The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self

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The meaning of things

Domestic symbols and the self

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CHAPTER 1

People and things

Humans display the intriguing characteristic of making and using objects. The things with which people interact are not simply tools for survival, or for making survival easier and more comfortable. Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and shape the identities of their users. Man is not only *homo sapiens* or *homo ludens,* he is also *homo faber,* the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts. Thus objects also make and use their makers and users.

To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished, and why, should become part of our knowledge of human beings. Yet it is surprising how little we know about what things mean to people. By and large social scientists have neglected a full investigation of the relationship between people and objects.

There are, of course, many invaluable insights on this subject in the previous work of other authors, but they seem to be fragmentary and of marginal significance to the authors' argument. Social scientists tend to look for the understanding of human life in the internal psychic processes of the individual or in the patterns of relationship between people; rarely do they consider the role of material objects. These past contributions will be reviewed wherever appropriate. On the whole, however, we shall proceed by developing our own perspective on the exceedingly complex subject of person–object transactions.

The person as a pattern of psychic activity

Before starting the main task of this volume – an empirical analysis of the interaction between persons and objects – we should define two of the terms of this relationship. At first such a definition might seem superfluous, for the terms appear to be clear enough: People and things are concrete entities that need no preliminary explication.

But what do we mean by "person"? Depending on one's unstated assumptions, entirely different entities might be referred to by this term. Therefore, to avoid confusion, we shall spell out the particular perspective from which we approach personhood. The perspective to be described is not intended to be a "nothing but" definition of what a person is. People are too complex to fit any one perspective; they are the result of so many forces and reflect so many principles of organization that it would be impossible to do them all justice in a single point of view.

There are, for instance, biochemical, genetic, neurophysiological, endocrinological levels of analysis that can illuminate what a person is. One can look at a person as the result of a history of reward contingencies, social learning, or cultural conditioning; or one can develop a description based on the vicissitudes of repressed libidinal drives. These and many other accounts bring us closer to understanding what a person is. But we shall not draw directly on any of these accounts. It is not that we dispute their usefulness; in fact, wherever applicable we shall borrow whatever concepts seem appropriate. But we intend to develop a different perspective on personhood, which we regard as more conducive than previous ones to the understanding of how people relate to things.

From our perspective, the most basic fact about persons is that they are not only aware of their own existence but can assume control of that existence, directing it toward certain purposes (cf., Smith, 1978). This, then, will be our starting point for a model of the self. How self-awareness came about is not relevant here. Thus we shall take self-awareness and self-control as givens.

But what is the "self" that self-awareness is aware of and which self-control controls? Let us begin answering this question by turning to the influential insight of Descartes, who grounded knowledge within the unity of the *cogito,* the subjective self-aware-

ness. Descartes pursued the method of doubt to show how knowledge of the objective world is based on inference, and is in no way certain, because inferences could be mistaken or based on external deception and internal delusion. He attempted systematically to peel away vagueness in order to arrive at the most basic "cardinal conception," or clear and distinct idea. He claimed to find this true basis for knowledge in the utterance, "I think, therefore I am." In Descartes's view the self is the *subject* of thought or self-awareness, and its existence ("therefore I am") can be inferred from this starting point.

Descartes's thoughts have had a profound effect on modern epistemology and psychology, and even on the commonsense assumptions of the average Western person. We have taken for granted that mind and body are separate entities; that thoughts are of the mind, emotions of the body; and also that we can know the self directly, and that it consists of a subjective and private self-consciousness.

But Descartes's assumptions, and consequently much of the social science tradition based on them, are by no means so clear and distinct as they seem. Even the "I think" is a process occurring in time and space, involving a transaction between subject and object, between self and other. Self-awareness occurs when the self becomes the *object* of reflection – that is, the self takes itself as its own object. In other words, even self-awareness – self-knowledge – is inferential and not direct. When we say, "Who am I?" we attend to certain bits of information or signs that represent the "I," and these signs become an object of interpretation. One could never attend to all the feelings, memories, and thoughts that constitute what one is; instead, we use representations that stand for the vast range of experiences that make up and shape the self and enable one to infer what the object of self-awareness is. Because self-awareness is a process occurring in time, the self can never be known directly. Instead, self-knowledge is inferential and mediate – mediated by the signs that comprise language and thought. Self-awareness, resulting from an act of inference, is always open to correction, change, and development. Therefore it seems more correct to think of self-awareness as a process of self-control rather than as a static moment of original apperception.

