CONSTRUCTING HUMAN NATURE: THE PRIMORDIAL AS PROPHETIC

KENNETH J. GERGEN

Questions about human nature can only be formulated and answered within a particular tradition of discourse. The major question we may thus ask about any conception of human nature concerns its implications for cultural life. As our formulations of primordial nature enter cultural life, so may they become prophetic in terms of their effects. Largely replacing religious institutions, the sciences are now perhaps the major authorities on human nature. In this context I first consider the core conception of human nature prevailing in psychological science. In my view the socio-political ramifications of this cognitive-biological conception are deeply problematic. I then take up newly emerging conceptions of humans as constituents of relational process. The outcomes of this view for human well-being in a globalizing world seem far more promising.

> Human nature is as much an abstraction as "God" or "the universal law."
> It is a magic wand that people wave over the practices they approve of.
> Louis Menand, *What Comes Naturally*

What is it to possess human nature? To answer such a question we necessarily require a contrast; we should need a criterion by which we could identify that which is not human nature. Without a meaningful binary separating human from non-human nature, the initial question cannot be posed. And yet, once we have specified the contrast, we have already begun to circumscribe what it is that we can say about the character of human nature. If we ask about human nature as opposed to animal nature, we will generate inquiry into ways in which humans are different from animals. Here we might, for example, draw on discursive traditions describing the characteristics of various animal species. If we were to inquire into the nature of humans as opposed to inert matter, our conclusions would be quite different. And in the vast majority of the population, where the presumption of a deity holds sway, an inquiry into the ways in which humans differ from God,would yield still different answers.

I raise this point at the outset to underscore the fact that any inquiry into human nature must necessarily proceed from specific traditions of understanding, their prevailing distinctions, the ways in which questions are constituted, and their agreements as to what constitute reasonable answers. The discursive conventions constituting these traditions will necessarily lay the groundwork for what it is that we can say about human nature and the ways in which our accounts will function within the culture.

In a broader sense this is to say that there is no "getting it right" with respect to the nature of human nature. We cannot step outside all traditions to ask questions and offer intelligible replies. Indeed, we may say that the very inquiry into human nature is itself derived from a tradition of understanding. It is not a question that *must* be answered in order for us to achieve fundamental knowledge or an accurate picture of our condition in the world or cosmos. Human nature is, after all, a "conversational object," and inquiry into its character is optional.

These preliminary remarks are in no sense intended to demean the pursuit of the question. Rather, it is to invite even more serious attention to the issues at stake. As reasoned, accuracy in the matter cannot be our goal. We cannot measure our discourses about human nature against a set of observations, such that we can determine whether one account is more accurate than another. What constitutes a fact or a relevant observation in one tradition will fail to do so in another. This has indeed been a major source of indeterminacy in debates between anti-abortionists and women's rights advocates. The former offer physiological evidence that a fetus becomes a human being soon after conception, while the latter eschew such evidence on the grounds that anti-abortionists bring anthropomorphic biases into their tissue readings. However, this same debate also demonstrates the deep significance of questions about human nature. Conceptions of when it is that one becomes a "human being" are enormously important in their social consequences. Discussions about what is or is not human nature are, then, entries into moral and political deliberation. Or as Schwartz (1986, 311) has put it, "Moral language is only sensible when applied to full-fledged people, and our understanding of the facts of human nature tells us who the full-fledged people are". We move, then, from accuracy as our criterion of concern, to societal consequences.

That it is the consequences that count is certainly a point for which there is ample historical illustration. To hold that human beings possess a sacred spirit, and are thus fundamentally superior to all else on earth, provides a rationale for bending nature and environment to human wishes. Darwin's thesis that human beings are simply one species of animal—human and animal nature now conflated—provided a basis for separating church and state, and the ultimate loss of religious power. In early U.S. history, the thesis that black slaves lacked a sacred soul, rationalized their servitude and the prohibition against their entering political life. When faced today with the question of whether we should sustain the life of an injured individual who will never regain consciousness, the decision to "pull the plug" will essentially depend on our conception of what it is to be human. In effect, what we presume to be primordially given in human nature is prophetic in terms of our forms of life.

