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Homo Dialogicus: Ethics for Empathic, Estranged Beings

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AN ABSTRACT OF

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
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ABSTRACT

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BY JEREMY LOWE

As morality evolved largely within socially interdependent and affectively responsive settings, how do human ethical capacities (such as empathy) and moral experiences (such as trust) manifest within the increasingly isolating conditions of modern life? To investigate this paradox in moral anthropology, this dissertation introduces a method of symbol development called “a rough draft entrance into ethics.” Such a technique accepts that images—especially those we draw of ourselves and our relations—are vital for human perception and activity, so accurate images are a moral matter. Hence, the method takes an ethical symbol and “redraws” it to better fit contemporary realities. For a base template, this project begins with an image of moral anthropology, *homo dialogicus*, first sketched by H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Responsible Self* (1963). In that work, Niebuhr argues that ethical phenomena are essentially dialogical in form. Further, Niebuhr proposes that four basic elements comprise the dialogical pattern: *response*, *interpretation*, *accountability*, and *social solidarity*. When these elements cohere, the result is the moral condition commonly known as “responsibility.” This dissertation reconsiders and resketches each of Niebuhr’s four elements in light of recent scholarship in neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, theology, and sociology. Additionally, the method tests each element within modern estrangement, a condition of moral numbness in which individuals are impaired from sensing each other’s needs, from sensing their responsibilities for each other’s needs, and from responding to these responsibilities in concert. The result is effectually a pattern within a pattern, so to speak, a recognizable series of images that forms a single symbol of human dialogical ethics, one that is meant to help modern humans both understand ourselves and guide our action.

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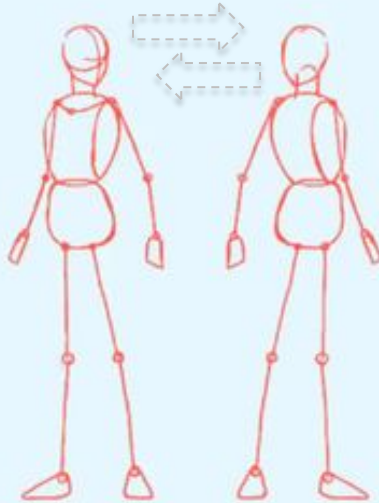
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CHAPTER 1



ENTERING ETHICS THROUGH A ROUGH DRAFT

Stories Needing Introductions and Reintroductions

July afternoon in Atlanta. A congested summer air weighs upon us, the metrorail commuters. The pressurized atmosphere dulls our minds but heightens the hum of fans and the steady clanking of the train against the track. Machine rhythms mix with the hotness of summer and bodies, lulling us more deeply into an agitated somnolence. Perhaps we can blame the event, then—both the agitation that happens and the inertia of what doesn't—on the weather.

A man feels insulted by another man's words. This much we—some sixty strangers—can tell. The offended man has risen from his seat and is pacing the aisle, his motion like a caged predator ambulating before a thing that just dropped into his box, his shoulders flexed and gaze fixed upon his affronter. Shall we call the other man an "affronter"? In fact, he has complimented the offended man's clothing, with either enough ambiguity or enough specificity

that the hearer perceived the comment as a sexual advance. Whether sexual tones were intended by the speaker or introduced by the hearer, this much we cannot tell. For now, let us call the man dropped into the box “the complimenter.”

For two rail stops, the offended man dictates his pacing with the cadence of speech and a periodic pound of his right fist into his left palm. *You messed with the wrong man! You think you can talk to me that way? Fist to palm. You like my jeans? You hitting on me? You hitting on a MAN? Fist to palm. Oh yeah, I’m from Brooklyn. You messed with a REAL MAN from Brooklyn. I ain’t no Atlanta BOY.* Fist to palm. For two rail stops, the complimenter, a young black male no more than 160 pounds, just stares out the window backwards. For two rail stops, most of us also pay close attention while pretending not to pay attention. But all are noticeably upset. Nervous glances. Frowns. Shifts in seats. An unsure quiet grows, an unwilling recognition of the performance. I stand behind my bicycle in the luggage zone, watching more obviously. About to begin a doctoral program in ethics, I remember feeling suddenly, so self-consciously like an ethnographer. Although, for two rail stops, our participation remains unclarified and our observation veiled.

Then, shortly before the third stop, the offended man, a young black male of some 230 pounds, lunges onto the complimenter and beats his cowering head into a corner between the wall and the plastic seats in front of them, where persons no longer sit. For everyone within fifteen feet of the men has moved with impressive nimbleness outside a sensed perimeter, forming a finally clear if terrified audience (Our terror is weird and empty, though, and the screams that sound are muffled and hollow, like ghosts yelling into the universe of human

beings). The complimenter simply covers his head, and the offended man hits him repeatedly for a clean twenty seconds.

Approaching the next stop, the train begins to slow, and the offended man rises and addresses the crowd, "Brooklyn in the building!" He then walks down the aisle toward me, pauses before my bike, which is blocking his way, and looks at me with a shocking regularity; he exhales and points behind me, indicating his intended direction. I politely turn my bike. The offended man opens the end door and continues into the next car. The metrorail grinds to a halt, and a gentle alarm sounds. Side doors open. The complimenter also rises. Face dripping red and expelling a few teeth into his hand, he walks off the car. I follow.

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah."

"Do you need me to call an ambulance?"

"No."

"Do you want me to call the police?"

"No."

We have already become two echoes of a failed history, unable to establish a now between us. He hurries away. As does the train.

Ethically, we need to be able to interpret harmful events in such a way that we better help each other now and in the future. But how might we examine the offended man's assault of the complimenter so that we change in helpful ways? After all, more than one analytical approach to this situation seems open. We might begin, for instance, by considering research that connects violence to cultural perceptions of disrespect. Of course, even as the assaulter appears to experience disrespect, the complimenter seems to intend the opposite social

meaning. From another angle, we might assess whether the assaulter's distinction between Brooklyn and Atlanta is relevant to the actual harm. The assaulter appeals to his geographically rooted identity at least twice during the event, and violence related to territorial identity is an ancient phenomenon. Even so, the assaulter also ties "Brooklyn" to his identity as a "man," while further tying those identifiers to a perceptual contrast he seems to infer between himself as straight and the complimenter as gay. Does this judgment allow us to investigate the event through a hate crime framework? If so, it would be worth noting that Georgia has yet to pass a hate crime law based on sexual orientation, while New York had passed such legislation eight years prior to the attack. Both at the time of the assault and now, however, the actual orientation of the complimenter remains unknown to the attacker and the other passengers on the metrorail.

More to the point, from an ethical vantage these approaches begin too narrowly—by attempting to understand one individual's harm against another while disregarding the other sixty or so people present within the event. Ethics is concerned with both helps and harms, whereas the methods of analysis mentioned so far focus heavily upon the physical harm contained between two people on the metrorail, thereby suggesting that the assault involved only two participants. Yet certainly anybody who felt anxiety in reaction to the threatening behavior, anyone who screamed in panic or moved an object in deference, each person who could have helped limit violence or foster peace within the network of interrelations on the metrorail participated in the event. An evolutionary biologist might explain my brief exchange with the complimenter, for instance, as a hardwired attempt at *consolation*, that is, as "reassurance by an uninvolved bystander to one of the combatants in a preceding aggressive

incident.”¹ Still, although a consideration of the “consolation” phenomenon may prove enlightening, we have already challenged whether it is accurate to label my role as “uninvolved.” At any rate, an emphasis upon my encounter with the complimenter is again too socially limited. To *begin* the process of ethically reading this situation, we need an interpretive tool that helps us frame the interrelations of all participants. In other words, we need a hermeneutic that helps passengers on the metro car both ask and answer the question, “How might we respond more helpfully in this situation?” Currently, the event framework that seems most prepared to treat this question is a psychological construct known as “the bystander effect.”

According to a recent meta-analysis of topical literature, “the bystander effect refers to the phenomenon that an individual’s likelihood of helping decreases when passive bystanders are present in a critical situation.”² The effect increases when: (i) bystanders are strangers,³ (ii) the dangerousness of the situation is ambiguous,⁴ (iii) response roles are socially undefined,⁵ and (iv) bystanders do not communicate their concerns openly.⁶ The element of communication is especially influential. Not least because it affects the previous three conditions (by familiarizing strangers, clarifying social responses, and reducing ambiguity), open communication turns the classic bystander notion of “diffusion of responsibility” on its head, by transforming additional bystanders into a resource for, rather than a hindrance to, responsive action.⁷ In short, the bystander pattern loses its shape when people communicate with one another about their situational needs.

Conversely, when individuals experience socially manifested needs through a generalized hush, a situation like the metrorail assault can evolve almost perfectly into a

bystander effect scenario. We passengers of the metrorail were passive participants who sensed danger, but we allowed our alarm to succumb to our ambiguity, we chose to remain strangers, and we permitted our consciences to recede into the grey zone of solipsistic duties. For some three stops in a train car, each of us became the “modern archetype” of the “bystander.”⁸ We might try to blame our stupor on bad weather, but interpreting the situation through the lens of the bystander effect leads us to understand our interrelations as a type of moral climate grounded in particular social perceptions.

Interestingly, research indicates that an individual’s identification of a current situation as a potential bystander scenario increases the likelihood that the individual will attempt to help.⁹ That is, the bystander effect is itself a way of perceiving social interrelations that impacts moral climate. More specifically, when an individual interprets a current situation as a possible bystander effect scenario, her sense of social responsibility tends to amplify, and the ambiguous duties typical between strangers give way to a clarity that her emerging role as a bystander is morally unacceptable. She feels pressured to help in order to avoid the ethical failure of passive bystanding. Released into living settings, the psychological construct of the bystander effect has thus become an interpretive tool that encourages agents to help strangers in harmful public situations.

The ethical question then becomes: Is the bystander effect a wise tool to choose to guide ethical responses between moral strangers? For, to the degree that perceptual constructs shape social responses, should we not ingrain lenses that promote helpful action? Essentially, this entire project is our “yes” answer to these questions. Yet the questions themselves first need sharpening. For, in choosing a construct to pattern social responses, what social situations

do we intend to pattern? Do we need to pattern all social interactions, all those between moral strangers, or only potential bystander effect scenarios?

I argue that we need help both in perceiving our moral capacities and in working out our responsibilities with one another in a wide variety of needful situations. Most basically, however, we need a pattern to help us navigate the organic ethical realms in between, beneath, and beyond institutions. Of course, institutions are themselves ethical patterns. To be precise, “an institution is a pattern of expected action of individuals or groups enforced by social sanctions, both positive and negative.”¹⁰ With remarkable scope and efficiency, from health care to handshakes, the consistent response patterns of institutions structure the interrelations of modern individuals. Yet, hand in hand with the stability of institutional existence comes a certain dependency, especially to the extent that individuals rely upon institutions to routinize responses to social needs. The assumed structure of ethical life within institutions can lead individuals to be startled—even socially paralyzed—by needful situations in which recourse to an institutionalized response seems unavailable. Such paralysis is always more than a phenomenon of bystanding.

The metrorail assault developed into one such situation “in between” institutions, in which the absence of a police officer or other publicly accountable figure allowed the passengers to bound ourselves within our muteness. Without a pattern to introduce us to one another as responsible agents, we chose against improvisation. When the metro doors opened and the complimenter and I returned to a less-caged ethical environment, I still did not improvise help but resorted to institutional responses (ambulance, police, etc.). Though, again, research suggests that, had I perceived the situation as a bystander effect scenario, I would

have been more likely to interpret my role as a bystander as a pattern of responsibility and, perhaps, intervened in a more creative manner. In other words, the bystander effect can stand in for a pattern of ethical action in lieu of the established rhythms of institutions.

Even so, although adoption of the bystander effect increases the odds that I will act, the bystander effect as a model offers little to inform social responses. For the bystander effect framework only addresses an *individual's likelihood of trying* to help. The bystander effect as an ethical pattern, therefore, leads me to both assess social situations and respond as an individual. Hence, the archetypal foil of the bystander is the lone hero. Unfortunately, the intervention of the bystander-turned-potential-hero always poses two risks alongside the possibility that it may help the situation: (1) as individual perceptions are typically more limited in knowledge than socially reasoned interpretations, the action of the solitary agent may be based upon an inaccurate or disconnected read of the situation and, as such, unwittingly multiply harm; and (2) if multiple persons perceive a situation as a bystander scenario and respond accordingly, then, at least in the case of the metrorail assault, some sixty individuals might improvise sixty disorganized courses of action within a single train car, again risking greater harm in the name of help.

Such risks make it difficult to commend the bystander effect as an ethical guide. Furthermore, as a tool for perception, the bystander effect only informs events “in between” institutions, that is, situations that lack normed social roles or responsibilities. In order to perceive our moral capacities and work out our responsibilities with one another throughout a wide variety of contexts, we also need to account for social needs “beneath and beyond” institutions.

a story needing reintroductions

The family has often been upheld as a key institution in modern ethics. Rousseau's philosophy goes further, casting the family not only as an institution but as an intimate prototype of the state. On Rousseau's view, the relational rhythms nurtured within the family in turn cultivate the political dynamics of society.¹¹ Although this project does not draw such a direct link between familial and societal patterns, it does resonate with Rousseau's attention to everyday moral rhythms, with what has been called "the immense...significance of the quotidian" in Rousseau's thought.¹² There is a connection between our everyday, local practices and our larger moral capacities and responsibilities as a society. More pointedly, it is at the level of local, embodied dialogue that we can most dynamically critique, reconceive of, and extend our shared institutional norms. This is what is meant by navigating ethics "beneath and beyond" institutions. As an example of how we need to attend to these priorities at the roots and horizons of our institutions, we consider Nel Noddings' hypothetical account of a family in moral deliberation:

In a very common—and sometimes deceptively simple—dilemma, we fall into conflict over the needs or wants of two different persons for whom we care. Consider Ms. Brown, who has promised to attend the symphony with her husband, and then their child comes down with an illness. Sometimes the decision is easy: the child is obviously too ill to leave, or the child is hardly ill at all and happily engaged in some activity. But often the dilemma is real, and we struggle with it. There is fever and, while there is no clear danger, the child keeps asking, "Mother, *must* you go?" The solution to this sort of conflict cannot be codified. Slogans such as "Put your husband (child) first!" are quite useless. There are times when he must come first; there are times when he cannot.¹³

In Noddings' "ethics of care," this family situation creates what Noddings calls a "conflict of care" for the "one-caring," the mother, in which the mother must choose to invest her care

in only one of two possible “cared-fors,” either her husband or her daughter. This ethical perspective burdens the mother, the “one-caring,” with the entire weight of responsibility and, therefore, judgment and action. In this way, Noddings’ caring mother shares the ethical vantage of the bystander-turned-potential-hero, in that both figures stand as individuals who solipsistically absorb the process of response to a socially shared need. One of the presuppositions of this project is that any such individualized absorption of group responsibility—though justifiable in extreme cases—is almost always wrongly conceived, unjust, and reckless. Social responsibilities require social processes of response.

In between institutions, we struggle to create such processes because our moral capacities and responsibilities must often be established anew within unfamiliar social conditions. Within institutions, divisions of moral labor can develop into unjust rhythms that inhibit persons from sensing the organic human needs that transcend even the most sophisticated institutional architecture. The bystander can become the lone hero when common structures of responsibility disappear and moral bonds are radically nebulous. The mother can become the only “one-caring” when the institutional patterns of her family unjustly fix her role as such. On the Atlanta metrorail, unfamiliar passengers need help to initially *introduce* their shared moral reality to one another. For surely we feel with—and thus care for—our two co-passengers. Surely their safety is our affair, and we can communicate our moral presence within this event in a way that brings our shared responsibility into clearer perception. In Noddings’ picture of domestic ethics, family members need a pattern through which to *reintroduce* organic moral experience into institutional rhythms, so that the latter are kept from hardening into unjust forms. For surely a caring spouse is also concerned about their

daughter's condition and desires not only to go to a concert but also to alleviate her suffering. And surely a caring spouse does not want the mother's sense of responsibility confusedly torn between two family members. And surely a caring daughter, her weakened state notwithstanding, still empathizes with her parents and wants them to enjoy an evening together—to hear music, to nurture their relationship, to flourish. A helpful ethical pattern would guide these family members to communicate and act upon the multiplicity of cares and needs that undergird and transcend their institutional roles. A pattern of ethical responsiveness reaches not only in between institutions, but also beneath and beyond them.

Evolving a Pattern of Responsibility

This project designs one such ethical pattern. Stated more technically, the dissertation develops a pattern of responsibility that helps persons introduce or reintroduce their organic moral relations with one another in order to coauthor responses to shared needs.¹⁴

For a base template, we return to a moral anthropology first sketched by H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Responsible Self* (1963). In that work, Niebuhr argues that human beings

are far more image-making and image-using creatures than we usually think ourselves to be and, further, that our processes of perception and conception, of organizing and understanding the signs that come to us in our dialogue with the circumambient world, are guided and formed by images in our minds.¹⁵

In line with such an anthropology, Niebuhr interprets ethics largely as a labor of patternmaking. That is, as humans are foremost image-using creatures, ethics is foremost a process of providing human beings with symbolic patterns through which we might interpret reality well and shape action responsibly.¹⁶

Niebuhr contributes to this labor by advocating for an essential relation in human morality and then expressing that relation in an image: *homo dialogicus* (which Niebuhr translates as “man-the-answerer”). For Niebuhr ethics is, at its core, a dialogical phenomenon of responsibility. *Homo dialogicus* thus enters situations as a speaker in a conversation of action. Within this conversation, the responsible self “answers” another’s act with a **response** that “fits” the self’s conscious **interpretation** of that act as informed by larger patterns of **social solidarity**, while holding the self **accountable** to the other’s subsequent response.¹⁷ These four elements—response, interpretation, accountability, and social solidarity—constitute *homo dialogicus*’ basic template. The result is effectually a pattern within a pattern, so to speak, a recognizable series of images that forms a single symbol of human responsibility.

This project affirms Niebuhr’s moral anthropology in many ways, not least by confessing human beings as image-using creatures and by beginning with Niebuhr’s basic image of human responsibility. At the same time, the project attempts to modernize Niebuhr’s pattern by adapting it according to both the capacities and needs of a more contemporary vision of human morality. In this sense, we develop our symbol through a type of evolution: a staged adaptation of Niebuhr’s sketch of human responsibility.¹⁸ Specifically, we adapt *homo dialogicus* by testing its four elements within conditions inhabited by “empathic, estranged beings.” By foregrounding “empathic”, the project highlights the natural, dialogical capacities for helping in human beings. Yet the modern settings into which *homo dialogicus* drops are “estranged.” At least from a surface vantage, such estrangement is not wholly troubling but, quite to the contrary, a series of aesthetically rich, politically dynamic, and digitally boundless experiences of “being together with strangers” akin to what Iris Young idealizes as “city life.”¹⁹ Beneath the

bright wrappings of our modern worlds, however, a deeper, moral estrangement persists that imbues our encounters of one another with unsurity.

We feel this estrangement within our quiet on the metrorail. For the hush of estrangement is indeed a risk of city life, an ethical muteness that can insulate individuals from one another within highly populated, culturally diffuse environments. Yet we also feel the chill of estrangement between the mother and family members whom she perceives as vying for her care. In this case, the family's estrangement manifests as the shadow of institutional accomplishment, in which response patterns that may be organizationally effective stifle the more basic empathic connections between group members. Both on the train and in the home, elemental moral experiences struggle to find expression in social consciousness. This ethical failure is the success of *estrangement*: a condition of moral numbness in which individuals are impaired (i) from sensing each other's needs, (ii) from sensing their responsibilities for each other's needs, and (iii) from responding to these responsibilities in concert. It should suffice to say, estrangement is the antithesis of empathic relation. It is into this tension between empathy and estrangement that *homo dialogicus* is first drawn, and it is from this conflict that the symbol must evolve if it is to help humans respond well with one another.

How a Symbol Might Help

Niebuhr labels his symbol "synecdochic," meaning that a primary mode of being—in this case "dialogue"—is used as a pattern for the whole of ethical action.²⁰ As previously noted, this method appeals to Niebuhr because it fits his view of human beings as "image-making and image-using creatures." In other words, a symbolic ethical method fits Niebuhr's moral

anthropology. Of course, Niebuhr's symbol *is* anthropological: *homo dialogicus* is Niebuhr's essential pattern of human ethics. Yet, despite Niebuhr's deep awareness of the symbolic nature of human beings, his writings never address the benefit of entering into ethics through a basic image. In fact, it seems possible that moral philosophy in general has yet to grapple with the ethical implications of Niebuhr's symbolic approach, which, if not a Copernican revolution of moral space, at least represents a distinct way of navigating that space. To be clear, this project does not intend, here, to tackle the infinite functions of symbols in ethics. Rather, it simply considers what might be gained by entering ethics through a symbol, especially an anthropological pattern.

To begin, there is something to be said for the generosity of symbol as an entrance into experience. Paul Ricoeur describes symbol's inclusiveness as a "surplus of meaning." Ricoeur compares this surplus with the limitations of metaphor, which he understands as more linguistically determined than symbol through culture. Symbols for Ricoeur are more ontologically primal and universal. In his words,

Metaphor occurs in the already purified universe of the *logos*, while the symbol hesitates on the dividing line between *bios* and *logos*. It testifies to the primordial rootedness of Discourse in Life.²¹

At the same time, Ricoeur notes that metaphor supplies its own surplus through the many ways that language sharpens connections between symbolic elements.²²

Ricoeur discovers a similar dynamic while investigating "the enigma of the passage from a narrative to a paradigm."²³ According to Ricoeur, agents heuristically distill narratives into single images, symbols that "govern the passage from a narrative to a life" and explain the ethical power of story.²⁴ Fascinatingly, Ricoeur credits Niebuhr's book, *The Meaning of*

Revelation, with illuminating this process. In that text, Niebuhr defines *revelation* as the “intelligible event which makes all other events intelligible.”²⁵ For Christians like Niebuhr, this “intelligible event” is Jesus Christ. But the Christian reality of Jesus Christ is itself grounded in an array of narratives—Christ is an event comprised of events. Ricoeur thus asks,

But how does one intelligible event make other events intelligible? Here between “our history” and that “special occasion” is interpolated the “rational pattern” Niebuhr calls an image.²⁶

A Niebuhrian ethical image—what Ricoeur and James Gustafson call a “paradigm”²⁷—is a “rational pattern” meant to guide life.²⁸ The pattern roots in history while helping us interpret and shape “our history.”²⁹ Hence the pattern exists in an ongoing, formative dynamic with narratives. The ethical pattern surrounds and permeates events, even as it emerges from them with new insights. Yet *homo dialogicus*, as a pattern of essential human relation, is not only a paradigm established through history but a symbol rooted in life. As such, even when a particular historical pattern fades, the “surplus” in *homo dialogicus* keeps its horizon open for new events that clarify its meaning. The image can then graft these compatible elements into its pattern, and human beings can act from the evolved paradigm, writing a new history.

The primary benefit of an ethical symbol, therefore, is the ongoing evolution between its rational pattern and its surplus of meaning. But is there a limit to the elements that *homo dialogicus* can absorb in order to evolve? On one hand, a symbol is always grounded by its “nonsemantic roots”³⁰ in life. In the case of Niebuhr’s symbol of responsibility, its nonsemantic roots emerge from dialogue. Granted, at first this may appear to be a contradiction, as *dialogue* would seem to necessarily begin at the semantic level of the symbol, that is, in the *logos*. Although dialogue depends upon a variety of media and sometimes even words to hone social

meaning, however, its phenomenal structure originates within the *bios*. To clarify, by “dialogue,” this project does not mean only (or even primarily) conversation through words but, more originally, *any activity by which two or more beings attempt to develop meaning between themselves in a responsive, back-and-forth manner*. The basic structure of dialogue, therefore, includes a vast array of epiphenomena: from emotions to dances, from physical affection to language, from varieties of children’s play to neural connections through eye contact. As will become apparent, this list represents a small fraction of the dialogical activities that saturate moral life. Indeed, although Niebuhr makes it clear that “synecdochic” images inherently overreach their relevance, if we are to attempt to symbolize the whole of human morality through a primary part, the depth and scope of dialogical phenomena in ethics support Niebuhr’s starting point. In fact, the only moral elements that *homo dialogicus* categorically excludes are those that are innately monological or nonresponsive. Consequently, accounts of estrangement are not rejected outright. For estranged conditions are not natural settings of isolation but, rather, contexts in which dialogical phenomena are unnaturally muted. Within these conditions, the initial activity of *homo dialogicus* is to bring the underlying moral dialogues of life to social awareness—to reconnect ethical perception across *logos* and *bios*, so to speak. The project sets off, therefore, not with a reasoned evolution of the pattern’s elements but with stories of estrangement (Chapter 1.5) to open attention to life and focus the symbol’s energy.

Rooted by its dialogical form, the symbol is further structured by the particular rationale of its pattern. In *homo dialogicus*, this rationale begins with its dual character as both an anthropological sketch and a Niebuhrian construct. As an image of moral anthropology, the

pattern invites accounts that inform the ethical capacities and needs of human beings. For Niebuhr, such accounts largely derive from philosophy and theology. Or, to put it another way, Niebuhr recognizes that moral visions tend to coincide with a distinct picture of human life. Thus Niebuhr proposes *homo dialogicus* as an alternative to two variant moral anthropologies, each with its own rationale: the teleological image of *homo faber* (“man-the-maker”), which patterns ethics as a process in which persons remake themselves “for the sake of a desired end,”³¹ and the deontological image of *homo politicus* (“man-the-citizen”), which patterns ethics as a process of self-rule through adherence to foundational laws.³² Whereas Niebuhr traces the origins of *homo faber* from Aristotle to Aquinas,³³ he follows the development of *homo politicus* from Plato to its fullest expression in Kant.³⁴ To fill out his own rational pattern of human responsibility, Niebuhr provocatively turns to the Stoics and, later, Spinoza.

It is at this level of the pattern’s source material that *homo dialogicus* undergoes its most significant evolutions in this project. For, in comparison to Niebuhr’s dependence upon philosophy and theology, ethicists today have both a more diverse and a more technical inventory of knowledge with which to sketch moral anthropologies and fill out their details. This is because a number of fields, not least neuroscience and its many intersecting disciplines, have significantly enhanced our modern understandings of the ethical capacities and needs of human beings. For instance, when Niebuhr first designed *homo dialogicus* as *responsive* and *interpretive*, he portrayed the self’s thoughtful responses as atomized within distinct spheres such as nature, society, and biology. Niebuhr’s choice to partition the self in this way was not based in any scientific account of natural vs. biological responses but, rather, Niebuhr’s own construals of nature and biology as independent systems. From Niebuhr’s vantage, “nature”

appeared to be a field of phenomena endemic to planetary life but external to human agency. Although humans interpret and respond to the storm's forces, we cannot wield them. At the same time, Niebuhr seemed to understand "biology" as a field of internally generated phenomena, including emotions and instinctual drives.³⁵ From Niebuhr's perspective, human beings interpret and respond to the separate systems of nature and biology through divorced acts that threaten to compromise the integrity of the self.³⁶ Within a Niebuhrian event, one self reflects upon and responds to external conditions, while another self attempts to manage the body's survival instincts and accompanying emotions. To unify these separate selves, Niebuhr depends upon a theological answer: a universal, divine One whose pattern of activity permeates all spheres of existence.³⁷

As we redraw *homo dialogicus*, however, modern research encourages a more integrative view of moral life. Epigenetic accounts of the relationships between organisms and their environments, for example, lead to a picture of human *response* that connects external conditions and internal biology. Similarly, recent revelations about the manifold nature of moral judgment lead to an image of *interpretation* that dissolves Niebuhrian boundaries—not only between nature, society, and biology, but within consciousness itself. In short, new self-understandings change moral anthropology.

Changes in how we perceive our ethical selves in turn transform how we act. Along these lines, Niebuhr articulated the "double purpose of ethics" as to (1) understand ourselves and (2) "seek guidance for our activity."³⁸ Rather straightforwardly, an anthropological pattern accomplishes this dual task of description and prescription. A moral anthropology describes ethics by outlining its basic capacities and movements. This is a simple pedagogy. At the same

time, the descriptive pattern offers a potentially elegant heuristic into human action. This is not to say that anthropological patterns expect that what agents ought to do in the future only follows from what we have done in the past. Although they might be used in such a way, moral anthropologies need not represent “ethical ideals,” and *homo dialogicus* is not intended to do so. Rather, as this project draws it, *homo dialogicus* serves as a heuristic reminder of the common moral tools that human beings have to shape ethical action. That is, our anthropological pattern does not prescribe a specific course for what is right as much as it opens attention to certain ethical needs, capacities, and trajectories for action.

In this way, there is something of *homo faber* in our *homo dialogicus*, though our pattern does not ask us to remake ourselves for a particular end. Rather, as a heuristic, it establishes a social awareness that evolution has gifted us with certain resources with which to move forward in the face of a common burden. This knowledge places ethical evolution somewhat in our hands. We cannot determine our precise endpoint in history either in terms of who we become or what we achieve, but we can bring intention to the choice of which moral resources we commonly utilize and which ones we leave behind. Organisms develop at least partially based upon what they routinely do. Knowing who we are, therefore, not only influences how we act but empowers us to direct who we will become. As we evolve, so do our anthropological sketches. Reciprocally, as our ethical patterns evolve, so do our possibilities for action. This is another benefit of Niebuhr’s symbolic approach to ethics, specifically in terms of its status as an anthropological pattern: it places self-understanding and ethical guidance within a movement of mutual evolution with one another. *Homo dialogicus* signifies an ethics grounded in reality but not stagnant in history.

Finally, the rationale of the pattern is structured by its unique Niebuhrian architecture, described earlier as “a pattern within a pattern, so to speak, a recognizable series of images that forms a single symbol of human responsibility.” In this project, I choose to treat *homo dialogicus*’ four main elements—response, interpretation, accountability, and social solidarity—as nearly as indispensable as its dialogical form. In truth, I believe the evidence shows that dialogue is indispensable for ethics, whereas Niebuhr’s elements represent a phenomenologically honest but optional way to frame responsibility. Niebuhr could have, for instance, emphasized responsibility as a *burden* as much as a process of *interpretation*. After all, several preeminent philosophers describe responsibility as the experience of an ethical weight. Heidegger argues that humans feel this “burden” (*Last*) when we are “charged with the responsibility” of being.³⁹ According to François Raffoul, Heidegger understands responsibility as nothing less than “the carrying of the weight of existence.”⁴⁰ Similarly to Heidegger,⁴¹ Sartre contends that this weight corresponds to an ontological “anxiety,” one which irresponsible agents attempt to “flee” in “bad faith.”⁴² Levinas goes beyond individual anxiety, rediscovering responsibility as an originary burden that the other’s existence places upon the self. Levinas characterizes this social force as a type of persecution:

Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted. The ipseity, in the passivity without arche characteristic of identity, is a hostage. The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone. Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting, which the limits of identity cannot retain.⁴³

Considering that Niebuhr translates *homo dialogicus* as “man-the-answerer,” the burdensomeness of responsibility disclosed by philosophers—especially as an *accountability* to the other—would seem to resonate with his account. Yet, though Niebuhr grants that human freedom gives weight to our choices,⁴⁴ his faith—his absolute dependence upon a divine “power that threw [him] into being”—makes him skeptical “of all the lonely debates of men to whom existence is a burden.”⁴⁵ For Niebuhr,

should I learn in the depths of my existence to praise the creative source, than [*sic*] I shall understand that, *whatever is, is good*, affirmed by the power of being, supported by it, intended to be, good in relation to the ultimate center, no matter how unrighteous it is in relation to finite companions.⁴⁶

In short, Niebuhr’s optimism that being is primordially good and affirming does not tonally fit with depictions of responsibility as fundamentally anxiety-ridden or persecutive. Thus, rather than trying to understand responsibility first through an individual angst or ontological burden, Niebuhr starts by observing a positive social activity already in motion. As a moral force, Niebuhr’s responsibility does not drag downward or pull outward as much as cycle forward.

Although I do not follow Niebuhr’s theology, I do share something of his optimism in the origins of human moral life. I found my particular optimism upon evidence that human morality arose from our evolutionary conditions as interdependent animals. This optimism is accompanied by a social point-of-view that diverges from, even as it reconciles, Niebuhr and the phenomenologists of burden. For example, while I accept that responsibility feels burdensome, as an interdependent creature I need not experience a shared burden as a persecution but can, instead, understand it as an essential grounding. Along these lines, this project asserts that trust in each other—not anxiety—is the originary ground of responsibility. Anxiety, on the other hand, is an individual’s experience of his inadequacy to bear a moral

weight after estrangement has, to some degree, uprooted him from the ground of trust. As heavy as dialogical responsibility can feel, absolute responsibility attempted by a solo agent is overbearing to the point of suffocation. Conversely, any temporary lightness sensed as an isolated being is substanceless: the vacuum of amorality. When we are confronted with responsibility in this vacuum, a feeling of anxiety often onsets. Modern humans must overcome the anxiety of estrangement in order to make the return journey to trust.

Beyond affirming the general optimism of Niebuhr's symbol, this project also finds value in the internal flow of its pattern. *Homo dialogicus'* elements move, dialogically and forward in time. As we will see in Chapters 2 and 3, Niebuhr's concept of *response* both precedes and precedes from his idea of *interpretation*. Of course, the response itself is spurred by an initial act from at least one other. Going forward, Niebuhr's notion of *accountability* then frames the self's response not only as an interpretation of the past but also as an anticipation of future responses from one's partners in the discourse of action. These partners are crucial. For the ethical movements within *homo dialogicus* only cohere "among beings forming a continuing society" (*social solidarity*).⁴⁷ Without a relatively stable social setting, the internal movements of responsibility become disjointed and, eventually, agents' responses become unintelligible to one another.

The forward momentum within *homo dialogicus* makes the pattern a good fit for the "rough draft" method of development introduced in this project. This method, which I have previously described as a "staged adaptation of Niebuhr's sketch of human responsibility," evolves *homo dialogicus* through these basic steps:

1. Each of chapters 2-6 is dedicated to developing one of *homo dialogicus'* four elements, beginning with *response* (Chapter 2) and concluding with

accountability (Chapter 6). The discussion of *social solidarity* occupies two chapters (4 and 5).

2. With the exception of *accountability*, the adaptation of each element begins with a summary of Niebuhr's original description, followed by a definition. This definition represents the first "draft" of the concept. As a variant, Chapter 6 begins with a discussion of the phenomenological turn of responsibility and then frames Niebuhr's concept of *accountability* as a particular movement within that tradition.
3. Using the principle of the symbol's surplus, each chapter then reviews research across a number of fields to test Niebuhr's conception against contemporary accounts. As previously mentioned, these accounts are initially delimited by three conditions innate to *homo dialogicus*: (i) its dialogical nature as a symbol, (ii.) its anthropological design, and (iii.) its four Niebuhrian elements. Even so, as an image of responsive human ethics, *homo dialogicus* is simultaneously affected by the external conditions of modern moral life that I have called "empathic" and "estranged."
4. As modern accounts and conditions alter our understandings of an element, the original Niebuhrian sketch gives way to a second draft. In turn, an evolved image of *response, interpretation, social solidarity, or accountability* emerges. The second draft is then submitted to another stage of adaptation, and the cycle is repeated until each element arrives at a version suitable for empathic, estranged beings.
5. Even the final iteration of each element is meant for ongoing development and can only represent a rough draft entrance into ethics vis-à-vis life.

This "rough draft" method of symbolic ethics helps explain why I preserve Niebuhr's four elements: As precise origin points, they enable clear markers of conceptual development, even as their internal movement encourages their forward growth. Niebuhr's responsibility is, first and foremost, responsive. As such, I take it as self-evident that his symbol of responsibility can adapt with the living world. In the final draft (which cannot fittingly be called a "conclusion"), the four updated elements will be revisited to sketch a contemporary version of *homo dialogicus* for empathic, estranged beings.

In sum, the benefits of entering ethics through a symbol are manifold. First, the symbol's surplus of meaning opens a generous gateway into experience. At the same time, the symbol's form (rooted in life) and its ethical rationale organize perceptions and introduce a basic logic to action. This places the symbol's rationale and its surplus in a tensioned discourse with one another, yielding a heuristic for action that remains open to new wisdom. This dynamic is intrinsic to all ethical symbols. Secondly, when the image is anthropological, the symbol also places self-understanding and ethical guidance in coevolution with one another. In this way, the anthropological form of the symbol offers us a simple agency over our moral development. We cannot determine our precise endpoint in history either as individuals or as a society, but we can bring intention to choices about which ethical capacities we prioritize and which ones fall out of practice. Finally, the adaptive nature of symbols—as well as the particular motion of *homo dialogicus*—empowers a form of image-development⁴⁸ that I have called “a rough draft entrance into ethics.” This is a complex method, but one which I hope will yield straightforward benefits for our dual ethical purpose to understand ourselves and seek guidance for our activity. In other words, my hope is that this work will lead to what Oliver Wendall Holmes named the “simplicity...on the other side of the complex.” Even if the project falls short of this ambition, however, the process itself fosters new and challenging integrations of scholarship—between neuroscience, psychology, theology, phenomenology, and sociology, among others—that represent conversations I believe are worth having. At the very least, these intellectual fusions may spark new curiosities, ones which more skillful scholars than I might follow towards more fruitful ends.

Why Symbols Cannot Help, in the End

Although we have, to this point, advanced under the assumption that the evolution of symbols in ethical life is beneficial, this is by no means an uncontested position. Nietzsche, for one, disdained the human tendency to frame life through concepts. For Nietzsche, concepts falsify experience by flattening the singularities of living beings into homogenous patterns. By attempting to perceive an actual leaf through something like its Platonic image, for example, human beings are tempted to interpret the real leaf—with all its spots and subtle asymmetries—as flawed. Humans eventually demote life by seeking a false ideal of it. As Nietzsche explains,

the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily dropping...individual differences, by forgetting the distinguishing factors, and this gives rise to the idea that besides leaves there is in nature such a thing as the "leaf," i.e., an original form according to which all leaves are supposedly woven, sketched, circled off, colored, curled, painted, but by awkward hands, so that not a single specimen turns out correctly and reliably as a true copy of the original form.⁴⁹

Nietzsche contrasts this human work of reconceptualizing life with the intuitive labor of bees:

As a "rational" being, [man] now puts his actions under the rule of abstractions; he no longer lets himself be carried away by sudden impressions, by intuitions; he first universalizes these impressions into less colorful, cooler concepts, in order to hitch the wagon of his life and actions to them. Everything that sets man off from the animal depends upon this capacity to dilute the concrete metaphors into a schema...In this respect man can probably be admired as a mighty architectural genius who succeeds in building an infinitely complicated conceptual cathedral on foundations that move like flowing water; of course, in order to anchor itself to such a foundation, the building must be light as gossamer—delicate enough to be earned along by the wave, yet strong enough not to be blown apart by the

wind. As an architectural genius, man excels the bee; for it builds out of wax which it collects from nature, while man builds out of the much more delicate material of the concepts, which he must fabricate out of his own self. In this respect he is quite admirable, but not because of his desire for truth, for pure knowledge of things. If someone hides an object behind a bush, then seeks and finds it there, that seeking and finding is not very laudable: but that is the way it is with the seeking and finding of "truth" within the rational sphere. If I define the mammal and then after examining a camel declare, "See, a mammal," a truth is brought to light, but it is of limited value. I mean, it is anthropomorphic through and through and contains not a single point that would be "true in itself," real, and universally valid, apart from man. The investigator into such truths is basically seeking just the metamorphosis of the world into man; he is struggling to understand the world as a human-like thing and acquires at best a feeling of assimilation.⁵⁰

Later, Nietzsche describes the process by which concepts falsify life as "the hardening and rigidification of the mass of images that originally gushed forth as hot magma out of the primeval faculty of human fantasy."⁵¹ All this is, to put it mildly, a more skeptical portrayal of humans as "image-making and image-using creatures" than Niebuhr contributes.

Yet, before addressing Nietzsche's critique of concepts, let us first consider his premise that image-making is a less "intuitive" and, therefore, less "natural" activity for humans than wax molding is for bees. Nietzsche appears to base this assertion on a formula between time, space, and the material stimuli of a subject's phenomenal experience. As François Raffoul explains, "[l]ife is for Nietzsche the ultimate phenomenon, a radically subjective experience that is not anchored in some problematic 'objective' realm."⁵² Thus, from Nietzsche's perspective, the rationalization of an experience through concepts inevitably disassociates—in multiple dimensions—the perceiver from the stimuli of the original, "natural" phenomena (what Nietzsche calls the "true in itself"). It is not just that the concept "leaf" distances us from an

intuitive experience of actual leaves, but that language itself detaches us from life, so much so that any rational articulation of nature itself is not just impossible but distortive:

Overlooking the individual and the real gives us the concept, just as it also gives us the form, whereas nature knows no forms and concepts, hence also no species, but only an x that is inaccessible and indefinable for us. For even our distinction between individual and species is anthropomorphic and does not stem from the essence of things...⁵³

According to Nietzsche, concepts not only distance but deceive. Concepts are an anthropomorphizing lie, a perceptual virus by which humans attempt to render the living “world as a human-like thing.”

This clarifies Nietzsche’s critique. It is not that concept-making is unnatural for humans. On the contrary, Nietzsche argues that concept-generation is, in fact, “fundamental” to human activity in the world. To reject this facility, he writes, “would amount to ignoring man himself.”⁵⁴ Nonetheless, this natural human habit divorces persons from any intuitive experience of the natural world. The conceptualizing human is, it might be said, naturally unnaturalizing. In so being, the conceptualizing human denies the natural world’s actuality and, therefore, constantly lies about it. Here it is worth noting that Nietzsche puts forth this argument in an essay titled, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.”

Does a “rough draft entrance into ethics” amount to a lie? Our response to Nietzsche addresses three aspects of concepts, beginning with their function in an extra-moral sense and ending with their application in a moral sense. First, let us test Nietzsche’s logic that distanced, conceptualized responses to phenomena falsify the “true in itself” state of the original stimuli. On this point, Nietzsche makes the case that, if a human could live in a routine state of intuited

responsiveness with the natural world, that person would “[reap] from his intuitions a continuously streaming clarification, cheerfulness, [and] redemption...[even as he] also suffers more often, because he does not know how to learn from experience and he falls again and again into the same pit into which he fell before.”⁵⁵ This image of intuition is awkward, as it portrays the intuitive body as incapable of learning about the world, even as Nietzsche turns to intuition for a natural experience of the world. It seems as if Nietzsche believes that intuitive consciousness is life conducted by random rushes to gratify each homeostatic need, an oversimplified struggle of “the horns and the sharp teeth of beasts of prey,”⁵⁶ while he simultaneously believes that the struggle endows the beasts with a more authentic experience of life. Ironically, if this were an accurate picture of intuitive existence, then no leaf would be experienced in its full actuality. For research shows that homeostatic urges narrow rather than open perception, focusing the animal’s sensory awareness towards stimuli salient for the current need.⁵⁷ This is at least one reason why we don’t observe an anteater studying the different angles of its prey to try to grasp the insect’s individual wholeness and distinction; we observe the anteater slurping indiscriminate hordes of ants into oblivion, although the anteater still exhibits an awareness of the differences between ants and not-ants in nature. Have you ever been deeply thirsty and, as your body welcomes water from the fountain, suddenly felt your field of awareness expand? When in one moment there was only a stream of water, now there is a wall with an advertisement, a coldness to the button, and an irritating electric hum below it all. These fuller perceptions do not arise from the urgency of intuitive life. They arise from the release of its urgency. The stretches of time in between the struggles for existence allow for the very possibility that a leaf might be more than a cover for a bird’s nest, food for a

giraffe, or litter on a manicured lawn. Within one leaf's cells a new experience of light, medicine, or taste may await one such nonintuitive moment. Or, if a poet who is neither hungry nor being mauled by a bear settles into a park bench, perhaps a single fallen leaf may catch her eye, and she may attend to all its peculiarity before wrecking it in words. But it will be through the mechanisms of this clumsy mauling of language that she will, for a time, experience that which Nietzsche merited only to the bear's claws. Of course, any poet worth her salt understands that her words are both a feeble echo and something wholly else entirely, both a prayer to and a sacralization of the leaf.

On this first matter of distance, we might also raise another problem: Which represents the "true in itself"-ness of the leaf—its DNA under a microscope, its youthful green on the vine, or its bits crunched between the goat's jaws? Aren't these all just altered perceptions of form imposed by various arrangements of beings in space and time? Do I experience the sun's "true in itself"-ness in a laser, through a cloud, or by trying to stand on its surface? At its core, what Nietzsche describes as "true in itself"-ness reduces to a single nerve response to a stimulus. Yet an individual neural event comprehends neither a cell nor a star. Anyone who has tried to examine the spots on a leaf knows that one cannot perceive two spots at the same time. As with the leaf, all natural x's of which Nietzsche speaks are multifaceted and declare infinite moments of singular "truths" within their ecologies. And it is only through the brain's interrelations of these stimuli across time—whether five seconds or five millennia—that humans arrive at a way to live in relation to lions that sound, scratch, bite, leap, run, and sleep in certain patterns, and vice versa. Otherwise, there would be no difference between a lion and an antelope, and intuition would be impossible. Each phenomenon would not, as Nietzsche

imagined, feel wholly original for a mind radically beholden to the moment, for there would be no comparison point to give “originality” meaning. Each event would only be another birthing and dying of the mind. There would be no x’s—only the evaporating X of the instant. That is, Nietzsche’s very notion of singularity is itself enabled because phenomena are not only experienced in their immediacy, but compared and contrasted with one another through the body’s different vantage points through life.

Our second response to Nietzsche’s critique of concepts follows from our first: namely, that “extra-moral,” partial perceptions or concepts do not constitute lies about the world. Rather, humans lie about the world when we raise one perception or image to the status of fixed truth. Hence, Plato indeed lied when he tried to subjugate life to the Forms, reducing the world to a series of dependent “copies” of original, metaphysical models.⁵⁸ In doing so, Plato elevated the concept above life, and, in extreme cases, planted a suspicion in human perception that the movements of life were fraudulent shadows—that life itself was a lie.⁵⁹ Nietzsche’s rejoinder to such metaphysical “truths” thus attempted a radical return to the epistemological power of experience by shattering all concepts. Of course, Nietzsche did not need to attack all concepts as false. He only needed to reject the exalting of the concept over life. The subjugation of experience was the lie. But Nietzsche was rarely one for moderation, so he dramatically claimed that life was abandoned the moment the lava of language hardened into a concept. This analogy overreaches. It is one thing to argue that igneous rock is not magma. It is another, however, to contend that the rock’s existence perjures the Earth. For persons familiar with the life of volcanoes, the rock contains a story about the Earth, one which remains at least partially true as long as it helps us recall the volcano’s greater capacities.

Similarly, to recognize that the concept does not capture the full truth of a living phenomenon does not mean that the concept is a sham. Rather, when oriented responsibly vis-à-vis the phenomenal world, the concept can point to truths about life—histories and possibilities—that might be temporarily hidden. The concept is thus, as Nietzsche knew, natural and necessary for human life. Philosophers erred by upholding form as prior to phenomena; but the dramatics of philosophers need not indicate a flaw in us.

So far, we have considered Nietzsche's critique of concepts in an extra-moral sense. *Homo dialogicus*, however, engages life in the moral domain. Although this shift into ethics does not change the basic activity of concepts, it does revise their stakes in a perhaps surprising way—namely, by uncoupling images from the primacy of truth. For truth is not what ethics foremost requires. Ethics seeks first to help and not to harm. Of course, to help well, subjects need accurate information about their situations. Hence, the efficacy of ethical symbols depends upon their power to relate subjects honestly within those situations. But this type of truthfulness does not, in a Nietzschean way, assume concepts grasp the facts of immediate phenomena. Rather, ethical symbols open subjects' perceptions to morally relevant phenomena, then provide an introductory schema for attending to those phenomena. In doing so, ethical symbols announce initial perceptions as partial and point to phenomena for fuller understanding. In other words, ethical symbols ask us to investigate situations in order to help. In the case of *homo dialogicus*, the assisting schema includes a pattern that brings human moral capacities to social awareness.

If a symbol can be ethical, can it also become immoral? As an extra-moral concept lies when it assumes its own fixed truth, a symbol becomes immoral when it attempts to subjugate

the world under a brittle moral design. This occurs, for instance, when a dogmatic vision drives one ethnic, religious, or political group to grant fewer rights to another group simply based on what John Stuart Mill [and later John Rawls] called “accident[s] of birth.”⁶⁰ As Rawls argued at length, it is unjust to allow “the accidents of natural endowment and the contingencies of social circumstance”⁶¹ to dictate such distributions. Yet Rawls also knew that the perpetuation of injustice against a societal group is itself rarely arbitrary, but almost always cosigned by a biased picture of one’s place over-and-against others in society. This is why Rawls’ first move towards justice is to try to blind citizens and institutions behind a “veil of ignorance.”⁶²

At a more personal level, an image becomes immoral when, as a stereotype, it spurs one human to force another inside a perceptual box. In this way, the stereotype behaves as a demonic Form, one which lies by clothing others in lies, rather than simply shielding or glossing individualities. Stereotypes represent a particularly vicious type of “problem which arises,” as Walter Lippmann famously explained, “because the pictures inside people’s heads do not automatically correspond with the world outside.”⁶³ Unlike Nietzsche, Lippman was less interested with philosophical arguments about truth than with the durability of democratic societies. Accordingly, Lippmann focused his analysis on the ways false images seed in the mind, warp perception, and impact social action. Even so, Lippman, like Nietzsche, understood that people cannot live without mental pictures to guide us:

To traverse the world, men must have maps of the world. Their persistent difficulty is to secure maps on which their own need, or someone else’s need, has not sketched in the coast of Bohemia.

The analyst...must begin then, by recognizing the triangular relationship between the sense of action, the human picture of the scene, and the

human response to that picture working itself out upon the scene of action.⁶⁴

Using Lippman's framework, we might say that an ethical symbol helps coordinate subjects' perceptions, their inquiries into phenomena, and their responsive actions. Conversely, an immoral symbol detaches perceptions from at least one if not both interpretations and responses. An immoral symbol thus forecloses rather than opens situations. It leads subjects into a monologue over the world rather than a dialogue with it.

Empathic beings need robust, layered, and skillful dialogue if we are to help one another—even more so if we are to emerge from estrangement. Entering such moral labor through a symbol is a challenging venture. I believe it is also a necessary one. For, despite the excesses of his critique, Nietzsche nonetheless recognized two truths about concepts: they often distort our senses, and we cannot experience life without them. Holding these truths in tension, we can no more retreat from the pitfalls of conceptualized life than we can discover justice behind ignorant veils. Rather, we need to accept both the natural functions and the risks of our moral visions and attempt to take responsibility for their evolution—to keep them in the service of life. As an ethical symbol, *homo dialogicus* should open our perceptions and direct our intentions towards helping each other in responsible ways. Our staged adaptation of Niebuhr's sketch begins with this aim. If our draft proves unworthy, we can always resketch it or draw a new image. Yet, regardless of whether our trajectory stays true, Nietzsche was right that life—and thus ethical action—ultimately lies beyond the realm of symbols. In Niebuhr's words, "actuality always extends beyond the patterns of ideas into which we want to force it."⁶⁵

An ethical concept might guide our entrance into a bullying situation on a metrorail or help a

family realize a more responsive way to care for one another. But, in the end, it is up to the living to help.

My God I'm so lonely
So I open the window
To hear sounds of people
To hear sounds of people...

—Mitski, from the song "Nobody"⁶⁶

CHAPTER 1.5: NARRATIVE SURPLUS



AFIRE WITHOUT WARMTH AND FREEZING WITHOUT COLD: *SETTINGS OF ESTRANGEMENT*

Every generation worries about itself—and especially its children—in ways that feel particular to it, even when those ways are largely inherited. Some form of children’s “screen time,” for example, has been the target of parental concern since televisions first stilled the reluctant eyes of youth. There is something distressing about the way a luminous screen dims a child’s responsiveness to the living world around her. Perhaps it is that the child’s eyes, themselves bestowed with the magic to give life to the subjects of their attention, un-bestow their worlds with life when they become frozen by the screen. The screen’s pried piper of minds has advanced through computers, video games, and social media, and it now can whisk our children away to infinite caves with a single fingerprint swipe upon a smartphone.

Our responses to such worries often take the form of normative counteroffers: Our children should watch TV less and read more, play video games less and play in neighborhood green spaces more, attend to digital worlds less and attend to immediate, physical and social

environs more. These are truisms that are probably vitally true, but we have spoken them without either conviction or counteraction enough that their vitality has ebbed to echoes. That is, despite an abundance of moral language, we seldom expect our speech to initiate more than fleeting attention much less lasting change.⁶⁷ Yet, when we experience this feebleness in our words, we often emphasize the power of things like screens rather than the lack of will in our conversations. At the very least, to consider the vigor of our responses is to interrogate both our modes of moral communication and the will in our souls.⁶⁸

We need to attend both to our forms of communication and our will in part because things like screens do shape our responsiveness in ways that are worth worrying about. And there are plenty of things like screens. Any common mode of being may spawn a schema that alters one's perceived range of possible responses within that condition. For example, living within radically gerrymandered voting districts may alter perceptions regarding the possibilities of civic discourse because citizens experience political outcomes as predetermined. Eventually a gerrymandered condition could degrade the possibility of civic discourse itself. Of course, the condition that most severely imperils responsiveness is isolation. With this in mind, the fact that the proportion of Americans who live alone has ballooned from 1-in-20 to 1-in-4 in less than a century⁶⁹ indicates a significant change in the responsiveness of American society. Consider what types of communication seem likely to advance within such a society, i.e. within a condition whose schemas increasingly depend upon the experiences of isolated individuals. Would we not expect this society's communications to enhance the perceived power of isolated individuals? Might contemporary America's "tweeting," blogging, Facebook posting, and even the phenomenon of "TED Talks" indicate shifts in conversation towards "ego-to-

crowd” modes of communication that dignify individual expression and away from “subject-with-subject” speech that assumes robust, face-to-face relations? Such questions address our conditioned perceptions, which shape part of our human capacities for response.

Here is a question from another part of human responsiveness: Is it our will to interact with each other through increasingly gerrymandered, twittered, estranged modes of life?

