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**PART I**

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**CHAPTER 1**

**People and things**

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

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

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

### The person as a pattern of psychic activity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The nature of things

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

We shall view a thing as any bit of information that has a recognizable identity in consciousness, a pattern that has enough coherence, or internal order, to evoke a consistent image or label. Such a unit of information might be called a *sign*, to borrow a term from semiotic. In this perspective a symbol is only one kind of *sign* – a sign defined as the representation of some object (a quality, physical thing, or idea) to some other interpreting sign (for a discussion of the meaning of cherished household objects from a semiotic perspective see Rochberg-Halton, 1979b, Chapter 1). Viewed as signs, objects have the peculiar character of *objectivity*, that is, they tend to evoke similar responses from the same person over time and from different people. Relative to other signs such as emotions, or ideas, objects seem to possess a unique concreteness and permanence. Obviously, this characteristic of objects is grounded in their physical structure so that an artifact from an ancient people can still convey an image of the ideas of that culture even though there may be no record of how those people spoke or what they believed.

To restrict our perspective even further, we shall be concerned here mainly with objects that were shaped by human intentionality. Man-made things are twice as much dependent on intention for their existence: Like any other object, they can be interpreted through the psychic activity of the interpreter; unlike natural objects, they were originally given shape by the investment of psychic energy of their maker. The physical constitution of the sun or the rain is independent of human intentionality. They are objects in the sense that we attend to them as patterned, meaningful information. But a sculpture or an old shoe owe their very physical existence to the attention and intention of their maker.

Because of this double relation to consciousness, man-made objects have an extremely important role to play in human affairs. It is quite obvious that interaction with objects alters the pattern of life; for instance, that refrigerators have revolutionized shopping and eating habits, that automobiles created suburbs and increased geographical mobility, or that television is changing how family members relate to one another. It is also relatively easy to admit that the things people use, own, and surround themselves with might quite accurately reflect aspects of the owner's personality. Not surprisingly, the clothes one wears, the car one drives, and

the furnishing of one's home, all are expressions of one's self, even when they act as disguises rather than as reflections. But it is more difficult to admit that the things one uses are in fact part of one's self; not in any mystical or metaphorical sense but in cold, concrete actuality. My old living-room chair with its worn velvet fabric, musty smell, creaking springs, and warm support has often shaped signs in my awareness. These signs are part of what organizes my consciousness, and because my self is inseparable from the sign process that constitutes consciousness, that chair is as much a part of my self as anything can possibly be.

It is difficult to imagine a king without a throne, a judge without a bench, or a distinguished professor without a chair. In these examples the chair is an essential element of the role of a king, judge, or professor. In the rites of investiture the authority of these positions are given to all three through the symbols of chair and robes. In other words, the ideal of authority is invested in king, judge, and professor; that is, they are literally clothed with the vestments of the positions and can thus command the attention of their subjects through these objects. The original meaning of invest was "to clothe," in the sense of endowing with the qualities intended, but now, in modern utilitarian capitalism, the term means to put in money or time with the intent of getting a return for that investment. Thus the older meaning was perhaps closer to the sense of ultimately giving rather than to an expected getting, and it is this older sense that we mean when we use the term.

This crucial role of things has seldom been investigated even by philosophers; social scientists have by and large ignored it altogether. One thinker whose work contributes to this understanding is Hannah Arendt (1958). As a social philosopher who firmly believed that only through free political action can one fully become a person, she was not primarily interested in people's relation to objects. Yet the fourth chapter of her *Human Condition* is certainly one of the most trenchant analyses of the role of things in history.

Essentially, she distinguishes our environment into the "planet," which is shaped by natural forces, and the "world," which is built up by human effort. It is by the work of *homo faber*, intentionally creating objects through signs and through the effort of his hands, that the world exists. This distinction is the nature-culture dialectic made familiar by anthropologists. But

Arendt's analysis of what it meant for the development of humankind to be able to create one's world is in many ways unique. She says on the issue:

The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that . . . men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table. In other words, against the subjectivity of men stands the objectivity of the man-made world rather than the sublime indifference of an untouched nature . . . Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity. (Arendt, 1958, p.137)

This conclusion echoes Heidegger's more obscure dictum: "Men alone, as mortals, by dwelling attain to the world as world. Only what conjoins itself out of world becomes a thing" (Heidegger, 1971, p.182).

These arguments imply that men and women make order in their selves (i.e., "retrieve their identity") by first creating and then interacting with the material world. The nature of that transaction will determine, to a great extent, the kind of person that emerges. Thus the things that surround us are inseparable from who we are. The material objects we use are not just tools we can pick up and discard at our convenience; they constitute the framework of experience that gives order to our otherwise shapeless selves. Therefore the things we make and use have a tremendous impact on the future of humankind.

