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Love as Belonging   
Towards an Interdisciplinary Understanding of the Human

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We use the word “love” to denote the most trivial of thoughts just as we use it to denote the most profound. But whatever else it means, the term “love” also points to mystery. What exactly happens in us when we feel caritative love towards others? What is happening when we fail to love? And how does this most powerful social force spread among us? Some people appear to be more capable of expressing love than others. But also there are many who are taken by surprise when they love. Given the importance of love not only in our individual lives, but also in the broader social contexts of encounters between peoples or civilizations, we are bound to ask simply: are we perhaps today in a better position to tackle some of these questions? More finely nuanced, the question might be the following. If love is somehow an integrating power within the human person, as well as socially, between people and peoples, then is it possible that recent scientific breakthroughs are making possible new interdisciplinary understandings of the human which may perhaps be able to cast some light on the “mystery” of love, or the practices of love?

But it is important to recognize that whatever else it may turn out to be, love always partakes of the nature of a practice. We recognize love in its realizations: we *see* it. Moreover the features of love will be recognizable in the human body—the urge to give concrete expression to love—even where love cannot become caritative acts. Perhaps then we can say that there is a certain “madness” in love which comes into view where the loving person *cannot* act. It would seem to make more sense if we could only feel caritative love in situations where love can in fact be enacted and expressed: where it has a force for change. But love, as we know, is not like that. Love is deeply part of us. This essay is not centred on an *advocacy* of love, however, but rather on a motivation to understand it in ways which may have the potential to extend and facilitate our common humanity in the formation of community, under the challenging circumstances of our times.

Theory of Practice

One of the characteristics of a society is that certain kinds of practices will occur which are constituted as constantly repeating behaviour. We might say then that the core of our social humanity is bound up with such recognizable practices which are deeply embedded, ancient forms of constantly repeating behaviour. Among these we can include such social activities as “clapping,” “smiling,” and “laughing” on the one hand, and “singing,” “music making,” or “chanting together” on the other. We can point to “celebrating births,” “burying the dead,” “adorning the body,” “planting seeds,” “hunting,” “harvesting crops,” “eating food” and “passing waste.” These are all things that human beings do, mostly together, expressing an architecture of repeating movements. We recognize such practices today as ways of humanizing biological imperatives, or shaping our regular inter-human encounters. Moreover, it is often in and through our practices that we are defined as the persons we are and as other people recognize us. It is our practices which often set us apart from others in their slight deviations and particularities. Across the globe, people eat differently in different cultures.

It was the French social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu who, from the 1970s, began to define social practices in terms of their immediacy and, with that, to perceive the difficulty posed in objectifying practices through scientific reflection.[[1]](#endnote-1) Bourdieu judged the motivating forces within practices to be far from evident to us. He identified that a different kind of reasoning might be in play here and that the “logic of practices” is very different from the logic of rationality in its orientation to ends. In particular, Bourdieu drew attention to the fact that our practices are not like our ideas in that they are arranged differently in time.[[2]](#endnote-2) If we choose to *do* something, then what we have done will remain irreversible in one important sense. We cannot undo what we have done, although of course we may be able to correct it by immediately doing something else. But we cannot “undo” history as such. Moreover, if the intentionality or rationale of our practices concerns a structure of reasoning which is directed towards acts rather than beliefs, then the “logic of practice” never has the possibility of closure which an “external” or “observational” perspective allows us.[[3]](#endnote-3) Bourdieu’s life-long work, in fact, is marked by a deep scepticism with respect to the possibilities of an observational, “scientific” understanding of practices: the very same practices which seem to define us as human. Bourdieu developed his insightful understandings of practice in the contexts of anthropological fieldwork that he undertook among the Berbers in Morocco. This experience of a close study of a very different culture allowed him to gain new insights into the universal phenomenon of practices, despite their capacity to elude objectification.

Alasdair MacIntyre, who also engaged in depth with the nature of practices, approaches the question from within a more humanistic, philosophical tradition. His account of practices has also been highly influential. MacIntyre defines our practices in the following terms: “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended”.[[4]](#endnote-4) Practices are identified here as *social* forms of action which have their own inherent values and skills and so can be improved and built upon. As repeating, practices are that kind of action, with social relevance, which allows us to learn to perform them better. This moment of practical learning is at the heart of what it is to be human, in which the individual performance of *love* points to the potential for enhanced and distributed forms of communitarian social practice.

A comparison between these two figures is informative however. Bourdieu’s focus lies upon the often obscure behaviours and motivations of pre-thematic (pre-self-aware) embodiment, while MacIntyre specifically engages with our conscious capacity to learn from experience. In short, MacIntyre explicitly places practices within the domain of the reflexivity of consciousness. Here he follows a more overtly philosophical trajectory, following an Aristotelian inheritance, while Bourdieu considers practices more from an anthropological perspective, though with his eye on sketching a universalist theory of practice. In a sense, Bourdieu exposed himself more deeply to the reality of human practices, according to their resistance to objectification.