Is it our will to experience so much of our lives isolated inside cars and trucks? For, really, anything that separates us can affect our responsive capacities. And one rather simple but powerful set of communicative schemas is evolving through our life in motor vehicles. I want to begin with stories from this way of being, which is so shallow yet burrowed inside our bones.

SETTING 1

The summer is the time to drive fast, and driving fast in a car is one way to sing if you can't sing. On another smoldering Atlanta afternoon in the summer of 2001, I was driving windows down, radio loud on I-75 northbound through the brief, privileged valley that is West Paces Ferry. I drove in a leftish lane because that was my habit when I was younger and prone to screaming mangled lyrics in such a way that the high-speed air and blaring speakers could swirl my voice into a feeling—if not a sound—like self-liberation. Just enough traffic to give the impression of a common will moved, worries subdued by the sun, along.

When human beings travel alone in machines at high speeds, little capacity and great hazard exists in noticing people. Of the millions of persons whom I have driven alongside on highways, I cannot recall 10 faces. Two of those faces happened to be waiting in the lane to my immediate right, riding less than 100 yards ahead inside an old but still ignorant, pale-blue-

dulled-to-silvery sedan. It was not a nice car; but it was the type of perfect car that seems to fit the unrustable bonds of college-aged couples in the summer.

As my car drew within fifty feet of the couple, I noticed gentle, soundless bursts of yellow slipping from the undercarriage of their vehicle around the left rear tire. At first, the flames appeared either in front of the tire or behind it, either below the driver's side rear door or under the rear bumper. Then they quickly extended around the edges of both sides of the tire to form a single, orange mass whose bursting turned to breathing.

Imagine how to speak. Please do not read further without imagining how to communicate amidst this.

I turned off the radio and began punching the horn. My foot slammed downward then slowly released, accelerating then measuring my car so that our front windows aligned, mine open and theirs closed innocently. A wavy-haired young man of maybe 19 held the wheel, his face confused by my finger directing him to unseal his world. As he rolled down his window with his left arm spinning around a manual lever, a young woman leaned her naturally tan face forward, shoulder-length brown hair slapping around startled eyes.

"Your car is on fire!" I yelled to them, pointing to the ball of flame some 10 feet from his left shoulder.

He looked at me.

"Get off the road! Your car is on fire!" With added force, I pointed to the calmly exploding area of their gasoline box. "Look! Look!"

He peered his head out the window and looked downward. Then, without seeing my eyes again, he retrieved his head into the car and pulled the steering wheel right, crossing over

one lane. His car slowed as his focus shifted from driving forward to moving sideways, and I watched the rest of the scene unfold through my rearview mirror. As his car decelerated, the vehicles in the other lanes accelerated relative to it, increasing his difficulty in changing lanes. His car was afire, but the vehicles on his right flew by, perhaps more accustomed to responding to a slow car than a burning car. I could not see the couple's faces, now, but I could imagine the panic in them. The young woman lowered her window and began waving her arms at the passing traffic, gesturing towards the emergency lane on the road's shoulder. I understood her. The vehicles kept passing.

I can never know if the three of us were the only ones aware, during this nightmarish minute, that they might be swallowed in flames. I only know that, after their car successfully crossed one lane, they were barred from safe passage by emotionless metal frames driven by faces I never saw. Whatever the faces inside these vehicles experienced did not alter their courses in the slightest.

Until, in a moment of cynical revelation, the young man took one hand from the wheel and flipped the car's right turn signal on. A light at the front corner of the passenger's side began to blink in muddy orange. Although I could not see their car's taillight from my mirror, suddenly traffic paused in the lane next to them, and they moved over. The blinker remained on, and a vehicle yielded in the next lane, allowing them over again. They continued in this way, aided not by the terror of their lit bomb but by the recognizability of their blinking bulb, onto the emergency shoulder. As their doors opened, my car passed over a hill, and I only know that there was no report in the news that evening of a young couple harmed by the explosion of an early 90s model Honda Accord.

SETTING 2

I teach students at an elementary school in a neighborhood of Atlanta that has no name. Neighborhoods in Atlanta are called by their names, but this neighborhood can be referenced only by the names of its roads, most of which are decorated with abandoned and boarded ruins of former homes.

On the third day of the 2015-2016 school year at 6:40 a.m., I turned onto one of these roads. Above the pine tree border of the road's right side, frustrated billows of smoke rose and faded into the morning's low, grey sky. My first intuition was that the smoke was too great and lively to come from intentionally burning trash, which is the usual culprit when smoke rises in August in Atlanta. But I heard no sirens, saw no lights, and sensed no emergency from the cars approaching me from the direction of the source fire. So I did not slow when I drove passed it; I only glanced to my right perfunctorily down a dirt road line that separated the small forest of pines from a field of abandoned brick and trash apartments.

I was driving by a car frame engulfed in a bonfire some twenty feet tall. The vision forced me to stop my car upon the nearest curb. Exiting in a sort of alert semi-consciousness, I dialed 9-1-1 and drifted closer. The fire crawled everywhere. A Virginia pine near the car quickly became infested with yellow and smoke, and the crackle of fresh wood and nettles exorcised silence from the wood.

"Hello, 9-1-1. What is your emergency?"

It was then that I realized that human beings might be in the car. Because of the size and aggressiveness of the blaze, I had kept my distance. For the first twenty seconds or so, I simply stood before the scene in confused awe. Sparked by the human voice on my phone,

however, I perceived the burning metal frame as a thing that was made to hold people. But I couldn't see glass or paint, nor could I distinguish tires or even doors. This seemed to be an empty frame lit this morning by someone with a curious purpose.

I detailed to the 9-1-1 operator that a car was on fire and that, although the frame didn't seem to have people in it, the fire was spreading quickly to the trees. The operator asked me to stay on the line until the fire department arrived. I agreed and turned around to see the many cars passing by on this road that led to my school. One person stopped, rolled down his window, and asked if anyone was in the burning car. I replied that I didn't think so, and he drove to work.⁷⁰

Within three minutes, a fire truck arrived and began to treat the blaze. The fire chief told me that I could continue to my job now too.

That afternoon, when I drove by the spot, I saw a forty-foot trunk of Virginia pine lying atop a smashed frame, like the remains of a funeral pyre. But what had been alive? What was honored as life in this place? Today, over three months after the event, I passed the same charred tree lying upon the same flattened car. They are buried above ground, joining the abandon homes, broken bottles, empty windows, and the fields of evergreens that blur our windows day after day in this neighborhood without a name.

SETTING 3

There's no rule that says that people can't celebrate Valentine's Day by hating each other. We can grinch on Christmas, we can trick instead of treat, and we can glut on a day set aside for giving thanks; hating on a day dedicated to love may only be the next progression of holiday freedom.

As for the communicative schema of motor vehicles, the disposition of a car is to protect insiders and threaten outsiders. Vehicular machinery is incapable of love and more than capable of hating the bodies and senses of any external thing. A moving car is two tons of metal that is continuously killing something (insects, squirrels, kangaroos) in its surroundings and seems poised to kill almost anything that ventures between it and its goal. This movement is accompanied by the following possible sounds: honking horns, screeching tires, crumpling metal, thudding bumpers, squeaking windshield wipers, thumping subwoofers, the exhaust of exploding fuel coughing through ill-suited mufflers, and the people inside yelling single-phrase monologues into the boiling soup of noise cooked up by these ingredients.

Of course, the injuries of motor vehicles have become mundane. And the great victory of harms that achieve prosaicness is that they naturally disguise themselves from reflection. Hence, the greatest critic banality ever faced bestowed this advice: “What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”⁷¹ It may feel silly to consider motor vehicles as oriented towards hate. But I think it is worth thinking about whether a machine that orients itself as a motor vehicle does towards outsiders possesses a capacity to morally form its human occupants in its image.

Valentine’s Day fell on a Sunday in 2016, so many persons chose Saturday evening to celebrate the holiday with a little less awareness of Monday morning. After a relaxing dinner, my wife and I were driving to my mother’s house to pick up our 2-year-old son. Our car was running the gauntlet of perhaps the busiest stretch of road in Atlanta: 16-lanes of concrete and flashing lights where I-75 and I-85 fuse between The Varsity and the 17th street bridge. I had just shifted into the HOV (high-occupancy vehicle) lane on the far left of briskly moving traffic.

One lane to our right and about 200 yards ahead, a car attempted to cross multiple lanes at once towards an exit ramp. Its right tail clipped the front left side of another car, sending both vehicles spinning like drunk dominoes into chain reactions of undesign. Within two seconds, seven vehicles were crunching-sliding-smoking-screaming in all manner of directions through the Valentine's Eve air. Human attention could not track any individual event amidst the dozens of events that were now in motion because of the single turn of a steering wheel just 2 seconds earlier. Yet everyone who was watching knew that the events were terrible even though we could not behold them. A single sedan spun from the pile of smoke and fracturing lights to the left and came to rest in a ½-lane between the HOV row and the southbound wall, some 90 yards in front of our now-stopped car. Three vehicles in the HOV lane between the injured car and us carefully circumvented it, without pausing, and accelerated towards their unaltered destinations.

As my wife and I prepared to stop to assist the occupants, a father and two teenagers stumbled from the vehicle and began walking in slow circles, orbiting dangerously close to the oncoming traffic.

"What are they doing?" I asked my wife. Then I immediately realized that we needed to use our vehicle to form a tenuous wall between the highway and these three people. We did so, ignited our hazard lights, and then I rushed to engage them as my wife phoned 9-1-1.

"Are you ok?"

"Who hit us? What happened? Where are they?" A girl of some 15 or 16 years, bent over and holding her immobilized right arm, yelled not back at me but into the traffic. She was a

victim searching for her attacker. Now she was stalking this unknown target of her vengeance in the direction of the accident.

“YOU NEED TO MOVE BACK TOWARDS THE WALL!” I yelled first at her but then at them all. “You are not safe here! We are calling an ambulance, but you need to stay away from the traffic!”

“Is anyone hurt?” The father asked his children, blankly.

“I can’t feel my arm!” His daughter replied, and then she began to cry in angry fits and starts. The son seemed unharmed but mute. All three appeared to exhibit acute stress responses. The father’s head hemorrhaged softly.

“Sir, can you come here, please? Sir, you are bleeding from your head a little bit. The cut is not bad, but you may have a concussion. Do you mind if I check you for a concussion?”

He came silently towards me with already dilated pupils. They did not flinch for the small flashlight in my phone.

“Sir, I think you have a concussion. We’ve already called an ambulance. You need to keep your family away from the traffic. Your car is not safe. You are in a lot of danger from the moving traffic here. We will stay with you until the ambulance arrives. Do you feel injured anywhere else?”

“I’m fine. I’m fine,” he said, and he slowly shifted his feet towards the wall. His daughter then recommenced her verbal aggression against the unknown cause of her pain. As I turned to place myself again between her and the traffic, I heard their car creaking forward. The father had misinterpreted my statement about the dangerous position of their vehicle and was

pushing it towards the wall. The car's front left side began to grind against the concrete barrier and threatened to sandwich him between its frame and the wall.

"SIR STOP! STOP THE CAR, SIR! STOP!"

He pulled the emergency brake and looked up blankly.

"Sir, just leave the car where it is. Just wait with your family for the ambulance."

At this time, a large truck came to a stop in the lane to the right of our car, establishing a larger buffer for the family against the still moving highway and preparing a zone for emergency vehicles to park. An off-duty security guard stepped from the truck and calmly signaled trailing vehicles to stay three lanes to the right of this side of the accident scene. Yet, instead of cooperating, the passengers started to vent their annoyance at the security guard's decision to block a second lane. Immediately, no fewer than 5 vehicles started to blare their horns at the steady hand of the guard. Then, a first window lowered, and a finely dressed woman placed her head outside.

"MOVE YOUR FUCKING TRUCK! MOVE YOUR FUCKING TRUCK OUT OF THE ROAD!"

Her apparent date then protruded his face from the opposite window.

"FUCK YOU! FUCKING MOVE! PEOPLE HAVE PLACES TO GO!"

Then, like ducklings, little heads popped out from the growing line of cars behind us, each committed to the public verbal scourging of this woman who was driving home from her job but still keeping people safe on the evening before Saint Valentine's Day. The ambulance came, replaced us, and we carefully drove to our son.

CAR PEOPLE

The responsiveness of urbanized human beings parallels the sociality of our automobiles. Each motor vehicle begins a course with a singular goal and relates only minimally to others along its lonely journey. An automobile's communications are generally brief, nonresponsive admonishments to others to maintain a safe distance. Any responsive messages are typically terms of alarm expecting quick compliance rather than patient dialogue. Inside the automobile breathes an organism with dynamic social capacities, but those capacities are kept from other organisms by both their metal exoskeletons and their disparate goals. The faces of cars are increasingly sneered.

To borrow Bruce Perry's phrasing: *the brain becomes what it does*.⁷² So it is not too much to argue that modern persons navigate existence as if upon little interstates. Our lonely minds target solitary destinations point-by-point, and our days sketch individualized histories in connect-the-dot patterns. Consciousness is an Outlook schedule turned into event data points traveled as a map. How do such schemas of destination affect our capacities to, when needed, enter into responsive relations with one another? When the accidents of each other's lives threaten to interrupt our courses, do we seek to circumvent those accidents, curse them, yield to them, or will our existence within them?

I just took a break from writing this at a coffee shop. The narrow hallway exiting the coffee shop is, rather unusually, 150 ft. long. As I began the long walk towards the doors, a woman began the dramatic walk from the doors towards me: 2 opposing vehicles on a 2-lane road. She managed to walk 75 feet towards and then passed me without making eye contact, much less smiling, or making any bodily signal to indicate that I was alive. I smiled at her anyway, but her silence was enough for me to prefer an authentic "fuck you for being in the

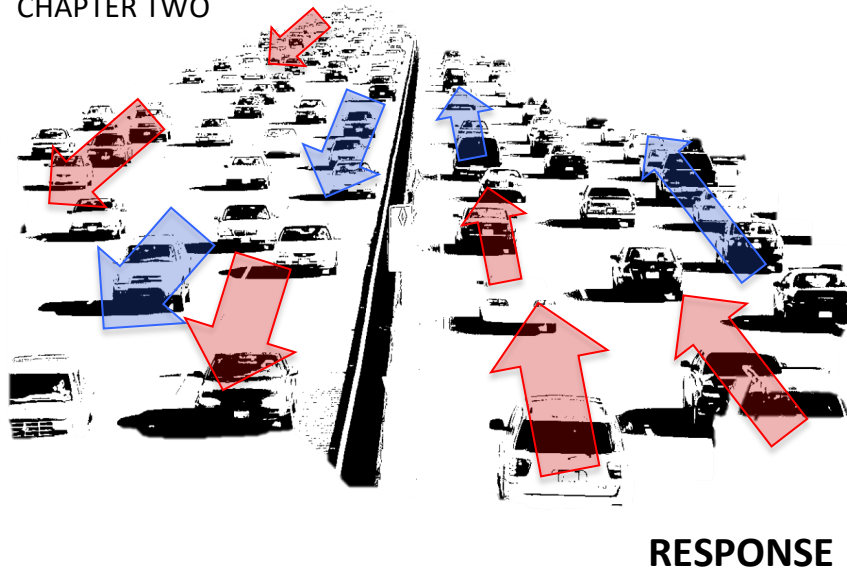
way!" Equally frustrating for me is that, for reasons too mysterious to divine, I do not smile much more naturally than an Audi. I too often smile because I think human beings need things like smiles to counteract things like screens; but even if my diagnosis is true, prescriptive smiles are not truly responsive and prove, therefore, to be weak medicine.

Do automobiles encourage communicative schemas that limit our capacities to respond with one another? Is vehicular life diminishing social understanding? I believe automobile travel is just one rhythm of life where we might think more caringly about both what we are doing and whom it is causing us to become. For my tale at this point, it suffices to allow these stories to symbolize a more basic reality: across cities of solitary, moving metal frames, the lives inside are at once in flames and chillingly alone, but the dominant feeling is not of heat or cold but of the motion of unthinkingly passing each other by.

*“We have time...to remember who we are—creatures
of history, of deep psychology, of complex relationships.
Of conversations artless, risky, and face-to-face.”*

—Sherry Turkle⁷³

CHAPTER TWO



A symbol of thoughtful response

H. Richard Niebuhr chose *response* as the first of four elements that comprise his ethical symbol of responsibility. According to Niebuhr, “all life has the character of responsiveness.”⁷⁴ At the same time, a response lacks the character of a moral decision if it is not saturated in rational reflection. In this sense, response and Niebuhr’s second element, *interpretation*, are paired elements:

All action, we now say, including what we rather indeterminately call moral action, is response to action upon us. We do not, however, call it the action of a self or moral action unless it is response to *interpreted* action by us. All actions that go within the sphere of our bodies, from heartbeats to knee jerks, are doubtless also reactions, but they do not fall within the domain of self-actions if they are not accompanied and infused, as it were, with interpretation.⁷⁵

Here, interpretation not only couples with response but forms a conceptual boundary between (i) response as a *prereflective, amoral reaction* and (ii) response as a *reflective, moral act*. In Niebuhr’s system, one human may react to another like an eyelid to a flash of light with what

Niebuhr calls “pure reflex.”⁷⁶ The resulting movement is, however, devoid of ethical character. The animal reflex becomes the act of a moral person when a reflecting “self” seeks to self-consciously understand the original stimulus and aims to respond to it through a reasoning will.⁷⁷ In Arendtian terms, Niebuhr does not so much ask as expect that we are continuously “thinking about what we are doing.”

Niebuhr traces this expectation from the Stoics to Spinoza. From Niebuhr’s view, “Stoic ethics...seems most intelligible when regarded as an ethics of response.”⁷⁸ Like the Stoics, Niebuhr frames moral response as a willful battle between a rational self and an impulsive body constantly under siege by emotional storms. That is, the emotional impulses of a human body are not simply ethically neutral but unwise, and, Niebuhr goes so far to say, lacking humanity.⁷⁹ Niebuhr’s moral self emerges—and humans find their humanity—by developing a capacity to substitute emotional reactions with what he understands as a distinct and opposite process of response through dispassionate interpretation. Niebuhr calls the perspective that engenders this substitution “awareness:”

Whatever else we may need to say about ourselves in defining ourselves, we shall need, apparently, always to say that we are characterized by awareness and that this awareness is more or less that of an intelligence which identifies, compares, analyzes, and relates events so that they come to us not as brute actions, but as understood and as having meaning.⁸⁰

Drawing inspiration from Spinoza, Niebuhr then argues that such awareness inherently refocuses moral action away from immediate situations precisely because reactions to local events are prone to emotional, short-term aims that fail to recognize ultimate meanings.

Conversely, a rational action seeks to respond to universal patterns (It is important to note, here, that Niebuhr has faith that stable moral patterns are not only discernible in history but, in fact, reveal the *essential goodness of being* throughout history⁸¹). Niebuhr's concept of interpretation thus leashes his concept of response and attempts to direct the latter from local experience towards universal truths. In Niebuhr's words, "[t]he freedom of man from his passions, and from the tyranny of events over him exercised via the passions, is freedom gained through correct interpretation with the consequent changing of responses by the self...⁸² Deliverance comes through a universalized interpretation of what is happening."⁸³

If adopted as a lens for action, Niebuhr's theoretical move towards universalism fundamentally alters practical responses between persons. On the face of it, to respond to another is to answer a statement posed by the other's action, hence Niebuhr's "man-the-answerer." Niebuhr's concept of interpretation, however, presses the answerer to assume more crucial questions behind and beyond the *prima facie* facts of the present situation. Responders, therefore, are not primarily responding to each other as much as the patterns of truth that they perceive as permeating each other's acts.

In these ways, the Niebuhrian answerer is foremost a questioner. First, the Niebuhrian responder interrogates her own body to subdue emotional allegiance to the current moment. Second, the answerer interrogates the other's actions in order to discern more significant patterns that are assumed to suffuse them. With this origin for response, Niebuhr's moral actions are less answers to the acts of others as much as universal countermoves made possible after one peels away the ephemeral distortions of a situation through a process of internal deliberation.

In other words, Niebuhr's *homo dialogicus* is indeed engaged in a dynamic moral conversation of questions and answers, but the primary dialogue takes place with one's self or, more specifically, with general internal representations similar to Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" or G. H. Mead's "generalized other." As Niebuhr discusses, Mead believes that sometimes "[o]ur thinking is an inner conversation in which we may be taking the roles of specific acquaintances over against ourselves," while more commonly we converse with what we perceive as the "generalized attitude of the group."⁸⁴ Niebuhr shifts Mead's notion by rediscovering the living, particular other not as a composite but as a component of a general pattern of activity over time:

I respond to [the other's] action not as isolated event but as action in a context, as part of a larger pattern...[T]he other and his actions are not atomic events or occasions to which atomic reactions are made; they are particular demonstrations of an enduring movement or particular parts of a continuous discourse. I live in the presence of, and in response to, a Thou who is not an isolated event but symbolic in his particularity of something general and constant. In the other I meet not a composite other but yet something general in the particular.⁸⁵

At this point, we may summarize Niebuhr's first two elements of his symbol of responsibility, *response* and *interpretation*, thusly:

- i.1 All life possesses the character of responsiveness, but moral *response* proceeds only from the complex processing plant of interpretation.

- ii.1 *Interpretation* centers around a threefold cognitive function: (1) a willful attempt to safeguard reflection from emotional sway, (2) an awareness that perceives ultimate patterns through particular persons and events, and (3) an internal dialogue through which one interrogates the meaning of social actions through stable

representations of society and being (i.e. *homo dialogicus* is originally a symbol of a single self that interprets on behalf of a social society, rather than a symbol of a society of mutually interpreting persons).

Accordingly, the degree to which we adopt, adapt, or re-sketch these aspects of Niebuhr's symbol depends upon the degree to which contemporary scholarship helps us consider these questions:

1. Why does moral life have the character of response?
2. Is moral response bound to, or even produced by, reflective thought?

We spend the rest of this chapter answering question one. Chapter 3, *Interpretation*, addresses the second question. As *response* and *interpretation* are paired concepts for Niebuhr, chapters 2 and 3 should likewise be read as coupled.

Why does moral life have the character of response?

NEL NODDINGS' BRIDGE

Although his sketch of moral anthropology remains unique, H. Richard Niebuhr is by no means the first thinker to characterize ethical life as responsive; nor is he alone in partitioning action into categories that reflect an ethical gap between emotions and reason.

In *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Nel Noddings locates the very "wellspring of ethics in human affective response."⁸⁶ Yet, though Noddings differs from Niebuhr by rooting responsiveness in emotional life, like Niebuhr she eventually reserves the label "ethical" only for responses that follow from rational choices.

Noddings divides response into two layers: *natural caring* and *ethical caring*. She identifies the first layer, natural caring, as synonymous both with a Humean sentiment that is “universal in the whole species” and with an instinct for parental nurturance that is observable across large swaths of the animal kingdom. The latter fact—that even nonhuman parents display an innate care for their children—keeps Noddings from granting ethical status to responses that seem instinctual:

In situations where we act on behalf of the other because we want to do so, we are acting in accord with natural caring. A mother’s caretaking efforts in behalf of her child are not usually considered ethical but natural. Even maternal animals take care of their offspring, and we do not credit them with ethical behavior.⁸⁷

For Noddings, behaviors enter the moral field when they are experienced as a function of a reflective will. A person acts ethically when she follows something near to a Kantian duty⁸⁸ to respond and, even more, when she chooses to respond in a way that draws her nearer to an “ethical ideal” perceived as an “ethical self.” As Noddings describes these notions, the

ethical self is an active relation between my actual self and a vision of my ideal self as one-caring and cared-for. It is born of the fundamental recognition of relatedness; that which connects me naturally to the other, reconnects me through the other to myself...The characteristic “I must” arises in connection with this other in me, this ideal self, and I respond to *it*. It is this caring that sustains me when caring for the other fails, and it is this caring that enables me to surpass my actual uncaring self in the direction of caring.”⁸⁹

Here, Noddings—like Niebuhr—sketches a symbol that represents social responsiveness but ultimately returns to individual fortitude to sustain the cycle of response. Unlike Niebuhr,

however, Noddings understands her image as morally prescriptive rather than descriptive. Furthermore, rather than placing “I must” and “I feel” at disparate poles of moral experience, Noddings’ “ethical self” casts emotion and reflection in a relation of developmental dependence, in which the will to become an ethical person “arises” from the innate feelings of care that humans experience in naturally caring relations.

Noddings later clarifies this ethical arising as “a remembrance,” an often unconscious memory of the natural care that we have experienced from our infancy onward.⁹⁰ Thus, at least on the surface, Noddings seems to define “natural caring” as necessary yet insufficient for moral response. Even so, at other times Noddings appears to locate the primary experience of goodness itself in the natural:

Ethical caring, the relation in which we do meet the other morally, will be described as arising out of natural caring—that relation in which we respond as one-caring out of love or natural inclination. The relation of natural caring will be identified as the human condition that we, consciously or unconsciously, perceive as “good” ...We want to be moral in order to remain in the caring relation and to enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring.⁹¹

The idea that the quality of one’s relations at early stages of life help forge one’s later social dispositions is, as I shall discuss shortly, now supported by research with a number of species, including humans. Nonetheless, Noddings’ claim that a caregiver’s motivations—i.e. “natural” or “ethical”—can be imparted to the memories of a developing life seems untestable and, ultimately, immaterial. More to the point, it seems logical that the instances of “natural care” that we experience at early stages of development also contain significant doses of

caregiver responses guided by ethical choices. At least, it seems that the distinction between “natural” and “ethical” is unknowable to the ingraining system of an infant body. As children we experience the quality of a care provider’s response, but this quality is absorbed as a whole act of care—not parsed into layers based upon an analysis of the other’s cognitive-affective state. In other words, the layers of our “remembrances” are dissolved so that care is care. As the roots of our moral memories are therefore already blended, caregiving would also seem to be less parsable.

So why does Noddings, or for that matter Niebuhr, attempt to morally differentiate response motivations at all? In a basic way, their partitioning may be attributable to the first-person singular analysis of moral consciousness that each philosopher adopts. For, even though each theorist appears to sketch an ethical vision that is highly social, each also restricts awareness of ethical action to the currently acting individual, rather than considering either how multiple agents individually experience a single action or how those agents experience the action as a first-person plural system. I think these distinctions in perspective need to be explored in order to more fully understand moral phenomena, and I will return to this matter of moral perspective throughout the project.

There is a second, connected explanation for why Noddings and Niebuhr assess actions differently depending upon whether the responses are viewed as emanating from emotions or rational choices: at least since the Stoics, these are inherited categories that are often taken for granted. As Joan Tronto points out, even the age of Scottish sentimentalism divided “natural virtue” so that moral action derived “from two sources: from reason, that higher plane of human existence, and from sentiments, the grounding place of human existence, now rooted in

the household.”⁹² Immanuel Kant’s choice to structure universal ethical equations entirely through the reasoning will of the individual was achieved, therefore, with little theoretical resistance, and his “moral point of view” has served as a primary pencil with which ethicists have sketched their interpretations since.⁹³

But to inherit epistemic categories uncritically is to abandon searches for truth that should be the Enlightenment’s heritage. And, in our moral experiences of social life—even just the nurturing exchange between a mother and child, the moral boundaries between emotion and reason rapidly degrade. When the experiential borders appear to blur, should the conceptual borders not be reconsidered? Are there not more fundamental bases for the responsive character of moral life?

FROM EPIGENETICS TO EMPATHY

Social responsiveness is in our genes. When Niebuhr and even Noddings scripted their ethical symbols, genes and sociality were conceptually opposed by the “nature vs. nurture” debate. Framed by this argument, human development was seen as a contest between the initial, static genetic design of one’s body and the subsequent power of society to influence how one’s personality becomes oriented within the world. Perhaps not coincidentally, this debate overlaid neatly with moral anthropologies that contrasted a realm of nature with a realm of ethics.

Contemporary genetics, however, has revealed this contest to be much more of an evolutionary collaboration. In fact, an organism’s genetic code is designed to respond dynamically to its environment and express certain genes differently based upon the capacities that the organism will need to best thrive in that environment. As Bruce Perry explains,

[i]f genes can produce only one pattern of responses, that pattern could turn out to be fatally maladaptive. But if genes are programmed to be 'set' differently by different early environments, organisms can be much more flexible. A whole new field of science—called 'epigenetics'—has been developed to study these interactions between genes and the environment.⁹⁴

In short, an organism's genetic code contains a range of possible architectures, and the specific blueprints are drawn in response to the organism's developmental experiences.

Fascinatingly, this development appears to occur primarily in stages in which the organism actively seeks external inputs in order to design its nervous system, especially. According to neuroscientist Eric Nelson, patterns of attention in infants often correspond to areas of the nervous system that are undergoing construction:

In humans and some nonhuman primates, a great deal of time is spent with up-close face-to-face interaction between the infant and mother, and this corresponds to the same period of time that appears to be a sensitive period for the development of face perceptual systems in the brain. This pattern suggests that what is most salient for the infant at a behavioral level corresponds to the functional systems that are undergoing construction in the nervous system and the information that is obtained behaviorally is integrated into the structure of the brain...In other words, the infant appears to be seeking out "information" from the environment on how to construct the nervous system consistent with when that functional capacity of the nervous system is maturing.⁹⁵

What may seem like ephemeral encounters—face-to-face exchanges between infants and caregivers—are, in fact, sought by the infant brain and can be consequential for its development. In one clinical example shared by Bruce Perry, a young man named "Ryan"

experienced 18 different primary caregivers (professional “nannies”)—18 different potential patterns of facially facilitated bonding—in his first three years of life. Remarkably, this instability in Ryan’s early social world was encouraged by his mother. Concerned that Ryan would form a relationship with a nanny that might displace her, Ryan’s mother switched to a new nanny every time he appeared to exhibit an intimate bond with the present one. Unable to establish trustworthy patterns of facial communication, Ryan’s nervous system eventually slowed its seeking and turned insular. Ryan became impaired from accurately reading the emotions of others or responding fittingly to their suffering. He began to exhibit sociopathic features. As a seventeen-year-old, Ryan deceived a developmentally disabled girl into attending a party as his apparent date. At the party, he raped her and forced her to “put on a show” for his friends. He laughed while she cried.⁹⁶

In another troubling case described by Perry, a depressed and socially isolated mother labored to emotionally care for her infant child, “Brandon.” She placed him in a high chair facing a television day after day, interacting with him only to change diapers and refill his bottle of juice when he cried. In this environment, Brandon’s socially seeking brain encoded a consistent pattern, but that pattern was the language of TV commercials. Brandon developed a form of speech, but his language did not reflect the dynamics of responsive humans. Rather, Brandon learned to speak in unidirectional phrases such as “new and improved!” and “supersize me!”⁹⁷ As an older child, Brandon struggles to connect with others’ eyes. His gaze exhibits a mechanical blankness, a looking past towards an invisible presence.

Although Ryan and Brandon’s cases represent both extreme and unusually direct pathologies, their very obviousness demonstrates—if in an overstated way—the epigenetic

correspondence between development and environment. As a young human grows, the body develops partly by seeking an increasing array of information from its surroundings. The sympathetic nervous system, for example, can be developmentally “tuned-up” so that a child raised in a frequently threatening environment maintains a ready state of semi-alarm. Persons whose nervous systems are molded in this way may suffer from heightened stress levels and nervous behavior, even as they benefit from being more alert to potential hazards.⁹⁸

Through such epigenetic processes, a person’s social-emotional capacities and tendencies are responsively influenced. This development takes place as one’s genes seek feedback from the environment in order to form an organism best equipped to thrive there. If developmental settings are sensed or perceived in a certain way at critical stages, then the individual can become predisposed to engage future contexts as such. An early environment chronically lacking caring, responsive faces can become a world in which caringly responding to faces isn’t experienced as *natural*. A developmental setting in which communication is unidirectional can shape a being who *naturally* speaks and looks as if upon a one-way social road. Epigenetically, what becomes morally “natural” for any person is partly the result of human choice, but the decisions are often made by others and are not necessarily the products of reflection. What may seem remarkable for many moral philosophers is that a similar process takes place in rodents.

The licking and grooming behavior of mother rats impacts generations of care. In a basic way, whether or not a mother rat licks and grooms a pup determines whether or not it will survive. An unloved pup will die.⁹⁹ At the same time, an affectionate mother epigenetically alters the brain of her pup in ways that positively incline its future behavior. A frequently licked

and groomed (“high-LG”) pup tends to both show greater problem-solving intelligence and develop an enhanced receptor system to manage reactions to fear. The pups of low-LG mothers tend to overreact to novel stimuli and stressors, exhibiting increased fearfulness in general. High-LG pups, on the other hand, are more likely to display calmer reactions to a host of stimuli.¹⁰⁰

Further, these biological dispositions tend to mature so that adult parents repeat the established cycle. Female rats raised by high-LG mothers are more likely to develop brains that lead them to be high-LG mothers themselves. Conversely, low-LG offspring are less inclined to be affectionate parents. Again, this is a matter of genetic responsiveness to environment. If relocated from low-LG to high-LG mothers, rat pups exhibit an increased likelihood of developing high-LG brains, while pups born to high-LG mothers have reduced odds of developing a caring neurobiology if transferred to low-LG mothers.¹⁰¹ Though the relationship between genetic development and parental care is inevitably more complex in humans, the overall principal appears consistent. Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp notes that the brains of low-LG rat pups exhibit parallel qualities to the brains of abused human children who eventually commit suicide.¹⁰²

When our brains can be oriented by others towards care, sociopathy, or even suicide before we have the capacity for rational reflection, any philosophical line between natural behavior and ethical choice is strained. To return to Noddings’ claim that motherly care is natural rather than ethical, we now see that what *feels natural* for a parent greatly depends upon a complex relation between genetic expression and early childhood experiences. Epigenetically, apathy can feel just as natural for one person as caring feels for another. Are we

ready to label apathy and caring morally equal? To be clear, such problems should not be used to confuse epigenetic development with moral determinism.¹⁰³ For the human neural system retains some plasticity into adulthood,¹⁰⁴ and even prereflective social responses are subject to a degree of cognitive control.¹⁰⁵ Still, epigenetic science does complicate a number of ethical conversations. Among its impacts, epigenetics restructures the “nature vs. nurture” debate, frustrates attempts to rigidly define “natural” and “unnatural” moral experiences, and complexifies the ground of ethical agency.

Yet, even as epigenetics upsets philosophical categories, it deepens our understanding of the responsive character of life. Humans are innately responsive. We are born with genetic maps that unfold themselves at least partly based upon our infant readings of the landscape. It is easy, from a philosopher’s perspective, to assume that a human child’s eyes and other sensory networks lack wisdom. But even an infant’s nervous system is bestowed perceptual wisdom from ages of successful evolution. This natural history entrusts our early senses with extraordinary creative powers, long before we can reflect upon ourselves or our intentions. How our young senses influence our growth in response to early environments affects how and why we will respond as we mature. For the dispositions that form epigenetically encourage us to respond with an intentionality that resonates from deep within us, even as that very resonance has been tuned by the actions of others.

This modern understanding of genetics compels us to redraw our Niebuhrian concept of *response* from:

- i.1 All life possesses the character of responsiveness, but moral *response* proceeds only from the complex processing plant of interpretation.

to:

- i.2 All life is by nature responsive, while the moral character of many social animals is founded in their epigenetic capacities, which assess an organism's early surroundings and develop its nervous system accordingly, so that the organism becomes responsive in ways that presume to benefit it within those settings. Thus, what each organism automatically perceives and responds to as helpful or harmful, good or bad, is influenced by the interactions of its genes with its early environments.

How does our nervous system help structure our particular responses in essentially moral ways? The next stage of our inquiry draws us to a neurological doorstep of one of the most simultaneously admired and embattled concepts in moral thought: *empathy*.

THE NEURAL SYNCHRONIZATION OF SELVES

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that the body connects multi-sensory inputs similarly to the way it fuses two images through binocular vision. As the body combines images from the left and right eyes, so it integrates auditory and visual stimuli from one source object into a single phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ When I see a silent video of a person snap her fingers, for example, the visual movement of the fingers still anticipates a particular sound. And, when I hear the sound of a snap with my eyes closed, I automatically imagine a specific movement of a middle finger against a thumb. The "visual and auditory experience[s] are pregnant with each other," in Merleau-Ponty's words, and their union is accomplished through the body's perception of movement.¹⁰⁷

As it turns out, neurobiological structures exist that support Merleau-Ponty's theory. Moreover, these structures help explain not only our capacities to connect sight and sound but

to connect with each other. Scientists have called the structures that help initiate these resonances “mirror neurons.”

All human movements require neural cells in the brain to “fire,” that is, to activate through a series of electrical and chemical transmissions. If I move my arm and hand in order to lift a wine glass, for instance, then a particular set of neurons will fire to help coordinate this activity. In the last few decades, research has revealed that a modest percentage (10-25%) of these neurons also fire when I *only observe someone else* picking up a glass. These “mirror neurons,” originally discovered in macaques, automatically mimic the neurochemical processes that underlie the actions of others. The resulting neural echo both allows the observer to internalize another’s movement and primes the observer to perform the action with precision.

Mirror neurons are both exact in their reading of others’ movements and aware of the goals of those movements. Different mirror neurons fire depending upon whether the observer senses the movement of a single finger, multiple fingers, or a whole hand. Marco Iacoboni calls these action-specific neurons “strictly congruent neurons.” At the same time, “broadly congruent neurons” fire in response to the perceived goal of picking up the glass, regardless of whether the observed actor seeks to pick up the glass with pinched fingers from one hand or two cupped hands.¹⁰⁸

Even more fascinatingly, mirror neurons predict the goals of actions.¹⁰⁹ Midway through another’s movement of an arm at a dinner table, various mirror neurons in an observer will fire to predict multiple plausible outcomes. A certain percentage of the observer’s neurons may fire to anticipate cupping a glass between the stem and bowl, while a lesser percentage may fire to predict picking up a spoon with a pinch grip. The accuracy of the neural prediction—and the

strength of the resonance in general—depends upon the observer’s experiences with similar activities. For example, when ballet dancers observe dance sequences, their mirror neurons fire with greater synchronicity when watching skills that they have been trained to perform.¹¹⁰ Moreover, according to recent research, experience with an activity aids neural resonance beyond the visual realm. Specifically, experience with the multisensory aspects of an activity assists mirror neurons in predicting visual movement based upon sound.¹¹¹ If I simply hear the sound of a galosh stomp in a puddle, for instance, then mirror neurons associated with the bodily movements required to accomplish a similar stomp will automatically fire, as long as my nervous system has visual experience linked to the sound of galosh stomps. As Merleau-Ponty’s mirror neurons no doubt helped him perceive, sound and sight are indeed pregnant with each other through movement.

Of course, if mirror neurons cause humans to automatically resonate with one another’s acts, why do we not constantly engage in unwanted public copycatting, as if caught in an eternal game of “Simon says”? In fact, structures that Iacoboni calls “super mirror neurons” appear to inhibit unconscious mimicry between human beings. Super mirror neurons both instigate and inhibit movement. They do the former during the performance of an act but the latter when an act is only observed.¹¹² Thus, whereas macaques, who possess basic mirror neurons but lack super mirror neurons, unavoidably replicate one another in cliché, “monkey-see-monkey-do” fashion, humans inherently feel and predict others’ behaviors but are usually kept from thoughtlessly repeating every act we notice. Still, some human actions regularly slip through the super mirror neurons’ filters. When this occurs, a single yawn, smile, or hand gesture can elicit a domino effect of prereflective mimic responses.

Whether or not we mimic each other's motions with intention, the work of mirror neurons places us inside the experiences of each other's bodies, and this basic function directly ties mirror neurons to research on empathy. Simply put, empathy is a set of capacities through which individuals share and perceive feelings with each other.¹¹³ As one contribution to empathic processes, mirror neurons link facial movements to emotional areas of the brain. Through this connection, if a shared smile becomes an automatically mimicked smile, then the facial echo also becomes an approximation of a shared feeling.¹¹⁴ It is not surprising, then, that more empathic persons tend to mimic others more than less empathic persons.¹¹⁵ Additionally, mirror neuron activity corresponds with empathy both when persons watch the expressions of others and when they listen to others' personal narratives.¹¹⁶ This activation of mirror neurons through stories suggests a connection between mirror neurons and the imagination, which is traditionally considered to facilitate empathic perspective-taking. Finally, in children, mirror neuron activity correlates both with empathy measures and with overall sociality.¹¹⁷

Long before the discovery of epigenetics or mirror neurons, Niebuhr understood the nervous system as a network of amoral reflexes—of eyelids and irises twitching in response to flashes of light.¹¹⁸ Now we know, unequivocally, that our neural responsiveness grounds our emotional connectivity, which helps establish our basic ability to form relationships. According to Iacoboni, mirror neurons may take this process quite far, physically ingraining the actions of others inside the self's activity so that elements of others live and breathe within each of us:

[M]irroring is not only simulating others as self...Indeed, the pervasive imitation and other factors (for instance, the pervasive presence of mirrors) may facilitate the coupling of activation in motor cells in the frontal cortex and in visual cells in the

medial temporal cortex. When I smile, you smile back to me. The repeated co-occurrence of these two events may shape mirroring properties in both frontal (motor) and temporal (perceptual) units such that even when I smile all by myself for whatever reason, I evoke the sight of your smile through the firing of neurons in my medial temporal cortex. When the self acts, the self also perceives the other. Self and other become two sides of the same coin.¹¹⁹

Mirror neurons synchronize human beings through a responsive, even dialogical process. Through neural conversations, selves resonate within one another in ways that recall past responses and echo towards future ones. Furthermore, the networks established by mirror neurons assist other layers of dialogue between persons—including the emotional discourse of empathy. The dialogue of mirror neurons is automatic, primal, and requisite for human beings to understand one another in order to respond well. In sum, rather than destabilizing ethics, the nervous system is the constitutive fiber of *homo dialogicus*. And it is this ancient social wiring that propels the next evolution of our concept:

1. Life is responsive. The moral character of our responses can be traced to our epigenetic capacities, which assess our early surroundings and develop our nervous systems accordingly, so that we become responsive in ways that presume to benefit us within those settings. As the most imperative environmental resources for humans are other humans, our nervous system evolved specialized cells that automatically establish intersubjective dialogues between persons prior to spoken words. These networks help ground all social—and thereby all ethical—responses.

Our neurons automatically structure one self inside another only to the extent that our social environments empower them to do so. The self anticipates relational others, and those relations help sew the contours of the self. To this point in our evolution, our bodies have

served as the social fabrics of our societal and, I am beginning to argue, moral orders. If our social connectivity degrades, will our bodies also not found our moral disorder? We now examine the moral functions of empathy to consider what is at stake.

THE PROXIMATE MORAL BASES OF EMPATHY

In their foundational paper, Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases, Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal analyze empathy from two vantages: an “ultimate” perspective that considers longterm, evolutionary causes for phenomena, and a “proximate” view that examines immediate biological and environmental factors. From the ultimate vantage, Preston and de Waal conceptualize empathy as a hierarchy of neural mechanisms that “evolved because it is adaptive for basic responses to the environment, and for group living.”¹²⁰ At the same time, “ultimate and proximate” perspectives overlap more than they conflict, and the ultimate causes Preston and de Waal suggest also help explain empathy’s proximate utility as a capacity that helps social animals respond to emotionally salient situations. These understandings of “ultimate and proximate” have become staples in empathy scholarship.¹²¹ I am clarifying this background of “proximate” and “ultimate” because I borrow from it even as I uniquely appropriate the terms within the following ethical analysis.

In the current section, I apply the phrase “Proximate Moral Bases” towards three aims. First I look at how a few, prominent theories of empathy describe the capacity’s responsiveness in situations. This leads to a reconsideration of empathy as a concept, in which I offer a dialogical definition of empathy that, I believe, makes empathy essential to any contemporary understanding of *homo dialogicus*. With this new definition, I then more thoroughly illustrate empathy’s role in moral dialogue.

1. *Conceptions of Empathy's Responsiveness In Situations*

Martin Hoffman defines empathy as “the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation than with his own situation.”¹²² In *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals*, Mark Bekoff and Jessica Pierce note that “[d]ogs will begin frenetic barkings, and only after the chorus of barks is well under way will the dogs look around to see what they’re barking at.”¹²³ At the core of his empathy model, Frans de Waal locates a state-matching phenomenon known as “emotional contagion” that accounts for multiple animal behaviors, including the way that the cries of a primate infant prompt surrounding infants to join in a chorus of distress, or the way that humans will unconsciously smile or frown in response to video images of smiling or frowning faces flashed at speeds too fast to register in conscious attention.¹²⁴ These frowns, cries, smiles, and barks all spread rapidly in patterns that seem socially “contagious.” In such cases, neural substructures that underlie empathy appear to stimulate an automatic, emotional tuning effect between social animals in a manner that, to adjust Hoffman, “makes [an animal] have feelings that are more congruent with another’s situation.”

The substructures of emotional contagion cannot be explained only—or even primarily—with mirror neurons. First, mirror neurons have only been confirmed in a few species, whereas many more species exhibit phenomena similar to emotional contagion. Secondly, emotional attunement processes are not simply matters of mimicry. As George Ainslie and John Monterosso point out, “appreciation of an object’s state may occasion not just a copy of that state, but a wholly different state that nevertheless depends on that

appreciation.”¹²⁵ Although mirror neurons certainly help drive resonances between humans, a description of the more dynamic processes of empathy requires a more complex model.

To this end, Preston and de Waal design empathy as a type of “Perception-Action Mechanism (PAM).” Not unlike Niebuhr’s sketch of *homo dialogicus*, Preston and de Waal’s PAM begins with the point-of-view of a *subject* (analogous to Niebuhr’s “self”) who perceives and responds to the state of an *object* (Niebuhr’s “other”).¹²⁶ When the subject perceives a salient aspect of the object’s state, “attended perception of the object’s state automatically activates the subject’s representations of the state, situation, and object, and that activation of these representations automatically primes or generates the associated autonomic responses unless inhibited.”¹²⁷ The “representations” that the PAM induces occur in “parallel distributed patterns of activation that reliably fire in response to a given stimulus.” A mimicked smile, a shared sense of worry that spreads amongst coworkers in response to a boss’ unusual shift in tone, or a group of children running away in playful fear from a parent pretending to be a “monster” could each fall within the Pam’s definition of a representation as a “parallel distributed pattern of activation.” In any event, the character and quality of the representation depends upon “developmental tuning biases and connectivity of neurons as well as alterations due to experience.”¹²⁸ In other words, epigenetic shifts, neural abnormalities, or any experience that changes the subject’s perception can “inhibit” or shift the PAM’s response to the object’s perceived state.

Of course, the fact that the PAM generates its representations “automatically” distances the model from moral responsiveness as portrayed by *homo dialogicus*. Nevertheless, Preston and de Waal explicitly frame the PAM as a model based in response, going so far as to say that

“response” represents a general shorthand for “perception-action.”¹²⁹ Furthermore, they stress that the PAM “emphasize[s] that perception selects elements in the environment that require or suggest a response by the subject.”¹³⁰ Preston and de Waal refer to these demanding elements as “salient.” Although the following explanation tempts tautology, it is plainly true that life has the character of response because living things need to react to important events; amongst human beings and other social mammals, these events usually involve others of the same species, so our nervous systems have evolved—and typically develop—to automatically tune our states according to one another’s salient cues.

Emotional expressions are our most basic such cues. Even in the early stages of empathic tuning, the emotional contents of both verbal and nonverbal signals initiate a number of responses. First, emotional expressions invite attention. Attention is itself a moral act. Iris Murdoch argues that “[i]t is...a psychological fact, and one of importance in moral philosophy, that we can all receive moral help by focusing our attention upon things which are valuable.”¹³¹ Sherry Turkle, analyzing the effects of technology upon our social development, observes that attention is “how we show what we value.”¹³² If we trust the emotional cues of our bodies, then what is to be foremost valued is attention to one another’s conditions.¹³³ Even if the initial attention amounts to little more than a responsive chorus of prereflective barks, the vocalizations themselves indicate both moral awareness and an invitation to further inquiry. Eventually everyone looks around to figure out what we’re barking at. An ethical question has been discovered through the emotive signals of an answer.

Secondly, emotional expressions begin to construct a social group through which to cooperatively respond to the situational need. Like attention, sociality itself is a moral

condition. In fact, Bekoff and Pierce argue that sociality is the first condition of morality.¹³⁴ Evolution forged our moral sentiments—our senses of helps and harms¹³⁵—within tight-knit clans, but in modern societies of strangers each public moment of emotional attunement invites the ad hoc formation of a new response group. As individuals gravitate towards a person who frantically yells “help!” at one end of a public park, or as a gathering of strangers smile, jump, and sing together at a concert at the other end of the park, emotional tuning processes begin to coalesce the groups towards different if respectively salient aims: the “help” group begins to cooperate in response to a perceived harm, whereas the concert group bonds together through what I would argue is a form of “social joy” or *play*—a basic affective nourishment for social animals.¹³⁶ This power of emotions to tune persons into a shared world is a primary reason that Martin Hoffman calls empathy the “‘glue’ of society.”¹³⁷

Third, while emotional attunement focuses attention upon a need and solicits a response group, the energy of emotions regulates the motivation to act. As Preston and de Waal note, “[e]motion leads the individual to take a particular emotional stance, which channels its further behavior.”¹³⁸ Contrary to the Stoics’ view of emotional motivation, Jaak Panksepp argues that the stances towards which emotions lead us contain a great deal of evolutionary wisdom. Panksepp identifies seven systems for primal “affective consciousness” in the mammalian brain, each which creates a certain “intention in action”¹³⁹ as a conscious but prereflective mood that drives general interactions with the environment. For Panksepp, these “genetically ingrained emotional systems reflect *ancestral memories*—adaptive affective functions of such universal importance for survival that they were built into the brain, rather than having to be learned afresh by each generation of individuals.”¹⁴⁰ We automatically—but

not unconsciously—rage, lust, fear, seek, play, care, or panic/grieve based upon environmental cues that our evolved bodies’ interpret as important for our welfare. To this extent, emotional attunement can itself be a moral experience because it signals that something is at stake for us and needs our response. This does not mean that emotional motivations direct us to respond skillfully. “Primal emotions are not,” Panksepp clarifies, “intrinsically bright and intelligent.”¹⁴¹ Their basic wisdom lies in focusing energy towards something that appears salient. Emotional systems can achieve a secondary intelligence, however, by learning to differentiate between situations that are or are not truly needful. Our brains regularly encode experiences initially perceived in one way with a variant emotional value, adjusting both our perceptions of similar experiences in the future and our responses to them.¹⁴²

Nevertheless, even when our emotions accurately cue us to a vital situation, we do not want to simply be huddled together and pressed to respond in a general way. We want to respond well. In any perception-action (i.e. “response”) process, the precise quality of the action matters, which may help explain why the lion’s share of traditional ethics begins at the point when individuals begin to intentionally design the act. As already mentioned, Niebuhr dismisses as amoral any bodily process that lies outside of reflective consciousness, believing interpretation to be the boundary at which the self begins to shape fitting responses. In a partial shift, Noddings includes primal emotional processes as necessary predecessors for ethics but ultimately follows a Kantian heritage that defines moral action as the product of a reasoning will. Even Noddings’ partial admittance of emotions into the ethical formula, however, allows her theory to serve as a transition between Niebuhr’s *homo dialogicus* and de Waal’s concept of empathy. For, in a second stage of his model, de Waal places emotional

contagion at the core of a hierarchical, “Russian Doll” model of human empathy. According to this framework,

[e]mpathy is multilayered, like a Russian Doll, with at its core the ancient tendency to match another’s emotional state. Around this core, evolution has built ever more sophisticated capacities, such as feeling concern for others and adopting their viewpoint.¹⁴³

The closer one gets to the core of the Russian Doll model, the more automatic the neural process—and the more species share the associated capacities. Among mammalian and even bird species, emotional contagion seems widespread. Far fewer species, however, display abilities synonymous with the model’s second level, which de Waal labels “Concern for Others” and includes behaviors such as the consolation of others following harmful events. The outermost layer of the model, “Perspective-Taking,” requires the cognitive capacity to imaginatively simulate the vantage of another and has only been indicated outside *homo sapiens* in a handful of cases.¹⁴⁴ In his related model of “The Three Levels of Morality,” de Waal identifies “moral reasoning” as the highest ethical capacity and without parallel in nonhuman animals.¹⁴⁵ Thus, like Noddings’ continuum from natural care to ethical care, de Waal’s empathy model originates with automatic, emotional drives, then develops towards capacities that increasingly depend upon reflective reasoning. Although de Waal differs from Noddings in that he recognizes all phenomena within his model as moral, both design ethical theories that illustrate what one might call an “emotion-to-reason” spectrum.

2. A Critique and Reconception of Empathy

Earlier, I introduced empathy as “one of the most simultaneously admired and embattled concepts in moral thought.” The reasons for its embattlement are largely

conceptual, as theorists from an array of fields struggle for consensus regarding what, exactly, empathy is. On my view, two methodological biases contribute to this problem: First, the host of scholarship on empathy attempts to define it at one or more points along an emotion-to-reason spectrum. Second, empathy is standardly understood as a subject-object phenomenon from a first-person point-of-view. While clear logic exists for both these approaches, I contend that the ethical movement of emotional attunement calls for a different continuum and a more dialogical point-of-view.

Theorists tend to locate empathy upon an emotion-to-reason spectrum for at least two reasons. Most basically, as an affective moral process, empathy finds itself pulled by the same perceived tensions between emotion and reason that have befuddled ethics—and probably much more than ethics—since at least the Stoics. These poles may simply be in our collective cultural head. Hence, even a scholar such as de Waal, who advocates for the inextricable dependence of reason upon emotion,¹⁴⁶ still partitions empathy into a hierarchy with more affective forms at the base and more abstract forms at the head. Of course, de Waal’s model is foremost an explanation of the evolution of empathic capacities in *homo sapiens* over time. Still, one might sketch a different spectrum by more closely following the development of the affective elements that lie at the Russian Doll’s core, for instance. Any such project may prove difficult, however, for a reason that lies beyond the historical emotion/reason dichotomy.

