

CHAPTER 7

**The transactions between persons  
and things**

Thus far we have discussed the various kinds and meanings of special objects, but we have not looked at the process by which meaning is attributed to things in any detail. Yet cherished possessions attain their significance through *psychic activities* or transactions. Objects are not static entities whose meaning is projected on to them from cognitive functions of the brain or from abstract conceptual systems of culture. They themselves are signs, objectified forms of psychic energy. Whether through action or contemplation, objects in the domestic environment are meaningful only as part of a communicative sign process and are active ingredients of that process.

How a person interacts with objects makes considerable difference. In Chapter 1 we defined the person and the thing as two elements, and in this chapter we will explore the third term, the transaction or relationship between the person and thing. The mode of this transaction determines the goals around which one can shape a life course. The most inclusive term to describe the modes of meaning that mediate people with objects is perhaps cultivation (see Rochberg-Halton, 1979a,b.; 1980a).

Cultivation involves both senses of the verb "to tend": to take care of or watch over ("she tends her plants regularly"), in other words, "to attend to"; and also to proceed or be directed on some course or inclination ("he tends to find the right way"), that is, "to intend" some aim. Indeed, cultivation – the improvement, development, refinement, or resultant expression of some object or habit of life due to care, training, or inquiry – comes closest to the original meaning of the term *culture*, although most contemporary theories of culture exclude this aspect in favor of a rather static "symbol system" approach, for example, in the structuralism

of Lévi-Strauss, the cognitive anthropology of David Schneider, or the “semiotic” of Umberto Eco. According to these contemporary theories, the essence of culture is that it is a “logical” system of conceptual beliefs rather than a life to be lived in the flesh and blood. They stress a radical dichotomy between nature, which is without meaning or purpose, a purely discrete mechanical system, and culture, from which all meaning is cognitively derived. Our view, by contrast, is to see nature and culture on a continuum, so that culture, or cultivation, is the completion of nature. When a person cultivates a habit of tending plants, for example, both the nature of that plant and the nature of that person can be enhanced by the transaction. The meaning of the object, then, becomes realized in the activity of interaction and in the direction or purpose that this activity indicates: physical and psychological growth.

A much less obvious example might be the activity of reminiscence when looking at or thinking about old family photos. First of all, this is an activity in which signs of loved ones or past experiences are communicated, certain moods associated with those people are induced, and a stream of thought about “how it was” is brought about from a person’s current perspective on how things are now. The reminiscence evoked by the photo has its own peculiar flavor or pervasive quality. But this activity has another dimension. It also indicates intention – a direction, purpose, or habit that is an essential feature of the meaning of the activity. Many animals can remember but presumably only humans reminisce, that is, actively intend a memory to come into consciousness and, in a sense, complete the natural process of memory. Indeed, remembrance and tangibility, according to Hannah Arendt (1958), are what make a human world possible:

The whole factual world of human affairs depends for its reality and its continued existence, first, upon the presence of others who have seen and will remember, and second, on the transformation of the intangible into the tangibility of things. Without remembrance and without the reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfillment and which makes it, indeed, as the Greeks held, the mother of all arts, the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they had never been. (Arendt, 1958, p. 95)

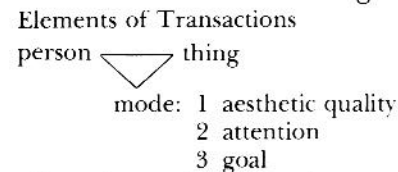
When a person intends something to come about, or attends to something, that activity tends in some direction – toward its out-

come or purpose. The attention that a person invests in the activity is the means by which that outcome can be realized.

To summarize, then, the meaning of cherished possessions is realized in the transaction between person and object; transactions are psychic activities (or communicative sign processes) and not simply physical behaviors per se, although they involve physical behaviors; and there are different modes of transactions.

The fact that some types of objects are usually meant to be valued for reasons other than their intrinsic qualities, such as trophies or dollar bills, whereas others are meant to be valued precisely for those qualities, illustrates that different modes of psychic activity seem to be involved in the way meaning is construed.

We would like to distinguish three modes of transactions that seem essential to understanding how artifacts can come to acquire significance. These modes should provide both different perspectives in which to view the person–object transaction and some criteria for understanding the process of cultivation. The modes of transactions that we consider essential to cultivation are: the aesthetic quality unique to the specific transaction; the channeling of psychic energy within the transaction; and the outcome or goal of the transaction. “Transaction” is used here in the technical sense proposed by Dewey, where an element of any act of intelligence only gains its meaning in the context of the transaction itself (see Dewey and Bentley, 1949); that is, the elements are not actually independent. Between the person and the thing, the first two elements of transaction, are the mediating modes we are considering, as illustrated in the following diagram.



In seeing these three modes as comprising transactions, we were influenced by Peirce’s three “modes of being,” which in his sign theory are roughly the iconic, indexical, and symbolic modes of signs (Rochberg-Halton, 1980c). But the tripart division of mind also has a very long tradition in psychology, as Ernest Hilgard (1980) has recently argued in an article called, “The Trilogy of Mind: Cognition, Affection, and Conation.” Hilgard sug-

gests that psychology has been dominated by the cognitive element to the relative neglect of the other two dimensions in the last 25 years. However, in our view all three modes are essential to experience and the cultivation of the self and serve to mediate the person with the thing.

