

DEFINING THE SELF AS AXIOLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

DEFINING THE SELF AS AXIOLOGICAL ORGANIZATION:  
AN ENACTIVE APPROACH TO THE METAPHYSICS OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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## LAY ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to provide a conception of selfhood and personal identity capable of accounting for the both the “embodied turn” and the “interactive turn” in cognitive science. It seeks to explain the persistence and individuation of selves both biologically, as living systems, and socially, as members that participate in or distinguish themselves from social groups. The first chapter explores selfhood from the perspective of Evan Thompson’s work on the definition of living systems as self-producing and self-organizing. Chapter two introduces Charles Taylor’s work on the necessity of moral frameworks for personal identity, a view which initially appears difficult to reconcile with the approach outlined in the first chapter. The third chapter attempts to combine these approaches by demonstrating that selfhood is best conceived of as axiological organization – the way living beings evaluate and prioritize possible actions in their environment.

## ABSTRACT

Enactivism builds on the “embodied turn” in cognitive science to firmly establish the close connection between mind and life, exemplified in the work of Evan Thompson. The more recent “interactive turn” emphasizes that individuals’ mental and cognitive processes are shaped by social interactions with other cognitive agents. Regarding personal identity, Miriam Kyselo argues that it remains unclear how and to what extent the self is individuated by these processes, and whether or not social relations are necessary for self-persistence. Further, it remains unclear how the self of simple biological organisms is continuous with the much more complicated *personal* identity of human beings, who are subject not only to the forces of the natural world, but also to forces that arise only in their uniquely symbolic and sociocultural milieu.

I contend that we can come to understand how evaluations dependent on the individual’s needs and desires, what Charles Taylor refers to as “weak evaluations,” are continuous with “strong evaluations,” whose validity are independent of the individual’s needs and desires, by recognizing that some organisms not only create value, but respond to values already present in their environment. The general notion of selfhood that results is one of axiological organization. I argue that what we are really referring to with the term “self” is the organization of evaluations that organisms make in regard to environmental affordances, a system which, over time, comes to take on definitive traits and characteristics. The self, regardless of the particular context in which it is situated, becomes individuated by the evaluations it makes, and is experienced as persistent because evaluative activity is an on-going process, ending only in death. The self is further experienced as persistent because these evaluations are made in accordance with a critical standard which itself rarely, and the overall axiological organization retains a high degree of stability.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I examine selfhood and personal identity from the perspective of autopoietic enactivism. Enactivist accounts seek to understand selves as embodied organisms, explicable in biological terms, but must also account for the degree to which some selves are constituted by social interactions. I argue that this problem, which Miriam Kyselo terms the “body-social” problem, can be overcome by defining axiological activity as the primary constitutive element of selfhood, and personal identity – the stronger, human “sense of self” – as awareness of the general critical standard guiding and organizing this activity.

Chapter one introduces the concepts of autopoiesis and autopoietic enactivism, then examines some of the approaches to personal identity within these frameworks, focusing especially on a debate between Miriam Kyselo and Michele Maiese over the role of social relations in the individuation of the self. I contend that this debate mostly turns on an equivocation of the term “human,” but nonetheless illuminates the challenges of addressing social relations from an embodied perspective while preserving the continuity of mind and life – one of the central claims of enactivism.

Chapter two turns to the work of Charles Taylor, who explain how identity is socially constituted through moral values or “frameworks.” Although Taylor is staunchly opposed to naturalism, this is because he conflates it with reductionism, and I proceed to explain how nonreductive autopoietic enactivism provides the metaphysical and naturalist support that is lacking in Taylor’s strictly phenomenological argument. Yet selfhood cannot be simply equated with life. Life is firmly associated with an immanent purposiveness that Antonio Damasio calls “biological value,” which is a way of saying that living things value their own preservation. If we try to trace all values back to “biological value,” a contradiction emerges when trying to explain



how biological value could lead an organism, such as a human being, to commit suicide. This behavior, I argue, can only be explained by a hypergood other than biological value – a hypergood being a value taken as good in itself and which determines how regular goods are to be evaluated. If enactivism cannot account for these kinds of alternative hypergoods, then it will be unable to account for selfhood and personal identity.

Chapter three addresses the implications of alternative hypergoods for theories of the self. Rather than narrowly defining the self as biological *or* social, I show that axiological activity is at the heart of identity and is capable of explaining how the self becomes individuated both biologically and socially. Evaluation<sup>1</sup> is a natural process co-enacted with the creation of the organism. Values represent specific relations that an organism has with its environment. Human selfhood is especially complicated because we do not merely generate values from within and project them onto the world, but also respond to values and hypergoods already present, in the form of symbols, in the sociocultural environment. The continuity of personal identity is, therefore, dependent on the continuity of the evaluative process. Thinking of selfhood as a matter of axiological organization provides a basic conception which allows for the self to be sensibly studied across a range of disciplines, but more importantly, enables us to understand how selves have evolved over time.

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<sup>1</sup> The term evaluation is frequently associated with the work of John Dewey, but, in this context, I use it simply to mean the overall process of assigning, comparing, and/or prioritizing values.

## CHAPTER ONE: Biology, Identity, and Autopoietic Enactivism

Any investigation of the nature of selfhood immediately faces the question of where to begin. If one is to start at the beginning, or with the simplest example of the phenomena in question, as I intend to do, then one must start with the appearance of life, for the issues of life and selfhood are deeply intertwined. The philosopher Hans Jonas, whose work has inspired contemporary philosophers such as Evan Thompson, wrote that “[the] introduction of the term ‘self,’ unavoidable in any description of the most elementary instance of life, indicates the emergence, with life as such, of internal identity.”<sup>2</sup> Even the most simple life forms, such as bacteria and ants, appear to have an identity of sorts, something that distinguishes them, as living systems, from their surrounding environment, hence Jonas’s remark about the emergence of an internal identity. Consequently, a philosophical investigation of the self – both in the minimal sense of an individuated organism and, in the richer sense, of a being consciously aware of its unique personal identity – must be attentive to the insights that biological science has yielded regarding the self-organizing properties of living systems.

There are other places one could start, such as with the inanimate world, where one might examine the identity of non-living things instead of organisms. Consider the well-known paradox about the ship of Theseus – if all the parts of Theseus’s ship are replaced over time does it remain the same ship? I do not wish to dismiss difficulty of this question or its philosophical significance. However, there is an easy way to avoid the issue. *If* we assert that the “identity” of the ship is entirely constructed by an external observer, then any confusion about its identity can be blamed on the conceptual operations of said observer. While this does not do away with the paradox itself, it does transform it from a problem about things to a problem about the perception

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (Northwestern University Press, 1966), 83.

of things. This external observer also has an identity, but since positing another observer would result in an infinite regression of observers in need of explaining, it is prudent to begin the investigation with the organism that does the observing. There is another reason to begin with biology, which is that starting the investigation of selfhood with psychology risks injecting unnecessary anthropomorphic baggage into the discussion. Self-consciousness and introspection are certainly valuable tools for the inquiry and will play a significant role later in this thesis, but they have the potential to overemphasize human particularities in a discussion that applies to the entire domain of life, or to miss essential features of selfhood because they are not immediately obvious human beings. Even when psychology draws on the tools of cognitive science or neurobiology – thus potentially avoiding the issue of anthropomorphism – it still presupposes a biological organism of some sort, and it is my contention that an adequate understanding will start “at the source.” We should understand how the self is individuated biologically before we attempt to expand our understanding to the psychology of biological organisms. As will be seen later, failure to clearly identify the type of selfhood in question can lead to a great deal of unnecessary confusion. The self to which we refer when discussing a single cell is not the same as the self of a multi-cellular organism or a human being.

In this chapter, I will examine the conditions for *minimal* selfhood – that is, the necessary and sufficient conditions for a living process to individuate itself – from the standpoint of enactivism, a philosophical view that embraces embodied cognition. Individuation does not necessarily yield a unique personal identity (the kind which we would associate with human beings), but it does yield a distinct and autonomous subject or entity. Enactivist theories of selfhood build on the consequences of groundlessness, the claim that there is no absolute or ultimate foundation on which our knowledge is built, a claim which includes the denial of a pre-

given world or self. The “interactive turn,” or the idea that that social relations play a constitutive role in cognition, raises questions about the conditions of minimal selfhood. Following Evan Thompson’s autopoietic enactivism, I begin with the premise that identity co-emerges with life, a cell being the minimal case of enacted identity,<sup>3</sup> then argue that the interactive turn necessitates the finding of a common ground on which to establish the continuity of the biological self, the kind of self which any organism possesses, and the social self, which includes the distinct personal identity of a human being situated in a community. We may consider the biological and the social self to be continuous if we can show how the self of biology develops by degrees of minute difference into the social self. It is a matter of understanding how the two interrelate, of figuring out what effects biological organization has on personal identity and what effects personal identity might have on an organism’s biology.

