CHAPTER 2

What things are for

To say that meaning is a process of communication involving signs raises the question: What is meant by "signs"? Apparently, material artifacts are the most concrete things that surround us in our homes: We can point to them, look at them, touch them, sit on some of them, sometimes we even bump into them and thus are forceably reminded of their materiality. One might wonder if signs or symbols refer only to things such as crucifixes, trophies, diplomas, or wedding rings, whose main function – if they, indeed, have any – is to *represent* something like religion, achievements, or relationships. A wedding ring on someone's hand, for example, is a sign of attachment, just as a trophy tells of its winner's prowess and the family's pride in displaying it. But what about other types of objects that seem to have a more clear-cut function, such as television sets or furniture? Do these things also qualify as "signs"? From our perspective they can provide just as many meanings as a crucifix or trophy. Television sets certainly have a utilitarian significance, although a person could live without them. However, the utility of a television set derives from its status as a means for entertainment and information and from the fact that in our culture about one-quarter of a person's waking day is spent watching television. Thus television sets both represent one of the most important beliefs in American culture as to how people should spend their time (and money) and are signs of the way Americans invest a significant portion of their daily attention.

Even the use of things for utilitarian purposes operates within the symbolic province of culture. The most "utilitarian" objects in the home, such as running water, toilets, electric appliances, and

the like, were all introduced into general use no more than 150 years ago by advances in Western technology – all considered luxuries when introduced (Boorstin, 1973, pp. 346f). Thus it is extremely difficult to disentangle the use-related function from the symbolic meanings in even the most practical objects. Even purely functional things serve to socialize a person to a certain habit or way of life and are representative signs of that way of life.

When a thing "means something" to someone, it is interpreted in the context of past experiences, either consciously, or unconsciously in the form of habit. The emotion that things evoke is also an interpretation or inference, a sign or symbol of one's attitude. The development of symbols – or signs whose relation to an object is based on convention rather than on a qualitative or physical resemblance – in a cultural tradition meant that people could compare their actions with those of their ancestors to anticipate new experiences. Symbols became able to convey feelings and attitudes that had an objective existence outside immediate situations, and this development of self-consciousness is generally considered the greatest accomplishment of humankind. By freeing sensations from their immediate environment, one can deal with them in the abstract and thus, to some extent, can achieve greater self-control and greater control over the environment. Through symbols, experiences such as fear, love, or awe could now be communicated in words, pictures, or ritual acts.

As humanity began to develop this procedure of making certain things represent others, the symbols themselves were creating human beings who, in turn, could reflect on their surroundings and accordingly could change their own conduct to a degree not even remotely approximated in other species. The spatiotemporal environment itself became culturalized and revealed to people their own past – the accumulated experience and wisdom of their ancestors – as well as their present goals, thus enlarging their possibilities. This had the two-sided effect of increasing the range of both solutions and problems. When goals become shortsighted, people can actually create more problems than they can solve. The fact that objects can affect people in this way is a mixed blessing. Relations with material things have powerful consequences for human experience, and even for the survival of the species. Many of these consequences are of dubious value and some might be seen as

dangerous. However, before discussing the effects of material symbolization, we should look more closely at how this complex process works in the praxis of everyday life.

Symbols that mediate conflicts within the self

Depth psychology in this century has described in detail one of the important dimensions of symbolization. In Freud's understanding of the inner dynamics of the psyche, symbols play a central role. It had long been a truism that negative experiences are the result of a conflict between inner desire and outer actuality. Freud added a crucial insight to this simple view of the causes of unhappiness: The really traumatic conflict is not that between the self and its environment, but the one that arises *within* the self. This conflict is the outcome of incompatible desires ingrained in the makeup of the human body and the *internalized* restraints that are part and parcel of social living. Because these controls are accepted by the person, the conflict becomes an inner one, between the formless libidinal drives and the stern censor of the superego.

The tension between desire and restraints cannot be admitted into the beleaguered consciousness, lest the realization of one's basic impulses destroys the precarious balance of the psyche that is forced to adapt to a social environment. It is at this point that symbols become important in the Freudian schema. The repressed contents of the unconscious, unable to manifest themselves in their real shapes, surface into consciousness under various disguises. Sexual or aggressive desires, which in their original form would threaten sanity, emerge into awareness camouflaged as apparently neutral acts or objects. The most potent psychic energy is the most destructive, which must be tamed to become effective. The very fact that irrepressible drives are allowed to express themselves consciously, even though disguised beyond recognition, is supposed to relieve the inner tension between id and superego, thereby helping the integration of personality. This transformation of the inadmissible into the harmless is the essential symbolic process in Freudian thinking.

How certain objects get to be carriers of repressed desire is essentially a simple one. An object whose shape, function, or name

is similar to a bodily part or process that is the seat of a given desire will be unobtrusively substituted for the real thing in a person's preconscious. "Symbolic relation seems to be a relic or mark of former identity" (Freud, 1900, p. 387). After this sleight of hand is accomplished, one's dreams and fantasies can freely deal with the symbol without incurring the wrath of the internalized censor. This process of transformation has been made into a commonplace by Freud's early writings. For example, "All elongated objects, such as sticks, tree-trunks, and umbrellas (the opening of these last being comparable to an erection) may stand for the male organ" (Freud, 1900, p. 389).

Thus objects, through their ability to embody problematic needs, feelings, or ideas, have a rather important place in the Freudian view of human experience. Yet their role is certainly not essential. If there were no things to serve as symbols, the mind could presumably latch onto abstract shapes or invent some other way to disguise the repressed forces in its subconscious. There is nothing in the object itself that helps to restore order in the psyche, it is not *an* object in its concreteness that produces a symbolic transformation but *the* object as an abstraction. The real meaning of a possession, like that of a dream, does not lie in its *manifest* content but, rather, in its underlying *latent* content. For Freud things did not contribute one way or another to the wholeness of the person; only the *concept* of certain objects, when seized by the mind, would act as mediator between the warring factions of the psyche. Therefore in the Freudian scheme, things per se do not serve any transcending purpose; they do not help a person to change or to grow. What they do is to lend their semblance to the preconscious, which projects meanings into them to neutralize part of the repressed energy of the psyche.

Although Freud's insights have been developed and revised during the past half century, psychoanalysts have continued to view transactions with objects in essentially the same light. Winnicott, for instance, who was interested in children's attachment to blankets, stuffed toys, and the like, called these "transitional objects" and declared: "The transitional object stands for the breast, or the object of first relationship" (Winnicott, 1958, p. 236). Although such explanations are accurate as far as they go, they become reductionistic if they are not pursued further. An object that represents a past relationship does, in addition, have a

present meaning and a projected future meaning as well. It makes a difference whether the breast is represented by a thumb, a blanket, or a rabbit. To the extent that analysts were interested in the genesis of object relations rather than in their consequences, they have ignored a crucial dimension of psychic activity.

Carl Jung, the other great depth psychologist of this century, assigned a somewhat more active role to the symbols that appear in art, religion, dreams, or fantasies. Jung distinguished between a sign, which is a relatively known thing, and a symbol, whose meaning is relatively unknown (cf., Turner, 1967, p. 26).

> The symbol is not a sign that veils something everybody knows. Such is not its significance: on the contrary, it represents an attempt to elucidate, by means of analogy, something that still belongs entirely to the domain of the unknown or something that is yet to be. Imagination reveals to us, in the form of a more or less striking analogy, what is in the process of becoming. If we reduce this by analysis to something else universally known, we destroy the authentic value of the symbol; but to attribute hermeneutic significance to it conforms to its value and its meaning. (Jung, 1953, p. 299)

A symbol is charged with psychic energy and transformative power precisely because much of its meaning is unknown or unconscious. Jung believed that unconscious drives included not only needs for physiological satisfaction but also powerful desires for personal development and spiritual union with the social and physical environment. These strivings are expressed by the archetypal symbols of the collective unconscious, like the rising sun or the swelling sea.