Thus our examination of the modes of transaction will involve three questions: (1) What is the aesthetic quality of the transaction or what characterizes aesthetic experience? (2) How is psychic energy channeled? (3) What is the outcome of the transaction? We shall attempt to answer (1) by examining the role of aesthetic experience in the valuing of art objects, using Dewey's distinction from his book *Art as Experience* between what he calls *perception* and *recognition*. Our answer to (2) will involve a discussion of how attention serves to channel psychic energy. In responding to (3), we shall discuss the goals of the cultivation process – how outcomes of psychic activity can be seen in the context of a hierarchy of goals.

A given experience will rarely come under the heading of only one of these areas, rather, all three will usually apply to any person-object transaction. The same experience will have different features come into prominence depending on what perspective one chooses to emphasize.

### Aesthetic experience

The first dimension along which one might assess the nature of a person-object transaction is its aesthetic quality. In everyday language, "aesthetic" has a refined, almost effete connotation that makes it seem irrelevant to everyday experience. But in its broadest sense, every act of awareness, whether of internal states or of the external environment, has an aesthetic component. What we are about to argue is that this aesthetic dimension is not a rarefied frill but a vitally important aspect of how we relate to the world.

The approach to aesthetic experience taken here was developed by Rochberg-Halton (1979a,b) and is based primarily on John Dewey's distinction between what he calls *perception* and *recognition* (see Dewey, 1934). For Dewey, recognition describes a falling back on some previously formed interpretive schema or

stereotype when confronted with an object, whereas perception involves an active receptivity to the object so that its qualities may modify previously formed habits or schemes. Although the explicit purpose of art is to evoke aesthetic experience, Dewey does not limit aesthetic experience to art alone but considers it a potential element of *all experience*. Perception is essential to aesthetic experience and leads to psychological growth and learning. Recognition, or the interpretation of an object or experience solely on the basis of already existing habits, only serves to condition a person further to a life of convention. If culture were simply a symbol system of convention, as some cognitive anthropologists argue, then aesthetic experience would only consist of recognition in Dewey's sense, because the object of that experience "contains" meaning only as an arbitrary sign endowed with meaning by cultural convention and not because of unique qualities of its own.

Culture seen as a process of cultivation makes it possible to view meaning as a transaction rather than as a subjective projection by a culture or individual on to a chaos with no meaningful properties of its own. Dewey's view seems to account for something left out of most contemporary accounts of meaning, namely, the way something genuinely new can arise in experience – something not reducible to convention. Although even perception largely involves conventional habits of interpretation, the fact that a person uses conventional habits of thought from his or her culture is not the important issue. What is important is that the object of interaction has some influence on the experiencer's interpretation because of its own intrinsic qualities – for this is the essential way that learning occurs in Dewey's aesthetic perspective. The *n*th listening to a favorite piece of music, the re-viewing of a painting or a sunset – or *any* activity – can and should involve novel elements that make the experience unique and complete. Aesthetic qualities occur in the immediate present, but they also act as mediating signs in consciousness (Rochberg-Halton, in press). They are neither exclusively mental nor physical, subjective nor objective, but belong to specific situations or contexts and form consummations of transactions between the organism and environment:

A situation may be cheerful, distressing, exciting, fearful, indeterminate, etc. In each instance there is a unique, pervasive quality that conditions, and is conditioned, by all the constituents of the situation . . . Pervasive quality is esthetic quality. Dewey's point is that esthetic quality is present in *any* experience that is



distinctively *an* experience – one that is marked off from the rest of our experience by its wholeness, integrity, and unity. (Bernstein, 1966, pp. 94–96)

Aesthetic experiences, which are often considered subjective and hence inessential by social scientists, thus actually may be one of the essential ways we learn to become *objective*, in the sense of coming to recognize the pervasive qualities of the environment in their own terms. On this basis it would seem that the almost ignored area of aesthetic experience should receive more attention in social research than it has previously.

But the aesthetic experience has usually been either reduced to a mere sensation of physiological perception or to a cultural convention. In the former case it is seen as a hedonistic individual sensation of pleasure, whereas in the latter all meaning is purely conventional (or symbolic in Peirce's sense of a sign that will be interpreted on the basis of conventional understanding rather than because of its own qualities or physicality). Including qualitative immediacy as an element of the person-object transaction seems to offer a way to go beyond the usual argument that reduces art solely to social convention (e.g., Durkheim, 1965, pp. 426, 427; Sahlin, 1977, pp. 11, 12; Goodman, 1968, pp. 5, 38) or the utilitarian argument that art only gives a "pleasure sensation" (e.g., Mehrabian, 1976) but is not an essential aspect of social life. Although most meaning seems to occur within the received bubble of conventional norms, we want to explore how aesthetic experience provides possibilities for the emergence of new experience. To clarify this, let us first discuss how respondents actually did value their art.

The most surprising feature of people's comments on the significance of paintings and sculpture was that intrinsic qualities of such objects were rarely mentioned. Instead, art was valued primarily because it recalled memories of events, family, and friendship. Of all the meanings mentioned in connection with visual art, only 16 percent could be coded as referring to intrinsic qualities; the same proportion for sculpture was 11 percent.

This pattern suggests that art tends to be valued more for the symbolic context surrounding it than for the expressive possibilities of the object itself. But a home is not a museum, so why should the intrinsic qualities of artistic objects be valued? If artistic objects reflect personal identity, ties to loved ones, or one's relation to a status hierarchy, their function is still important because they serve to unite "experiences" in symbolic form.

However, from the aesthetic perspective, art objects have a purpose of their own – the unique ability of producing new visual experiences, feelings, and ideas. If a picture drawn by a child is cherished for this reason and not for what it looks like, the object is valued as a symbol of love or personal relationship, but not as art. Likewise, it is possible to value an original Picasso, as at least one of the respondents did, not as art but as a token of social standing. In so doing, personal needs may be realized, but the "purpose" of the object itself is denied. An aesthetic experience involves something more than the projection of meaning from the person to the environment or vice versa. It involves a realization of meaning through interaction with the inherent qualities of the object.