Specifically, modern scholars have inherited a “theory of mind” conception of empathy that has established itself as a fixed pole at the reasoning end of the spectrum. De Waal typically refers to this concept as “perspective taking,” while other writers commonly call it “cognitive empathy” or “projective empathy.” Regardless of the title, the notion originated

when phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein coopted empathy (when the term was at a very nascent stage¹⁴⁷) to answer the so-called “problem of intersubjectivity.” Like many philosophers before them, these phenomenologists were interested in how persons might know each other’s mental states. As a proposed solution, they molded empathy into a “unique mode of consciousness through which we *directly* experience others’ thoughts, emotions, and desires.”¹⁴⁸ Empowered by this cognitive device, the subject’s mind imaginatively assumes the object’s orientation in the world; one consciousness temporarily inhabits another consciousness and understands it. For many thinkers, some version of this definition of empathy remains dominant today. Fascinatingly, Nel Noddings rejected empathy in her ethics of care because she believed projection to be empathy’s entire function.¹⁴⁹ The theory of mind account of empathy exerts such gravity, in fact, that scholars often begin with it as a given and then pull affective accounts into its framework.¹⁵⁰ In sum, most empathy definitions fall upon an “emotion-to-reason”¹⁵¹ spectrum not only because an emotion/reason dichotomy persists in our cultural consciousness, but also because empathy’s own origins fix it to an endpoint of abstract reasoning.

Defining empathy through a subject-object perspective further complicates the matter. This point-of-view is found at empathy’s birth as the German term, *Einfühlung*. In its original use, *Einfühlung* attempts to capture the power of art to evoke feelings from viewing subjects. According to this aesthetic theory, a subject “feels into” a painting or sculpture, experiencing a literal “object” as emotive. At the turn of the 20th century, Theodore Lipps adopted this idea to account for the way that humans naturally imitate the expressions of others. For Lipps, humans “feel into” the movements of living others in the same way that we emotionally resonate with

an aesthetic object.¹⁵² Lipps thus argued that aesthetic and social interactions depend upon a common psychological mechanism: *Einfühlung*. As a consequence, the interplay of human social-emotional life became shoehorned into the subject-object vantage of an art critic.

Like emotion-to-reason spectrum bias, the bias of the subject-object perspective is now so thoroughly ingrained in empathy scholarship that it may feel curious to question it. Theory of mind concepts rely upon this point-of-view to explain how a subject enters the alien consciousness of another being. For one subject cannot assume the mind of another subject without jeopardizing the other's subjectivity. Perhaps aware of this dilemma, Amy Coplan attempts to set restrictions on the process in order to guarantee a type of strict, "other-oriented perspective-taking:"

To stay focused on the other and move us beyond our own experiences, perspective-taking requires mental flexibility and relies on regulatory mechanisms to modulate our level of affective arousal and suppress our own perspective. It often requires at least some knowledge of the *target*, though how much depends on the context...In order to represent the situation and experiences of those we know less well and with whom we fail to identify, we must work harder, and even then, we may be unable to simulate their situated psychological states.¹⁵³

If one can achieve this cognitive gymnastic, Coplan believes that we can "stay focused within our simulation on the other's experiences and characteristics rather than reverting to imagining based on our own experiences and characteristics." Even more strenuously, Coplan requires that empathizers complete the exercise while maintaining "clear self-other differentiation."¹⁵⁴ Needless to say, it is an impressive mental feat to set aside one's own experiences and characteristics, replace them with a simulation of another's experiences and characteristics,

and then proceed to empathize with the other via a clear sense of one's self. At most, I submit that only a very few expert practitioners might achieve it, and Coplan's brand of empathy thus represents a relatively irrelevant societal skill. More likely, nearly everyone who attempts this "mental flexibility" cannot abstract themselves from their own experiences and characteristics, so they remain confined to Coplan's "self-oriented perspective-taking." In this way, projective empathy solves the problem of intersubjectivity by erasing it—that is, by declassifying others as full subjects. Can intersubjectivity exist between a subject and an object?¹⁵⁵

In any case, affective models of empathy embed the subject-object vantage just as thoroughly. As noted, Preston and de Waal's PAM defines *the object* as "the primary individual who experience[s] the emotion or state," while *the subject* "is the individual that secondarily experience[s or understands] the emotions/state of the object."¹⁵⁶ In line with the aesthetic perspective, the PAM understands the object as the original elicitor but not as the original agent of empathy. Conversely, the PAM's subject receives the communication of another's state but claims primary agency over the affective dialogue. In addition to following the aesthetic tradition, such a conception allows the PAM to fit with definitions of empathy similar to Hoffman's as "the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation." The subject-object perspective appears, again, integral to empathy as a concept.¹⁵⁷

We unnecessarily limit empathy, however, by *only* experiencing it through a subject-object lens. For a subject-object view frustrates two, equally indispensable realities of empathic processes: (1) The fact that empathy is a dialogical phenomenon, and (2) the related fact that ethical situations are not foremost personal problems requiring one individual to adopt

another's state but shared matters that necessitate social-emotional tuning between multiple group members in preparation for cooperative action. By defining empathy as a dialogical phenomenon, I affirm its rootedness in affective, embodied conversations—at varying times automatic or intentional, prereflective or reflective, verbal or nonverbal. At all times, however, empathy expects emotional responsiveness. When I frown, and you frown and raise your eyebrows in return, this is not meant to be the end. Certainly you appear to have begun the process of tuning yourself to my communicated state, but I also sense the nuances of your response cues and respond emotively to them—to you. We tune each other to a potentially needful situation as it emerges. We tune each other because, among other things, it is possible that I am unaware of my frown before I witness yours and read a question in your eyes. *It is a significant truth of emotive animals that our faces—and our expressions in general—are meant to be more salient to others than to ourselves.* Our bodies invite others to attend to something and, in so doing, invite us to cooperatively attend to this something as well. For it's also possible that my frown is an accidental facial tick, even as it is possible that my frown signals a relational conflict between us. More to the point, my frown may no longer be our focus, for your responses introduce new conditions into the affective dialogue that I may perceive and bring to common awareness. Empathy does not transport us into one another's heads as much as *it manifests our needs through one another dialogically.* This is the moral meaning of intersubjectivity. My needs are illuminated for us through your responses to me, and your needs are clarified through my responses to you. Often, we discover needs in common, especially when a shared event affects us simultaneously. In any case, the public nature of empathy tells us that we are meant to address our revealed needs together.

The fact that humans respond with each other in shared situations challenges Hoffman's notion of empathy as a process that "make[s] a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation." What separates Hoffman's subject from his object's situation by definition? Principally, Hoffman's concept of empathy is largely built upon the "empathic distress" experienced by witnesses in bystander scenarios. In other words, Hoffman begins with an "innocent"¹⁵⁸ subject who views a "victim's" suffering but often does not enter into affective dialogue with the sufferer. In a primitive sense, the situations of these characters are separated by title, as Hoffman labels one a "bystander" and the other a "victim." But such labels only capture a narrow history of action rather than analyzing the affective activity between persons.¹⁵⁹ Certainly the bystander and the victim have different situations in terms of the narrow history of acts that placed them in this relation. But emotional phenomena do not respect the titles of bystanders and victims. In terms of empathy, what matters is the movement of the affectively rooted encounter. When remaining a stranger, the subject's empathic perception shrinks to a solitary, almost voyeuristic experience of a disturbing image.¹⁶⁰ Emotionally and relationally, Hoffman's bystander and victim thus exist in disjointed situations. Ethically, the initial work of empathy still creates a sense of obligation¹⁶¹ in the viewer for the sufferer and thus the foundation for a moral situation in common, but the bystander's quiescence frustrates responsiveness and thus true sharedness. Despairingly, one might understand a nonresponsive bystander as linked to the sufferer within a situation with ethical consequences but without hope.¹⁶² To be fair, Hoffman's theory establishes hope through the power of empathic distress to motivate bystanders to help.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, the moral point-of-view upon which Hoffman designs his concept of empathy remains one in which

an innocent stranger feels initial distress in the presence of a suffering stranger. For Hoffman, empathy is primarily a motivational moment rather than an affective movement. Although, as anecdotes in this project attest, bystander scenarios make for salient empathic beginnings, this does not mean that empathy as a moral phenomenon is best defined through the perspective of a bystander. For empathy's natural movement indicates not estrangement but congregation, not innocence but innate responsibility, not a subject's situation vis-à-vis an object's situation but a common moral horizon beckoning multiple subjects.

Empathy is a set of capacities through which subjects share, perceive, and tune affective representations through one another.¹⁶⁴ The phrase *through one another* evinces an intersubjective conversation, one in which subjects' feelings come to clarity via a dialogue stimulated by each other's affective representations and subsequent responses.¹⁶⁵ Socially, *affective representations* are emotional expressions. Neurologically, the term "representations" suggests Preston and de Waal's "parallel distributed patterns of activation," although empathic patterns need not run precisely in parallel. Rather, not unlike the movement of freeform jazz from one player to the next, a response pattern simply needs to intelligibly recognize the previous tone, rhythm, beat, etc. Relatedly, representations should not be interpreted as simulated experiences. Too frequently, the point of empathy is assumed to be simulation. I submit that, rather like Adam Smith imagining the torture of "our brother...upon the rack,"¹⁶⁶ the attempt to simulate another person's experience signals something of a moral last resort (That is, in most instances, responding to earlier emotional cues should suffice to prevent situations like the rack from developing).¹⁶⁷ More basically, simulating another's experience often proves its own hazardous exercise. A human experience conjointly depends upon the

influence of personal memories, dispositions, cultural filters, and variances in anatomy, among other things. These aspects of experience cannot be automatically transferred through a neural representation.

Rather than simulating another's experience, empathy functions to socially clarify salient emotional states and, in so doing, to disclose associated needs.¹⁶⁸ *Subjects share, perceive, and tune.* Including emotional sharing as part of the empathic process signals a paradigm shift. Heretofore, empathy has been cast as a uniformly receptive facility. Framing it as such amounts to reducing communication to listening. As an affective dialogue, empathy depends upon particular skillsets for both "speaking" and "listening" in emotional terms. Accordingly, persons necessarily exist who are adept at initiating empathic dialogues via accurate,¹⁶⁹ socially compelling representations of their internal states. These persons are empathic in a vital if previously unrecognized sense. They are responsive in a crucial sense, as well, as each inceptive cue responds to a corresponding change in some condition. To be sure, empathic expression is key to moral responsiveness. Empathic expression's paired skillset—empathic perception—summarizes a subject's ability to recognize and respond to the inceptive cue. When subjects operate both skillsets competently in a shared situation, they dialogically tune emotional signals to clarify their source conditions, including any relevant needs. If any such need is illumined, then it is not an accident of empathic dialogue that a focused, cohesive group now stands ready to act in response.

Finally, to define *empathy as a set of capacities through which* is to, up front, acknowledge fellow subjects as our most notable empathic capacities. For, as **empathy** *is a set of capacities through which subjects share, perceive, and tune affective representations through*

one another, the “through one another” signifies the primary “capacities through which.”

During affective tuning, each subject may need to automatically or reflectively summon any host of resources within the self in order to see the process towards ethical action. But the first ethical act is the dialogue between subjects.

3. Dialogue, Responsiveness, and Empathy

This definition conceives of empathy as a set of capacities that empower particular processes. Thus, not unlike a term such as “digestion,” “empathy” accounts for both a complex, embodied activity and the ability to undertake that activity. Even so, if we emphasize empathy’s processes rather than its capacities, we can offer a shorthand definition of **empathy** as *a dialogue of affective attunement*.¹⁷⁰ This conception locates empathy at the responsive core of “*homo dialogicus*.”

At the same time, questions persist regarding *how*, exactly, empathic dialogue establishes an ethical dynamic between persons. I contend that the ethical seed of empathy lies in the potential for *synchrony through reciprocity* in affective dialogue. Frans de Waal writes that

[n]ot only do we mimic those with whom we identify, but mimicry in turn strengthens the bond. Human mothers and children play games of clapping hands either against each other or together in the same rhythm. These are games of synchronization. And what do lovers do when they first meet? They stroll long distances side by side, eat together, laugh together, dance together. Being in sync has a bonding effect. Think about dancing. Partners complement each other’s moves, anticipate them, or guide each other through their own movements. Dancing screams “We’re in synchrony” which is the way animals have been bonding for millions of years.¹⁷¹

De Waal describes this synchrony as empathic creatures becoming “in tune”¹⁷² with one another in an intrinsically musical way. To this point, de Waal notes that the male and female songs of siamangs (“howler monkeys”) tend to harmonize in correlation with the strength of the social bonds of their family groups. In de Waal’s words, “[o]ne can literally tell a good siamang marriage by its song.”¹⁷³

In *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, de Waal makes the explicit claim that “[e]mpathy finds its origin in bodily synchronization and the spreading of moods.”¹⁷⁴ In primarily visual animals such as humans, this synchronization often begins through reciprocating eye contact. Sherry Turkle, among others, argues that the development of empathy in humans requires face-to-face conversations rooted in a dialogue between subjects’ eyes:

Children need eye contact to develop parts of the brain that are involved with attachment. Without eye contact, there is a persistent sense of disconnection and problems with empathy. [Daniel] Siegel sums up what a moment of eye contact accomplishes: “Repeated tens of thousands of times in the child’s life, these small moments of mutual rapport [serve to] transmit the best part of humanity—our capacity for love—from one generation to the next.” Atsushi Senju, a cognitive neuroscientist, studies this mechanism through adulthood, showing that the parts of the brain that allow us to process another person’s feelings and intentions are activated by eye contact. Emoticons on texts and emails, Senju found, don’t have the same effect. He says, “A richer mode of communication is possible right after making eye contact. It amplifies your ability to read the other person’s brain.”¹⁷⁵

Recent studies indicate that Senju’s “richer mode of communication” parallels an actual convergence of brainwaves between persons making eye contact. Victoria Leong et al. (2017) examined the effect of “speaker gaze” on neural synchrony in two experiments with adult-

infant couplings. In the first group, infants viewed 3 different videos of an adult singing a nursery rhyme. In two of the videos, the adult stared directly (“direct gaze”) at the viewer through the screen, while in the third video the singer looked away (“indirect gaze”) from the infant viewer. The researchers discovered that the brains of infant viewers synchronized more closely with the brain of the adult singer during the direct gazes of videos one and two. Of course, direct gaze, which is a one-sided experience for the viewer, is not the same as “mutual gaze” or eye contact, in which two subjects simultaneously experience one another through each other’s eyes. So the researchers conducted a second experiment in which the adult sang the nursery rhyme while sharing a live space with each infant, singing once with indirect gaze and once with direct gaze. Once again, the infants’ brains displayed greater neural synchrony with the live adult through direct gaze. Moreover, the adult singer’s brain also responded to the infants’ gazes in a live context, so the coupled brains synchronized with one another through mutual gaze. In musical terminology, responsive eye contact helped tune adult and infant brains towards neural harmony. The researchers concluded that “ostensive social signals could act to bring brains into mutual temporal alignment, creating a joint-networked state that is structured to facilitate information transfer during early communication and learning.”¹⁷⁶

Similar neural synchrony has been observed in a variety of dialogical contexts. Jing Jiang et al. (2012) have shown that face-to-face human dialogue fosters neural synchrony between partners that other forms of communication—including face-to-face monologue—fail to approach, much less achieve.¹⁷⁷ And Suzanne Dikker et al. (2017) have recently demonstrated that the degree of neural synchrony between high school students in a classroom predicts both class engagement and social dynamics.¹⁷⁸ For it is not that eye contact in dialogue synchronizes

brains unpurposely; neural linking between persons prepares them for social understanding.¹⁷⁹

In short, although one brain can indeed, in Senju's words, "read the other person's brain" through eye contact across space, the fuller neural process between humans in responsive, face-to-face dialogue synchronizes multiple brains—brings them "in tune" with one another—in ways that automatically encourage understanding and social bonding.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that neural synchronization overlays perfectly with affective attunement (empathy). Still, the evidence indicates that these two dialogical phenomena intertwine so intimately that a depletion in one will soon impair the other. A decline in face-to-face dialogue within a population will, for example, correspond to a decrease in empathic attunement. In reality, this mutual degeneration of dialogue and empathy has been observed in American college students for at least three decades, with the sharpest downturns occurring since the year 2000. In a meta-analysis of seventy-two studies, Sara Konrath et al. (2010) examined the empathic dispositions of American undergraduates from 1979-2009. The authors discovered a nearly 50 percent drop in empathy during that period, foremost in students' concern for others (48% decrease) and secondarily in the students' ability to approximate the perspectives of others (34% decrease). The researchers attributed this alarming loss of moral capacity to, among other causes, a decline in face-to-face contact between the students.¹⁸⁰

Sherry Turkle connects the mutual decline of dialogue and empathy to the advance of digital communication. During what Turkle calls "old conversation" (i.e. face-to-face dialogue), persons develop empathic capacities through eye contact and natural responsiveness with others.¹⁸¹ During digital conversation, however, information transfer is out-of-sync with human

bodies by design and the “voice feels like an interruption.”¹⁸² In one prominent digitized setting, young individuals sit around a common dinner table, but their eyes are transfixed upon their independent smart phone screens, each person texting multiple absent others rather than attending to the embodied persons around them. In this world, a dinner companion’s living voice is experienced as a blunt splinter into an array of meticulously composed digital thoughts. Hence, Turkle notes that the defining phrase of digitized settings is, “Wait, what?”¹⁸³ Within such contexts, human bodies strain to orient themselves through natural faculties of attunement. The dynamic layers of meaning in human conversation flatten, blur, or lose themselves altogether without the responsive clarifications of gestures and expressions. Place itself is unclear. “Who am I actually with?” and “Where am I, really?” are two continuously valid yet unanswerable questions for persons whose awareness is split between living and digital worlds, for each may be with 10 apparent others in 7 partially perceived spaces. To the human body such persons are barely with anyone in a shared somewhere.

The basic moral problem of digitized conversation is that its modes of response lead its subjects away from, rather than towards, synchrony. To reiterate, I assert that the ethical seed of empathy lies in the potential for *synchrony through reciprocity* in affective dialogue. Socially and ethically, synchrony is an ever-present horizon of human conversation. Conversely, *if* horizons reveal themselves during digitized conversation, they are horizons not of synchrony but of sanitization.

On this point, Turkle explains that younger generations of Americans value digital conversations because they feel “low risk.”¹⁸⁴ Unlike the feral movements of meaning exchanged during face-to-face dialogue, digital communications can be edited and controlled.

The faith in editable conversation is that, at least from a narrow, literal point-of-view, it appears to offer a method of purifying meaning. On the surface, it might likewise seem that purity of social meaning would minimize opportunities for misunderstanding and, in doing so, enhance opportunities for communicative success. But this is a plot contrived from a writer's consciousness (and, indeed, it might be claimed that texting is writing to a personality masquerading as speaking with a person). And it is not just that the writer's assumption is false with regard to dialogue; it is inverted. For dialogue is a process that evolved to forge understanding from social misapprehension. Dialogue, therefore, cannot begin by sanitizing misunderstanding *because it is born from it*.

Dialogue begins by absorbing variant personal understandings onto a shared plane of being. This ground is created by an initial, communal response of persons towards each other that may be affective, visual, linguistic, or comprised of a combination of social signals. The dialogical plane itself is the first, tenuous synchrony created through reciprocity. It is the "mutual gaze" of being. The plane then unfolds into a number of potential horizons that pose varying degrees of synchronized understanding. Here, "synchronized understanding" should not be interpreted as "identical perspectives, feelings, or courses of action" but, rather, "responsive, increasing awareness of the evolving perspectives, feelings, and intents of persons in dialogue, some of which may be or become shared." The experience of this process is captured by the simple phrase, "We understand each other."

The affective attunement of empathy is one stratum of the dialogical plane, one whose continuous feedback helps shape not just emotional responses but responses through language, imagination, and a host of capacities—including mirror neurons—called upon during

dialogue. These layers of attunement are, again, only partially distinct in the dialogical plane and ultimately composite in the actual movement of face-to-face conversation. (This intimacy of empathy, imagination, and other capacities in dialogical attunement is one likely reason that “projective empathy” has been conceptualized as a form of empathy rather than a product of it.¹⁸⁵) In face-to-face dialogue, we read and respond to each other’s emotional cues, and those cues drive linguistic responses, which in turn contain emotive notes through and around physical expressions, which resonate through mirror neurons, the whole of which may incite imaginations to simulate situations, which in turn stir particular emotional responses, which shape ideas, which are further formed through words, and so on. Moreover, these attunement events do not occur in clean, A→B→C→D stages. Rather, they ebb-and-flow in complex social combinations that can only be synchronized through human bodies in face-to-face dialogue. These reciprocities—the back-and-forths of dialogical attunement processes—eventually become so intimate that synchronies beyond the dialogical plane—such as common action or moral experiences such as trust—emerge, like sections in an orchestra adding to a movement.¹⁸⁶

Empathy is the moral core of these phenomena. For it is through affective dialogue that we foremost disclose and perceive well-being. It is through affective attunement that we first register whether or not a response was helpful or harmful, even as it is through the emotional components of dialogue that we report whether a response was finally trusted or distrusted. Prior to birth, evolution imparts us with basic affective systems, predispositions to automatically respond to situational elements that may benefit or harm us. Jaak Panksepp thus calls emotions “ancestral wisdom.” As infants we say “this is good” or “that feels bad” through

emotional expressions. This nascent but essential vocabulary develops throughout our lives into an entire language of wellbeing. When we speak the language of emotion, we do so with implicit hope that another's response that will move us closer to a particular synchrony, one whose understanding brings us nearer to flourishing. Because, ultimately, we need each other to help us make sense of our condition. Empathy is not the whole of ethics. But human ethics is essentially dialogical. Hence empathy remains our deepest and most trustworthy capacity for establishing a moral ground. Without it, our other capacities of response lose their ethical bearing, and *homo dialogicus* is lost.

A final draft of *response*

Our evolution of Niebuhr's image of *response* has taken place in four stages, the last of which places empathy at the concept's core. We now retrace our steps before making a final edit. We began with Niebuhr's basic pairing of *response* and *interpretation*:

1. All life possesses the character of responsiveness, but moral *response* proceeds only from the complex processing plant of interpretation.

Then, after uncoupling these two concepts for analysis, we redrew *response* in light of modern scholarship on epigenetics:

2. All life is by nature responsive, while the moral character of many social animals is founded in their epigenetic capacities, which assess an organism's early surroundings and develop its nervous system accordingly, so that the organism becomes responsive in ways that presume to benefit it within those settings. Thus, what each organism automatically perceives and responds to as helpful or harmful, good or bad, is influenced by the interactions of its genes with its early environments.

Next, we considered how mirror neurons construct an intersubjective web between persons that helps ground our social and moral dialogue:

3. Life is responsive. The moral character of our responses can be traced to our epigenetic capacities, which assess our early surroundings and develop our nervous systems accordingly, so that we become responsive in ways that presume to benefit us within those settings. As the most imperative environmental resources for humans are other humans, our nervous system evolved specialized cells that automatically establish intersubjective dialogues between persons prior to spoken words. These networks help ground all social—and thereby all ethical—responses.

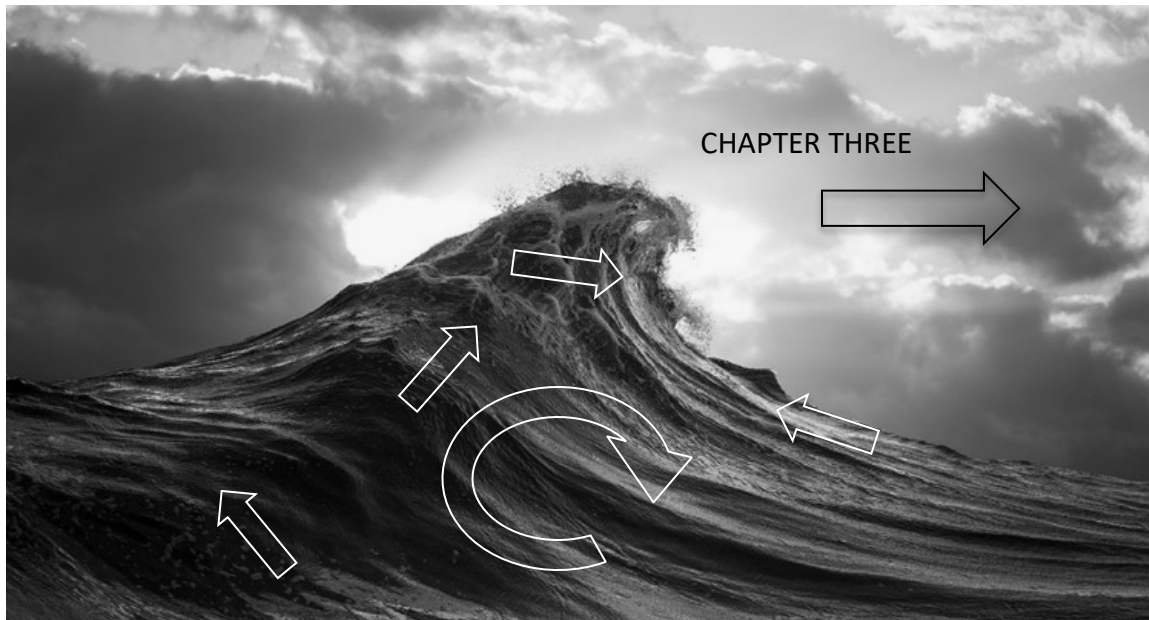
Finally, we reconceived of empathy itself. In doing so, we have perhaps offered a new understanding of what Paul Ricoeur described as “the primordial rootedness of Discourse in life:”

4. Life is responsive, and moral response is by nature dialogical. Our genes converse with our caregivers to form our neural dispositions, shaping our perceptions of what benefits us as well as our capacities to respond to helps and harms. Our social nervous system establishes a responsive dialogue within and between bodies. Through empathy, we disclose, perceive, and tune the states of our conditions through one another dialogically. At the horizon of each of these moral dialogues waits a type of synchrony, an experience in which responses merge to sharedness, a social place where we might better understand each other and achieve a sense of what is good.

Right Conduct

by James Tate

A boy and a girl were playing together when they spotted a woodchuck and started chasing it. The woodchuck's burrow was at the edge of the forest and it safely disappeared into it, but the children did not see this and kept running into the forest. In no time at all they realized that they were lost and they sat down and began to cry. After a while, a man appeared and this frightened them all the more. They had been warned a thousand times never to talk to strangers. He assured them that he would not hurt them and that, in fact, he would lead them back to their home. They agreed to walk with him, but when he tried to make conversation they would not reply. "You act like you're prisoners of war," he said. "Not much fun for me, but I guess that's good. When I was a kid my mother also told me never to talk to strangers. But I did anyway, because that's how you learn stuff. I always thought the stuff my ma and pa tried to teach me was boring. But from strangers you could learn the secret stuff, like how to break into a locked door or how to tame a wild stallion, stuff you could use in life." It made sense what he was saying, but the kids were sworn to silence, a brain-washed silence in a shrunken world from which they could already faintly hear their mother scolding them.¹⁸⁷



INTERPRETATION

A bit of speculation for play and curiosity

(they spotted a woodchuck and started chasing it)

Ethics is concerned with any activity that helps or harms living beings. The more we consider the interconnectedness of life, the more difficult it is to conceive of an activity whose impacts can be circumscribed entirely outside the ethical domain. For social creatures such as human beings, relationships themselves are essential for wellbeing, so any activity that helps or harms the quality of our relationships is a moral matter. Thus, if a human being were to seek a life of complete isolation from others in order to avoid ethical consequences, a fundamental harm—and most likely many harms—would already be underway. On this view, birth and death are inescapably ethical events, even when they appear to happen outside any rational agency.

Interpreting ethics in terms of helps and harms throughout the interconnected webs of life may seem imprecise to the point of inspiring dread, particularly for those who seek to trace each moral judgment to an act originated by an identifiable, individual will. How can the intent

of a single agent be followed through the irruption of helps and harms the agent's action influences within an ecological system? As Thomas Nagel famously articulated one version of this problem, "[p]rior to reflection it is intuitively plausible that people cannot be morally assessed for what is not their fault, or for what is due to factors beyond their control."¹⁸⁸ Now, though I have little interest in solving the so-called problem of "moral luck" framed by Nagel in these words,¹⁸⁹ I do think the intuitive link Nagel describes between personal control and moral judgment still permeates moral philosophy. And I think this intuition is rife within Niebuhr's attempt to determine the morality of a *response* in terms of whether or not the response was preceded by an agent's conscious *interpretation*.

This perceived link between agency and Niebuhr's notion of interpretation is admittedly speculative. Yet, if only to satisfy curiosity, I think it's worth considering why Niebuhr grounds moral response in conscious reflection. As spelled out in the previous chapter, Niebuhr's concept of *interpretation* centers around a threefold cognitive function: (1) a willful attempt to safeguard reflection from emotional sway, (2) an awareness that perceives ultimate patterns through particular persons and events, and (3) an internal dialogue through which one interrogates the meaning of social actions through stable representations of society and being (i.e. *homo dialogicus* is originally a symbol of a single self that interprets on behalf of a social society, rather than a symbol of a society of mutually interpreting persons). To be clear, Niebuhr does not state that an agent must summon all three functions in every interpretive process. Still, for Niebuhr, it is this intentional interpretation—the emotionally cool reflection of an individual about "what's going on" in multiple layers of society and history within a single

act—that can guide the self to respond well within the dialogue of moral action.¹⁹⁰ So he expects some form of this interpretation to precede each moral response.

Why might Niebuhr construct such a demanding cognitive threshold for ethical action? Perhaps it is indeed because Niebuhr, like many philosophers, is persuaded by the (now intuitive) idea that a reasoning human will draws a clear line of responsibility from agent to action.¹⁹¹ At the very least, Niebuhr worries about the ethical volatility of the immediate moment. Recall that Niebuhr's sketch of *homo dialogicus* casts the natural reactions of the body—from blinks to emotions—as ranging from amoral to morally irrational expressly because these phenomena seem spurred by the exigencies of the current situation.¹⁹² Simply put, unconscious or emotional responses appear to be caused by the moment much more than by a reasoning self. For Niebuhr, “[p]urposiveness and humanity do seem to go together,”¹⁹³ and he quotes at length Thomas Aquinas' claim that

man differs from the irrational creatures in this, that he is master of his own acts...But man is master of his own acts by reason and will: hence free-will is said to be a *function of will and reason*. Those actions, therefore, are properly called *human*, which proceed from a deliberate will.¹⁹⁴

As more than an aside, notice that both Aquinas and Niebuhr seem interested in a supposed connection between reason, intention, and action that helps define what is essentially human about human beings. There may be peculiar theological motivations at work here, among other influences.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, this deliberate will, this *purposiveness* of which Niebuhr seems so keenly aware is finally sketched into *homo dialogicus* not with certainty but

with tension.¹⁹⁶ For, in a striking passage that seems to both accurately describe human experience and weaken rational will, Niebuhr writes:

We respond as we interpret the meaning of actions upon us. The child's character may be formed less, the psychologists lead us to believe, by the injunctions and commandments of parents than by the child's interpretation of the attitudes such commandments are taken to express. The inferiority and superiority feelings, the aggressions, guilt feelings, and fears with which men encounter each other, and which do not easily yield to the commandment of neighbor-love, are dependent on their interpretations of each other's attitudes and valuations...Such interpretation, it need scarcely be added, is not simply an affair of our conscious, and rational, mind but also of the deep memories that are buried within us, of feelings and intuitions that are only partly under our immediate control.¹⁹⁷

When juxtaposed with Niebuhr's Stoic and universalist priorities,¹⁹⁸ this passage presents a theoretical conflict. On the one hand, Niebuhr has clearly established that interpretation is the capacity by which the individual looks past the immediate moment and transcends the prereflective impulses activated by situational stimuli. Yet in this singular excerpt Niebuhr confesses that unconscious memories, intuitions, and feelings are operative, and powerfully so, within interpretation itself.

One way to minimize this conflict is to understand the incongruent passage not as a deprioritization of rational reflection but as a prioritization of an ethics of response over deontological ethics. As we shall discuss further in this project's conclusion, Niebuhr advances his symbol of response ethics, *homo dialogicus*, over-and-against two established moral anthropologies: *homo faber*, the teleological man-the-maker, and *homo politicus*, the deontological man-the-citizen.¹⁹⁹ In the text under consideration, Niebuhr emphasizes the

innate power of interpretations—unconscious, affective, or otherwise—over any personal allegiance to law. Imbued with this natural energy, even basic, emotional appraisals of another’s fear or aggression can subdue the divine command to love one’s neighbor. This view does not necessarily commend such interpretations as ethically superior to divine law; it only observes that interpretation is more elemental to human moral experience than duty.

If this reading is accurate, then Niebuhr can hold in tension that unconscious elements “only partly under our immediate control” inform interpretation even as he summons rational reflection to control interpretation and, in turn, response. Moreover, these wild roots of memory and feeling might be viewed as further reasons for Niebuhr to design a purposive superstructure around interpretation in the first place. In any case, this theoretical balancing does not soften the fact that a tension between prereflection and reflection exists at the core of *homo dialogicus*’ moral reasoning. This stress requires a small but significant correction to our draft from:

- ii.1 *Interpretation* centers around a threefold cognitive function: (1) a willful attempt to safeguard reflection from emotional sway, (2) an awareness that perceives ultimate patterns through particular persons and events, and (3) an internal dialogue through which one interrogates the meaning of social actions through stable representations of society and being (i.e. *homo dialogicus* is originally a symbol of a single self that interprets on behalf of a social society, rather than a symbol of a society of mutually interpreting persons).

to:

- ii.4. *Interpretation* centers around a threefold cognitive function: (1) a willful attempt to **manage unconscious perceptions and** safeguard reflection from emotional sway, (2) an awareness that perceives ultimate patterns through particular persons and

events, and (3) an internal dialogue through which one interrogates the meaning of social actions through stable representations of society and being (i.e. *homo dialogicus* is originally a symbol of a single self that interprets on behalf of a social society, rather than a symbol of a society of mutually interpreting persons).

The evidence suggests that Niebuhr regarded the tension between prereflection and reflection as a problem of moral agency and attempted to solve it. But his solution, a self-aware interpretation that distinguishes moral responses from mere reactions, depends upon a dated notion of human responsiveness that this project has redrawn. It also seems likely that Niebuhr's concept of interpretation inherits philosophical DNA about the special purposiveness of human beings relative to nonhuman life. Yet, as we continue to learn, modern research with human and nonhuman animals challenges both the sequence of intention → action in human animals and the lack of intention in nonhuman ones.

In brief, Niebuhr's image of interpretation derives from givens that this project does not share. One expectation does, however, remain in common: "to think what we are doing."

ii3. *Interpretation* is thinking what we are doing.

From this simple origin, this chapter moves to develop a concept of interpretation based in modern insights on judgment, as well as an understanding of ethics rooted in helps and harms. What does it mean to "think what we are doing" in these conditions? Like children in a poem, we have followed curiosity and find ourselves surrounded by the unfamiliar. Might strangers help us understand what is going on?

Is moral response bound to reflective thought?

(they realized that they were lost)

Interpretation has been presented both as rooted in automatic perceptions and as a rational liberator from automatic processes. The image of a powerful human rationality has often been drawn by philosophers, who describe moral thinking in hundreds of pages while sitting at desks. It is a temptation of habit that the longer one sits and writes ethical reflection onto paper, the clearer and deeper personal reflection appears. One can literally ink an ocean of moral thought into existence, then dive into proof of one's rationality ad infinitum. But writing isn't really the same as thinking.²⁰⁰ And writing about ethics isn't necessarily ethics, and on the whole it is probably less ethical than baking biscuits and inviting one's neighbors over for breakfast and conversation, even if the biscuits disappoint.²⁰¹ This is my first concern: In living, responsive moments, those situations when people nurture relationships over a shared meal or shape corporate actions at an accident scene, *chasing* moral reflection risks pulling persons away from *being and responding with* one other. This is my corresponding claim: we must think, but to cognitively chase reflection is not necessarily to nurture interpretation. Just as likely, it is to lose one's way.

Chasing reflection can lead us astray both because neural processes that appear automatic are not without agency and because operations that appear reflective are only partially controllable. As Frans de Waal points out, "'automaticity'...refers to the speed and subconscious nature of a process, not the ability to override it."²⁰² A person can breathe, blink, climb stairs, dance, and even drive a car automatically, yet a person can also cognitively "control" these activities through adjustments in attention.²⁰³ During such adjustments, any neural gulf between automaticity and control is rarely bridged because the agent consciously seeks control; rather, a novel event or perception (a staring contest, a change in dance partner,

or a new neighborhood to navigate) pulls the agent into awareness. Awareness chases the situation, and cognitive agency merges with the situation through the chase. The agent only perceives the gulf between automaticity and control after awareness has pulled the agent across it.

At the same time, automatic neural processes respond to morally relevant variations in perception. For example, Lamm et al. (2007) showed subjects videos of the faces of patients undergoing a painful medical treatment. As subjects watched the patients' expressions of pain, some viewers were told that the procedure succeeded in healing the patients, whereas others were told that the procedure failed. Remarkably, viewers exhibited weaker empathic responses in pain-related areas of the brain when they believed the treatment helped, even though the expressions of pain were the same.²⁰⁴ In other words, subjects' perceptions of whether or not a temporary harm led to an eventual help influenced the subjects' automatic experiences of the harm.

This dynamic between perception and automaticity impacts moral responses. For one automatic process directs another, and, as the study's authors note, weaker empathic representations in the brain are less apt to motivate helping behavior. Of course, cured patients do not need help, so any motivation for subjects to intervene into a painful healing process would be misguided. Indeed, subjects would risk causing more harm to patients if the subjects were to act only on a blunt sense that pain should always be understood as harm. Thankfully, our moral senses do not appear to be wired so simply. Instead, automatic empathic processes tuned by perception display a capacity to fittingly respond to the ethical needs of a situation.

To take this example one step further, consider the dynamic between automaticity and control for subjects who encounter pain that only harms patients, that is, the pain of unsuccessful treatments. In such cases, when automatic responses are more likely to motivate a subject towards helping, prereflective affects—such as empathic concern—may move the subject towards greater cognitive control. Prereflective emotions can thus summon reflection. This return from automaticity to control takes place in the movement towards fitting help. For determining *how* one should precisely help typically requires more cognitive control than realizing that help is needed in some general form. How might one act to correct the painful effects of an unsuccessful medical treatment? Surely one should not undertake such an intervention recklessly. And most subjects do not. Rather, as a subject perceives a complex situation, awareness spurs prereflective empathic assessment, which in turn pushes the subject towards reflection upon specific actions and their contingencies. In sum, automaticity and control exist in continual, multiple feedback loops with one another, and the agent's cognitions follow, as much as they direct, the push and pull of these movements.

It should not be surprising, then, that experiences that seem driven by self-conscious reflection depend significantly upon prereflective judgments. In fact, many prominent scientists argue that consciousness itself exists in both prereflective and reflective forms. One influential model introduced by neuropsychologist Endel Tulving maps out consciousness in three types: *anoetic*, *noetic*, and *autonoetic*.²⁰⁵ In a state of *anoetic* consciousness, a subject only prereflectively experiences external stimuli in her current situation.²⁰⁶ She neither reflectively considers internal representations nor cognitively time travels to memories or future possibilities. Even so, an *anoetic* subject makes judgments about her immediate environs. An

example of anoetic judgment posed by Janet Metcalfe and Lisa Son involves discriminating between Pinot Gris and Pinot Grigio while imbibing a series of wine samples.²⁰⁷ According to Metcalfe and Son, the taster's differentiations between the wines, though influenced by past learning, are perceptual responses to the current environment rather than reflections upon past wines.²⁰⁸ This in-the-moment responsiveness insulates the subject from self-awareness. To consider another type of anoetic judgment, imagine a basketball player defending an opponent who is dribbling the ball. Like a dancer countering a partner's moves, the defender senses the rhythm of the opponent's dribble and responds to a perceived, vulnerable moment when the basketball is released from the dribbler's hand. Through learning, this skillful perception has become intuitive. The defender swipes her hand into the motion of the dribble and steals the ball. In this case, the defender makes a prereflective judgment within the movement of the activity, even though the efficacy of the steal is informed by past experience playing basketball. During anoetic consciousness, perception, judgment, and response occur in flow with one another through interaction with the external world.

During *noetic* consciousness, the subject becomes aware that she possesses internal knowledge that is distinct from her external setting. Noetic consciousness thus empowers the subject to reflect upon things beyond her immediate world, which includes the power to make judgments about her own knowledge. Metcalfe and Son argue that, on more than one occasion, researchers have observed evidence of this form of consciousness in monkeys.²⁰⁹ In one cited study, Kornell, Son, and Terrace (2007) guided rhesus macaques to view six sequentially presented images. The experimenters then placed one of the images alongside eight images that had not been shown and directed the monkeys to choose the previously

viewed one. After making its selection, each monkey was then instructed to “wager” one or three tokens (exchangeable for food pellets) to signal the monkey’s “confidence” in her choice. A correct choice resulted in gaining tokens, whereas an incorrect choice resulted in tokens being taken away. Within a few trials, the monkeys tended to wager high amounts before correct answers and low amounts before incorrect answers, signaling that the monkeys were not only aware of their accumulated knowledge, but could express confidence in the accuracy of that knowledge.²¹⁰

In a preceding study, Robert Hampton (2001) gave macaques two forms of a memory test, both of which tasked the monkeys with identifying a previously shown image alongside three distractor images. The first version required the monkeys to take the test. The second version permitted the monkeys to opt out. The option to decline the test was offered during a delay period between showing the target image and presenting the problem. Opting out ensured a modest reward, a correct answer earned a greater reward, and an incorrect answer resulted in no reward. Monkeys regularly declined the optional test. Fascinatingly, their answers on this test were consistently more accurate when compared with their answers on the mandatory test.²¹¹ The higher scores on the optional exam indicate that the monkeys’ choices to opt-out were not haphazard. Rather, they seemed to have a correct sense of the accuracy of their own internal images. This type of awareness meets the cognitive demands of noetic consciousness. At least in this sense, macaques are metacognitive: monkeys can “know what they know.” A capacity for reflective judgment exists in nonhumans.

Yet consciousness of one’s internal knowledge does not mean that the subject is experiencing complex self-awareness. In Tulving’s final type of consciousness, auto-noetic, the

subject develops a conception of herself *as a unified self* across time. That is, the self revealed through auto-noetic consciousness bridges personal experiences across past, present, and future. The auto-noetic self reflects upon episodes of personal memory while recognizing that the self's own experiences are the sources of the memories. Moreover, through a process that Tulving calls "proscopical chronesthesia,"²¹² the auto-noetic self simulates future events similarly to the way in which the self re-experiences episodic memories.²¹³

When juxtaposed through reflection, the self's experiences through past, present, and future enable the subject to see herself as an agent in the world across time. Hence, the ethical implications of auto-noetic consciousness are profound. Metcalfe and Son, for instance, attribute the subject's ability to judge agency itself to auto-noetic consciousness.²¹⁴ But could we not assert more? Could we not, in fact, credit the development of any moral vision that relies upon notions of character or causality—that is, *all moral visions*—to the capacity for auto-noetic consciousness? Without the ability to experience self-continuity through time, could Kant have conceived of an absolutely free, self-causing, and accountable agent? Could Aristotle have discerned a *telos* for humanity? Could Alasdair MacIntyre have envisioned that all the atomized moments of a whole human life could be unified through an adventure story?²¹⁵ Could Thomas Hobbes have imagined that the grand journey of a man began by sprouting from the earth like a mushroom?²¹⁶ Could Seyla Benhabib have told Hobbes to recall his mother?²¹⁷ Could H. Richard Niebuhr have interpreted purposiveness and universal pattern in humanity? Could Martin Luther King Jr. have witnessed the mountaintop before history has climbed it? Surely each of these visions is indebted to a capacity for auto-noetic awareness. Nonetheless, I

am equally sure that the cleverest moral systems and the most beautiful ethical dreams in history are insufficient for us “to think what we are doing.”²¹⁸

Here, let us step back and consider the hierarchical nature of Tulving’s model. In doing so, we notice that Tulving corresponds advances in consciousness with increases in self-awareness: the more complex a subject’s internal experience of the self, the higher—and rarer, in species terms—the form of consciousness.²¹⁹ Thus, a subject operating within anoetic consciousness, while prereflectively engaged with the external world, does not experience her internal cognitions or her sense of herself at all, even though she is fully conscious. A noetic subject, in comparison, experiences an awareness of her cognitions as distinct from her environment, even as those cognitions remain bound to judgments of the present moment. It is only in auto-noetic consciousness that the subject’s awareness frees itself from present stimuli and becomes aware of the continuity of the subject as a self across time. Not surprisingly, Tulving believed that only humans experience this pinnacle of consciousness.²²⁰ In this way, Tulving himself seemed invested—not unlike Aquinas, Niebuhr, and countless others²²¹—in the search for an essentially human way of cognitively being in the world.

If we can, however, release the quest for what is essentially human and instead search for an essentially ethical vantage, i.e. a perspective geared towards helps and harms, then the primary movement from anoesis towards auto-noesis does not take place vertically but horizontally. This is because, as Micah Allen and Gary Williams explain, “cognition is primarily embodied and embedded within an organized environment and social field rather than detached and spectatorial.”²²² In other words, awareness is an ecological and social phenomenon prior to being a self phenomenon. Of course, subjects experience their

surroundings—including other persons—through anoetic consciousness foremost. Anoetic consciousness cannot, therefore, occupy the lowest rung of consciousness, for it is the cardinal way of being through which we encounter and respond with others. It is children’s purest disposition during social play, the nurturing relation between parent and infant, the most common form of eating with trusted friends, and the basic mode for sex.²²³ Jaak Panksepp argues, in fact, that the most influential mammalian state is a type of anoetic consciousness generated by dopamine.²²⁴ According to Panksepp, this “seeking system” helps drive the “appetitive phases” of all other systems—from hunger to lust to the search for friends. Panksepp contends that this form of prereflective consciousness is so ubiquitous that it can propel a child to quickly put on her suit to swim in a pool, motivate a person to bake a cake for a companion, and energize another to seek revenge for past harm.²²⁵ If anything, responsiveness with the outside world is prompted—and most experientially dynamic—through anoetic consciousness.

To the extent that such responsiveness sets ethical action, prereflective consciousness helps found moral experience. Indeed, Frans de Waal proposes that

[w]e show a host of behavior...for which we develop justifications after the fact. It is entirely possible, in my opinion, that we reach out and touch a grieving family member or lift up a fallen elderly person in the street before we fully realize the consequences of our actions. We are excellent at providing *post hoc* explanations for altruistic impulses. We say such things as “I felt I had to do something,” whereas in reality our behavior was automatic and intuitive, following the common human pattern that affect precedes cognition. Similarly, it has been argued that much of our moral decision-making is too rapid to be mediated by the cognition and self-reflection often assumed by moral philosophers.

We may therefore be less intentionally altruistic than we like to think. While we are *capable* of intentional altruism, we should be open to the possibility that much of the time we arrive at such behavior through rapid-fire psychological processes similar to those of a chimpanzee reaching out to comfort another or sharing food with a beggar. Our vaunted rationality is partly illusory.²²⁶

Even so, de Waal's examples of prereflective helping only account for the first-person perspective of one agent in each activity. When chimpanzees comfort one another, when someone lifts a fallen person from the ground, or when food is shared with hungry others, then multiple consciousnesses coordinate the activity both responsively and simultaneously. Action occurs both as a dialogical back-and-forth between agents and as a statement they utter in unison. In each situation, prereflective consciousness begins as a social phenomenon that develops outwardly at least as much as it deepens inwardly. As Merleau-Ponty illumines,

we have learned...not to conceive of our perspectival views as independent of each other; we know that they slip into each other and are gathered together...Similarly, we must learn to find the communication of consciousnesses in a single world. In fact, the other person is not enclosed in my perspective on the world because this perspective itself has no definite limits, because it spontaneously slips into the other's perspective, and because they are gathered together in a single world in which we all participate as anonymous subjects of perception.²²⁷

Tulving's stages, though instructive regarding self-awareness, cannot capture the social orientation of consciousness described by Merleau-Ponty. In fairness to Tulving, it is unlikely that these complex dynamics can be grasped by any framework. For "[a]ctuality always extends beyond the patterns of ideas into which we want to force it," to quote Niebuhr.²²⁸ Still, if we

cannot establish a clear hold upon moral consciousness, perhaps we can better understand—so that we can more wisely navigate—its movement.

Settling into the movement of thinking *(they sat down)*

To this point, our study of consciousness has largely unsettled relationships between prereflection, reflection, and ethical action. We have blurred the boundaries between automaticity and control, challenged the hierarchy of self-awareness, shown nonhumans to be capable of reflective judgment, and displaced cognitive consciousness as the fundamental ethical perspective. We have not, however, revealed these faults in the picture of rational reflection in order to lose confidence in moral thinking. We never yield our claim that we must think what we are doing. We only seek an understanding of ethical thinking that rings true with both science and the complexity of experience, that is, an interpretation we can trust, so that we might direct more trustworthy courses of action.

A first step towards trusting our thinking is to describe consciousness in ways that reflect the functional connectivity of brain systems. Prereflection/reflection and anoetic/noetic/autonoetic conceptions, for instance, begin and end with distinctions between types that too easily infer clean separations both in terms of neural processes and with regard to phenomenal experiences. Though such divisions persist—and even dominate—during moments, Micah Allen and Gary Williams argue that the more fundamental activities of consciousness are integrative and overlapping. To account for this connectivity, Allen and Williams develop a “neurophenomenology of intersubjective consciousness.”²²⁹ At the start, their model recognizes two brain systems that coordinate prereflective social consciousness.

One system, the central-executive network (CEN), regulates attention and inhibits behavior irrelevant to the current situation. The other, the saliency network (SAL), automatically detects significant visual and somatosensory phenomena.²³⁰ Together, the CEN and SAL networks collaborate to execute actions for which prereflective skills have been learned over time: for example, adjusting faucet water to the correct temperature while brushing teeth before bed, or tying one's shoes once someone notices the unraveled strings.

At the same time, Allen and Williams propose that a third brain system, the resting-state or default mode network (DFM), manifests many social functions through reflective consciousness even as it triangulates neural activity between itself, the CEN, and the SAL. Among other activities, the DFM cognitively controls social responses and encodes reflection to memory. The DFM also ties fragments of experience together through narrative, helps empower subjects to experience social life as an autobiographical "I," and assists in the "folk-psychological" explanations of others' behavior and mental states. Thus, to recall Tulving's stages, the DFM helps power aspects of reflective consciousness critical for the imagining of moral visions. Yet, unlike Tulving's "autonoetic consciousness," which is a phenomenological construct delimited within a specialized mental state, the DFM is a system of brain structures that links with two additional, functionally interdependent brain networks.²³¹ The experience of social action coordinated by the DFM, CEN, and SAL, therefore, is phenomenally dynamic and "category resistant."²³² Its activities are at turns prereflective, reflective, and both simultaneously.²³³ The movements of consciousness throughout are multivalent—both hierarchical and horizontal, both forward and oscillatory—in ways that even Merleau-Ponty

might struggle to detail. To give some sense of this manifold nature of social consciousness, Allen and Williams offer the example of “cocktail party coping” at a post-conference dinner:

I, the subject in question, having just entered the room, am immediately presented with the multitude of faces, voices, and explorative eyeball saccades that fixate in wild fluctuation across the room. Further constraining my interaction are the intersubjective power narratives that hang like spectral ether across the room; the “who’s whos” and veritas of any social gathering. Entering into conversation, I must not only attend to the complex linguistic content of my new dyad, but also the randomly wavering eye-gazes, body postures, and other embodied semantic content determining the mood of the room...As we interact, I must continuously update the narrative coming from my mouth and my memory with the information given back to me by my partner. This process will be continually structured by salient target information as well as cultural representational values and is likely to only be minimally “conscious” in the traditional (i.e., intentional, reflective, self-identical) sense of the term.

Consider further the relationship between power narrative and embodied dynamics that unfold in this particular scene. Surely I am not constantly meta-conscious of the continuously unfolding social dynamics. To be so would be almost schizophrenic, and certainly I might suffer social-anxiety should I try to iteratively track all these possible variables. Rather, in line with the reputation costs associated with embodied social behavior, I simply act. I respond automatically to belief states, embodied gestures, and a host of constantly unfolding social-cognitive dynamics. My eyes and face must automatically track my partner’s, lest I fail in engaging the chameleon effects that seem so crucial for smooth interpersonal interaction. Clearly we have a situation where my narrative processing is automatically guiding my tracking of salient social cues, and also in the inhibition of action: the social-narrative stream pouring forth from my mouth is consistently inhibited. Simply put, the power-dynamics of my social context are modulating both my behavior

(compare ones' posture in a work setting to that of a bar or amongst close friends) and my default speech. If I am to be socially successful, I will inhibit whatever dirty jokes I might tell otherwise. Human social interaction is completely pervaded by these information intensive interchanges of narrative and embodied coping.²³⁴

This picture of intersubjective consciousness compels us to reconsider previous accounts. A basketball player stealing a ball, for instance, does not remain in a static mode of anoetic consciousness. Rather, she calculates her defensive aggression as a function of the number of fouls she has accumulated, the score of the game, and her past research on the ballhandling trends of her opponent. As she sets her defensive posture, her saliency network alertly scans the environment for a possible screen from the opposing power forward, verbal cues from coaches and teammates, and visual hints from the ballhandler. Should the screen arrive, her CEN network enacts her training—embedded through repeated practice—to squeeze over the pick tightly towards the ballhandler, because this ballhandler shoots three pointers at a high percentage. Throughout the entire game, the player's consciousness is responsively constructed through these layers of integrated prereflection and reflection, automaticity and control, individual and social interpretation. It is not just that the player herself has moments of self-awareness but, more accurately, each network of her social brain engages its own tasks of awareness, and the entire system together makes increasingly complex forms of social engagement possible. If the internal awareness of any network in the system breaks down, or if the connections between networks are underdeveloped or severed,²³⁵ then the player cannot interpret her world with acuity, and her chances to steal the ball diminish.