An object like the *ting*, the four-legged bowl used as a cult utensil in connection with the *I Ching* divination rituals, becomes a projection for the universal aspiration toward achieving wholeness in existence (Jung, 1958, p. 234). The four legs of the bowl, like the four arms of the cross, or the axes of the *mandala*, stand for the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the resolution of the dualism of experience, the synthesis of dialectical forces. In Jung's view, even the figure of Christ is a symbol of the self (Jung, 1958, p. 36): part God, part man; part male, part female – a template representing the ultimate goal of the process of individuation. Despite the profound insights in Jung's analysis, there is a certain sense of claustrophobia derived from looking at symbolic processes from his – or for that matter, from Freud's – perspective. One gets the sense that the entire panoply of natural and cultural phenomena are nothing but projections of the inner travails of the psyche. They make the self a purely internal, subjective state of mind.

The main difference between Jung's view of symbols and that of Freud is that the psychic transformations produced by symbols are relatively more open-ended in the former. The psychic development that Jung saw as a human possibility, and that was given life by symbols whose structural form anticipates and spurs along the unfolding of the psyche, must be rediscovered by each person in a different way, depending on his or her location in cultural space and time. Although the steps of individual differentiation and spiritual union are essentially the same throughout history – hence the universal power of basic symbols – they have to be rediscovered independently by each person in his or her own existential configuration. Implicit in Jungian thought is the possibility of transcendence, of discovering new psychic skills and achieving higher forms of relatedness with the cosmos. Although Jung's pessimism about our particular historical period was hardly less unrelieved than Freud's, in principle his interpretation of human psychology admits more optimism. This optimism is based on the transformative potential of symbols, which are seen from his perspective as templates for development rather than as simply adjustment.

However, Jung shared with Freud an essentially abstract, conceptual view of the role of things in the symbolic transformations of the psyche. Like Freud, Jung was not interested in the actual experience that people may have had in their lives with concrete objects. He also focused only on the visual or functional properties of objects, on the Platonic idea of things, rather than on their impact in the transaction people have with them in an existential context.

Psychologists in general have followed the lead of Freud and Jung by ignoring the place of things in the daily commerce of existence. To examine more closely this aspect of how objects affect people, we turn now in a different direction.

Signs that express qualities of the self

In attempting to describe what being a part of an alien culture is, anthropologists have often found themselves in a position to use objects as metaphors for the peculiar essence they wanted to portray. Thus Ruth Benedict (1946) chose *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* as the title for her book on Japan because she felt that these

two things, deeply enmeshed in Japanese culture, were potent symbols for the polar oppositions between which life in that nation is played out. Victor Turner (1967) named his book on the ritual life of the Ndembu of south central Africa, *The Forest of Symbols,* to convey a wide range of meanings including the fact that certain trees, such as the *mudyi,* act as dominant symbols in this culture. Even the indigenous term for symbol derives from the word that means "to blaze a trail" through the forest (Turner, 1967, p. 48).

In fact, anthropologists have accumulated incredibly detailed descriptions of the symbolic use of objects in a variety of cultures. Rather than summarize this wealth of information here, we shall select a few instances to illustrate the ways in which objects can serve to express valued personal traits.

In almost every culture, objects are chosen to represent the power of the bearer. More than any other trait, the potential energy of the person, his or her power to affect others, is the one that is symbolically expressed. For men this power tends to be synonymous with virile virtues such as strength, bravery, prowess, endurance; for women, power is expressed in the equally stereotyped forms of seductiveness, fertility, and nurturance. Perhaps the course of biological and social evolution originally favored the development of these traits and their segregation by gender. In many traditional societies, however, these sex stereotypes are maintained even though they no longer reflect adaptation to the physical environment. Here is an example of how a particular object, in this case the spear, acts as a central symbol of the self in a preliterate society:

> A man's fighting spear (*mut*) is constantly in his hand, forming almost part of him . . . and he is never tired of sharpening or polishing it, for a Nuer is very proud of his spear . . . In a sense it is animate, for it is an extension and external symbol . . . which stands for the strength, vitality and virtue of the person. It is a projection of the self. (Evans-Pritchard, 1956, p. 233)

This description implies that for the Nuer the spear is more than a conceptual sign standing for some set of inner needs or desires. The spear is not an abstraction, but a heavy, sharp object one can balance, twirl, or throw; a thing with which one can dig, jab, or slash; a long smooth wooden shaft with a wicked point. In other words, it is a real object that a man carries and feels the weight of – an object, above all, he can display to others. In its

objective character, the spear exaggerates and demonstrates to everyone those personal traits that the owner – and the rest of the culture – aspire to: strength, speed, potency, permanence; the ability to command respect, to control one's surroundings.

Presumably, this symbolic meaning of the spear, or of any other expressive object, is not simply to reflect an already existing actuality. It also helps bring that actuality about. The Nuer lugging his spear across the sunbaked plateaus of the Sudan might not be particularly endowed with strength. His weapon, however, conveys to the man the power that he lacks. By hoisting the spear, he *feels* the kinetic energy in its shaft. But it is possible to claim an even greater creative role to such objects. One might see, not only in the lives of individuals but also in the history of cultures, that symbolic objects foreshadow ways of being, or feeling, which had not previously been available to any person. As Geertz (1966) has argued in a different context, symbols can be both "models of" and "models for" reality. In the first sense, they reflect what *is;* in the second, they foreshadow what *could be;* and thus they become a vital force in determining cultural evolution.

Preliterate societies are, of course, not the only ones in which objects reflect, or create, a sense of power in those who use them. In our own culture the enormous symbolic significance of vehicles is so obvious that it is too easily taken for granted. From a child's first tricycle to a ten-speed bike, later to a motorcycle or a car, the physical energy of the owner is enhanced by more and more powerful machinery. He or she, like the car, can be auto-mobile, literally self-moving. The constant loving care so many people devote to their cars parallels the Nuer's fascination with his spear. One can see in this almost narcissistic concern a libidinal, phallic fixation; but it seems to be more – an expression of Eros in the broadest sense, a need to demonstrate that one is alive, that one matters, that one makes a difference in the world.

Because of their physical structure, objects lend themselves to the expression of raw physical power. From the spear to the airplane, they can act as levers that increase a person's strength or speed – his or her kinetic energy. But there are also more subtle aspects of the self that can be expressed through the medium of objects. Magic powers, based on a human's presumed close relationship with supernatural forces, are stored in "power objects," which the American Indians carried in their medicine bags. The

clergy of the Catholic church, for instance, still have access to such sacramental objects. Some things stand for wisdom, justice, frugality, or other virtues respected in the community. In all cases where actual physical objects become associated with a particular quality of the self, it is difficult to know how far the thing simply reflects an already existing trait and to what extent it anticipates, or even generates, a previous nonexistent quality. A woman suddenly feeling beautiful or sophisticated because she is wearing a new dress or necklace or a young man feeling free because he is driving his own car are common experiences. Without doubt, things actively change the content of what we think is our self and thus perform a creative as well as a reflexive function.

All people can, and presumably most people do, use symbolic objects to express dimly perceived possibilities of their selves to serve as models for possible goals. This process can be seen most clearly, as one would expect, among visual artists. Many painters and sculptors are constantly involved in seeking objective counterparts for ideas or feelings they experience. Creative artists are those who can find a convincing visual solution for a problem that was never previously formulated. In the solution, and even in the formulation of creative problems, objects stimulate and help develop the artist's thought (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976, pp. 244ff).