As mentioned earlier, recognition is a falling back upon a previously formed schema or stereotype when confronted with some object:

Bare recognition is satisfied when a proper tag or label is attached, "proper" signifying one that serves a purpose outside the act of recognition – as a salesman identifies wares by a sample. It involves no stir of the organism, no inner commotion. (Dewey, 1958, p. 53)

Thus recognition involves the use of art for purely external reasons, such as valuing a painting only because it was a wedding gift, or because it fits an interior decorating scheme, rather than a valuing of art because it emphasizes the specific expressive qualities of those objects.

It could be argued that the proper function of the home is to be a safe haven of recognition, whereas the "stir of the organism," the "inner commotion" that Dewey attributes to the aesthetic act of perception, is more properly relegated to the public arena. Perhaps there is a complementary relationship between the home and the outside world: People who can bask in the understanding milieu of recognition at home might then practice aesthetic perception all the more acutely when they are out of it. But perception and recognition are not opposites. More correctly, recognition is "arrested perception" because it does not go far enough to meet the inherent qualities of the object on their own terms. Perception includes the familiar and cannot occur without it because that would be utter chaos. Much of what makes a home such a warm and familiar place is that it embodies all our prejudices and habitual idiosyncrasies and allows us to "vegetate" when we must. But without the "stir of the organism" provided by aesthetic expe-

riences, a home would very easily lose its warmth and become petrified. It seems more likely that habits of transaction formed in the home will be generalized to other contexts as well, and how one learns to relate to things at home will have a decisive effect on the psychological growth of the person.

To give an idea of what it means to value art exclusively in terms of recognition, and to show the relationship of this habit to a person's overall life course, we might consider the case of a woman who named five art objects out of a total of seven things that were special to her in the home:

*Wall plaques:* They give the kitchen a "kitcheny" look. Without them the kitchen would seem plain.

*Last Supper portrait:* It makes the kitchen more religious. It's just like when the family is all together at dinner . . . It looks nice and it "belongs there."

*Metal ship:* It reminds me of something from the seventeenth century. It's special because I bought it for my boy, I would miss it.

*Venus de Milo reproduction:* It's unusual 'cause it doesn't have arms. I got it at a demonstration through a point system. I would feel bad because I really worked at getting it.

*Plaques:* A peasant boy and a peasant girl set of plaques. I really like it. I paid a lot for them. I would be very upset if anything were to happen to it.

All the objects in these descriptions are valued because of social meanings they embody, such as ties to kin, or effort or money spent. Objective qualities only serve the purpose of recognition, embodying religious beliefs and cultural beliefs about interior decoration. The objects have no "purpose" of their own that might call out a novel idea or emotion. Even the *Venus de Milo* is unusual " 'cause it doesn't have arms," not because of the beauty of the figure. Its symbolic value lies in the efforts invested in acquiring it through some point system – serving as a trophy.

When we look at this woman's daily activities and responses to some of the other questions, it becomes apparent that she is habituated to an extremely passive life-style. Electronic media dominate her day. She reports, for example, spending about 8 hours each day watching television, listening to the morning radio for about 4 hours, and spending an hour or two every day on the telephone. One would hope that some of these activities overlapped in time, otherwise, 13 hours each day are spent attending to appliances.

One example of this passivity is her response to the question

about what kinds of things she does at home during the day that are special. She said: "I watch TV and listen to tapes. I think about things I wish I could do but don't." Another example is her response to a question that asked which objects and places in her home she would go to if she felt the following emotions: happy, sad, in touch with other people, lonely, powerless, and free. Five of the six answers involved a situation where she would be lying down – "happy" in the living room on the sofa; "sad" in the bedroom on the bed; "in touch with other people" was the bedroom again, but on the phone; "lonely" in the basement on the sofa; "free" in the living room on the rug. Only "powerless" evoked a nonhorizontal situation and high stimulus environment – the front porch.

As indicators of a general life-style, the habituation to the media and to lethargic activities reveal that it would be extremely difficult for this woman to have an aesthetic experience in Dewey's sense – that is, to be really affected and not merely manipulated by the objects of her experience. As long as things mean only what they are "supposed" to mean, a person cannot grow beyond the boundaries set by culture and socialization.

Perception, on the other hand, involves an active, critical receptivity to the object so that its qualities may modify previously formed habits or interpretive associations. In perception the objective qualities of objects are intrinsic to our experience; in recognition they are extrinsic. An experience of perception means that the scheme through which we interpret an object is changed or enlarged, which is how learning occurs, by enlarging or changing the habitual framework of interpretation. Dewey's comments on the act of expression also convey what he means by perception:

The junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the "stored," material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation . . . Things in the environment that would otherwise be mere smooth channels or else blind obstructions become means, media. At the same time, things retained from past experience that would grow stale from routine or inert from lack of use, become coefficients in new adventures and put on a raiment of fresh meaning. (Dewey, 1958, p. 60-61)

This orientation to experience is similar to the one that Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) have found to be the hallmark of creativity. Their study showed that creative artists were no more

technically proficient or intelligent than those who were uncreative; what distinguished the two groups was that the former tended to approach a task as a “discovered problem,” whereas the latter faced it as a “presented problem.” Creative artists did not look at an object or composition in terms of given aesthetic categories (e.g., pleasing color, strong texture, exciting vanishing point) but discovered unique peculiarities and relationships in the objects they were about to paint.