As we settle into this manifold nature of awareness, we also learn to trust the nonlinear movements between interpretation and action. Unlike the plot of a children's story, moral responses do not unfold in distinct chronological stages. Our brains are not an information processing line that produces direct logical outputs from sensory inputs, as in a "sense-represent-plan-act model" of propositional reasoning.²³⁶ Instead, as John Protevi details, "there is a continual looping as sensory information feeds into an ongoing dynamic system, altering, or reinforcing pattern formation."²³⁷

My potential choice to share food at a gas station with a homeless man named "Andrew," for example, does not happen as a granular action moment produced by a reflection period, but, at least if my systems of awareness are engaged, as an array of switchbacks, reassessments, and anticipations that starts with my perceptions of the environment, my readings of salient aspects of Andrew's body posture and voice intonations, my cultural biases that lead me to automatically highlight certain aspects of Andrew as salient over others, my sense of whether or not I can coordinate this action process with my preceding course (am I late to work?), whether or not I have food to share, whether or not my CEN has encoded a script for acquiring food for persons in need at gas stations, whether or not suspicions arise in me after Andrew steps inside my perceived boundary of social space, whether or not my startled gesture suddenly scares Andrew, whether or not we drift into dialogue that extends beyond the transactional topic, whether or not I suddenly see Andrew's companion shooting up against a wall in the background, whether or not I judge his companion's drug use to be relevant to Andrew's claim of hunger, and whether or not I perceive that I have the resources and experience with homelessness to help Andrew with much more than a plastic wrapped

sandwich from a gas station. To this point, we have not nearly approximated my full, ongoing awareness, Andrew's awareness, or our interacting social consciousnesses. All we have shown is that interpretation never ceases and even a single response is not singular (We have also, perhaps, given some indication of why modern exchanges with beggars have been efficiently reduced and de-ethicized to the passing over of a dollar through a car window at the prompting of a cardboard sign. If we truly think what we are doing, sharing with a person in need will neither be a logical proposition nor, as de Waal portrays, comparable to a chimpanzee's consolation).

Through this gas station analysis, we realize that Niebuhr's description of response as "accompanied and infused...with interpretation" proves fitting, if not precisely as Niebuhr intended.²³⁸ Interpretation does not authorize moral response in such a way that an "answer" follows an "interpretation of the question...being given."²³⁹ But responses and interpretations do accompany and mutually infuse one another in the multiform movements of consciousness, some of which is reflective. The question-and-answer image of moral action portrays agents as more logical and purposive, if less dynamic in our interpretive capacities. Arriving at home, I retell my encounter with Andrew as a story with an ordered plot, a one-sided and atomized decision, and one response. I control by oversimplifying my control. In truth, I probably identify the recipient of my action as "a homeless man" rather than as "Andrew." But I only habituate myself to these oversimplifications because my narrative power, though helpful, is a radically insufficient substitute for my experience of thinking within the world of one gas station.²⁴⁰ Conversely, a view of interpretation as manifold and mutually infused through response accepts

that we cannot approximate this dynamic world. It does, however, give us a chance to live well in it.

To respond well in the world, we must trust our complex ways of thinking in it. This is not a proposal that we uncouple control from interpretation and “release” ourselves lightly into thought. It is more akin to a confession that what we call our “will,” like consciousness, is more manifold than we often suppose and, therefore, requires more insightful methods of discipline than we usually employ. It is also to reject, as misrepresenting ethical reality, images such as Plato’s reasoning charioteer struggling to steer horses of divergent moral impulses into alignment.²⁴¹ If the mind was made of horses, they all would be designed to help, there would be multiple charioteers (including external others), and no one final destination would be the goal. Instead, to prime ethical action, I maintain that a heuristic of ourselves, *homo dialogicus*, allows us to settle into the movement of moral thinking most naturally. To act ethically in the world, “trusting our thinking” means that, to borrow from Rodney Brooks, “[i]t turns out to be better to use the world as its own model.”²⁴² Ethically, our world needs perpetual help. Thus, rather than chasing a certain form of moral thinking, we must first trust our thinking as we seek particular, responsive forms of help. This does not mean that all our thinking will prove helpful, but it does mean that, to the extent that we can commend certain characteristics for interpretation, they are those qualities that best guide us towards helping.

We now veer into a shifted movement of ethical consciousness, one that develops from:

ii.3. *Interpretation* is thinking what we are doing.

to:

ii.4. *Interpretation* is trusting our thinking as we chase helpful responses.

Interpreting Emotionally

(this frightened them all the more)

To trust our thinking we must not abandon criticism of it. In fact, we can trust interpretation because it contains the mechanisms of its own pruning. How to prune our ideas, affects, and other aspects of consciousness, however, often proves a tricky science. As we discussed in Chapter 2, moral philosophers have often sought to clip emotions from moral thinking at an early stage. Even to this day, emotions serve as something of a scapegoat for failed ethical thinking. In this section, we return to the case of emotions to further investigate those facets of interpretation that best guide us towards helping. I contend that ethicists have tended to scapegoat emotions both because we have misperceived their moral functions and, subsequently, because our methods of pruning thought have followed that misunderstanding. Thus, to help tune our critical thinking, I address three reasons for our distortion of emotions during interpretation: (1) emotions are the prereflective phenomena that most commonly, clearly, and powerfully come to social awareness; (2) when perceived from an individualistic point-of-view, emotions “skew the epistemic landscape” or create an “empathy gap” that hazards fitting responses; and (3) philosophers have not traditionally understood seeking as a form of affective consciousness. If our analysis succeeds, it will impel us to experience emotions with more interpretive skill.

EMOTIONS ARE EVERYWHERE!

In the ancient philosophical battle that (falsely, as we have shown) pit reflection against prereflection, there is a reason that “the passions” became shorthand for the vast and mysterious complex of prereflective consciousness: unlike prereflective task networks such as the SAL and the CEN, emotions manifest through blunt external forms that do not require the postulation of their existence. Emotions are, quite obviously to everyone, both ubiquitous and powerful in everyday life. They are also the only prereflective phenomena that so markedly inhabit social awareness. Therefore, prior to modern correlations between brain anatomy and function, the prereflective mind, as evidenced almost entirely by emotions, appeared to be something like a wild steed, a fickle internal weather system, or a web of puppet strings wielded by a baby demon.

This possessive otherness of emotions is exacerbated by the fact that we cannot command re-experiences of them. Although we can retell a dream, revisit memories, and even project our consciousness into future visions of existence, we cannot cognitively summon an honest experience of fear, love, anger, lust, or joy. Emotions possess us in their own time according to their own principles. The most we can do to control emotions is to accelerate their abatement or construct a socially accepted vehicle for their expression. And this is perhaps why philosophical history has pitted the reflective subject against emotions, for these tasks of narrow agency appear to be endowed, like reins to the charioteer, only to it.

From an ethical vantage, however, these tasks are misconceived, for the reflective self is not meant to be the primary interpreter of emotions. In fact, emotions inhabit social awareness so forcefully with good reasons. As we detailed in Chapter 2, an emotional expression both publicly discloses a situational condition and invites others to attend to the condition

dialogically. Emotions summon social interpretation and response together. Expressions of anger bring questions of fairness to public salience, an infant's cry urges parental care to locate the source of discomfort, and a rock musician's primal scream invites concertgoers to raise their fists and playfully howl back. In a formal sense, societies have long recognized that emotions function to elicit social interpretation and response, and the public urge to discipline that power has driven societies to cultural invention. We have, for instance, displayed a keen proclivity for emotion vehicles—to repossess that which possesses us—that has led us to design all manner of creative rituals and practices, from marriage rites that bound lust, to breathing meditations that calm anxiety, to playgrounds that circumscribe the joy of children's play. In conjunction with this organization of emotion vehicles, most societies have established a general moratorium on the random and disruptive expression of emotion in public spaces.²⁴³ Consequently, public experiences of emotion have largely been de-socialized and turned back on the emoting individual, as if the message was meant for a single internal self. To understate the matter: Human beings are not evolutionarily equipped to interpret our feelings alone. The turning back of emotions upon individuals is both a distortion of the function of emotions and a societal irresponsibility. It is also a basic element of the condition we have called "estrangement."

EMOTIONS SKEW THE EPISTEMIC LANDSCAPES OF INDIVIDUALS

One of the unjust ironies in moral thinking is that, even though emotions are not meant to be interpreted by isolated individuals, philosophers continually critique the warping effect of emotion upon individual judgment. In Peter Goldie's words, "[e]motions have a tendency to 'skew the epistemic landscape': to make what is irrational or unfounded appear to the agent as

rational or well-founded.”²⁴⁴ Up front, we might ask Goldie whether something as fickle as rationality, which seems so state-dependent, can be trusted for moral judgment any more than emotions. But that would be to fall into the dichotomous battle between reason and emotion that the brain is not designed to fight.²⁴⁵ We must trust all capacities of thinking at the onset.

Of course, the philosophical critique of emotion in moral judgment is based precisely in a distrust founded upon a confusion. This confusion—that emotions are individual states—has spawned countless experiments designed to reveal the ways in which feelings bias individual perception. Alvin Goldman, for example, critiques feelings of hunger and thirst as inciting “egocentric bias” in this experiment by Leaf Van Boven and George Loewenstein:²⁴⁶

Van Boven and Loewenstein (2003) asked participants to predict states like hunger and thirst in a group of hypothetical hikers lost in the woods with neither food nor water. Their predictions were solicited either before or after they vigorously exercised at a gymnasium. In the case of the post-exercise participants, the combined feelings of thirst and warmth were positively associated with their predictions of the hikers’ feelings. Here too there is an apparent failure to quarantine one’s own concurrent states while mindreading hypothetical targets.²⁴⁷

Goldman calls the exercisers’ inability to perceive the influence of their feelings upon their judgments “quarantine failure,” and argues that “good...simulation [of another’s mental state] requires such quarantining.”²⁴⁸ But what moral benefit comes from quarantining feelings of hunger or thirst? If this case is to be taken seriously, the first moral issue is not the degree of the hikers’ hunger but the fact that they are lost in the woods without basic resources. In ways that recall abstract moral dilemmas like the infamous “Trolley Problem,”²⁴⁹ it is ethically awkward to say, “People are lost without food and water. *How hungry are they?*” Secondly,

even if we put aside the fact that the hikers are in a life and death situation, what is the moral hazard in overestimating their hunger? Surely if we find the hikers, they will be hungry. Is it likely that a rescued hiker will at some point say, “Why did you bring me so much food?” More to the point, persons are not practiced in communicating hunger over great physical distances. Social expressions of hunger, not unlike emotions of fear or anxiety, are accustomed to situations in which others can interpret and respond to the expression in a timely fashion. The task of consciousness required in this experiment is, therefore, alien to human existence. If we ate based upon others’ guesses about our hunger, the results would be inefficient, to say the least. Thus, my kindergarten son does not ask me to tell him how hungry he is. He rubs his belly, moans, and slowly growls, “Dad, I’m soooo hungry.” I then enter into a back-and-forth with him that interrogates the authenticity of the growl, the proximity of dinner, and the subsequent options for meeting his need.

To be fair, we must note that feelings of hunger and thirst do not qualify as emotions in a strict sense but, rather, as *homeostatic affects*. Even so, neuroscientists recognize that homeostatic feelings such as hunger are often accompanied by particular emotional affects.²⁵⁰ For purposes of ethical analysis, one difference between homeostatic affects and emotions is that homeostatic feelings are always attuned to internal bodily conditions and are not, therefore, inherently social. Unlike fear, experiences of hunger are not socially contagious; I do not become hungry because you are hungry. Nonetheless, for humans, the search for and consumption of food evolved as eminently social activities, so a domain of accompanying nonverbal expressions and emotions surround the human experience of hunger. And yet none

of those evolved social capacities prepare us for an interpretive situation in which guessing at another's degree of hunger will be helpful.

Another emotional bias uncovered by Loewenstein, the so-called "empathy gap," poses more direct consequences for ethical interpretation. J.D. Trout, who wrote an entire book (*The Empathy Gap*) to detail empathy's flawed biases, explains the basic concern:

We think about the same events differently depending upon whether we are in a "hot" state (angry, hungry, fearful, sexually aroused) or a "cold" state (composed, quiet, and reflective). This is due not to *moral* differences between the events, but to morally irrelevant differences between the evaluators.²⁵¹

The basic observation deserves agreement: variant affects necessarily alter our perceptions of, and therefore our engagements with, our environments. Trout's subsequent claim that differences in emotional states are morally irrelevant is, however, troublesome. To begin, Trout presents the judgment as a self-evident fact. Yet we can only grant Trout's claim if empathic perceivers are not worthy of sympathy and care in their own right but, rather, something like automatons of care. Consider mothers who suffer from postpartum depression (PPD). It goes without saying that depressed mothers both experience and exhibit qualitatively different affects from non-depressed mothers. I contend that we should interpret these differences in affect as morally relevant both for mothers and their newborns. For, if PPD goes untreated, the infant's social emotional development may stunt, among other complications.²⁵² Knowing this, do we have the right to expect depressed mothers to provide the same quality of care for their newborns as non-depressed mothers? If so, then we cast each mother as an identical care automaton. In reality, like her newborn's cry, a depressed mother's vacant expression is a social

signal for help. Surely we should interpret—through our own emotional intelligence—the mother’s lack of affect as morally relevant and attend to her.

As with the case of the lost hikers, Trout’s critique of emotion only holds if we adopt a first-person perspective in which one’s emotional experiences are only relevant to one’s self. In this individualized state of affairs, emotions truly do not matter to others, and the sole “experiencer” becomes, by default, the only person accountable for the perceptual impacts of her emotions. Trout certainly appears to take this view, going so far as to describe his moral agent as “the evaluator.” Of course, if all we are doing is evaluating “events,” are we really helping anyone? The individualistic view of emotional interpretation leaves us straining with such questions. At times, even Trout seems both appreciative of personal connection and confused by its implications:

Yale economist Ebonya Washington recently showed that congressmen’s voting records on women’s issues were predicted by whether or not they had daughters, and how many. The more daughters they had, the more likely they were to have a liberal stance on issues such as reproductive rights...

So, high-minded theoretical debate can be window dressing. The real question is why poverty and sickness have to *touch* us personally before we *take* it personally.²⁵³

Is Trout genuinely frustrated by the personal orientation of ethics? In his least relational moment, Trout writes: “[I]t seems we want the human touch, even if it mangles us. This is a bad habit, worthy of being broken.”²⁵⁴ The epistemic landscape is skewed, indeed.

Humans are relational, and emotions are our most elemental social language. We automatically speak emotions both as a prereflective act of interpreting some condition and as

a primal invitation to others that we need help to further understand our condition. Solitarily, a person cannot make sense of emotions, and it is scientifically true that experiencing emotions alone causes the brain to falter. As de Waal's description of the "baby farms" inspired by behaviorist John Watson attests, a solipsistic emotional world can become, literally, a type of death:

Watson was so enamored by the power of conditioning that he became allergic to emotions. He was particularly skeptical of maternal love, which he considered a dangerous instrument. Fussing over their children, mothers were ruining them by instilling weaknesses, fears, and inferiorities. Society needed less warmth and more structure. Watson dreamed of a "baby farm" without parents so that infants could be raised according to scientific principles. For example, a child should be touched only if it has behaved incredibly well, and not with a hug or a kiss, but rather with a little pat on the head...

Unfortunately, environments like the baby farm existed, and all we can say about them is that they were deadly! This became clear when psychologists studied orphans kept in little cribs separated by white sheets, deprived of visual stimulation and body contact. As recommended by scientists, the orphans had never been cooed at, held, or tickled. They looked like zombies, with immobile faces and wide-open, expressionless eyes. Had Watson been right, these children should have been thriving, but they in fact lacked all resistance to disease. At some orphanages, mortality approached 100 percent.²⁵⁵

THE PASSION OF SEEKING

An unsubtle irony awaits any philosopher—any "lover of wisdom"—who distrusts emotion but seeks to think wisely. This irony stems from the fact that the same philosophers who cast a wary eye upon emotions often uphold *seeking* as crucial for moral education.

Niebuhr, for one, describes his project in the *The Responsible Self* as Stoic only after he explains it as a personal journey in seeking:²⁵⁶

I use the term, philosophy, in the quite nontechnical though widely accepted meaning of love of wisdom or understanding and want to say by my subtitle simply that these are the reflections of a Christian who is seeking to understand the mode²⁵⁷ of his existence and that of his fellow beings as human agents.²⁵⁸

Later, Niebuhr clarifies the ethical seeking of *homo dialogicus* as founded in a “Stoic...interpretive power which understands the rationale in the action to which the self is subject and so enables it to respond rationally and freely rather than under the sway of passion.”²⁵⁹ In light of recent findings in neuroscience, however, philosophers can no longer seek understanding with one hand while distrusting emotions with the other. For, in terms of neural processes, seeking is not an act of metaphysical will or dispassionate curiosity. Rather, seeking is a form of affective consciousness. That is, seeking—by its very nature—is an emotional state of being. Although philosophers have missed this emotional core of seeking, they have been right to perceive seeking as principal for moral thought.

Granted, it may seem categorically strange to qualify seeking as an emotional experience. This awkwardness can be explained. First, unlike other forms of affective consciousness, seeking does not orient the subject to a narrow environmental condition in the same way that, say, fear orients to danger or panic orients to social distress. What Jaak Panksepp calls the “SEEKING system” does orient to novelty,²⁶⁰ but novel events are endemic to all forms of experience. Seeking thus operates in an integrative way with all other affective and homeostatic states, and its effects are camouflaged by the more unique experience. For

instance, the SEEKING system may propel a thirsty person to explore the environment systematically for water, while the same system may energize a child in need of play to find a friend. The SEEKING system can both funnel fear constructively through the flight for safety²⁶¹ and suppress fear through the firefighter's focused search for a trapped child.²⁶² In short, our most common experiences of seeking layer themselves within other diverse states. This heterogeneity of seeking makes it hard to phenomenally isolate its affective quality.

Relatedly, social expressions of seeking often go unrecognized within modern society.

This is in contradistinction to other mammals, as Panksepp explains:

Among animals in the wild, it is easy to see the SEEKING system in action. Resources are not readily available and animals must persistently seek them out in order to survive. They must hunt or forage for food and search for water, find twigs or dig holes to fashion sheltering nests. The SEEKING system urges them to nurture their young, to search for a sexual partner, and, when animals live in social communities, to also find nonsexual companions, forming friendships and social alliances. However, the role of the SEEKING system is not as obvious in the comfortable settings of modern human life, so evident in developed countries. We do our "hunting" at a leisurely pace down the aisles of supermarkets. Water is not actively sought so long as it is available on tap. We have easy access to warm comfortable homes. We meet friends and find lovers at arranged gatherings.

...[Yet,] [t]he SEEKING system is in more or less continual operation for people as well. We regularly scan our environments, look in storefront windows, flip through magazines and catalogues, and surf the internet and answer emails. We are always on the lookout for something that we might need or want, or something that might simply interest us and satisfy our curiosity. Our SEEKING systems keep us in a general state of engagement with the world.²⁶³

In no small way, it is a testament to seeking's power that societies have attended to its basic aims so thoroughly. Our systems of food production, clean water, shelter, play, and even our myriad methods of responding to anxiety (from pharmaceuticals to therapies) reflect particular histories of social seeking. Our ability to observe ourselves seeking in common, however, is increasingly lost as human cooperation becomes more shielded and routinized by large-scale organizations. Consequently, modern persons often witness seeking on a large scale only within behavioral enclaves that are highly culturalized, chaotic, or both: e.g. the euphoria of shoppers released inside a department store's "Black Friday Sale," the gathering roar of a soccer crowd sensing an impending goal, or the ad hoc network of boat rescuers that emerged after a hurricane paralyzed Houston's formal institutions,²⁶⁴ to cite a few examples.

Due to its diverse tasks, seeking manifests in more individualized forms than other emotional experiences, even though each expression contains a common neural thread. Neurochemically, seeking is generated foremost by the release of dopamine.²⁶⁵ Experienced independently, the corresponding feeling of seeking can be described as *anticipation*, ranging from mild interest to elation.²⁶⁶ The excitement prior to conducting a science experiment, the fervor that builds before embarking on an adventurous vacation, and the nervous energy that grows as one prepares for a first date are all emotional experiences produced by the SEEKING system. Eagerly reaching for a cell phone to check a new text is perhaps the most routine seeking behavior in modern humans. Though even this simple behavior can assume myriad qualities when integrated with anxiety, care, or any other emotion, depending upon the nature of the correspondence.

The most stable expression of the SEEKING system in contemporary life may occur, sadly, through its dysfunction. For when a person develops a chronic drop in dopamine related to an overabundance of the chemical dynorphin, depression onsets. At the molecular level, depression is not the opposite of happiness or flourishing; it is the opposite of seeking, and the stark emotional change exhibited by depressed persons can, therefore, also be described as a loss of seeking.²⁶⁷ Consequently, to truly divorce the self from passion during the search for wisdom is to, both effectively and affectively, cease the quest itself and invite despair.²⁶⁸

It suffices to say that the stakes of seeking are high. When the SEEKING system is functioning in balance with other networks, the subject engages—simultaneously reads and responds with—her environment in multiplex ways. Panksepp, in fact, credits the SEEKING system with casting animals as “active agents” rather than “passive processors” in their worlds.²⁶⁹ Moreover, though seeking begins as a prereflective state, it mobilizes the entirety of its agents’ abilities to solve problems. In animals with capacities for noetic and auto-noetic thought, this includes all manner of cognitive rumination and planning. In this way, the seeking affect vitalizes self-aware intelligence:

[T]he neocortex does not provide its own motivation; the neocortex is activated by subcortical emotional systems...[T]he SEEKING systems of architects, writers, artists, politicians, and scientists urge them to discover new and better ways to solve problems and to express themselves. This system energizes all human creativity—it has been a mental engine for all civilizations.

This is hardly a minor point. It highlights the fact that, in many ways, the neocortex—the source of our human intellect—is the servant of our emotional systems. The SEEKING system impels the neocortex to find ways of meeting our needs and desires: to cultivate farms, breed animals, build comfortable shelters, and

weave protective garments. The SEEKING system urges the neocortex to do things that make us feel important and in command of our destinies; we try to manipulate social ties in ways that make us more influential or powerful. We build monuments to ourselves and to our gods and we express ourselves through artistic endeavors...The SEEKING system also urges the neocortex to devise ways to gratify each and every one of our desires. We don't just farm and milk cows; we also make chocolate. Our clothes are not just for protection but for beauty and sexual allure. Mankind's great and unique achievements, the products of our prodigious neocortices, are firmly rooted in the psychic energy provided by this system.²⁷⁰

This is not meant to suggest either that the seeking affect is innately moral or that interpretation is basically an automatic process. The evidence does show, however, that the very desire to focus our desires towards helpful actions is an emotionally rooted imperative. There are not good horses and bad horses, good passions and bad passions needing to be steered. There are emotional drives to act and emotional drives to understand and direct that action. Interpretation contains, as I have said, the mechanisms of its own pruning.

As we conclude this analysis of emotional thinking, we are not yet required to further amend our definition:

ii4. *Interpretation* is trusting our thinking as we chase helpful responses.

Still, we are led to perceive the definition with more color and depth. To trust our thinking is to know that its movements offer generally beneficial outcomes tested by evolution, that emotions compel us to create wiser options for our present and future worlds, and that emotional thinking itself is not a choice.²⁷¹ Emotional thinking is our only thinking. Furthermore, to trust thinking "as we chase helpful responses" is to realize that the basis of each moral quest

is a prereflective push. Seeking catches us up in its affective movement, then invites our powers of reflection to advance the chase. Now, upon reflection, can we find ways to chase more helpfully?

A Prescription for Talking, Close Together

***(They agreed to walk with him,
but when he tried to make conversation they
would not reply)***

Until now, we have honed a mainly descriptive notion of *interpretation*, grounded by contemporary accounts of consciousness, intersubjectivity, and emotion. We have not ventured into normativity beyond advising trust in our thinking. We prescribe trust to repair unbalanced theories of judgment that ennoble some types of thinking (reflection, reason) at the expense of others (prereflection, emotion). Such formulas pit the mind against itself in simplistic equations of self-discipline. The actual effect of these subtractions, however, is often closer to paralysis than prudence.

At the same time, we also advocate trust not because our thinking is infallible but because interpretation contains the tools for its own critique. Yet, when we reflect critically upon our modern experiences of interpretation, we often find that it is not easy to trust ourselves, after all. Plainly put, our readings of each other and our environments commonly seem *off*. Searching for the sources of this discord, many moralists have, as noted, asked us to subdue some unruly facet of consciousness. As a result, we have found ourselves turning to alien constructs such as “disinterested love,” which tries to domesticate love into dutiful devotion, or “proximity bias,” which blames our inability to navigate abstract death scenarios

on our need for closeness. Only in realities structured by textual consciousness could love and social intimacy become our targets of distrust.

My argument is that the weaknesses in our thinking are not due to some corrupt part of ourselves that needs to be excised, but in something lost that needs to be found. Namely, we need to reestablish dialogical conditions fit for interpretation. For our modern conditions of interpretation are fundamentally askew from those anticipated by our capacities for thought. In brief, we live in estrangement. And, though Chapter 4 is dedicated to the fuller analysis of our social conditions, an ethical account of interpretation requires that we face a few problems here. Thus, our sketch of *interpretation* transitions now from description into prescription. I do believe that, to adapt Arendt, we can think better about how we are thinking.

Broadly, I urge what Sherry Turkle calls “whole person conversation” as our essential interpretive setting.²⁷² Specifically, I prescribe one characteristic for interpretation that has been maligned—proximity, and one that has been taken for granted—dialogue itself. Though closeness and conversation ultimately interrelate, we can perceive the moral function of each more clearly by attending to them one at a time. Let us begin with proximity.

CLOSE TOGETHER

Especially in discussions about empathy, closeness has become associated with bias. Martin Hoffman, for instance, argues that empathy induces “familiarity bias” due to its emergence within the small social groups that have dominated human evolution. Since Hoffman views this evolved empathy as “not suited to life in contemporary multicultural societies like ours,” he advises that moral educators train children to practice “looking beyond the situation” from a viewpoint similar to John Rawls’ “original position.”²⁷³ To adopt this

perspective, children would be taught to imaginatively reflect upon questions like “How will my action affect the other person not only now but also in the future?” and “Are there other people, present or absent, who might be affected?” Hoffman expects that these crucibles of individual imagination will transform empathy into a key part of “universal prosocial morality.”²⁷⁴

This attempt by Hoffman to convert empathy by universalizing its point-of-view was presaged by Adam Smith in mid-18th century Scotland. As Joan Tronto details, Smith became increasingly concerned with “the problems of social distance” for his moral theory based in sympathy. For Smith, these problems are at least threefold: (1) persons tend to respond with more interest to those who are closest to them, (2) persons are prone to imaginatively project themselves into the lives of those who are better off, and (3) events that are nearer to us are naturally experienced as more serious.²⁷⁵ Weighing these matters, Smith famously suggests that a Scot under sympathy’s spell would “snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions [*sic*] of his brethren” who perished in an earthquake in China, while the same man will be unable to sleep at all over the loss of his pinky finger.²⁷⁶ According to Tronto,

Smith’s solution to all of these problems, which emerges through time in his subsequent revisions of *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is to propose a way in which reason moderates the concerns of sympathy by tempering the sympathetic responses of “the man within.” The “impartial spectator,” who had played a relatively insignificant role in the early editions of *TMS*, draws upon universal notions of what human conduct should be in order to direct our proper sympathetic responses. Smith has retreated from a pure theory of moral sentiments, increasingly viewing them as moderated by a principle of self-command that arises in part from

reason. Smith became increasingly skeptical about the prospects of people acting in a moral manner.²⁷⁷

Not unlike scenarios that ask joggers to fantasize the hunger of lost campers, Smith and Hoffman's problems begin when they attempt to drop feelings, whose intelligence is contextual, within an abstracted, calculating vantage of judgment. From any point-of-view of any sane person, surely an earthquake that kills millions of people deserves more attention than a single individual's severed finger. Nonetheless, as far as actionability, the attention of an average, 18th century man in Scotland does not pose equal value to a Chinese earthquake victim as it does to his own injured hand. That is to say, as immeasurably unbalanced as the harms are between the cases, so the scales tip the other way in terms of the pinkyless man's power to help. Interpretation necessarily assesses both the gravity of an event's conditions and the responder's agency to impact those conditions. Unless an 18th century Scottish male is a god capable of responding with equal verve to all current happenings in the universe, then he does only harm by staying up at night worrying about an earthquake in China rather than attending to his fresh wound. Indeed, if all the world's persons refuse to attend to their injured bodies in order to agonize about natural disasters on the other side of the planet, an easily preventable catastrophe of infection and death will no doubt ensue on a global scale. In other words, Smith's sympathies are not nearly as morally dumb, at least in this case, as his abstracted imagination. Moreover, the fact that Smith obviously *senses* that the earthquake is a graver matter confirms that there is no practical moral conflict. In regard to actual helps and harms, the only question that remains is whether fretful sleeplessness might be a form of

virtue. More likely, the world needs persons with healed hands and rested minds to begin designing earthquake-proof buildings the following morning.

Of course, in 21st century America, we have a more globalized conception of action and, correspondingly, a more expansive sense of ethical proximity. Yet, even as empathy struggles to inform universal perspectives in the way Hoffman envisioned, an inversion is taking place: a distant, spectatorial viewpoint is infiltrating our modern experiences of closeness. Sherry Turkle portrays this undoing of intimacy through the real-life account of “Haley” and “Natalie,” two friends:

[Haley] was out for dinner with her best friend, Natalie, when Natalie received an upsetting text from an ex-boyfriend. Haley tried to console Natalie, but her friend was more interested in what other friends were saying who were leaving messages on the network. Here is how Haley describes Nathalie’s turn to the “people in the phone:”

*I am not great at consoling people at all but I was hugging her and trying so hard. I decided that it was my chance to console her. She had been there for me...I decided to go all out. I was trying all of these different methods. And five minutes into me trying to console her she sent out five texts to people describing the situation and then started reading their feedback while I was talking to her. We were walking down the street and she was just texting her “consolation network.” So then I changed my approach and started asking her what people were saying over text. And I tried to engage with her on that strange and oblique access point. But it was so weird to not be the primary person even though I was the only real person there. Terrible. She was texting people that were hundreds of miles away instead of talking to me.*²⁷⁸

As Haley's frustration reveals, the greatest peril for modern interpretation is not being too close; it is losing the ability to perceive that which is right in front of us with any depth or fullness. In this estranged reality, it is difficult for a person to bias what is nearby because consciousness is no longer proximal in nature. Rather, individual attention is shrunk and scattered over a dozen data points across a multiplicity of digitized realms at any one moment. As Nathalie's awareness disperses from her physical setting, how can we say that she is biased in favor of Haley? Can we even describe Nathalie as having a "point-of-view" from which to bias anything other than herself? The image of this encounter is not of a scale with "proximity bias" on one side and "impartial distance" on the other. This is a picture of a microscopic world in which persons are neither partial nor impartial but always *spectators in part*, perceiving only tiny bits of multiple realities instead of immersing themselves in the one embodied reality of closeness. If anything, the only proximity bias at work in estranged reality is narcissism: Nathalie interprets herself through a proxy network, one member of which is nearby, but none of whom are close. As ethics is a social phenomenon, there is at most a thin qualitative difference between Nathalie's vantage and the point-of-view of the impartial spectator.

In just a few centuries, we have shifted from fearing the ethical gravity of closeness to wondering what force is left. As a hopeful sign, research shows that children display a marked increase in their ability to empathize after just five days at an electronic device-free camp.²⁷⁹ If we nourish conditions that fit our capacities for moral thinking, our capacities develop. These conditions are not picky. First, we need embodied closeness. Proximity *is* biased, but its preferences are toward accurate information and efficient, skillful responses. Proximal consciousness allows our brains to incorporate the maximum amount of relevant information

during situations. Rather plainly, accurate knowledge increases our chances to interpret well and respond fittingly. Additionally, attention to our intimate surroundings suits our station as corporeal agents. Not just empathy, but all our sensory, perceptual, and interpretive faculties evolved to function integratively within embodied settings. Our boundness to time, space, and embodied relation is neither a condition in which we should idle nor one that we should seek to transcend without humility. Within these limits of proximity, our evolved faculties can foster rich understanding and finely tuned, timely action. This does not mean that our responsive thinking should be moored only to present circumstances; only that the present is a good place to begin and end.

TALKING

Whereas proximity has often been maligned as a condition for moral thinking, dialogue has been taken for granted. These disparate fates are curious, not least because closeness and conversation evolved as mutually embedded conditions of interpretation. Beginning with empathy, our proximal moral faculties presuppose that each of us will not interpret alone but together, dialogically. As Merleau Ponty describes, embodied perception itself is an open social system at once tied together and liberated through dialogue:

Now, it is precisely my body that perceives the other's body and finds there something of a miraculous extension of its own intentions, a familiar manner of handling the world. Henceforth, just as the parts of my body together form a system, the other's body and my own are a single whole, two sides of a single phenomenon...

This only establishes another living being, and not yet another man. But this foreign life, like my own life with which it communicates, is an open life...In the experience of dialogue, a common ground is constituted between me and another;

my thought and his form a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion and are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. Here there is a being-shared-by-two...We are, for each other, collaborators in perfect reciprocity: our perspectives slip into each other, we coexist in a single world.²⁸⁰

Yet, because our faculties effortlessly enter and exit us from conversation, “[t]he linguistic and intersubjective world no longer causes us any wonder.”²⁸¹ We only appreciate it when our capacities blatantly fail and the dialogical fabric is torn, such as when a best friend retreats from the living world to the “people in her phone,” or when a mother refuses to reciprocate her infant’s gestures or attempts at eye contact.²⁸²

It is one thing to recognize when dialogue is broken; it is wholly different to sense when it is only half there. Estrangement most frequently structures dialogue into the latter condition. For, in its fullest functionality, dialogue does not simply gather persons together or present data for each listener to independently analyze. On the contrary, dialogue emerges from the need for social interpretation and is, quite possibly (at least at this stage in human evolution), our only condition for social thinking. As such, it is our only way to figure things out with both humility and moral assurance. And, as figuring things out is usually a messy process, we should expect our conversations to be, in Sherry Turkle’s words, “artless, risky, and face-to-face.”²⁸³

When dialogue is “only half there,” it is usually because we have excised some messier aspect of experience from it. Texting, for instance, censors both emotion and the imperfections of in-the-moment language. Structured conversations common in social justice settings try to flatten power inequalities by requiring speakers and listeners to communicate in segmented, individualized blocks of time. Dialogue between drivers on a road eliminates complex

sentences, specific identities, and the responsibility that comes with the potential for relationship. Ironically, we allow expressions from cars to be “messy” in a limited, crude sense precisely because we do not experience them within the messier burden of relationship itself. And, ultimately, it is relationships in time and space that are artless, risky, and face-to-face.

When we avoid these messy realities of dialogue, we abandon our minds to a domain of tidy confusions. This is the realm of the isolated experimental subject—the rat in the trial-and-error maze, the lone thinker behind the veil of ignorance who miscalculates the thirst of hikers, the cowardly 65% of us who would, when alone at a laboratory desk with a button, administer lethal shocks to an unseen human on the other side of a wall, just because a researcher in a white coat says, “You have no other choice, you must go on.”²⁸⁴ But are the morally weak interpretations of these subjects not a function of their isolation? What if we change the experimental conditions for rats and humans—eminently social animals—by providing both embodied closeness and the opportunity for open communication with peers? If the wall is taken down between the administer and receiver of electric shocks, for instance, and embodied proximity is established between them, *not even rats* will push the button.²⁸⁵ What is more, when researchers place two rats in an experiment that requires the cooperation of one to free the other, the squeaks of the trapped rat appear to compel the partner to press a lever until both are free.²⁸⁶ These open social conditions for rats are akin to allowing the subject in the hiking scenario to find the lost group and directly ask them to describe their thirst. And what if we similarly alter the conditions of Stanley Milgram’s human study? Simply adding two confederates who refuse to comply with the command to shock lowers the rate of subject compliance from 65 to 10 percent.²⁸⁷ If we remove the wall entirely and ask five subjects to

discuss together whether or not to administer the punishment after each command, will a single harm take place? Will five random citizens look another human in the eyes and, after thinking together about the action, shock him into oblivion? If so, then all human moral philosophy should cease until we can perform at least as admirably as the rats.

Living in estrangement turns moral thinking in the world into a series of trial-and-error experiments performed by individuals. Thinking alone, my judgment is susceptible to all manner of misperceptions and discordant impulses. Worse, I have no trustworthy way to discover—much less correct—my false ideas and one-sided feelings. Dialogue, messy and face-to-face, is our only way out of the cage. Only conversation with close others can take my emotional expression, interrogate its energy, and direct it into helpful responses. Through dialogue, we look past the moment to consider the impacts of potential action upon real lives. Any individual can autonomously see a future. But only dialogue allows us to both imagine futures that are shared and coordinate our action in order to render societies that are coherent. In other words, the problems of immediacy associated with the whimsical energies of individuals are given natural intelligence and structure through dialogue. Of course dialogue has been the intended setting of our energy all along. Finally, it is the intimate and free public dialogue of citizens that offers the most basic check to tyrannical thinking, which is why the tyrant prefers propaganda and speeches given to distant crowds, while the first moral priorities of a democracy are always dialogical and proximal—the freedom of speech and of the press, or the right of the people to peaceably assemble and petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Pluralistic dialogue is, in truth, the closest thing we have to an original moral position. The first gesture into social interpretation is, therefore, an act of remembering and humility and, moreover, an opening of the grounds of trust in one another.

ii5. *Interpretation* is trusting our thinking as we chase helpful responses **together**.

Homo Dialogicus as a Perceptual Portal

(how to break into a locked door)

Iris Murdoch taught us that “[f]reedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action.”²⁸⁸ How do we see accurately? If we are to act ethically in response with one another, then we see accurately only through interpretation, through thinking together dialogically. At the same time, we also need to develop wise vision as individuals, so that the moral world can cultivate responses between us in emergent ways when our institutional bulwarks fail through either excess or inadequacy. A full account of interpretation, therefore, cannot neglect individual perception.

Or, more specifically, an ethical account of interpretation focuses individual perception towards certain aims. This is the closest that we can come to an act of individual moral will: to understand the world as good in basic ways, and so to reflectively condition images into our prereflections that help us perceive the essentials of goodness most clearly. Through this self-imprinting, we effectively take hold of what Murdoch calls the “continuous breeding of imagery in the consciousness which is, for better or worse, a function of moral change.”²⁸⁹

Homo dialogicus itself is this symbolic germ we offer to prereflection. It is a heuristic image, a prescriptive “portal”²⁹⁰ that opens the individual agent’s consciousness onto the world with certain expectations: first and foremost, that we respond and think together, dialogically. To yield this vision is to succumb to estrangement.

The Crisis of the First Sentiment

(a brain-washed silence in a shrunken world)

As we discussed in the previous chapter, Nel Noddings divides care into two layers of moral consciousness. The first layer develops as a prereflective memory of the care persons did (or did not) receive from others during infancy and childhood. As agents in the world, persons experience this remembrance as a sentimental feeling that naturally disposes them towards or away from care in basic ways. Noddings identifies the second layer of moral consciousness, ethical care, as a capacity for reason that remains grounded in the pre-ethical, sentimental layer. Thus, in Noddings’ theory, rational agents make ethically accountable choices that are guided by their natural sentiments but not determined by them.²⁹¹

Despite the fact that *homo dialogicus* does not categorically exclude any human experience from ethics, Noddings’ levels again provide a helpful jumping off point for our discussion. In the previous chapter, we followed Noddings’ theory into a robust analysis of empathy. To conclude Chapter 3, we consider estrangement’s effect upon the interdependent phenomena of interpretation and response. We tweak the categories upfront, however. For the crux of the matter is not strictly between early memory and later judgment, but between all experience (including all memories), interpretation, and response. This is my final concern: that

a condition of enfeebled experience leads to weak moral thinking and shallow action. A final poem:

This Is Just To Say
by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold²⁹²

If interpretation is only the work of reflective, individual minds, then brief, perfectly cultured statements—like a phone text or this poem by Williams—might prove not only sufficient but helpful for thinking; carefully editing our ideas to each other would sharpen rather than dull understanding. But the messy dialogue of full bodies is infinitely more complex and morally vital than the most perfect sentence ever scripted. Imagine tasting food, hearing a concert, or smelling gardenias through written language primarily—or *only*. Even Williams' elegant poem about plums really only works if one has seen, felt, smelled, and tasted the juices of the messy violet fruit with the tight skin. The words need to conjure a sensory memory to establish any logic. And the poem is given all the more meaning if one has visited the refrigerator for sustenance with a lover in the bedroom, perhaps with blood still flush, the parasympathetic nervous system ripe. The cold plum against the humid lips and lust in every

nerve. Carlos Williams relies upon sensory literacy prior to the ability to read to give the poem its meaning. Without embodied, emotional, face-to-face dialogue to give words a first sentiment with which to work, our texts would become a world of Jabberwockies without even a vorpal blade to give us some agency, and Williams could write about munching saltine crackers with equal effect. But in the kitchen after lovemaking, plums and crackers are such separate worlds that only one is really food at that moment. And in a situation where human welfare is saliently at stake, two different movements of the mouth may both be called smiles even though one leads to an entirely different set of logical needs and responses. Embodied conversation is the only context that our species has in which we can really begin the act of interpretation, an act intended to be lush with memory and feeling, so that an economy of words (28, in Williams' case) incites a whole world of wisdom that has already started the act of interpretation before we are aware that thinking has begun.

We take our lonely bodies, surround them not with intimate others but with metal boxes on wheels, and gaze down into our phones. Then we turn on the radio to hear the ancient sound of voices.

*“[T]here must be a modicum of fit between morality and sociopolitical institutions.
Not just any institutions will do.”*

—Jürgen Habermas²⁹³

*“When mammals opted for a family way of life, they set the stage
for one of the most distressful forms of suffering. A condition that, for us,
makes being a mammal so painful is having to endure separation or isolation
from loved ones and, in the end, the utter isolation of death.”*

—Paul MacLean²⁹⁴



How do empathic, estranged beings live in solidarity with one another? What does “solidarity” mean for us? For that matter, what does “us” mean for a society of strangers who struggle to sense each other’s needs and respond to them? If we are to forge ethical lives on the other side of estrangement, or if we are to act morally in the here and now, then we need to be able to both envision and establish solidarity from our isolating conditions. In these next two chapters, we sketch one such vision of solidarity. For estrangement attacks each element of responsibility, from response to accountability, but its first and most forceful attack is upon social solidarity. And, as Niebuhr knew full well, without a sense of ourselves as embedded and bonded with concrete others, responsibility—and morality itself—loses meaning.

Niebuhr's solidarity

For Niebuhr, “social solidarity” implies²⁹⁵ at least three interdependent conditions. First, a moral response cannot issue randomly but must fit into a pattern of “continuity in the community of agents to which the response is being made.”²⁹⁶ Second, this “continuing discourse” of action,²⁹⁷ which is prior to individual experience,²⁹⁸ is the face-to-face setting through which the self develops into a morally aware being.²⁹⁹ Third, as long as these two conditions—the durability of agents and the persistence of face-to-face dialogue—hold, then society nourishes an ethos that enables coherent moral points-of-view between selves to emerge. To be clear, these three conditions do not follow from one another in linear fashion. Rather, they codevelop synergistically so that each condition serves as a womb that helps generate the others. Hence, if the stability of agents, the dialogue of selves, or the ethos of society breaks down, the other conditions also decay, and moral life becomes confused. To understand this sensitive balance, let us briefly examine each condition.

By casting social solidarity as a function of the stability of agents, Niebuhr is not leaning on a static conception of culture or a singular vision of community to establish moral life. He is simply beginning with an obvious fact of discourse—that conversations make little sense if their dialogical elements are haphazard:

A series of responses to disconnected actions guided by disconnected interpretations would scarcely be the action of a self but only of a series of states of mind somehow connected with the same body—though the sameness of the body would be apparent only to an external point of view. Personal responsibility implies the continuity of a self with a relatively consistent scheme of interpretations of what it is reacting to. By the same token it implies continuity in the community of agents to which response is being made. There could be no responsible self in an interaction in which the

reaction to one's response comes from a source wholly different from that whence the original action issued.³⁰⁰

A relatively continuous set of dialogue partners is, therefore, necessary for both intelligible communication and coherent action to take place. More specifically, this continuity of agents allows for responses and interpretations to comport with one another to address the needs of dynamic situations. When this agreement between the elements of responsibility occurs, Niebuhr calls the action *fitting*.³⁰¹ Thus, Niebuhr's first condition of social solidarity does not depend upon a rigorous community culture. It only requires the degree of shared background culture needed for agents to fittingly work out a dialogue of action. In this way, Niebuhr's "solidarity" is neither synonymous with, nor inimical to, common dogma, shared interests, or institutionally regulated practices. Rather, Niebuhr's solidarity is a discursive context stable enough that responses, interpretations, and (as we shall see in Chapter 6) accountabilities can cohere. His first expectation of social solidarity is not that people conform, but that dialogical elements accord with one another so that moral action is intelligible. Certainly the population of subjects throughout a discourse can evolve, expand, or narrow, but the conversation must maintain some durability of agents as a basic foundation for responsibility.

Whereas Niebuhr's first condition of solidarity focuses upon the stability of dialogical agents in society, his second and third conditions attend to the moral interrelations of selves in those dialogues. Within settings of regular, face-to-face dialogues, the relational self develops as a morally aware being. Drawing from Martin Buber, Niebuhr refers to this self-awareness that arises socially as "I-Thou, I-You, existence:"³⁰²

The fundamental form of human association, it is seen, is not that contract society into which men enter as atomic individuals, making partial

commitments to each other for the sake of gaining limited common ends or of maintaining certain laws; it is rather the face-to-face community in which unlimited commitments are the rule and in which every aspect of every self's existence is conditioned by membership in the interpersonal group...To say that the self is social is not to say that it finds itself in need of fellow men in order to achieve its purposes, but that it is born in the womb of society as a sentient, thinking, needful being with certain definitions of its needs and with the possibility of experience of a common world. It is born in society as mind and as a moral being, but above all it is born in society as self.³⁰³

The Niebuhrian self thus enters the world neither as a solipsism nor as some arbitrary addition to a social horde. *Homo dialogicus* is born into responsibility ongoing,³⁰⁴ into responsive patterns of solidarity, back-and-forths with the faces of concrete others who immediately begin to clarify the self and give form to its horizons. From these origins, the self experiences the vitalization of both its moral realities and its very existence through its dialogues with other selves.

As long as these face-to-face, dialogical patterns between agents exhibit some constancy,³⁰⁵ then a third condition of solidarity manifests: an ethos that nurtures coherent moral points-of-view between diverse selves. As a first step towards this condition, Niebuhr adapts the work of G.H. Mead to assert that dialogue with others helps the self achieve a reflexive point of view:

[H]ow is it possible that a being can become an object to itself? Only, Mead, argues, through dialogue with others. To be a being that is an object to itself is possible genetically and actually only as I take toward myself the attitude of other selves, see myself as seen, hear myself as heard, speak to myself as spoken to. "The self," he writes, "as that which can be an object to itself is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience."³⁰⁶

As Niebuhr notes, Mead further claims that this reflexive competency ultimately integrates multiple social perspectives and allows the self to take the crucial cognitive leap towards the

phenomenon of internal conscience. Mead therefore famously names his moral point of view the “generalized other:”

We assume the generalized attitude of the group, in the censor that stands at the door of our imagery and inner conversations, and in the affirmation of the laws and axioms of the universe of discourse...Our thinking is an inner conversation in which we may be taking the roles of specific acquaintances over against ourselves, but usually it is with what I have termed the ‘generalized other’ that we converse...³⁰⁷

Although Niebuhr draws much from Mead’s connection between dialogue and moral development, he is skeptical of Mead’s final step towards a “generalized other” perspective. In Niebuhr’s critique, the generalized other betrays the basic orientation of dialogue by dissolving concrete relationships into an abstract, homogenized gaze. It makes little sense to Niebuhr that a moral dynamic rooted in embodied, social reciprocities would experience its maturation in a moral point of view suddenly quite resonant with Kantian philosophy.³⁰⁸ Niebuhr’s final move, therefore, takes a different direction. Instead of reducing dialogue to an individual orientation, Niebuhr renders the moral realm as a composite pattern of “I-Thou” relations:

“[T]he social self exists in responses neither to atomic other beings nor to a generalized other or impartial spectator but to others who as Thou’s are members of a group in whose interactions constancies are present in such a way that the self can interpret present and anticipate future action upon it. It can respond to the meaning of present action because such action is a part of a total action, something which *means* the total action or derives its meaning from that whole. So my conscience represents not so much my awareness of the approvals and disapprovals of other individuals in isolation as of the ethos of my society, that is, of its mode of interpersonal interactions.”³⁰⁹

Granted, one might suggest that Niebuhr is splitting hairs with Mead here, as both the generalized other and the Niebuhrian conscience seem, in essence, to be individual

experiences. Additionally, as we saw in Chapter 2, the Niebuhrian self tends to impinge upon the other's dialogical agency through Niebuhr's concept of response. Still, how do we learn what's inside a hair if we don't occasionally open one up? In this case, the meaningful difference between Niebuhr's conscience and Mead's generalized other is revealed by the way each theorist structures dialogue with the moral point of view. Mead, for his part, casts discourse as the developmental machine that yields the product of individual conscience. Thus, Mead's framing of dialogue not only explains the phenomenon of conscience but imparts the lion's share of moral reasoning to the generalized perspective, once developed. That is, like Adam Smith's "impartial spectator" or John Rawls's "original position," Mead's "generalized other" functions as the principal point of view in his moral philosophy. In this sense, dialogue for Mead is primary for moral development but secondary to the individual vantage for moral judgment. In contrast, Niebuhr maintains the primacy of dialogue in both developing and acting from a moral point of view. For Niebuhr never commends his notion of conscience—what might be called "ethos awareness"—as the principal moral perspective. Rather, recognizing that ethos awareness emerges naturally through the self's solidarity with other agents, Niebuhr simply structures conscience back into the discourse of social action. Or, more accurately, Niebuhr never abstracts the moral point of view from the dialogical point of view in the first place. He leaves them intact.

Partially because Niebuhr keeps the moral point of view and dialogue mutually infused with one another, he opens a fascinating possibility for the conscience of society, one worth noting as we move towards our first draft of social solidarity. Namely, if the ethos of a society arises from its interpersonal interactions, and if the essential moral way of being for humans is

dialogical, then can dialogue not also be upheld as an essential character of a good society? To be clear, I am not speaking of dialogue as a commendable social practice, here, but as a defining moral quality—as an ethos of society itself. Admittedly, this possibility is preceded by significant ifs. Still, is it not time to consider what binds us? H. Richard Niebuhr believed that two connected questions drive the core of responsibility: “To whom or what am I responsible and in what community of interaction am I myself?”³¹⁰ Can empathic, estranged beings answer Niebuhr’s questions with clarity? Does the second question, especially, feel apprehensible to us? Are there communities of interaction in which we are ourselves, or are there only networks in which different aspects of our personalities float to the surface and breathe for a while? Morphing from one setting to the next, are we just chameleons who cannot remember if we had an original form? How do we live in solidarity with one another?

In Niebuhr’s initial sketch of responsibility, our bonds are generated through a complex system of common acts:

- ii.3. **Social solidarity** is a moral cohesion that derives from a synergetic dialogue of selves within and with their society. At the level of society, solidarity depends upon discourses of action occurring within patterns of agents stable enough to render the dialogues coherent. At the level of selves, dialogue itself develops morally aware beings in solidarity with one another. Moreover, when these interpersonal relations exhibit some constancy across society, they nourish an ethos that enables socially meaningful moral points of view between selves to emerge.

Because of the interdependence of its elements, Niebuhr’s social solidarity exhibits qualities at once stalwart and vulnerable. Its strengths stem from the ways in which everyday, dialogical relations connect agents intimately with both one another and their worlds. Its fragilities wait

on the other side of the same dynamic. For if any leg of the system falters, Niebuhr does not consider how the system remains steady. If dialogue ebbs, how do moral selves develop? If a society of relatively continuous agents is also a gathering of strangers, how does dialogue remain ethically coherent much less responsible? How do citizens form not just effervescent moments but societal character from estrangement?

Such questions press our inquiry as we test Niebuhr's symbol not only within empathic, estranged conditions but against modern scholarship. Due to the dense challenges of this task, our study of social solidarity is divided into two chapters. In Chapter 4, we consider whether or not Niebuhr's vision of *solidarity in society* translates to today's world in light of contemporary moral theories of discourse and relations in industrialized urban centers. In Chapter 5, we test Niebuhr's *solidarity of selves* in similar fashion. In both chapters, we quickly find ourselves confronted with perhaps the most noteworthy analysis of dialogue in modern moral philosophy, Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics.

Solidarity in society

In her essay, "Models of Public Space," Seyla Benhabib searches for a normative theory of civic engagement that "is compatible both with the general social trends of our societies and with the emancipatory aspirations of new social movements like the women's movement."³¹¹ Initially, Benhabib finds worth in the way Hannah Arendt's "agonistic model" of public space invites the contestation of political norms through the spontaneous power of public discourse.³¹² In the end, however, Benhabib rejects the agonistic model due to its tendency to parse, in ways not dissimilar from the Greek polis that Arendt celebrates, social life from the

realm of politics. On Benhabib's view, this separation leads Arendt to privatize matters of public justice such as work and labor, leaving the agonistic model "at odds with the sociological reality of modernity, as well as with modern political struggles for justice."³¹³

Benhabib then moves on to the "liberal model" of public space. According to Benhabib, liberalism focuses its energy on mitigating "the corrosive effect of unbridled majoritarian politics upon civil and political liberties."³¹⁴ To limit unjust majorities, the liberal model tries to democratize the legitimacy of power in the public sphere. Yet, not only on Benhabib's view, the liberal answer to illegitimate power relies too narrowly upon legal and constitutional remedies, attempting to formally restructure society from above rather than allowing citizens to dialogically contest it on open ground. Here, Benhabib aligns herself with Benjamin Barber to critique the timid public discourse inherent in the liberal theories of John Rawls and Bruce Ackerman:

Where there is little doubt that [Rawl's] principle of free public reason expresses a governing normative rule for the public accountability of the major institutions of a liberal-democratic society, consider also what is missing from it. All contestatory, rhetorical, affective, impassioned elements of public discourse, with all their excesses and virtues, are absent from this view. Free public reason is not freely wielded public reasoning, with all the infuriating ideological and rhetorical mess that this may involve. Again in his comment on Ackerman, Benjamin Barber capture this point well. "It is neutrality that destroys dialogue, for the power of political talk lies in its creativity, its variety, its openness and flexibility, its inventiveness, its capacity for discovery, its subtlety and complexity, its potential for empathetic and affective expression—in other words, in its deeply paradoxical, some would say dialectical character."³¹⁵

In brief, the failure of the liberal approach is that its pre-constraints keep it from discovering the full agency of open human dialogue in society. Hence, although it can disclose the unjust systems of power against which modern social movements struggle, the liberal model itself

struggles to empower the voices in those movements to come together in imaginative and enduring ways.