In what follows I wish to bring critical attention to two accounts of human nature within contemporary scholarship. My concern is first with the confluence of cognitive, neurological and evolutionary/genetic conceptions of human nature that increasingly leap the bounds of the science to enter public deliberations on society's future. I will then turn to a more recent development in the social sciences, namely a broad movement to reconceptualize human nature in more social or relational terms. When understood in its radical form, we find that it is indeed relational process out of which the significance of "being human" emerges. As I will propose, a relational answer to the question of "what is human nature," has far greater promise for future global life.

Human Nature in Contemporary Psychology

> Consciousness, like digestion, is a property of biological tissue.
> John Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind*

There are good reasons for examining the definitions of human nature informing inquiry and practice within psychological science. With the increased secularization of Western culture since the Enlightenment, authority in matters of "what is man" have shifted away from the church and become increasingly lodged within the sciences. In the late 19th century, psychological science began to acquire a pivotal position in terms of defining the nature of human behavior. No other science seemed equipped to determine what gives rise to the particular configuration of human action. The hope has been, and continues to be, that scientific research will ultimately yield answers to the question of what characterizes human nature.

Yet, psychologists also enter the laboratory already immersed in a multi-layered history of cultural meanings. They enter the laboratory not as mirrors of the world but as agents of interpretation. And these interpretations are necessarily informed by this more general immersion in cultural life. Scientific findings cannot solve the riddle of human nature, because the interpretative history already governs the forms of research and their potential meanings. At the same time, it is this interpretive forestructure that secretes a sense of drama into such research. For, at one level we understand that defining experiments are not pitting one theory against another so much as competing ways of life. Thus, for example, when Rumbaugh (1977) and others, have attempted to prove that chimpanzees are capable of speaking like humans, we are not so much witnesses to "new facts about chimps" (indeed, much depends here on how we conceptualize "speaking like humans") so much as thrust into a disconcerting possibility that we are but "mere animals".

There are numerous treatments of the ways in which psychologists have conceptualized human nature over the past (see, for example, Shotter 1975, Leary 1990, Soyland 1994). However, to underscore the socio-political significance of such conceptions, I wish to focus on a contemporary movement within psychology. It is a movement of particular importance because it represents the confluence of three longstanding metaphors of human nature, and resultantly acquires substantial weight of authority. By taking a critical look at this movement, we will also be prepared to consider the relational developments to follow.

My concern, then, is with the emerging confluence among the cognitive, neurological and evolutionary/genetic accounts of human nature. Historically, the three orientations have not only tended toward separation, but even antagonism. The cognitive view of human nature holds that the chief determinants of human action are located within rationcinative systems such as thought, memory, planning, intending, and so on. Traditionally such views were allied with 19th century mentalism along with methods of introspection and theories of mental chemistry. In turn, this orientation to "the nature of human functioning" can be traced to Enlightenment conceptions of people as conscious agents of their own destiny. However, owing chiefly to the development of the computer in the waning decades of the 21st century, the cognitive vision of human nature turned mechanistic. With the conjoining of cognitive research and artificial intelligence

125

programs (see, for example, Schultz 2003; Marcus 2001) one could begin to understand all mental functioning in terms of computer mechanisms (i.e. information processing systems).

It was this latter move that established the groundwork for an alliance with the neurological view of human nature. Psychological science had long resisted tendencies toward neurological explanation, as such explanation would ultimately mean the demise of psychology. If all mental states can be reduced to physiological states, and physiological processes can be observed in a way that psychological processes cannot, then psychological descriptions can be dismissed as so much folklore. However, with the mechanistic turn in cognitive psychology, the way was opened toward a congenial parallelism. That is, because both cognitive and physiological systems could be understood mechanistically, then it was inviting to see the two languages as describing "the same thing" only at different levels of functioning. Psychologists thus acquired important rhetorical support from a "natural science," and the way was open for neurological scientists to appropriate an entire field of scientific endeavor. With the development of brain scanning methods researchers seemingly demonstrate visually *where* in the cortex various cognitive processes occur. Cognitive-neuro research now flourishes (see, for example, *The Journal for Cognitive Neuroscience*) and within the U.S. relevant programs of cognitive science are everywhere in evidence.