### Enactivism and Embodied Cognition

Enactivism is a position that emerged alongside the “embodied turn” in cognitive science. First popularized by Evan Thompson, Francisco Varela, and Eleanor Rosch in 1991 via *The Embodied Mind*, today there are several varieties of enactivism, though I will focus on autopoietic variant.<sup>4</sup> The shared beliefs uniting the various enactive approaches are their embrace of the embodied turn and a metaphysics of “groundlessness” – the denial of an absolute foundation and pre-given world or self.<sup>5</sup> The key concept of enacted *cognition* is that the physical constitution of our bodies plays a fundamental role in cognition, agency, and

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<sup>3</sup> Cells are to be considered the minimal instance of selfhood because they are the most basic “unit” that qualifies as autopoietic (defined on page 8). Smaller organic structures, such as viruses or mitochondria, fail to meet at least one of the three classificatory criteria for autopoietic systems. Viruses, for example, do not have a metabolism, therefore, they fail to meet the criterion of self-maintenance.

<sup>4</sup> Other variants of enactivism include “sensorimotor” enactivism and “radical” enactivism. Interested readers should refer to Ward et al. (2017) for a more comprehensive overview of the variants and their differences.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of how the author’s arrived at the concept of groundlessness readers may turn to chapter ten of *The Embodied Mind*, pages 217-219.

subjectivity. We should not make the mistake of taking cognition to mean *human* cognition, as this would obscure the primary insight, which is that cognition is not only something that brains do, but something that any living system does. This claim coincides with the move away from a representative theory of mind (and truth as correspondence) to one emphasizing action and performance. Cognition becomes a matter of embodied action “depend[ing] upon the kinds of experience that come from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities...[that] are embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context.”<sup>6</sup> From this perspective even something like an amoeba or bacterium – single celled organisms without even a simple nervous system – can be described as engaging in cognitive activity when they coordinate behavior in such a way as to maximize the efficiency of certain tasks. The humble bacterium will, upon encountering a graded nutrient stream, swim to the richest part of said stream.<sup>7</sup> Sensorimotor capacities are essential for cognition and are embedded in biological, psychological, and sociocultural contexts.<sup>8</sup> Perceptions thus become perceptually guided actions, with cognitive structures emerging from recurrent sensorimotor patterns, like, to borrow one of Thompson’s favorite metaphors, a path laid down in walking.<sup>9</sup>

The enactive approach to cognition follows from its stance on groundlessness, the claim that the mind is incapable of providing epistemic certainty about the world apart from human

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<sup>6</sup> Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience - Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 173. Although the authors talk about cognition being embedded in “biological, psychological, *and* cultural” contexts it is clear in the text that not all three contexts must be present to talk about cognition. They are simply acknowledging that cognition is present in *each* of these contexts, and that the given context will subtly shape our understanding of cognition.

<sup>7</sup> Evan Thompson, “Sensorimotor Subjectivity and the Enactive Approach to Experience,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4, no. 4 (2005): 407–27, 418.

<sup>8</sup> Sensorimotor capacities here refer simply to the capacity to receive information about the environment and to initiate movement in accordance with said information. Accordingly, even bacteria and unicellular organisms can be said to possess sensorimotor capacities in this sense.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 173.

experience.<sup>10</sup> To further complicate matters, minds and organisms are not simple input-output networks but emergent and autonomous systems whose behavior cannot be explained solely through reduction to the most basic constituents of the system.<sup>11</sup> Simple input-output systems have rigid and pre-defined meanings associated with their various behaviors. For example, a mechanical system such as a keyboard, where pressing the spacebar always sends the same electrical signal through the device, and any failure in this process is considered a malfunction. Autonomous and emergent systems, however, establish their own domains of significance and define their own operations in a way that resists linear analysis. As such, the meaning of any particular interaction “is not prescribed from outside but is the result of the organization and history of the system itself” and cannot be reduced to an input-output network.<sup>12</sup> Value, in the most basic sense, therefore comes to be determined by the organism as it begins relating to the various environmental affordances available. Although these values may be thought of in a deflationary or descriptive sense, as mere indicators of behavior, I contend that they are nonetheless also values in the fullest sense of the word. *If* an organism values its own persistence, then it *ought* to value the things necessary for its persistence. If the naturalistic fallacy is brought to bear on this claim, it must be done at the level of the values or norms that guide behavior, which in this case is the norm of self-persistence.

Understanding the cognitive behavior of any enacted system, including its identity creating-and-maintaining behavior, involves understanding its historical interactions with the environment.<sup>13</sup> We must be familiar with both the system and the domain in which it is situated

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<sup>10</sup> Presumably, the view that the mind cannot provide epistemic certainty about the world “outside” or “beyond” the mind would apply to any minded organism.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson et al., 150.

<sup>12</sup> Thompson et al., 158.

<sup>13</sup> Historical interactions, here, should be understood in the ontogenetic, not the phylogenetic, sense.

if either is to be properly understood. With a basic understanding of enacted cognition now in place, it is time to examine the emergence of organic processes – otherwise known as autopoietic systems.

### What is Autopoiesis?

Autopoiesis is a term first coined by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela to describe the continual self-production of the living cell. In Thompson's words: "the autopoietic organization is that of a peculiar circular interdependency between an interconnected web of self-regenerating processes and the self-production of a boundary, such that the whole system persists in continuous self-production as a spatially distinct individual."<sup>14</sup> Autopoietic systems, so defined, have three key characteristics: (1) self-producing parts, (2) a semipermeable boundary enclosing said parts, and (3) a relationship of interdependency between the parts and the boundary. Thompson develops these three characteristics in an attempt to create a clear set of criteria for determining if a system is autopoietic.

The boundary of an autopoietic system is semipermeable and therefore allows for the on-going exchange of matter and energy with the environment. "A cell," Thompson writes, "is spatially formed by a semi-permeable membrane which establishes a boundary between the inside of the cell and the outside environment."<sup>15</sup> Without such a boundary the chemical network that defines the cell's interior would simply dissolve back into the surroundings from which it initially formed. The crucial point here is to determine if the boundary "discriminate[s] between the inside and outside of the system in relation to its relevant components."<sup>16</sup> Should such a distinction be feasible, we move on to examine the components of the system.

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<sup>14</sup> Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 101.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, 98.

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, 103.

In an autopoietic system “components are being produced by a network of reactions that take place within the boundary.” In short, the interior of the system is a reaction network.<sup>17</sup> It is important to understand that, for the system to qualify as autopoietic, the *resources* for producing the network can come from outside the boundary, but the *processes* which produce this network must take place *within*. Cells are thermodynamically open systems constantly exchanging matter and energy with the environment – a process known as metabolism. Without this metabolic exchange the formal organization of the system would quickly deteriorate and collapse, leading to the death of the organism.

The final condition for a system to qualify as autopoietic is the interdependency of the semipermeable boundary and the reaction network contained therein. The boundary is created through components generated by the network, but it also establishes the conditions necessary for the reaction network to produce itself and its components. In this sense the boundary is not only semipermeable but *selective*.<sup>18</sup> Influences which disrupt the functioning of the cell as a whole are rejected, while the boundary selects for and accepts environmental affordances which benefit the cell’s operations. The interdependency between the boundary and its constituent inner parts is such that one cannot logically precede the other, and in this sense the autopoietic system is enacted or, in Buddhist terminology, dependently co-originated. They come into being together, mutually dependent on one another for their continued existence.

### Autopoiesis, Cognition, and the Conditions Necessary for Life

Before proceeding to discuss the relationship between autopoiesis and selfhood, it will be prudent to come to an understanding of the relationship between autopoiesis and cognition.

Thompson, writing independently in *Mind in Life* (2007), which serves as a follow-up to the

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson, 103.

<sup>18</sup> That is, the boundary accepts or rejects environmental affordances, it is *not* selective in the Darwinian sense.



earlier *The Embodied Mind*, addresses the issue of whether or not autopoiesis is sufficient for cognition. The issue, for Thompson, turns on the definition of autopoiesis:

If autopoiesis is taken narrowly to mean internal self-production...that does not involve active interaction with the outside environment, then autopoiesis is not sufficient for cognition. But if autopoiesis is taken more widely to mean internal self-production sufficient for constructive and interactive processes in relation to the environment, then autopoiesis does entail cognition.<sup>19</sup>

Thompson declines to weigh in on the proper scope of the term autopoiesis, instead stipulating that “any living system is *both* an autopoietic *and* a cognitive system.”<sup>20</sup> Cognition, for Thompson, is any “behavior or conduct in relation to meaning and norms that the system itself enacts or brings forth on the basis of its autonomy.”<sup>21</sup> Yet even with this definition in place one may doubt the veracity of Thompson’s claim that *any* living system is both autopoietic and cognitive. Slightly before the writing of *Mind in Life*, Paul Bourguine and John Stewart also addressed this issue, paying special attention to the case of cognition in life forms with which the term is not commonly associated, such as bacteria.