The Science of Practices

Neither Bourdieu’s nor MacIntyre’s work can be said to sit within natural science. But today, practices appear to call for both scientific and humanistic readings at the same time. Since the 1970s, neuroscience has developed in ways that have increasingly allowed new light to be cast upon what were previously largely inaccessible processes of pre-thematic behaviour. It is not the case however that practices as such have become the focus of attention. In general, our “practices” raise demanding issues of complexity. For instance, across the board our “practices” appear to raise questions about the disparity between inheritance and act, or between agency, education, and deeply ingrained habit. Where else does the “automatic” or “unthinking” principle form such an essential part of the human, while also seeming to occupy the same biological space as our developed sense of reason and responsibility? What we see from a neuroscientific perspective however, is the development of a highly productive focus upon the human social cognition system in the present, which casts light on how modern human beings bond and build community, while evolutionary science engages with this same capacity from the perspective of our history: how we became the human beings we are over time. Progress in both these fields is leading to extensive gains in terms of medical and psychological applications, and it is time that what we understand by love, or our strong belonging together, should begin to resource our social and political sensibility on a larger scale.

There is an emphasis today upon “teaching practices,” “scientific practices,” “the practices of teaching science,” and “the transfer of research gains into practical applications.” But engaging with the broad topic of “practices” as such, with its uncompromising and far-reaching interdisciplinarity, has proved elusive. In the light of this, it is very welcome that a paper was published in 2016, by Ramstead, Veissière and Kirmayer entitled “Cultural Affordances: Scaffolding Local Worlds Through Shared Intentionality and Regimes of Attention.” This influential paper examines human behaviour through the lens of “cultural affordances,” and it makes a major contribution to our understanding of practices.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The term “affordance” was first defined by J. J. Gibson in 1979: “The affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes either for good or ill … It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The significant insight here is that “affordances” show us that we respond to the shape or nature of the environment we find ourselves in. In an attempt to bridge “cognitive and social sciences,” Ramstead, Veissière and Kirmayer seek to better understand “how culture and context interact with human biology to shape human behavior, cognition, and experience,” where our practices appear to be the social memory or deposit of these interactions over time. The authors argue that practices “acquire content through immersive participation of the agent in social practices that regulate joint attention and shared intentionality.” Here our experience of human reality is based in “a multilevel account of the socio-culturally scaffolded forms of affordance learning and the transmission of affordances in patterned sociocultural practices and regimes of shared attention.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

But this influential reading of practices as a form of “cultural scaffolding,” in which collaborative meaning-making takes place, also includes the principle that practices remain “contentless” until they are scripted, formed or inhabited by communicating minds who “share intentionality” and practice “joint attention.” It is argued that our practices are animated or “filled” by the immersive presence of self-aware mind, communicating with other minds. Here the authors are drawing upon the influential intellectual movement of “radical enactivism” as developed principally by David Hutto and Erik Myin.[[8]](#endnote-8) We have to contrast this “radical enactivism” with the “enactivist” school favoured by both scientists and philosophers whose work specifically reflects an engagement with our “social cognition system.” This is the place of intense information exchange which is the foundation of our human sociality. Moreover, the social cognition system is understood to be overwhelmingly pre-thematic. It is not “contentless” then, but rather is constituted by content which the conscious mind does not *reflexively* know, but with which—as neuroscience shows—conscious mind is nevertheless intimately connected.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The important distinction then between “radical enactivism” on the one hand and the “enactivism” of social cognition on the other can be expressed in terms of directionality. In the “radically enactivist” model, mind extends in a linear way, across a range of different practices, which can be counted as “contentless” until they are filled by mind through agent-centred social interactions. “Radical enactivism” suggests that there can be no differentiation at the level of practice on account of the intrinsically “contentless” nature of its material form. Rather, the differentiation occurs at the level of function, according to our intentionalities and our representations which come to “fill” the practices in processes of “cultural scaffolding.”

In contrast, the “enactivist” model suggests that mind extends in an axis of depth, allowing a specific focus on the social cognition system. This combines both the pre-thematic and the thematic levels of the self, which converge in ways that can deeply shape our self-understanding. Here pre-thematic neural activation and the neural activation of our advanced linguistic consciousness combine, in ways that give us self-awareness and an apprehension of internality and depth. From an evolutionary perspective, this is also our shared human “inheritance.” Our social cognition is thus set apart from other practices in the nature of the “fit” between the pre-thematic density or “rapport” and our communicative practices, on the one hand, and the thematic intensity of our advanced linguistic consciousness on the other.[[10]](#endnote-10) This underpins the view that human social cognition is not just a practice but can be considered to be the foundational human practice, which is bound up with the emergence of our linguistic consciousness.

The overflow or connectivity between the pre-thematic and the thematic in our social cognition is well developed in the following quotation:

When we interact with another person, our brains and bodies are no longer isolated, but immersed in an environment with the other person, in which we become a coupled unit through a continuous moment-to-moment mutual adaptation of our own actions and the actions of the other.[[11]](#endnote-11)

These multiple reflex interactions occur at speeds well below the threshold of conscious perception. But in their communication of a dynamic “rapport,” they are “complex, multi-layered, self-organizing”, sitting within the early motor system, involving sets of mutual responses ranging from eye movement, facial expression, posture and gesture to the synchrony of brain waves, breathing and pulse. This constitutes a subtle and pervasive “alignment of behaviour” which includes “synergies, co-ordination and phase attraction.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Moreover, there is also a complex engagement with the other which recruits the medial prefrontal cortex in processes of evaluation, which may need to integrate different sources of knowledge: a first-hand knowledge of the other gained in the moment and a second-hand, associative knowledge acquired from other sources. Within the “social cognition system”, the evaluative protocols of one are densely exposed to the evaluative protocols of the other, and so such a system has to be understood as a form of pre-thematic reflexivity which is extensively conditioned by an environment of interactive, physical-social complexity. Empathy, affectivity and evaluation all combine with high levels of pre-thematic evaluative activity in what di Paulo and de Jaegher call “participatory sense-making” of the human other.[[13]](#endnote-13) As we shall see later, it is in this area that love belongs, as essential to harmonious social cognition, and so as creating a sense of belonging.