It stands to reason that perception should be a prerequisite to creativity. But this form of transaction with the environment is not limited to creative artists or scientists. Every time we interact with an object the possibility of new learning is potentially there. It is important to mention that aesthetic experiences may range from the most extraordinary and ecstatic to the most simple and humble. The first bird chirping at dawn might induce a sense of delight in a way quite different from Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy,” but each would have a place along a continuum. Similarly, the sense of complete exhaustion at the end of a good day’s work might be different from that of finishing the work of a lifetime. However, each might be an experience of the aesthetic, ranging from the humble to the profound – the feeling that one has given one’s all toward realizing the work.

Perception is not limited to artistic objects but is a mode of psychic activity applicable to any object. It involves a consummation, a quality of finality that unifies and distinguishes the experience. Whereas the third mode of psychic activity – the outcomes of transactions – emphasizes the directionality in which a person’s goals may be furthered through interactions with the object, and the second mode – flow – emphasizes the means through which psychic energy may be channeled to realize those goals, the aesthetic mode involves the consummation or completion of an experience through the realization of the inherent or intrinsic qualities of that experience.

An illustration of this type of psychic activity is the following description of a wooden chest:

*American Indian chest:* One of the things that we bought most recently is a chest downstairs that’s done by North American Indians. And we fell in love with that when we were in Canada this summer, and we brought it home, and I just love having it in the living room. (Why?) Well, because we have made somewhat of an effort this year to study Indian art. We went to many shows, and we did some reading, and when we went to Canada we saw this piece in a gallery and we had

seen many things like it at the shows, and it is a thing we could afford, and so we bought it. And since then we have seen this Indian show at the Art Institute. They had a day where they had the Indian chief of the tribe come in and it was the same tribe that made this chest. And so we spoke to the people. The symbols and the things that they showed us and some of the other things that they had to sell, are so very similar, because this particular tribe are part of the Whale People, and only this tribe can use certain symbols and they used it for centuries in their art. So that’s kind of a nice thing and we value it.

(And what would it mean to you *not* to have this chest?) I would feel that the surrounding part, the living part, would be pretty empty. I would hate to have to start collecting knickknacks and mementos. (So you’re speaking of all of your art as a group?) I would group all of the atmosphere, the feel that you get. I don’t have one major piece of art downstairs; they’re a bunch of minor pieces. The total atmosphere that you get of the living room, or of any room in the house, is one of some visual excitement, because so much is going on. There is not one large statement. It’s a lot of little shouts. So, if the walls were blank, I could not live in a plain, unadorned room. It gets to be that I become so familiar with what’s on the walls, that I know it’s there and I don’t even have to see it. I *know* it’s there. If you were to take it down and remove it, I would know it’s gone immediately. If anything’s out of place, I would know that it’s out of place.

There are many conventional elements in this description: The respondent and his wife were aware of the style of the chest and had seen others like it; it is a souvenir of their trip to Canada, and much of the art is often experienced on an almost unconscious, habitual level. But an important element of the meaning of this chest is that it has its own story and a living quality in the sense that it creates new experiences for the owners. The chest and the other art objects impart an atmosphere of “visual excitement,” “a lot of little shouts,” that are an essential feature of the lives of these people.

Again, we should mention that art objects are by no means the only source for aesthetic experience. Houseplants, for example, seemed to provide more aesthetic experiences than art objects for a number of respondents. Books can also provide experiences of perception, as illustrated in the following response:

*Books,* because they open up a new world. They’re informative and you can learn a lot. They’re enjoyable because they tell you about other countries and you can escape from where you are to a different surrounding.

The purpose of artistic objects is to express feelings and ideas and to stimulate new perceptions through their own qualities. There is no real reason, other than convention, that a home should simply contain works of art, but there is every reason that aesthetic experience should form an intrinsic aspect of domestic



living, and art is both a template and medium for the realization of these experiences.

### The flow of psychic energy

The next dimension of the transaction between persons and objects concerns how psychic energy is channeled. We have just seen how the intrinsic qualities of the object can have a decisive role in the transaction when a person allows those qualities to be realized as part of the meaning of the transaction. Aesthetic experience, or what Dewey calls perception, is what enables the individual to learn new things, to accommodate his interpretive schemes to the qualitative properties of the environment.

But for any transaction to occur it is also necessary that a certain amount of psychic energy be allocated to the object. Attention is needed to realize a psychic transaction. When we turn to consider how psychic energy is channeled, it becomes clear that attention plays the key role in serving to limit and direct psychic energy.

When a person interacts with an object, he or she selects it from the surrounding environment (including the mental environment) through concentrating attention on it. Of course, there are many reverse instances when the object "selects" the individual and compels the person to pay attention. For instance, when a pet (in our extended use of "object") barks or meows loudly in order to be fed, or when an alarm clock harshly reminds us of the agreement we made with it last night to awaken at this ungodly hour. But mostly, it is the person who chooses to invest attention in a particular object, and most of our interactions with possessions consist of habitual patterns of attention.

Household artifacts not only have meaning as individual objects but also form part of a gestalt for the people who live with them – a gestalt that both communicates a sense of "home" and indicates the type of activities that are appropriate for different parts of the home. In the same way, the organization of the household can be seen as a pattern of attention and intention made concrete in the artifacts and the ambience they create; a pattern that in turn channels the psychic energy of the inhabitants. The household objectively represents what the self is in terms of what things psychic energy has been invested in – what we consider significant to

possess. If examined closely it can reveal the patterns of attention that help to structure our everyday consciousness. The organization of furniture and appliances shows where family members habitually spend time, what they tend to pay attention to, and what they wish visitors to see or not to see. The location of display items in the living room, and of more personal objects in the privacy of the bedroom, is only one illustration of the organized pattern of attention that can channel psychic energy in the household.