Another effect of the Cartesian influence was to seek the meaning of the self, or indeed of any inquiry, in an absolute origin or

beginning, a "cardinal conception." Our approach will involve going in the other direction, toward the ends or goals of experience and the means used in getting there. We shall view the self in a context of *cultivation* (Rochberg-Halton, 1979a,b), a process of interpretation and self-control motivated by goals rather than by origins. This point may seem minor, but it actually has important consequences for any inquiry about the self. A Cartesian approach consists of peeling off the allegedly false persona or mask of the self to attain the "real me" (or cogito) inside. This goal of reaching for a private and original self is limited in that it ignores the process of cultivation. If cultivation is a self-corrective process, in which some goals are refined or given expression, and others are rejected, then the self should be the culmination of cultivation itself. However, the goal of a private self posits authentic being as something logically prior to experience and cultivation, a kind of elementary form, making it seem as if it were possible to think and feel, act, and be a self prior to socialization through culture and language. But what would the medium of thought or emotion be – What would give it direction? How could one form intentions and act intelligently or attend to the process of acting without cultivation?

Cultivation is a psychic activity that is only possible because humans are able to focus their attention selectively in the pursuit of goals. Because attention is the medium through which intentional acts can be accomplished, it is convenient to think of it as "psychic energy." As used throughout this book, psychic energy is not the same concept made familiar by Freud's later writings. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it refers to an unconscious reservoir of libidinal strivings, a life force that manifests itself in desires that provide motivation and direction to conscious life. Our use of the concept is quite different, more in line with Freud's own early formulations, in which he identified psychic energy with "mobile attention" (Freud, 1965, p. 134). Attention and psychic energy are used interchangeably here, on the grounds that intentional psychological acts cannot be carried out without the allocation of attention.

Psychic activity consists of intentions that direct the attention through which information is selected and processed in consciousness. When attending to something, we do so in order to

realize some intention. Because psychic activity determines the dynamics of self-consciousness, it also determines what a person is by constituting his or her self. In the words of William James:

> But the moment one thinks of the matter, one sees how false a notion of experience that is which would make it tantamount to the mere presence to the senses of an outward order. Millions of items in the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to.* Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind – without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. (James, 1890, p. 402)

It would be a mistake to think of psychic activity as a sort of *élan vital,* a raw force that gives meaning and purpose but is itself outside of meaning and purpose. In Freud's variant of Cartesianism, for example, psychic activity is ultimately grounded in the underlying mechanistic forces of the unconscious. Cultivation only serves to repress and sublimate the original impulses that are beyond the process of representation. In contrast, we assume that the meaning of psychic activity is to be found in the intentions that one forms as a result of cultivation. Human beings never experience "raw" instincts: Even hunger and sexual drives always appear in consciousness transformed and interpreted through the network of signs one has learned from one's culture. To assume that only the biological source of the experience is "real" while its symbolic interpretation in consciousness is just an epiphenomenon is certainly possible, as long as the fact that it is an assumption is admitted and one realizes that it ignores precisely what makes human experience human.

The actualization of intentions is dependent on the available psychic energy, or attention. Any intentional act requires attention – reaching for a cup of coffee, reading a paper, or conducting a conversation. Only by concentrating attention can we "make things happen." Therefore it is convenient to think of attention as psychic energy, because through its allocation ordered patterns of information and action are created.

Making the metaphor of energy even more compelling is the fact that attention is a finite resource. At any given moment we are incapable of focusing on more than a few bits of information at a time. It requires effort to concentrate, that is, to keep the same information in focus for any length of time (Binet, 1890; Bakan, 1966; Kahneman, 1973). Consequently, there are a limited num-

ber of things we can *do,* a limited number of ways we can *be*. Of course, it is true that people differ considerably in how they learn to structure their attention, in how much they can concentrate on certain patterns of information, and thus in how much they can accomplish. However, even the most heroic efforts of consciousness draw on the same limited supply of attention. The "divine" Michelangelo through his long life was constantly bedeviled by competing demands that forced him to shift his concentration from one task to another, and therefore the projects he was able to complete are far fewer than those he planned to accomplish.

How this limited psychic energy is invested – and consequently what sort of self will emerge – is determined by an enormous array of factors. Chance, which lies outside individual control, obviously plays a primary role. Where one is born, with what genes, and in what surroundings limit drastically the options for what can or must be attended to. But again, we are left with the fact that people pay attention to what they *want to.* Part of the information in consciousness consists of intentions, structured in a hierarchy of goals. These intentions, then, direct attention and as a result, we can interpret information. Without intentions we could have no meaningful information and there would be no consistent change in human affairs except for those produced by genetic evolution. Thus for each person the pattern of information that constitutes the self is shaped by conscious goals – no matter what other factor "below" conscious intentionality determines it.