A key element in the contribution of Ramstead, Vessière and Kirmayer in their article of 2016 thus lies in the alignment of the “radical enactivist” school with an *interdisciplinary* science of “affordances.” If evolutionary science and neuroscience can combine here, from a humanities perspective it appears also that philosophy can makes its mark. But now we have to ask: what kind of interdisciplinarity is this? From a humanities point of view, a scholar who is familiar with the history of the social and philosophical reception of Enlightenment science, will see something very different here from what might at first seem evident to an analytical philosopher. Modern Western rationalism was born in the shock of the discovery of the seemingly universal law of efficient causation, which appeared to exclude the possibility of freedom. In the immediate aftermath of Kant’s first critique, Johann Gottlieb Fichte asserted the principle that whether we are free or not depends upon whether we *choose* to be free. Fichte states: “For the Idealist nothing is positive but freedom, and, for him, being is nothing but a negation of freedom.” [[14]](#endnote-14) We can paraphrase this as meaning: do we exercise our freedom, as *Geist* or “Spirit”, even in the face of an apparent scientific reductivism, or not? This was a pivotal question of the times. But during the Enlightenment period, the dualist Rationalism of the day was repeatedly challenged by their Romantic opponents who believed we are integrally present within this universe, as beings who are constituted according to the fundamental unity of body and mind. The science of the day, however, was of a kind which meant that Hegel’s later commitment to mind (or Spirit) above matter and his massive elaboration of this theme in terms of human freedom, would achieve normativity. Above all, Hegel identified the materiality of language, with its ever-changing contextual meanings, as being a key challenge to our free decision-making. Mind needs to express its sovereign independence as reason, beyond the material constraints of language as this compromises mind on account of its varying formats and contexts.[[15]](#endnote-15) Here mind becomes “universal knowledge” and the materiality of language is merely the limited path the mind takes to its ultimate liberation as universal consciousness.

The Hegelian Spirit transcends the materiality of language, and places Spirit above matter, or at least in discontinuity with matter. It would not be wholly misrepresentative to suggest that Hegel is motivated by a real need to overcome the materiality of the sign, through a mechanism of mental assertiveness: being free because we *choose* to be free. The opposite of this dualism would appear to be the recognition of what David Chalmers calls “the hard question” which is simply acknowledging that the relation between mind and matter, in human beings, continues to defeat us.[[16]](#endnote-16) But it seems that the move from “contentless basic mental processes” to “content through immersive participation of the agent in social practices” possesses the same performativity or “assertion” with respect to the mind’s freedom that we find earlier in the Western tradition. While it shuns the “autonomy” of the self, which is a central idea in Western rationalism, replacing it with a welcome social model of the “content” of mind, we are at the same time left with no account of what sense we are to make of the transition from the “contentless” nature of our “basic *mental* processes” (my italics) to the “cultural content” which defines mature practices.[[17]](#endnote-17) If the passage from “contentless” to “cultural content” occurs through what is termed “immersive participation of the agent in social practices,” then what does the word “participation” mean here? If it is the agency of “the agent” which determines the participation, then this “immersive participation” appears to be the self-production of the agent concerned, in combination with other agents. In other words, human agency is not mediated here by what goes before, as in the accounts of the self which we find in the evolutionary or indeed neurological sciences. Rather this configuration of mind on the one hand and contentless matter on the other appears to suspend the possibility of Chalmer’s recognition of the “hard question.” Something is resolved here by the apparently magical power of mind to think its own genesis. In short, it is not clear to what extent “radical enactivism” escapes its own cultural origins.

Furthermore, we need to place this discussion in the context of contemporary science of language which gives emphasis to the grounding of consciousness within the materiality of language. The Romantics already anticipated this response in their belief that as human beings we wholly belong in this world. They understood the materiality of language to be the framing of our belonging in space and time, which they further linked with the Romantic sense of aesthetics and the “sublime.” In the Romantic perspective, language is our point of access into the world around us, in the fulness of its infinity.

Some of these same problematics have reappeared in contemporary neuroscience of language and, in recent years, the view has predominated that even advanced language, and complex mathematics, show a material interface in the brain.[[18]](#endnote-18) The advanced linguistic mind does not escape materiality. It does not follow that this is a reductive argument however: language is not reduced to matter. It is important to recall that we *choose* our words (*parole* from *langue* in de Saussure’s terms[[19]](#endnote-19)), and we will always, under normal conditions, accept answerability for what we say. Material words are embedded in the human social cognition system and are continuous with it: speech and writing are the extension of powerfully communicative protocols which are embedded in evolutionary processes of accessing and belonging in the surrounding world. The practices of speech and writing appear to assume our responsibility then for what we say, which can be summarized in terms of the sense we have of being *free*. Again, then, we enter the territory of love which, as we shall see, is associated with a certain kind of freedom.