In her search for a model that is equipped to both engage modern societies and address their unjust conditions, Benhabib ultimately turns to Jürgen Habermas's concept of discursive public space (*Öffentlichkeit*). Though Benhabib is wary of the way Habermas partitions moral and ethical themes,³¹⁶ she deems the procedural power of discourse ethics as powerful enough to overcome Habermas's own philosophical limitations:

If in discourses the agenda of the conversation is radically open, if participants can bring any and all matters under critical scrutiny and questioning, then there is no way to predefine the nature of the issues discussed as being public ones of justice versus private one of the good life. Distinctions such as between justice and the good life, norms and values, interests and needs are "subsequent" and not prior to the process of discursive will formation. As long as these distinctions are renegotiated, reinterpreted and rearticulated as a result of a radically open and procedurally fair discourse, they can be drawn in any of a number of ways.³¹⁷

Here Benhabib stakes her claim that open, challenging dialogue offers citizens the best chance to morally shape society. Yet, as she is aware, there are degrees of friction in her choice of Habermas's model, as Habermas himself notes that discourse ethics not only operates within a comparatively narrow moral space but also within a horizon of consensus.³¹⁸ Though Benhabib attempts to broaden the space via Habermas's own processes, she does not address how the discursive model satisfies her condition of being contestatory even as it prioritizes agreement. Nor does she analyze Habermas's dependence on Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* ("ethical life"), which at times drifts near enough to an image of community culture that Benhabib would seem to need to clarify how it meets "the realities of highly differentiated and pluralistic modern societies."³¹⁹

Nevertheless, the point of our review is not to dispute whether discourse ethics offers value as a contemporary political model. Rather, with regards to social solidarity, what is interesting about Benhabib's quest for a vision of public space is that each approach begins and ends with dialogue. There is no model for creating public space, for instance, whose first recommendation is a series of monologues, much less silence, between all parties. This is a reality both obvious and, therefore, capable of being taken for granted. Even agonistic and liberal models, which Benhabib criticizes due to the first's tendency to keep certain topics and classes of people from public discourse and the second's tendency to constrain discourse to legal settings, begin by assuming the power of dialogue and seeking to wield it in particular ways. In fact, one might point out that both the agonistic model and the liberal model start with a respectful fear of dialogue. The agonistic model fears that the power of dialogue might dissipate if not concentrated in group political action, whereas the liberal model fears that discourse's power might overrun human interactions if not disciplined by formal political institutions. Benhabib herself expresses less of a fear regarding dialogue than a faith in its unconstrained possibilities. Even so, at no point does Benhabib guarantee that radically open discourse will lead to more ethical public spaces, much less to greater solidarity. She only asserts that open dialogue gives society the best chance to work itself out.

HABERMAS'S DISCOURSE ETHICS AND THE PRINCIPAL OF SOLIDARITY

As Benhabib's study suggests, Habermas's theory of discourse ethics is so thorough and cogent that any subsequent dialogical ethic must grapple with some aspect of its analysis along the way. Similarly to Mead and Niebuhr, Habermas discerns pervasive functions for language in society. He initially separates these functions into three categories: "(a) that of reproducing

culture and keeping traditions alive...(b) that of social integration or the coordination of the plans of different actors in social interaction..., and (c) that of socialization or the cultural interpretation of needs.”³²⁰ Originally, Habermas locates his work only within the second function through his theory of communicative action. At the same time, he links Gadamer’s hermeneutics with the first function of language and Mead’s social psychology with the third. Yet, as Habermas’s theory unfolds, it becomes clear that discourse ethics is active within all three functions. First, Habermas places communicative action in a mutual relationship with the so-called “lifeworld,”³²¹ thereby merging the first two functions. Then Habermas fully inhabits the third function by using Kohlberg’s theory of moral development to validate discourse ethics.³²² In the end, Habermas’s philosophy carves out a functionality for dialogue that, if not quite as open, is nearly as ambitious as Benhabib argues for it to be. More particularly, in the ways it connects the functions of dialogue between broader lifeworlds, specific action situations, and the maturation of moral points-of-view, Habermas’s discourse ethics shares clear points of reference with Niebuhr’s *homo dialogicus*.

In this initial part of our study of Habermas’s discourse ethics, we focus on the ways dialogue interacts with social cohesion in his theory, with special attention upon what Habermas calls the “principle of solidarity.” Before discussing this principle, however, at least three other processes of social cohesion in discourse ethics are worth noting. First, in terms of procedural morality, the solidarity that Habermas anticipates through dialogue is “consensus.” On Habermas’s view, the need for discourse ethics is spurred by “some disruption in normative consensus”³²³ (Recall that this project made an analogous yet protracted claim in chapter two³²⁴). After the normative break occurs, the ensuing process of reestablishing agreement

“cannot be handled monologically but require[s] a cooperative effort” in which subjects either mend the broken norm or validate a new one together dialogically. This new—or newly restored—consensus, Habermas contends, represents the subjects’ “*common will*.”³²⁵ Thus, the first form of solidarity in discourse ethics is the common will of its participants, discovered through dialogue at the horizon of consensus.

Before participants enter dialogues aimed at consensus, Discourse ethics assumes that they are undergoing a lifelong, universal process of moral development, one which establishes commonalities between their perspectives at key stages. The resulting competencies signify a second form of cohesion. Adhering to Kohlberg’s theory, Habermas maintains that, typically in adolescence, human beings develop a moral awareness of “mutual interpersonal expectations, relationships, and conformity.”³²⁶ Kohlberg labels this stage 3, the first of two stages in his “conventional level” of morality. The mutuality that individuals develop at stage 3 proceeds both from a cognitive ability to adopt the other’s perspective and from a sense that the expectations of others “take primacy over individual interests.”³²⁷ In other words, Kohlberg’s mutuality is indeed an extension of “conformity,” albeit aided by a greater capacity to imagine the interests of those with whom one is expected to conform. To understand this dynamic, a review of Kohlberg’s first and second stages is needed. In brief, Kohlberg’s first stage frames right action as “literal obedience to rules and authority” and the “avoidance of punishment.” His second stage then casts a slightly more mature morality as the instrumentalization of one’s own interests in competition with others’ interests.³²⁸ Hence, on one hand, the stage of mutuality suggests a progression beyond the blunt level of punishment and individual purpose. Yet, more plainly, Kohlberg and Habermas’s third stage continues the pattern of power

established in stages 1 and 2, in which external authority basically tussles with self-interest. At stage 3 this pattern is simply internalized via new cognitive abilities, allowing the individual to prevent punishment by anticipating the interests of others and attending to their claims before conflicts irrupt. Subsequent levels of Kohlberg's theory only expand this pattern. At stage 4, the individual mind conceives of the interests of institutions and strives to uphold them. At stage 5, the individual mind perceives the values of society and pledges allegiance to their authority. At stage 6, the individual mind comprehends the universe of humanity and the laws that, if applied at stage 1, would serve as just authorities over all. In sum, there is an egoistic anthropology at the center of Habermas's work, one which views the individual as innately selfish and, therefore, requiring the crucible of punishment to establish submission to others' claims, at least until the brain develops enough to internalize that submission through a magnified awareness of other persons, institutions, societies, and worlds. Somewhat cynically, it is from within this arc of moral submission that discourse ethics' second form of social cohesion emerges: a mutuality that develops when comprehending interpersonal relations becomes central for individual growth. It suffices to say, such mutuality is not experienced as a good in itself, but rather as a tool for morally balancing competing interests. Although this mutuality is probably the least obvious example of social cohesion in discourse ethics, as we shall see in our study of Habermas's principal of solidarity, it is arguably the most influential.

Let us consider one additional process of social cohesion in discourse ethics. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas depicts complex situations that fuse culture, values, and moral skillsets through dialogue:

Communicative action can be understood as a circular process in which the actor is two things in one: an initiator who masters situations through actions for which he is accountable and a product of the traditions surrounding him, of groups whose cohesion is based on solidarity to which he belongs, and of processes of socialization in which he is reared.

The actor stands face-to-face with that situationally relevant segment of the lifeworld that impinges on him as a problem, a problem he must resolve through his own efforts. But in another sense, the actor is carried or supported from behind, as it were, by a lifeworld that not only forms the context for the process of reaching understanding but also furnishes resources for it. The shared lifeworld offers a storehouse of unquestioned cultural givens from which those participating in communication draw agreed-upon patterns of interpretation for use in their interpretive efforts.

These ingrained cultural background assumptions are only one component of the lifeworld. The solidarity of groups integrated through values and the competences of socialized individuals also serve as resources for action oriented toward reaching understanding, although in a different way than cultural traditions.³²⁹

In this picture of discourse, agents communicate at the intersection of multiple prospects of togetherness. In front of them lies the horizon of understanding reached through consensus. In the background, a history of cultural continuity offers both a common setting and a translatable set of skills with which to respond to the situation. And this is not all. For Habermas also argues that participants in a discourse cohere through shared values and competencies. In short, communicative action not only expresses a common will but also operates as a type of local hub that summons a range of solidarities from society.

But what happens to discourse if these prospects of solidarity fail to materialize? What if, for instance, Habermas's "storehouse" of cultural resources experiences a chronic shortage? What if social values and competencies disassociate to degrees that strain agents' capacities to spontaneously bond through them? Can a comparatively bare lifeworld effectively stage

communicative action? Will the horizon of consensus be enough to pull participants together, or are Habermasian subjects vulnerable?

To these nervous questions Habermas's theory offers a single, bald reply: Of course we are vulnerable. Even so, on Habermas's view, such frailty is not the result of enfeebled solidarities. Rather, human beings are feeble precisely because we need solidarity in the first place:

In anthropological terms, morality is a safety device compensating for the vulnerability built into the sociocultural form of life. The basic facts are the following: Creatures that are individuated only through socialization are vulnerable and morally in need of considerateness...The more the subject becomes individuated, the more he becomes entangled in a densely woven fabric of mutual recognition, that is, of reciprocal exposedness and vulnerability. Unless the subject externalizes himself by participating in interpersonal relations through language, he is unable to form that inner center that is his personal identity. This explains the almost constitutional insecurity and chronic fragility of personal identity—an insecurity that is antecedent to cruder threats to the integrity of life and limb.³³⁰

In other words, "solidarity," for Habermas, forces the individual into a particular confession about the human condition, one which is inverted from the insights on human sociality offered by neuroscientist Paul MacLean. As evidenced by his epigraph to this chapter, MacLean argues that the security of mammalian bonds results in an evolutionary opportunity cost: namely, the suffering of the isolated human being. Conversely, Habermas portrays the individual as perpetually insecure *because he cannot escape dependency* upon others. This inversion of sociality is anticipated by Habermas's reliance upon Kohlberg's moral anthropology. As previously shown, Kohlberg's theory places interpersonal relationships at the service of the individual's development. At the same time, each person must remain subservient to societal authorities in order to balance the pursuit of individual interests. Subsequently, the

Habermasian individual is continually humbled by a social order that demands the sacrifice of self-interest in order to acquire self-identity. Unsurprisingly, on the flipside of Habermas's anthropology is a taken-for-granted sociology. Habermas's theoretical inclusion of lifeworlds and Hegel's *Sittlichkeit* notwithstanding, discourse ethics does not sufficiently consider the actualities of group life beyond their functions for individuals.³³¹

Habermas's functional view of human sociality, in turn, produces a peculiar image of morality. Quite distinct from an evolutionary awareness of helps and harms, Habermas's morality amounts to a "safety device" for creatures of "constitutional insecurity and chronic fragility." Such creatures need both vigilant protection and regular assuagement from one another. Habermas's vision of morality attends to both needs, the first through justice and the second through solidarity:

Since moralities are tailored to suit the fragility of human beings individuated through socialization, they must always solve two tasks at once. They must emphasize the inviolability of the individual by postulating equal respect for the dignity of each individual. But they must also protect the web of intersubjective relations of mutual recognition by which these individuals survive as members of a community. To these two complementary aspects correspond the principles of justice and solidarity respectively. The first postulates equal respect and equal rights for the individual, whereas the second postulates empathy and concern for the well-being of one's neighbor. Justice in the modern sense of the term refers to the subjective freedom of inalienable individuality. Solidarity refers to the well-being of associated members of a community who intersubjectively share the same lifeworld...In my view it is important to see that both principles have one and the same root: the specific vulnerability of the human species, which individuates itself through sociation.³³²

When venturing onto the field of species classification, it seems a curious step to define *homo sapiens* as an animal that "individuates itself through sociation." Especially in light of Habermas's moral anthropology, such a definition is not analogous to recognizing that humans

develop through social responsiveness. Rather, Habermas replaces the biological process of animal development with the theoretical notion of personality individuation. This substitution both narrows human reality and disregards broader phenomena in the animal world.

Honeybees, mole rats, and lions, for instance, are among numerous species that exhibit role differentiation between individuals, but it would be awkward to identify one bee's distinct activities within the hive as the reason for its vulnerability. Instead, similarly to MacLean's picture of human sociality, the truly insecure honeybee is the one that loses its hive.

Now, if Habermas is interested in social species whose processes of individuation render their group members psychologically frail, then his moral theory might benefit from Robert Sapolsky's research on baboon hierarchies in the Serengeti. Baboons live in extremely tiered societies, in which higher status members regularly abuse those of lower rank. Sapolsky exemplifies this pattern of abuse through a scenario in which a "middle ranking male gets trounced in a fight, turns and chases a sub-adult male who lunges at an adult female, who bites a juvenile, who slaps an infant."³³³ To analyze the effects of this society on individual baboons, Sapolsky compared a range of health data between baboons of different statures. He found that, as baboons lost rank, their stress hormones and blood pressure increased, while their HDL cholesterol and immune system responsiveness depleted to harmful levels. In short, the further down the hierarchy a baboon finds itself, the more vulnerable its existence. Unsurprisingly, lower ranking baboons face greater risks for a host of health problems and, on average, live shorter lives.³³⁴

Human communities that structure power in hierarchies similarly to baboons exhibit parallel disparities in health. In the famous "Whitehall Study" of bureaucratic life in 1960s Great

Britain, researchers analyzed mortality rates between four classes of male civil service workers. Statistically, mortality rates stratified with employee rank, with risk of death increasing at each lower tier of the hierarchy. The most dramatic inequities occurred between ages forty and sixty-four, as the lowest ranking men in this age group were subjected to a likelihood of dying four times that of workers at the highest tier of the bureaucracy. These disparities remained active to age eighty-nine, with only a slight diminishing of the gaps between classes in advanced age groups. A follow-up study of 1980s civil servants, "Whitehall II," revealed similar impacts for women.³³⁵

Yet, as the primary researcher on both Whitehall studies, Michael Marmot, argues, the most significant health factor in social orders is not one's rank in a community but, more specifically, the correspondence between an individual's agency and her conditions.³³⁶ That is, what strains a human being (or member of another social species) is the inability to respond to, and influence, that which impacts her. Correlatively, abusive primate societies and unjustly demanding human bureaucracies tend to compound the senses of powerlessness for individuals at each subjacent level of their social orders. At the lowest rungs, sometimes the only agency an individual can exercise is to pass on the pattern of abuse to the few members who rank below her. In short, for social creatures, chronically disabled social power multiplies individual harms. Of course, unjust hierarchies are not the only social orders that foment social impotence. And, as we shall see later in this chapter, a sense of isolation from social life may impair human wellbeing even more severely than a sense of unjust connection.

Returning to Habermas, we can now clarify that "individuation through sociation" qualifies as neither a defining characteristic nor as a particular weakness of human beings.

Instead, a vulnerability of multiple social species stems from how their social orders nurture or frustrate individual agency. Granted, if a person deems—in a manner resonant with Habermas’s moral anthropology—the acquisition of individual personality as the prime function of sociality, then it indeed seems possible that such a person could encounter a social world that distributes personality in a prudish manner as frustrating. But even this narrowly conceived insecurity traces not to individuation itself but to how individuals both perceive personality and encounter its social allocation. To respond to these dynamics, a society could redesign its institutions to nourish individual personality in ways that minimize Habermasian insecurities. In sum, the frailties that Habermas attributes to human beings are “constitutional” neither in a biological nor in a psychological sense but, rather, primarily in a political meaning, that is, to the degree that society structures them as such.

How does this altered view of human vulnerability inform Habermas’s principle of solidarity? For, within the same excerpt that he attempts to define human beings, Habermas proposes the principle of solidarity as “empathy and concern for the well-being of one’s neighbor.” Habermas suggests that individuals need such a principle to promote “the well-being of associated members of a community who intersubjectively share the same lifeworld.” Without solidarity, community members could morally attend to their relations only through the principle of justice, which advocates “equal respect and equal rights for [each] individual.” Justice thus insulates individuals from others but does not encourage them either to bolster one another’s interests or to conceive of their interests as interdependent. To address this need, the principle of solidarity steps in to guarantee the main resource for individuals to achieve their interests—the group. In this way, justice and solidarity function as joint

protections against two insecurities for individuals: the threat of an overbearing social order that imperils individual interests and the hazard of the loss of social life that makes the achievement of individual interests possible. Cast in this way, Habermas's solidarity becomes a moral tool for the maintenance of social settings in which individuals can prosper.

Since *homo sapiens* are not insecure in the way Habermas assumes, however, then his principle of solidarity no longer responds to a clear moral need. And, since Habermas conceives of solidarity as a response to an individual need rather than as a social phenomenon unto itself, then the principle is either narrowly applicable or irrevocably flawed. Habermas's principle of solidarity remains relevant within social orders that realize both a Kohlbergian moral anthropology and a hierarchy that distributes individual development unjustly. Such a society would manifest both individuals with Habermasian vulnerabilities and institutions that exploit them. Outside this limited vision of society, however, Habermas's understanding of solidarity requires significant reworking. As one possible reconception, Habermas might imagine a solidarity that begins not with individual frailty but with his democratic practices of discourse. For it stands to reason that, if discourse reveals a "common will" through the snapshot of normative consensus, then dialogue is also central to solidarity as a broader moral phenomenon of the lifeworld. Furthermore, discourse's very orientation towards a common will suggests that the moral meaning of solidarity lies beyond individual interests. If this logic holds, then the basic practice for achieving normative consensus—dialogue—may also be the essential resource of moral solidarity writ large.

We will return to this possibility later in the chapter. As it stands, Habermas's principle ultimately places dialogue in a stressful relation to social solidarity. At the outset of his moral

theory, Habermas appears to see discourse as integrated within the moral nature of society in ways that resonate with both Mead and Niebuhr. Nevertheless, in the end he connects solidarity to discourse through an image of radically insecure individuals. In doing so, Habermas suffuses social life with trepidation, and dialogue finds itself under a horizon of solidarity achieved not through responsibility but through deference.

“CITY LIFE,” DIFFERENCE INSTEAD OF SOLIDARITY, AND DIALOGUE WITHOUT FACES

To this point in our analysis, we have followed Niebuhr’s view of solidarity, accepting that dialogue and social cohesion are not only integral to one another but to moral life in society as a whole. This approach takes for granted that the institutions of society should correlate with fitting moral anthropologies, ones which account for the evolved capacities of human beings. Precisely because humans evolve, though, it may be argued that using an image of our historical abilities to interpret our dynamic modern societies is backwards. Instead, a moral analysis of modern society should begin with its actual conditions, then reflect upon the type of human beings who might thrive here and now. If we reconsider estrangement, for example, through this adapted lens, is it possible that a new form of ethical society is emerging, one in which dialogue does not require face-to-face interaction because its members no longer need to cohere?

Iris Marion Young envisions just such a society through her political ideal of “city life.” According to Young, any moral model of society “must begin from the material structures that are given to us at this time in history.”³³⁷ For Young, “large-scale industry and urban centers”³³⁸ not only comprise these materials, but also compose “the horizon of the modern, not to mention the postmodern condition.”³³⁹ Despite this, contemporary models of society

commonly seek to either ignore our given conditions or radically restructure them. Both flawed efforts correspond, on Young's view, to the attempt to cast society entirely within one of two oversimplified images of public life: liberal individualism or communitarianism.³⁴⁰ Young criticizes the individualist model for neglecting the complexity of urban sociality. At the same time, she critiques the communitarian search for tightly-knit sociocultural templates. Whereas individualism homogenizes society by overdrawing the self, communitarianism homogenizes society by overextending the group. By refusing to embrace the patterns of life that emerge from cities organically, individualism and communitarianism both undermine human difference.

And, as the city itself provides Young's material origin, difference is her moral starting point. Similar to the mutual development between dialogue and solidarity in Niebuhr's symbol of responsibility, cities and human difference complement each other in Young's ideal of city life. Yet this relation between urban centers and difference is defined much more by tension than by solidarity. For Young tasks the modern city with a strenuous moral balancing act—welcoming nearly endless types of human variety without allowing potentially antagonistic forms to exclude one another.³⁴¹ As Young explains, the result is a society of elastic, shifting, but nonetheless palpable moral bonds:

By "city life" I mean a form of social relations which I define as the being together of strangers. In the city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness. City life is composed of clusters of people with affinities—families, a vast array of small "communities." City dwellers frequently venture beyond such familiar enclaves, however, to the more open public of politics, commerce, and festival, where strangers meet and interact. City dwelling situates one's own identity and activity in relation to a horizon of a vast variety of other activity, and the awareness that this unknown, unfamiliar activity affects the conditions of one's own.

City life is a vast, even infinite, economic network of production, distribution, transportation, exchange, communication, service provision, and amusement. City dwellers are thus together, bound to one another, in what should be and sometimes is a single polity. Their being together entails some common problems and common interests, but they do not create a community of shared final ends, of mutual identification and reciprocity.³⁴²

In this ambitious description, Young expects “city life” to hold not just difference and exclusion but multiple moral elements in tension. Young’s city affirms the dignity of individuals while making space for plural microcommunities. At the same time, the ceaseless variety of the city transcends both individuals and communities, pulling citizens outside themselves into a world of continuous novelty. Along with this, city life balances multiple experiences of belonging without friction erupting between allegiances. As we shall discuss shortly, Young’s claim is not that city life citizens harmonize their differentiated selves through unified bodies. On the contrary, they simply accept that the harmony of selves is an illusion. Finally—and most fascinatingly for this project, Young’s city life depicts a society of strangers who appear immune to estrangement. How does Young presume that persons who do not know each other personally can sustain each other morally? To answer, Young devises an equally paradoxical practice: dialogue abstracted from human presence.

Young’s account of dialogue in society attempts to hold three incongruities together: (1) dialogue is the essential form of moral reasoning,³⁴³ (2) face-to-face interaction is vital for human “warmth and sharing,”³⁴⁴ but (3) normative relations in city life cannot depend primarily on face-to-face dialogue. As the first two claims are relatively consistent as a pair, our review focuses on Young’s critique of face-to-face relations:

Proponents frequently privilege face-to-face relations in reaction to the alienation and domination produced by huge, faceless bureaucracies and corporations, whose actions and decisions affect most people, but are out of control...But the important question is how relations among these locales can be organized so as to foster justice and minimize domination and oppression. Invoking a mystical ideal of community does not address this question, but rather obscures it. Politics must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across space and time.³⁴⁵

Not unlike communitarians who respond to bureaucracies by trying to decentralize society,³⁴⁶

Young's rejection of face-to-face politics represents an overreaction. The misstep follows at least partly from Young's attempt to idealize both difference and "being together with strangers" in city life. To do so infers that difference and unfamiliarity logically coincide. But this premise is dubious on at least two social levels. At the level of personal interaction, human beings can be radically different and still understand one another intimately, while individuals who display extensive similarities can be strangers. This is both common sense and common experience, especially for persons in large urban areas. Secondly, although difference and unfamiliarity have often overlapped between identity groups throughout human history, Young extols the modern city precisely because of the ways it blurs these lines of ancient separation. Yet Young appears to infuse the old link between group difference and unfamiliarity into her politics of modern conditions, mandating that "[p]olitics must be conceived as a relationship of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense."

Nonetheless, to live in a city that values difference by no means requires that citizens coexist as strangers. Conversely, life in a society of strangers does not value difference in any special way.

Young bases her politics of "being together with strangers" on much more than difference, however. More basically, Young asserts that city populations are simply too vast for

citizens to relate face-to-face in any meaningful sense. Even if city life individuals could achieve face-to-face dialogue with a majority of others, though, Young's image of the modern self as utterly differentiated and displaced would declare such intimacy an illusion:

Because the subject is not a unity, it cannot be present to itself, know itself. I do not always know what I mean, need, want, desire, because meanings, needs, and desires do not arise from an origin in some transparent ego. Often I express my desire in gesture or tone of voice, without meaning to do so. Consciousness, speech, expressiveness, are possible only if the subject always surpasses itself, and is thus necessarily unable to comprehend itself. Subjects all have multiple desires that do not cohere; they attach layers of meanings to objects without always being aware of each layer or the connections. Consequently, any individual subject is a play of difference that cannot be completely comprehended.

If the subject is [a] heterogenous process, never fully present to itself, then it follows that subjects cannot make themselves transparent, wholly present to one another. Consequently the subject also eludes sympathetic comprehension by others. I cannot understand others as they understand themselves, because they do not completely understand themselves. Indeed, because the meanings and desires they express may outrun their own awareness or intention, I may understand their words or actions more fully than they.³⁴⁷

In this image of an incoherent self, Young wraps decontextualized truths around a straw reality. It is true, for instance, that the "individual subject is a play of difference that cannot be completely comprehended." It is false that an absolute understanding of the entire megastructure of the self has ever been the need of practical human inquiry. Actual dialogue begins with misapprehension rooted in specific needs defined by limited content investigated by finite participants. As such, dialogue does not need to unearth every facet of meaning and desire within each participant in order to move towards understanding. Any such attempt at a wholly transparent self would be both confusing and bizarre. Even if complete comprehension were realized for a static moment, however, it would evaporate in the next. For human

understanding unfolds dialogically because situations move, and our thinking needs to be able to move with our worlds. The compact vehicle of dialogue enables us to keep pace with situations precisely because its awareness is partial. In other words, the notion that some sort of absolute understanding of the self is possible with or without face-to-face relations is a myth, possibly fabricated by the same type of individualistic gaze through which aesthetes deconstruct a painting. Since transparent self-understanding does not exist, then humans can focus on working out the incomplete understandings that we actually need. Do relations between strangers across time and space help citizens respond to the real demands of city life?

From an institutional vantage, the answer is yes. Most private and public institutions relate to persons first as generalized strangers defined by certain trends. Retail companies target specific market demands, fire stations ready themselves to respond to emergency situations typical in their areas, and hospitals equip themselves to treat distinct categories of patients. As Nel Noddings explains, institutional points-of-view such as these reduce persons to “cases” “handled by formula.”³⁴⁸ Nonetheless, especially in vital activities such as firefighting and healthcare, eventually the institutional gaze must yield to real persons who can no longer be strangers, communicating face-to-face in urgent situations. At least such face-to-face encounters remain necessary in today’s societies. If the institutional gaze completely displaces the mutual gaze of corporeal humans, that is, if all societal institutions transform themselves into Amazon markets delivering goods and services by drones, then we will truly test the validity of “relationship[s] of strangers who do not understand one another in a subjective and immediate sense, relating across space and time.” At that point it may be too late to wonder whether such relations are really relationships at all.

Young's own observations suggest that humans will struggle to adapt to a society in which strangers constitute ideal others. Reflecting upon the limits of modern selves, Young writes: "Indeed, because the meanings and desires they express may outrun their own awareness or intention, I may understand their words or actions more fully than they." Since present others often read persons more accurately than they read themselves, Young reasons that the self is so severely differentiated that notions such as intersubjectivity and social wholeness amount to dreams.³⁴⁹ That is, Young interprets the other's capacity to understand the self as an indictment against the self's wholeness. Of course, like transparent self-understanding, the concept of a whole, immediate self is both odd and impractical. By contrast, what is eminently valuable for social creatures is the ability to assess situations through the bodies of others. As stated in Chapter 2, *it is a significant truth of emotive animals that our faces—and our expressions in general—are meant to be more salient to others than to ourselves. Our bodies invite others to attend to something and, in so doing, invite us to cooperatively attend to this something as well.* For human beings, face-to-face relations are not a philosophical option; they are an evolved expectation of our bodies. Subsequently, the immediate copresence of subjects is not accomplished through the uniform identity of selves but through dialogical capacities such as empathy. Despite Young's portrayal, it is in no way problematic that citizens need one another in order to understand themselves. It is, in fact, part of our species' condition. Conversely, a truly anxious condition for a human being would be a society of strangers who do not expect to be present with one another, much less understand each other. Young's city of strangers could easily turn into a society of abandoned selves.

ESTRANGEMENT AND POWERLESSNESS: EXOSKELETAL MORALITY, PART 1

Young admits that her vision of city life remains an unrealized ideal.³⁵⁰ She romanticizes it nonetheless. Young even suggests “eroticism” as one of four virtues that accompany the character of city life:

City life also instantiates difference as the erotic, in the wide sense of an attraction to the other, the pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one’s secure routine to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising...The erotic dimension of the city has always been an aspect of its fearfulness, for it holds out the possibility that one will lose one’s identity, will fall. But we also take pleasure in being open to and interested in people we experience as different...

...The erotic meaning of the city arises from its social and spatial inexhaustibility. A place of many places, the city folds over on itself in so many layers and relationships that it is incomprehensible. One cannot “take it in,” one never feels as though there is nothing new and interesting to explore, no new and interesting people to meet.³⁵¹

In this sketch of city life, Young pictures a wonderland of human seeking. Recalling our discussion of seeking from Chapter 3, it seems plausible that a person could experience the city’s novelties as a nearly endless rush of anticipations. The resulting phenomenon could certainly account for Young’s “eroticism.” Even so, human seeking is not a quest for anticipation.³⁵² Rather, as neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp explains, the seeking affect evolved to energize “animals to search for, find, and acquire all of the resources that are needed for survival.”³⁵³ Anticipation is simply the emotional energy that helps motivate the quest for vital resources. At the same time, Panksepp is clear that “[w]hen a situation ceases to be novel,” the brain succumbs to “habituation” and the seeking buzz abates.³⁵⁴ Eventually the newness of the city’s exterior—and the romantic atmosphere it incites—fades. Humans then find themselves occupied with the search for meaningful resources beneath the neon luster. Of course, as our

other basic affective systems—play, lust, rage, care, fear, panic/grief—indicate, our most meaningful resources are relationships with other human beings.

All this is to say that Young does not consider the hazards of a social existence dominated by strangers. Most obviously, a society of strangers places its citizens at risk for profound loneliness. At minimum, this society would risk normalizing loneliness as a low-level, chronic state of being. Such a condition would prove dire, for research shows that loneliness poses severe health problems. In fact, loneliness has the same effect on mortality as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.³⁵⁵ Additionally, loneliness is “a consistent part of the pathology” of the nearly 20% of Americans who suffer from mental health problems.³⁵⁶ These risks appear more critical in light of the fact that 43% of Americans report that they “always or sometimes feel as though...they are isolated from others,” “that their relationships are not meaningful,” and that “they lack companionship.”³⁵⁷ Alarming, these feelings are increasing in likelihood with each successive generation of Americans.³⁵⁸ Even so, the statistics are not without hope. For the same report finds that the prevalence of loneliness decreases significantly through “frequent meaningful in-person interactions.”³⁵⁹ Perhaps surprisingly for Young, face-to-face dialogue is essential not just for political visions of community but for basic human health.

Persons familiar with the Whitehall Studies, on the other hand, should not be caught off guard by the negative health impacts of loneliness. Isolation is the definition of powerlessness. Loneliness, therefore, is a degree of social impotence, one without even the minimal securities or opportunities for advancement provided by the abusive bureaucracies of Whitehall.³⁶⁰ Compared with the scaled helplessness endured by British civil servants, the loss of agency experienced by the lonely is more nebulous and puzzling. This is because the most obvious

resource to convert individual action into power—a network of other human beings—is stolen away by loneliness into an inaccessible dimension. Or, more accurately, the lonely human feels abducted into a half-dimension just askance of social life. It is a particular vulnerability of the human species that persons cannot escape this half-dimension through individual will alone. Subsequently, the dimension of loneliness is always pressed between two gravities: the hope of human responsiveness on one side and the hopelessness of isolation on the other.

Stretched thin, the lonely person may be in jeopardy not only of suffering harm but of inflicting it. Making the connection between loneliness and mental disorders more worrisome, Hannah Arendt has theorized a direct link between powerlessness and violence. For Arendt, power is a social phenomenon rooted in the ability of human beings to “act in concert” with one another.³⁶¹ As Benhabib notes, Arendt argues that such power manifests only through the “persuasion and conviction” of public dialogue.³⁶² When individuals feel this dialogical power slipping away, they become frustrated by their corresponding inability to act. Unfortunately, an analogous phenomenon to social power does not exist to give individuals recourse, so fading agents turn to the opposite of power as a substitute. Violence is this antithesis:

[I]t is insufficient to say that power and violence are not the same. Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power’s disappearance.³⁶³

Violence destroys power through the former’s fundamentally individualistic character. Since power achieves its validity through cooperative assent, the solo nature of violence tears not only the fabric of power but, along with it, the very foundations of a legitimate social order.³⁶⁴ The wielder of violence then finds himself all the more alone.

Although Arendt does not use exactly these terms, one might extend her theory towards a definition of *violence* as “targeted or reckless force that injures, or is meant to injure, its recipient’s agency.”³⁶⁵ Arendt does write that “the extreme form of violence is One against All. And this...is never possible without instruments.”³⁶⁶ In the metrorail assault from Chapter 1, the offended man attacked the complimenter’s mouth, temporarily incapacitating the physiological power—and perhaps also the will—to flatter. Because no one else on the train opened a dialogue of action, the offended man achieved this particular destruction of agency one-to-one with leverage, mass, and fists. In May of 2017, an isolated man riding a metrorail in Portland, Oregon, attacked three men with a knife, killing Ricky John Best and Taliesin Myrddin Namkai-Meche, while seriously injuring Micah David-Cole Fletcher. Together, the three men had formed an impromptu human barrier between the attacker, a self-proclaimed white nationalist, and two teenage girls whom he originally targeted with violent, anti-Muslim language.³⁶⁷ When the men cooperated to verbally direct the nationalist to exit the train (as previously ordered by the conductor), the attacker did not respond in terms of power but substituted violence. As Arendt spells out, “[i]n a head-on clash between violence and power, the outcome is hardly in doubt.”³⁶⁸ To be clear, in this statement Arendt is not recognizing any natural superiority of violence over power; she is only acknowledging violence’s brutal effectiveness in achieving short-term goals, which is part of its temptation.³⁶⁹

In both metrorail assaults, an isolated attacker violently harmed strangers within a broader setting of strangers. Although speech was uttered in both cases, dialogue remained mostly at the level of prereflection on both metrorails. Accordingly, social power reached nascent expression only on the second train. Now, I want to be careful not to trip into

oversimplified, cause-and-effect assertions through these points. At the same time, I agree with Arendt that a direct relation exists between a lack of social power and the individual temptation to substitute violence for that lack. Alongside this relation, it seems indisputable that isolation and loneliness impair both physical and social health, both of which result in losses of agency. On the other side, there is an essential phenomenological link between dialogue and power.

Reflecting upon these dynamics, I draw five implications for solidarity in society. **First**, loneliness so gravely harms human beings that any society whose institutions promote social isolation or loneliness is unjust. Based on the statistical prevalence of loneliness in America, it seems likely that the modern settings of Young's "city life" ideal are unjust on these grounds.³⁷⁰ **Second**, solidarity itself is a matter of justice. As Habermas's theory demonstrates, justice and solidarity are often segregated from one another as moral phenomena. Following Young's critique of "the exhaustive dichotomy between individualism and community,"³⁷¹ we might note that liberal moral philosophy has tended to emphasize justice, while solidarity has commonly been associated with "community" ethics. Habermas's principles of justice and solidarity model these stereotypes. Nonetheless, to the extent that human bondedness remains not just a political arrangement but a vital human need, then a just society will protect basic relationships of solidarity. Furthermore, the fairness of any societal institution includes the degree to which citizens can affect its activities dialogically.

Third, although loneliness does not determine individual actions, a lonely society poses risks for specific types of violence. Perhaps most notably, a lonely society will be susceptible to individuals using weapons to harm strangers in contexts where humans are unprepared to respond with social power, force, or violence³⁷² adequate to negate the initial violence. The fact

that relationships in this type of violence are largely between strangers impacts both perpetrators and victims. For victims, although a variety of human gatherings can be unprepared for violence, a group of mostly strangers is further disabled by a lack of dialogical history and, therefore, of established power to respond in concert. Conversely, though further analysis is needed here, it may be that perpetrators choose strangers as the victims of their violence because strangers can more easily be rendered as symbols from the perpetrator's point of view. As violence replaces power, then the message inscribed on the bodies of others through symbolic violence substitutes for the agency of dialogue. In cases of lonely violence, individuals may seek to harm strangers who symbolize access to social power lacked by the perpetrators themselves.³⁷³ Overall, a group of strangers largely unprepared for violence offers a sizable and accessible public template on which to imprint the violent monologue. There is no society immune from violence, but there are patterns of violence that logically correspond to isolation. All violence is isolating in nature, but not all violence stems from lonely conditions. Hence, a society of strangers will manifest violence in particular ways.

Fourth, if isolation depletes agency, then a loss of social power also induces a sense of isolation. This notion is relevant not only to individuals but to groups who feel that their public influence is waning. To be clear, human groups do not have to actually be marginalized from societal power in order to feel isolated. They only have to believe that their power is weakening and be severed from dialogue with outsiders who might illustrate otherwise. The severing of dialogue itself sustains the sense of powerlessness and, in fact, partially fulfills the prophecy. An alarming potential exists within this dynamic for a society of strangers. For, especially when that society avoids challenging, face-to-face dialogue between diverse others, a propaganda

campaign by an exclusionary media machine can effectively plant, coordinate, or exploit a sense of powerlessness by vast amounts of individuals, creating a unified group of strangers sharing an oppressed consciousness, whether or not they are actually oppressed. This abstract sense of unity through oppression fills in for the experience of solidarity embodied through dialogue. The media machine thus incites a sense of powerlessness in order to first attend to the ensuing loneliness. Since the resulting group is defined foremost by an inaccessible propaganda machine rather than through either the internal dialogue of its members or through external interactions with diverse others, it is nearly impenetrable by a society of strangers. This effect is amplified by a society in which public discourse is impoverished, because the modern formats of media monologues are often designed to impersonate dialogues. The more emaciated public discourse becomes, the more individuals are tempted to substitute media monologues for it. Worse, since strangers under the spell of exclusionary media are further discouraged from actualizing power through public dialogue, the propaganda machine itself also becomes the default voice of the community it bred. Of course, this abstract community of strangers is not an actual community, for its members cannot work out a common will dialogically amongst themselves; they can only mimic the will of the machine. Still, individuals may feel some semblance of their isolation abate, and this may be worth the cost of real power they do not believe themselves to have. The exclusionary media source thus works, paradoxically, as both the fomenter of the sense of its community's powerlessness and as the public expresser of what power endures. In reality, the unified frustration of strangers is milked as fuel for the machine's own violence. The machine is violent because it encourages powerlessness in order to expand its own cancerous growth. In this sense, through modern

media a community of strangers can be exploited to damage society much more deviously than any embodied community in the historical sense. The deepest injustice, however, is that there are individuals caught up by the machine who have genuinely lost power, but they will never regain it as long as they remain in the mirage of the monologue.

Finally, and perhaps most dangerously, as justice and solidarity are linked, the lonely perpetrators of violence may experience a warped sense of justice. Physiologically, feelings of injustice spark rage. Panksepp adapts Jim Averill's work to define rage as "an emotional state that involves both an attribution of blame for some perceived wrong and an impulse to correct the wrong or prevent its recurrence."³⁷⁴ Although persons often experience rage as a fleeting emotion, chronic abusive conditions can indoctrinate rage as a pathology. A society of strangers exacerbates this problem. For, as Panksepp explains, a "key to recovering from pathological RAGE is to establish or re-establish a person's capacity to form and sustain warm trusting relationships."³⁷⁵ Needless to say, lonely individuals will struggle to heal this capacity in a society of strangers who are not dialogically proficient with one another. Thus, not only will a lonely society produce individuals who feel a chronic loss of agency, those individuals may also navigate their worlds in a constant state of rage. Any subsequent violence will feel like justice to them.

Regrettably, Young's vision of city life fails to account for persons' moral experiences of being, continually and finally, amongst strangers. Loneliness has moral consequences. This is the reality of estrangement. At the same time, estranged conditions differentiate between a "moral stranger" and a "stranger" commonly understood. *Moral strangers* are individuals who have not established ethical responsiveness with one another. Thus, although all strangers are

moral strangers, the reverse is by no means true. Here we unearth a deeper loneliness, in which relationships within traditional communities, systems of care, and even families may be estranged. The fact that persons communicate face-to-face in these institutions does not prevent them from remaining moral strangers. For, as we have previously analyzed, dialogue and social power exist in direct relation with one another. When social power is markedly unbalanced between persons, therefore, face-to-face dialogue may only be a literal “facade” for an underlying monologue of power. The deadly orphanages mentioned in Chapter 3, in which infants were tended at behaviorist intervals determined by a clock rather than through responsiveness and touch, are among the most severe examples of such estrangement. All forms of organizational care, however, from nursing homes to residential psychiatric facilities, can perpetuate similar harms if persons do not practice ethical responsiveness. In a related manner, the lopsided power of religious authorities places their communities in particular jeopardy. Sadly, the robed figures whom persons traditionally depend on for moral guidance have at times wielded their influence monologically, at least partly to maintain the structure of their own authority. Because of the broad claims of religions over whole lives and often beyond life itself, religious monological power can manifest in terrifying perversions of sociality. At worst, this power can be systematized against highly vulnerable populations, and the Roman Catholic Church can institutionalize the sexual abuse of children. Certainly this goes beyond estrangement into evil. Even so, the monological orientation of power is a necessary foundation for such evil to become part of the order of things. In the most malicious cases, fake dialogue is often deployed as a lure—the impression of care—to coax innocents into relationships of domination. Victims initially believe they are experiencing reciprocal care while morality itself is

being undone. Still, religious authorities do not need to debase the moral order in order to cultivate face-to-face estrangement. They only need to prioritize a monologue of power over a dialogue of faith. As a final point, it should now go without saying that estrangement can infiltrate the family. Indeed, spouses who do not respond to each other's needs dialogically can live together as moral strangers. And a parent and child who have shared 18 years of housing can also persist in estrangement.

Returning to Young's ideal of "being together with strangers" one last time, we now see that Young captures one moral dynamic of modern life with remarkable accuracy. Namely, modern virtues do not reflect the quality of human interpersonal relations; they describe a general orientation of citizens within and towards society itself. Hence Young identifies the virtues of city life with names like "variety," "publicity," and, as we have already mentioned, "eroticism."³⁷⁶ Estranged from one another, Young's citizens turn their faces toward a moral vision of their heterogeneous whole. To conclude our discussion of solidarity in society, I will now argue that this turning away from each other and towards the world is a defining phenomenon of modern morality. We turn our gaze to society, however, not because we discover our virtuousness in the grand vision. We turn because we experience insufficient moral power in the faces around us.

In truth, modern sociality is much busier and more fragmented than a world of strangers could muster on its own. The day-to-day social existence of any random individual might wonder between adhering to customs, engaging in light pleasantries during economic exchanges, fading in-and-out of conversations with family members not only face-to-face but via various technologies, sending and receiving digital messages through multiple media

platforms, sitting quietly and staring out the window of the metrorail, making eye contact with babies in supermarkets, communicating with colleagues at work or school, glancing back-and-forth behind hundreds of red taillights, and interacting with pets. Throughout all these interactions, though, the activity of strangers dominates the perceptible landscape both in terms of the present activities of bodies and in the details of the material world. Nearly every item on my desk and every vehicular roar outside my window is the creation of a stranger. Especially when I travel my city alone, its impersonal character seems to drift constantly beyond my existence into an endless background. I cannot know this world much less enter into action with it; I can only tell about it and try to be a good tipper. Regardless of whether my existence is defined by strangers, the alien quality of the city imposes a feeling of isolation upon me, and with it a sense of weakness.

Not without reason, this society of atomized, sporadically communicating individuals does not trust its citizens to work out ethics face-to-face. Instead, it places its moral confidence in institutions. Institutions offer basic outlines for role responsibility while drawing clear borders to define transgressions. The individual, then, is accountable for navigating her motley institutional environments in ways that both meet each institution's expectations and do not infringe upon others' distinct rights within each setting. "No parking," *please stand for the national anthem*, "Employees Only," *red light*, 30 minutes for lunch, report due at noon, "Please refrain from talk about religion or politics!", jeans permitted on Fridays, "50 pound luggage limit," *raise your hand in you have a question*, "Recycle Only," please address all concerns in writing, "Must be 42 inches or taller to ride," *make sure to push the new wine special*, "No Trespassing!", dribble the ball before the third step, *brush your teeth before bedtime*, "sterilize

critical medical and surgical devices,” must provide proof of identification and residence, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s donkey,” 280 characters or less. Somehow, the mind of the modern individual must catalogue plural rule systems such as these into a fluid if not coherent mechanism for judgment. Michael Walzer describes a similar moral consciousness as a “divided self,” a circle of self-critics who represent various institutions around a “worried self” who mediates their tensioned interests.³⁷⁷

In another passage of the same text, Walzer sketches a different, if associated moral image. To illustrate a concept he calls “moral minimalism,” Walzer describes morality as simultaneously “thick” and “thin.” By “thick” Walzer means that ethical consciousness is “culturally integrated” and “fully resonant” from birth.³⁷⁸ Yet Walzer explains that, in urgent situations, “we hastily construct an abstract version” of the thick moral work in order to “seize upon a single aspect” that unites us.³⁷⁹ “Minimalism,” therefore,

does not describe a morality that is substantively minor or emotionally shallow. The opposite is more likely true: this is morality close to the bone. There isn’t much that is more important than “truth” and “justice,” minimally understood. The minimal demands that we make on one another are, when denied, repeated with passionate insistence. In moral discourse, thinness and intensity go together, whereas with thickness comes qualification, compromise, complexity, and disagreement.³⁸⁰

Despite the essentialness of thin morality, Walzer is clear that minimalism is preceded by maximalism. In other words, without a cultural background that imbues us with a dense and vivid moral consciousness, morality “close to the bone” “would not even be plausible to us.”³⁸¹

It is my concern that estrangement is pushing us close to this point of implausibility. This is not because modern humans lack coherent maximalist moralities from which to begin. If we

can understand what it means to be born into them, the institutions of our plural society can offer us immense resources for thickness. But we cannot discover these moral horizons because we too rarely dialogue not only about matters thick and thin but about simple helps and harms. It is telling that Walzer writes, “[i]n moral discourse, thinness and intensity go together, whereas with thickness comes qualification, compromise, complexity, and disagreement.” In estrangement nothing has the chance to come together or to disagree, because moral discourse is suspended. Without face-to-face dialogue, individuals have to manufacture a capacity for judgment from ethical spare parts. One available approach to this construction is to supplement institutional morality with individual reflection upon current ethical issues. In a society of strangers, such matters are not ordinarily disclosed dialogically. Rather, modern persons typically encounter ethical issues as moral “topics” distributed through the monologues of digital journalism, tweets, talk radio, TED talks, documentary films, and Facebook posts, etc. Needless to say, these topics tend to address sweeping moral issues relevant to broad sectors of society.

In sum, a society of strangers conveys morality to individuals through two general methods, both of which are essentially monological. First, institutions place basic expectations and constraints on individual behavior. Second, media sources stream a monologue of moral topics into the individual conscience. Outside dialogue, how do individuals respond to these moral messages? They reorient moral judgment away from dialogical action in situation and towards an opinion on a public issue. This transition has been presaged by at least two conditions. First, as already established, estranged society foments a sense of individual powerlessness. This experience is rooted in a general paucity of dialogue between citizens, as

well as in the way the immense otherness of the city swallows the lonely individual. With his ethical agency diminished, the individual protectively seeks a new context in which to exercise his moral energy. Secondly, as also previously mentioned, the monological format of media often mimics dialogue in deceptive ways. This illusion proves convenient for the enfeebled agent in search of a new moral outlet. For the same media source that presents the moral topic also encourages the individual to respond. In the cases of online journalism sites and blogs, such responses often take the form of “comment section” replies. On Twitter and Facebook, the individual may simply click a symbol—such as a star or a thumb—indicating assent to, or dissent from, a position. Although these reactions cannot take place on a horizon either of a common will or of cooperative action, the individual’s moral senses have still been moved, and perhaps some loneliness has been forgotten for a moment. Estranged citizens can thus feel ready to solve a vast array of societal problems—from health care to climate change to war itself, despite our sense of inadequacy to respond face-to-face to each other’s deep needs.

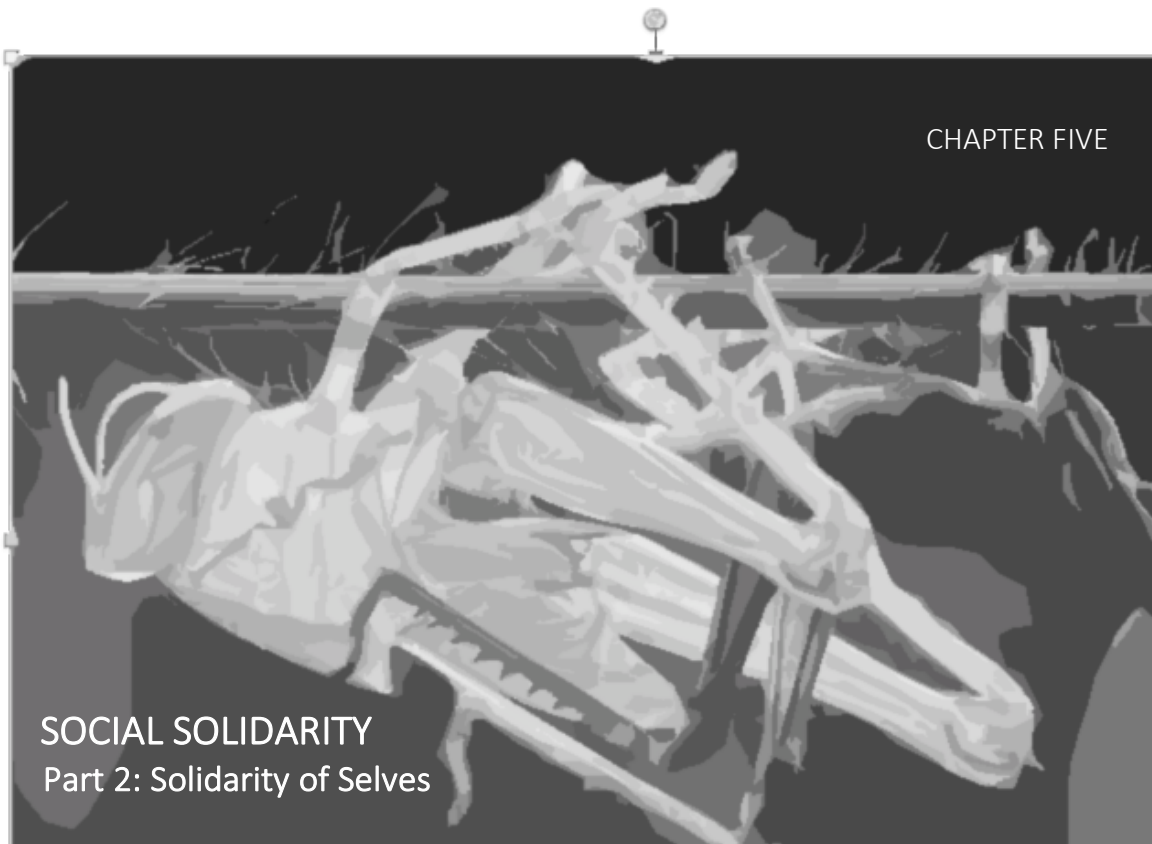
It would be cynical to say that we turn to society’s ills only because we experience insufficient moral power in the faces around us. To be sure, we focus on issues of far-reaching importance because we care and want to participate in the betterment of our world. But we cannot aspire to societal transformation honestly if can’t dialogue with our neighbors. And we cannot fool morality into a disembodied, monological existence. To attempt this is to abandon the very thickness from which we hew our ethical bones. If we accept this turn away from embodied dialogue with one another, then our moral capacities become thin as in *shallow*. We invite an exoskeletal morality, an ethics of institutional shells and individual opinions. In truth, this morality is well-suited for estrangement and comes pre-furnished with assurances for the

lonely. But, to the extent that we can forge a common will on the matter, is this the metamorphosis we choose?

In Niebuhr's sketch of responsibility, our bonds are generated through a complex system of common acts:

5. **Social solidarity** is a moral cohesion that derives from a synergetic dialogue of selves within and with their society. At the level of society, solidarity depends upon discourses of action occurring within patterns of agents stable enough to render the dialogues coherent. At the level of selves, dialogue itself develops morally aware beings in solidarity with one another. Moreover, when these interpersonal relations exhibit some constancy across society, they nourish an ethos that enables socially meaningful moral points of view between selves to emerge.

To this point in our investigation, we have found no reason to alter our Niebuhrian definition. In fact, we have discovered a society in need of it.



Solidarity of selves

The bonds of solidarity, though ambitious enough to envelope society, begin-and-end with personal dialogues. These dialogues help generate the first moral attachments between selves. Eventually, priorities established at the personal level—whether from monarchs downward, grassroots movements upward, or generally shared human needs, etc.—are institutionalized and given cultural reach. Society itself can then internalize basic moral discourses throughout its citizenry, even as local persons continue to both reform institutional norms and originate new responses and interpretations with one another. This discursive moral synergy between society and selves is the infrastructure of social solidarity.