Among the patterns of ordered information that depend on attention for their existence are what we usually call social systems. A *social system* is a predictable pattern of interaction among persons made possible by shared structures of attention. The simplest example is a dyad. Two persons constitute a dyadic system when their actions with respect to one another are not random but, rather, follow a recognizable pattern. Two people are part of a system if they come together more frequently than when left to chance, if their thoughts focus on the same information more often than one would expect by chance, if their reactions take into account each other's actions, and so forth. In other words, a dyadic system is based on congruence in two persons' consciousnesses. The more similar the attentional structures of the two are, the stronger the dyad is.

However, to achieve such a congruence one must draw on the

same amount of limited attention that is needed to allow one to experience the self and the environment. Thus social systems lead the same precarious existence as other forms of order do; entropy threatens their structure, which can be maintained only by further investments of psychic energy. In practice, in terms of a dyad, a person can only be involved in a few such relationships at any given time. One cannot physically meet, let alone psychologically be on the same wavelength with, more than a few other individuals. Sympathy, concern, care, and love, which describe the states of consciousness that make two people want to continue a relationship, are great drains on their attention. Mozart's Don Giovanni, whose conquests in Spain alone numbered 1,003, definitely violates the laws that limit how many dyadic systems one can be a part of.

Social systems involving more than two people also rely on the same pool of limited attention for their survival. A business company, an army, or a nation exist only as long as people pay attention to the goals of such systems. Thus social systems owe their organization of goals to attention, and in turn these goals structure their members' attention, giving shape to the selves of those who are part of the system. The relationship between social systems and personal consciousness, each structuring and being structured by the other, is so delicate as to appear circular.

The process that explains how social systems survive by structuring the attention of individuals – and incidentally, avoids circularity in the argument – is socialization. Whenever a person begins to interact with another individual or a group, at first the respective goals will tend to be out of phase. If the newcomer is to become a part of the already existing system, a reordering of intentions is required. One simple example of socialization concerns the mutual adaptations involved in developing a congruent pattern of wakefulness and sleep when a baby is born to a couple (Csikszentmihalyi and Graef, 1975). Infants have no preference as to when to do the things of which they are capable; their attention is not structured but is utterly unsocialized. To the parents, their demands for attention are entirely random and conflict with the rhythm of sleep, work, and leisure that their parents have already established and that give structure to their lives. Hence a reordering of goals is necessary for the system to continue functioning: The parents will have to change their routines somewhat,

and the infant, who is most dependent on the system for survival, will have to reorganize its attention to reduce conflict. Socialization proceeds in a similar manner in all such contexts: The interaction between people requires an ordering of consciousness that simultaneously preserves the system and changes it; shaping the person while preserving his or her goals.

When socialization is viewed from the perspective of personhood as developed here, some additional aspects of the process become salient – for instance, a person should not only accept uncritically the conventional goals of society but he or she should be able to change them if evidence shows their limitations. This critical element, usually omitted from the accounts of socialization, is the cutting edge of cultivation.

Thus by the cultivation of goals through limited attention, individuals become persons. Psychic energy has another characteristic to be considered in this context. When someone invests psychic energy in an object – a thing, another person, or an idea – that object becomes "charged" with the energy of the agent. For example, if a person works at a task, a certain amount of his or her attention is invested in that task, thus that invested energy is "lost" because the agent was unable to use that attention for other purposes. Part of the person's life has been transferred to the focal object – part of his or her ability to experience the world, to process information, to pursue goals has been channeled into the task to the exclusion of other possibilities. However, this lost invested energy can turn into a gain if as a result of the investment the agent achieves a goal he or she has set for his or herself. Accomplishing a goal provides positive feedback to the self and strengthens it in allowing the self to grow.

The fact that attention can be condensed to tasks or objects also opens up the possibility of expropriating psychic energy. If, for instance, a farmer devotes years of his life to cultivating a field but then the field is taken away, the farmer loses the object in which his life energy has been condensed. Another example is the alienation of labor. As Marx observed, wage laborers invest a certain amount of their life in labor. While working in the factory, their choices of action and experience are drastically reduced; they forfeit the opportunity to live any other way. Because workers concentrate their attention on the job at hand, a product takes shape; however, workers do not "own" the product, having little choice

in deciding what it will be, how it will be done, and to whom it will be sold and for how much. Moreover, the return workers get is always less than the value of the activity they have invested in the task, the difference being surplus value – the profit that the employer makes by appropriating part of the workers' life energy.