How this works in actuality is well illustrated by the account of a young artist who explains why he is painting:

> I like to look at these things, that's why I paint. It's like enjoying dreams, which I do. I like to think, daydream about things I see. The theme of my paintings covers the past, the present, and the future; it has conscious and subconscious elements. *I paint only objects with personal significance, those that have meaning for me. With them I create a little world of my own.*
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> In my paintings, I usually include New York, cats, my uncle; a car, a railroad, or some other sort of transportation, for instance roller skates; address, numbers; a dragon coming out of the kitchen. Once I put a boot in a ship to symbolize a trip to Italy; mother, girlfriend, myself; organic shapes – trees, plants . . . these things have many different meanings to me and I enjoy them all. I would like to fly out of the window like the plane I paint, or be with the person I like and whom I paint. (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976, p. 147; italics added)

Not every artist describes his relationship with the visual symbols he manipulates in his paintings with such exuberant abandon. But every artist uses objects "to create a little world of my own," a world in which he or she can play out vicariously dynamic situations from which he or she can learn, and can show others, how the world operates.

Objects as signs of status

The most extensive studies of objects as expressions of the self have been done in connection with the status-giving role of things. This is a special case of the use of objects as expressions of the self. Objects signifying status appear in almost all cultures, although what objects will be chosen as status symbols, how they will be used to signify status, and even what the meaning and context of status itself will be, are as diverse and variegated as the peoples who make up humankind. Thus although status symbols are an extremely important aspect of the whole person–object interaction process, it is, nevertheless, unfortunate that this one dimension has so overshadowed the rest that it is almost impossible to think of people's possessions except as symbols of their social standing. Just as depth psychologists immediately interpret a person's relationship to an object in terms of sexual symbolism, sociologists tend to look at the same relationship in terms of status symbolism. The value of these perspectives should not disguise the fact that human interaction with things is much more complex and flexible.

Status is also a form of power, but of a different kind from the raw kinetic energy contained in spears or cars. It consists of the respect, consideration, and envy of others. A person with status sets the standards and norms by which others will act, and in this way embodies the goals of a culture. Similarly, a thing with status also acts as a template embodying these goals because it will cause people who believe in its status to act accordingly toward it and its owner who possesses the status. A flashy or expensive car, for example, conveys to those who believe in its status that its owner is a person possessing distinctive or superior qualities, someone "above" the crowd. Thus one might say that status is control over psychic energy because those who have it can count on the attention and to a certain extent the compliance of those who have less. People "look up to" those who have higher status; an expression that well describes the focusing of attention – and hence of psychic energy – along status lines. The origins of status hierarchies are already present in primate dominance systems where, as

Chance (1967) has noted, the pattern of glances exchanged by the animals seems to reflect accurately their rank: Submissive animals "look to" the more dominant ones, but the reverse is rarely true (Csikszentmihalyi, 1978b).

At first status was probably based simply on the power of kinetic energy and indistinguishable from it. The hunter who could throw the spear farthest was the one everyone looked up to. But as human beings discovered more varied and subtle forms of self-control, the reasons for obtaining status also multiplied. Finally, we reached the point where status – or the ability to control meaning in one's community – has become, to a certain extent, independent of other sources of control and has taken on a life of its own. Wealth, political power, talent or physical prowess are still the stuff from which status is made, but one can maintain or even gain status by manipulating its symbols for one's own purposes. This is where the importance of things as status symbols lies.

There are many ways in which a given object may become a symbol of status. To qualify as a status symbol, the object might, for instance, be *rare*. Rarity implies that a thing is difficult to obtain, and therefore it takes a large investment of psychic activity to make or to find. Such an object will in turn be "looked up to" – provided the audience is aware of its rarity – and its owner will indirectly gain control over others' psychic energy. An object that is *expensive* functions essentially the same way. In fact, rarity and expense are by and large synonymous, because both terms refer to the amount of attention required to make a thing. The *age* of an object also enhances its status. The products of humans' labor do not survive very long; the order imposed by concentrated psychic activity through the craftsman's skills turns with time into disordered fragments. The second law of thermodynamics acts on things, as on everything else. Entropy gnaws at the shapes we create. There is not enough surplus psychic energy to store and maintain the things we make. By and large, only the most outstanding objects survive. But even a trivial object, if preserved accidentally, becomes rare with age. Thus an antique will have status by the criterion of rarity and eventually that of expense. Finally, an object can gain status simply by *attracting the attention of people who have status*. People of high status control others' attention, thus their own goals can exert more influence than that of average people. An object that is "in" among the elites will embody their

status and thus attract the attention of those with less power. True, an object that is singled out by an elite usually already has one or more of the characteristics previously mentioned – rarity, cost, and age – but sometimes even simple objects, such as common houseplants, can be invested with attributes of status like "fashion" or "style." Similarly, even "antistatus" symbols can signify something about the owner's relation to status conventions. When something is invested with attention by those whose attention is powerful, the thing will attract attention in its own right. Having famous persons sponsor products in commercial advertising is an obvious application of this general principle.

Status symbols, therefore, express a very general aspect of their owners – their power to control others. They are in some ways a summary of all the salient characteristics of the self, a global measure of the owner's standing in the community. It should be remembered, however, that status itself is a symbol, standing for generalized power but not necessarily translatable into it. People who look up to those who have high status might at any time refuse to be controlled and on occasion might actively revolt against the hierarchy, destroying its symbols.

In this context it is pertinent to mention the most abstract form of status symbols, namely, money. Although this topic deserves a separate treatment, the symbolic dimensions of money belong with the discussion of status symbols. Ordinarily, we conceive of money as "real" rather than as symbolic, yet it is perhaps one of the most purely symbolic objects devised. For example, a gallon of gasoline today will probably get you as far as it did ten years ago. But a dollar's worth of gasoline will not get you anywhere near as far as it did ten years ago – even if the same dollar bill were used. That is, the physical properties of gasoline are what contribute to its value, whereas the physical properties of a dollar bill are relatively unimportant. What gives money its value and status is the fact that people agree on its worth. Checks and credit cards are mere scraps of paper and plastic, yet a single one could potentially be worth a billion dollars, a billion invisible, but very real, dollars. Thus the phrase "money is no object" rings true in a different sense: It is the object that is no object, because it can transform itself into anything "it" wishes. Money is the most social of all things because its inherent quality is that of a conventional symbol, an agreement among people for exchange. Indeed, as Sim-

mel (1978) suggests, money has in many ways usurped the role of God as the representation of ultimate purpose and measure of value in the modern world.

With the rise of technology and the establishment of a free market system, money has become the agreed-upon counter of exchange into which nearly all manifestations of psychic activity could be transformed. Whereas in the past one could achieve status through strength, wisdom, honor, or holiness, and each of these required different forms of psychic energy investment irreducible to the other, in modern times wealth has become the measure of a person's standing on a uniform scale (Simmel, 1978; Polanyi, 1957). As Marx has noted, a man who has money need not be handsome, brave, loving, or wise: He can buy all these qualities and benefit from their effects (Marx, 1972, p. 83).

The symbolic power of money derives in large part from the fact that over the millennia it has become accepted as a symbol of human effort. Thus in practice money is *objectified psychic energy*. A laborer will work all week, focusing his attention on a task from which he does not benefit directly. In exchange for his labor he will get money with which he can purchase the products of other people's labor. The employer who paid his wages will exchange the product of the laborer's effort for more money, and so on. In other words, those who own money are in control of other people's objectified psychic energy; therefore wealth confers status.