Interdisciplinarity and Practices

It would seem that nothing comes more naturally to us than establishing regimes of knowledge in the flow of life as systems of control. But such paradigms run the risk of by-passing the central role of language in framing consciousness, following the cultural inheritance of Idealists and the Rationalists who sought to by-pass the difficult question of materiality (with its implicit seeming denial of the possibility of freedom) through establishing a dualistic model of the self and, indeed, of the world as such. It is in fact much more extensively the case today that language in both humanistic and scientific discourse is understood to be simultaneously matter and mind, underpinning a non-dualist discourse of the kind we find in the “enactivist” school.[[20]](#endnote-20)

If we decisively break with that dualistic model, however, then the key methodological question which arises within a non-dualistic framework is the following: which practice or practices should we take as normative and so as the basis of such an interdisciplinary study? The decision to begin with the human social cognition system is a pragmatic one. The pressing questions for us today are social, concerning the development of community under the pressures of globalization and reduced access to resources. Today, we need to develop better understandings of our capacity for positive, life-affirming, social change, or for what we might call the “production of community.” The social cognition system itself represents a space of unparalleled dynamic interactions, based upon responsive harmonizations, in the formation of strong and vital relationships between people. Its “participative sense making” supports both the exceptionally fast and dense pre-thematic neural networks, on the one hand, and the self-possessing, self-aware considerations of our advanced linguistic consciousness on the other. The critical point of contact between the pre-thematic and the thematic level lies in the materiality of language itself: the sounds and shapes of words. These are, in essence, “social tools.” Arguably, the tool-like nature of words in the advanced linguistic consciousness which defines us today results from the fusion of ancient *homo faber* and *homo socius*, and so also to the production of a new humanity who speaks and writes, sings and debates, blesses and curses, argues and agrees, tells jokes, recites poetry, “spins” communication and passes on “false news”.

But at this point we have to be clear about what it is that we are seeing. If mind and matter together form a single unity, then we need to understand that what is coming into view is a primary human “structure.” This structure tells us that if we look at our advanced linguistic consciousness in the light of what we understand of the social cognition system, as this is scientifically studied, then we will recognize a series of features which suggest a top-down alignment. But likewise, if we study the neural mechanisms which underlie our experience of consciousness, then we shall again recognize a host of features suggesting in this case a bottom-up alignment. This two-way structure of “consciousness” and “emergence” (or of “enactivist” *surface* and *depth*) grounds a far-ranging process of self-recognition, within a space marked out by evolutionary anthropology and social neuroscience. But of course this self-recognition does not in itself as yet identify any kind of specific practice. And love, as we suggested at the outset, is most fundamentally practice: it is something done.

The argument here is that the human person is a unity of mind and matter, thought and practice, and that this unity supports a structure of consciousness and depth. But how can we bring clarity to this structure in the dynamics of lived reality? How can we begin to learn in ways that can improve our social practices, for instance, growing in self-understanding, practical wisdom and an enhanced power of producing community in the way that Alisdair MacIntyre recommends?

Understanding freedom

We have asserted that it is the presence of advanced language, with its material foundation in sound and script, which “sets us free.” This is the case in the sense that the power of choice is intrinsic to any advanced linguistic system, in which we choose individual words (*parole*) or sequences from the system in its entirely (*langue*), accepting responsibility for what we say. But here I argue for the view that this freedom, which is grounded in our linguistic nature, can only become properly real in three specific ways. Freedom is not simply like the “idling” of an engine. It is rather a form of statement or self-positioning in the world, in which our freedom becomes *real*. Or to put it another way, in which we freely *manifest* as real. Like anything else that is real, we can be free only in specific times and places, and in specific ways. The account of freedom given here seeks to elucidate the three different types of freedom of which we are capable as human beings. Each is marked by its own characteristic form of reasoning, its own type of language use, its own mode of being in time. Finally, each has its own level or depth of belonging in the world. We shall begin with the familiar distinction between the theoretical and practical reasoning of the “observer” and the “agent” before considering a third level or kind of reasoning, which—as we shall argue—is vital for understand the limits of the first two but which has itself been significantly occluded in the Western “universalist” tradition. Its recovery, its proper naming, and its identification as associated with love, is fundamental for the possibility of significant social renewal today.

*Freedom “from”*

Typically this is associated with the *observer*. An observer needs to establish a distance between self and world in order for the world, or things in the world, to come into view with sufficient clarity. In this sense scientists are observers of a very specialized kind. They have to acquire the exact skills of description, in highly technical forms of language, which centre on mathematics. This specialized, though also shared, form of language allows scientists to form a community of those who can validate or call into question acute scientific observations.

Scientists are in time in a particular way. They can refine the questions asked and extend deadlines as needed in order to reduce complexity and to maximize the possibility that the resulting knowledge will be as accurate and stable as possible. This is a matter of cognitive control, through focus, which secures the validity of what is discovered. What we see here then is a *theoretical* form of reasoning which is determined by the need to establish secure knowledge. Theoretical reasoning brings observers a freedom *from* the world as they clarify their relation to the world, simplifying and ordering that relation as best they can. The most authoritative linguistic mediation of the observer-world relation is always likely to be the objectivity of the language of mathematics and, in its own contexts, symbolic logic. Scientific freedom *from* gives a real belonging in the world but one which is limited and constrained by the objects of its study and the methods of its analysis.

*Freedom “to”*

But not all decisions we make are theoretical ones. It is likely that the decisions which most of us make most of the time will address practical rather than theoretical issues. These will concern how we take account of, or respond to, other people with whom we share space and time, and also resources. Calculations about “what might work” with regard to those who live with us, or with whom we have connections and contacts, differ from those of scientific observations. Here we no longer have the luxury of slowing down and simplifying the questions until they achieve a maximal clarity. Someone else’s timetable for reflection and decision might be quite different from my own. We may not have all the information we would like. There may be a power differential. And we may have only a partial or evolving understanding of what it is we are seeking to achieve in any particular situation. The complexity that comes with our freedom *to* cannot be eradicated but only managed.