As a first step, they provide a more rigorous definition of cognition: “a system is cognitive if and only if type A interactions serve to trigger type B interactions in a specific way, so as to satisfy a viability constraint.”<sup>22</sup> Type A interactions are those in which the organism’s interaction has consequences for its internal state, and type B interactions are those which “have consequences for the state of the (proximal) environment, or that modify the relation of the system to its environment.”<sup>23</sup> In making the case for bacterial cognition they appeal to “certain bacteria [that] have molecular receptors in their membranes that can take two conformations: (A) if the concentration of sugar in their local environment is constant or decreasing, and (B) if the

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<sup>19</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 126-7.

<sup>20</sup> Thompson, 127.

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, 126.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Bourguine and John Stewart, “Autopoiesis and Cognition,” *Artificial Life* 10 (2004): 327–45, 338.

<sup>23</sup> Bourguine and Stewart, 338.

sugar concentration is increasing.”<sup>24</sup> The signals available to these sensory inputs will then lead the bacteria, through the use of cilia attached to its membrane, to move in such a way that it is generally led towards the source of sugar in its environment.

Bourgine and Stewart contend that this definition of cognition also extends to plants, which exhibit a range of actions similarly guided by sensory input that allow them to satisfy their particular viability constraints, such as the turning of leaves to the sun or the opening and closing of stomata to regulate the exchange of liquids and gases.<sup>25</sup> While Thompson is ambiguous as to whether autopoiesis is sufficient for cognition, Bourguine and Stewart are not: “an autopoietic system is not necessarily cognitive; and...a cognitive system is not necessarily autopoietic.”<sup>26</sup> However, they ultimately agree with, and put forward the same thesis as Thompson regarding the relationship between life, autopoiesis, and cognition: “all living systems lie within the intersection between autopoietic systems and cognitive systems. Being both autopoietic and cognitive is thus a *necessary* condition for being a living system.”<sup>27</sup>

In a much more recent article, part of a special series for the Royal Society’s Philosophical Transactions B, a group of philosophers and biologists set out to “reframe cognition” under the claim that “taking seriously modern evolutionary and cell biology arguably now requires recognition that the information-processing dynamics of ‘simpler’ forms of life are part of a continuum with human cognition. The commonalities are mechanistic, not metaphorical.”<sup>28</sup> The authors provide a definition of cognition different from both Thompson and Paul and Bourguine, claiming that:

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<sup>24</sup> Bourguine and Stewart, 339.

<sup>25</sup> Bourguine and Stewart, 340.

<sup>26</sup> Bourguine and Stewart, 341.

<sup>27</sup> Bourguine and Stewart, 341.

<sup>28</sup> Pamela Lyon et al., “Reframing Cognition: Getting Down to Biological Basics,” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 376, no. 1821 (January 25, 2021).

Cognition comprises the sensory and other information-processing mechanisms an organism has for becoming familiar with, valuing, and interacting productively with features of its environment (exploring, exploiting, evading) in order to meet existential needs, the most basic of which are survival/persistence, growth/thriving, and reproduction.<sup>29</sup>

Although the authors of this article do not discuss autopoiesis, they do conclude that “cognition is a function necessary for *any* autonomous biological system’s survival, wellbeing, and reproduction,” acknowledging that, while this proposition may be “uncomfortable” it is nonetheless productive for the biological sciences to proceed as if it were the case.<sup>30</sup>

### The Autopoietic Cell and the Human Self

When referring to “the self” we usually mean not only basic individuation but the apparent persistence of personal identity. Another way to say this is that we are usually concerned with the identity of *persons*, not just organisms qua organisms. One might then reasonably wonder how this minimal notion of cellular selfhood relates to people – who are not only *multicellular* beings, but also have emotional, rational, social, moral, artistic, and other aspects. Cells, Thompson argues, are first order autopoietic systems – the minimal case of autopoiesis.<sup>31</sup> Multicellular organisms, such as human beings, are thus to be understood as second order autopoietic systems *and* first order autopoietic systems. Thompson insists that the semipermeable boundary of an autopoietic system does not need to be physical. “[T]he crucial matter is that the system produce and regulate its own internal topology and functional boundary, not the particular physical structure that realizes this boundary.”<sup>32</sup> Multicellular beings, although they are composed of single-celled autopoietic systems, are not *just* second-order systems

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<sup>29</sup> Lyon et al., 4.

<sup>30</sup> Lyon et al., 4.

<sup>31</sup> For more on whether or not autopoiesis is *necessary* for life or *necessary and sufficient* see Thompson, 2007, pages 122-127.

<sup>32</sup> Thompson, 107.

because the overall organization also exhibits autopoietic behavior. As autopoietic systems in their own right, then, the personal identity of human beings should also be explicable in a way analogous to and compatible with autopoiesis.<sup>33</sup>

There is a general consensus, at least from the perspective of embodied cognition, that any living system is necessarily a cognitive one. Cognition here meaning “behavior or conduct in relation to meaning and norms that the system itself enacts or brings forth on the basis of its autonomy.”<sup>34</sup> Cognition depends on the ability of a living system to evaluate its surroundings, although there is no need for this system to be self-aware of its evaluations. Meaning, in the above sense, is a matter of relations between an organism’s norm of self-continuance and the environmental affordances available. Whether or not autopoietic organization alone suffices for cognition remains a contested issue, but, like Thompson, it is enough for my purposes merely to stipulate that any living system is necessarily autopoietic *and* cognitive. What is of importance is that living systems not only produce themselves but also produce, or rather *enact*, “meanings and norms” that recursively affect the system’s behavior and environmental interactions. While the next chapter will show that autopoiesis and biology alone cannot provide us with a complete and definitive explanation of human behavior and identity, they do play a crucial role in explaining how we create and respond to domains of meaning and signification, domains which include moral, aesthetic, and other sociocultural values. Understanding human identity from the perspective of autopoietic enactivism requires addressing the role social relations play in

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<sup>33</sup> In principle, the autopoietic model can also be expanded to include systems that seem to lack intentional action. James Lovelock uses the term “ecopoiesis” to describe his “Gaia hypothesis.” While there is much debate over the merits of the Gaia theory, the difference between a planetary system (Earth) and a minimal autopoietic system (the cell) is not a matter of autonomy but of the scale and expression of said autonomy. Further consideration must also be given to the meaning of the term “boundary,” especially whether this boundary is merely functional, or must be both functional and physical.

<sup>34</sup> Thompson, 126.

molding cognition and identity. This has prompted a good deal of debate as to the constitutive status of social relations and their proper place in the formation of selfhood.

### Enactive Tensions Concerning Selfhood and the “Body-Social” Problem

The so called “embodied turn” has not been the only shift in cognitive science to draw the attention of enactivists. Miriam Kyselo argues the “interactive turn” – which emphasizes the role of social relations in cognitive processes – creates a new problem for the ontology of selfhood. The “body-social problem” addresses “how bodily and social aspects figure in the individuation of the human individual self.”<sup>35</sup> Kyselo’s concern is that associating selfhood too strongly with either the individual body or the social environment will result in an incomplete or misconstrued ontological position. Taking inspiration from Hans Jonas’s notion of needful freedom to try and solve the problem, Kyselo argues identity should be understood as a “self-other-generated network” in which “the organizational process that constitutes the identity of the individual [is] defined in terms of interpersonal behavior and action.”<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, the body functions as a flexible interface facilitating interaction with the social environment. This interaction takes the form of either participation or distinction. Regarding this social self, “the stability of the unity is not achieved by individual biological or bodily means, but through engaging with others, by learning first how to and then continuously negotiating the balance between the processes of distinction and participation.”<sup>37</sup> Without participation humans would not be “social” in any significant sense, but “without a distinction, the individual would dissolve in social interactions, becoming invisible *as* individual.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Miriam Kyselo, “The Body Social: An Enactive Approach to the Self,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 1–16, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Kyselo, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Kyselo, 10.

<sup>38</sup> Kyselo, 8, emphasis in original.