Whereas other sources of status – respect, talent, tradition – rely on a direct hold over people's attention, wealth does so indirectly. Money must be exchanged to assert its power. Thus there are situations in which the status-giving power of money is not entirely effective. In certain social contexts its power is resisted by those who claim different sources of status – and with some success. For instance, in the small and traditional New England towns W. Lloyd Warner (1963) studied, the highest status belonged not to the wealthiest but to those who descended from families with long-established tradition in the community. In fact, the newcomers tried to purchase tradition with money. But present prestige is usually based on former wealth, and thus the lack of status of "new money" might be a case of culture lag. The competition of different values against money is a rearguard action doomed to failure as long as money remains the most effective symbol of human energy.

Objects as symbols of social integration

Thus far we have dealt only with the ways objects can be used to express, or to create, personal qualities. By either embodying hidden psychic processes or exhibiting the power or prestige of their owner, things can serve as means of individual *differentiation;* that is, the development of a person's traits that make him or her stand out from others. However, the cultivation of individuality serves a larger goal of integration because the intention to differentiate oneself from others still needs other people to give it meaning. If pursued as an ultimate goal, differentiation would eventually result in chaos, not uniqueness, and so even differentiation has a purpose within and for the integrated life of the community. How signs contribute to integration is another area where anthropologists have provided a wealth of examples that illustrate the process.

A classic study of the emergence of integrative symbols is Durkheim's interpretation of the ethnographic accounts of preliterate religions, especially those of the tribes of Central Australia, which because of their primitiveness, Durkheim claimed, present a clearer picture of the origins of religion. There are obvious problems with this premise, the first is that even the most "primitive peoples" possess extremely complex as well as very different forms of religious life. In seeing all religion, science, and art as reducible to Cartesian "elementary forms," Durkheim loses sight of the fact that these traditions are all historical achievements, discovered through experience and cultivation, and are not only mere appearances of an "underlying" a priori order; and thus he gets into similar problems as Freud and Jung did. Yet even with these difficulties, Durkheim presents some rich ideas to account for religious life. Durkheim's conception was that religion originates in order to account for a concrete, yet mysterious experience: the experience of sociability. He denied the then favorite explanation, according to which religion arises to explain inexplicable natural phenomena. It was the feeling of belonging to a group of people that produced the notion of a sacred supernatural force existing on a different plane from the forces of nature. The miracle of sociability, according to Durkheim, is first experienced in the continuity of generations: Although individuals die, the lineage continues. A divine force was postulated to account

for the permanence of life through its various transformations. Needless to say, this explanation fits most other religions, including the Judeo-Christian, whose basic text consists to a large extent of an enumeration of genealogies and of various explanations as to how and why the Supreme Being allowed the chosen people to survive, suffer, or prosper.

Another utterly mysterious aspect of sociability is what Durkheim called "collective effervescence." This is the experience people get when participating in common activities, especially of a ritualistic or exhilarating kind: the experience of belonging to a whole greater than the sum of its parts, of being carried away by a group "spirit." In our times this feeling may be relatively rare, confined perhaps to revolutions, football games, rock concerts, and religious revival meetings. But for traditional people dancing around their campfires, collective effervescence was a proof that a great spirit was abroad, a powerful force that manifested itself only through the group, and thus was somehow implicated in the existence and the survival of the clan.

Religion, Durkheim argued, started as a system of practices – or rites – whose purpose was to relate individuals to the great pervading force of whose existence they learned through the experience of sociability. This force was conceived as existing everywhere but as being especially powerful in certain places, animals, plants, or objects that were particularly associated with the clan or its divisions. These repositories of spiritual force were what some cultures called *totems* (Durkheim, 1965, pp. 121ff).

Some of the most sacred objects of the Australian Aborigines illustrate how the experience of belonging to a group might have given rise to the idea of an all-powerful spiritual force. "The *churinga,*" Durkheim (1965, p. 141) writes, "is counted among the eminently sacred things; there are none which surpass it in religious dignity." This churinga is a bullroarer, a wooden instrument used to make a booming sound during tribal ceremonies. For the Arunta of Central Australia its sound is a manifestation of the sacred force that binds each individual to the group. It is certainly not accidental (although Durkheim did not argue this point) that the spiritual force was most concentrated in an object that was used in connection with the very rituals that produced the experience of sacredness originally. Thus the churinga actively produced group cohesion by making the sounds necessary for a collective experience. Such instances are rather common in ethnographies; among the pygmies of the Ituri forest, the spirit of the tribe is manifested in the *molimo* trumpets. Whenever things go badly in the forest, when someone gets sick or dies, or game is scarce, the trumpets are taken out of their hiding places and are blown all night, sometimes for weeks. It is not the trumpets that are sacred; it is their sound – the concrete manifestation of the spirit of the tribe – which is supposed to heal misfortune (Turnbull, 1961, p. 80).

Among the other sacred objects of the Arunta that symbolize the essential force of the clan is the *nurturya,* a bundle of sticks or spears that is assembled at the center of the village for ritual occasions (Durkheim, 1965, p. 145). This symbol has been used often even in modern times: Mussolini's emblem for fascism was the *fascio,* a bundle of sticks bound to an ax, which represented the idea that whereas each stick could be easily broken separately, the bundle is impossible to break – *l'unione fa la forza,* union makes strength. The same symbol is conspicuously displayed behind the speaker's rostrum in the U.S. House of Representatives, among other places.

In different historical periods a culture may resort to different signs to express the basic goal that unites it and gives it purpose and direction. In an account of his travels in France, Henry Adams (1905) reflects that the Gothic cathedrals dedicated to the Virgin Mary were the medieval equivalents of the large electric turbines of his times. Both edifices acted as giant storehouses of power, which reflected the goals of the age; the one spiritual, the other material. Adam's insight is not just an intriguing metaphor. The cathedral and the generator are, indeed, centers of accumulated energy: the psychic energy of those who built them and those who "used" them. Chartres was built with the direct input of labor from the community and has attracted the attention of people for centuries. The electric dynamos of the nineteenth century, like the atomic generators of the twentieth, are built through the psychic energy of people redirected through the mediation of taxes or financial investments; we use the power of the generator also indirectly through the energy that heats our homes and runs our appliances. The investment of attention in these two symbols

is equally real. Which formulation of the force that makes a society survive and flourish will be more successful remains to be seen.

All symbols of social integration, however, can also act as signs of the opposite process, namely, social differentiation and opposition. The cross is a concrete expression of the unity of all Christians, but it also underlines the separation between the latter and the followers of Islam or any other religion. The American flag commands the allegiance of U.S. citizens, but it excludes other nationals from the community. The maple leaf is a rallying emblem for Toronto hockey fans in competition with the followers of other teams. The classic study of the differentiating yet integrating effect of symbols is Victor Turner's account of Ndembu ritual. Among the Ndembu the "dominant symbol" for the female puberty initiation rite is the *mudyi,* or milk tree. Because of its white secretion, this tree has become associated with milk and the nurturing, life-giving role of women. By extension it also signifies the maternal lineage through which the Ndembu reckon their descent, and hence the unity and continuity of their society (Turner, 1967, pp. 21ff). A *mudyi* sapling, representing the "greenness" or immaturity of the novice herself, is placed in the center of the initiation site. By focusing their attention on the milk tree in their ceremonials, the Ndembu experience, in a compressed form, the qualities that are most important to them as individuals and to their society as a whole. The explicit purpose of the girl's puberty rite is to celebrate the principles of matrilineage and continuity, yet there are many instances during the ritual that highlight various levels of conflict: the jeers of the women toward the men in the early phase of the ritual, the initiate's own mother versus the adult women representing the matrilineage into which the girl will be initiated, and the girl as a unique individual and literally a "center of public attention" set apart as the hub of the dancing circle of women. But here the conflict and differentiating aspects ultimately contribute a creative tension that provides the psychic energy for a unifying resolution:

> The "energy" required to reanimate the values and norms enshrined in dominant symbols and expressed in various kinds of verbal behavior is "borrowed," to speak metaphorically in lieu at the moment of a more rigorous language, from the miming of well-known and normally mentionable conflicts. The raw energies of conflict are domesticated into the service of social order. (Turner, 1967, pp. 38–9)

Thus the Ndembu girl's puberty rite is a process of cultivation in which a tree and all it symbolizes serves to initiate a person into maturity.