Evolutionary views of human nature have long had a voice in psychological science, but not always a favored one. Early in the 20th century, evolutionary theory—as a theory of instincts—enjoyed a certain prominence. However, with the hegemony of behaviorism, instinct explanations grew out of fashion. Not only did such explanations fly in the face of the optimistic vision of behaviorists, to whit, that all human behavior could be shaped for the better. But, it seemed, explanations by "instinct" seemed to superficially circumvent the real challenge of understanding how behavior patterns were acquired and extinguished in society. With the emergence of socio-biology in the latter half of the century, a form of instinct theory once again began to acquire status (Wilson, 1978). The fact that evolutionary accounts of human behavior could be congenially allied with developments in behavior genetics added significant weight to such explanations. And, when fledgling cognitivists required fuel for undoing the behaviorist establishment in psychology, inherentist theories such as these became valuable allies. To the extent that the organism is genetically prepared to act in various ways, behaviorist promises of creating futures through reinforcement are undone. The determinants of human action successfully shifted from environmentalist ("bottom up") to nativist ("top down").

At least within the U.S. the confluence of the cognitive-neuro-evolutionary/genetic accounts of human nature essentially constitute the core of contemporary psychological science. It is important to understand that none of the accumulated research findings in these combined areas in any way furnish a foundation for a cognitive-bio vision of human nature. All such facts are generated from within a discourse already in place. Without the interpretive forestructure there would be no "contributing facts." How then might we evaluate this vision of human nature? To be sure, we might wish to ask whether research in the cognitive-bio paradigm has yet contributed in any important way to health or human well-being. On this score there is little to be said for the orientation thus far; however we must also keep the ledger open. We might also inquire into the

methodological and philosophical strengths and weaknesses of the paradigm. Here we would find both reason for celebration and skepticism alike (see, for example, Uttal 2001). However, in my view the important question concerns the socio-political implications. To what kind of relationships and what kind of society do we contribute when we understand human nature in this way? These issues gain in significance as the cognitive-bio perspective increasingly enters into common culture. (See, for example, the commercially successful books of Pinker 1997; 2002; Wilson 1998; and Dawkins 1976.)

As many see it, the implications are little short of disastrous. Humanists have long been concerned with the way in which deterministic visions such as this undermine the cultural assumption of voluntary choice. With voluntarism impugned, we lose what many see as the essential capacity to hold individuals responsible for their actions. Such misgivings are intensified in the present instance, because a reduction of human meaning to biological process would strip much of it of significance or value. If we were to replace the vocabulary of emotion, for example, with the more precise vocabulary of neurological correlates, valued traditions would crumble. To employ and expression such as, "my medulla oblongata is stimulated by you," for example, as an expression of love, would undermine the entire tradition in which words of love play a pivotal role.

Yet, the humanists are scarcely alone in their concerns. Perhaps the most outstanding criticism now in circulation is directed at the implicit political conservatism of the cognitive-bio conception. If patterns of human behavior are prepared by evolution and locked into the nervous system, then whatever exists does so for good historical reasons. Roughly speaking, what is here is here to stay. Thus, for example, as psychologists document racial differences in intelligence, we are lead to the conclusion that this is simply a fact of nature. There is little we can do about it. Feminists have been particularly vociferous in their antagonism to such views, for evolutionary theory in particular is used to rationalize patterns of male promiscuity and aggression (see, for example, Fausto-Sterling 1985). In this sense, philandering and marital breakdown are simply among the enduring facts of life. Issues of morality or responsibility are largely irrelevant.

The cognitive-bio vision of human nature also has implications for policies of social control. By implication, undesirable behavior such as crime or dysfunctional behavior (e.g. "mental illness") are locked into the nervous system. If we wish to eliminate crime, our best option is to remove "the criminal element" from the streets. Attention to such issues as economic disparity and ethnic prejudice are replaced with the development of more punitive laws and larger prisons. In the case of socially dysfunctional behavior, the invitation is to generate categories of disease and to link such diseases to biological malfunctioning. The cognitive-bio conception of human nature thus contributes to the enormous increase in the number of labels for psychiatric diseases, the number of people who are diagnosed in these ways, and the number of psychopharmacological prescriptions.