What we are describing here is the reasoning of the *agent*, which is quite different from that of the observer. The agent is more directly immersed in time, with all the fluctuations, pressures and diverse constructions of situational reality. Our language use will also be very different. Here we will seek to influence others to act in certain ways; or indeed not to act at all. Language becomes a tool not of clarity so much as persuasion or indeed our participation in reality. This is decision-making then which cannot stand back from life in order to come to judgment as a scientist might. Rather we are now intrinsically in the flow of time and are part of the situation to hand. We can no longer reduce complexity as the scientist does. We are now ourselves taken up in the situation we are seeking to manage. This becomes practical rather than theoretical reasoning. But how can we now reduce the complexity of the world in ways that will make it manageable and allow us to act rationally? How do we come to rational judgments in open-ended situations in which we can never bring the fluidity of life under our own control: in which we can never fully stand outside the situation we are in and examine it objectively?

Practical reasoning of this kind reduces the inevitable openness and fluidity of situational reality by determining what it is that I *need* or *want*. We filter complex reality through our own embedded characteristics and proclivities. In effect, I reduce the complexity of what I shall do now, in this situation, on the basis of what I have done before, and what it is that I need. It is only when something quite new appears, or indeed something which has significant new ethical implications, that I am challenged and have to look afresh at the situation I find myself in.

The kind of language involved in practical reasoning then is interrogative, efficacious and driven by intentions. We will seek to persuade others in ways that seem to move things on in the right direction. The agent certainly belongs in the world but only in ways that are potentially disruptive. Reality here is not just something I can view, as if from afar, but is now also something that I can experience from within. In my practical reasoning I recognize that I immersively belong in this world, but not that I am fully at home.

*Freedom “from” and “to” together form a historical “totality”*

In fact, the theoretical freedom *from* of the scientific observer, and the practical freedom *to*, of the agent have a long history in the Western world. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, they came to combine in influential ways through the rise of technologies. We can see this iconically in the case of Galileo who, in the early 1600s, became intrigued by reports of the production of a new telescope in the Netherlands. He was determined to surpass that, and finally produced a telescope with significantly larger magnification. In early January of 1610, Galileo was studying the planet Jupiter and he noted the appearance of what appeared to be very small “fixed stars.” One disappeared and Galileo assumed that it had gone behind the planet. Over a period of days, Galileo came to the conclusion that what he was seeing through his telescope were the four transiting moons of Jupiter.[[21]](#endnote-21)

To describe orbits mathematically is one thing, but to *see planets orbiting for yourself* is quite another*.* This particular act of seeing would prove irreversible. The new laws of mechanics that were emerging held not only for the visible world, but also for the invisible one. The technology of the telescope brought into view what was previously invisible.

But Galileo’s invention also allowed others, with military interests, to gain advantages on the battlefield. This combination and re-combination of science with ways of enhancing or empowering the human body through technology was to become a primary feature of the industrial and imperial age. Technological progress may have led to significant improvement in the medical sciences, but it also allowed faster ships to be built increasing the reach of empire, while constantly improving armaments gave the Western powers supremacy.

It is difficult not to conclude today that this particular inheritance of progress has been achieved without much regard for our long term social and ethical values. The ethical precepts which sustained family life, for instance, met firm resistance in the public and global sphere. Technological developments have led to the exploitation of the planet. We have been surprisingly slow to ask the right questions about how we should responsibly use the power of technology, or indeed question the kinds of economic reasoning we use with respect to the environment in relation to production, profit and growth.[[22]](#endnote-22) The claims to “freedom” today can be passionate, visceral, often internally contradictory, and are not infrequently tinged with violence (even in the “mature democracies” of the US and the UK). But if we look at the academic discussions of freedom today, these are often highly technical with the development of concepts such as “negative freedom” (the right to “non-interference” by others), “positive freedom” (the right to “opportunities” through others) and “republican freedom” (the right to “non-domination” by others).[[23]](#endnote-23) There is little here to capture the imagination and, potentially, to recast the human. And yet the immediate experience of freedom itself—the freedom to breathe, move, eat, talk, to learn and to thrive in community—seems so fundamental. How do we account for this?

We can read our Western history as being based, since the sixteenth century, on the fusion of two primary forms of freedom: our practical freedom *to* and our theoretical freedom *from*. Technology is the fusion of these two. But we should note firstly that technology has the power strongly to shape culture and society, but neither our freedom *from* nor our freedom *to* appears to have the capacity to introduce a foundational ethics. Neither are particularly defined by the production or sustaining of long term viable community, or indeed by the capacity for generating social creativity. In fact, we are reminded of Emmanuel Levinas’s philosophical definition of a “totality”. To be a totality means that “individuals are reduced to bearers of forces which command them without their knowledge. Individuals borrow from this totality their meaning.” [[24]](#endnote-24) Alternatively, a “totality” can be defined as a closed system produced by an instinct for control in which no awareness is shown that it is part of a larger system. From Levinas’ point of view, our freedom *from* and our freedom *to* have extensively combined to constitute such a “totality” on the basis of technological innovations which gave expression to new understandings of the world and how we can control it, while contributing very little indeed to our self-understanding as social and ethical creatures. Of course it is also the case (as Kant lamented at the time[[25]](#endnote-25)) that much was hidden from view which concerned ourselves especially as social creatures. For more information about the inner workings of our sociality we have needed to wait for advances in neuroscience and evolutionary science in the modern period.