One of the best ways to create bonds between people in most cultures is through gifts. Mauss's classic work on the subject explores how interpersonal relations can be strengthened through the exchange of objects:

> But for the moment it is clear that in Maori custom this bond created by things is in fact a bond between persons, since the thing itself is a person or pertains to a person. Hence it follows that to give something is to give a part of oneself . . . It follows clearly from what we have seen that in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence . . . The thing given is not inert. It is alive and often personified, and strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place. (Mauss, 1967 (1925), p. 10)

On a larger scale ritualized barter can also have the effect of reducing potential conflict between neighboring social groups. The best known example of such a process is the trade of armshells for spondylous necklaces in the Papuan *kula* ring, which are exchanged across hundreds of miles of open sea by islanders and which are eventually returned as presents to their original owners after all that trafficking is over. Thus no economic benefit results from the transaction, but the practice "is a strong protection of trade in an area rent by fear of the black art, suspicion, and hostility" (Fortune, 1932, p. 210).

Embedded in the context of exchange, objects become containers for the being of the donor, who freely gives up part of him or herself to another. If the gift is reciprocated, a definite tie is established between the partners in the exchange. Again, this is not a metaphorical tie, for what has been exchanged is real energy: A small part of my being has been given to another for a small part of his or hers. Presumably gifts are necessary when the relationship between people is problematic, and a person needs concrete, permanent signs of its existence. However, if they are detached from the actual sources of their meaning, gift objects can easily be manipulated to express a false relationship; a fact

well known to Vergil, who coined the adage: *Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes* (Beware of Greeks bearing gifts).

The three levels of representation

As we have seen, through time and space humans have used objects to express, or to explore, some of the purposes that animate their own individual lives, as well as those that bound them to or divided them from each other. These two dynamic centers, the personal and the social, are related to each other at many points; moreover, both are also related to a third center of purposes, which we shall call the *cosmic* level.

In traditional societies this cosmic level includes the great natural phenomena that control the rhythm of life: the sun, the moon, the stars; water and fire; wind and earth. Every society has to make a believable connection between its own purpose and those that make the world go round. This necessity is well expressed by Eric Fromm: "The basic passions of man are not rooted in his instinctive needs, but in the specific conditions of human existence, in *the need to find a new relatedness to man and nature* after having lost the primary relatedness of the pre-human stage" (Fromm, 1955, vii; italics added).

We can now see more clearly the scope and the meaning of representations. The objects that people use, despite their incredible diversity and sometimes contradictory usage, appear to be signs on a blueprint that represent the relation of man to himself, to his fellows, and to the universe. The relationship is usually represented in personified and dynamic terms: It is both the vitalizing and destructive energies of these three levels of organization that are personified most often in various cultures.

In addition, we have seen that these three levels can be described by two modalities: *differentiation* and *integration*. Symbols of the self, for instance, might stress the unique qualities of the owner, his or her skills and superiority over others. In this case the objects serve a process of differentiation, separating the owner from the social context, emphasizing his or her individuality. Or they might represent dimensions of similarity between the owner and others: shared descent, religion, ethnic origin, or life-

style. In this instance, the object symbolically expresses the integration of the owner with his or her social context.

This dialectic pervades the human predicament. On the one hand, persons must discover the limits of their being, by expressing the purposes and potentials inherent in the individual organism they inhabit. This involves the ability to control the environment, others, and oneself by cultivating purposive habits of life through which one in-habits the world (Dewey, 1934, p. 104). Only through self-control, through shaping events to one's intentions, can one learn who one is and what one is capable of. On the other hand, people know, consciously or unconsciously, how fragile and insignificant they ultimately are. Thus one also must find ways to establish links between one's self and the far more vast purposes in the environment: other persons, groups, or the great patterns of cosmos.

The psychiatrist H. F. Searles states this dialectic as follows:

> The human being is engaged, throughout his life span, in an unceasing struggle to differentiate himself increasingly fully, not only from his human, but also from his nonhuman environment, while developing, in proportion as he succeeds in these differentiations, an increasingly meaningful relatedness with the latter environment as well as with his fellow human beings. (Searles, 1960, p. 30)

This is one of the oldest problems in philosophy – the relation between particulars and generals. In most of modern philosophy the tendency has been to see the relation as a dichotomy rather than as a dialectic (see Rochberg-Halton, 1979c). The dialectic underlies most psychologies, including the Freudian and the gestaltist (Werner, 1957). It can also be perceived in Baldwin's and Piaget's tension between assimilation and accommodation (Baldwin, 1906; Piaget, 1967). In an evolutionary perspective it has been seen as the dynamic that propels the evolution of organisms from atomic structures to molecules, to living organisms and, finally, to human societies (Mayr, 1963; de Chardin, 1965; Csikszentmihalyi, 1970).

How does this perhaps overly general distinction between differentiation and integration help us to understand what signs do? First, it suggests that the balance required for a vital, growing culture should include both processes. It alerts us to the dangers incurred by a person, or a culture, that fails to develop its individual potentialities; or conversely, that attempts to develop its individual control at the expense of relatedness with other purposes.

Later, we shall describe how an overemphasis on differentiating or integrating goals may be normal in an age developmental context. However, if, on the average, most people's objects reflect only dimensions of the personal self, if they are used exclusively to express each one's individuality, we might suspect the existence of a basic pathology – a tendency to fragmentation, a competitive attitude toward the *Umwelt* that forbodes a fall. The same argument applies to a community or whole culture. Conversely, for people whose relationship to objects reflects only ties to other individuals or systems, the opposite pathology is suggested – a lack of individual development, the failure to unfold one's potentials.

This two-sided dialectic is also reflected in the history and etymology of the word *symbol.* In ancient Greek, *sym-ballein* meant to "throw together," or to "join." The phrase came to designate a coin that two friends break in half, each with the hope of reuniting. When the two friends would meet again, the joining of the two half coins signified the relationship between the two persons, so the separation of the coin served the larger purpose of unity. Thus *symbol* originally meant that which brings people together. It is significant that the opposite of *sym-ballein* is *dia-ballein,* to "throw apart," or "separate," which is the root of our word for "diabolic," the essence of evil. Evil is what separates the self of a person into conflicting forces, what divides one person from others, what sets up people against the cosmos. It is *chaos,* the force of entropy that destroys the order on which life depends.

When one traces the course of the self in ethnographic and historical reports, it appears that most traditional peoples have emphasized the integrated or social self at the expense of personal uniqueness (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1969), whereas modern Western culture has tended to stress the differentiated, uniquely individual self (Durkheim, 1897; Simmel, 1971; Arendt, 1959). Thus runaway fragmentation is more of an actual possibility in our own culture. The writings of many of the great social scientists near the turn of the century deal with the problem of chaos and entropy, which in their view dominates modern life. The theme linking the diverse theories of Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Freud, and Jung is a common concern with the crisis of modern society that was brought about through the increase of industrial specialization, rationalism, and the developments of modern science. This

common concern with the possibilities of an imminent breakdown of social life led each of these men, through very different approaches, to study both the ways meaning is created and how it serves to bind society together.

Durkheim's concern with the fragmenting effects of modernity is reflected in his study of suicide, where he states that the problems underlying increasing European suicide rates resulted, "not from a regular evolution but from a morbid disturbance which, while able to uproot the institutions of the past, has put nothing in their place" (Durkheim, 1966, p. 369). This "morbid disturbance" was not due to an increase in physical suffering or economic poverty but to an increasing poverty of morality – in other words, a loss of the meaning of existence and standards by which to judge actions (Bellah, 1973; pp. xxix, pp. xxx).