But the organization of household artifacts also represents a structured and structuring process of attention at a more unconscious level. Indeed, most of the vitality of a culture seems to reside in its ability to provide a vast reservoir of ideas and feelings that exist as unquestioned assumptions and which allow an individual to learn complex information with relatively little self-consciousness or direct attention. The relative ease with which a child learns language shows how culture can operate to reduce the amount of information one has to pay conscious attention to, so that one's attention can become more concentrated on a few key elements, meanwhile the remaining information is internalized almost without effort. Likewise, the total context of artifacts in a household acts as a constant sign of familiarity, telling us who we and our kindred are, what we have done or plan to do, and in this way reduces the amount of information we have to pay attention to in order to act with ease. It is worth mentioning that the words familiar and family are both derived from the Latin word *familia*, which included the kin as well as household possessions and slaves. One of the important functions of household possessions, then, is to provide a *familiar* environment, which can reflect the order, control, and significance of its inhabitants, and thus enable them to channel their psychic energy more effectively within it.

Every conscious experience lies on a continuum ranging from boring sameness at one end to enjoyable diversity at the center and, finally, to anxiety-producing chaos at the further end. It is in the enjoyable middle regions of experience that one's attention is fully effective. This optimal state of involvement with experience, or *flow*, is in contrast with the extremes of boredom and anxiety, which can be seen as states of alienated attention (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; 1978b).

Alienated attention represents a waste of psychic energy because it is expended without contributing to the process of cultiva-

tion. Marx discussed this process in the context of production as alienated labor, when the full fruits of the worker's product (e.g., ownership of the object, the full money value of the object, pride in workmanship, etc.) were denied him. But the same holds true for people in a consumer society: When the culture directs consumers to pay attention to attention-getting devices rather than to the specific functions or qualities of the goods themselves, this can also be called alienated attention – or what Marx called “false consciousness.” It is alienated because in the end it is not really the object that is consumed but merely the attention of the consumer.

Flow, by contrast, is a kind of integrated attention that serves to direct a person's psychic energy toward realizing his or her goals, regardless, at this point in our discussion, of what those goals might be. Integrated attention contributes to the cultivation process by stimulating growth through the intrinsically rewarding nature of the transaction with the object. The following quotations from younger respondents illustrate how flow can arise from transactions with valued objects:

*My radio.* I've grown accustomed to doing my homework while listening to it. I also go to sleep to it and it's my alarm too, so I depend on it alot. (Without it) I'd feel uncomfortable. It would take more concentration and I would also have to depend on someone to get me up.

*Drums.* They're an activity. I started saving money to get some drums. I can really get into them after playing for awhile. I just turn on the radio, close my eyes – it gets that I'm *in* the music, *in* the record.

(What do all your objects taken as a whole mean to you?) A feeling of memories I suppose. Sometimes when you're really, really sentimental, you take out albums of stuff and look through them and you can keep in mind some of the things from your past. It helps you keep in mind some of the things you want to remember, that you feel you should remember.

These descriptions contain some of the key elements of the flow experience: a merging of action and awareness (“it gets so that I'm *in* the music, *in* the record”); a centering of attention on a limited stimulus field (without the radio “it would take more concentration,” the photo album “helps you keep in mind some of the things you want to remember”); a loss of ego or sense of self (the drums again); control over one's actions and over the environment (all three descriptions, although the photo albums seem to emphasize control over one's mental environment); coherent noncontradictory demands for action and clear, unambiguous feedback to a person's actions (the radio and drums provide clear feedback, but even the photo albums provide context and clear

feedback for attention to focus on symbols of reminiscence); and finally, intrinsic rewards.

The concept of flow illustrates how psychic energy is directed through activities capable of being valued as intrinsically enjoyable – activities in which the psychic energy given to the object is returned to the person as meaningful, enjoyable information, thus creating a kind of free and open “current” of psychic energy. In other words, flow, as a kind of integrated attention is another way of describing the process of cultivation at work.

Household objects appear to facilitate flow experiences in two distinctly different ways. On the one hand, by providing a familiar symbolic context they reaffirm the identity of the owner. They can create a milieu free of boredom and anxiety, a setting conducive to involvement and learning. Although it might seem that in this sense objects only provide experiences of recognition, this very familiarity serves to reduce the number of things a person has to attend to, thus freeing the self to concentrate on a specific transaction. Without this sense of familiarity there could be no perception or flow, only chaos. On the other hand, objects in the household might provide opportunities for flow directly, by engaging the attention of people in acts of perception that lead to flow activities – as illustrated in the three previous quotations.

So far we have discussed how attention serves to channel psychic energy in transactions with objects. But we have not yet raised the question of what purpose this transaction serves. The fact that some of the greatest criminals in history commanded great powers of attention, or that juvenile delinquents find illegal acts “flow experiences” (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1978), suggests that there must be more to the attention process than mere technique. The technique of allocating attention is surely important because it is the very means for realizing intentions. However, this raises the issue of the purpose of attention, or the ends it helps to cultivate and realize. To answer this we must turn to the third dimension of psychic activity: What are the *outcomes* of the transaction?

### The goals of transactions with objects

Cultivation of the interaction with objects implies, first of all, perception of the unique intrinsic qualities of the object and, second,



a channeling of psychic energy in order to realize the transaction most effectively, which we have described as the process of flow. The third aspect of psychic activity refers to the outcomes of the transaction. Here we shall consider the role of intention in the meaning of cherished possessions. To do this we must address the purpose of cultivation itself, to examine what ends or goals meanings reflect.