We are left with the question whether the language of contemporary philosophical ethics can appear so attenuated because it is failing to locate the foundations of ethics which are in some degree concealed by the far-reaching cultural structures of our freedom *from* and our freedom *to*. If such an ethical foundation exists, as successful small-scale societies or community networks suggest that it does, or indeed as we find evidenced in the core of long term religious traditions, then it will still not be easy to draw upon this “frame of reference.” In fact, it may be that this most fundamental freedom, our freedom *in*, has been hidden from us since it did not correspond to the shape of the cultural and historical processes which have been in the ascendancy since the Enlightenment. It may be the case that we did not have to name our freedom *in* in the pre-modern period but that, following the Enlightenment, it was no longer possible to name it since it was now concealed in the shadow of a powerful “totality” which combined our freedom *from* and freedom *to*, through the rise of a technological age.

*Freedom “in”*

It is time to define our freedom *in* in the same terms as the above, which is to say with respect to the structure of our reasoning, the kind of language we use, and our situatedness in time, as well as the nature and extent of our belonging in the world. But this “belonging” which is of such social importance is a concept that requires elucidation.

In order to establish the parameters for such an elucidation we need to consider what are arguably two of the most significant scientific discoveries about our own humanity in recent years. These point to two different but nevertheless related aspects of the human which have a fundamental role to play in any understanding of the human. The first concerns neurological data which casts light on the material basis of advanced language in the brain. This means that it is now no longer possible to suppose that mind transcends matter. Rather, mind and matter are mutually implicating. This does not happen in ways that compromise our freedom, however. In fact, we can now say that our freedom is distinctively *linguistic* to the extent that we always choose our *parole* (or “word”) from *langue* (or “language”), as de Saussure suggests.[[26]](#endnote-26) Reasoning is always at some level linguistic. While the question of how we can understand the thorough-going mutuality of mind and matter in our advanced linguistic consciousness remains a very difficult one (which we may never understand), the fact that this unity has implications for our practices is much more straightforward. If we want to understand the nature of our belonging, through freedom, then we need to look at how we *use* our freedom: how we can *choose to be free*.

But the second deeply influential discovery concerns advances in evolutionary science which identify the emergence of our advanced modern language as being bound up with ritual. The sophisticated tool-making processes first identified in Southern Africa, and linked with the first emergence of what archaeologists call “analogical reasoning” (or how we can have mental representations of what might be happening to stone objects that are being prepared and which we cannot see), are also recognizably forms of ritual.[[27]](#endnote-27) Different traditions of sequencing in the production of stone tools have been identified, and these were all repeating, ritualistic forms of behavior. Evolutionary science has identified the “lithic landscapes” of our past in which a very high proportion of the community will have been involved in the production of stone tools. We can conclude from this on the one hand then that there is no escaping the internalized power of tool making and tool use, which has defined us modern human beings as linguistic creatures. But on the other hand, the particular ways in which we have ourselves been “shaped” through this evolutionary process, can also be considered to be ritual or ritual-like effects. Tool manufacture and use combine with advanced language in and through social processes of both learning and performance which have a distinctively repetitive character. It is through repeating words that we learn them: the words are learned from the mouths of others. And it is words that allow us to shape the social world of which we are a part, and indeed the landscape in which we live, in accordance with our intentionalities. Even a handshake is a form of co-ordinated movement. We have to use the term “ritual” then both in the specific sense of the organized rites of religions, but also in an extended sense of less organized, ritual-like practices in which however repetition still plays a key role.

It is not surprising then that our freedom *in* turns out to be a very particular kind of freedom in which the materiality of the linguistic sign plays a significant role. But when we suspend the referential meanings of words (or moderate them) through practices of repetition, as we do in ritual or ritual-like practices (in which we sing, dance, recite, rhyme, chant, sway or otherwise move synchronically together), we are in effect choosing to highlight the material nature of the sign itself rather than (or together with) its meanings. Here we begin to see the configuration of our freedom *in*. If in our agent-freedom *to* we can be said to be pursuing our own agenda, as actor in the world, and if we are pursuing our own agenda as a scientist in our freedom *from*, allowing us the liberating cognitive freedom from the world enjoyed by the observer, then when we use our freedom *in*, we are using words in ways that allow us to *celebrate language as such*. If it is through the materiality of language that we are made free, then why should we not be able to celebrate this fundamental freedom by freely choosing to enhance or foreground the materiality of words as such? Arguably this is what is happening in ritual: ritual then is the form that language takes when we positively and personally choose to celebrate the materiality of the signs which allow us to belong freely, with others, in this world. It is our freedom *in* that grounds the possible integration of both our freedom *from* and our freedom *to*. In fact, what could be more worthy of celebration than this direct belonging, or sharing in reality with our fellow human beings with whom we have not just a particular language in common (if indeed we do) but most importantly with whom we have language itself in common? Here repeating ritual is the celebration of our shared belonging in the world and so also our shared celebration as self-possessing, self-aware and, above all, *free* human beings.

It appears then that ritual in a formal sense is the way in which we celebrate the freedom we have through the thousands of internalized linguistic signs which populate our brain and which together constitute our advanced linguistic consciousness, with its three, distinct but also far reaching freedoms. Celebrating the materiality of words then is a way of celebrating our being free in the world. But this still leaves us with the difficult question of what exactly we should understand ritual to be?