Georg Simmel expressed similar concerns in his landmark article, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (Simmel, 1971), in which he relates the growth of modern urban forms with the development of individuality. In Simmel's view the overwhelming sensory overload and anonymity encountered in the modern metropolis causes the individual to develop "the blasé attitude" – an overemphasis of rationality – as a means of adaptation to city life. The blasé attitude, and the increased need for specialization as a result of the division of labor, causes an impoverishment of "subjective culture" – the cultivation of the relative uniqueness of the individual developed in interaction with the objective forms of culture. Thus the modern metropolis presents the two-sided fact that through the breakdown of traditional norms and affective life, an increased emphasis on individuality is made possible. On the other hand, "subjective culture" – which should follow its intrinsic laws leading to a wholeness of personality – is actually subjected to enormous pressures from the complex and differentiated urban environment, which tends to result in a pseudoindividuality of overexaggerated behaviors, mannerisms, styles, and so forth. While opening the possibilities for the cultivation of personality, modern urban culture actually encourages a false isolating individuality at the expense of subjective culture, resulting in differentiated, but not centered, selves.

Max Weber (1958) also saw the differentiating effects of rationalism and bureaucratization as presenting serious threats to free-

dom, creativity, and the very survival of Western civilization. In his well-known conclusion to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* he remarks:

> No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved. (Weber, 1958, p. 182)

Freud and Jung too, from their different psychological perspectives, saw the increasing threat to instinctual life that civilization brought.

The problem of modern society confronting Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Freud, and Jung was the fragmenting and entropic effect of exaggerated differentiation, the opposite of the *sym-bolic*. What they all sensed was the process of what might be called the *dia-bolic*, the raising of the mode of differentiation to an ultimate goal. Durkheim, who said that God is a symbol of society, and who saw a morbid disturbance of society, would probably agree with the metaphor of the dia-bolic. His rejection of God and religion as obsolete, and his belief that art is superfluous, however, left him with only a secular, institutional approach to reinvesting meaning in modern society. For Carl Jung the metaphor of the diabolic in modern life was more than a metaphor, it was literal mythological truth. The archetypes of the collective unconscious are forms that shape the content of history, and the archetype dominating modern society and consciousness is the trickster, the Faustian devil figure, the bringer of chaos.

The modern age has proclaimed in many ways that God, the ultimate purpose, is dead. It has attempted to replace the religious representation of ultimate purpose with other ultimate purposes, like rationalistic science, but these do not seem to provide the integration or depth of expression or enduring vitality that many of the great world religions have.

We might, then, see what is usually called "religion" as the effort to represent, and to participate in, the relationship among the three centers of purpose that constitute the human experience. Every religion can be seen as an attempt to identify the ultimate goals within the person, the community, and the cosmos, and to

establish some connection, through ritual or other sign processes, among these three levels. From this perspective, religions cease to be anachronisms to be discarded along the way. In their historical forms, religions certainly contained considerable superstition and misunderstanding, a large ratio of noise to information. Once institutionalized, religions acquire an identity of their own to be defended against competing systems of thought; thus they often lose their ability to pursue integration and, in fact, become a hindrance in that pursuit. However, the essential purpose that religions have served has been indispensable and will be so in the future, regardless of what forms the religious impulse takes. It is impossible to imagine human life without a map or blueprint as to how the cosmos is organized, what makes it related, and how humans fit in it. Whether this map will be produced by science or politics or a revamped version of an old religion, the attempt to realize the integration will be essentially "religious," even if couched in scientific terminology, because it will have to represent through signs a set of relationships that probably will never be completely exhausted.

Objects, then, serve to express dynamic processes within people, among people, and between people and the total environment. These processes might lead to either a more and more specific differentiation or increasing integration. Transactions with things can be either representative – a "model of" some aspect of the environment – or actively stimulating and creative – "a model for" the environment. This last distinction needs some further elaboration.

One of the most important, but unfortunately most neglected, aspects of the meaning of things is precisely the ability of an object to convey meaning through its own inherent qualities. Yet most accounts of how things signify tend to ignore the active contribution of the thing itself to the meaning process. We have seen that in the work of Freud, Durkheim, and to a lesser extent, Jung, the concrete sign or thing plays an extremely passive role, and meaning tends to be projected from the knowing subject. At most, drawing on some resemblance to inner psychic processes, things act as catalysts to express or clarify a thought or feeling already present in the person's experience. Similarly, despite the numerous pages he devoted to describing how children play with or understand things, Piaget's theory is not truly *interactionist*, be-

cause the schemas are a priori forms of thought and the environment only serves to facilitate these structures (Bailin, 1971, p. 90). Interaction is necessary to bring the developmental stages into operation, but the interaction is purely "logical" for Piaget and any object X may be substituted for object Y without making a significant difference on the subject. The objects of interaction have no intrinsic character of their own, which may have an effect on the categories of thought. These various structuralist approaches echo the Cartesian tradition by seeing that meaning occurs because of structures of the mind, not experience; because of *langue* (the general language system), not *parole* (the actual speech act or interaction); because of form, not content. In these views the self is ultimately set apart from its environment; and the world of living people, cherished possessions, and monuments of human civilization become mere façades masking underlying ideas (Rochberg-Halton, 1980b).

In other accounts, such as those given by Evans-Pritchard (1974), Geertz (1973), and Turner (1967), the object appears to make a more active contribution to the process of cultivation. Here the object, by its concrete properties, can stimulate new insights, new understandings. It seems important, then, to allow for the inherent character of the thing to have some influence in the interpretive process of meaning, and in *Art as Experience* (1934), John Dewey introduced a distinction between *perception* and *recognition* as a way of dealing with the role of an object's own qualities (Rochberg-Halton, 1979a). Recognition is when we experience a thing and interpret it only as something we already know. The act of recognition may be conscious or unconscious, may or may not cause pleasure, or may or may not restore balance to a disturbed psyche. In any case it does not produce a new organization of feeling, attention, or intentions. Many people relate to objects through recognition simply because of habituation, or because they are unable to give their full attention to all the information received from the environment (e.g., Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Milgram, 1970). Perception, on the other hand, occurs when we experience a thing and realize its own inherent character. It might be a very ordinary object, such as the peasant clogs or the battered straw-bottomed chair painted by Van Gogh, and so eloquently analyzed by Heidegger, or a patch of sunlight on the morning floor. The point is that the object imposes certain qualities on the viewer that create new insights, which is what makes any experience aesthetic in Dewey's perspective.

Again, this distinction runs deep in human psychology, underlying, for instance, the different cognitive approaches that Getzels calls "presented problem solving," and "discovered problem solving." The first refers to a stance in which a person already knows what the problem is and what needs to be done; the second refers to a stance in which one first questions the nature of the problem and only then begins to worry about solving it. Needless to say, it is the second approach that leads to creative accomplishment (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1976).

The socializing effect of things

Thousands of examples attest to the indirect impact of objects on the changing human existence. It has been claimed that the earliest Paleolithic artifacts helped to "select" *homo sapiens* by favoring the survival and reproduction of those who had the right genetic makeup or social organization to benefit from the use of tools. Let us assume that a flint scraper or axe was somehow introduced to an early human horde, whether accidentally or intentionally. Further, assuming that the individuals in the group varied in terms of, say, fine muscle coordination or intelligence, it stands to reason that the tool would be used first and most effectively by those persons who were best coordinated and most intelligent. Because tools make life easier for their users, the more coordinated and/or intelligent persons will have a relatively greater chance to survive and ensure the survival of their offspring. With time, the genetic makeup of the species will slowly be changed in the direction of increasingly greater proportion of genes favoring the selected traits. Thus it can be said that man-made objects are also responsible for human intelligence (Washburn, 1959; Geertz, 1973).