Michelle Maiese, responding to Kyselo, has several concerns with this position, arguing it conflicts with enactivism's emphasis on the centrality of embodiment. First, she suggests it downplays the role of the living body, which is central to enactivist concepts of selfhood. Second, she argues Kyselo's account conflicts with an enacted account of autonomous agency, which is deeply connected to "the autonomous organization of the living body."<sup>39</sup> Together this amounts to a weakening of the strong continuity between mind and life that is the hallmark of Thompson's approach. Instead, Maiese proposes the "life-shaping thesis," which she believes does a better job of accounting for selfhood in enactive terms.

Before diving deeper into both authors' positions, I wish to make a remark. I believe there is little *actual* tension between Kyselo and Maiese's positions, any appearance to the contrary owing to a confusion about the particular *type* of identity under discussion. Kyselo is concerned with the human self in its social and cultural dimensions. Maiese is concerned with both human identity in its biological dimensions and selfhood in general as a biological phenomenon. When the latter assumes that the former's account must be strictly applied to minimal, cellular instances of selfhood, problems inevitably arise. The notion of autonomy plays a pivotal role in this debate. Kyselo defines individual autonomy as:

a self-other generated network of precariously organized interpersonal processes whose systemic identity emerges as a result of a continuous engagement in social interactions and relations that can be qualified as moving in two opposed directions, toward emancipation from others (distinction) and toward openness to them (participation).<sup>40</sup>

Key to understanding Kyselo's approach is the dichotomy introduced between distinction and participation. Distinction refers to our emancipation as individuals from the social environment; our ability, as individuals, to resist or distance ourselves from certain social relations. This is

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<sup>39</sup> Michelle Maiese, "Embodiment, Sociality, and the Life Shaping Thesis," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 18, no. 2 (2019): 353–74, 353.

<sup>40</sup> Kyselo, "The Body Social," 10.

Jonas's notion of needful freedom applied to the social environment, the self "never just is, but rather emerges continuously and jointly relying on behavior and action and on doing and being together with others."<sup>41</sup> Self is an achievement that must be constantly re-achieved; without a milieu of social roles and cultural influences underpinning our identity we cannot distinguish ourselves through the rejection (or participation) of these forces. We might say that social and cultural factors provide a crucial context for the achievement of (human) identity. Without this context we lose much of what we mean by the word "human."

The participatory end of the dichotomy reflects our status as social beings who voluntarily immerse themselves in collaborative activity, often to the point where individual identity is eclipsed by group identity. Humans are born in an environment already richly saturated with sociocultural structures: families, neighborhoods, corporations, unions, governments, little-leagues etc. The cultural fabric in which we are embedded and the sociocultural forces to which we acquiesce (or reject) define us. It is impossible to deny the role of social interactions in the formation of a human being's identity – in the identity of any creature born into a social environment, for that matter.

Maiese raises three challenges against Kyselo's idea of identity as a self-other generated network, two of which become inconsequential when the distinction between the human self and the cellular self is properly considered. First, Maiese worries that Kyselo's claim of social death leading to the loss of the self is nonsensical. "It seems that an individual could enter into the extreme of participation and suffer a loss of individual agency...yet not 'dissolve' as a self...conversely, an individual could become isolated from social structures...yet persist as a self."<sup>42</sup> The individual would continue to persist as a distinct organism in space and time,

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<sup>41</sup> Kyselo, 8.

<sup>42</sup> Maiese, "Embodiment, Sociality, and the Life-Shaping Thesis," 359.

performing whatever operations were necessary to achieve homeostasis, but this does not mean they would persist in a way we would typically be comfortable calling human. It is not a matter of self or no self, but of *what kind* of self. An organism incapable of independent thought, participating in some kind of hive-mind is still *a* self, it has *an* identity, but not anything remotely comparable to that typically associated with the human species, which, of course, is exactly the kind of self with which Kyselo is concerned.

Maiese also worries that Kyselo's account of agency conflicts with enactivism because "if the social plays a primary and constitutive role in the individuation of the self" it is difficult to reconcile how normativity can be generated from *within*. Yet no enactivist, including Maiese, believes normativity is *purely* the result of individual processes. Normativity, as Maiese herself notes, results from the adaptation of an autonomous individual organization to its environment over the course of its lifetime.<sup>43</sup> The environment does not entirely determine what norms an organism will enact, but it most surely constrains the possibilities. If there is a compelling reason to treat the social environment as categorically distinct from the rest of the world to which an organism must adapt, Maiese does not indicate what it would be. In this context, at least, I see no reason not to treat society as part of the larger environment from which and in which the emancipation of individuals takes place. The problem is not understanding how the *social* aspect affects normativity but how organisms enact norms in response to the environment as a whole, including both natural and conventional affordances. The attempt to understand normativity as a property of organisms is an issue to which I will return again in the second and third chapters.

Maiese's most serious challenge comes when she claims it would be mistaken to "suppose that the self in its most minimal form *escapes* the living body."<sup>44</sup> Kyselo does indeed

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<sup>43</sup> Maiese, 360.

<sup>44</sup> Maiese, 359, emphasis in original.



seem to imply that this is the case: “self...has boundaries that are generated through interacting and being related to others. The self in its most minimal sense, thus escapes the body.”<sup>45</sup> It would be easy to insist that Kyselo is simply wrong about the role of social relations in the case of the minimal self, or that she really meant “minimal *human* self”<sup>46</sup> However, Maiese’s claim that we should individuate the self “according to its characteristic form or organization, rather than the energetic or ‘relational material’ that ensures its continued existence”<sup>47</sup> is not notably different from what Kyselo has done. Social relations are not “energetic material” – they are patterns or forms of organization that are themselves enacted between individuals. To say, for example, that one’s role as a parent is a constitutive aspect of their self is simply to identify an aspect of their self’s “characteristic organization” that only makes sense in the context of their relationship with another individual. In the next chapter we will come to see that these constitutive relations between organisms and conventional affordances take on a new significance, and qualitative experience, that relationships with natural affordances do not. For now, however, let us return to the issues of substance, self, and representation.

### Representation and Reductionism Revisited

Enactivism is commonly noted for its denial of representationalism – the idea that cognition invariably relies on representations – and its emphasis on embodied cognition as an alternative. Enactivism endorses these approaches, in part, as a response to what Thompson et al. call “groundlessness,” the state in which we find ourselves after failing to discover an “independent, fixed, or unitary self within the world of experience.”<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, the idea of a

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<sup>45</sup> Kyselo, “The Body Social,” 12.

<sup>46</sup> In the paragraph immediately preceding the quote, Kyselo explicitly refers to the human life and human existence and could thus be interpreted as intending human minimal self, not cellular minimal self.

<sup>47</sup> Maiese, “Embodiment, Sociality, and the Life-Shaping Thesis,” 364.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 59. The authors refer to this as the “naïve” sense of self, the notion of selfhood that we obtain through our immediate experience, but then fail to find in reflection on that experience.

sharp divide between the organism and the world apart from it falls away – the two are caught in a circle of reciprocal causation where the environment affects the organism and the subsequent actions taken by the organism affect the environment. However, Maiese’s denial that the self is socially extended fails to account for a key premise of enactivism – the self cannot be identified with any specific thing in the world of experience, including the physical body. I anticipate that at this point many will object, saying “you’ve claimed selfhood co-emerges with life, which presents itself to us as organic *bodies*, so how can you claim the self cannot be identified with these bodies. How can this possibly be?”

Organisms are not just bodies in the sense of static objects, but first or second order autopoietic *systems*. To better understand what this means it will be instructive to return to the issue of why the self cannot be found in experience. In *The Embodied Mind*, Thompson et al. deny the existence of a substantial self, supporting their argument with developments in cognitive psychology and an interpretation of Buddhist teachings as a form of introspective psychology. Although Thompson and his co-authors are resistant to the idea of Cognitivism – which they define as the hypothesis that all cognition can be understood as the rule-based manipulation of representational symbols<sup>49</sup> – they acknowledge that cognitivism presents a challenge to accounts of selfhood that emphasize awareness because, it “postulates processes that are mental but that cannot be brought to consciousness at all.”<sup>50</sup> This contrasts with the colloquial understanding of the unconscious, where “we usually suppose that what is unconscious can be brought to consciousness” either through reflection or psychoanalysis.<sup>51</sup> This denies the common-sense idea that consciousness is the central feature of the self, leading to a

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<sup>49</sup> Thompson et al., 40-43, “Defining the Cognitivist Hypothesis.”

<sup>50</sup> Thompson et al., 49.