Further, the cognitive-bio account of human nature discourages the envisioning of new futures. If we are hard wired to engage in deceit, oppression, and war, for example, there is little reason to open deliberation on whether we might create alternative forms of life. We might reasonably think in terms of control by force, but discouraged is the

active search for means of establishing ways of life in which these forms of activity would simply be irrelevant.

Yet, over and above these socio-political shortcomings, there is an overarching problem which cognitive-bio advocates share with much of the remainder of the field. It is essentially a problem of boundaries. That is, the prevailing view of human nature treats the individual as a bounded being, one who possesses within (the body, the cortex, the mind, the genes) the major determinants of action. Or, as Edward Sampson has put it, the vision is of a "self-contained individual" (Sampson 1993, 16). We are asked, then, to view society as composed of fundamentally separate or alienated entities, each seeking ends that are largely self-sustaining or self-gratifying. We create a sense of a Hobbesian world of "all against all." We come to believe that people's concerns for others are highly delimited—largely based on individual gratification ("enlightened individualism") or the desire to perpetuate one's genes. And, from this standpoint human relationships are artificial byproducts of otherwise separate individuals; the social is secondary to and derivative of the personal. Relationships are to be valued only when one is unable to function autonomously. As many see it, the individualist ideology already undergirds many of our major institutions (education, law, and virtually all large organizations). We thus reap a harvest of conflict, anxiety, loneliness, conformity, manipulation and exploitation.

The Human as Relational Being

> Human beings are constituted in conversation.
> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*

It is one thing to fault psychology's prevailing view of human nature for its individualist ideology. Yet, it is quite another to articulate an. This is so, in part, because for over three centuries most all major conceptions of the human being have shared in the presumption of bounded being. If we are to speak of human nature at all, we can scarcely leap out of these traditions. Even the common conception of relationships presumes the existence of at least two fundamentally separate elements that come together to form a relationship.

How, then, are we to formulate a viable and compelling account of human nature that makes intelligible our inherent interweaving, and in which separation constitutes the unnatural and artificial and care and compassion the inherent? Further, could we articulate a relational account that might sustain the meaningful and valuable in cultural life, encourage innovation, and avoid tendencies toward conservatism in social control?

Here it is useful to return to the social constructionist view with which this essay began. As ventured, when we set out to describe and explain the world we must inevitably draw from the resources of intelligibility already at hand. In this sense, all that we take to be the real and the good are embedded within discursive relationships among people. It is thus that social constructionist writings more generally give special attention to language, dialogue, negotiation, social pragmatics, conversational positioning, ritual, cultural practice, and the distribution of power (Gergen 1999). As a

128

general premise, relational process is given primacy over the individual.

Of course, attempts to conceptualize the individual as a social actor have long been fixtures on the intellectual landscape (see Burkitt 1993). Current constructionist attempts must be viewed as extensions of this tradition. At the same time, while providing significant resources for sustaining the dialogue on human nature as relational, there are important differences among current theorists. These differences have important socio-political implications. For analytic purposes it is useful to consider a continuum of conceptualizations, varying in terms of their congeniality with traditional individualism as opposed to the primacy of relationship. A brief accounting will illustrate the breadth of the intellectual movement, beginning with the most traditional.

Individuals as Cultural Carriers

That persons are influenced by their cultural surrounds has virtually served as a theoretical truism for psychology. This was most obviously the case during the hegemony of behaviorism, and remains vital in contemporary cognitivism. Yet, relational reconstructions of the present radically alter our understanding of this process. In contemporary psychology the presumption prevails that the individual is endowed with certain psychological structures or processes. For the behaviorist the human learns about the external world, but the process of learning is not thereby altered; for cognitivists the external world provides raw resources for appropriation by neurologically based cognitive appetites. In neither case is the mental fundament itself produced, extinguished or transformed by the social world. It is precisely this latter move that characterizes a range of recent attempts at relational reconstitution. As variously reasoned, it is not the self-contained individual who precedes culture, but the culture that establishes the basic character of psychological functioning.

Vygotskian theory provided the initial stimulus for this line of reasoning (Vygotsky 1978). More recently, Bruner's highly influential work has drawn sustenance from Vygotsky in proposing that "it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system" (Vygotsky 1978, 34). Similarly, James Gee argues that "the individual interprets experience by forming 'folk theories,' which together with nonlinguistic modules of the mind, cause the person to talk and act in certain ways..." (Gee 1992, 104). Related attempts to "socialize" the self have drawn significantly from the early work of George Kelly, and from object relations theory in psychoanalysis to argue that the forms of mental structure and process are vitally shaped by social experience.