It is interesting to note here that psychoanalytically oriented psychologists interested in "object relations" (who by "objects" do not mean things, but representations of other people), have recently come to a somewhat similar conclusion. They claim,

in effect, that it is not the instincts that determine the way we deal with "objects"; it is our relationship with the objects that brings about instinctual needs. In other words, children do not get attached to their parents because they have a need for attachment; it is the interaction with the parents that creates such a need (see, e.g., Fairbairn, 1954; Kohut, 1971).

Each new object changes the way people organize and experience their lives. For example, Lynn White makes a compelling argument to the effect that the invention of the stirrup by the eighth century made it possible for mounted knights to wear heavy armor – a fact that made those few who could afford to be so armed essentially impregnable. The armored knights became a different caste with a power several magnitudes greater than that of the peasant; at first this fact was simply a measure of a differential in brute force, but later it became the basis for the social and economic organization of feudal Europe. In White's words:

> Few inventions have been so simple as the stirrup, but few have had so catalytic an influence on history. The requirements of the new mode of warfare which it made possible found expression in a new form of western European society dominated by an aristocracy of warriors endowed with land so that they might fight in a new and highly specialized way. Inevitably this nobility developed cultural forms and patterns of thought and emotion in harmony with its style of mounted shock combat and its social posture. (White, 1966, p. 38)

Other historians have claimed equally revolutionary effects due to the introduction of the heavy plow, the watermill (Bloch, 1967, pp. 136ff), the yoke harness (Lefebvre des Noettes, 1931), the rudder (Lefebvre des Noettes, 1932), the spinning wheel, and the power loom (Thompson, 1963), to name but a few. Innovations developed to cope with a specific problem have a way of changing the way people do things and of altering how they relate to each other; eventually they affect the way people experience their lives. Recently, the rate at which new things have arisen to shape and reshape our lives has, if anything, increased. Historians and sociologists have speculated widely on the effects of the radio, the car, various electric home appliances, contraceptive pills, microcircuits, and nuclear bombs, among others. Yet we know very little about how such things have affected our "patterns of thought and emotion," to use White's phrase.

A partial exception to this general neglect appears to be the interest that social scientists devote to the effects of television.

Certainly, studies on this subject must by now be in the thousands (a number are reported in Comstock et al., 1978). But if one looks at what these studies are focused on, one soon discovers that, with a few exceptions, researchers are not interested in how *the television* affects people but only in the effects of *programs*. Because programs are made by people, and consist of conscious acts of communication, it is assumed that the program is what affects the viewer. The thing itself, the set that transmits the communication, is supposed to be neutral. Despite MacLuhan's (1964) insight about the medium being the message, few investigators have looked directly at the effects of watching television per se, regardless of content. Those who have, find that people feel more relaxed viewing TV than doing anything else but, at the same time, they experience it as the most passive and mindless activity in their lives (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1977). Given the fact that, on the average, we spend four hours a day interacting with this thing, one wonders what the ultimate effect on our "patterns of thought and emotion" will be.

In every known society, certain objects are necessary to provide subsistence, those Marx called the "means of production." For a hunter this might be a spear, for a Mexican peasant woman the stone on which she grinds the corn. According to Marx, the free use of such things is an essential condition of a truly human life for two reasons: (1) because without it one cannot control one's material survival and (2) because it is through productive labor that people create their own being. "Men . . . begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence . . . This mode of production [is] . . . a definite form of expressing their life . . . As individuals express their life, so they are" (Marx, 1972, p. 114).

If the means of production are owned by someone else, the worker is related to the product of his or her labor as to an *alien* object (Marx, 1972, p. 58). But because the product of labor is the objectified self – the outcome of psychic activity invested over time – the worker relates to his or her own self as an alien object. There is no need to detail here the various dimensions of alienation that Marx derives from wage labor: estrangement from nature, estrangement from one's life activity, estrangement from control over one's consciousness, and finally estrangement from one's fellow men (Marx, 1972, p. 62).

It is doubtful that anyone has yet improved on Marx's analysis of a person's relation to the means of production, and on its social and psychological consequences. Still, Marx in his later life, and certainly his followers, have given a rather narrow interpretation to productivity. It does not seem necessary to assume that only productive *labor* allows people to unfold their potentialities, to create their selves. In his famous passage from the *German Ideology,* the young Marx spelled out a prescription for nonalienated life: "to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic" (Marx, 1972, p. 124). Clearly, material productivity was not the goal; rather, it was the chance to freely actualize as many of one's skills as possible. But this utopian attitude toward human activity did not survive long; in the West it became absorbed into the Calvinist "Protestant ethic," which rigidly separated work from leisure; in Communist countries, faced by the harsh demands of industrial development and political survival, only the materially productive value of work was retained.

The exalted position of work, as the only means to define one's being, perhaps has been carried too far. People can also create strong and complex selves by investing their psychic energy in activities that are usually called "leisure" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Over seven centuries ago, Dante Alighieri expressed this idea clearly:

> For in every action, whether caused by necessity or free will, the main intention of the agent is to express his own image; thus it is that every doer, whenever he does, enjoys (*delectatur*) the doing; because everything that is desires to be, and in action the doer unfolds his being, enjoyment naturally follows, for a thing desired always brings delight . . . Therefore nothing acts without making its self manifest. (Alighieri, 1921 (1317), Book I, Chap. 13, our translation)

In other words, action need not be productive in the material sense to disclose the self of the agent. What counts is that it allows the person to "express his own image," and in the process, to cultivate that image through immersion in the activity at hand. To the extent that work does this better than any other activity, it retains a privileged status – if not, it becomes a hindrance to personal development, and other forms of action can substitute for it. It is not the purely mechanical motions or material products of work or leisure that matter but, rather, the intentions or goals that can be concretely realized through these activities.

These reflections are relevant to our topic in that the crucial issue for personal development might not be who owns the means of production but who owns the *means of action.* The former are a special subset of the latter, as was pointed out by Aristotle in the *Politics* (Aristotle 1973, pp. 601ff). By "means of action" we mean any object or sign that allows a person to "make his self manifest," as Dante would have it. We have seen, for instance, in Evans-Pritchard's (1974) account of the Nuer, what an important place the spear had in that culture as a means for expressing and enhancing valued traits of the owner. Yet the Nuer are not hunters, merely pastoralists. Moreover, only the fighting spear (*mut*) is special to the Nuer, not any of the other kinds (*bidh, giit*) he owns (Evans-Pritchard, 1974, p. 237). Perhaps the *mut* in the hunting past of the Nuer was the principal means of production, and its present symbolic value is only a reflection of its former use value. Or it could be said that in recent prehistory, warfare was the main productive activity in the culture, hence the centrality of the fighting spear. In either case we might simply have an instance of culture lag, in which the metaphoric superstructure of the object rests on a previous context of historical experience.

Although this kind of reductionistic argument might be correct historically, it does not explain reality existentially in the here and now. For at least several generations the Nuer have used spears to make their existence more meaningful, even though these objects were only marginally related to their productive activities. In our own consumer society hundreds of objects can be found in each household that are not necessarily productive in a purely material sense. The empirical part of this volume will explore what these are, and thus we reserve this discussion for later.