A good example of the confusion surrounding this simple point emerges in the context of the current debate surrounding the control of firearms. A slogan of the gun lobby is: "Guns don't kill people, people do." The neutrality of the object is assumed; people's intentions will be carried out independently of the things they use. Needless to say, our position implies the opposite conclusion. There are no "people" in the abstract, people are what they attend to, what they cherish and use. A person who has a gun in his or her house is by that fact different from the one who does not.

Because objects are so intimately related to the self, the same criteria of development can be applied to them as was earlier applied to personhood. Things contribute to the cultivation of the self when they help create order in consciousness at the levels of the person, community, and patterns of natural order. An object that, when attended to, inhibits the pursuit of goals at any of these levels is a hindrance to the development of the self. Thus the ma-

terial environment that surrounds us is rarely neutral; it either helps the forces of chaos that make life random and disorganized or it helps to give purpose and direction to one's life.

### The objects of the household

Of all the things that people use and surround themselves with, our study will concentrate primarily on those objects they keep in their homes. This limitation will exclude many things that are important in defining the self, such as tools of the trade, cars, and those things that people encounter and use in the public spaces of life. But one can argue that the home contains the most special objects: those that were selected by the person to attend to regularly or to have close at hand, that create permanence in the intimate life of a person, and therefore that are most involved in making up his or her identity. The objects of the household represent, at least potentially, the endogenous being of the owner. Although one has little control over the things encountered outside the home, household objects are chosen and could be freely discarded if they produced too much conflict within the self. Thus household objects constitute an ecology of signs that reflects as well as *shapes* the pattern of the owner's self. It might be noted in this context that the term "ecology" literally means the study of households.

Despite the importance of this ecology of signs, few social scientists have given it the attention it deserves. Those who have, were interested in them only as signs of the owner's relationship to others, as symbols of status within a social hierarchy. W. Lloyd Warner, for instance, in his classic study of Newburyport, Massachusetts, in discussing the eating utensils used by the upper-upper class inhabitants of "Yankee City", says:

They give objective expression to the inner feeling of the persons involved about themselves, help to reinforce the person's opinion about himself, and increase his sense of security. (Warner, 1953, p.120)

In general, sociologists imply that status symbols serve to maintain social order by supporting hierarchial differentiation among people. However, when such differentiation is not ratified by endogenous community acceptance but is based on a rigid distinction enforced by the social structure, status symbols might be seen

as contributing to entropy at the second level of analysis – community order – which we have discussed. Even art objects can perform this divisive function:

The presence and control of objects of art provide a permanent mirror of superiority into which the upper classes can look and always see what they believe to be their own excellence, thus reinforcing one of their principal claims to superiority, their belief in their own good taste. (Warner, 1963, p.235)

Art, expropriated by one group to bolster its control over the psychic activity of others, becomes a tool of oppression. Other sociologists have observed how people belonging to the same social class share the same pattern of objects in their living rooms (Laumann and House, 1970). Attitudes, behavior, and household objects form an ordered sign system that structures, and is structured by, the selves of those who derive their identities from the same social class. Similar studies, with similar results, had been conducted earlier by Chapin (1935), Davis (1955), and Junker (1954). These sociological studies all focus on those dimensions of the household ecology that are determined by social class status – past, present, or anticipated in the future. One's position in the social order is an integral part of who one is, thus the signs of status are important ingredients of the self. But they certainly do not exhaust all the meanings of objects for people.

Psychologists have been even less interested in studying household objects. With the exception of Furby's work, which emphasizes the ownership of objects as an expression of a person's ability to control the environment (Furby, 1978), and Mehrabian's study of the physiological arousal resulting from household objects and their use (Mehrabian, 1976), references to the phenomenon are incidental and fragmentary. Control and arousal are again important dimensions of the self. The first refers to the positive feedback a person receives from the environment; the second, to the activation level of attention and therefore to the extent of readiness to invest psychic energy. It is important to know how objects affect these dimensions, but to get a full understanding of person – object relations one cannot be limited to seeing people as mere neural robots. Other aspects of the transaction must be integrated into the picture.

In the following chapters we shall consider some of these other aspects. First, we shall explore further the theoretical links between people and things, drawing on a variety of social science

perspectives. Part II will present the empirical findings of our investigation; describing the household objects considered to be special by a sample of typical American families and the reasons they give for interacting with these objects. The relationship between these empirical patterns and the goals people in our culture cultivate to give meaning to their lives will be explored in Part III. Finally, in the concluding chapter, the viability of the goals themselves will be reviewed in terms of the survival of humanity.

# The meaning of things

Domestic symbols and the self

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