Ritual is defined in different ways, though always related in some way to the concept of *practice* and also to what we can call “non-emphatic repetition.” It is entirely normal in ritual practice that phrases, or prayers (the “Our Father,” for instance) should always be uttered in exactly the same way. Moreover, repetition generally implies emphasis, as we try to get our point over. Repetition in ritual then needs to be understood quite differently. The effect of non-emphatic repetition as something which is constantly recurring is to create harmonies. Repeating speech, song or movement create their own world of symmetry. This is quite different from communication through discursive language, in which the meaning of the words is uppermost. Moreover, its openness suggests that in ritual we are also in time according to repetition. Repetition in ritual suggests that the properties of time are enhanced for us, and indeed that we can say that we are in time through the rhythms and harmonies of ritual. In some sense, we *are* these rhythms and harmonies.

In terms of contemporary understandings of rituals, Catherine Bell puts an emphasis on the extent to which ritual appeals to the illocutionary principle or motivation to practice rather than discursive knowledge.[[28]](#endnote-28) Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon have important insights for ritual however when they suggest that we should think of it as a structure which allows the emergence of our being or belonging in the world. Rather than policing the interpretations of ritual in a way that shifts the focus from practice to belief, ritual—for these authors—appears as a fundamental inheritance which generates the possibilities through radical openness of new forms of comprehensive or cosmic belonging.[[29]](#endnote-29)

Today however we have a further way of looking at ritual. Here we need to recall that the human social cognition system is itself pre-thematic and grounded in communication through interactive harmonies. Moreover, this “participative sense-making” combines evaluation and empathy, which together will form the ground of love. If we understand love to be the wholly free entry of the self into the world however, in a way that reflects our deep belonging in the world with others, then we must also be concerned with how we can receive the presence of this ancient social cognition system within ourselves in terms of our own advanced linguistic consciousness with its far-reaching powers of choice. We can put this question another way. As self-aware human beings, we already find ourselves with a history of human relations. Indeed, we are extensively constituted as *this* human being on the basis of the relationships which have sustained us, or damaged us. This means for instance that we can allow our relational power of empathy to be the basis of cruelty (in which we discern through empathy what will cause maximum pain or distress) or, alternatively, empathy can sustain and drive our power of compassion. Empathy is a given of our human nature, but compassion is specifically the product of positive and enlightened evaluation. The pre-thematic emphasis upon practice is incomplete in modern human beings then until it becomes clear how the social cognition system which embeds us in life is being culturally, psychologically and ethically fostered and received within the diverse communities which shape us.

Love then turns out to be the possibility that we will positively receive the harmonies of our shared social cognition system which is to say this long term inheritance of belonging to one another, as self-aware human beings who possess the power of choice. But precisely because it is a harmonization, love always remains gratuitous. We cannot *assert* love. We can only choose not to reject it when it presents itself to us in and through harmonic discernment in parallel with the consenting promptings to movement that we associate with ritual and ritual-like behavior, or indeed with loving behavior. Our freedom *in* then is fundamentally our reception of the positive orientation to the other—our *recognition* of the other—which arises from within us and which we do not oppose through any assertive (and so also conditional) freedom of choice. We can understand love, in fact, to be the reception or recognition of those encompassing and deep-set harmonics which are associated with regular movements, in which pre-thematic and self-aware levels harmonically combine, allowing the emergence of a wholeness which can naturally precipitate in action.

Technology and the Practice of Love

It may seem strange to bring technology into the picture that is presently being drawn here. In my account of the Western Enlightenment, I stressed the emergence of a historical “totality” which focused our capacity for freedom as “freedom *from*” and “freedom *to*” through the assimilation of technology. Such technological advances (which were not yet supported by the gains of our contemporary science) closed out our freedom *in* with its far-reaching sociality. It becomes important then that we should look again at the potential contribution which technology might be able to make in the light, for instance, of the measurable rhythmic states of rituals.

In the first place, we need to consider that the right kinds of technological interventions may have the capacity to enhance states which sit more deeply than reflexive mind. We know today that the social cognition system within us, which is deeply ritual-like in its dynamic and interactive structure, is prior to mind: indeed, our self-aware advanced linguistic consciousness must have evolved from our social cognition system and it must remain rooted in it. We can call this ancient, inherited system “ritual\_1.”

If we agree with the dominant view that the rapid increase in human population size, through the advent of agriculture and townships during the early Neolithic, placed new strains on our social accommodation with one another, then we will not be surprised that evidence appears for the emergence of large scale rituals in this period. This level of ritual is arguably what we would most easily identify as ritual today, since these have shaped the world religions in particular, showing also a close affinity with the arts and the spread of civilizations. At the same time, significant levels of division appear both within and between world religions; perhaps more so than at any other time in our history. We can call this more recent inheritance “ritual\_2.”

What we need today then is “ritual\_3” which outlines a genuinely species-wide or human-centred approach to the harmonization of our advanced linguistic consciousness with the social cognition system. This harmonization, as I have proposed, is inseparable from the practice of love, since love involves both evaluation of the other and empathy with the other. But what would a new “ritual\_3” look like? How can we extend “harmonization” interculturally, beyond its present limits? In a fierce attack upon the limits of Enlightenment, Friedrich Nietzsche advocated that the world only comes into being when a sequence of “beats” occur which spacially map onto the stream of time. For this reason, in the spirit of Seligman, Weller, Puett and Simon, he held music to have cosmic effects. Is there a place here then for “Virtual Times?”