<sup>51</sup> Thompson et al., 49.

new development of the mind-body problem – the mind-mind problem. How are we to understand the relationship between the “computational mind” and the “phenomenological mind;” between the mind that acts (computes) and the mind that is *aware* of the action?<sup>52</sup>

Thompson et al. argue that cognitive science is “thereby led to embrace the idea that the self or cognizing subject is fundamentally fragmented and nonunified.”<sup>53</sup> In chapter four of the same work they set out to prove this conclusion again, except this time from the perspective of the Buddhist teachings called the Abhidharma. These texts lay out five “categories” of experience which together “constitute the psychophysical complex that makes up a person and that makes up each moment of experience.”<sup>54</sup> It is important to note that these are not intended as ontological categories, but “simple descriptions of experience” meant to aid the individual in the investigation of experience. The five categories are: (1) forms, (2) feelings or sensations, (3) perceptions and impulses, (4) dispositional formations (habits), and (5) consciousness. According to the teachings of the Abhidharma, nowhere in these five categories can we find a fixed, unitary self that corresponds to our commonsense intuition of identity.

The first category, “forms,” refers to the physical environment and the body. But since the body is constantly changing, it clearly cannot be the source of a fixed and unchanging self. We recognize this intuitively when we say, not “I am a body” but “I *have* a body.” Further, as Thompson et al. point out, the ease with which we can imagine a “total body transplant” suggests that we do not generally take the body to be the essence of selfhood.<sup>55</sup> The next category consists of feelings and sensations, which, despite being closely identified with the self, are likewise in a state of constant flux; they are events that we perceive as happening *to* the self, therefore they

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<sup>52</sup> Thompson et al., 52.

<sup>53</sup> Thompson et al., 49.

<sup>54</sup> Thompson et al., 64.

<sup>55</sup> Thompson et al., 66.

cannot *be* the self. Nor, however, can we identify the self with perception and impulse, also referred to as discrimination and action, because these are things that we experience the self to *do*, but not that we experience the self *as*. Identifying selfhood with dispositional formations seems more promising at first, but on closer inspection we realize that our “habits, motives, and emotional tendencies may change considerably over time, but we still feel a sense of continuity as if there were a self that is distinct from these personality changes.”<sup>56</sup>

The last category, consciousness, seems the most promising of the five aggregates, in part because it contains all the others. Yet here, too, we fail to find the fixed and unitary self of commonsense experience. To understand why this is, we must briefly touch on the Buddhist view of consciousness, which here “always refers to the dualistic sense of experience in which there is an experience, an object experienced, and a relation (or relations) binding them together.”<sup>57</sup> Buddhists work from the fact that objects are experienced by different senses to develop a framework of six sense consciousnesses: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, tactile consciousness, and mind consciousness.<sup>58</sup> Unless we closely attend to the workings of our own mind, we tend to “impute continuity of consciousness to all our experience...But this apparent totality and continuity...masks the discontinuity of momentary consciousnesses related to one another by cause and effect.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, even consciousness, which appears to be stable and continuous, is fragmented, impermanent, and cannot be identified with a fixed and unified self.

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<sup>56</sup> Thompson et al., 67.

<sup>57</sup> Thompson et al.

<sup>58</sup> One of the interesting points of difference between Buddhist and Western psychologies is the view that “mind” constitutes its own sense. For an in-depth discussion of this point refer to Thich Nhat Hanh’s (2006) book on the subject: *Understanding Our Mind*.

<sup>59</sup> Thompson et al., 69.

Thompson et al. treat Buddhism as roughly analogous to a successful version of introspective psychology in the West,<sup>60</sup> ultimately concluding that neither scientific investigation nor the wisdom of the contemplative traditions has ever found anything in our experience that corresponds to what we typically mean by “self,” that is, our “naïve” sense of self as something lasting, separate, and independent. Thompson et al. do not conclude however, that the self does not exist, only that it does not exist in the way which our immediate experience leads us to believe. The self is a system, the whole of which has behaviors and properties irreducible to the functioning of any particular part. It is for this reason that attempts to locate the self *within* experience always fail to yield sufficient results – phenomenological experience is only a part of the self (the fifth aggregate) and thus cannot account for the self as a whole. Maiese’s proposed solution, which is to accept the causal role played by social relations in the formation of identity while rejecting the idea of the self as socially extended, is functionally reductionist. Granted, when she reduces self to the body she understands the body as a system, but, by refusing to consider the self as extended beyond physiological processes, she conflates the processes of identity and life, an equivalence I strongly argue against in the next chapter.

### Conclusion to Chapter One: Time, Value, and Other Concerns

This chapter has examined enactivist ideas of identity, which establish selfhood as a dynamic system coemerging with life itself, i.e., the autopoietic organization. It is not just organisms (i.e., organic bodies) that are systems or processes, but identity itself. “An organism’s identity is not bound to its material constitution, for this constitution is constantly renewed; its *identity is accomplished dynamically at a formal level*. Yet with this freedom comes a correlative

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<sup>60</sup> As acknowledged by the authors in their revised introductions, representing modern Buddhism as the product of introspection alone is naïve and mistaken; modern Buddhism, like any significant “school” of thought, has been shaped by innumerable cultural and social pressures. Nevertheless, the “self” remains an idea unattachable to any concrete substance or thing in our experience, including the body.

necessity: the organism has to change; *stasis is impossible*.”<sup>61</sup> Selfhood is an achievement akin to balancing; a state only achieved in spite of *and* in virtue of tension. The challenges an organism faces in attempting to renew its formal organization against a backdrop of constant material change only grow as the organism increases in complexity. The attempt to maintain basic biological feasibility is referred to as homeostasis, which neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes as “the primitive of organism value,”<sup>62</sup> or the beginning of what Francisco Varela refers to as “sense-making.”

The debate between Kyselo and Maiese exposes the ease with which one can slip into to a reductionist approach that conflicts with the ontological claims of enactivism. It also reveals that the body-social problem is not just about participation and distinction, but also involves the question of what the self is such that it can be individuated both biologically *and* socially, since social interactions seem to take the self beyond its merely physiological organization. Further, although life and identity may co-emerge via spontaneous autopoietic organization, this *does not mean they are synonymous terms*. Our identity can come to be defined by factors that do not directly relate to our homeostatic success, as will become evident when we examine values leading to actions that, if undertaken, result in *intentional* homeostatic failure, such as suicide.

The next chapter, in an effort to better understand what social-individuation looks like, examines a view of selfhood in which social and moral relations are the primary constituents of personal identity. My primary interlocutor will be Charles Taylor, who holds that moral values play a constitutive role in the making of the self, a claim that initially seems to conflict with Thompson and Varela’s account of sense-making. If organisms create their own value and

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<sup>61</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 152 (emphasis added).

<sup>62</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2010), 52.

significance *only* in regard to internal, biological norms, we should expect, as Damasio does, for these values “[to] bear some relation, no matter how indirect or remote, to the...general maintenance of living tissue [and]...the particular regulation required for...well-being relative to the current context.”<sup>63</sup> There are good reasons to resist this reduction, not the least of which being that it fails to adequately explain all possible human behavior. Ultimately, Kyselo’s suggestion that self “escapes” the body is intuitively correct but poorly worded, as “to escape” suggests “to leave behind.” It would be better to say that the self, as a process, *extends* or *grows* beyond the body into symbolically mediated domains of value and signification. These domains are dependent on, but not entirely determined by, human existence and biological value. After this stage of the investigation is complete the third chapter will reconcile the idea of the socially extended self with the biologically defined self by re-examining the place of normativity in enactivist philosophy and a theory of selfhood.

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<sup>63</sup> Damasio, 52.

## CHAPTER TWO: The Sociocultural Self and the Limits of Biological Explanation

Charles Taylor, in *Sources of the Self*, argues human identity “is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which [one] can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done.”<sup>64</sup> Reciprocally, the courses of action to which we commit ourselves eventually merge into and alter our evaluative framework. This framework provides the means by which we determine what is good or bad and what we ought or ought not to do. A key part of this framework is that it provides the critical standard against which we determine the success or failure of our actions, as well as which ends are worthy of pursuit. Our identity limits our possible choices, providing direction regarding the remaining choices available to us; the particular evaluations we make, and the beliefs to which we commit ourselves, then inform our ideal identity. “Doing without [these] frameworks is utterly impossible for us...living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency.”<sup>65</sup> Writing in 1989, Taylor is concerned with combatting the oversimplification and reductionism in value theory that resulted from sociobiological approaches – the attempt to not only explain, but justify, all our values and their social significance solely through the survival value of evolution. I believe this a worthy endeavor, yet I find Taylor’s distaste for naturalism unwarranted and will argue that his account of selfhood actually complements the sense-making activity that Varela and Thompson believe naturally follows from autopoietic processes. Enactivism makes it possible to understand how values, including moral and aesthetic values, can arise from and be shaped by natural or biological processes *without* being reduced to predetermined brute natural phenomena.

