticipating the future and of appropriating the past, of anticipating the real possibilities available to us, as who we 'are' in the situation we occupy, and of drawing from what we know in the service of acting into a possibility available to us. And as in life

so in philosophy, our task is that of being prudent, judicious, and discerning, of not just acting mindlessly according to a formula, but of acting in accord with a judicious balance that relates our actions to who we are, to who we feel we ought to be, to our situation, to the others around us, to our past, to our future, and so, taking into account in a way we can justify, all the relations of uncertainty within which we live. Where, what we require to strike this balance, is a sound understanding and judgment, that is, to be able to act in ways for which we possess justifiable reasons. The therapy consists in us gaining access to a language within which we can account to ourselves for ourselves.

Thus – when Fraser says to himself: “Why have I never seen this? Two mothers and I’m torn between them...” And the analyst is able then to remark, to remind Fraser: “... You split them – into the good and the bad mother.” And he replies: “Oh... I split them! Not they me...” – this is the outcome. In drawing his attention to his own part in his own constitution of himself, Fraser’s analyst enables him to account to himself for himself. It is at this point that his craving ‘to belong’, his suffering at being ‘split’, ceases; he is no longer tormented by his lack of a ‘haven’, a ‘refuge’, a mother to whom he could always ‘return’. Those cravings were of his own devising. Now, besides his mother and Ilse, he comes to sense all the other people he has known as “gathering, coming together, until they fill the emptiness around me... like people in books you can return to time again” (p.186). His ‘therapy’, his ‘cure’, consists in him ceasing to search for a way out of a prison cage of his own making. Instead of the *object* of his own past, he has become, his analyst suggests, its *subject* as well. “Yes,” Fraser replies, “but also the object. Its the synthesis of the two, isn’t it?” “The author of your own childhood then, the historian of your past.” And that is, of course, precisely what he became in writing the book from which I have quoted.

His sense of ‘not belonging’ disappears, because now he is no longer separated from the world, living entrapped solely within a single story, narrative, system, or logic, etc. of his own devising. His world is no longer an ‘external’ world, present to him only in terms of a representation; he is no longer merely a spectator. Now, he himself is present actually *in* the world, ‘in touch’ with it, acting upon it (and it upon him) *through* different images, metaphors, stories, etc. as required. His therapy consisted, not in an expert analyst lifting his repressions, but in the two of them – Fraser and his analyst – creating between them a new way of talking that gave Fraser himself a way of attending to aspects of his own past, such that he could re-arrange it, re-collect it, in new ways, ways more appropriate to his future projects. ‘Therapy’ of this kind is never over, there are always further ‘connections’ between elements of our past that future projects will reveal as unknown to us. But it is how people re-collect their past due to their need to act ‘into’ an interest in the future, thus to ‘reshape’ what has been – not how they must act ‘out of’ a fixed past – that is crucial, not just in personal

psychotherapy, but in us curing what Wittgenstein (1980a) saw as a sickness of our time, a sickness that lies in our incapacity for wonder (p.5), in our incapacity to recognize that the strange, the unique, the novel, the unknown and the extraordinary that all lie hidden within our everyday mundane activity. Such a capacity for wonder, to confront the strange nature of radical otherness without wanting to assimilate it to what is already known and familiar to us – what Keats called a *negative capability* – is an important part of the sound human understanding. And it has been one of my main philosophical or therapeutic purposes in this current chapter to draw people's attention to its place in our everyday affairs: having the patience to defer judgment, to dwell on and in a situation for sufficient time to be able to describe it in all its unique details, to allow its 'otherness' to enter us and to make us 'other', is what is required.