Thus far we can conclude the following. Personhood depends on the ability to allocate one's psychic energy freely. An individual cannot become a person if he or she is unable to cultivate his or her goals, and therefore the shape that the self will take.

There are potentially many obstacles to the development of self-control. Some may be organic in nature, caused by genetic failure or physiological imbalances. Others result from early experiences or from opportunity structures built into the social context. Psychiatrists have remarked on the fact that most psychopathologies, especially the more severe ones, are characterized by "disorders of attention." People classified as schizophrenic, for instance, feel unable to control the sounds, sights, and feelings they attend to and are impaired in their effort to concentrate even on the most simple intentional actions. Some patients worry as to whether they will be able to place one foot ahead of the other when they walk or to lift a glass to their lips when they are thirsty. The simplest tasks of information processing, of attention allocation, become problematic when one is unable to dispose of his or her psychic energy freely (McGhie and Chapman, 1961; Freedman, 1974; Shield et al., 1974).

Less extreme but more widespread interference with control over attention occurs whenever people feel forced to attend to tasks against their present intentions in order to secure some future goal. Students who sit in a classroom when they wish to be out playing football lose control over the psychic energy invested in their immediate intentions because they fear the even greater loss that would result from failing the course or dropping out of school. Workers who hate their jobs but perform them because of the paychecks they receive at the end of the week similarly forfeit control over their psychic energy, at least temporarily. Throughout the course of a lifetime, however, these instances of alienation can add up to loss of control over a substantial portion of one's life energy.

The optimal state of experience for the individual is one in which intentions are not in conflict with each other. In this state of

inner harmony people can freely choose to invest their psychic energy in goals that are congruent with the rest of their intentions. Subjectively, this is felt to be a state of heightened energy, a state of increased control. The experience is considered challenging and enjoyable. In previous research this state of vital activity and inner order has been described in detail as the "flow" experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1976, 1978a,b).

The opposite of psychic order is inner conflict – the desire to do incompatible things or to do something other than what one is doing. Phenomenologically, one recognizes psychic disorder because one's attention is split: Psychic energy is focused on conflicting intentions. This reduces the effectiveness of psychic activity, for the two goals interfere with each other. Because inner conflict both introduces noise in the information-processing system of consciousness and reduces its capacity to do work, one may think of it as psychic entropy. The terms we use to describe such experiences are anxiety, frustration, alienation, or boredom, all referring to temporary impairments of psychic activity.

From the individual's point of view, the ability to invest psychic energy freely is the prerequisite toward achieving self-control. The exercise of self-control is experienced as an enjoyable state of inner order. But this criterion alone is insufficient for developing a critical perspective on personhood. It is, unfortunately, possible for persons to invest energy in projects that conflict with, or are destructive of, the goals of others. Saint Augustine, for instance, describes with puzzlement the deep enjoyment he derived in his youth from stealing pears from a neighbor's orchard (Augustine, (450) 1969, p. 41). Juvenile delinquents in our time also claim that nothing compares with crime as a source of a personally satisfying experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1978). The industrialist may be in full control of his psychic energy, deriving enjoyment and fulfillment from his manipulation of other people's energies, but his actions might have the result of increasing conflict in his community. Depending on which goals a person develops, an action will involve effects that are socially desirable, neutral, or disruptive. Therefore one must go beyond the goals of the individual to find a criterion for evaluating personhood.

However, moving from a personal to a social perspective does not change the nature of the criterion. The same considerations that define a positive state of the individual apply to the social

system, except that we move from the level of personal consciousness to that of community. The relevant consideration shifts from order and disorder within persons to order and disorder between persons. Entropy in a social system exists when the intentions of people conflict with one another; when the same information is interpreted as positive feedback by some and as negative by others; and when the psychic energy investment of some people makes it more difficult for others to attain an ordered state. When a group is in an entropic state the intentions of its members cancel out each other instead of contributing toward each person's goals.