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

<sup>65</sup> Taylor, 27.



### Sense-Making and Environments of Significance

To begin, we must understand what it means for an organism to “make sense” of its environment in enactivist terms. Thompson, drawing on the work of Jonas, turns to metabolic functions. “Metabolism operates according to internal norms that determine whether otherwise neutral events are good or bad for the continuation of the organism...metabolism is immanently teleological.”<sup>66</sup> These “otherwise neutral events” are what make up the world prior to the introduction of the organism – the world before it becomes an environment, or *umwelt*, where events are laden with meaning. A fundamental part of cognition then, and of simply being an organism, consists in making evaluations. Evaluative activity requires a reference point or a critical standard. This is because questions of value are always questions of relationships. We cannot say “X is good” but must say “X is good *for* something.” The “for something,” which Aristotle famously phrased as “that for the sake of which,” is the point upon which our values are anchored. Thompson uses the example of sucrose – while its molecular structure is independent of any relationship to an organism, its status as a source of nutrition is “a relational feature, linked to the bacterium’s metabolism.”<sup>67</sup> Food is good because it is necessary for energy, energy because it is necessary for survival, and survival is that which is good for its own sake. Any organism, in order to maintain homeostasis, will need to be capable of evaluating the present environmental affordances in relation to its internally established norms so that it can respond appropriately, otherwise the norms it establishes would serve no purpose. Yet the evaluative process, though similar in principle, will look very different depending on the organism in question, including the requirements necessary for it to maintain homeostasis and the various features or affordances of its environment for which it must account. It is hard to imagine that

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<sup>66</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 152.

<sup>67</sup> Thompson, 158.

bacteria have a need, let alone the capacity, for abstract thought, yet human beings need to be capable of evaluating their actions against abstract principles, such as moral considerations, in order to determine the best course of action in a world filled with complex and multi-layered social interactions.

The relationship between an organism's identity and its environment is a two-way street. To see this more clearly it will be helpful to understand how Thompson develops the proposition that "living is sense-making." The following list is Thompson's own elaboration:<sup>68</sup>

- 1) *Life = autopoiesis and cognition.* Any living system is both an autopoietic and a cognitive system.
- 2) *Autopoiesis entails the emergence of a bodily self.* A physical autopoietic system, by virtue of its operational closure (autonomy), produces and realizes an individual or self in the form of a living body, an organism.
- 3) *Emergence of a self entails emergence of a world.* The emergence of a self is also by necessity the co-emergence of a domain of interactions proper to that self, an environment or *Umwelt*.
- 4) *Emergence of a self and world = sense-making.* The organism's environment is the sense it makes of the world. This environment is a place of significance and valence, as a result of the global action of the organism.
- 5) *Sense-making = enaction.* Sense-making is viable conduct. Such conduct is oriented toward and subject to the environment's significance and valence. Significance and valence do not preexist 'out there,' but are enacted, brought forth, and constituted by living beings. Living entails sense-making, which equals enaction.

Thompson is of the opinion that organisms cannot exist without a normative framework, an orientation towards whatever is defined as "good." Taylor, in regard to humans, holds that we must have a moral framework in order to properly make sense of our lives. Although the normative framework of a single-celled organism is necessarily very different from that of a human being, evaluative activity is nonetheless a fundamental part of cognition and identity, and this framework, in either case, emerges with the cognitive interactions of an organism relating to its environment. Yet this makes distinguishing between being alive and being a self rather

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<sup>68</sup> Thompson, 158, emphasis in original. All items in the list are taken directly from Thompson's work.

difficult. Values don't just describe the direction in which the process of identity tends, but also the tendencies characteristic of life itself. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio argues that the guiding principle of "life regulation" (homeostasis) is "biological value," which works to ensure the "managing and safekeeping [of] life."<sup>69</sup> Yet biological value is not a value in the ordinary sense of the word but is akin to what Taylor calls a "hypergood" – "goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, and decided about."<sup>70</sup> Hypergoods are the critical standards that dictate the priority we assign to various "regular" goods; they are qualitatively different from regular goods and taken as good for their own sake. Returning to Damasio, biological value "naturally guides and colors, so to speak, almost everything that happens inside our very minded, very conscious brains. Biological value has the status of a principle."<sup>71</sup> More than this, Damasio hypothesizes that:

[the] objects and processes we confront in our daily lives acquire their assigned value by reference to this primitive of naturally selected organism value. The values that humans attribute to objects and activities...bear some relation, no matter how indirect or remote, to the following conditions: first, the general maintenance of living tissue within the homeostatic range suitable to its current context; second, the particular regulation required for the process to operate within the sector of the homeostatic range associated with well-being relative to the current context.<sup>72</sup>

Sucrose, for example, in addition to signifying "nutrient" or "food," comes to be valued as a good because of the role it plays in helping organisms maintain homeostasis. At first this may appear to be exactly the kind of evolutionary reductionism Taylor resists, but a closer look tells a more complicated story. Taylor is suspicious of the "naturalist temper" primarily because the reductive attitude of the naturalist fails to provide the best possible account of human affairs –

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<sup>69</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 26.

<sup>70</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 63.

<sup>71</sup> Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 27.

<sup>72</sup> Damasio, 52.

specifically, it fails to satisfactorily explain “strong evaluation,” which Taylor claims is central to human experience.

Strong evaluation involves “discriminations of right and wrong, better and worse...which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.”<sup>73</sup> Clearly, strong evaluation depends on the existence of a hypergood, but Taylor’s main point is that, at least some of the time, we make evaluations in this way, and since strong evaluation plays a central role in our moral frameworks, it is an indispensable part of human identity. However, naturalism, as Taylor sees it, reduces values to brute facts or to mere descriptions of behavior.<sup>74</sup> This approach to morality is “concerned purely with what it is right to do rather than with what it is good to be.”<sup>75</sup> Precisely speaking, the problem with naturalism, even in its more “sophisticated” varieties, is that

it conceives the ‘objectivity’ of our valuations entirely in terms of their embedding in our different ways of life [therefore,] it allows in principle no purchase from which the goods enshrined in a given way of life can be shown as wrong or inadequate.<sup>76</sup>

Damasio’s attempt to make homeostasis into a hypergood is exactly the kind of maneuver Taylor is referring to when he says that naturalists embed objectivity into our different ways of life. In the case of biological value, the Damasio is attempting to ground the “objectivity” of our valuations in the “brute fact” of biological value. Although Taylor tends to disparage these brute facts in favor of discursive hypergoods, biological value nonetheless fulfills the role of a hypergood because it is one of the ways in which organisms, including humans, evaluate the goods afforded by their environment. Further, it does not seem a stretch to claim that biological value is qualitatively different from regular goods; granted, it can only be qualitatively different

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<sup>73</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Taylor seems to conflate naturalism with reductionism, and issue to which I return in the next chapter.

<sup>75</sup> Taylor, 79.

<sup>76</sup> Taylor, 67.

to an organism capable of becoming aware of it – a limited number given the abstract nature of biological value – but I would think most people would agree that the maintenance of homeostasis *is* qualitatively different in the sense of feeling more important than the normal goods of everyday life. Ultimately, I do not believe that this “incommensurability” can be avoided, but I hope to show that the situation is not as dire as Taylor seems to think. Values, when they are understood as enacted features of the cultural environment, are (1) more than simple projections because they do, in fact, allow for the possibility of strong evaluation and, (2) the “objectivity” of these values is intertwined with, *but not completely determined by*, human life alone, since the sociocultural systems that human beings establish, and in which they participate, also determine the objectivity of these values.

### Moral Orientation

Organisms need a value framework to make sense of their environment. But why do human beings need moral frameworks in particular, as Taylor claims? Taylor’s answer is that there is an “essential link between identity and [moral] orientation” and “we take as basic that the human agent exists in a space of questions.”<sup>77</sup> These are the questions typical of moral philosophy – what should we do? what makes for a good life? what are my obligations to others? Human beings exist in a world filled with these possibilities which present themselves to us in the present moment, but our choice is usually, although not always, informed by the consequences they signify. To make a choice, to “answer a question,” means committing oneself to a future course of events through actions taken in the present moment. The field of actionable options is significant, the number of possible questions practically infinite, and an individual’s

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<sup>77</sup> Taylor, 28-29.

moral framework, which automatically restricts or requires certain actions, acts as a kind of heuristic device to help individuals navigate through this immense space of possibilities.