As previously mentioned, personal dialogues also help form moral points-of-view and draw them together. Without doubt, the development of the moral point of view has been the subject of significant philosophical discussion. In this chapter, we begin by considering how the moral point of view emerges through dialogue at the level of selves. We then analyze how estrangement mutates this development, breaking down solidarity at its genesis point. Through this deconstruction, we discover a core element of solidarity in need of renewed energy as this project moves towards its conclusion.

HABERMAS AND THE MORAL POINT OF VIEW

Jürgen Habermas defines the moral point of view as “[t]he viewpoint from which moral questions can be judged impartially.”³⁸² Habermas presents this formulation—especially its emphasis upon neutrality—as a continuation of the Kantian moral tradition. This heritage, which includes John Rawls’ original position and Karl-Otto Apel’s pioneering version of discourse ethics, frames the moral point of view as cognitivist, universalist, and formalist.³⁸³ To realize ethics according to these criteria is to adopt a perspective that is, in Habermas’s summation, *impartial*.

To be clear, an impartial morality does not fit *homo dialogicus*’ DNA. Rather, *homo dialogicus* conceives of ethics as naturally biased towards help and away from harm, a disposition that works itself out by responding and interpreting with proximate others dialogically. Along these lines, it is not evident that either helping or the discourses through which humans seek it are governed by abstract, universal norms. Rather, ethical dialogue is less an excavation of what is universally valid than a social seeking of what is, to return to Niebuhr, *fitting*. Granted, selves may help each other by seeking a common vision of fairness that fits

within Kantian boundaries. But this very quest for fairness emerges not from some noumenal realm but from our evolved genetics, which share a number of moral qualities—including an ability to recognize unfair treatment—with other social species.³⁸⁴ Moreover, dialogue often discloses multiple norms and possibilities for action, many of which are acceptably fair, and it is left to responsible participants to decide which processes best help (It should go without saying that choosing an unfair option is harmful). Accordingly, this search for fitting responses not only analyzes the current situation but also reflects upon history and, as we shall see in Chapter 6, anticipates future consequences. That is, responsible dialogue considers impacts across time. In short, although *homo dialogicus* rejects the notion of moral impartiality, it is far from capricious or ungrounded. Rather, it assumes that moral experiences such as fairness are grounded not in an abstract universe but in the embodied, epigenetic histories and bonded futures of agents in dialogue.

These agents, though not unbiased, nonetheless develop moral points-of-view. Hence, this project is less interested in Habermas's belief in the objectivity of such points-of-view than in his claim that they develop dialogically. The crux of this argument is that individuals progress through stages of moral development in conjunction with advances in social perspectives.³⁸⁵

These stages and perspectives converge through communicative action:

Individual action plans...determine the current need for consensual understanding that must be met through the activity of interpretation. In these terms the action situation is at the same time a speech situation in which the actors take turns playing the communicative roles of speaker, addressee, and bystander. To these roles correspond first- and second-person participant perspectives as well as the third-person observer perspective from which the I-thou relation is observed as an intersubjective complex and can thus be objectified. This system of speaker perspectives is intertwined with a system of world perspectives.³⁸⁶

Following Selman's theory of perspective taking,³⁸⁷ Habermas contends that the third-person observer perspective within action situations eventually expands into an objective point of view capable of judging the whole "world of existing states of affairs."³⁸⁸ Through this development, the observer perspective becomes, in Habermas's terms, *decentered* from current bodily experience into the realm of the hypothetical.³⁸⁹ This abstracted vantage further differentiates itself into three *world perspectives*, depending upon whether the individual assesses the world through the lens of truth, justice, or personal taste.³⁹⁰ And yet, according to Habermas, the abstracted moral perspective is continually returned to communicative action. It is this ensuing dynamic between hypothetical morality and embodied speakers, he argues, that "permits a reorganization of action coordination at a higher level."³⁹¹

Habermas connects the formation of this moral point of view to the theories of both Kohlberg and G.H. Mead. Broadly traced, the evolution of action perspectives from first-person, to reversible I-Thou, to hypothetical judgment mirrors Kohlberg's movement from preconventional to conventional to postconventional morality. The realization of the universal moral point of view within communicative action essentially manifests Kohlberg's postconventional type. Similarly, the integration of I-Thou awareness within the hypothetical point of view basically simulates Mead's generalized other perspective. As Habermas notes, "[p]ractical discourse can...be viewed as a communicative process *simultaneously* exhorting *all* participants to ideal role taking. Thus practical discourse transforms what Mead viewed as *individual, privately enacted* role taking into a *public* affair, practiced intersubjectively by all involved."³⁹²

The main premise of Habermas's ontogeny of the moral perspective—that it develops intersubjectively through dialogue—is accepted by a range of thinkers. Differences between their accounts usually amount to shifts in emphases at certain stages. Still, precisely because the moral point of view *develops*, small changes can alter the overall course significantly. Seyla Benhabib, for instance, similarly argues that the moral point of view emerges through the “reversibility of perspectives” in dialogue.³⁹³ Benhabib also asserts that the resulting viewpoint is universalizable in key ways.³⁹⁴ Unlike Habermas, however, she does not identify any third-person, objective perspective as serving an important role in moral development. Instead, Benhabib reformulates Hannah Arendt's concept of “enlarged thinking” to argue that the moral imagination only thrives through ongoing, agonistic discourse with concrete others.³⁹⁵ Benhabib thus renders a moral point of view that never decenters but remains concrete and dialogical throughout. Consequently, whereas Habermas turns to the hypothetical perspective in order to “reorganize[e]...action coordination at a higher level,” for Benhabib public discourse itself is the height of moral activity.

Theorizing the moral point of view through the development of self-consciousness, psychologist Philippe Rochat focuses upon distinct phenomena between first- and second-person perspectives. To begin, Rochat notes that first- and second-person vantage points impact the self's moral development at the very core of being. According to Rochat, “primary intersubjectivity,” in which the self seeks the other's attention through face-to-face interaction, is evident from birth. Through this form of intersubjectivity, the infant experiences the first impressions of self-awareness via the other's responses to the infant's activity.³⁹⁶ It is not just that the other's perspective is reversible with the self's; emotions and other forms of dialogue

transform the other's perspective into a feedback mirror of sorts—the first indicator of the infant's nascent social power. As such, the self initially becomes a self through the other's eyes. In terms of moral viewpoint, this is a fascinating starting place.

Nonetheless, at approximately 7 months of age, the first-person viewpoint of infants enters a new stage of interrelation with the perspectives of others:

Along with exhibiting mutual attention tracking in the context of direct face-to-face and bodily interactions (primary intersubjectivity), they now begin to engage in social referencing and bouts of joint attention (secondary intersubjectivity). Infants' social attention grows to include a focus on other individuals' gaze toward novel things and situations encountered in the environment, particularly if they trigger wariness (e.g., encounters with strangers or visual cliffs). They start checking the reactions and expressions of familiar others as third-party witnesses and emotional benchmarks. They use these emotional cues in their decisions to either approach or avoid novel things...Outward social referencing is a sign of a significant change in the communication between self and others, which at this point starts to be determined by shared objects of attention.³⁹⁷

It seems logical that this cooperation of perspectives—this “joint attention”—coincides with the onset of the infant's ability to crawl and explore the environment.³⁹⁸ In no small way, the infant needs to trust the caregiver's point of view to assess the possibilities of the newly unfolding world. Rochat contends that joint attention thus helps the infant overcome human infancy's “unique existential conundrum: maintaining proximity with those dispensing the indispensable care while responding to the insatiable curiosity instinct that pushes all healthy infants to roam.”³⁹⁹ In the next section I will argue that this phenomena of joint attention poses implications for trust and solidarity well beyond Rochat's conundrum.

Before examining these implications, however, let us first consider the moral function of the objective perspective in Rochat's theory. Recall that, for Habermas, the self develops the

objective moral viewpoint by way of the third-person perspective. This hypothetical vantage observes and evaluates others in dialogue as it eventually judges the entire moral realm. Habermas's moral point of view can be called "objective," therefore, because it objectifies the world. Conversely, Rochat's moral self is objectified by the world—or, more accurately, by the self's hypothesis about others' evaluations of the self as a public being. Around 18 months of age, the human child begins to internalize a conception of the self as an object of the judgments of others. Rochat thus names this stage of self-consciousness "inward social referencing."⁴⁰⁰ Attention to this stage yields an important distinction in the moral point of view from Habermas's theory. As previously mentioned, Habermas's emphasis upon the self's objectification of the world eventually draws the ethical perspective into a universal moral realm. In contrast, Rochat's focus upon the world's (hypothetical) objectification of the self produces a moral point of view less interested in universal validity than in public character. According to Rochat, the fact that humans root our ethical viewpoint so deeply within the "gaze of others" explains diverse phenomena from mascara to the desire for respect:

A trademark of all human cultures is the systematic use of self-branding devices like makeup, fashionable clothes, and complex panoplies of etiquettes and practices that mark each individual's personality and class distinction...

...It is a deliberate attempt at controlling how others perceive us: how we project the self to the outside world. But it is also more than just our public appearance. It is about our reputation, the calculation of how others construe us in terms of enduring qualities such as intelligence, charm, attractiveness, or moral integrity. Etymologically, the word *reputation* does indeed derive from the Latin verb *putare*, meaning "to compute or calculate." We work hard on appearance to signal deeper qualities regarding who we are as persons.

In human affairs, we gauge the incomparable secure feeling of social affiliation or closeness: the fragile sense of belonging to our social niche by having agency and a place among others. We gauge our social affiliation via the attention, respect, and admiration of others, namely our "good"

reputation. The equation is simple: good reputation = good affiliation. The struggle for recognition and the maintenance of a good reputation shapes the development of human social cognition. It is, I would argue, a major drive behind it.⁴⁰¹

THE ESTRANGED MORAL POINT OF VIEW: EXOSKELETAL MORALITY PART 2

Precisely because the moral point of view develops dialogically between selves, disruptions between selves can malform it. The social dynamics revealed by Rochat's analysis appear particularly vulnerable. In this section, I argue that estrangement warps the development of the moral point of view by breaking down two dialogical phenomena: (1) joint attention and (2) a sense of the self's character grounded by relatively stable, face-to-face relations with the perspectives of others.

joint attention

The basic elements of joint attention presage Habermas's communicative action. Although the infant is not yet a full-fledged agent in society, joint attention places the child within, to use Habermas's decentered terminology, a "subjective world" in which "truthfulness" and "mutual trust" are centrally at stake for the participants in dialogue.⁴⁰² Yet, as Benhabib argues and as Rochat's account attests, the objective, social, and subjective worlds are not decentered as much as interdependent in communicative action. In the case of joint attention, the infant and its mature familiars communicate about a range of environmental realities, from novel objects that might be useful, to strangers who might themselves become familiars, to all manner of potential dangers. Throughout these early dialogues, the objective, social, and subjective worlds are experienced as seamless, without a decentered horizon. The infant is not only testing the trustworthiness of its familiars; it is developing its own responsive

agency and practicing social interpretation. Still lacking full self-awareness, the infant tests and is tested by a moral space in which all worlds are at stake together.

These processes—whether as an infant’s joint attention or as an adult’s public discourse—do not have to succeed. They can fail, or, more worryingly, they can fail to take place. As Habermas explains,

discourse cannot by itself insure that the conditions necessary for the actual participation of all concerned are met. Often lacking are crucial institutions that would facilitate discursive decision making. Often lacking are crucial socialization processes, so that the dispositions and abilities necessary for taking part in moral argumentation cannot be learned.⁴⁰³

I hold joint attention to be one such “crucial socialization process” that develops moral communication. Accordingly, it is not difficult to imagine situations in which the searching gaze of an infant cannot locate the faces of familiar others with whom to interpret the world. In truth, this failed seeking happens at (not uncommon) moments in the development of all persons. But what if the absence of trustworthy faces becomes the norm? As we have seen throughout this project, the consequences are grave. In extreme examples such as radically behaviorist orphanages, the void of responsive faces can equate to death.⁴⁰⁴ In the individual cases detailed by Bruce Perry’s research, eventually children cease to expend energy seeking trustworthy others and develop asocial, even sociopathic dispositions.⁴⁰⁵ The resulting moral point of view is then non-dialogical. It is estranged.

And estrangement does not only disrupt the moral point of view at early stages. If there is indeed a developmental link between joint attention and communicative action, then “outward social referencing” is not merely a stage undergone by humans between 7 and 18

months of age. It is an ongoing moral practice so crucial that humans engage in it from before we can walk until we lose all social agency. With this in mind, estrangement can distort the moral point of view by undoing the elements of joint attention at any age. Fundamentally, I propose that the phenomenon of **joint attention** occurs when *two or more humans evaluate an aspect of their common world together face-to-face, dialogically*. Hence, estrangement can break down joint attention by (1) isolating interpretation, (2) muting expression or reception, or (3) enfeebling reciprocity. Although it may go without saying, the chronic expansion of any one of these conditions also stimulates the other two.

The isolation of interpretation is one of estrangement's most deceptive achievements. For, unlike other attacks on joint attention, solitary interpretation is often framed positively as proof of the self's moral independence. This portrayal itself often follows the simplistic assumption that, since immature humans are characterized by obvious dependencies, maturation is a process of disentangling the self from dependence.⁴⁰⁶ To develop is therefore to display independence, and to think alone is to interpret maturely. The coherence in this line of reasoning is ensnaring. It is also built upon an impossible premise. For, as morality is essentially a social phenomenon,⁴⁰⁷ the concept of a morally independent self is inside-out from the start. To be clear, this does not mean that the self cannot or should not interpret the world apart from other selves. Of course each individual can and sometimes must think alone. To normalize isolated interpretation, however, inverts moral reality. Estrangement coerces the self into individualized judgment as an expectation and even an ideal.⁴⁰⁸ The subsequent fracturing of meaning can deform the moral point of view to a point where moral experience itself mutates. We will examine this mutation further in the second part of this section.

In order to interpret their world together, individuals need to be able to both express their perceptions of that world and read one another's expressions accurately. When practiced, joint attention develops these faculties in vital ways. Conversely, when joint attention deteriorates, our capacities for socially expressing and receiving information about our environments also diminish. Likewise, any activity that emaciates our faculties of expression and reception impairs our ability to socially understand situations. Considering these dynamics, the fact that the communicative faculties of American adults are absorbed for over 9 hours a day by screens is alarming.⁴⁰⁹ When we account for the additional 1 hour a day that we spend in motor vehicles,⁴¹⁰ the day begins for American adults with ten hours of social expression and reception effectively muted. Now, one might argue that screen time, in particular, does not necessarily foreclose joint attention, as persons can socially interpret screen content together. Although this is technically true, the nonstop, hyperactive nature of screen content tends to absorb the human gaze, precluding responsive eye contact between interpreters. As discussed in Chapter 2, neural synchrony established through mutual gaze is primary for social understanding. Individuals playing a video game on a common screen, for instance, can engage in joint verbal attention about the screen's content, but the lack of eye contact along with a host of other forms of communication severely thins their interpretive power. The event is less a joint interpretation of the game than a swallowing of the players' attention by the screen. The outcome amounts to only a fragment of joint attention.

Any such fragmentation hinders communicative expression and reception. In a 2019 study by Sheri Madigan et al., higher levels of screen time in 2- and 3-year-old children correlated to significant delays not only in communication skills but in motor and problem-

solving skills, as well.⁴¹¹ In 2012, UCLA researchers randomly divided preteens from the same public school into two groups. Students in the experimental group spent 5 days at an overnight education camp without access to screens of any kind. Control group students continued normal activities related to home, school, screens, etc. In less than a week, students in the experimental group exhibited marked advances over the control group in their capacities to accurately read nonverbal emotional cues.⁴¹² On one hand, these findings are encouraging for those seeking to counter the effects of estrangement through prescribed practices. At the same time, if 5 days without screens can noticeably impact the communicative faculties of 11-year-olds, it seems sobering to project the impacts of chronic screen use over entire generations. Moreover, estrangement does not only mute our capacities of expression and reception through screens.

These issues are made more complex by the fact that situations are in constant motion. During joint attention, subjects and objects shift, individual perceptions change, and communications adjust accordingly. Interpretation depends upon reciprocity between participants, then, to keep up with the moving world. Through joint attention, individuals forge a more sophisticated geometry of perspectives, triangulating their interpretation of a subject. The expanded point of view, in general, enhances interpretive accuracy. Greater accuracy then fosters increased confidence both between the agents themselves and in their potential action. Still, the math here remains too simple—or at least too static. For the world, as noted, does not stand still and wait for analysis. Joint attention thus depends upon continual feedback between participants, therefore, to recalculate the changing equations. Without reciprocity between

participants, the coordination of perspectives breaks down. As a basic element of joint attention, reciprocity empowers interpretation to evolve with environments.

And yet the moral function of reciprocity is much more foundational. In Chapter 2, I argued that “the ethical seed of empathy lies in the potential for *synchrony through reciprocity* in affective dialogue.” We are now in a position to clarify this assertion in terms of joint attention and communicative action. To begin, synchrony established through reciprocity is not analogous to Habermas’s “consensus.” Though reciprocity during joint attention can lead to consensus, agreement is a technical horizon not an ethical one.⁴¹³ Reciprocity is, by contrast, inherently moral. It should not be surprising, then, that synchrony nurtured through reciprocity roots toward a level of ethical being where understanding does not reduce to rational consensus. This moral ground is defined primarily not by confident interpretations but by trust in specific human beings.⁴¹⁴

Reciprocity, if stable enough, develops from an initial synchrony into this trust. The term “stable,” here, does not mean “constant” or “invariable” as much as “consistently fitting.” Niebuhr wrote that moral responses *fit* in time as “a sentence fits into a paragraph in a book.”⁴¹⁵ And reciprocity through communicative action is indeed a form of social writing. But, to press the metaphor, before selves can write sentences much less whole books together, we need to learn both how to share the pen and with whom to do so. This journey towards trustworthy communicative action begins even before joint attention, during the first reciprocal expressions between caregiver and newborn, grounded by mutual gaze and responsive touch. This is not a one-sided activity from caregiver to child, or even a simple mirroring between them, but an “intricate ‘dance’” that, over time, “builds on familiarity with the partner's

behavioral repertoire and interaction rhythms.”⁴¹⁶ At the stage of joint attention, caregiver and child transition this dance into dynamic, interactive settings. Their responsive expressions complexify to account for the expanding world. Even in these first dialogues about their shared environs, the synchrony nurtured through reciprocity between caregiver and child is more than a matter of accurate interpretation. Accuracy is, in truth, a relative term at this stage. More crucial is trust that, if one expresses a need for response, the other will reciprocate in a way that communicates an understanding of, and a responsibility to, the self’s need as much as a knowledge of the world. It is from this relational ground that humans venture into volatile surroundings with as much security as we can muster, that is, trust in each other. As we mature, the repertoire of responses between us becomes more advanced even if the moral function of reciprocity remains the same. Our fitting responses to one another draw us together, forming a tenuous bond (synchrony) that can become a moral foundation (trust). For selves to engage in communicative action requires more than a skill in pen-sharing. We need to establish a horizon of trust with one another if we seek to inhabit the world as full human beings. When synchrony through reciprocity roots deeply enough between selves, this horizon appears. When interpersonal trust becomes encultured so that dialogical action within society itself is more surefooted, we call this social solidarity.

Thus, to the degree that estrangement impairs reciprocity between selves, it eats away not only at our faculties of joint attention but at trust and, eventually, social solidarity. As we will investigate this deterioration at length in Chapter 6, for now it suffices to recognize that trust between selves is both a crucial development of dialogical action and its moral foundation. At last, we have a reason to redraft Niebuhr’s original definition:

iii.2. **Social solidarity** is a moral cohesion that derives from a synergetic dialogue of selves within and with their society. At the level of society, solidarity depends upon discourses of action occurring within patterns of agents stable enough to render the dialogues coherent. **At the level of selves, reciprocity between individuals during dialogue initiates synchrony, a personal bond that anticipates developing into the moral foundation of trust.** When **trustworthy dialogical action** exhibits some constancy across society, **the practice** nourishes an ethos that enables socially meaningful moral points of view between selves to emerge.

Although it took patience to edit Niebuhr's construct, our sketch of solidarity still requires finishing touches. At this point, having identified the main threats of estrangement to joint attention, we now look at how estrangement distorts the self's sense of its own character. We then summarize how these effects, in turn, warp the moral point of view.

the self's character, grounded in the perspectives of others

As Rochat's research shows, each human being depends upon responsive, familiar faces in order to develop a sense of the self as an agent with a unique public character. To briefly review, through "primary intersubjectivity" the infant experiences nascent self-awareness by 7 months of age. This emergence of the self occurs as the developing brain encodes others' fitting responses to the infant's distinct behaviors. Rather straightforwardly, the reciprocating acts of others infer the self's agency. Less than a year later, the child adapts its experiences with intersubjectivity in order to internalize a hypothetical perspective of the self as an object of the judgments of others. Through this "inward social referencing," a desire arises within the self to be commendable from the world's point of view—to, in Rochat's wording, foster a good public *reputation*.

In estrangement, the scarcity of responsive faces impoverishes these experiences of intersubjectivity. Granted, the magnitude of this diminishing cannot be known without targeted research. Nonetheless, this project has culled enough related data on chronic loneliness, the decline of social-emotional intelligence in youth, increases in screen time and corresponding drops in infant communication skills, etc., that there should be little controversy in presuming that the loss of face-to-face intersubjectivity in American society is substantial. Rather than debating the severity of the loss, therefore, I want to focus on what is at stake ethically. And, in light of Rochat's analysis, what is clearly at stake is both a stable experience of the self and a socially connected sense of the self's character.

First, since the very experience of selfhood is born through mutual gaze, any chronic degeneration in primary intersubjectivity will destabilize the self. Although this vulnerability is most acute during early stages of human development, the self does not gain immunity to the loss of responsive faces at any point in life. For selfhood is an embodied, social construct molded by others' clarification of the self's agency. The less detailed this social feedback proves, the less clearly the possibilities, limitations, and realities of the self are rendered. A self lacking such definition thus vacillates between shrinking and overextending. And the self who feels close to disappearing feels equally close to being capable of anything. It seems possible, in fact, that the modern American promise to its youth, "You can be anything you want to be!", gains much of its appeal because it suits the amorphousness of the estranged self. What is more plainly true is that, although we cannot become anything, we can surely become more than we are. And what is more urgently true is that we can become more in multiple ways, not

least in our abilities to build trust with one another. This becoming can only be worked out, however, through a detailed balance of agency between the self and responsive others.

Second, as the core definition of the self loses form, the self's character also destabilizes. To understand this relation, we must note that the hypothetical perspective by which the self presumes its reputation vis-à-vis the world is not a fundamentally imaginative act. Rather, the self develops a world perspective through durable, face-to-face interactions with others who consistently place expectations upon it and, with equal importance, responsively communicate how well the self meets those expectations. In other words, the world perspective is a *hypothesis* in the sense of "a proposition...accepted as highly probable in the light of established facts."⁴¹⁷ To form this hypothesis, the imagination transforms the facts established through dialogue with others into a representative point of view. Of course, this perspective only maintains its accuracy as long as it remains grounded in stable face-to-face dialogues. To the extent that estrangement disrupts this stability, the imagination is abandoned to its own devices. Construction of the world perspective then becomes hypothetical as in "highly conjectural."⁴¹⁸ The self's sense of its own character relative to other selves is now, at minimum, unreliable. More likely it is dissolved.

I contend that the psychology of a human being resists these casualties of the self. Although this resistance might take many forms, I further argue that, rather than relinquish the self and its character, the imagination redesigns the contours of the self on the individual's own terms. To accomplish this, the first-person perspective necessarily supplements—or even wholly supplants—the socially responsive point of view. In doing so, the estranged self attempts to replace the expectation of stable face-to-face dialogue with a horizon of something

like self-actualization. Although the experience of this estranged self does not prevent the individual from feeling insecure much less lonely within society, it does offer both a sense of a future and an anchor of dignity amidst the vacating world.

It also forces a remaking of the moral point of view. Whether one follows the theoretical course of Habermas or Roach, the development of the moral point of view requires that the hypothetical perspective originate from, and return to, an intersubjective setting.

Estrangement's doubling down of the ethical viewpoint within first-person experience, therefore, poses a conundrum: namely, how does the estranged self interpret existence and sustain its character while retaining the social nature of morality? In the previous chapter, I proposed that estrangement buffers this problem by substituting ethics "close to the bone" with exoskeletal morality. At the level of society, this morality frames two basic roles: the role of institutions in providing a moral structure and the role of individuals in contributing monologues on public issues. These shells only hold together, though, if estrangement yields complementary moral viewpoints at the level of selves. Because exoskeletal morality is so thinly outlined, more than one matching perspective seems possible. Even so, the moral viewpoints most attractive to the estranged self also need to answer its first-person conundrum. That is, an estranged point of view will not only fit the self within exoskeletal society but also defend the self's individualized character over-and-against that society. Such a viewpoint might then accommodate the self for its losses of social judgment and reputation.

I submit that we are in the midst of this accommodation, and a variety of estranged moral points of view are indeed expanding within society. Although we will identify a few examples in the project's conclusion, it is worth mentioning one up front that appears

particularly well matched to exoskeletal relations: the viewpoint of personal offense. This perspective adapts the self to estrangement through a clever reversal: Rather than developing the self in response to others' perspectives, the self judges the moral quality of others' communications according to how well they appease the self. Through this twist, a morality of personal offense offers a number of remedies for the estranged self. First and foremost, personal offense attends to the self's need for a socially defined character. As we have already established, the self anticipates feedback from others' perspectives in order to form its public reputation. Even as estrangement withdraws these intersubjective points of view, the self does not cease to anticipate them. The individual's need for solidarity endures even when the stability and depth of its relationships break down. Shrewdly, personal offense responds to this need by reorienting shallow social interactions around the self's integrity. If another's tweet, text, informal greeting, or even glance affirm the individual's sense of self, then the self feels justified. If others' communications fail to make the self feel secure, then the individual experiences and may even proclaim offense. Either way, the self's sense of its integrity is reinforced. Of course, since this integrity is largely imagined on the self's terms, moral experience from this point of view essentially reduces to individual perception. In other words, although the actions of others still function to define the self, the diverse perspectives connected to those actions are irrelevant from the vantage of personal offense. And yet, since estrangement has already foreclosed access to those perspectives, the self's ability to constructively determine social meaning regardless is precisely the genius of this point of view.

There are other ways in which a morality of personal offense mitigates estrangement. This point of view overlays convincingly, for instance, with a basic ethic of helps and harms. If

another's activity offends the self, the individual experiences harm. Conversely, the self feels helped when others affirm it. This plain formula for moral perception helps compensate for the loss of complex interpretation, in which selves evaluate helps, harms, and responsive actions together. Additionally, personal offense appeals to the estranged self because it preserves moral coherence at the level of individuals. To clarify, a morality of personal offense does not, as with intersubjective dialogue, reciprocally bond selves together. As an ethical system for individuals, however, personal offense does allow for selves to persist alongside one another in a state of parallel moral logic. As long as each self allows the other the freedom of self-definition, the system can project congruity. It may even offer a thin cultural contract of sorts, in which selves generally agree to try to affirm one another, despite lacking the intersubjective awareness to do so with profoundness. Finally, personal offense poses no serious conflicts with exoskeletal morality at the level of society. The offendable self can still satisfactorily meet institutional norms and contribute monologues on public issues. In truth, the estranged self's tendency to be offended can both help motivate its opinionating and assist in matching the self with institutions less likely to offend it.

Still, for all its assuagements, this point of view cannot create a basic ethical ground between selves. Because it does not understand moral intersubjectivity, personal offense does not guide selves to share their perspectives and dialogically engage the world together. Without these dialogues, the synchrony engendered by reciprocity has no origin, and the horizon of trust cannot materialize. Failing to nurture these initial moral bonds, personal offense is powerless to open a synergy between selves and society that makes solidarity possible. At most, personal offense can offer a sense of sameness in our moral conditions, but

this is far from solidarity. In the end, at the unavoidable point where its adaptations are confronted by shared human responsibilities, personal offense is forced to confess what all estranged viewpoints eventually reveal: that a point of view grounded by a singular perspective on morality cannot be moral. In the case of personal offense, because the self's imagination sets its own standards, there is no intelligible way to discern whether perceived offenses amount to actual harms. In fact, it seems quite possible that gratifying a narcissistic self may result in considerable harms over time. Thus, a foundational premise of ethics is that helps and harms must be matters of social interpretation rather than individual perception. For, despite the fact that individual perspectives can stir a sense of personal injustice or even outrage, such experiences may have little to no grounding in the ethics of evolved social animals.

This is all to say that the moral point of view is multi-perspectival by definition. To the degree that estrangement severs perspectives between selves, it malforms moral experience. Having studied this warping in detail, we conclude this chapter by reorienting the moral point of view away from estrangement and towards solidarity.

'WE' AND THE GROWTH OF SOCIAL BONES

The significance of pronouns in ethics is often taken for granted. Pronouns do more than simply replace words. Because each pronoun signifies a type of entity (or entities) with a certain relational perspective, it creates a bounded domain open only to that type. Consequently, the semantic field of each pronoun simultaneously vitalizes and obstructs certain forms of existence. A fishbowl can be an "it," for example, but it cannot become an "I" without remaking several aspects of reality, including the perspectival possibilities of fishbowls. But the truth is that reality does change in surprising ways, and my phone now refers to itself as an "I" when I

occasionally ask it about the weather. Of course the possibilities of human beings surely surpass those of phones and fishbowls. Accordingly, language needs to continually evolve to help us both keep pace with new realities and communicate longstanding realities that have been culturally marginalized. For example, consider the growing attention on binary gender pronouns. Here, ethical problems stem from the manner in which “he”, “she”, and their pronoun sets both routinize and categorically exclude human ways of being. In response, persons have begun to create a diversity of “non-binary” pronoun sets—e.g. “xe/xem/xyr/xyrs/xemself”—meant to facilitate more inclusive realities.⁴¹⁹ The ensuing process by which non-binary words seek to transform binary culture represents only one way in which the activity of pronouns and human ethics are linked.

With an eye towards solidarity, our focus is not the creation of new terminologies but the revitalization of a word that estrangement has sapped: the pronoun *we*. In spite of the word’s weakened state, it remains central to the realization of social solidarity. I thus offer two primary insights into the ethical significance of *we*. **First, *we* orients the self within an original dialogical perspective that is necessary to fully develop a moral point of view.** Remarkably, though dialogical ethics assume intersubjectivity, theorists have seemed tentative to commit to the range of perspectives that intersubjectivity implies. This reluctance especially includes the possibility of a plural moral viewpoint. Habermas, for instance, accounts for first-, second-, and third-person perspectives in communicative action. Nonetheless, a reexamination of this key passage shows that Habermas limits the opportunities of those perspectives:

[T]he action situation is at the same time a speech situation in which the actors take turns playing the communicative roles of speaker, addressee, and bystander. To these roles correspond first- and second-person

participant perspectives as well as the third-person observer perspective from which the I-thou relation is observed as an intersubjective complex and can thus be objectified. This system of speaker perspectives is intertwined with a system of world perspectives.⁴²⁰

To begin, Habermas singles out speaking as the dominant activity in dialogue. This prioritization is not subtle, as Habermas refers to dialogical roles as “speaker perspectives.” In doing so, he pairs roles and points of view too neatly. In actual experiences of dialogue, *I*, as a first-person speaker, monitor the nonverbal communications of other participants even as I talk. In other words, expression and reception happen contemporaneously at various levels of consciousness. Even when dialogue is more clearly parsed by time during speech, however, listening remains a first-person, *I* experience. It is not clear, therefore, why Habermas overlays *I* and *you* with the roles of speaker and addressee, though the self certainly experiences both *I* and *you* orientations through speech. Equally limiting is Habermas’s association of the third-person perspective with the role of bystander. As an initial matter, the idea of a bystander in communication assumes that speakers can will their addressees. Although this is partly true, in reality expressions often occur prior to reflection and are open to multiple respondents. Even in exchanges of 1-to-1 verbal dialogue, public discourse rarely behaves as a closable system. In short, human communication is not a bystander-generating phenomenon. Regardless, postulating the bystander in third-person terms again presumes that speaking orients point of view. Yet Habermas then appears to insert an *I* perspective into the third-person bystander. This curious shift allows Habermas to frame the speaker and addressee as an *I-Thou* relation from an objective vantage point that is also necessarily an *I* perspective (The shift further raises the question of whether or not a self can dialogue either through or with a third-person

perspective. Unlike Habermas, I am not ready to label third-person points of view as dialogical, as it seems dubious that a self can communicate intersubjectively with another self perceived in the third-person). To summarize these points, we can say both that dialogue is less confined and that its points of view are more fluidly intersubjective than Habermas demonstrates. To this we can add that Habermas's account unnecessarily restricts each communicative role to a singular perspective. As an inherently plural activity, dialogue should naturally correspond to the use of *we* and *you (pl.)* just as readily as to *I* and *you (sing.)*. Yet, alongside the fact that Habermas describes only one speaker, one addressee, and one bystander, his analysis does not allow for the reality that dialogical perspectives also have plural forms.

Though less surprising, the lack of a *we* perspective in Rochat's theory also merits discussion. As a reminder, Rochat primarily analyzes intersubjectivity in order to map the development of self-consciousness in young children. He subsequently offers insights into moral development that dovetail with his stages of self-consciousness. Hence, the fact that Rochat focuses upon singular personal and possessive pronouns such as *I*, *me*, and *mine* should be expected.⁴²¹ At the same time, the centrality of secondary intersubjectivity in Rochat's theory, as well as his explanation that young children "have others in mind, existing *through* in addition to *with* others,"⁴²² seems to suggest a potential point at which intersubjective perspectives infuse one another, at least to a degree. Granted, during an infant's earliest attempts at joint attention, the child's budding communication skills limit the depth of perspective sharing. Still, I contend that, even during an infant and parent's mutual evaluation of a friendly stranger at a public park, for example, the basic elements of a *we* point of view are already in place.

What, precisely, is meant by a “we point of view?” To clarify, this perspective does not denote that two or more people experience an exactly duplicated frame of reference. More basically, a *we* point of view begins with a shared context loosely akin to what Habermas calls a “situation.” In Habermas’s terms, a *situation* is a “segment of a lifeworld that has been delimited in term of specific theme” that “arises in connection with the interests and objectives of actors.”⁴²³ Now, despite this definition’s helpfulness as a starting place, on my view it too strongly emphasizes the need for a theme. No doubt many robust dialogues emerge around a common theme. Yet it seems just as evident that communicative action can take place without one. For in communicative action the objectives and interests of actors are often both too multiform and too obscure to guarantee that a shared theme drives the dialogue. To grasp this, let’s revisit a previously mentioned example of joint attention: the common activity of an infant and parent approaching a stranger in public. In this situation, an infant crawls towards an unfamiliar adult seated on a park bench, pausing five feet from the stranger’s feet. The stranger makes eye contact with the infant, smiles, and offers a greeting in a reassuring tone. Partly reciprocating the smile, the infant then peers back into mutual gaze with the parent, seeking guidance on how to proceed. Instead of directing the child’s attention, the parent instead makes eye contact with the stranger, and the two exchange civilities. Quickly, the eyes of parent and child then find one another again, and the parent encourages the infant to greet the new acquaintance. The child’s gaze then pivots back towards the bench and begins to experiment with the new face through a more vibrant set of expressions. As simplistic as this example is, it still offers a variety of credible themes—curiosity, safety, friendliness, development, trust building, etc.—that might define the situation. And yet, no one theme

definitively propels the encounter. Instead, the action is constituted merely by the coordinated dialogical attention between its participants. Dialogue itself is the act. As such, a situation in communicative action requires nothing more than a setting within which persons dialogically coordinate attention.

With a basic understanding of a situation, we can now explain a *we* point of view. As selves dialogically coordinate attention, each self discloses information from the individual's perceptual vantage point. Through this public sharing, the perceptions of each self modify the perceptions of the other self or selves in dialogue. These adjustments are not fundamentally a matter of changing one another's opinions, beliefs, or interpretations. Rather, they are foremost an activity of fine-tuning what selves can perceive in common.⁴²⁴ In addition, this organization of perception is more than an exchange of data. Because of the integrated epiphenomena of dialogue—arising from the activity of mirror neurons, affective responsiveness, neural synchrony through eye contact, etc.—selves are able to draw their perceptions towards one another through the mutual infusing of their bodies' sensory, affective, and imaginative experiences. In short, dialogically coordinated attention reorients the embodied perspective of each self in the situation. Again, at no point is the frame of reference of one self perfectly cloned during this perceptual tuning. More accurately, each self's point of view progressively becomes its own unique composite of the perspectives of all selves in the dialogue. One way to express this phenomenon is to say that *my* situational perceptions increasingly originate not only from my perspective but from the perspectives of the *you's* with whom *I* am in dialogue. Another way to describe it is to say that one self's *I* perspective becomes imbued with those of other *I's*. A more direct way to explain it is to say that *we*

perceive this situation together. In this last iteration, each self's *we* point of view remains singularly its own, even as it increasingly represents the perspectives of others.

The previous description summarizes how the pronoun "*we* orients the self within an original dialogical perspective." In connection with this first point, I also claimed that a *we* perspective "is necessary to fully develop a moral point of view." Note that this phrasing emphasizes development and is not synonymous with the attainment of either an "advanced" or a "complex" moral perspective. A self can render an advanced or a complex moral point of view without manifesting a *we* perspective. Such an achievement depends upon the expectations of the self's philosophy, the demands of the situation, and the self's current abilities, among other conditions. A libertarian acting within a libertarian society, for instance, could experience a complex moral point of view without a *we* orientation. Many advanced Kantian perspectives, as well, seem satisfied by a "substitutionalist" *I* that can simulate all other *I*'s and, therefore, do not require a *we* point of view.⁴²⁵ Despite the impressiveness of such perspectives relative to their settings, however, they leave an essential moral vantage point underdeveloped or even neglected. And this is the crux of my claim: that the development of the *we* point of view opens an original layer of being that is necessary to realize our full ethical possibilities. To be clear, I am not proposing that the *we* point of view represents an advanced stage of moral perception, similarly to Kohlberg's theory. Rather, I contend that humans have evolved multiple dialogical perspectives, each signified by *I*, *you*, *we*, etc., and these perspectives co-develop. Hence, the *I* perspective gains both definition and agency as it matures within settings rich with *you* and *we* perspectives; likewise, a *we* perspective develops more assuredly vis-à-vis *you*'s and *I*'s whose dialogues are more vigorous. The intersubjective

nature of dialogue anticipates the mutual cultivation of these perspectives. Consequently, a complex but bounded *I* can engage in communicative action with a series of other bounded *I*'s without nourishing complex intersubjectivity. The resulting moral viewpoint may be mature in a narrow sense, while the overall ethical capacities of the selves in dialogue remain underdeveloped. Conversely, through dialogically coordinated attention, the *we* moral point of view empowers intersubjective perception in order to enhance both the accuracy of human interpretation and the potential of human action.

It was previously inferred that the *we* point of view can also be expressed as a sequence of *I-you* perspectives or even as a complex array of *I* vantage points. Although theoretically comparable, these substitutions are not equivalent to the *we* orientation in terms of moral experience. The main difference between them is made apparent by my second insight into the ethical significance of *we*: **the self's profession of *we* helps usher a form of relationship into being, one uniquely associated with social solidarity.** To understand this claim, we need to briefly examine Martin Buber's *I-Thou*.

Buber classifies *I-Thou* as a "primary word." By this he means that *I-Thou* does not "signify things" but "intimate[s] relations." In Buber's dialogical personalism, the self cannot speak *Thou* apart from *I*, for the relationship between them is constitutive of being itself. To separate *Thou* from *I* is, therefore, to fragment being. Accordingly, Buber explains that "*I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being."⁴²⁶ And it is indeed through being—much more than through language—that each person professes *I-Thou*. For Buber, the relational gravity within *I-Thou* pervades and sustains existence not only between selves but also between the self and nonhuman animals and, ultimately, between the self and God.⁴²⁷

Despite the dialogical composition of being, Buber insists that no person can take relationship for granted. On the contrary, each person's being must continually speak its relationships into re-existence. It is in the act of confessing *I-Thou* that each self realizes both its essential connectedness and its specific relations. In terms of the current project, we might say that *I-Thou* functions as a perceptual "portal" into dialogical relations. In Buber's vocabulary, if a self fails to utter *I-Thou*, that self does not transcend the sensory realm of *I-It*. Here it is important to note that Buber portrays the nature of human life as "twofold."⁴²⁸ As the "other primary word" in this twofold existence, *I-It* captures individualistic human experience, which Buber narrates bluntly as: "*I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something.*"⁴²⁹ Although Buber connects the two primary words in ways that restore value to *I-It*, he maintains the basic differentiation between *I-It* as the objectifying, separating vantage of the individual and *I-Thou* as the confession of the self-in-relationship. In shorthand, he calls *I-It* a "natural detachment" and *I-Thou* a "natural solidarity."⁴³⁰

Buber's *I-Thou* has greatly influenced moral philosophy, including many of the ethical theories upon which this project depends. As already mentioned, Habermas assigns *I-Thou* a crucial role in the development of the moral point of view. H. Richard Niebuhr identifies *I-Thou* as a precursor to *homo dialogicus*, writing: "All this reflective life is life in relations to companions; it is I-Thou, I-You existence. It is existence in response to action upon us by other selves."⁴³¹ Nel Noddings goes further, drawing an explicit parallel between her "one-caring" ↔ "cared-for" relation and *I-Thou*:

Buber underscores the role of the one-caring, that is, of the one-caring as the I in I-Thou relations, insisting: "The relation can obtain even if the human

being to whom *I* say *Thou* does not hear it in his experience. For *Thou* is more than *It* knows. *Thou* does more, and more happens to it, than *It* knows. No deception reaches this far: here is the cradle of actual life."⁴³²

With regard to their basic visions, the ethical theories of Niebuhr, Noddings, and Habermas all share *I-Thou's* confession of human connectedness. Yet they are also delimited by *I-Thou's* first-person singular orientation. For, to the degree that *I-Thou* speaks relationship into being, ethical theories based on this perspective tend to structure moral bonds into a self↔other architecture, one in which the other's agency is inherently secondary to the self's. Granted, in an obvious way this makes sense, in that *I* always hold more power over my embodied faculties than *I* do over *Thou's*. Hence the prioritization of the self's vantage point logically aligns with the first-person singular distribution of agency. Nonetheless, from a situational point of view—that is, from the perspective of dialogical action itself—an *I-Thou* orientation does not suffice to comprehend the ethical reality of selves in dialogical action together, much less bring it into being.

Human sociality is not twofold but manifold. To speak the manifold nature of relationship into being, *homo dialogicus* needs to be able to say a primary word beyond *I-It* and *I-Thou*, a word that recognizes that human plurality is more than a bonding of singularities. At the threshold of our togetherness is a form of being we call "solidarity." Solidarity itself is more than a dialogical fusion of perspectives between selves. It is a truth of our moral condition towards which our instinctively merging points of view lead us: humans evolved to sense, act, and be together. Of course, with our awareness of this condition comes an undeniable burden for one another. And, even though the reciprocities of dialogue anticipate this burden, there is a stark difference between inching towards the burden in a situation and professing that the

burden is always there. The self experiences the first movement primarily as a choosing of responsibility for the other. The experience of the constant burden, on the other hand, feels prior to agency—similar to Emmanuel Levinas’s description of an “encounter:”

To encounter, what does that mean? From the very start you are not indifferent to the other. From the very start you are not alone! Even if you adopt an attitude of indifference you are obliged to adopt it! The other counts for you; you answer him as much as he addresses himself to you; he concerns you!⁴³³

For Levinas this encounter with the other is primordial, a phenomenon of ethical gravity that establishes the self as “the-one-for-the-other” before time is sensible. So radical is this experience of social burden that Levinas argues that it carries the self not only beyond time but *beyond being*.⁴³⁴ Even so, Levinas defines the encounter with the other as a fundamentally one-to-one rather than manifold social experience.⁴³⁵ The expansion I introduce here—and attempt to untangle in the next chapter—is that the ethical gravity made salient through the self’s encounter with the Levinasian other does not cease its activity even when the subject reenters multiplex social life. In fact the very burdensome gravity of responsibility stems from manifold—even mundane—social existence.

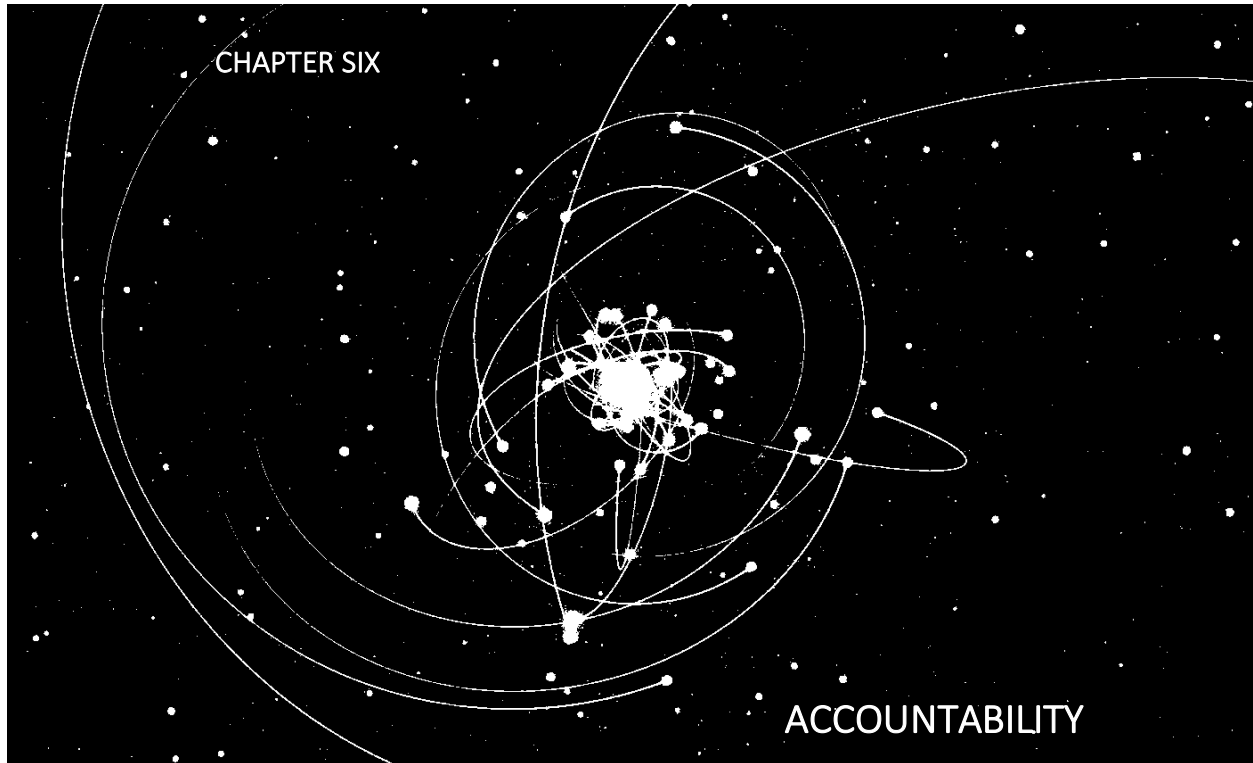
To profess the primary word *we* is to find one’s self already in responsibility with other selves as the necessary state of moral being. At the start, it is to cross the threshold from a singular point of view into a solidarity. Over time, the concomitance of the word with dialogical action helps form a shared ethical foundation upon which more than situations are at stake. At that point, *we* no longer intimates a mere association of selves bonded through dialogue. It

assembles friends, communities, and cultures into being. The profession of *we* is thus crucial if exoskeletal society is to shed its thinness and grow new ethical bones:

6. **Social solidarity** is a moral cohesion that derives from a synergetic dialogue of selves within and with their society. At the level of society, solidarity depends upon discourses of action occurring within patterns of agents stable enough to render the dialogues coherent. At the level of selves, reciprocity between individuals during dialogue initiates synchrony, a personal bond that anticipates developing into the moral foundation of trust. When trustworthy dialogical action exhibits some constancy across society, the practice nourishes an ethos that enables socially meaningful moral points of view between selves to emerge. **Finally, when selves speak the primary word *we*, these levels and perspectives of moral coherence are experienced as a unique form of being together.**

I am freed from myself in the present dialogue, even though the other's thoughts are certainly his own, since I do not form them, I nonetheless grasp them as soon as they are born or I even anticipate them.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁴³⁶



Backwards forwards subjectivity

Probably more than his other elements, Niebuhr's concept of accountability propels the phenomenological turn of responsibility, a turn initiated by Nietzsche's deconstruction of Kant's self-causing agent.⁴³⁷ Emmanuel Levinas summarizes the tradition of this turn with these words: "Usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say...that responsibility is initially a *for the Other*."⁴³⁸ In the first part of this statement, Levinas steers away from the line that Kant traces from the effects of an action backwards to an accountable subject. Kant describes this direct accountability in terms of *authorship*:

An action is called a *deed* insofar as it comes under obligatory laws and hence insofar as the subject, in doing it, is considered in terms of the freedom of his choice. By such an action the agent is regarded as the *author* of its effect...⁴³⁹

Kant goes on to argue that such authorship means that both the deed and its consequences “can be *imputed to*” the agent. Moreover, this very imputation can be accomplished through the author’s own conscience, which Kant analogizes to “*an internal court*” within each person’s mind.⁴⁴⁰ By designing the subject as perfectly imputable so that her effects can be tracked backwards to her, Kant hopes that the agent will be motivated to reason outwardly, universally, to act in ways that might be judged right for everyone. The result is nonetheless an ethical solipsism. The Kantian subject bears full moral autonomy, not only as the willing cause of all effects, but as both defendant and judge, author and critic of the originating act. This absolutely accountable self is the paradigm to which Levinas alludes when he says that “[u]sually, one is responsible for what one does oneself.”

Turning away from this solipsism, Levinas reorients the burden of responsibility towards others. In doing so, he crafts a responsibility for the other that may be just as radical as Kant’s accountability for the self. Levinas, in fact, defines subjectivity itself as a condition of responsibility for the other:

I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.

I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face.⁴⁴¹

Here Levinas details ethical subjectivity in remarkable terms, not least that it “does not supplement a preceding existential base.” Levinas stresses that the subject begins “in the very movement wherein being responsible for the other devolves on it.”⁴⁴² Subjectivity thus arrives from outside itself—from *beyond*. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas explains that this emergence of the subject from beyond essence “comes to pass as a passivity more passive than all passivity.”⁴⁴³ In other words, the Levinasian self, far from the Kantian self-causing subject, emerges not with independent agency but in a condition of ethical subjection to the other. The subject’s very subjectivity derives from this *subjection*, from the turning over of its own being into responsibility for the other. Levinas expresses subjectivity, therefore, not as a condition but as an “uncondition.” Responsibility constitutes the subject as both “hostage” to and, even more, as “substitution” for the other.⁴⁴⁴

In Levinas’s vernacular, “the beyond” is a synonym for “transcendence,”⁴⁴⁵ and transcendence—“the breaking point where essence is exceeded by the infinite”⁴⁴⁶—is Levinas’s first project. Although Levinas explains that the infinite cannot be tracked like a quarry,⁴⁴⁷ from the first words of *Otherwise than Being* it is clear that there will be a hunt even so:

If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being. But what is *Being’s other*?⁴⁴⁸

To situate Levinas's account of responsibility accurately, it should be understood in the context of his more foundational project of transcendence. Levinasian responsibility is transcendence wielded—instrumentalized, even—in human relations. What, specifically, does responsibility transcend? The *conatus* of the individual human being. For Levinas, the *conatus* represents the self-interested ego, the individual essence of a human being laboring to perpetuate itself. Simply put, the *conatus* is the “positivity” of being.⁴⁴⁹ Responsibility “inverts” the *conatus* towards the other, pulls positive essence outside itself, and creates the subject as a passivity, as a “one-for-the-other.”⁴⁵⁰ Levinas portrays this inversion as an absolute passivity that explicitly undermines the Kantian subject:

The responsibility for the other could not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a “prior to every memory” ...⁴⁵¹

Whereas Kant designs subjectivity as free and self-causing, that is, as the agent's own ethical bedrock, Levinas discloses the subject through a movement that not only lies beyond its essence but precedes its freedom, continually breaking the solipsistic ground. Through responsibility, the infinite transcends the mirage of individual freedom like a “past that was never present.”⁴⁵² Born as a transcendence of a self that cannot exist as such, the Levinasian subject experiences freedom differently, as an escape from the lie of ethical self-sufficiency.

CAN A TRANSCENDENT ETHICAL SUBJECT ENTER DIALOGUE?