It follows that to achieve a vital community the psychic energy of individuals must be congruently structured. This congruence can result from either historical or environmental pressures, as in Durkheim's examples of "mechanical solidarity," or it can be achieved by intentionally cultivating common values, ideals, or interests. In either case, harmony exists among the goals held by individuals in the community. This implies, in turn, a restructuring of attention, a partial reallocation of psychic energy that will be invested willingly in goals that might not benefit each individual directly. A truly vital community, however, does not become more homogeneous. People are so different from each other genetically and experientially that, in order to reflect such differences accurately, individuals must structure their attention differently, thus building selves that diverge from each other in a variety of ways. However, it is possible for each individual to cultivate goals without producing conflict in the community. This would result in an integrated group of people pursuing a common goal while contributing their own unique perspectives to that goal. The condition of community, as Hannah Arendt (1958) has said, is one of *plurality,* not homogeneity.

Even the achievement of a harmonious community cannot serve as an ultimate criterion. True, such a human group would have a tremendous power, a great amount of psychic energy to focus on common goals. But these goals might, in turn, conflict with the goals of other human groups or with those of nonhuman systems.

The ecological awareness of recent years has made us realize that the survival of humans depends on preserving patterns of order in chemical, physical, and biological systems that have

"goals" of their own. By attempting to reorder our environment in terms of human goals, we have introduced such a heavy dose of entropy in the planetary ecology that we are making it unfit even for human habitation. Crass consideration for our own survival suggests more subtle values: understanding and respect for different communities and cultures, different forms of life, different patterns of energy.

Clearly neither the individual nor the family nor the country, and not even the human race, can alone provide grounds for ultimate values. As humans' ability to affect their environment increases, so must their consciousness grow to include patterns of energy based on principles different from their own. Of course, this "ecological consciousness," forced on us by the awareness of how technology can destroy Earth, is not an achievement of our times; it was discovered long ago by religions and philosophies in different parts of the world.

One of the universals that unites most of the diverse religions of traditional peoples is the idea of "cosmos," the living idea of a universe composed of personified laws and forces – a universe that speaks to humans. The practical effect of modern consciousness has been to depersonalize the cosmos and reconceive it as a Newtonian machine, a Cartesian "apparatus." But this creation of the modern person's "single vision," as Blake would have it, is a kind of robot or Golem that many have claimed to be out of control. It is as if Descartes himself were being manipulated by his own machine and forced to say, "It thinks me, therefore I am not." For the ancient Greeks a "pragmatic" solution still meant one that conformed to moral goals bearing on an ultimate conception of what was the right way to live. In the modern world dominated by technical values, "pragmatic" has come to mean a solution that is expedient in the short run without regard to ultimate goals (Bernstein, 1971, 1976; Habermas, 1973). Georg Simmel, as far back as 1908, saw deeply into the problems that arise when the objective world – believed to be ruled totally by mechanistic forces – is separated from the individual so that life becomes increasingly a technique rather than a process of cultivation:

> Thus far at least, historical development has moved toward a steadily increasing separation between objective cultural production and the cultural level of the individual. The dissonance of modern life – in particular that manifested in the improvement of technique in every area and the simultaneous deep dissatisfaction with technical progress – is caused in large part by the fact that things are

becoming more and more cultivated, while men are less able to gain from the perfection of objects a perfection of the subjective life. (Simmel, 1971, p. 234)

Simmel suggests that for all our technical mastery over things, in the end it is the things that have come to dominate us. The cultivation of the person, or what he calls "subjective culture," has been subsumed under the domination of the thing and what philosopher William Barrett (1978) has called "the illusion of technique."

In sum, we shall say that the fullest development of personhood involves a free ordering of psychic energy at the level of the individual, the wider human community and social institutions, and the total environment. At each level, attention is invested in intentions that should lead toward consistency with each other. Thus the consciousness of the person in itself unifies the pattern of forces within those dimensions of the universe that are accessible to humans. The person who is able to cultivate his or her own desires, the goals of the community, and the laws of nature, and is able to reconcile these patterns, succeeds in establishing a temporary structure of order out of potential randomness. This is the creation of cosmos out of chaos and the ultimate touchstone of what is ordinarily called mental health, or self-actualization.

We have called this process *cultivation*. Cultivation refers to the process of investing psychic energy so that one becomes conscious of the goals operating within oneself, among and between other persons, and in the environment. It refers also to the process of channeling one's attention in order to realize such goals. This, then, is the ideal against which our model of the person can be assessed.

The nature of things

Having defined the perspective from which persons will be viewed, we shall next develop a workable definition of the other term in the relationship, namely, the object or the thing. This should be an easier project because things seem much less complex and thus present fewer problems than humans. Yet clearly here, too, we must exclude a great deal of information that cannot be dealt with adequately in the present context. In talking about objects, we shall not be concerned with their chemical composition, their mass, or their weight.