If the human social cognition system is genuinely “self-organizing” and therefore identifiable at some level with “world”, why should it not be the case that Virtual Reality can provide experiences of natural landscapes which can in some way parallel the experiences we can have in nature itself? Can we have some kind of genuine experience of indigenous tribal life through a fusion of VR and real time images? If our advanced linguistic consciousness is at its heart social, but also discerning (or “evaluative”), then is it possible to build new levels of shared evaluation through practicing joint or group decision making today? Such shared evaluation is enabled by, yet also itself enables, the practice of love. Group decision-making (of the kind still practiced by some small-scale societies today as well as our contemporary “citizen’s assemblies”) potentially offers us a degree of return to an ancient form of deep sociality. This presupposes the proximity of the face-to-face however. But does VR potentially have a role here in terms of extending the immense social generativity of the human face-to-face? Can new science of the human combine with new technological enhancements in ways that allow us to practice new extensions of the social cognition system, and so to practice love? This may raise questions of innovation which should be tackled by the emerging generation in both East and West. “Ritual\_3” will indeed need to be something new. The extension from the social cognition system (A) to religious rituals (A+B) and then, thirdly, to a new medium for fostering communitarianism and social unity today (A+B+C) will needed to be grounded in scientific understandings of practice, empathy, and evaluation. But we may also need to look for a technological “powering up” or enhancement of the human social cognition system, in ways which mark a new “wholenesss” between our social “self” and our technological “self”.

A reconciliation here (the emergence of a genuinely social technology, deeply shaped by our ethical and cultural values) may retrieve the kind of relationship which existed between technology and the self in the centuries before the emergence of the Western Enlightenment. We know today that it contained at its heart a far-reaching scientific imbalance, which would lead to significant divisions, with deleterious effects, despite its own best intentions.

Notes

1. See for instance Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1977); Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Polity Press, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bourdieu reference[I’ll have to wait a bit for this reference] [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bourdieu reference [ditto] [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Maxwell J. D. Ramstead, Samuel P. L. Veissière, and Laurence J. Kirmayer, "Cultural Affordances: Scaffolding Local Worlds through Shared Intentionality and Regimes of Attention," *Frontiers in Psychology* 7, no. 1090 (2016), <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01090> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1979), 127. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ramstead, Veissière and Kirmeyer, “Cultural Affordances”, <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01090>

   [pages].[NO PAGE NUMBERING IS GIVEN IN THE ARTICLE] [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. David D. Hutto, and Erik Myin, *Radicalizing Enactivism: Basic Minds without Content* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013); Hutto and Myin, *Evolving Enactivism: Basic Minds Meet Content* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017), https://doi:10.2307/j.ctt1q1xq5g). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Lawrence Shapiro ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Embodied Cognition*, (London: Routledge, 2014). See also Albert Newen, Leon de Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. On the importance of “rapport,” see Linda Tickle-Degnen, and Robert Rosenthal, “The Nature of Rapport and Its Nonverbal Correlates,” *Psychological Inquiry,* 1, no. 4 (1990): 285–293, https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0104\_1. See also Gary Bente and Eric Novotny, “Bodies and Minds in Sync: Forms and Functions of Interpersonal Synchrony in Human Interaction,” in *The Handbook of Communication, Science and Biology*, ed. Kory Floyd and René Weber (Routledge: New York and London, 2020), 416–428. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ivana Konvalinka and Andreas Roepstorff, “The two-brain approach: how can mutually interacting brains teach us something about social interaction?” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 6 (2012): 215, https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00215. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ezequiel A. Di Paolo and Hanne De Jaegher, “The Interactive Brain Hypothesis,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 6 (2012), 1 [1-16]. See also Leonhard Schilbach et al., “Toward a Second-Person Neuroscience,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36, no. 4 (2013): 393–414. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Di Paulo and De Jaegher, “Interactive Brain Hypothesis,” 1, 2–4. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Johann G. Fichte, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings, 1797-1800*, ed. and transl. with an introduction and notes by Daniel Breazeale (Hackett Publishing Company Inc., Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1994), 84. See also Oliver Davies, *The Creativity of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ???-???. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§90–110, 58–66. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. David J. Chalmers, “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no.3 (1995): 200–219. For a broader development of this theme, see also Chalmers, *The Character of Consciousness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ramstead, Veissière and Kirmeyer, “Cultural Affordances”,

    <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01090> [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. James Hurford, *The Origins of Meaning. Language in the Light of Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind. Embodiment, Action and Cognitive Extension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Alexander G. Huth, Wendy A. de Heer, Thomas L. Griffiths, Frédéric E. Theunissen, and Jack L. Gallant, “Natural Speech Reveals the Semantic Maps That Tile Human Cerebral Cortex,” *Nature* 532, no. 7600 (2016), 453–458. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. R. Harris, 3rd ed. Chicago: Open Court, 1986), 9-10,15. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See note 18, and especially Huth et al., “Natural Speech”. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Stillman Drake, *Galileo at Work* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 134–156. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. See J. C. Swann, *Seeking Virtue in Finance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See for instance Elizabeth Anderson, “Freedom and Equality”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Freedom*, ed. David Schmidtz and Carmen E. Pavel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). In fact, Anderson is among the most humanistic and strongly communicative commentators on ethics, which perhaps underlines the point being made here. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, transl. with an Introduction and Notes by Mary J. Gregor (Martinus Nijhoff/ The Hague, 1974), ?? [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See note 19 above. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Jayne Wilkins, ‘Archaeological evidence for human social learning and sociality in the Middle Stone Age of South Africa’, in Celia Deane-Drummond and Agustín Fuentes, eds., *Theology and Evolutionary Anthropology*. *Dialogues in Wisdom, Humility and Grace* (Routledge: London and New York, 2020), 119-141. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Oxford and New York: OUP, 1992. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences. An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

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