In a basic way, Levinas's transcendence is a rescue, what Iris Murdoch calls “salvation” from “the fat relentless ego”⁴⁵³ (Notably, both Murdoch and Levinas illustrate deliverance from

egoism as a movement towards Platonic goodness⁴⁵⁴). But Levinas proposes more than an emancipation *from*; he seeks a thorough transcendence, an inversion of being into its *otherwise*. This task poses an obvious problem for a writer: How does one give an account *beyond* being through the media of time and essence? Undaunted, Levinas explains that he must betray transcendence through an abuse of language in order to disclose “the unsayable.” No less provocatively, he justifies this betrayal by claiming it as the primary work of philosophy.⁴⁵⁵ Now, although the details by which the unsayable reveals itself in Levinas’s philosophy lie beyond the scope of this project, his basic method is of concern. For a common human approach to solving an apparently unsolvable problem is to cause a different problem. And, in order to conceptualize how the gap between language and the unsayable is crossed, Levinas theorizes an original break within language itself. He names these primal linguistic categories, simply, *saying* and *said*. The ontological fissure between *saying* and *said* pervades Levinas’s account of transcendence, parsing phenomena into one of two experiential domains. The result, I contend, dissociates ethical phenomena that evolved in coherence with one another, uncleaving affective awareness from sensory perception, responsibility from reciprocity, and discourse from dialogue.

abstracting affective awareness from sensory perception

Levinas renders *saying* as the “pre-original language,”⁴⁵⁶ the discourse of responsibility itself, and, as such, speech that “belongs to...extreme passivity, despite its apparent activity.”⁴⁵⁷ *Saying* is the unsayable expressionism of transcendence. Since *saying* is the language of the beyond, Levinas locates *saying’s* expression as beyond “phenomenality,” that is, beyond “the exhibition of being’s essence.”⁴⁵⁸ For Levinas, this means that the discourse of responsibility

cannot be reduced to the cognitions of vision or any other sensory-based perceptions.⁴⁵⁹

Moreover, as written and verbal language—the expressive forms of *said*—exist predominately⁴⁶⁰ within this domain of sensory perception, Levinas posits *saying* as a “a phenomenon...possible without the kerygmatic logos, without a phenomenology,” at least in the way Western philosophy has typically construed phenomenology.⁴⁶¹

In order to access this phenomenon beyond phenomenality, Levinas forges a new phenomenology: an account of affective awareness beyond the senses. But what affects the subject beyond the field of sensory experience? What expresses *saying*? According to Levinas, the mouth through which transcendence speaks is the “face” of the other. In Levinas’s precise words, “the dimension of the divine opens up from the human face.”⁴⁶² Levinas clarifies that the “face” that meets the self is not an arrangement of bodily features unique to each person. The face is not a perceptible combination of eye color, nose geometry, mouth position, etc:

[T]he face is not “seen.” It is what cannot become content, which your thought would embrace; it is uncontainable, it leads you beyond. It is in this that the signification of the face makes its escape from being, as a correlate of a knowing. Vision, to the contrary, is a search for adequation; it is what par excellence absorbs being. But the relation to the face is straightaway ethical.⁴⁶³

Hence, Levinas portrays any attempt to “look...toward the face” as an objectification, and, with it, a risk of reducing the other to a set of cognitions. In a striking illustration, Levinas declares that

[t]he best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes!
When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the
Other.⁴⁶⁴

If the subject does not encounter the other through conventional facial qualities, why does Levinas name the mechanism of transcendence as such? In short, the face is expressive. Specifically, “the face speaks.” Not only this, but Levinas argues that the utterance of the face is the origin point of all discourse.⁴⁶⁵ It may be more direct, in truth, to declare that the face is the discourse. In a moment of transparency, Levinas recognizes that “[t]he different concepts that come up in the attempt to state transcendence echo one another.”⁴⁶⁶ And an explicit circularity does persist within Levinas’s parlance: Responsibility for the other is transcendence, transcendence is the opening of the infinite, the infinity reveals itself through the face, the face speaks, *saying* is the pre-original language, the pre-original language is responsibility for the other. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas proclaims that “[r]evelation is discourse.”⁴⁶⁷ Yet, earlier in the same text he writes that within discourse’s revelation, within “the coinciding of the revealer and the revealed in the face: the interlocutor alone is the term of pure experience.”⁴⁶⁸ As the most salient point of the *saying*, the face of the other manifests as discourse itself.

But how does the subject “hear” the face of the other? After all, the face speaks the *saying* beyond the domain of sensory perception. Levinas’s phenomenology requires not only a way of *saying* but a way of experiencing the pre-original discourse. Expression anticipates a capacity for reception. Levinas discovers this facility in the ways that the subject *feels* three phenomena of the face: proximity, vulnerability, and gravity. By “proximity,” Levinas captures the subject’s experience of awakening during “the approach of the other.” The other, of course,

draws near to the self not as essence, primarily, but as face. The proximity of the face is felt simultaneously by the ego, which resists the *saying*, and the emerging subject, which passively answers and, in so doing, is born.⁴⁶⁹ Levinas thus says that the discourse of the face “orders and ordains” the subject into responsibility.⁴⁷⁰

Hypothetically, the proximity of the other could ordain the subject into any manner of relation. The subject is called to responsibility because the face expresses the other’s vulnerability foremost. François Raffoul suggests, in fact, that the signification of the face amounts to this single word. More precisely, Raffoul interprets “vulnerability” in Levinas’s philosophy to mean the defining characteristic of humanity, the very meaning of “humanity.”⁴⁷¹ To be human is to be vulnerable, affected by—and in need of—the other. And, indeed, Levinas describes the subject’s response to the vulnerability of the face as an experience of the self’s own vulnerability:

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego’s identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject.⁴⁷²

Exposed to the vulnerability of the other in proximity, the subject *feels* vulnerable. Yet the subject’s vulnerability is most profound in the face’s inversion of its essence, the reversal of its *conatus* into responsibility.

The word Levinas employs to summarize this affective pull of the other upon being is “gravity:”

Does not disinterestedness, without compensation, without eternal life, without the pleasingness of happiness, complete gratuity, indicate an extreme gravity...? By anticipation let us ask: does not this gravity, where being's *esse* is inverted, refer to this pre-original language, the responsibility of one for the other, the substitution of one for the other, and the condition (or the uncondition) of being hostage which thus takes form?⁴⁷³

The vulnerability of the face in proximity exerts gravity upon the self. This gravity pulls being over into its *otherwise*, into the transcendence of responsibility. Like proximity and vulnerability, the subject feels gravity. These words represent the core of an affective lexicon through which Levinas displaces sensory perception from phenomenology. The Levinasian subject does not see the color of the other's eyes, hear the other's voice, or touch the other's skin. But the subject does *feel* the face of the other nonetheless. The subject does not focus upon concrete emotional cues as much as sense the vulnerability of the other as a comprehensive human reality. Levinas's notion of proprioception is "straightaway ethical," in that the subject does not monitor its own bodily orientation as much as feel the ethical gravity of others within relational space. The face of the other speaks, and the self experiences the *saying* beyond sound.

It should not be forgotten that these extra-sensory phenomena are all realized in the search for transcendence. To this end, Levinas is clear that he is not seeking to construct an ethics, but to "find its meaning."⁴⁷⁴ The meaning Levinas discovers is the transcendent *feeling* of responsibility for the other from the first-person singular perspective. In other words, Levinas's particular phenomenology of ethical affectivity—moral experience beyond sensory perception—leads to an articulation of responsibility from one side of a discourse.

Discourse from dialogue, responsibility from reciprocity

As mentioned, Levinas defines discourse as the face of the other. The part of the subject in the discourse is actualized as the experience of responsibility itself. For Levinas, *saying* signifies a complete discourse through which the face of the other speaks, and the subject answers passively in the form of responsibility. Another way to understand this pre-original passivity is to locate ethical discourse beyond the field of action. On this point, Levinas affirms that his philosophy “separates radically language and activity, expression and labor, in spite of all the practical side of language, whose importance we may not underestimate.”⁴⁷⁵ Regarding language’s “practical side,” Levinas explains that human sociality needs the enunciation of the *said* in order to develop the formal structures of society, its institutions and laws.⁴⁷⁶ Yet Levinas just as readily compares the *said* to the frivolous public pressure “to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what.” The resulting conversational trivialities manifest within the field of activity and labor. The ethical demand to answer the other in the first place, however, belongs to the passive domain of *saying*.⁴⁷⁷

Despite the two-human form of *saying*, the experience of the discourse is one-sided, non-dialogical even. The subject alone feels the passive answer to the face. This discursive separation reflects a number of fissures in Levinas’ account of responsibility, not least the break from sensory perception. One of the taken-for-granted facts of verbal dialogue may be that all participants hear a relatively homologous movement of sound, even if each single participant perceives the movement uniquely. The common sensory phenomenon allows for one or multiple participants to pick up the movement, propel it forward, or even double it back and revisit the previous expression in a way that continues the movement itself, that is, to dialogue.

Of course, this description of dialogue strongly resembles action. And it is not coincidental that the divide that emerges between discourse and dialogue parallels Levinas's depiction of the *saying* as passive and the *said* as active.

Levinas deepens this gap between ethical discourse and dialogical action by severing responsibility from reciprocity. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas argues that responsibility for the other necessarily transcends reciprocity. He expresses this move beyond reciprocity in absolute terms:

One of the fundamental themes...is that the intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjected to the Other; and I am "subject" essentially in this sense. It is I who support all...I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility.⁴⁷⁸

Granted, the search for transcendence obliges absoluteness. For stopping short of total responsibility for the other would risk only a partial inversion of the ego—only a hint of transcendence. It is not logical for infinity to parse itself. The transcendent ethical subject, therefore, cannot cease responsibility at a certain point. Levinasian responsibility must be responsible even for the other's responsibility.

At the same time, it does not seem accidental that Levinas defends total responsibility in the context of reciprocity. For reciprocity persists as a curious breakdown of absolute ethics. On one hand, there is the rather blunt possibility that the other's responsibility includes the "affair" of reciprocity, even reciprocity for the subject. In this simple case, absorption of the other's

responsibility suddenly makes reciprocity also unavoidably the subject's affair. On the other hand, Levinas himself has already portrayed the encounter with the other as a form of reciprocation—a mutuality of vulnerability. The face of the other signifies itself as vulnerability, a vulnerability that inverts the self into responsible subjectivity, an inversion that lays bare the subject's own vulnerability. Reciprocation thus helps found responsibility. Nevertheless, Levinas insists that responsibility abandon reciprocity.

More basically, the very motion of reciprocity—its social back-and-forthness—betrays the absolute subject. Noticeably, Levinas's phenomenology of responsibility insulates the subject not only against reciprocity but against its movement. Discourse abstracted from dialogue enables the subject to respond to the other not only passively but silently, disabling precise replies. Discourse estranged from action occurs in virtually the same stroke.⁴⁷⁹ Ethics abstracted from sensory phenomena ensconces responsibility within the affective sensibilities of the subject. For Levinas this reveals the meaning of ethics: how responsibility feels to the first-person singular subject,⁴⁸⁰ the transcendent experience of the other's gravity, its burdensome pull. Levinas does not concern his ethics as much with how that feeling impacts other humans within the field of action. But feeling responsibility is not the same thing as being responsible. This is a main thesis of accountability towards which we are working.

Gravity beyond two humans

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Levinas's phenomenology of responsibility is its extreme two-human form. Levinas states that when "I am alone with the Other, I owe him everything."⁴⁸¹ Yet, this total responsibility for the other "is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party appears."⁴⁸² The addition of another human divides

affective awareness, breaking up the transcendent experience of the other's proximity. The other is no longer absolutely salient. Rather, the other is compared with another in a context as a part of a system.⁴⁸³ This assessment objectifies both humans as reference points in consciousness. Levinas, in fact, posits that "[c]onsciousness is born as the presence of a third party."⁴⁸⁴ The once irresistible gravity of the other gives way to multiple others as analyzable objects of knowledge.

To be clear, Levinas conceives this return from ethical gravity to societal consciousness as a necessary transition, even "an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at."⁴⁸⁵ As previously noted, it is within this systematizing domain of the *said* that humans establish justice, laws, and institutions. Split between consciousness and transcendence, can justice and responsibility then collaborate in Levinas's ethics? Here, Levinas proposes that

the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of the two: justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest.⁴⁸⁶

In other words, the ongoing, routine transcendences of responsibility make ethical meaning within systems of justice possible, even as those institutions keep the radical gravity of the other from overwhelming society.

But is ethical gravity only a two-human phenomenon? I submit that not only justice but also responsibility exerts itself through multiplex sociality. Furthermore, I suggest that the difference in experience between Levinasian and multiplex gravity can be illustrated by

considering the basic relation between Newtonian and Einsteinian gravity. In brief, Einstein theorizes gravity not as a force but as a curvature of spacetime resulting from the uneven distribution of mass in the universe. In Newtonian physics, the experience of gravity can be calculated as a force between any two such bodies of mass. In terms of ethics, we can understand responsibility as a basic moral curvature between not only all humans but, I argue, all our ecological relations to some extent. However, like our habituation to Einsteinian gravity, for the most part human experience takes the moral curvature between the self and others for granted. Having evolved in relation to Earth, humans do not feel its gravity unless our orientation in spacetime shifts dramatically, for instance, the ground suddenly disappears from beneath us (and we sense ourselves falling), or we find ourselves on the moon (and sense ourselves not falling as rapidly). But our very experiences of gravity through radical shifts in spacetime are only possible because the curvature is always there. Similarly, the evolution of humans within complex interdependencies has acclimated us to the responsibilities of those relations in a mostly unconscious way. The sense of ethical gravity becomes burdensome only when the relational orientation shifts, for example, when a profound help or harm between relations occurs or is pondered. As Levinas's philosophy evinces, the severity of gravity corresponds to the proximity of bodies in relation. This principle of proximity also affects the curvature of moral space, establishing a more substantial field of responsibility between more intimate relations,⁴⁸⁷ especially family members. Hence the most profound alterations of ethical gravity happen in relation to birth and death, the introduction or destruction of an entire gravitational field.

By comparison, Levinas's gravity represents a paradigmatic calculation of Newtonian force. In all the ways Levinas describes and then some, the single face of the other provides the most salient experience of ethical relation. Not least due to the neural synchrony of mutual gaze (detailed in Chapter 2), the subject comprehends the vulnerability of both others and self most profoundly during a one-to-one encounter. Even so, the depth of ethical feeling for the other in this encounter need not proclaim the ego's transcendence. Instead, if the subject's activity has been in alignment with the moral curvature of its relations, then the immediate salience of the other can simply manifest as an intensified awareness of the ever-present and sobering stakes of gravity. With this in mind, I offer the perhaps controversial opinion that we might be wary of the transcendent uprooting of the ego through responsibility. A human in responsibility with others is in perpetual ethical motion, so to speak, even when the movement feels effortless, even during the respite of solitude.⁴⁸⁸ Consequently, if the experience of responsibility feels like the self "torn from itself,"⁴⁸⁹ as Levinas conveys, then either the self has been out of orbit with others or something has distorted the curvature of moral life.

Back-and-forth as the passive and active movement of ethics

Whether oriented to the self or the other, defining responsibility in terms of the subjectivity of the subject proves problematic. Kant's attempt to establish the subject as the willful author of all effects of his action ends up violating the very meaning of responsibility. As Levinas shows, the experience of responsibility does not trace backwards to the self but outwards to the other. Yet Levinas's desire to transcend the solipsistic self ends up tripping into an inverted absolutism—a constitution of the subject in total responsibility for the other. In this

inversion, Levinas's subject hazards a shadow self-interest, an appeal to the other to save oneself from oneself. Kant constructs the absolutely accountable self through a metaphysics that controls morality on the field of action. Conversely, Levinas reveals an ethical subject that passively transcends action, even as the one-for-the-other sustains the moral bonds undergirding society itself. In both philosophies, the sourcing of responsibility in subjectivity coincides with a certain unidirectionality. The Kantian subject tracks all effects backwards to his action and presumes, therefore, to act in total responsibility. The Levinasian subject appears in the transcendence of a complete movement towards the other and feels inhabited by total responsibility. Unidirectionality and totality thus infuse with one another as responsibility settles in subjectivity.

NIEBUHR'S RE-TURN

Niebuhr's concept of accountability offers a simple course into responsibility, if only by expecting the subject to continue to turn with it. At its most elemental, *accountability* is defined by Niebuhr as our "anticipation of answers to our answers."⁴⁹⁰ Expounded, *homo dialogicus* does not merely answer the other socially and interpretively but does so upon a dialogical horizon, one that continually places the response of the other ahead of the self. The result of this constant anticipation of the other, according to Niebuhr, is that the subject seeks to design fitting and continuable responses:

An agent's action is like a statement in a dialogue. Such a statement not only seeks to meet, as it were, or to fit into, the previous statement to which it is an answer, but is made in anticipation of reply. It looks forward as well as backward; it anticipates objections, confirmations, and corrections. It is made as part of a total conversation

that leads forward and is to have meaning as a whole...So considered, no action taken as an atomic unit is responsible. Responsibility lies in the agent who stays with his action, who accepts the consequences in the form of reactions and looks forward in a present deed to the continued interaction.⁴⁹¹

In short, accountability senses the back-and-forth of responsibility and keeps the self in the movement for its duration. Likewise, from a Niebuhrian point-of-view, responsibility does not so much occupy subjectivity as compel the subject to tend closely to the preoccupation of moral life, that is, existence caught up in dialogical relation with others.

Still, even as Niebuhr's turn diverges from the ethics of subjectivity of Kant and Levinas, it also returns to their notions of responsibility in key ways. Similar to Kant's "author," for example, Niebuhr's accountable self sticks with action. *Homo dialogicus* both responds within the field of action and claims the effects of those responses. There is, it might even be said, an aspect of "one is responsible for what one does oneself" in Niebuhr's accountability. Yet Kant's author owns this principle more thoroughly, attempting to write the complete story of action from beginning to end. For Niebuhr, accepting one's impact in a dialogue of action means acknowledging the limits of that agency. The narrative always precedes and outlasts the self's part in some way; hence any attempt to script the whole story ends up atomizing action. Respecting the before and after of action, *homo dialogicus* seeks to act significantly yet expectantly, as a sentence rather than as a complete account.

Like Levinas, Niebuhr details the experience of responsibility as a responsive motion of the self towards the other. Not only in this way, *homo dialogicus* participates in the phenomenological turn of responsibility. If anything, Niebuhr's anthropological symbol keeps turning when others cease. The element of accountability necessitates it. For when

accountability infuses the anticipation of continued dialogue into the self's responses, each response then bears a dual gravity—simultaneously seeking to answer the other while also returning the other to the self. Further, since the responsive self will then adjust—through interpretation with others—and answer anew in light of the other's subsequent response, the self's initial answer has already opened an infinite relational loop. Levinas says that “[i]t is difficult to be silent in someone's presence.”⁴⁹² Because of the gravity of accountability, it is equally difficult to exit dialogue once the movement begins. This is precisely why cultures structure public speech in customary, open-and-close formats: “How are you?” “Fine, thank you.” The *thank you* serves as a mutually understood exit from the infinite gravity of accountability. Accordingly, the substitution of a novel answer to a customary question suddenly leaves the dialogue participants on an open and relatively spare horizon. If I ask a grocery cashier, “How are you?”, and she replies, “Actually, I just got some bad news,” then my answer may or may not move the conversation in a helpful direction, but there is no customary exit from an expression of *help*. If I do exit, my leaving will be just as novel as this sudden infinity between us.

There is a paradox within Levinasian responsibility, in that the subject owes everything to the other but, in its ethical passivity, anticipates nothing. Where does dialogue go without anticipation? How do we passively seek?

To respond with accountability is to seek the return of the other, and thereby welcome the infinite.

7. **Accountability** anticipates social answers to our answers and seeks to respond with others, therefore, in a way that fits and continues the dialogical relation.

“Images should not be resting places, but pointers...”

—Iris Murdoch⁴⁹³



Other Anthropologies

Each moral anthropology is formed from a peculiar synthesis of dirt and bone—the combination of givens and creative choices. Reflecting this, Niebuhr breathes life into one symbol, *homo dialogicus*, as a reasoned decision over-and-against two alternatives, variant moral anthropologies that he views as historically dominant. Niebuhr identifies one such symbol as *homo politicus*, “man-the-citizen.”⁴⁹⁴ Drawn in differing forms by Plato and Kant, *homo politicus* captures the general reality that humans “come to self-awareness...in the midst of *mores*, of commandments and rules, *Thou shalt*s and *Thou shalt not*s, of directions and permissions.”⁴⁹⁵ According to Niebuhr, laws plant themselves within the self so deeply because we are born into a society already in motion, and the massive structures of society depend

upon public rules for moral administration. *Homo politicus* excels, therefore, as an aid to incorporate selves morally within society. Even so, Niebuhr argues that the symbol falters as a tool for self-legislation, not least because individuals struggle to psychologically transform societal structures into mechanisms for personal judgment. Niebuhr expresses skepticism, here, about Kant's image of the self as its own micro-government.⁴⁹⁶

Niebuhr proposes *homo faber*, "man-the-maker," as a second prominent image of human ethics.⁴⁹⁷ Theorized most cogently by Aristotle and Aquinas, *homo faber* frames ethics as a teleological process of shaping humanity towards good outcomes. This fashioning foremost requires humans to remake ourselves, to continually develop ourselves towards our aims as a species. According to Niebuhr, *homo faber* encourages the view that "man is the being who makes himself—though he does not do so by himself—for the sake of a desired end."⁴⁹⁸ For Niebuhr, the ethical appeal of *homo faber* derives from its attention to the "purposiveness" of human existence.⁴⁹⁹ And, in fact, our current project is itself a purposeful evolution of *homo dialogicus*. Even so, our present work does not aim at a specific human endpoint. Rather, we seek to understand our ethical capacities and their implications in modern life, so that we are well-equipped to "seek guidance for our activity."⁵⁰⁰ That is, *homo dialogicus* is concerned less with the goals humans choose than with how we pursue existence together. After all, as Niebuhr notes in his critique of *homo faber*, throughout history people have defended a myriad of conflicting goals as the single aim of humanity.⁵⁰¹

SURPRISING CONCERNS ABOUT ALTRUISM AND DIGNITY

Since ethical images are at least partly a matter of will, we should choose wisely. That is the crux of this final analysis. When Frans de Waal commends empathy as a primary moral

resource for modern society, he does so at least partly through a rough anthropological sketch, the so-called “Russian Doll Model.”⁵⁰² Although we studied this model in Chapter 2, we did not mention the fact that de Waal, not unlike Niebuhr, endorses his ethical vision over-and-against a competing image. De Waal names this contrary anthropology “Veneer Theory:” the view that “[h]uman morality is...a thin crust underneath of which boil antisocial, amoral, and egoistic passions.”⁵⁰³ Veneer Theory sharply divorces the concepts of culture and nature, identifying culture as the realm of morals and nature as the domain of primal instincts. According to de Waal, those who adopt Veneer Theory then seek to control humanity’s “very bad” core⁵⁰⁴ via the instruments of culture. Yet, even as the advance of “civilized” society indicates the partial success of this method, underneath the surface human “nature” remains fundamentally immoral.⁵⁰⁵ De Waal summarizes the cynicism of Veneer Theory through Michael Ghiselin’s gibe, “Scratch an ‘altruist,’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed.”⁵⁰⁶

After addressing Ghiselin and Veneer Theory, much of de Waal’s project in *Primates and Philosophers* then becomes a reclamation of human morality as altruistic—or at least oriented towards altruism—all the way to the core. In fact, de Waal argues that a significant proportion of our altruistic acts are prereflective movements guided by our underlying, empathic motivations. Although we may display an innate relationality through these responses, the acts themselves do not stem from reflective, rational decisions in the sense of morality assumed by Veneer Theory.⁵⁰⁷ Rather, de Waal connects altruistic behavior directly with the empathic layers of the Russian Doll.⁵⁰⁸ This intimacy between empathy and altruism also renders altruism, like empathy, a significantly in-group phenomenon in de Waal’s account. In his model of the “expanding circle of human morality,” de Waal illustrates that altruism “thins” as

familiarity between humans decreases.⁵⁰⁹ In short, for de Waal, the depth of altruism is not dependent on the nature of human beings as much as the proximity of our relations.

Nonetheless, an inescapable irony weighs on de Waal's attempt to challenge Veneer Theory on the grounds of altruism. For hypocrisy is built into the anthropology of altruism as a moral construct. Auguste Comte introduced the term "altruism" in his *System of Positive Polity* (1851). Sketching his vision of moral anthropology in Volume 1, Comte hypothesizes ten "affective forces" within human beings. Linking seven of the forces to egoism, Comte describes human personality as essentially selfish. Yet three forces of "altruism" persist that encourage the individual towards sociality. In order to turn the odds in altruism's favor, Comte argues that humans must use science to discipline the power of egoism and create rational mechanisms for altruistic expression.⁵¹⁰

In sum, altruism *is* Veneer Theory. At the very least, the notion of altruism is born from an anthropological tension between selfish behavior as an expectation and ethical behavior as a surprise. This helps explain why altruism frequently connotes a "cost" to the agent.⁵¹¹ Any integration of altruism into moral anthropology, therefore, effectively grafts this sentiment of "cost" or at least "surprise" into our experience of ethical action. Should helping feel like bewilderment? Returning to de Waal's theory, here, recall that he attempts to reclaim altruism as a phenomenon of proximity. More intimate relations between persons anticipate altruism. But is this proximal altruism not more plainly responsible helping? Isn't de Waal's altruism simply responsibility? When family, friends, and community members respond helpfully with one another, are they not moving within the natural curvature of ethical gravity? In this case,

de Waal's attempt to salvage one moral term appears to displace another. Granted, what was once considered responsibility may now feel like altruism to empathic, estranged beings.

Throughout this study, we have evolved *homo dialogicus* in various ways, but each change has aimed to enrich our dialogical capacities in the facelessness of estrangement. If human life continues its momentum into estrangement, however, the choice to emphasize dialogical ethics may feel—like our very experiences of responsibility—increasingly unclear. Could estrangement then—or at least an image of the independent self—not begin to appear progressively more intriguing as an ethical ideal? As discussed in Chapter 4, Iris Marion Young's vision of "city life" as an erotic "being together with strangers" represents one possible such shift, at least at the level of society. At the same time, Young's account does not take us inside the moral experience of the individual attempting to navigate estrangement. "City life" portrays the organization of strangers as virtuous without venerating personal estrangement as such.

To be sure, it seems unlikely that any ethical image would esteem personal estrangement in these exact terms. "Estrangement," after all, connotes a nastier moral condition than "being together with strangers." In modern life, encounters with strangers increasingly populate each person's social horizon. Even so, it seems rather extreme to endorse a society in which alienation as a normative experience morally satisfies individuals. The more likely sanction is of a type of moral self-worth that safeguards the individual through alienation but does not preclude social bonds—and certainly does not stamp estrangement as preferable.

In fact, Donna Hicks' anthropology of *dignity* promotes individual morality along these lines. Hicks borrows from William James, Kant, and evolutionary psychology to create a fascinating picture of a person's internal moral life. Beginning with James' division of the self

into the “I” and the “Me,”⁵¹² Hicks roughly grafts a Kantian notion of dignity as the “inherent value and worth” of each person⁵¹³ onto the “I;” she then posits the “Me” as the psychological residue of our species’ primal sociality, specifically, “the need to be accepted by others” rooted in *homo sapiens*’ group-based history.⁵¹⁴ Assimilating de Waal, Hicks argues that the Me’s desire to form reliable social bonds is biologically hardwired: the Me wants to *feel* socially connected “because connection helps us *feel* safe rather than vulnerable.”⁵¹⁵ The I does not share the Me’s longing for social assurance. Rather,

[t]he I knows that its significance and worth are not negotiable. It doesn’t need validation from outside sources...[I]t’s dignity is unconditional...

The I...does not need acknowledgment of its right to hold itself in esteem.

The I just is...

The I keeps us steady when our Me is threatened or hurt. It is the part of us that we can always retreat to when our dignity has been violated. It stops our Me from wanting to get even with the person who offends us. *The I is stronger than the Me.*⁵¹⁶

At first glance, the tension between the I and the Me appears to reduce to a conflict between the individual self and the social self. But Hicks colors the dynamic with a bit more complexity. For the I is also social in an epistemic sense: it *knows* “that being connected to others is our natural state.”⁵¹⁷ Thus assured, the I does not lose poise when particular relationships sour. Instead, the I emphasizes its “power to maintain...dignity no matter how badly someone treats us.” The I “knows, or can learn, that we do not want to let the bad behavior of others determine how we act, and it knows that by extending dignity to others, we strengthen our own.”⁵¹⁸ In contrast, whereas the I *knows* that human connectivity persists despite harmful acts or alienating conditions, the Me reacts according to how the individual

emotionally reads the current social situation. When the Me *feels* estranged or offended, it directs the individual to respond with distrust or revenge.⁵¹⁹ The more precise tension, therefore, is between what the I knows internally and what the Me feels externally.

In Hicks' "dignity model," responsibility falls to the I to epistemically bridle the emotional volatility of the Me.⁵²⁰ In part, this type of moral anthropology echoes Veneer Theory by interpreting instinctual responses as wild things whose reactions with the world need taming. In actuality, the dignity model's suspicions draw it much nearer to estrangement. For, according to Hicks, the I need not monitor all emotions with equal wariness. Rather, the I should focus its skepticism upon particular reactions that Hicks imputes to "our evolved biology," "a great deal of [which] does not work well for us now."⁵²¹

Hicks structures these anachronistic emotions into two categories: self-preservation instincts and self-extension instincts. Self-preservation instincts, a.k.a. "fight-or-flight" drives, "prime us to alienate ourselves from those who harm us."⁵²² These self-protective impulses evolved in conditions of scarcity, in which survival itself regularly hinged upon efficient response to external threats. Consequently, when self-preservation instincts attempt to assess the "complex, interdependent world we currently live in," they often overestimate the implications of routine offenses and transgressions, leading to emotional responses vastly disproportionate to the actual stakes.⁵²³

Self-extension instincts, on the other hand, "prompt us to reach out to others and find security and comfort in friendly relationships with them."⁵²⁴ Although seemingly benign, these "tend-and-befriend" impulses exhibit a dual character in modern life. Insofar as they compel persons to "restor[e] our capacity for connection," Hicks affirms self-extension instincts as

constructive.⁵²⁵ At the same time, the very language of “restoring capacity” indicates that modern persons, on the whole, lack the relational skills to constructively channel these drives. Lamentably, the complex, interdependent world is not socially whole. In its fissures writhes an anti-world of alienation.⁵²⁶ Within the alienated self, fettered prosocial drives stoke the Me’s insecurities, spurring unnerving reactions to experiences such as shame. Thus, although self-extension instincts can guide moral improvement, in current conditions they pose reactionary hazards similar to those of “fight-or-flight.” Hicks, therefore, tasks the I with regulating emotions of both preservation and extension.

Hicks’ choice to empower the I over the Me results in a certain kind of dignity: self-worth founded solely upon self-assuredness. The acceptance of this concept as a moral model, in turn, results in certain ethical experiences and prescriptions. For instance, the dignity model prioritizes a certain form of moral conversation: namely, an internal dialogue in which one part of the self responds to another part of the self. Until now, our study has assumed that human beings conceptualize ethical action primarily as an internal-external dynamic in the manner of *I→It*, *I→Thou*, *we*, etc. The dignity model checks this assumption by grounding morality in a person’s inner sociality. This orientation does not preclude human↔human ethics, but it does make them derivative. Consider Hicks’ prescription for **intimacy**: “If you want to create intimacy with another, speak the truth about yourself, about what is happening in your inner world, and invite the other person to do the same.”⁵²⁷ Hicks very construction of the self’s inner life, however, makes this advice potentially awkward. Does Hicks, for instance, expect friendships to birth from each person’s narration of her own I vs. Me battles, or, even more curiously, from each person’s alternating proclamations of her dignity? Perhaps not so directly,

but in a sense, yes. Again, consider Hicks' prescriptions for **inclusion, safety, and independence**, three of her "ten essential elements of dignity:"

INCLUSION: Make others *feel* that they belong, whatever the relationship—whether they are in your family, community, organization, or nation.

SAFETY: Put people at ease at two levels: physically, so they *feel* safe from bodily harm, and psychologically, so they *feel* safe from being humiliated. Help them *feel* free to speak without fear of retribution.

INDEPENDENCE: Encourage people to act on their own behalf so they *feel* in control of their lives and *experience a sense of hope and possibility*.⁵²⁸

In the dignity model, healthy relationships develop as persons attend to one another's inner lives. More precisely, relationships *feel* healthy when each person's "I" massages the other's "Me." As the aforementioned elements of dignity make plain, one person dignifies another by putting the latter's emotional worries "at ease." Of course, these anxieties arise from the Me. Due to its social confusion, the Me does not *feel* as if it belongs, as if it is safe, or as if it is in control of its life. The Me feels alienated and inadequate. How might the Me be assuaged? One recourse is for the self's other part, the I, to assert its epistemic authority and declare exterior sources as *false*: "*Beware of the desire for external recognition in the form of approval and praise. If we depend on others alone for validation of our worth, we are seeking false dignity. Authentic dignity resides within us.*"⁵²⁹ Fetching the I upon the Me in such a severe fashion seems a last psychological bastion, however, as it risks souring the self's desire to trust others.⁵³⁰

Fortunately, the essential elements of dignity propose a more affable version of the method: In social situations, the I applies its skill at surety to the other's Me, assuaging the

other preemptively. The I tells the other's Me that it belongs. The I assures the other's Me that humiliation cannot reach their shared space. The I encourages the other's Me to act as the author of its destiny. Through mediating sentiments such as these, persons interact with one another by intervening into each other's internal conversations. Hicks' advice to "speak the truth...about what is happening in your inner world" now gains clarity. For, by disclosing its social fears, the Me empowers another's I to skillfully allay them. This is an expression of trust, despite its self-reflexivity. And, if both I's enter successfully into assuring relations with their external Me counterparts, then the ensuing dynamic does feel like a kind of intimacy—frenetic and demanding, but also responsive and close. An intimacy of Me's and I's.

The dignity model links human beings by appealing to each other's social insecurities. The benefit of dignity's calming intervention is an immediate decrease in social stress. This is by no means a small benefit. Nonetheless, in its particular subjection of the Me to the I, the dignity model exacts at least an equal cost. One notable price is that risk of offense supplants hope for solidarity as the moral driver for human sociality. Even this tradeoff may prove too steep for us to accept the dignity model's terms. For, when emotional assuagement of the Me becomes human responsiveness' first task, then a method meant to placate immediate needs ends up elevating neediness in general. Accustomed to having their Me's stroked, individuals become wrapped in a cloud of emotional entitlement. So coddled, each Me's natural yearning for intimacy risks becoming lost in the fog, so to speak, and therein morphing into an ambition for social assurance. The Me's eye turns in on itself. After this inversion, already insecure persons may become touchier and more easily offended. The general level of relational static across

society may not, then, be allayed. Consequently, it is difficult to foresee the competency of dignity's interventions keeping pace with the accelerating fussiness of its social world.

The irony of the dignity model is that it enthrones the very insecure self that it sets out to govern. Ultimately, the Me—or at least a dissatisfied version of it—stands as the final arbiter of moral action. Yet the Me still feels estranged. In the end, the dignity model gives an account of personal estrangement that esteems the self despite its alienation. In doing so, the dignity model complements a public vision of “city life” at the level of individual moral experience. Moreover, the model reveals that estrangement itself, even if it remains undesirable, is already preoccupying other concepts in a covert expansion. In this way, the dignity model represents a potential example of what this project has called “exoskeletal morality.” At some point of human separation, a similar type of dignity may ask individuals to embrace estrangement openly.

These concerns over altruism and dignity may strike one as unusual. At any rate, neither altruism nor especially dignity have been routine targets of philosophies grounded in empathy. Even if this critique “surprises” however, it is by no means intended to have the last word on either moral concept (Indeed, guided by dialogical ethics, this study never presumes to have the last word). Instead, we are trying to open—perhaps even provoke—public conversation about our view of ourselves as ethical beings. In this context, I do believe it is worth thinking about the way seemingly positive moral concepts can be remade within estrangement into accusative or insular anthropologies. I previously stated that each moral anthropology is formed from a peculiar synthesis of dirt and bone—the combination of givens and creative

choices. The givens also may be opened by the agency of curiosity, of seeking. There are conversations we need to have, and choices to make. Estrangement will not make them easier.

Homo dialogicus

In Chapter 1, we recognized that a Nietzschean conflict resides in all symbols: they often distort our perceptions, and we cannot experience life without them. At their best, ethical images open portals to crucial realities and help guide our responsiveness within them. Yet, to open life in these ways, symbols oversimplify and filter out all manner of phenomenal life. Hence symbols are always at risk of lying, of closing life. But we cannot choose whether or not to experience life through images. We can only choose how to do so. Thus, from the beginning we have accepted both their functions and their risks and sought to take responsibility for their evolution.

Niebuhr's choice to model ethical action as responsible dialogue set the arc of our entire evolutionary project. In turn, we subjected each of Niebuhr's four elements of responsibility—response, interpretation, social solidarity, and accountability—to two primary adaptive contexts: contemporary scholarship and estrangement. In the cases of response and interpretation, research led us to modernize Niebuhr's conceptions in significant ways. In regard to accountability and social solidarity, Niebuhr's original formulations proved not only durable but instructive for our estranged conditions. Throughout, *homo dialogicus* has established itself as a generous "rough draft entrance into ethics," one that presses us to continued sketching. Let us recount *homo dialogicus'* evolution to this point:

RESPONSE

- i.1 Niebuhr originally conceives of *response* as not only paired with, but partly defined by, interpretation: **All life possesses the character of responsiveness, but moral *response* proceeds only from the complex processing plant of interpretation.**
- i.2 After unfastening it from interpretation, we redrew *response* in light of modern scholarship on epigenetics: **All life is by nature responsive, while the moral character of many social animals is founded in their epigenetic capacities, which assess an organism's early surroundings and develop its nervous system accordingly, so that the organism becomes responsive in ways that presume to benefit it within those settings. Thus, what each organism automatically perceives and responds to as helpful or harmful, good or bad, is influenced by the interactions of its genes with its early environments.**
- i.3 Next, we integrated the capacity of mirror neurons to construct intersubjective webs between persons, assisting in the experiential grounding of dialogue: **Life is responsive. The moral character of our responses can be traced to our epigenetic capacities, which assess our early surroundings and develop our nervous systems accordingly, so that we become responsive in ways that presume to benefit us within those settings. As the most imperative environmental resources for humans are other humans, our nervous system evolved specialized cells that automatically establish intersubjective dialogues between persons prior to spoken words. These networks help ground all social—and thereby all ethical—responses.**
- i.4 Finally, we reconceived of empathy itself. In doing so, we have perhaps offered a new understanding of *response* as what Paul Ricoeur described as “the primordial rootedness of Discourse in life:” **Life is responsive, and moral response is by nature dialogical. Our genes converse with our caregivers to form our neural dispositions, shaping our perceptions of what benefits us as**

well as our capacities to respond to helps and harms. Our social nervous system establishes a responsive dialogue within and between bodies. Through empathy, we disclose, perceive, and tune the states of our conditions through one another dialogically. At the horizon of each of these moral dialogues waits a type of synchrony, an experience in which responses merge to sharedness, a social place where we might better understand each other and achieve a sense of what is good.

INTERPRETATION

- ii.1 Our initial draft of Niebuhr's second element reflected his multi-layered expectations for ethical reflection: ***Interpretation* centers around a threefold cognitive function: (1) a willful attempt to safeguard reflection from emotional sway, (2) an awareness that perceives ultimate patterns through particular persons and events, and (3) an internal dialogue through which one interrogates the meaning of social actions through stable representations of society and being (i.e. *homo dialogicus* is originally a symbol of a single self that interprets on behalf of a social society, rather than a symbol of a society of mutually interpreting persons).**

- ii.2 We only slightly adjusted the first definition after analyzing Niebuhr's brief discussion of unconscious perceptions: ***Interpretation* centers around a threefold cognitive function: (1) a willful attempt to manage unconscious perceptions and safeguard reflection from emotional sway, (2) an awareness that perceives ultimate patterns through particular persons and events, and (3) an internal dialogue through which one interrogates the meaning of social actions through stable representations of society and being (i.e. *homo dialogicus* is originally a symbol of a single self that interprets on behalf of a social society, rather than a symbol of a society of mutually interpreting persons).**

- ii.3 Returning to our prereflective yet morally attune capacities for *response*, we concluded that Niebuhr's hyper-reflective view of *interpretation* no longer fit *homo dialogicus'* adapted sketch. So we turned to Hannah Arendt:
Interpretation is thinking what we are doing.
- ii.4 After a concentrated study of the neuroscience of consciousness, we blurred the boundaries between automaticity and control, challenged the hierarchy of self-awareness in relation to social awareness, and showed nonhumans to be capable of reflective judgment. This did not spur us to commend one form or capacity of moral thinking but to "settle into the manifold nature of awareness" in its responsive ethical movement: ***Interpretation is trusting our thinking as we chase helpful responses.*** Our ensuing study of emotions reaffirmed this trust, revealing that a special form of affective consciousness, seeking, motivates every moral quest.
- ii.5 Our inquiry then takes a normative turn. Examining the relationship between ethical judgment, proximity, and isolation, we argue for *interpretation* as an eminently social act: ***Interpretation is trusting our thinking as we chase helpful responses together.***

SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

- iii.3 Niebuhr's third element clarifies the stakes of dialogue in the relation between selves and society: ***Social solidarity is a moral cohesion that derives from a synergetic dialogue of selves within and with their society. At the level of society, solidarity depends upon discourses of action occurring within patterns of agents stable enough to render the dialogues coherent. At the level of selves, dialogue itself develops morally aware beings in solidarity with one another. Moreover, when these interpersonal relations exhibit some constancy across society, they nourish an ethos that enables socially meaningful moral points of view between selves to emerge.*** An examination of the theories of both Benhabib and Habermas confirm this direct relation

between dialogue and solidarity. Conversely, estrangement places us in hazardous monological conditions, opening horizons of powerlessness, violence, and exoskeletal moralities. The perils of estrangement lead us first not to adapt Niebuhr's conception but to seek its realization.

- iii.3 In Chapter 5, the developmental functions of joint attention and reciprocity, among other phenomena, help clarify both the methods and relational power of selves in dialogue: ***Social solidarity is a moral cohesion that derives from a synergetic dialogue of selves within and with their society. At the level of society, solidarity depends upon discourses of action occurring within patterns of agents stable enough to render the dialogues coherent. At the level of selves, reciprocity between individuals during dialogue initiates synchrony, a personal bond that anticipates developing into the moral foundation of trust. When trustworthy dialogical action exhibits some constancy across society, the practice nourishes an ethos that enables socially meaningful moral points of view between selves to emerge.***
- iii.3 Following an analysis of the ways estrangement triggers exoskeletal morality at the level of selves, we contemplate the rarely addressed, third-person plural perspective in ethics. We then claim it: ***Social solidarity is a moral cohesion that derives from a synergetic dialogue of selves within and with their society. At the level of society, solidarity depends upon discourses of action occurring within patterns of agents stable enough to render the dialogues coherent. At the level of selves, reciprocity between individuals during dialogue initiates synchrony, a personal bond that anticipates developing into the moral foundation of trust. When trustworthy dialogical action exhibits some constancy across society, the practice nourishes an ethos that enables socially meaningful moral points of view between selves to emerge. Finally, when selves speak the primary word we, these levels and perspectives of moral coherence are experienced as a unique form of being together.***

ACCOUNTABILITY

iv.1 Levinas helps us feel the gravity of responsibility as a rupture. Niebuhr helps us reframe the tearing away of the self by the other as the self's anticipation of the other. *Homo dialogicus* then finds itself within a more constant gravity:

Accountability anticipates social answers to our answers and seeks to respond with others, therefore, in a way that fits and continues the dialogical relation.

Oliver Wendall Holmes famously advocated for the "simplicity...on the other side of the complex."⁵³¹ He did so within the pages of a lifelong series of letters with a friend. Regarding the quote itself, Holmes no doubt undervalues many simplicities, and he probably overestimates complexity (He was a Supreme Court justice). But here we are on the other side of complexity, and there's no denying we want Holmes to be right. That cannot be assured. These simple clarities must suffice: Nothing more needs to be written. Everything is still waiting to be said.

Endnotes

¹ See Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 2006), pp. 33-37.

² Fischer, P. , Krueger, J., Greitemeyer, T., Vorgincic, C., Kastenmüller, A., Frey, D., Heene, M., Wicher, M., and Kainbacher, M. (2011). The Bystander-Effect: A Meta-Analytic Review on Bystander Intervention in Dangerous and Non-Dangerous Emergencies. *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 137, No. 4, 517-537.

³ Ibid., p. 534

⁴ Ibid., p. 533

⁵ Marsh, Jason and Keltner, Dacher, "We Are All Bystanders," *Greater Good Magazine: Science-Based Insights for a Meaningful Life*, The Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, 1 September 2006, http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/we_are_all_bystanders/.

⁶ Staub, E. (1970). A child in distress: The influence of age and number of witnesses on children's attempts to help. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 14, 130-140.

⁷ Fischer et al. (2011), The Bystander-Effect: A Meta-Analytic Review on Bystander Intervention in Dangerous and Non-Dangerous Emergencies, p. 518.

⁸ Charles Garfield's assessment, as cited in Marsh, Jason and Keltner, Dacher, "We Are All Bystanders," http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/we_are_all_bystanders/.

⁹ Beaman, A., Barnes, P.J., Klentz, B., & McQuirk, B. (1978). Increasing helping rates through information dissemination: Teaching pays. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

¹⁰ Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 10.

¹¹ Ball, Nan T. (2000). The Reemergence of Enlightenment Ideas in the 1994 French Bioethics Debates. *Duke Law Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 545-587.

¹² Mira Morgenstern, "Rousseau for the Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Family", in Ourida Mostefai ed., *Reading la Nouvelle Héloïse Today* (1993). p. 227, n. 120, as cited in Ball, Nan T. (2000), The Reemergence of Enlightenment Ideas in the 1994 French Bioethics Debates, p. 145.

¹³ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2003), p. 52.

¹⁴ By "shared needs," I include both "needs in common," such as oxygen for breathing, and "an individual need that is socially communicated," such as a child's request for a pencil to complete her school assignment. In perhaps all instances of the latter type, the socially communicated need enacts a more primordial "need in common," not least the need to trust other humans. Hence, differences between individual needs in a situation can still help actualize shared moral needs.

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1999), pp. 151-152.

¹⁶ See James M. Gustafson, "Introduction," in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 18.

¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, pp. 61-65. In Niebuhr's exact words, the "pattern of responsibility...may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action

and with his expectation of response to his response; and all this is in a continuing community of agents” (p. 65).

¹⁸ To call the method an “artistic evolution” fits both the activity itself and Niebuhr’s language, for he describes symbolic reasoning as “an art of knowing.” H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 161.

¹⁹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1990), p 237.

²⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, p. 56.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian U. Press, 1976), p. 59.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, “The Bible and the Imagination,” in *Figuring the Sacred* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), p. 146.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p. 50.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, p. 147.

²⁷ James Gustafson defines *paradigms* as “basic models of a vision of life and of the practice of life, from which follow certain consistent attitudes, outlooks (or “on-looks”), rules or norms of behavior, and specific actions.”

James Gustafson, *Moral Discernment in the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 48.

²⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, p. 50.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁰ See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, p. 69.

³¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 49.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 51-54.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-54 and 92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 137.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145. It is not clear why Niebuhr assumes a categorial separation between natural, societal, and biological spheres. One provocative hypothesis would be that Niebuhr’s theological universalism, in which God ultimately unites all fragmented aspects of life, tempts him to separate all phenomena in order that they might need unification. In other words, it might be worth considering whether a supposed divine solution begs a human problem, in this case.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Zollikon Seminars*, trans. Franz Mayer and Richard Askey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern U. Press, 2001), p. 134.

⁴⁰ François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 16.

⁴¹ See Martin Heidegger, *The Zollikon Seminars*, p. 187-188.

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- ⁴² See Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Humanism of Existentialism,” in *Essays in Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1995), p. 38, as cited in François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility*, p. 157.
- ⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne U. Press, 2000), p. 114.
- ⁴⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 48.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ⁴⁸ Iris Murdoch described a related manner of ethical image-development as a “continuous breeding of imagery in the consciousness which is, for better or worse, a function of moral change.” See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 329.
- ⁴⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, edited and translated by Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1989), p. 249.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252.
- ⁵² François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility*, p. 85.
- ⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, edited and translated by Sander L. Gilman, Carole Blair, and David J. Parent (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1989), pp. 249-250.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- ⁵⁷ Christof Becker et al. (2015), Thirst and the state-dependent representation of incentive stimulus value in human motive circuitry. *Social Cognitive Affective Neuroscience*, 10(12), pp. 1722-1729.
- ⁵⁸ See Plato, *The Phaedo*, 65a-67a, 72e-84b, and 95a-107a, and *The Republic*, books Six and Seven.
- ⁵⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, 514a-520a.
- ⁶⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Chapters on Socialism* (The Floating Press, 2009), ebook, p. 15.
- ⁶¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1971), p. 15.
- ⁶² See *ibid.*, pp. 136-142.
- ⁶³ Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p. 31.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 16-17. Lippman’s reference to the “coast of Bohemia” alludes to the geographic controversy provoked by *The Winter’s Tale*, in which Shakespeare includes a seacoast for an area of Europe—the contemporary Czech Republic—that is entirely landlocked.
- ⁶⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 67.
- ⁶⁶ Mitsuki Laycock (2018). “Nobody.” On *Be the Cowboy* (digital recording). Philadelphia, PA: Dead Oceans.
- ⁶⁷ To frame the issue more provocatively, we might suggest that gaining fleeting attention—especially in the form of affirmation—is becoming the assumed point of words in the era of social media. That is,

modern speech does not seek to gain attention in order to organize action as much it acts by accumulating attention.

⁶⁸ By “soul” I mean any experience of a relational spirit that seeks to connect the self with others or phenomena perceived as meaningful.

⁶⁹ Henderson, Tim. “More Americans living alone, census says,” *The Washington Post*, 28 September 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/more-americans-living-alone-census-says/2014/09/28/67e1d02e-473a-11e4-b72e-d60a9229cc10_story.html?utm_term=.7c8639c3e3c8.

⁷⁰ When I shared this story with a group of neighborhood parents, they uniformly admonished me to “never stop Mr. Lowe—call, but never stop!”

⁷¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 5.

⁷² Bruce Perry, *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential—and Endangered* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), p 230.

⁷³ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), p. 362.

⁷⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), p. 46.

⁷⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 61.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49. Niebuhr is well aware of, and in many ways echoes, Thomas Aquinas’ stance that “[t]hose actions...are properly called *human*, which proceed from a deliberate will.”

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁸⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 61.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125: “Whatever is, is good, affirmed by the power of being, supported by it, intended to be, good in relation to the ultimate center, no matter how unrighteous it is in relation to finite companions. And now all my relative evaluations will be subjected to the continuing and great correction...nor what is good for man (though that is also included) but what is good for being.”

⁸² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 58.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁸⁴ G.H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1932), p. 190.

⁸⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 77.

⁸⁶ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), p. 3.

⁸⁷ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, p. 79. On the one hand, this passage might raise parents’ eyebrows because Noddings appears to understand a mother’s caring response to her child as naturally emanating from a desirable feeling *prior to* a sense of obligation. On the other hand, it might (as we shall see later in this chapter) invite objections from contemporary researchers who perceive a continuum, rather than a gap, in moral agency between human and nonhuman animals.

⁸⁸ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, p. 80.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50. Italics added.

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- ⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 79-80.
- ⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 4-5.
- ⁹² Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, Inc., 1994), p. 51.
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. 51.
- ⁹⁴ Bruce Perry, *Born For Love*, p. 128.
- ⁹⁵ Eric Nelson, "The Neurobiological Basis of Empathy and Its Development in the Context of Our Evolutionary Heritage", in *Evolution, Early Experience, and Human Development* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2013), p. 185.
- ⁹⁶ Bruce Perry, *Born for Love*, pp. 120-127.
- ⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 211-216.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 151-152.
- ⁹⁹ Ibid., 130.
- ¹⁰⁰ Michael J. Meaney, "Epigenetics and the Environmental Regulation of the Genome and Its Function", in *Evolution, Early Experience, and Human Development* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2013), p. 103.
- ¹⁰¹ Bruce Perry, *Born to Love*, p. 131.
- ¹⁰² Jaak Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotion* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2012), p. 343.
- ¹⁰³ See Waggoner, M. R., & Uller, T. (2015). Epigenetic Determinism in Science and Society. *New genetics and society*, 34(2), 177–195. doi:10.1080/14636778.2015.1033052. Waggoner et al. note that epigenetic science has commonly been employed to ostensibly undo genetic determinism, even as it surreptitiously replaces it with determinism of a subtler sort.
- ¹⁰⁴ See Hensch, T. K., & Bilimoria, P. M. (2012). Re-opening Windows: Manipulating Critical Periods for Brain Development. *Cerebrum : the Dana forum on brain science*, 2012, 11.
- ¹⁰⁵ See Micah Allen and Gary Williams. "Consciousness, Plasticity, and Connectomics: The Role of Intersubjectivity in Human Cognition." *Frontiers in Psychology*. Feb, 2011; 2: 20. According to Allen and Williams, the reflective default mode network (DFM) helps coordinate activity between two prereflective social processing systems, the central-executive network (CEN) and the saliency network (SAL).
- ¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty focuses upon sound and sight, but a like connection between many different senses might be explored.
- ¹⁰⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 243-244.
- ¹⁰⁸ Marco Iacoboni, "Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2011), pp. 46-47.
- ¹⁰⁹ Iacoboni, "Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain," p. 47.
- ¹¹⁰ Calvo-Merino, B., Glaser, D.E., Grèzes, J., Passingham, R.E., and Haggard, P., Action Observation and Acquired Motor Skills: An fMRI Study with Expert Dancers, *Cerebral Cortex*, Volume 15, Issue 8, August 2005, Pages 1243–1249, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cercor/bhi007>.
- ¹¹¹ Valeria Gazzola et al. (2006). Empathy and the Somatotopic Auditory Mirror System in Humans. *Current Biology*, Vol. 16, No. 18, pp. 1824-1829.
- ¹¹² Iacoboni, "Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain," pp. 53-54.

¹¹³ This is very close to Iacoboni's definition of empathy, although the slight differences in terminology can open important differences. Most basically, the vast majority of empathy definitions orient empathy as a subject-object relation so that empathy helps the subject understand the feelings *of others*. Although Iacoboni's conception of mirror neurons blurs the subject-object borders between persons, he does not alter the fundamental orientation of empathy. For reasons that will eventually become clear, I begin with a different preposition. Iacoboni, "Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain," p. 45.

¹¹⁴ Iacoboni, "Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain," pp. 50-51.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹¹⁸ H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 62.

¹¹⁹ Iacoboni, "Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain," p. 56.

¹²⁰ Stephanie Preston and Frans de Waal (2002). Empathy: Its Ultimate and Proximate Bases. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 1-72, p. 9.

¹²¹ Ernst Mayr (1961). Cause and Effect in Biology. *Science*, Vol. 134, No. 3489, pp. 1501-1506.

¹²² Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (New York: Cambridge U. Press 2000), pp. 30-31.

¹²³ Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 91.

¹²⁴ Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 2006), pp. 66, 67, and 209.