I would add that it is important to recognize how, over time, choices accumulate into habits, a habit simply understood as a tendency to act in a certain way in response to a certain situation. Both the future-oriented tendency and the history of one's individuation from their social environment are essential features of selfhood. Taylor acknowledges this point as a prelude to his discussion of the narrative self. "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of *how we have become, and of where we are going*."<sup>78</sup> Time, duration for reflection, is a necessary condition of personal identity. Thompson, too, argues that duration is necessary for sense-making: "[an] organism must project beyond itself, *opening into the temporal horizon* of its own life cycle or lifeline and the spatial horizon of the outer world. In this way, autopoiesis and sense-making enact or bring forth biological time and space."<sup>79</sup> All organisms, to some extent, act on environmental affordances in virtue of the future value signified. Humans may differ from other organisms in the degree to which this temporal horizon is amplified and structured, but not in its basic existence.

The ongoing processes of autopoiesis and metabolism can be thought of as the "present" stage of identity.<sup>80</sup> The recollection of processes that have faded into the past constitutes the historical phase of personal identity; it is a record of how we have become that both informs our sense of identity in the present and influences our decisions regarding the future. For human beings, this recollection takes the active form of memory. But for first order autopoietic systems, which would not seem to possess sufficient cognitive capacities for memory, we may make the

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<sup>78</sup> Taylor, 47 (emphasis added).

<sup>79</sup> Thompson, *Mind in Life*, 155 (emphasis added).

<sup>80</sup> The meaning of "present" here is analogous to William James's concept of the "specious present" – a bit of past remembrance, the instant that is the conceptual "now," and the anticipation of the soon-to-come.

distinction that while personal identity relies on the recollection of past events, to simply be a self, an individuated entity in the most basic sense, does not. However, even the most basic organism must still project into the “temporal horizon” of its future as it orients itself towards the affordances necessary for its continuance. The values which an organism then enacts can be construed as reliable descriptors of its future behavior or as the ends towards which an organism strives.<sup>81</sup> If someone says they value *x*, yet never acts in such a way as to realize *x*, then either *x* is not truly valued by that person or something else is valued *more*.<sup>82</sup> Taylor criticizes modern strains of ethical thought for the reason that they ignore the question of what it is good to *be* in favor of what it is good to *do*. But being and doing, at least for the enactivist, cannot be completely pried apart; autopoiesis is both a system and an ongoing process which continually renews itself.<sup>83</sup>

Taylor mostly focuses on moral values, a selectivity which, combined with his anti-naturalist attitude, seemingly blinds him to the continuity of value.<sup>84</sup> “[There] are ends or goods which are worthy or desirable in a way that cannot be measured on the same scale as our ordinary goods... They are not just *more* desirable, in the same sense though to a greater degree, than some of these ordinary goods are.”<sup>85</sup> While this thesis is not primarily concerned with ethics or moral ontology, I argue against this stark separation of moral value from the “mundane”

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<sup>81</sup> Here we should bear in mind that these values need not be the complex moral or aesthetic values of human beings but include even the simplest evaluations that an organism makes in the process of maintaining autopoiesis. From this perspective, even a bacterium enacts value when it identifies the sugar in its environment as worthy of pursuit.

<sup>82</sup> I am *not* trying to claim that values are merely descriptive. I only point out that they can be reliably used as descriptors of behavior.

<sup>83</sup> We can, however, separate being and doing in reference to intentional action.

<sup>84</sup> What I mean to say is that moral values are different from other types of value *not* in regards to some intrinsic quality, but simply in regards to the types of relations they deal with, namely social interactions. While moral values, then, must play a critical role in the social individuation of the self, we should not believe that only moral values have a role to play.

<sup>85</sup> Taylor, 20.

values Taylor disparages as “brute facts” (e.g. taste).<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, like Taylor, I hope to ultimately show that not all values are reducible to the standard of evolutionary success – understood here as survival, the preservation of life, or homeostatic regulation. In other words, at least some values are good for their own sake and are not valuable just because they confer an evolutionary benefit. However, before examining how organisms come to enact domains of meaning and significance and make evaluative judgments of any kind, moral or otherwise, it is worth addressing Taylor’s conflation of naturalism with reductionism as well as several of the common objections to his claim that moral orientation plays a constitutive role in the making of identity.

Warren Frisina criticizes Taylor for only supporting his claims with phenomenological arguments while ignoring various nonreductionist alternatives in American and Chinese philosophy, such as pragmatism, process philosophy, and Confucianism.<sup>87</sup> Frisina attempts to show that Taylor’s argument is not only compatible with, but strengthened by, the incorporation of a nonreductionist metaphysics.<sup>88</sup> However, since Frisina does not specifically discuss autopoietic enactivism as an alternative, I will now take it upon myself to briefly show how enactivists might respond to several of the objections leveled against Taylor’s argument. First, there is the worry that Taylor places too much emphasis on social relations, which leaves him in the unreasonable position of saying there is no self without social relations.<sup>89</sup> Second, several commenters have questioned the strength and sufficiency of Taylor’s phenomenological

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<sup>86</sup> Taylor, 6.

<sup>87</sup> Taylor defends his claim that we cannot do without moral frameworks solely by appealing to our personal experience of the inability to “make sense” of our lives without such frameworks, and this is the sense in which the argument rests on phenomenological grounds. For further discussion regarding the problems with Taylor’s account see Frisina, 2002; Hittinger, 1990; Kerr, 2004; and Smith, 2002.

<sup>88</sup> Warren G. Frisina, “Value and the Self: A Pragmatic-Process-Confucian Response to Charles Taylor’s Sources of Self,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (2000): 117–25.

<sup>89</sup> The worry that the loss of social relations will lead to nonexistence is the same objection that Maiese raised against Kyselo’s claim about “social death,” which was covered in the previous chapter.



argument (outlined below). Third, Taylor has been accused, and rightfully so I believe, of having overly-intellectualized identity by defining it solely in a discursive, dialogical manner reliant upon many of our more advanced capacities for reflective thought.<sup>90</sup>

There is no good reason to believe that individuation is solely a social process – a human being withdrawn from a community will not suddenly cease being, and such an account cannot easily explain the identity of nonsocial organisms. Yet, in order to achieve an evolutionary understanding of identity, there must be some way to connect the process of biological individuation with that of social individuation. Although Taylor’s central concern is *human identity*, the account we give of such identity cannot be restricted *only* to social individuation, as Taylor’s emphasis on moral frameworks suggests, but must include an understanding of how humans are *both* biological and sociocultural creatures. By de-emphasizing the unique nature of *moral* and *aesthetic* values, instead recharacterizing them as continuous with other valuations, while treating social relations as a particular subset of environmental relations, it becomes possible to reconcile Taylor’s account with insights from biology.<sup>91</sup> When moral and aesthetic values such as goodness and beauty are treated as fundamentally distinct from the biological values of organisms it becomes impossible to reconcile biological and sociocultural accounts of identity. Instead, I propose, we should treat such values as relatively distinct, recognizing the important ways in which they are different (such as how they come into being), while also acknowledging that, like biological values, they have an important influence on the life and actions of an organism.

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<sup>90</sup> Owen Abbott and O.J. Flanagan share this criticism of Taylor, yet Abbott goes further than Flanagan by pointing out that Taylor’s argument in *Sources* relies on a “great man” view of history that over-emphasizes the contributions of philosophers in the shaping of modern identity. For further discussion review Abbott, 2020 and Flanagan, 1990.

<sup>91</sup> The need to de-emphasize the uniqueness of moral/aesthetic values closely parallels the argument that I made in the first chapter, in response to Maiese, which is that there is good reason to think that social relations are simply a subset of environmental relations.

Taylor's argument for the necessity of moral frameworks hinges on his account of strong evaluation, the idea that "discriminations of right and wrong, better and worse...are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."<sup>92</sup> Taylor makes a phenomenological argument for the existence of such evaluations; we feel that what it means to operate within a moral framework (consisting of strong evaluations) is to "function with the sense that some action, or mode of life, or mode of feeling is incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us."<sup>93</sup> Although such evaluations may be *phenomenologically* constitutive of identity, this does not mean that it is actually the case, since we know that our experience is not always reflective of reality. Yet the insight that we "cannot imagine ourselves operating in the world without engaging in a continual evaluative process"<sup>94</sup> is taken by many philosophers to be a fundamental aspect of life.<sup>95</sup> As I will argue shortly, the private experience of strong evaluation can be explained by recognizing that sociocultural systems perpetuate their own values through human beings. Much like with the first objection, Taylor's argument can be strengthened by eliminating the stark contrast between strong and weak<sup>96</sup> evaluation, since all living organisms must make evaluations *of some kind* to maintain homeostasis. Thus, we can supplement Taylor's phenomenological argument with the more empirical accounts of life given by philosophers like

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<sup>92</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 4.

<sup>93</sup> Taylor, 19.

<sup>94</sup> Warren G. Frisina, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action: Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 18.