These varying attempts to conceptualize individual process as derivative of social process represent an important step toward a relational refiguring of human nature. As a family, they undermine the bifurcation between self and other. Our very nature is that of cultural carrier. Yet, for many, such theorizing remains insufficient. There are, first of all, conceptual problems inhering in such accounts. The paramount question of how the mind can be culturally formed remains deeply problematic. As I have argued elsewhere, if all mental process is built up from social process, then we are left without an account of how this "building of the mind" can get under way (Gergen 1994, Chpt.1).

129

Presumably the individual would have no mental processes to enable him or her to understand and absorb the lessons of the culture. If mental process is required in order to understand the social, then the mental must precede the social. The social view of the individual threatens to collapse. On the socio-political level, many also find the view of humans as cultural carriers too deterministic. If all is fixed by that which precedes, there is little room left for creative deviation. More importantly, such views leave us without capacities for questioning our traditions. We are left beholden to our cultural forebears for our capacities to function, and the result is a vacuum with respect to political resistance.

The Mind as Culturally Immersed

A second and smaller family of relational theories is more successful in moving beyond cultural determinism. Focal attention shifts in this case from psychological process as a byproduct of cultural surrounds to psychological process immersed *within* ongoing relationships. We move, then, from internal residues of cultural experience to ongoing social process from which individual functioning cannot be extricated. In such accounts, the self-other (individual/culture) binary is virtually destroyed. For example, Edward Sampson draws significantly from both Wittgenstein and Bakhtin in proposing that "all meaning, including the meaning of one's self, is rooted in the social process and must be seen as an ongoing accomplishment of that process. Neither meaning nor self is a precondition for social interaction; rather, these emerge from and are sustained by conversations occurring between people" (Sampson 1993, 99). In his development of a "rhetorically responsive" view of human action, John Shotter expands the range of relevant contributions to include Vico, Valosinov and Garfinkel (Shotter 1993). Shotter is concerned with the way "responsive meanings are always first 'sensed' or 'felt' from within a conversation, ...and amenable to yet further responsive (sensible) development" (Shotter 1993, 180). For Hermans and Kempen (1993) the individual is inherently dialogical, participating first in public dialogue and playing out such dialogues silently within the mind. For these authors, emotions are "rhetorical actions," and agency is a byproduct of participation in a dialogic relationship.

In my view, these are invaluable contributions to a vision of human nature as relational. Here we find that all that is meaningful becomes so within the process of dialogue. The independent self is an empty vessel. And, while not avowedly ideological, there are significant socio-political implications. For example, Edward Sampson's Bakhtinian analysis is specifically dedicated to a "celebration of the other," and the potential of such a formulation for undermining oppressive power relations (Sampson 1993). Similarly, John Shotter (1993a) is deeply concerned with the political dimension of everyday interaction, and with using psychology to give marginal voices a broader space of expression. Yet there is reason to press further in conceiving of relational being. Because of their emphasis on mental relationships, such formulations continue to bear the problems of dualist epistemology. And, beyond their political exhortations, it is unclear how such formulations can be placed into cultural practice.

The Relational Constitution of Self

There is a third, more radical reconceptualization of the person slowly reaching articulation. It finds its roots in the same line of reasoning with which the present essay began. As proposed, all ontological posits gain their intelligibility through discursive traditions. By extension, this would include the "reality of mind" (Rorty 1979). Thus, rather than placing mental activity somewhere toward the center of the relational formulation, we may abandon all forms of dualism and allow social process to serve as the essential fulcrum of explanation. That is, we may envision the elimination of psychological states and conditions as explanations for action, and reconstitute psychological predicates within the sphere of social process.