The importance of the cultural environment from this perspective is that it facilitates adaptation or socialization, that is, indicates goals, acts as a rule for conduct, has a purposive influence. It is plain that many personal habits are formed within the environment of the home. The cultural microcosm of the home, like culture in general, is not only a reflection of what people are but also molds what they may yet become. The pragmatic meaning of cherished possessions is that they serve to socialize and influence conduct toward certain ends or goals. The term "pragmatic," as originally developed by Aristotle, and as reformulated by the pragmatists, meant the cultivation of a way of life through activities aimed toward the attainment of the good or virtuous life and thus was intrinsically moral. It implied that the path to learning to live well, as opposed to mere living, is dependent on a process of cultivating the activities that make up one's life – that living well is a kind of practice.

The process of cultivation is motivated by belief in goals held to be ultimate by individuals. This does not mean that these beliefs are necessarily ultimate but only that they provide a provisional sense of purpose around which to shape one's life course. Any ultimate beliefs, like one's conception of God, love, moral standards, political ideology, or truth, are still open to cultivation and so are only provisionally ultimate for any given individual.

Ultimate goals provide a standard toward which actions are or should be aimed. Thus when one values a cherished photo, or souvenir, or plant, these transactions are intentional activities that reflect what one considers significant and which involve real outcomes. The sense of being in touch with a loved one or a place one has visited, or of being in touch with nature itself, expresses what we consider significant and reveals the purpose that motivates us to invest attention in certain objects and meanings rather than in others. As the cluster of objects one values solidifies, so do the meanings one derives from experiences with them. Different selves

emerge around goals embedded in cherished belongings through habitual interactions. The possessions one selects to endow with special meaning out of the total environment of artifacts are both models of the self as well as templates for further development. They serve to give a tangible expression and thus a continued existence through signs to one's relationships, experiences, and values.

Valued possessions involve outcomes in the sense that these transactions reveal intentions or goal-directed purposes; that is, they tell us what "it all adds up to," and how these goals are being realized. The outcome of valuing old family photos, for example, might be that it reveals, simply and concretely, the goal of family preservation and continuity.

Perhaps the best way to discuss the outcomes of transactions with objects is by returning to the earlier distinction among personal, social, and cosmic levels. Although each of these levels may contribute to cultivation, in the sense in which we are using this term, it is only by establishing some sense of harmony among them, some balance, that authentic being or what the Greeks aimed for as "the good life" may be achieved over the course of a lifetime.

### The personal, the social, and the cosmic self

It is usually taken for granted that underneath the *persona* or mask that we present to the world, there is a "real me," apart from others and private. This commonsense assumption is held especially by Americans who believe in "rugged individualism." Yet if we examine this assumption closely, it seems to lose much of its common sense. In fact, it is literally a view opposed to common sense. Common sense after all is a belief that our experience tells us would be shared in common, by the community. The personal self develops through internalizing the social environment. When the infant begins to learn how to pay attention to his or her parents and internalizes their intentions, and later those of playmates and friends, he or she is learning to develop *common* sense, and in this way cultivates the self.

Thus the idea that the "real me" is in some sense independent of other people reflects the overemphasis on individualism in

modern life, an overemphasis that would ultimately result quite literally in idiocy. The ancient Greeks actually saw the emphasis on one's own (*idion*) to be a *deprivation*, a cutting off of the self from the community, which is absolutely essential to its health and vigor (Arendt, 1958; Rochberg-Halton, 1979c).

The personal self is fully infused with the social. So when a transaction is valued because it has outcomes for the individual, it must be realized that the individual is still a social being. The positive side of the modern emphasis on individualism has been to render a much richer view of what privacy, intimacy, originality, uniqueness, and autonomy can provide. Its merit has been to relax the culturally accepted norms for conduct, thus allowing the possibility of the freer development of the self. But the purpose of this process still remains the fuller unfolding of our humanity within and for the social life of the community. Originality is often thought to mean not being influenced in any way – not imitating others. But if originality becomes an ultimate goal, and one consistently pursues it, one loses the most valuable means of growing as a person – the possibility of imitation, the process that is so essential to the development of the self in the first place.

When transactions with objects further this development of the personal self, presumably the purpose is to aid in creating a world of one's own, a world in which one makes a difference, "my world." This is illustrated in the following responses to what all one's objects mean:

They're just reflections and images of places that I like and feel happy with and people that I know pretty well and activities I enjoy.

If I didn't have them, I probably wouldn't be the same person. They sort of mold my personality.

Well, they're a part of my personality. Everybody's made up of different things. They're part of me in the respect that they make up my personality.

The objects provide an environment charged with personal meanings. They also indicate the goal of a personal self that can assimilate the diverse information of an impersonal world and imbue it with order and significance.

When an object is imbued with qualities of the self, it expresses the being of that person, whether in written words or a chair that was crafted or a photograph. It becomes an objectified form of consciousness no less than words spoken into someone's ear, all forming part of the social self. Through these objects a part of the

self comes to be embodied in the consciousness of others and will continue to exist long after the consciousness that molded them has ceased to exist. Perhaps the clearest example is when a number of people gather to mourn for someone at a wake or funeral. These people – family, kin, and friends of the departed person – are the living representation of the deceased. Although the personal self has ceased to exist, the social self has a continued existence in those who will remember and through those artifacts that in whatever way give testimony to that person. Similarly, the idea of family – those people, living or dead, that one loves and cares for and would devote one's life to – is an idea or ultimate goal whose full realization involves the development of the social self. This description given by a mother of what all her objects mean to her illustrates how certain outcomes of transactions serve to express and further the social self:

It's the story of our lives and our children's lives. They represent the experiences that we've been through together. They represent a period – a turmoil that they went through and came out of. All the years that you spent going through those turmoils to get them to this stage. They grow up and they leave you when they're civilized! After all your hard labor, you don't get to enjoy the fruits of it!