Our emphasis on means of action as against means of production is not intended to erase the peculiar importance of the latter. It is a misguided idealism indeed to ignore the fact that the necessities of physical survival must be met first. Even the least "materialist" views of the human condition agree on this (Maslow, 1963; Arendt, 1958), and thus we shall simply assume it. It follows that issues related to the ownership of such means have powerful economic, social, and, finally, psychological consequences. But given the overwhelming wealth of American society, the question of the necessities for physical survival is by and large irrelevant. The only claim we are making in this argument is that the actions and objects involved in productive labor are not necessarily the most

central from a social-psychological perspective; that nonproductive actions and objects might serve just as important ends in the development of the self.

Things as role models

The triangular relationship whose apices are the self, the object, and the "other," has another set of profound implications. When we confront a thing, we usually do so in a context of cultural meanings that help us interpret the object. As existential philosophers are fond of saying, the network of cultural meanings is "always already there," mediating the transactions. At the same time, we believe that new signs are constantly being created by people throughout their lives, some embodying enduring meanings in new forms, others expressing new meanings in forms that can either be traditional or unprecedented.

From a sociological perspective this situation has been described in terms of a socially constructed "symbolic universe" that persons confront as an "objectified reality" (Schutz, 1960; Berger and Luckmann, 1967). In pragmatist philosophy it is reflected in the triadic nature of meaning: When we interpret a thing it acts as a sign (first element), standing for something (second element), through creating an interpreting thought or emotion (third element). The new sign, created through the interpretation may be equivalent to the first sign or may be more developed (Peirce, 1931 – 5, Vol. 2, para. 228). One grandmother we interviewed, for example, named her husband's and her own grandmother's wedding rings as special and had given them to her grandson and his fiancé for their wedding. These rings are signs (first element), standing for five generations of family continuity (second element) to this woman. The third element of these signs are her memories of the people and events and the thoughts or emotions evoked through reflection. In a given act of reflection the memories, thoughts, or emotions may not be new at all, but over the course of her life these rings have continued to "grow" and develop and to take on new meanings, and are still doing so, even while retaining the same physical form.

Therefore it becomes possible to see how interaction with objects results in socialization. To use a thing in a culturally appropriate way means to experience the culture directly – becoming part of the medium of signs that constitutes that culture. The little boy who plays with guns or toy soldiers is learning to act according to the rules that are part of the repertoire of roles of that society, as is his sister who plays with a doll house. In either case already existing goals reified in toy objects attract the child's attention and restructure it in conformity with the toy's intended use and ultimately with the societal norms. If socialization is successful, the child will grow by internalizing societal expectations, which reciprocally make a differentiated self possible. George Herbert Mead (1934) implied this in his discussion of socialization when he said that *inanimate objects* could serve as elements of the "generalized other," as role models (Rochberg-Halton and Csikszentmihalyi, 1978; Rochberg-Halton, 1980a):

> It is possible for *inanimate objects*, no less than for other human organisms, to form parts of the generalized and organized – the completely socialized – other for any given human individual, in so far as he responds to such objects socially or in a social fashion (by means of the mechanism of thought, the internalized conversation of gestures). *Any thing – any object or set of objects, whether animate or inanimate, human or animal, or merely physical* – toward which he acts, or to which he responds, socially, is an element in what for him is the generalized other; by taking the attitudes of which toward himself he becomes conscious of himself as an object or individual and *thus develops a self* or personality. (Mead, 1934, pp. 154fn, italics added)

In Mead's view, through assuming the role of the group or community, an individual's conduct becomes influenced and guided by social rules and norms. Unfortunately, Mead's original meaning of the term "role model" has become narrowed, so that now social scientists tend to emphasize the behavioral patterns of an actual person as constituting a "role model," leaving out or omitting the fact that Mead includes "any object" or "set of objects" as having this power as well. The importance of a role model lies in its representativeness as a sign.

Mead's account again highlights the dialectic, which we have already encountered in the analysis of symbolization: the tension between differentiation and integration. Mead, like Marx, emphasizes the fact that when the agent interacts with the peculiar physical characteristics of an object, his or her unique personal traits will emerge. Both also agree on the socializing function of a thing; its ability to reveal social goals and expectations through its use. How such socialization through objects works is usually too

obvious to attract notice. Yet it is an active part of the experiential context of people and therefore important to understand.

The socializing effect of objects is relatively clear. Substituting pictures of Stalin and Lenin for crucifixes in Russian classrooms was an orderly part of indoctrination into a new set of ultimate goals (Bronfenbrenner, 1973; O'Dell, 1978). But what social messages are being transmitted by objects in use? What is the implication of the fact that only 7 percent of the West German population in 1965 preferred traditional overstuffed furniture, whereas 35 percent preferred modern Scandinavian design; 15 percent chose imitation antique coffeepots; and 43 percent, pots of an identical shape but of a more contemporary style (Noelle and Neumann, 1967, pp. 132, 141–2)? Or what is the implication of the fact that the new city houses of Hyderabad in India often contain refrigerators in the dining room for guests to admire (Duncan and Duncan, 1976, p. 208)? Certainly, interaction with such objects helps either to pass along an already articulated set of social values and attitudes or to structure a new set of orientations, in which case the objects help to accomplish a "status passage" (Strauss, 1969, p. 37).

Until the 1960s many Americans prided themselves on their home appliances, and using them provided an empathic participation with the dominant ideology based on technological control. This relationship has by no means disappeared; every year some new technological marvel, such as a food processor or a word processor, will stimulate the enthusiasms of the great consuming public. But since the late 1960s plants have also become an important focal center in urban homes. Now transactions with plants are accompained by very different meanings from those with electrical appliances. There is a quality of generativity and nurturance in the former, a real sense of both a contribution to life as well as the symbolization of cultivation itself. Like the Ndembu girls initiated under the *mudyi* tree, many respondents emphasized how their own goals were being cultivated by houseplants. There is no question that the increased attention to plants represents the cultivation of ecological values that have become part of the culture in recent years. The question still remains: Is this microcosmic transaction with the natural environment a cause or a consequence of cultural values? In all probability, the answer is "both."

The role of objects in the development of the self – a summary

The Paleolithic hunter who spent days chipping stone tools regained the psychic energy invested fashioning them, and more, through the saving in time and the added efficiency in procuring calories that the use of the tools provided. This saving is well expressed by the Greek poet, writing in the time of Augustus, who celebrates the advantages of the watermill: "Spare your hands, which have been long familiar with the millstone, you maidens who used to crush the grain. Henceforth you shall sleep long, oblivious of the crowing cocks who greet the dawn." (quoted in Bloch, 1967, p. 145).

However, because a certain response is adaptive at a given time and at a specific level, it does not follow that the same response will always contribute to survival no matter how often and how intensely it is produced. Humanity's development of technique – the ability to manipulate and make use of external objects – is one of the distinguishing features of human evolution but, unfortunately, it also seems to be an ability that has gotten out of hand. If things attract our attention excessively, there is not enough psychic energy left to cultivate the interaction with the rest of the world. The danger of focusing attention exclusively on a goal of physical consumption – or materialism – is that one does not attend enough to the cultivation of the self, to the relationship with others, or to the broader purposes that affect life. As the economist Linder (1970) has pointed out, the acquisition and maintenance of objects can easily fill up a person's life, until there is no time to do anything else, not even to use the things that are exhausting all of one's psychic energy. When such a pass is reached, the adaptive value of objects is reversed; instead of liberating psychic activity, the things bind it to useless tasks. The former tool turns its master into its slave.

Objects affect what a person can do, either by expanding or restricting the scope of that person's actions and thoughts. And because what a person does is largely what he or she is, objects have a determining effect on the development of the self, which is why understanding the type of relationship that exists between people and things is so crucial.

In the preceding pages we have tried to explore some of the complex dimensions of this relationship. Considering the extent to which the fate of the human species has become intertwined with the things it has created, it is now essential to understand clearly how this relationship works and what its possible consequences might be.

The meaning of things

Domestic symbols and the self

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