¹²⁵ George Ainslie and John Monterosso (2002). Hyperbolic Discounting Lets Empathy Be a Motivated Process. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 21-22.

¹²⁶ This is not to infer that Niebuhr would agree with Preston and de Waal's claims regarding morality as a field that originates in unconscious processes and whose structures are shared across a number of species.

¹²⁷ Preston and de Waal (2002), p. 4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1970), pp. 54-55.

¹³² Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, p. 213.

¹³³ See Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, p. 11. Indeed, Turkle argues that "[f]ailure to pay attention to others weakens our ability to know or trust ourselves."

¹³⁴ Bekoff and Pierce, *Wild Justice*, p. 16.

¹³⁵ I agree with de Waal's stance that "the moral domain of action is Helping and (not) Hurting others", although I would expand the domain of the "two H's" considerably beyond de Waal's boundaries. For instance, de Waal believes that "[t]hose who invoke morality in reference to, say, same-sex marriage or the visibility of a naked breast on prime-time television are merely trying to couch social conventions in moral language." On my view, discussions of marriage are implicitly moral—and debates about public

expressions of nudity have the potential to be moral—because they address the quality of relationships between human beings. For me, any act that might help or harm relationships between living things falls within the moral domain. This is not to infer that every detail of human bodies or social contracts is unavoidably moral or immoral, but the realms of sexuality and promises are not ethically equivalent to one’s choice of where to place a spoon in relation to a fork. Yet, even social conventions regarding cutlery placement at a dinner table can become moral matters if they are used to impose unjust boundaries between persons.

See Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 2006), pp. 161-162.

¹³⁶ Jaak Panksepp uses the phrase “social joy” as a synonym for “play” and argues that play is one of the seven primary affective systems in the mammalian brain. See Panksepp, *Archaeology of Mind*, p. 2.

Bekoff and Pierce argue that “[p]lay has been overlooked by just about all scholars interested in the evolution of morality...Research on play behavior in social carnivores suggests that when animals play, they are fair to one another and only rarely breach the agreed upon rules of engagement—if I ask you to play, I mean it, and I don’t intend to dominate you, mate with you, or eat you. See Bekoff and Pierce, *Wild Justice*, p. xii.

¹³⁷ Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, p. 215. It should be noted that empathy does not tune all persons equally, and a “familiarity bias” tends to favor bonding with persons with whom we associate.

¹³⁸ Filippo Aureli and Colleen M. Schaffner (2002), Empathy as a Special Case of Emotional Mediation of Social Behavior. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 23-24.

¹³⁹ Jaak Panksepp, Nakia Gordon, and Jeff Burgdorf (2002), Empathy and the Action-Perception Resonances of Basic Social-Emotional Systems of the Brain. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 44-45.

¹⁴⁰ Panksepp, *Archaeology of Mind*, p. 36.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 211. In Aureli’s and Schaffner’s language, “emotion also offers an integrated summary of previous interactions.” See Aureli and Schaffner, “Empathy as a Special Case of Emotional Mediation of Social Behavior,” p. 24.

¹⁴³ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), p. 209.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-107.

¹⁴⁵ Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, p. 174.

¹⁴⁶ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, p. 8:

The notion of pure reason is pure fiction.

If morality is derived from abstract principles, why do judgments often come instantaneously?

...Clearly, we often make snap moral decisions that come from our “gut.” Our emotions decide, after which our reasoning power tries to catch up as spin doctor, concocting plausible justifications. With this dent in the primacy of human logic, pre-Kantian approaches to morality are making a comeback.”

See also, Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2013), p. 17: "I am a firm believer in David Hume's position that reason is the slave of the passions."

¹⁴⁷ Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2011), p. xii.

¹⁴⁸ Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, p. xiii.

¹⁴⁹ This anticipation is ironic, for Noddings is wary of the psychological injection of one self into another, a process she equates to empathy: "I do not project; I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other." Noddings, *Caring*, p. 30. Yet, as Michael Slote recognizes, Noddings' preference for "engrossment" over "projective empathy" is "out of touch with the...recent psychological literature on empathy," which finds cognitive empathic exchanges within the very emotional resonances Noddings commends. Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 12.

¹⁵⁰ See, for instance, Amy Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, p. 14: "The effort and regulation involved in other-oriented perspective-taking suggests that empathy is a motivated and controlled process, which is neither automatic nor involuntary and demands that the observer attend to relevant differences between self and other. This makes it a top-down process, that is, one that must be initiated by the agent and generated from within, though it is likely that bottom-up processes such as emotional contagion may interact with this process, providing influential feedback that alters it in important ways."

¹⁵¹ One might also call this spectrum: "embodied-to-abstract."

¹⁵² Coplan and Goldie, *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, p. xii.

¹⁵³ Amy Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects," pp. 13-14.

¹⁵⁴ Alvin Goldman, "Two Routes to Empathy: Insights from Cognitive Neuroscience", in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2011), p. 50.

¹⁵⁵ Or, to consider a slightly more awkward but related scenario, if two subjects simultaneously occupy the minds of one another, is the experience like being in a funhouse hall of infinitely empty mirrors?

¹⁵⁶ Preston and de Waal (2002), p. 4.

¹⁵⁷ In response to this subject-object dynamic, Cynthia Willett advises affective ethics away from "the mirror metaphor...of empathy" and towards "attunement and resonance metaphors." Willett argues that, in comparison with the mimicry of empathy, "affect attunement" helps ethics "break out of the Cartesianism that lingers in modernity's active subject/passive object and sameness/difference boundaries."

See Cynthia Willett, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 2014), p. 15.

¹⁵⁸ See Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, pp. 3-4 and 29-31. Hoffman defines "innocent bystanders" as people who "witness someone in pain, danger, or any other form of distress." According to Hoffman, "The moral issue in these situations is whether the bystander is motivated to help and if he is, the extent to which the motivation is self-serving or based on true concern for the victim" (29).

¹⁵⁹ I also contend that the titles of "bystander" and "victim" do not accurately capture (1) the broader history of action for these persons (in which the bystander may also be a type of victim relevant to the current situation), (2) the current pattern of action between them (in which, among other things, the victim may also be a relative type of bystander), or (3) the future of action between them.

¹⁶⁰ For a provocative comparison, see Susan Sontag's aesthetic study in *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

¹⁶¹ Hoffman speaks of “responsibility guilt,” although it is important to note that Hoffman refers to bystanders as “innocent observers” and tends to assume that morally misplaced “self-blame attribution transforms the observer’s empathic distress into a feeling of guilt.” See Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, pp. 12 and 102-107.

¹⁶² On my view, hope is founded in the sense of a relationship with agency—that is, a connection between two or more parties that gives the opportunity for action to have efficacy in bettering conditions for at least one of the parties. These parties need not be individual humans but can be institutions or nonhuman animals, for example.

¹⁶³ Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, pp. 30-35.

¹⁶⁴ I offer this definition to underscore empathy as a social phenomenon of emotional dialogue between multiple subjects, including complex groups. At the same time, the phrasing does not necessarily exclude concepts of empathy based in first-person singular, subject-object vantages. It simply places the first-person point-of-view in conversation with second- and third-person perceptions, as well as with first-person plural perspectives, which seems natural for any activity associated with intersubjectivity.

¹⁶⁵ Similarly, *through one another* implies a dialogue in which a group’s shared emotional state reveals a common need.

¹⁶⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1976), pp. 9-10.

In the first three paragraphs of this essential text, Smith provides accounts that seem to presage both projective empathy and mirror neurons. Smith describes a version of projective empathy in the second paragraph:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them (9).

Then he accounts for the function of mirror neurons in the following paragraph:

The mob, when they are gazing at a dancer on the slack rope, naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies, as they see him do, and as they feel that they themselves must do in is situation. Persons of delicate fibres and a weak constitution of body complain, that in looking on the sores and ulcers which are exposed by beggars in the streets, they are apt to feel an itching or uneasy sensation in the corresponding part of their own bodies (10).

¹⁶⁷ If we’ve gotten to the point where we need to simulate each other’s conditions in order to adequately care, then core moral structures would seem to be faltering.

¹⁶⁸ A considerable tradition associates empathy with understanding.

¹⁶⁹ In its common usage, the term “empathic accuracy” refers to the perceiver’s skill in correctly sensing the expresser’s state. In a dialogical model of empathy, however, the expresser’s capacity to accurately symbolize her state to others is equally vital, not least because we learn the meaning of emotional cues by corporately reading each other as dynamic texts. If expressers regularly fail to accurately symbolize their states, then the accuracy of the perceiver is rendered inert.

¹⁷⁰ “Affective attunement” and related phenomena are gaining traction in contemporary moral philosophy. Cynthia Willett’s *Interspecies Ethics*, for example, identifies “affect attunement” as “the primary bio-discourse of social creatures” (92). With regard to attunement in humans, Willett begins with Daniel Stern’s research on the affective back-and-forth between infants and caregivers (88-89). Willett then creatively expands attunement from this paradigm towards a “wave-and-particle model of ethics,” in which “social phenomena on occasion take the shape of bound and discrete moral subjects (particles),...[even while] particles also can function as ecstatic nodes within clouds of collective affect (waves)” (86-88). Willett recognizes these “clouds of collective affect waves” as synonymous with the phenomenon of “emotional contagion” described by de Waal and others (136). Nevertheless, most likely due to her concerns over the “mirror metaphor” of empathy in modern scholarship, Willett never goes so far as to call affect attunement “empathy” (15 and 27). Willett’s tacit distinction between affect attunement and empathy assists her in offering novel insights, not only with respect to affective solidarities between species, but also with regard to sensory adaptations between predators and prey (98). Despite the benefits of these distinctions, I view affect attunement and empathy as essentially identical phenomena. For, although I agree with Willett that “attunement” is preferable to “mirroring” as a single metaphor for affective responsiveness, it seems to me that the back-of-forth innovations of attunement always depend upon an initial “resonance” that amounts to mirroring, not unlike two instruments that must be tuned to a first note before building cooperatively yet uniquely upon it. In this way, both tuning and mirroring metaphors fit within the umbrella concept of empathy.

See Cynthia Willett, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia U. Press, 2014).

¹⁷¹ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁷² See Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, pp. 63 and 67.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57. Here de Waal cites the siamang research of Thomas Geissman.

¹⁷⁴ Frans de Waal, *The Bonobo and the Atheist*, p. 133.

¹⁷⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, pp. 170-171. Turkle’s sources:

Daniel Siegel, cited in Mark Matousek, “The Meeting Eyes of Love: How Empathy is Born in Us,” <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/ethical-wisdom/201104/the-meeting-eyes-love-how-empathy-is-born-in-us>.

Atsushi Senji cited in Kate Murphy, “Psst. Look Over Here,” *New York Times*, May 16, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/sunday-review/the-eyes-have-it.html>.

¹⁷⁶ Victoria Leong et al (2017). Speaker Gaze Increases Information Coupling Between Infant and Adult Brains. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)*, Vol. 114, No. 50, 13290-13295.

¹⁷⁷ Jing Jang et al (2012). Neural Synchronization Through Face-to-Face Communication. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, Vol. 32, No. 45, 16064-16069.

¹⁷⁸ Suzanne Dikker et al (2017). Brain-to-Brain Synchrony Tracks Real-World Dynamic Group Interactions in the Classroom. *Current Biology*, Vol. 27, 1375-1380.

¹⁷⁹ Greg J. Stephens et al (2010). Speaker-Listener Neural Coupling Underlies Successful Communication. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)*, Vol. 107, No. 32, 14425-14430.

¹⁸⁰ Sarah Konrath et al (2010). Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 180-198.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁸² Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, p. 45.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁸⁵ On my view, “projective empathy” is an experience initially made possible by the intertwining of capacities such as empathy, mirror neurons, and imagination in dialogue. Regrettably, the conceptualization of projective empathy has given it a certain cultural credibility, and the experience has been increasingly called upon as a resource to care for distant others outside the practice of dialogue. Projective empathy is now typically described as a monological rather than dialogical activity.

¹⁸⁶ Recall Iacoboni’s description of the synchrony of selves through mimicry:

When I smile, you smile back to me. The repeated co-occurrence of these two events may shape mirroring properties in both frontal (motor) and temporal (perceptual) units such that even when I smile all by myself for whatever reason, I evoke the sight of your smile through the firing of neurons in my medial temporal cortex. When the self acts, the self also perceives the other. Self and other become two sides of the same coin.

Iacoboni, “Within Each Other: Neural Mechanisms for Empathy in the Primate Brain,” p. 56.

¹⁸¹ James Tate, *Memoir of the Hawk* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), p. 146.

¹⁸⁸ Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (New York: Cambridge U. Press, 1979), p. 25.

¹⁸⁹ I agree with Margaret Walker that moral luck only becomes a problem if we instill “pure” control into agents. Conversely, our acceptance of “impure” agency allows us to assume the mantle of “responsibilities [that] outrun control.”

See Margaret Walker (1991), “Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency,” *Metaphilosophy*, 22: 14–27.

¹⁹⁰ H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 59.

¹⁹¹ This idea has become synonymous with Kantian moral anthropology, as Kant developed an image of a powerful moral subject who, imbued with transcendental freedom and a rational will, can author an act entirely from within the self (*causa sui*) and, therefore, be held fully accountable for the act’s outcomes.

For a phenomenological take on Kantian accountability, see François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility*, pp. 58-79.

¹⁹² H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, pp. 61 and 170.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Prima Secundae, Q.I., as quoted in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 49.

¹⁹⁵ Within Aquinas' quote, especially, we find the strange relation between theology and a human impulse to explain ourselves as elevated above nonhuman animals in definable ways. Perhaps the most obvious such explanation within Aquinas' tradition is that human beings are imbued by God with God's very likeness; related theological explanations—most of which are locatable within the first few chapters of Genesis—include claims that humans contain divine capacities of self-awareness, reason, and morality. Of course, Genesis also casts human beings as originally tasked by God to rule over all nonhuman creatures and, in no small sense, the natural world itself. There is a strange relation, therefore, within the source narratives of Judeo-Christian history between human self-consciousness, control, and ethics, and this strange relation seems to have exerted a sense of itself through western moral philosophies to this day.

In a related explanation in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant identifies the rational will as the dividing line between "persons" and "things:"

Beings whose existence does not depend on our will but on nature, if they are not rational beings, have only relative worth as means, and are therefore called "things;" rational beings, on the other hand, are designated "persons " because their nature indicates that they are ends in themselves, i.e. things which may not be used merely as means. Such a being is thus an object of respect.

See Immanuel Kant, "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals," in Oliver Johnson and Andrews Reath (Eds.), *Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2012), p. 201.

¹⁹⁶ Niebuhr himself would no doubt interpret this tension between a concept and experience as fitting. For, in Niebuhr's words, "Actuality always extends beyond the patterns of ideas into which we want to force it."

See H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 67.

¹⁹⁷ H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 63.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172. Niebuhr explicitly connects universalism with his notions of interpretation and responsibility in this passage:

When birth and death and the things that happen in life between these terminal points are understood as outworkings of the world-reason, or of God, as the later Stoics said, then the wise man will do the fitting thing, the act that is in accord with the working of the universal reason. Stoic action is action in the universe; it is not dominated by the concerns of a single, individual life, nor yet by those of some special group. The Stoic is a citizen of the cosmos to whom nothing is foreign that is not foreign to the central, all-pervading power; he looks to every event as expressive in some fashion of universal plan and pattern; he interprets it in that way and so tries to respond fittingly. When early Christians, seeking to develop a social ethics in the Roman world, adopted much Stoic thought, and even classified Seneca with the fathers as St. Seneca, they showed a sound instinct for the affinity of one universal ethos with another.

...There is an egoistic style of life, even one which calls itself Christian, but has nothing in common with what we see in Jesus Christ, since it seeks only its own happiness and interprets whatever happens to it as action of a God whose only concern is just with this lonely self, a God who is the counterpart of individuality...Such ethics indeed has little in common with Stoic or Spinozistic universalism. It has much in common with every kind of closed-society ethics. But the ethics of Jesus Christ, as the way of life of one who responds to the action of the universal God in all action, in whatever happens, is an ethics of universal responsibility and not wholly alien to all those styles

of life that men have developed when they lifted up their eyes beyond the particularities of their situation and looked for the universal good beyond all special goods, the universal law beyond all local law, the universal action beyond all particular action.

¹⁹⁹ H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, pp. 47-54 and p. 160.

²⁰⁰ Scholarly writing is construction; writing evinces thought via a crafted product not unlike the way a symphony or a building evinces thought. Because many of the movements of embodied thinking are not transferable to two dimensions, a written document captures thinking about as well as notes on a page capture music. Prereflective phenomena such as emotions, the monitoring of one's external environment during daydreaming, and task-based consciousness, for example, are narrowed to pale, disaggregated outlines of themselves within written language. The dynamic fusions and randomness of consciousness evaporate. At the same time, reflection takes on superhuman qualities through writing's labored organization of ideas: the stringing together of compound sentences, topics and headings, theses and supporting details, citations and footnotes. Writing structures elements of thought marvelously, but thinking itself is infinitely more dynamic. Living thought is the ocean moving in a wave—compressed, transverse, and orbital motions all at once, a general, forward vector in time through infinite movements in all directions, and all its creatures with it. Perception cannot grasp or funnel the whole of it. Writing is loosely akin to a meticulously engineered aquarium inside a hydrogen-oxygen propulsion submarine.

Writing structures ideas marvelously, while reading gives the impression that thinking is marvelously structured. Experiences of brilliantly reasoned texts may help explain why some persons uphold rationality as our species' defining moral quality. When one reads a text, human relationality presupposes an authorial personality beneath the words. The precise, edited vernacular of the text, when read with the fluency of natural speech, suggests that the personality is "thinking" about a subject in a dynamic way. Micah Allen and Gary Williams, in fact, argue that the experience of rationalized language gives several false impressions of consciousness:

[W]e delude ourselves into thinking that we have a rich picture "inside" our heads when perceiving the world. We suggest that this is a side-effect of language turning experience itself into an object of understanding, amenable to folk psychological metaphors steeped with dualistic presuppositions about the continual presence of consciousness for the control of "rational" thought and action. Reflective consciousness seems to pervade our experience because our mental metaphors are structured by the concept of rational access and control, i.e., the "I." Indeed, our entire autobiographical language is centered around a culture in which the ineffable "self" is both container and director of our experiences.

Despite its brilliant architecture of ideas, writing is extracted from the sensuality and sociality that gives true thinking its incomparable sense and flow. Yet, through the experience of reading structured ideas as in-the-moment speech, the invented personality behind writing now seems defined by a profound and purposed rationality. A hermeneutic confusion suggests both rationality and personality are present in the constructed text, which is now only a gentle slip away from another delusion: writing is thinking.

See Micah Allen and Gary Williams. "Consciousness, Plasticity, and Connectomics: The Role of Intersubjectivity in Human Cognition." *Frontiers in Psychology*. Feb, 2011; 2: 20.

²⁰¹ Intentionally slacking on the biscuits, however, may be morally hazardous. Aim for flakiness, butteriness, and good jelly. This is a matter of caring.

²⁰² Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, p. 79.

²⁰³ Bargh, John; Kay L. Schwader; Sarah E. Hailey; Rebecca L. Dyer; Erica J. Boothby (2012). Automaticity in Social-Cognitive Processes. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*. 16 (12):593-605.

²⁰⁴ Lamm, C, Batson, CD, and Decety, J (2007). The Neural Substrate of Human Empathy: Effects of Perspective-Taking and Cognitive Appraisal. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*. Jan, 2007; 19(1): 42-58.

²⁰⁵ Endel Tulving, "Episodic Memory and Autonoesis: Uniquely Human?", in H. S. Terrace & J. Metcalfe (Eds.), *The Missing Link in Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 4-56.

²⁰⁶ Panksepp describes anoetic experience as "an unreflective, unthinking primary-process kind of consciousness that precedes our cognitive understanding of the world."

See Jaak Panksepp, *Archaeology of Mind*, p. 14.

²⁰⁷ Janet Metcalfe and Lisa Son, "Anoetic, Noetic, and Autonoetic Metacognition," in Michael J. Beran, Johannes Brandl, Joseph Perner, and Joëlle Proust (Eds.), *Foundations of Metacognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 289-301.

²⁰⁸ On my view, while Metcalfe and Son's winetasting example is helpful for considering moments of anoetic judgment, it is difficult to prove that moments of anoetic differentiation do not slip into moments of recollection, especially if the subject compares more than 2 samples in a sitting. Eventually the subject would need to summon experiences of short-term memories in order to accurately compare multiple samples.

²⁰⁹ Janet Metcalfe and Lisa Son, "Anoetic, Noetic, and Autonoetic Metacognition," p. 294.

²¹⁰ Nate Kornell, Lisa Son, and Herbert Terrace (2007). "Transfer of metacognitive skills and hint seeking in monkeys." *Psychological Science*, 18, 64-71.

²¹¹ Robert Hampton. "Rhesus Monkeys Know When They Remember." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS)*, April 24, 2001; 98(9): 5359-5362.

²¹² Endel Tulving, "Chronesthesia: Awareness of subjective time," in D. T. Stuss, & R. C. Knight (Eds.), *Principles of Frontal Lobe Functions* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 311-325.

²¹³ Damian Scarf et al. note that subsequent fMRI studies support Tulving's thesis that similar neural pathways are involved in the mental simulation of past and future events.

Scarf, D., Smith, C., and Stuart, M (2014). A spoonful of studies helps the comparison go down: a comparative analysis of Tulving's spoon test. *Frontiers in Psychology*. August 12, 2014: 893.

Schacter, Daniel et al (2012). The Future of Memory: Remembering, Imagining, and the Brain. *Neuron*. Nov 21, 2012; 76(4): 677-694

²¹⁴ Janet Metcalfe and Lisa Son, "Anoetic, Noetic, and Autonoetic Metacognition," p. 297.

²¹⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 219. MacIntyre later shifts towards a less narratively driven vision of moral life in *Dependent Rational Animals*.

²¹⁶ Thomas Hobbes, "Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society," in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, Ed. W. Molesworth (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966), vol. 2, p. 109.

²¹⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 156.

²¹⁸ Though moral visions may not be fundamental for ethics, they are phenomenally transformational for the subjects they bind in common. Moral visions dramatically shape, to borrow from Allen and Williams' analysis, the "what-it-is-like" of human ethical experience:

In contrast to higher-order theorists, we do not think higher-order representations are needed

to explain phenomenal consciousness (the “what-it-is-like” of an organism). Instead, we think all organisms have a “what-it-is-like” insofar as they are living, embodied beings. However, we do contend that higher-order representations change the what-it-is-like of human cognition to such an extent as to radically change the phenomenal qualities of experience, giving rise to new forms of narratological subjectivity.

See Micah Allen and Gary Williams. “Consciousness, Plasticity, and Connectomics: The Role of Intersubjectivity in Human Cognition.” *Frontiers in Psychology*. Feb, 2011; 2: 20.

²¹⁹ Damian Scarf, Christopher Smith, and Michael Stuart, “A spoonful of studies helps the comparison go down: a comparative analysis of Tulving’s spoon test.” *Frontiers in Psychology*. August 12, 2014: 893.

²²⁰ Janet Metcalfe and Lisa Son, “Anoetic, Noetic, and Auto-noetic Metacognition,” p. 297.

²²¹ Frans de Waal’s “Three Levels of Morality,” for instance, identifies “Judgment and Reasoning” as a class of moral thinking that ultimately distinguishes humans from nonhuman primates.

See Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, p. 168.

²²² Micah Allen and Gary Williams. “Consciousness, Plasticity, and Connectomics: The Role of Intersubjectivity in Human Cognition.” *Frontiers in Psychology*. Feb, 2011; 2: 20.

²²³ Panksepp identifies brain networks corresponding to at least seven forms of affective consciousness: CARE, LUST, PLAY, SEEKING, RAGE, FEAR, and PANIC/GRIEF.

See Jaak Panksepp, *Archaeology of Mind*, pp. 34-38.

²²⁴ Panksepp argues that affective consciousness is anoetic consciousness and, further, that the “SEEKING system” “holds a special place among emotional systems, because to some extent it plays a dynamic supporting role for all the other emotions.”

See *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15 and p. 34.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-100.

²²⁶ Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, pp. 178-179.

²²⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 369.

²²⁸ H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 67.

²²⁹ Micah Allen and Gary Williams. “Consciousness, Plasticity, and Connectomics: The Role of Intersubjectivity in Human Cognition.” *Frontiers in Psychology*. Feb, 2011; 2: 20, p. 7.

²³⁰ According to Allen and Williams, the central-executive network (CEN) is comprised of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, frontal eye fields, dorsal medial-prefrontal cortex (MPFC), intraparietal sulcus, and superior parietal lobule, whereas The saliency network (SAL) is made up of the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, fronto-insular cortices, amygdala and ventral midbrain.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 13. Allen and Williams explain manifold consciousness this way:

It is not the case that in prereflective interaction I am no longer able to engage in detached, metarepresentational processing. Nor is it fully the case that in my detached navel-gazing I am shielded from the sensory–motor fluctuation of my body in its environment. Rather, in both cases there exists a fine tuned spatiotemporal distribution of processing and resource allocation between these functional domains.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

²³⁵ Kim et al (2017) showed that lower functional connectivity between the medial prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex in the DFM correlated with lower levels of subject empathy.

See Kim, SJ et al. "Altered Functional Connectivity of the Default Mode Network in Low-Empathy Subjects." *Yansei Medical Journal*. Sep, 2017; 58(5): 1061-1065.

²³⁶ Allen and Williams. "Consciousness, Plasticity, and Connectomics: The Role of Intersubjectivity in Human Cognition." p. 2.

²³⁷ John Protevi, *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 18.

²³⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 61. Indeed, one could argue that even eyelid blinks have ethical consequences, as the harm done should an eyelid not blink regularly (debilitating dryness to the cornea) or in response to interpreted harm (such as an accidental projectile in the eye's vicinity) could be as seriousness as blindness itself.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁴⁰ One might argue that "we agree to these oversimplifications" as a matter of efficient action, as basic heuristics and scripts allow us to behave fluidly in the social world. This is true, but we must discern the difference between an honest heuristic that opens the world of action and an oversimplified one that enters us into the world in an out-of-sync way.

²⁴¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a-246e.

²⁴² Brooks, Rodney (1991). Intelligence without representation. *Artificial Intelligence*. Jan, 1991; 47(1-3): 139-159.

²⁴³ There is a societal benefit, which I address later in the project, to public emotional prudence. On the whole, however, I contend that the harm of restricting emotions is not worth the burden of publicly interpreting and responding to them.

²⁴⁴ Peter Goldie, "Anti-Empathy," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2011), p. 312.

²⁴⁵ De Waal describes emotion and reason as cooperative in moral thinking:

[I]t is well known that, rather than being the antithesis of rationality, emotions aid human reasoning. People can reason and deliberate as much as they want, but, as neuroscientists have found, if there are no emotions attached to the various option in front of them, they will never reach a decision or conviction...This is critical for moral choice, because if anything morality involves strong convictions. These convictions don't—or rather can't—come about through a cool rationality: they require caring about others and powerful "gut feelings" about right and wrong.

Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, p. 18.

²⁴⁶ Leaf Van Boven and George Loewenstein. Social Projection of Transient Drive States. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Sep, 2003; 29(9): 1159-68.

²⁴⁷ Alvin Goldman, "Two Routes to Empathy: Insights from Cognitive Neuroscience," in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2011), p. 41.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41

²⁴⁹ See Judith Jarvis Thompson, "The Trolley Problem," in *The Realm of Rights* (Cambridge, MA: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1990), 176-203. To this day, one of the more bizarre scenarios in moral philosophy remains Thompson's deliberation over whether or not to push a "fat man" off a

footbridge with the intent of stopping a moving train from running over five people waiting naively down the track.

²⁵⁰ See Jaak Panksepp, *Archaeology of Mind*, p. 18.

²⁵¹ J.D. Trout, *The Empathy Gap* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2009), p. 34.

²⁵² Bruce Perry, *Born to Love*, p. 217.

²⁵³ J.D. Trout, *The Empathy Gap*, p. 38.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁵⁵ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, pp. 12-13.

²⁵⁶ On my view, evidence has yet to disprove Nietzsche's aphorism that "every great philosophy up till now has consisted of—namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography." To the extent that philosophers have loosened Nietzsche's argument, they have done so not by abandoning autobiography but by, as Niebuhr does in *The Responsible Self*, making its confession explicit rather than involuntary.

See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1907), p. 10.

²⁵⁷ In truth, this confession by Niebuhr presents no less than two ironies. The first, quite poetic paradox emerges from the search for what Niebuhr calls "the mode of his existence." For, to seek essentially human ways of being in the world is to, eventually, discover humans to be seekers. Thus, Niebuhr's quest to find his mode of existence is an exploration that at some point must lead back—in a manner befitting T.S. Eliot—to the origins of his search. Or, to quote Alasdair MacIntyre, we might say that Niebuhr's confession fittingly attests to the dictum that "the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man."

See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 218.

²⁵⁸ H.R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 42. Niebuhr obviously inherits the well-known phrasing of "seeking to understand" from another Christian philosopher, St. Anselm of Canterbury, who made "faith seeking understanding" (*fides quaerens intellectum*) a motto.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

²⁶⁰ Jaak Paaksepp, *Archaeology of Mind*, p. 106: "[T]he SEEKING system is also briefly aroused by all novel events, which means it is aroused for a short time by a large number of changes in the environment. When a stimulus ceases to be novel (when the animal becomes accustomed to it) the SEEKING system no longer responds. This phenomenon is known as "habituation."

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

²⁶⁴ Kevin Sullivan and Peter Holley, "Texans' do-it-ourselves rescue effort defines Hurricane Harvey," *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/texans-do-it-ourselves-rescue-effort-defines-hurricane-harvey/2017/09/02/f41bb8ee-8f2f-11e7-8df5-c2e5cf46c1e2_story.html?utm_term=.1f277b1d73e4 (accessed May 6, 2017).

²⁶⁵ Jaak Panksepp, *Archaeology of Mind*, pp. 103. Nevertheless, Panksepp is careful to note that the "SEEKING system...is much more than the creation of one energizing neurotransmitter."

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 34 and 119.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 99 and 106.

²⁶⁸ While depression can manifest during chronic dopamine deficiencies, Panksepp also details a number of complications that can take place when dopamine is regularly in excess, such as schizophrenia (p. 109), narcissism (p. 141), and repetitive behaviors (what Panksepp calls “adjunctive behaviors”, p. 111) that display characteristics of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

See *ibid.*, pp. 109-141.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 127-128.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 102-103.

²⁷¹ The etymology of “emotion” traces to the Middle French “*émotion*” circa the late 16th century. In this context, its original usage meant “a (social) moving, stirring, agitation.”

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/emotion> , cited May 13, 2018.

²⁷² Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*, p. 151:

There is another way to think about conversation, one that is less about information and more about creating a space to be explored. You are interested in hearing about how another person approaches things—his or her opinions and associations. In this kind of conversation—I think of it as “whole person conversation”—if things go quiet for a while you look deeper, you don’t look away or text another friend. You try to read your friends in a different way. Perhaps you look into their faces or attend to their body language. Or you allow for silence. Perhaps when we talk about conversations being “boring,” such a frequent complaint, we are saying how uncomfortable we are with stillness. And how hard we find it to “read” the face and voice, changes in body language, and changes in tone.

²⁷³ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard U. Press, 1999), pp. 118-183.

²⁷⁴ See Martin Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*, pp. 287-298.

²⁷⁵ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, pp. 46-47.

²⁷⁶ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. ?.

²⁷⁷ Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, p. 47.

²⁷⁸ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*, p. 155.

²⁷⁹ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*, p. 11.

²⁸⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 370.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 189.

²⁸² See Bruce Perry, *Born for Love*, p. 218. In the so-called “still-face paradigm” experiments designed by Ed Tronick, mothers were asked to deny their three-month-old infants any facial expression of emotion. Over the course of only a few minutes, babies exhibited frantic, even terrified motions and cries, entreating some human response from their mothers. After these attempts also failed, infants often withdrew and attempted to pacify themselves by sucking their own fingers or toes.

²⁸³ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*, p. 362.

²⁸⁴ Blass, Thomas (2002). The Man Who Shocked the World. *Psychology Today*. 35 (2), April, 2002: 68-74.

²⁸⁵ Langford, DJ et al. (2006). Social modulation of pain as evidence for empathy in mice. *Science*, 312:1967-1970.

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- ²⁸⁶ Rice, George E. and Gainer, Priscilla (1962). "Altruism" in the albino rat. *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology*, 55:123-125.
- ²⁸⁷ Blass, Thomas (1991). Understanding Behavior in the Milgram Obedience Experiment: The Role of Personality, Situations, and Their Interactions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1991; 60:398-413.
- ²⁸⁸ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good*, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), p. 65.
- ²⁸⁹ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 329.
- ²⁹⁰ See Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, p. 213: "Empathy needs both a filter that makes us select what we react to, and a turn-off switch. Like every emotional reaction, it has a "portal," a situation that typically triggers it or that we allow to trigger it."
- ²⁹¹ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A feminist approach to ethics and moral education*, pp. 79-81.
- ²⁹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 370.
- ²⁹³ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 207-208.
- ²⁹⁴ Paul MacLean (1985), Brain evolution relating to family, play and the separation call. *Archives of General Psychiatry*. 42:405– 417.
- ²⁹⁵ To be clear, Niebuhr himself does not explicitly label "three conditions of social solidarity." The use of the term, "implies," is accurate, however, as each of these conditions is evident in Niebuhr's extended development of his "theme" of social solidarity. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 65 and pp. 69-89.
- ²⁹⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 65.
- ²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- ²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- ³⁰¹ It is worth noting here that, for Niebuhr, responsibility is most easily described as an ethic of fitting action. See *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ³⁰² See *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 73, and 76.
- ³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- ³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71: "Responsibility prioritizes the fundamentally social character of selfhood. To be a self in the presence of other selves is not a derivative experience but primordial...many areas of modern man's thinking...have converged on the recognition that the self is fundamentally social, in this sense that it is a being which not only knows itself in relation to other selves but exists as self only in that relation."
- ³⁰⁵ See *Ibid.*, p. 78: "When in the experience of conscience I judge my action from the point of view of another, I do not abstract some vague general figure from all the particular individuals who together constitute my society, but I refer to the constancies in the responses of individuals—a constancy which is presented, if nowhere else, at least in the constant meanings of a common language. The social self is never a mere I-Thou self but an I-You self, responding to a Thou that is a member of an interacting community."
- ³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 72. G.H. Mead citation from *The Social Psychology of George Herbert Mead*, ed. A. Strauss (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), p. 217.
- ³⁰⁷ G.H. Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1932), p. 190, as cited in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 72.
- ³⁰⁸ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 78.
- ³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

³¹¹ Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas," in *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 113.

³¹² Ibid., p. 95.

³¹³ Ibid., p. 113.

³¹⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 102. Citation from Benjamin Barber, *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1988), p. 151.

³¹⁶ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 103-104.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

³¹⁸ See Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 104:

Participants [in a discourse] can distance themselves from norms and normative systems that have been set off from the totality of social life only to the extent necessary to assume a hypothetical attitude toward them. Individuals who have been socialized cannot take a hypothetical attitude toward the form of life and the personal life history that have shaped their own identity. We are now in a position to define the scope of application of a deontological ethics: it covers only practical questions that can be debated rationally, i.e. those that hold out the prospect of consensus. It deals not with the value preferences but with the normative validity of norms of action.

³¹⁹ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 103.

³²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 25.

³²¹ Ibid., pp. 135-137.

³²² Ibid., pp. 117-133.

³²³ Ibid., p. 67.

³²⁴ See Chapter 2, p. 43: "For dialogue is a process that evolved to forge understanding from social misapprehension. Dialogue, therefore, cannot begin by sanitizing misunderstanding *because it is born from it.*"

³²⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 67.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 123.

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 128.

³²⁸ Ibid., p. 123.

³²⁹ Ibid., pp. 135-136.

³³⁰ Ibid., p. 199.

³³¹ At one point, Habermas implies a more robust sociology, writing that "one has to take into account the fact that the normatively integrated fabric of social relations is moral *in and of itself*, as Durkheim has shown." However, Habermas directly follows this statement with the qualification that "[t]he basic moral phenomenon is the binding force of norms, which can be violated by acting subjects." Through this qualification, Habermas returns to his tendency to reduce society to its function for individuals—in this case, a series of covalent moral bonds between persons. See Ibid., p. 164.

³³² Ibid., p. 200.

³³³ Robert Sapolsky, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2004), p. 356.

³³⁴ Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz, *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential—and Endangered* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 248.

³³⁵ Michael Marmot, *The Status Syndrome: How Social Standing Affects Our Health and Longevity* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004), p. 39.

³³⁶ Ibid., pp. 122-128.

³³⁷ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U. Press, 1990), p. 234.

³³⁸ Ibid., p. 234.

³³⁹ Ibid. p. 237.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 228-229.

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 238.

³⁴² Ibid., pp. 237-238.

³⁴³ See Ibid., p. 106: "As I have argued, the theory of impartiality assumes a monologic moral reason, a single subject attempting to get out of its myopic point of view. If one assumes instead that moral reason is dialogic, the product of discussion among differently situated subjects all of whom desire recognition and acknowledgment from the others, then there is no need for a universal point of view to pull people out of egoism."

³⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 233.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 234.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 233.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 231-232.

³⁴⁸ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: U. of California Press), p. 65-66.

³⁴⁹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 232.

³⁵⁰ See Ibid., p. 241: "An ideal can inspire action for social change only if it arises from possibilities suggested by actual experience. The ideals of city life I have proposed are realized incidentally and intermittently in some cities today. There is no doubt, however, that many large cities in the United States today are sites of decay, poverty, and crime. There is just as little doubt that the smaller towns and suburbs to which many people escape from these ills are strung along congested highways, are homogeneous, segregated, and privatized. In either case, an ideal of city life as eroticized public vitality where differences are affirmed in openness might seem laughably utopian."

³⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 239-240.

³⁵² Granted, an increasing number of aspects of modern life seem designed to exploit anticipation. Addictive cell phone applications, online media methods, and even Netflix queues present themselves as amusement park callers, ceaselessly beckoning potential customers to their attractions. But few humans can stomach amusement parks for consecutive days, much less accept a carnival ride as a form of life.

³⁵³ Jaak Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 95.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁵⁵ Holt-Lundstadt, Julian et al (2015). Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Vol. 10, Issue 2, 2015, pp. 227-237.

³⁵⁶ Nemecek, Douglas et. Al (2018). Cigna U.S. Loneliness Index: Survey of 20,000 Americans Examining Behaviors Driving Loneliness in the United States, May 2018, <https://www.cigna.com/assets/docs/newsroom/loneliness-survey-2018-full-report.pdf>, p. 2.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

³⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt's critique of bureaucracy allows for this parallel between the powerlessness of loneliness and that of Whitehall to be drawn more closely:

In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one can argue, to whom one can present grievances, on whom the pressures of power can be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act.

Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 81.

³⁶¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 44.

³⁶² Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, p. 95.

³⁶³ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 56.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁶⁵ I do not expect this definition to cover all possible examples of actual violence or interpretations thereof. Rather, I propose this definition because I believe it gets at a core reason for violence's existence.

³⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 42.

³⁶⁷ "2017 Portland Train Attack." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, 10 December 2018. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Portland_train_attack.

³⁶⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, p. 53.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

³⁷⁰ Moreover, if loneliness continues to expand within America's youth, a provocative argument could be made that America is committing violence against its own citizenry, considering that violence constitutes an attack on social agency, and the systematic advancement of loneliness effectively mimics this harm. Still, it should not take a multiplex argument such as this for citizens to realize that widespread isolation is a threat to democracy.

³⁷¹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 229.

³⁷² See Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, pp. 44-45 and 63-64. Arendt defines *force* as "the energy released by physical or social movements," and it is in that sense that I am using the term here. Additionally, Arendt contends that

in private as well as public life there are situations in which the very swiftness of a violent act may be the only appropriate remedy. The point is not that this permits us to let off steam—which indeed can be equally done by pounding the table or slamming the door. The point is that under certain circumstances violence—acting without argument or speech and without counting the consequences—is the only way to set the scales of justice right again.

In cases in which persons employ violence with the clear intent to unjustly harm others, then it seems to me that Arendt is correct that return violence is justifiable, although this does not mean that the answering violence will prove effective, much less wise in the aftermath. And, remembering that justice and solidarity are linked, I disagree with Arendt that violence can ever "set the scales of justice right again." Because it harms human relationships, violence is always unjust. At most violence can prevent unjust scales from tilting further.

³⁷³ One of the curious dynamics of many mass shootings, for instance, is that a lonely individual attacks a social space in which people are usually happy or pursuing fulfillment. It may be worth considering whether such violence constitutes symbolic jealousy against humans who are simply happy together in ways that directly foment the perpetrator's sense of loss. If the violent individual is chronically lonely, then the general happiness of the gathering itself may be enough. Social joy, after all, is itself an experience of agency.

³⁷⁴ See Jim. R. Averill, "Ten Questions About Anger That You May Never Have Thought to Ask," In F. Pahlavan (Ed.), *Multiple Facets of Anger: Getting Mad or Restoring Justice?* (New York: Academic Press, 2010), pp. 1-25, as adapted in Jaak Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, pp. 145-146.

³⁷⁵ Jaak Panksepp, *The Archaeology of Mind*, pp. 172-173.

³⁷⁶ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, pp. 238-241.

³⁷⁷ See Michael Walzer, "The Divided Self", in *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 2006), ch. 5.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

³⁸¹ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁸² Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 198.

³⁸³ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

³⁸⁴ Brosnan, Sarah & de Waal, Frans. (2014). Evolution of responses to (un)fairness. *Science* (New York, N.Y.). 346. 1251776. 10.1126/science.1251776.

³⁸⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 132-133.

³⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 135. The original text includes numerous emphases: that

Individual *action plans* help put a theme in relief and determine the *current need for consensual understanding* that must be met through the activity of interpretation. In these terms the action situation is at the same time a speech situation in which the actors take turns playing the *communicative roles* of speaker, addressee, and bystander. To these roles correspond first- and second-person *participant perspectives* as well as the third-person *observer perspective* from which the I-thou relation is observed as an intersubjective complex and can thus be objectified. This system of *speaker perspectives* is intertwined with a system of *world perspectives*.

³⁸⁷ R.L. Selman, *The Growth of Interpersonal Understanding* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

³⁸⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 139.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 132-133.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

³⁹¹ Ibid., p. 140.

³⁹² Ibid., p. 198. The fact that Habermas's moral point of view dovetails with the theories of both Kohlberg and Mead makes sense considering Kohlberg's early reliance upon Mead's thought (see Ibid., p. 119).

³⁹³ Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 116.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 164-165. Benhabib proposes an "interactive universalism" through which moral selves "recognize the dignity of the generalized other through an acknowledgement of the moral identity of the concrete other." Thus, Benhabib's moral point of view is universalizable in its developmental processes, in its perception of the dignity of each person, and in its awareness that universal dignity depends upon the particularities of each concrete individual.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 140-141.

³⁹⁶ Rochat, Philippe (2018). The Ontogeny of Human Self-Consciousness. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27(5).

³⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

³⁹⁸ Philippe Rochat, "Self-Consciousness and the Origins of the Ethical Stance," in B.R. Kar (Ed.), *Cognition and Brain Development: Converging Evidence from Various Methodologies* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), p. 160.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

⁴⁰⁰ Rochat, Philippe (2018). The Ontogeny of Human Self-Consciousness, p. 3.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁴⁰² Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, pp. 136-137.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, p. 209.

⁴⁰⁴ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy*, pp. 13-14.

⁴⁰⁵ See Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz, *Born for Love*, especially chapters two, six, and ten.

⁴⁰⁶ On my view, it seems more thorough to reason that, since immature human beings are characterized by obvious dependencies upon specific, more mature others, and adulthood is characterized by more

complex systems of dependencies and interdependencies with a greater and less definable range of others, then maturation is a process of developing multiple faculties to help foster and influence those systems.

⁴⁰⁷ See Marc Bekoff and Jessica Pierce, *Wild Justice: The Moral Lives of Animals* (Chicago: The U. of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. xii-xiii, 53.

⁴⁰⁸ Despite the priority of joint attention, the solitary interpreter can become, during unfortunate times, morally necessary. Throughout history, harmful groups and societies have forced ethical individuals to take risky public stances against them. Nevertheless, the self who stands alone against society in an act of public conscience still does so at least partly as a public statement inviting social interpretation. An act of individual civil disobedience, for instance, attempts to coerce public moral reflection on a matter of justice. And yet, the self who appears to interpret alone during earnest times still relies upon particles of history, culture, and society, even if the subsequent interpretation is based only upon a narrow perspective of those social fragments. Of course, any public action that follows such interpretation is inherently desperate. At the same time, it must be said that immoral groups and societies are rarely resisted by truly isolated individuals. More likely, a minority resistance comprised of multiple members—their own activity enriched by joint attention to vital matters—challenges a rigid majority that has foreclosed agonistic dialogue.

⁴⁰⁹ “Time Flies: How U.S. Adults Now Spend Nearly Half a Day Interacting with Media,” The Nielsen Company (US), July 31, 2018, <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/news/2018/time-flies-us-adults-now-spend-nearly-half-a-day-interacting-with-media.html>. The Nielsen study includes radio listening time, which amounts to around 110 min/day for the average American. As radio does not officially amount to “screen time,” however, these 110 minutes were subtracted from the Nielsen data in order to produce the “9+” hours a day number cited in the current analysis.

⁴¹⁰ Tefft, B. C. (2018). American Driving Survey: 2015-2016. (Research Brief). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. https://aaafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/18-0019_AAAFTS-ADS-Research-Brief.pdf.

⁴¹¹ Madigan S, Browne D, Racine N, Mori C, Tough S. Association Between Screen Time and Children’s Performance on a Developmental Screening Test. *JAMA Pediatr.* 2019;173(3):244-250.

⁴¹² Uhls, Yalda T. et al (2014). Five days at outdoor education camp without screens improves preteen skills with nonverbal emotion cues. *Computers in Human Behavior.* 2014; Volume 39:387-392. The simultaneous decline of communication, motor, and problem-solving abilities is fascinating considering that the social evaluation of joint attention emerges with the onset of infant mobility.

⁴¹³ Consensus is a technical overlapping of interpretation. The achievement of consensus does not guarantee the unharfulness of that consensus much less its helpfulness. Even if consensus is achieved through dialogue in which the norms of dialogue were themselves consensually agreed upon and followed, the experience of consensus itself is not a moral destination, although the social event of consensus can serve as the end or beginning of a specific course of activity. Even if consensus were inherently moral, however, social agreement is too vulnerable to power dynamics to trust in consensus itself.

⁴¹⁴ All the same, consistently accurate interpretations certainly contribute to the development of trust.

⁴¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1963), p 97.

⁴¹⁶ Leclère C, Viaux S, Avril M, et al. Why synchrony matters during mother-child interactions: a systematic review. *PLoS One.* 2014;9(12):e113571. Published 2014 Dec 3. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0113571.

⁴¹⁷ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hypothesis?s=t>.

⁴¹⁸ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/hypothetical>.

⁴¹⁹ Avinash Chak, "Beyond 'he' and 'she': The rise of non-binary pronouns," *BBC News*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34901704>.

⁴²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 135.

⁴²¹ Philippe Rochat, "Self-Consciousness and the Origins of the Ethical Stance," in B.R. Kar (Ed.), *Cognition and Brain Development: Converging Evidence from Various Methodologies* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2013), p. 164.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴²³ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, p. 135.

⁴²⁴ To be sure, opinions, beliefs, and interpretations influence perceptions. Therefore, to the degree that the opinions, beliefs, and interpretations of selves are relevant to a situation, the disclosure of those positions assists each self in developing a *we* point of view. But the function of dialogically coordinated attention is not to change any particular belief as much as to empower social perception in order to enhance both the accuracy of human interpretation and the potential of human action.

⁴²⁵ I refer specifically, here, to Benhabib's critique of "substitutionalism" in the Kantian moral tradition. See Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self*, pp. 11, 18, 163, 164-165, 190, 227-228.

⁴²⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 3.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4, italics added.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴³¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 76.

⁴³² Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: U. of California Press, 2003), p. 73, with internal citation from Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 60, italics added.

⁴³³ Jill Robbins (Ed.), *Is It Righteousness to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford U. Press, 2001), p. 50. To be clear, Levinas himself does not equally distribute responsibility amongst a *we*. Rather, he places the lion's share of the burden for the other upon the self. Thus, as François Raffoul points out, the preposition that most fittingly represents Levinas's responsible self is not *I* but *me*, signifying the originary call of the other upon the self. It is this unavoidable, preexisting burden for others experienced by the self that resonates with our description of *we*.

See François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana U. Press, 2010), p. 164.

⁴³⁴ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. By Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne U. Press, 2000), pp. 135-139.

⁴³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 157.

⁴³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. By Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 370.

⁴³⁷ My understanding of this phenomenological "turn" is indebted to François Raffoul's work, *The Origins of Responsibility* (Indianapolis: Indiana U. Press, 2010).

⁴³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 96.

⁴³⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U. Press, 1996), p. 16.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 95.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁴⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne U. Press, 2000), p. 14.

⁴⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 100.

⁴⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 3:

To be or not to be is not the question where transcendence is concerned. The statement of being's *other*, of the otherwise than being, claims to state a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness—the very difference of the *beyond*, the difference of transcendence.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12: "The infinite then cannot be tracked down like game by a hunter."

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1. In fairness, Levinas would no doubt view this "hunt" passively, as if transcendence were a matter of the subject being hunted rather than hunting the infinite.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6. In his prior work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas frames this inversion of being in the language of a "Desire" for the face of the other:

Desire marks a sort of inversion with regard to the classical notion of substance. In it being becomes goodness: at the apogee of its being, expanded into happiness, in egoism, positing itself as *ego*, here it is, beating its own record, preoccupied with another being! This represents a fundamental inversion not of some one of the functions of being, a function turned from its goal, but an inversion of its very exercise of being, which suspends its spontaneous movement of existing and gives another direction to its unsurpassable apology.

See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. By Alphonso Lingis (Hingham, MA: Duquesne U. Press, 1979), p. 63.

⁴⁵¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 10.

⁴⁵² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 154.

⁴⁵³ On "the fat relentless ego" as the enemy of the moral life, see Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), p. 51. Murdoch describes escape from the ego as "salvation" throughout *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, beginning with the conclusion of her opening chapter. See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 24, 61, 80, 81, 308-347.

⁴⁵⁴ Levinas compares the transcendence of responsibility to Platonic goodness in a number of passages, for instance:

The beyond being, *being's other* or the *otherwise than being*, here situated in diachrony, here expressed as infinity, has been recognized as the Good by Plato. It matters little that Plato made of it an idea and a light source. The beyond being, showing itself in the said, always shows itself there enigmatically, is already betrayed.

See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 19.

⁴⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁴⁶⁰ Levinas defines the *said* as "irreducible to essence" but nevertheless belonging to the experiential domain of time (whereas *saying* belongs to the experience of the infinite). In Levinas's vernacular, the *said* is something of an "enigma," a "hesitation between knowing and responsibility." At the same time, *said* is clearly the form of written and spoken language. Levinas argues that, as the *said* attempts to transmute the *saying* into these terms, the *said's* very hesitation, the failure in the gap between

experience and articulation, reveals that which could not be assembled, the unsayable, the *saying*. See *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132-133.

⁴⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 78.

⁴⁶³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, pp. 85-86.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

⁴⁶⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 19.

⁴⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴⁶⁹ Emmanuel Levinas., *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 137-139.

⁴⁷⁰ Emmanuel Levinas., *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 97.

⁴⁷¹ François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility*, p. 184.

⁴⁷² Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond Being*, p. 15.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁷⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 90.

⁴⁷⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 205.

⁴⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, pp. 88-90.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

⁴⁷⁹ The connected abstraction of discourse from both action and dialogue corresponds to Hannah Arendt's argument that speech and action primordially relate. In light of Levinas's ethics, it is also worth mentioning that Arendt perceived a "revelatory character" not only in speech but in action independent of formal language.

See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 178.

⁴⁸⁰ Among numerous passages, Levinas describes ethics as dependent upon first-person, affective awareness in this excerpt from *Ethics and Infinity*, which explains the other's proximity as almost reliant upon the subject's experience of it.

Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another...the proximity of the Other is presented as the fact that the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him.

See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 96.

⁴⁸¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, pp. 89-90.

⁴⁸² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 157.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-134.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁴⁸⁷ The principle of proximity does not mean that the ethical subject cannot feel responsibility for a being on the other side of the Earth. It is likely that such an experience will be rooted in an awareness of extreme helpfulness, harmfulness, or most likely both, however. That is, the experience will feel like a disruption of regular moral gravity. Still, because of the modern reach of human agency, the self can be placed in a tenuous ethical proximity with distant others, though most likely only temporarily and mediated by the activities of multiple others.

⁴⁸⁸ As Bonhoeffer wrote, “Blessed is he who is alone in the strength of the fellowship and blessed is he who keeps the fellowship in the strength of aloneness.”

See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954), p. 89.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁹⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 64.

⁴⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴⁹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 88.

⁴⁹³ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 318.

⁴⁹⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, p. 51.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 49 and 160.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵⁰² Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, p. 39.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10, Figure 1.

⁵⁰⁵ De Waal credits Freud with the popularization of Veneer theory. See *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

⁵⁰⁶ Michael Ghiselin, *The Economy of Nature and the Evolution of Sex* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 1974), p. 247.

⁵⁰⁷ Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, pp. 178-179.

⁵⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164, Figure 9.

⁵¹⁰ Michel Bourdeau, "Auguste Comte", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Sec. 5.4, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/comte/>>.

⁵¹¹ De Waal writes that “the term ‘altruism’ is defined in biology as behavior costly to the performer and beneficial to the recipient regardless of intentions or motives.”

See Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, p. 178.

⁵¹² Donna Hicks, *Dignity: The Essential Role It Plays in Resolving Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale U. Press, 2011), p. 38.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, emphasis added.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41. Hicks labels this reining a “reconciling.”

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25-26.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., p. 93, emphasis added.

⁵³⁰ This sentence represents my interpretation. For her part, Hicks does not portray the I's discipline of the Me as either severe or souring of trust.

⁵³¹ Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. and Frederick Pollock, *Holmes-Pollock Letters: The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Sir Frederick Pollock, 1874-1932*, ed. by Mark DeWolfe Howe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1961), p. 109.

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