One important opening to this more radical conception of the relational emerges from contemporary discourse analysis. Such analysis typically focuses on the pragmatics of discourse use. In the case of mental discourse, then, the analyst is less concerned with the mental phenomena to which such discourse may or may not refer, than with the way it functions within relationships. For example, in Potter and Wetherell's (1987) ground breaking work, the concept of "attitude" is shorn of mental referents, and as they see it, serves to index positional claims within social intercourse. An attitude, then, is essentially a social claim ("I feel..." "My view is..." "I prefer...."), and not an external expression of an internal impulse. Similarly, Billig's (1990) essay on memory focuses on the way in which people negotiate the past, thus defining memory not as a mental event but a relational achievement. Or as Shotter (1990) proposes, memory is a "social institution."

Yet, while the discursive movement represents an important innovation, it is also clear that we must press beyond discourse alone. A fully developed account of the human as relational would ideally include fully embodied patterns of interdependence. This has indeed been the direction of my own work over the past decade. To illustrate, consider the case of emotion. Emotion terms (e.g. anger, love, depression) may serve as key elements of conversation (e.g. "That makes me angry," "Do you love me?"). Yet, these terms are also embodied, in the sense that without certain patterns of facial expression, tone of voice, posture and so on, they would lose their intelligibility. In effect, we may say that emotions are forms of cultural performance. One doesn't possess an emotion so much as he or she engages in the doing of an emotion. The question is not, then, whether one is truly feeling love, sadness, or depression, but whether he or she is fully engaged in such performances.

At the same time, these embodied performances of emotion are also embedded within patterns of interchange. They acquire their meaning from their use within the ongoing process of relationship. I use the term "relational scenario" in referring to the culturally sedimented patterns of interchange (*lived narratives*), within which emotional performances may often play an important role. Thus, for example, the performance of *anger* (complete with discourse, facial expressions, postural configurations) is typically embedded within a scenario in which a preceding *affront* may be required to legitimate its meaning as anger. (One cannot simply shout out in anger for no reason; to do so would be to exit the corridors of intelligibility). Further, one's performance of anger also sets the stage for the subsequent performance of an *apology* or a *defense* on the part of another; and if an apology is offered a common response in western culture is

forgiveness. At that juncture the scenario may be terminated. All the actions making up the sequence, from affront to forgiveness, require each other to achieve legitimacy. To be recognizably human is to participate successfully within the dances of relationship.

Relational Being and Future Making

These attempts to generate a more relational conception of human nature are yet in their infancy. (See also, Davies, Harré 1990; Taylor 1989; Baudrillard 1988). At the same time, their potentials cannot be underestimated. This is so both intellectually and in terms of socio/political reverberations. Within the Western tradition the individual human being has served as the cornerstone of social thought and the rationalizing device for most of our major institutions (e.g. democracy, public education, law). We now confront the possibility of developing intelligibilities that go beyond the identification of separable units—I vs. you, we vs. them—and that may create the reality of a more fundamental relatedness, the palpability of inseparability. The tendency to view the social world as constituted by individual units—whether selves or groups (and by implication ethnicities, classes, institutions and nations)—may be replaced by a concern with the relational processes by which the very idea of individual units (selves, groups and so on) come into being. The focus moves from the dancers to the dance.

To illustrate, consider the longstanding tradition of holding individuals responsible for their actions. This presumption is not only built into Western systems of law, but on the level of everyday life it is a chief means of reinforcing the social order. Yet, we are also well aware that these same traditions of individual responsibility are often alienating. The discourse of blame functions much like criticism, in that the target is typically degraded, set apart from the community who judge. In the process of blame, the vast sea of complexity in which any action is submerged is removed from view, and the single individual serves as the sole origin of the untoward act.

Yet, if we shift our sites from the individual to relational process a range of new possibilities emerge. We may indeed begin to think in terms of *relational responsibility*, that is, how it is that we can sustain the process of meaning making without which all that we hold as intelligible or valuable decays (McNamee, Gergen 1998). Here we may begin to seek alternatives to our rituals of individual blame. In what ways can we speak, we may ask, such that we may replace patterns of blame, mutual recrimination and separation with the collaborative generation of meaning? How else can we talk under such conditions that might serve the ends of altering or terminating the unwanted action but simultaneously sustain a relationship of mutual respect?