Her statement that, "After all your hard labor, you don't get to enjoy the fruits of it!" almost echoes our description of alienated attention in the last section. We must be careful to interpret her statements within their particular context, however; and when we do this we see that she is expressing some anxiety about the imminent departure of her now grown up children from the nest and the disruption of her immediate family to whom she has given so many years of her life. When this woman reflects on what objects mean to her, her attention turns to the process of cultivation itself – to the experience of raising her children. But it is the social self we hear speaking ("our lives and our children's lives," "They represent the experiences that we've been through together"). She most cherishes those things whose meaning reflects the development of the family as a whole.

The social self is not limited to the family but is that part of one's psychic activity in communion with the goals of friends, co-workers, the craft of work itself, and the various other institutions that make up one's world. The roles of the social self – parent, worker, citizen, consumer – are strands interwoven in the social fabric, and these roles lose their meaning without their *relata*.

There is yet another level that should be distinguished – that of the cosmic self. If the personal self serves to answer the question, “Who am I?” and the social self answers, “Who are you and we?” the third level of the self, the cosmic one, seems to answer the question, “What and why is it?” The “cosmic” self is not a mystical entity that transcends human understanding, existing in a realm beyond signs, conceptions, or physicality. Rather, it is that portion of the self whose ultimate goal is the larger harmony of things. One might say it is the portion of the self involved in the creation, discovery, or embodiment of the laws of the universe, the cosmos. If this sounds a bit grandiose for the everyday experience of the common person, it should be realized that one does not have to be a physicist to reflect on the laws of the universe, for these are at work everywhere, even in the communication of joy between mother and infant. Creation and death, love and hate, good and evil, truth and ignorance – these are some of the great moving principles of nature, as they are realized in human experience. Just as electromagnetic laws govern energy, so these laws direct psychic energy, though in ways we are only beginning to understand.

One would think from the popular usage of the term that the cosmic self sits serene in bliss and perfect knowledge, bathed in freedom from all desire, aloof from ignorance and error. But this might be a good definition of the idiotic, not the cosmic self. The cosmic self also has its serene moments, when the quality of the larger harmony is enjoyed in an aesthetic experience or through a flow activity; but these seem to occur as consummations of critical perception from which growth occurs. The cosmic self is the manifestation of man’s restlessness at his own limitations and his quest after the true order of things; in this sense, it has been essential to the development of humanity. With its relentless and passionate question, “What and why is it?” the cosmic self is the essence of both religion and science. We are so used to thinking of religion and science as providing final answers that we forget that, in essence, both are manifestations of man’s need to question the universe and to discover its meaning.

In our study we expected to see indications of the cosmic self in the valuations of objects for religious purposes, but very few things were mentioned that had religious meaning. Perhaps Embodiments of Ideals could be taken as indicators of the cosmic self,

but again, the goals reflected in these meanings referred much more often to the personal or social self and not to the integration of one’s purpose with some greater pattern of purpose. It might be inferred that the question of the cosmic self, “What and why is it?” does not find much tangible expression in the lives of many contemporary Americans. Of those responses that gave even a glimmer of the cosmic self, perhaps the simplest was that of the youngest member of the entire sample. Although already quoted, it bears repeating. When asked what all of his objects meant to him, he replied:

They make me feel like I’m part of the world. Because when I look at them, I keep my eyes on them and I think what they mean. Like I have a bank from the First National, and when I look at it I think what it means. It means money for our cities and for our country, it means tax for the government. My stuffed bunny reminds me of wild life, all the rabbits and dogs and cats. That toy animal over there (points to plastic lion) reminds me of circuses and the way they train animals so they don’t get hurt. That’s what I mean, all my special things make me feel like I’m part of the world.

Even the toys serve as signs of the larger totality and thus endow the room with the quality of a *microcosmos*. By interacting with them, some of his psychic energy is channeled beyond personal goals toward larger purposes and thereby to the realization of the interconnectedness of the individual with the totality. Some responses from older persons suggested a de-emphasis of the personal self, of the transience of personal life. As expressed by one 84-year-old great-grandmother, for example:

No, I’m not *attached* to anything. You get so that you feel you are with one foot in the grave and you just dis-attach yourself. You couldn’t know that yet because you are young still.

There definitely seems to be a shift with age toward objects and meanings that convey the continuity of one’s experiences. In the community we studied, children first relate to objects by seizing the material world and bringing it to themselves. They seem more concerned with the use and control of psychic energy itself than with outcomes and hence emphasize the experience of the object as an ongoing occasion or as a means for enjoyment in activities oriented toward the development of the personal self. With age, the individuals increasingly realize that psychic activities have *outcomes* and cultivation shifts from an emphasis on process regardless of outcome to goal-directed processes. Memory and reminis-



cence become more prominent; first, because the person has begun to build up a past, and also because the goal of preserving one's past self and experiences becomes more important.

In addition, there is a shift from an emphasis on egocentric meanings in childhood and adolescence to a social orientation in adulthood. Other people become increasingly embodied in the artifacts adults cherish as special, and the adult comes to see his or her own self as inseparable from family and kin and friends and co-workers. The social self comes to the fore. Those who, tempered by their life's experiences, avoid being possessed by a consumer culture that elevates utility to the ultimate goal of life, perhaps learn in later years to let go of the materiality of this world and to appreciate its transience. They learn to cultivate experiences and grow through interaction with their environment and, finally, complete this potential process of development with a shift in old age to goals that will realize the cosmic self. Those who do, begin to disengage from the social fabric in its actuality and conceive of social life as part of the broader harmony of nature itself.