The shift from individual to relational responsibility is but one conceptual leap of great promise. We begin to ask new questions and generate new visions of action. Consider as well the following vistas opened by a conception of relational nature:

• Political life is typically constructed in terms of oppositions, with one party, group or faction pitted against another. The traditional construction of separation now gives way to possibilities of shared investments. Or, more generally, we may think in terms of moving from an *antagonistic* to a *relational politics*. Here we move from *we* vs. *them* to *we together*, which means placing the primary emphasis on decision making in

the context of relations with the greater society. In relational politics party loyalty gives way to concerns for the greater array of societal relations of which party members are a part.

• Identity is not derived from the nature of the world. (There are no necessary or natural distinctions among persons or groups). Rather, identity is a relational achievement. Individuation (or unitization) is only one of many ways in which we might describe or explain the world. Such forms of discourse obscure the more essential domain of human connection. Invited, then, is an obscuring or rendering more fluid the demarcation lines separating either individuals or groups (e.g. professional, political, ethnic, national, religious). Desired are concepts and practices that enable a continuous flow of meaning making across all boundaries.

• Prejudice does not originate in the individual mind. Prejudicial action is a meaningful move within a variety of cultural scenarios. As the scenarios unfold, so is prejudicial action invited. Given a modicum of participation in the culture (including its mass media) all of us are capable of prejudicial actions. By the same token, we are all capable of loving, caring and societally responsible action. The challenge is to cultivate such forms of interchange.

• We may properly challenge the view that there is a natural (biological, genetic) basis for inter-group antagonism (as socio-biologists, ethologists, and Freudians are wont to argue). Violence is a meaningful integer in a relational dance; this dance is rooted in historical convention and is subject to change both on the grass-roots and policy levels. To avoid the outbreak of hostilities requires stepping out of the traditional dances and locating alternatives to the rituals of *we* vs. *them*.

• There is no means of ultimate victory (politically, economically, militarily), if winning means eradication of the other (or the other's position). To condemn, excoriate, or wage war against a constructed other in our world is inherently self-destructive; for in a fundamental sense we are the other. We are born of our relationship and derive their sense of identity from relationship.

• Societal transformation is not a matter of changing minds and hearts, political values or the sense of the good. Rather, transformation will require unleashing the positive potential inherent in relational process. In effect, we must locate a range of relational forms that enable collective transformation as opposed to alienated dissociation.

Of course, such proposals may strike the reader as so many idealisms, utopian as opposed to practical. And, to be sure, in seeking change we confront the enormous barriers of traditional institutions and sedimented forms of interchange. Bringing about a more relationally responsible world will require highly skilled and imaginative innovations in practice. Are there possibilities for such transformations? As I survey developments in various sectors of cultural life I do find reasons for optimism. In the area of conflict resolution, for example, there is a significant movement toward creating new and more promising forms of dialogue (www.publicdialogue.org; www.publicconversations.org). In the domain of organizational change, I am most impressed with emerging practices of appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider et al.,

1999). Here through the use of narrative and positive visioning, participants in an organization collaborate to bring about a mutually sustaining future. In the educational sphere we are now witnessing an increasing number of attempts to generate collaborative pedagogical practices (see for example, www.stanford.edu/group/collaborate). For mental health professionals, the advent of narrative and brief therapy orientations is replacing the traditional metaphor of therapy as medical cure with practices emphasizing the collaborative creation of new realities (see, for example, McLeod 1997) And, with the enormous mushrooming of NGOs in recent years, we find people coordinating their efforts to move beyond stifling traditions and suppressive boundaries for a greater global good. All serve as realizations of a vision of human nature as relational.

In important respects, this issuing of multiple practices from a relational perspective provides the most striking contrast with the cognitive-bio vision of human nature. This vision primarily leads to postures of post-hoc accounting and a perpetual postponement of action. The researcher begins with a taken for granted phenomenon (e.g. emotion, mating habits, memory, depression) and attempts to reason about why they are favored by evolution, how they could occur within an information processing system (both cognitively and neurologically), and where (through brain scanning) they must reside in the brain. Because of unlimited possibilities of post-hoc explanation and the essentially contested character of "the phenomena," such inquiries can (and do) continue indefinitely. And, owing to the presumption that patterns of human action are both universal and transhistorical, there is little invitation to imagine new worlds of possibility. In contrast, from a relational perspective, our institutions of understanding and action derive from relationship. All that exists could be understood otherwise; all that is worth doing could be transformed. The potential for new worlds may be found in each moment of conversation. Innovative practices flourish.

As I tap these final words into my computer, I listen to the sounds of a distant radio. The World Series of baseball is being broadcast, and a game winning home run has brought ecstasy to the home team fans. If it were not for the relationships in which we engage, would there be words, a computer, a radio, home runs or the euphoria of victory? Would I even have the capacity for this reflection? And without this engagement, would I simply sit silently on a rock awaiting the arrival of some otherwise meaningless impulse of the soma?

References

Baudrillard, J. *The Ecstasy of Communication.* New York: Semiotext(e), 1988.
Billig, M. Collective Memory, Ideology and the British Royal Family. In D. Middleton, D. Edwards (Eds.). *Collective Remembering.* London: Sage, 1990.
Burkitt, I. *Social Selves.* London: Sage, 1993.
Cooperrider, D., Sorenson, P. F., Whitney, D., Yaeger, T. (Eds.). *Appreciative Inquiry.* Cleveland: Stipes, 1999.
Davies, B., Harré, R. Positioning the Discursive Production of Selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior 20,* (1), 43–63, 1990.

Dawkins, R. *The Selfish Gene.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Ehrlich, P. R. *Human Natures: Genes, Cultures and the Human Prospect.* Washington, DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2000.

Fausto-Sterling, A. *Myths of Gender, Biological Theories About Women and Men.* New York: Basic Books, 1985.

Gee, J. P. *The Social Mind: Language, Ideology, and Social Practice.* New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1992.

Gergen, K. J. *Realities and Relationships.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Gergen, K. J. *An Invitation to Social Construction.* London: Sage, 1998.

Hermans, H. J. M., Kempen, H. J. G. *The Dialogical Self, Meaning as Movement.* San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1993.

Johnson, S. H. *Taking Action, Cognitive Neuroscience Perspectives on Intentional Acts.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

Kinder, A., Shanks, D. R. Neuropsychological Dissociations between Priming and Recognition: A Single-System Connectionist Account. *Psychological Review 4*, 728–744, 2003.

Leary, D. E. (Ed.). *Metaphors in the History of Psychology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Marcus, G. F. *The Algebraic Mind, Integrating Connectionism and Cognitive Science.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.

McLeod, J. *Narrative and Psychotherapy.* London: Sage, 1997.

McNamee, S., Gergen, K. J. *Relational Responsibility.* London: Sage, 1998.

Norman, K. A., O'Reilly, R. C. Modeling Hippocampal and Neocortical Contributions to Recognition Memory: A Complementary Learning Systems Approach. *Psychological Review 4*, 611–646, 2003.

Pinker, S. *How the Mind Works.* New York: Norton, 1997.

Pinker, S. *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature.* New York: Viking Press, 2002.

Potter, J., Wetherell, M. *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behavior.* London: Sage, 1987.

Rorty, R. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Rumbaugh, D. M. *Language Learning by a Chimpanzee: The Lana Project.* New York: Academic Press, 1977.

Sampson, E. E. *Celebrating the Other, a Dialogic Account of Human Nature.* Boulder, Co.: Westview, 1993.

Schwartz, B. *The Battle for Human Nature.* New York: Norton, 1986.

Shultz, T. R. *Computational Developmental Psychology.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.

Shotter, J. *Images of Man in Psychological Research.* London: Methuen, 1975.

Shotter, J. The Social Construction of Remembering and Forgetting. In D. Middleton, D. Edwards (Eds.). *Collective Remembering.* London: Sage, 1990.

Shotter, J. *Conversational Realities.* London: Sage, 1993.

Shotter, J. *The Cultural Politics of Everyday Life.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993a.

Soyland, A. J. *Psychology as Metaphor.* London: Sage, 1994.

Taylor, C. *Sources of the Self.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Uttal, W.R. *The New Phrenology, The Limits of Localizing Cognitive Processes in the Brain.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.

Vygotsky, L. S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.

Wilson, E. O. *On Human Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
Wilson, E. O. *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. New York: Knopf. Distributed by Random House, 1998.

Dept. of Psychology,
Swarthmore College,
Swarthmore, PA 19081
Tel.: (610) 328-8434
Fax: (610) 328-7814
E-mail: kgergen1@swarthmore.edu