Although each of these three levels of the self potentially emerge at an appropriate phase of the life cycle, all three are always available for cultivation. Authentic being, or "the good life," can only come about by the establishment of some balance among the three, which is not contingent upon one's age. But we do want to draw attention to what seems to be the course of the self from a developmental perspective. Of interest is that, like in folktales where the destination ultimately is the original point of departure, the individual discovers what was always there to begin with.

A child may value objects purely for the sake of experiences without concern for outcomes. Nonetheless, there are inevitable consequences that shape the kind of person that child will become. Through experience the person may come to realize that transactions with objects always do produce outcomes regardless of whether or not the individual is aware of this. A person who never goes beyond adolescent self-centeredness will increasingly come into conflict with the laws of the two other levels of the self. The development of the broader potentials and possibilities of the self will not only be arrested but negative outcomes will also follow as a result of this undeveloped state of self. A person who cannot reach out and integrate him or herself with the wider networks of

meaning is ultimately in a state of deprivation. It is the third level, the cosmic self, that is undervalued in our modern culture, as our empirical results suggest, whereas the first level seems to be over-emphasized. The valuing of the personal self as the sole ultimate goal, which often is actually a goal of a private self, can thus be seen as privative, as deprivation rather than as ultimate fulfillment, because it excludes those larger patterns of meaning whose internalization and personification are essential to the reality of human existence. In the modern world people seem to want to be "private," to maximize the world of "one's own," and to cultivate idiosyncrasy as the means to personal fulfillment. But this is literally idiocy (*idion*: one's own) in the long run. The ultimate goal of personality is not to be a private, it is to become a general, in the technical sense of a sign with the fullest development of real relations to others and the world.

In exploring the processes through which things come to be endowed with special significance, we have seen that transactions with objects are not simple physiological processes but require complex cultivation. The elements of the process of cultivation are its aesthetic quality, the way in which psychic energy is channeled, and its outcomes or goals. What emerges from this discussion is a view of what the authentic self looks like. It is a self, first of all, capable of being perceptive; that is, a self that can experience its environment and interpret that environment on the basis of experience and not only because of previously accepted conventions of interpretation. The perceptive self is one capable of aesthetic experience (*aisthētikós*: perceptive) and can allow the intrinsic qualities of an object or situation to be fully realized in the interpretation.

The free self is also one capable of *flow*, of attending to objects and activities in a way that allows the psychic energy given to the object to be returned to the person as enjoyment. Through integrated patterns of attention, the free self furthers the process of cultivation by channeling psychic energy in effective ways and by growing in the process.

The authentic self also cultivates its intentions and goals. It can criticize its own ultimate goals and refine them. The free self is one that is personal, social, and cosmic. It is assured of its relative autonomy, related to a living network of family, friends, co-workers and citizens, the living and the dead, and it is, or strives to

be, related to the larger harmony of forces in the universe. The free self is an answer to the questions, "Who am I?" "Who are you and we?" and "What and why is it?" and, at the same time, it is these questions, seeking their answer in a continual process of cultivation.

It appears, then, that at every level of consciousness and self-consciousness there is a critical element that is essential to the development of the free self: critical elements that enable one to break out of the constrictions of heredity and convention to realize the intrinsic qualities of things. A critical attitude is one that enables a person to overcome an alienated environment or potential dispersion of his or her own psychic resources through integrated attention and to reflect on what is worthy to be lived or pursued as an ultimate goal. So often we think of freedom as absolute individual autonomy, the completely unfettered. But to be free means to be free *for some purpose*. Freedom seems to be a culmination rather than a beginning, an achieved state of affairs. Freedom is often contrasted with necessity, the compulsive force of experience. Necessity is how we *must* act (or, more strictly, react), but freedom is how we *must* choose. Necessity, it is often said, is what binds and keeps us from what we would really like to do if we were free. However, if we are free *for some purpose*, then there is also a sense in which we are bound to that purpose. As Cicero said, to be completely free one must become the slave of a set of laws. The cultivation of a way of life oriented by ultimate goals, themselves capable of cultivation, seems to be how a free self might develop. Indeed, pursued with all one's psychic energy, the process of cultivation would eventually compel the self to become free.

## CHAPTER 8

### Signs of family life

We turn now to see the process of cultivation at work in some concrete profiles of families. These case studies are geared to provide a different level of interpretation from the ones used in previous chapters. Through them we shall try to show how cherished possessions, persons, and events may be integrated in a pattern that reflects the goals of the self and the family and acts as a template that motivates the cultivation process.

We have already discussed the empirical patterns associated with cherished possessions. In statistical comparisons, however, the context for the individual is usually lost. The sign is turned into a variable in an attempt to determine the norms of common meanings, that is, the empirical context. With this purpose accomplished, we shall now return to the individual and family context in order to explore the richness and multiplicity of meanings that things can hold for their possessors. Here we hope to explore the transactions between people and things by concentrating on the signs of family life. In many families a common set of concerns was expressed in the meanings attributed to the ecology of signs in the household – the objects, events, and admired persons shared by family members. When these meanings are directed toward related goals, it is possible to see them as "signs of family life," or vital webs of relationships that give each family a unique identity. In the "warm" families discussed in Chapter 6 one of the goals shared by the members is the cultivation of the family itself; the psychic activity of each person supports the others' goals. In "cool" families persons tend to cultivate their personal goals without concern for the family as a whole. But even in these families one might discern a common theme, characterized by dissonance rather than by harmony.