<sup>95</sup> Damasio's account of selfhood depends on biological value; Hans Jonas associates metabolism with the process of evaluation, as do the enactivists. Resistance to this idea can probably be traced to Kant's third critique, where Kant very explicitly states that it is *as if* life is teleological, because it cannot be described otherwise, but that this is a failure of human understanding and is not indicative of reality.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor himself does not use the term "weak evaluation," but it seems to me the natural way to describe those evaluations which *are* rooted in individual desires, impulses, beliefs, etc. It may also be of interest to the reader to consider that for "strong evaluations" to exist, one must reject the idea of psychological egoism.

Hans Jonas or Francisco Varela, provided we can demonstrate some kind of continuity between strong evaluations and “weak” evaluations.

The third objection, that Taylor relies too much on “the individual’s capacity to articulate and live up to the commitments that they take to be definitive of who they are”<sup>97</sup> can be partially overcome by remembering that cognition, for enactivists, is something *all* living systems do, not just human beings. Taylor’s claims about the necessity of well-articulated frameworks are made in regard to the distinctly *human* self, the individuation of which relies at least partly on *language*, rather than a claim about all of life. We can generalize Taylor’s insight, while also addressing the issue of “over-intellectualization,” by placing less emphasis on the linguistic aspect of articulating and “living up” to one’s goals, instead emphasizing that, in humans, cognition plays an even more substantial role in identity than other organisms. Personal identity surely relies on the articulation of one’s goals to an extent, but, as developments in psychology and our understanding of the unconscious have shown, it is possible for us to act cognitively without acting consciously. Sense-making – the assignation of significance to objects and events within the world enacted by an organism – is necessary for self-individuation, but only in humans does sense-making include the specific form of language. The absence of language in other organisms, then, is not an obstacle to their biological individuation, but its existence in the human world adds another complex layer to the puzzle of human individuation in a sociocultural context and the conscious feeling of having a personal identity.

There is yet another distinctly human phenomenon, one which is perhaps even more puzzling, however. Let us now turn to the examination of biological value in the context of

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<sup>97</sup> Owen Abbott, “The Self as the Locus of Morality: A Comparison between Charles Taylor and George Herbert Mead’s Theories of the Moral Constitution of the Self,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 50, no. 4 (2020): 516–33, 523. See also Flanigan, *Identity, Character, and Morality* (1990).

rational suicide, which will serve to clarify the problems Taylor raises, reveal the limits of any account that attempts to explain value solely in terms of “the will to life,” and demonstrate why self and life cannot be flatly equated.

### Rational Suicide and the Limits of Biological Value

Antonio Damasio’s conception of “biological value” posits homeostasis, specifically what we might call the homeostatic urge or impulse – the drive to *maintain* homeostasis – as the hypergood to which all our other values are subordinated. “I see value as indelibly tied to need, and need as tied to life. The valuations we establish in everyday social and cultural activities have a direct or indirect connection with homeostasis.”<sup>98</sup> Damasio is hardly the first to identify biological value as a fundamental feature of organisms – Spinoza’s concept of *conatus* is just one well-known example – nor is Damasio alone in attempting to tie *all* our values to life-processes. Philip Kitcher, for example, builds an entire ethics out of the idea of altruism being an evolutionarily advantageous trait for a population of social beings to have.<sup>99</sup>

Evaluation, obviously, is *constrained* by organic evolution. An organism could not survive if it consistently realized values with consequences contrary to sufficient homeostatic regulation. However, this does not mean *everything* valuable must necessarily guide us to life, just that what is valuable cannot guide us to death, which is what Damasio seems to mean by an “indirect” connection to homeostasis. Values which do not affect survivability or homeostasis in any notable way are, in effect, neutral in regard to biological value. Biological norms may not always be the direct driving cause of behavior, yet the need to maintain homeostasis is still an operative condition that would seem to limit the possible range of actions which an organism

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<sup>98</sup> Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind*, 51.

<sup>99</sup> See Philip Kitcher’s book from 2011, *The Ethical Project*, for a descriptive account of an ethics founded on a mutually beneficial altruism.

might pursue. This raises a problematic and interesting question. If Damasio and the like are correct, how do we account for behavior where organisms, specifically human beings, intentionally realize values that lead to death, such as suicide? Some instances of suicide, perhaps, are readily explained in terms of Damasio's biological value. We often hear of people – usually after suffering some kind of severe trauma – “losing the will to live.” This could be viewed simply as a failure of the organism to act towards its goals or as a failure to acknowledge the goal of continued biological persistence. Calling cases such as these “suicides” seems inaccurate, however, since death results not by intentional decision but by accident; it is an outcome of impersonal or external events, not choices made by a person of sound mind. In a similar category are the deaths that result from intentionally risky behavior, an example being “thrill seekers” who are commonly described as “having a death wish.” Here, however, death is accepted as a possible outcome, but never as the consciously *intended* outcome. Suicide resulting from mental illness (e.g., major depressive disorder) can also be explained in terms of biological value and organic failure. Some series of events, internal or external, has led to conditions where the human organism no longer functions as it “should,” such as when depression is attributed to a chemical imbalance in the brain. If one's brain was operating in a healthy state, the reasoning goes, one would not wish to commit suicide.

Yet two types of suicide remain, both of which seem to resist explanation through appeal to biological value. The first of these is the kind associated with martyrdom and self-sacrifice. To willfully give one's life for an ideological cause seems like a difficult action to explain through reference to biological value alone. It is perhaps explicable if we connect biological value to the notion of altruism, claiming that one dies so that others might live – although this necessarily introduces a social component to biological value that seems to defy the basic idea of biological

value as an immanent drive created and maintained by individuals. However, there are times where sacrifice does not yield obvious benefits to others. Take the case of Socrates: despite having multiple opportunities to flee Athens, he chose death because he cared about more than mere existence and was unwilling to sacrifice the activities essential to his idea of the good life: “I say it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day...for the unexamined life is *not worth living*.”<sup>100</sup> To explain Socrates’s death via biological value requires one to bend the notion as far as to make it absurd. There is more at stake here than simple well-being and biological persistence.

The second form of suicide is as an act that preserves human dignity. This is one of the motivations that drives support for practices like physician-assisted suicide and medical assistance in dying (MAiD). The requirements to qualify for programs offering MAiD (e.g., Switzerland’s Dignitas) are quite strict, requiring, among other conditions, that the patient be of sound mind.<sup>101</sup> If *all* values directly or indirectly refer to biological value, as Damasio contends, how do we make sense of a rational agent, in full command of their faculties, freely choosing to realize a course of action that will reach consummation only in death?

Philosophers frequently acknowledge the challenge that altruistic behavior poses for theories of evolution which depend on an *individual* organism’s striving for self-continuation. One way to explain altruistic behavior, however, is to consider natural selection as acting at multiple levels. Thus, a *group* sharing altruistic traits may be more likely to survive and reproduce than a group which does not possess such traits. Yet rational suicide cannot be

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<sup>100</sup> Plato, *Plato - Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D.S. Hutchinson (Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 38a (emphasis added).

<sup>101</sup> Canada’s MAiD program requires patients to 1) be “at least 18 years old and mentally competent, 2) “make a voluntary request for MAiD that is not the result of outside pressure or influence, and 3), “give informed consent to receive MAiD.” Health Canada, “Medical Assistance in Dying,” education and awareness, June 16, 2016, <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/medical-assistance-dying.html>.

explained in this way, because the behavior in questions does not necessarily confer any benefits to the group. Although it is surely possible to cast *some* suicides as altruistically motivated – explained as “weaker” members of the group, no longer able to contribute to the collective resources, choosing to sacrifice themselves to relieve the group of the burden of keeping them alive – this explanation is insufficient in cases where there is an abundance of natural resources. It is the fact that suicide is, or can be, oriented towards the individual alone that makes it difficult to reconcile with any notion of biological value since, unlike with altruistic behavior, it cannot be explained simply by changing the unit or level at which natural selection operates.

I contend that neither ideological martyrdom nor suicides of dignity can be adequately explained by biological value alone, and if biological value is taken as the evaluative standard of activity, suicides of martyrdom or dignity represent a distinct break in the continuity of value. Further, I argue that it is at this precise point, where the continuity is broken, that life and identity become the most conceptually distinct, although they remain closely interrelated processes. Since biological value is unable to fully explain the range of human behaviors, it therefore falls short of Taylor’s “best account” principle, which is an indispensable part of his phenomenological approach. According to Taylor:

What we need to explain is people living their lives; the terms in which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum... We cannot just leap outside of these terms altogether, on the grounds that their logic doesn’t fit some model of ‘science’ and that we know a priori that human beings must be explicable in this science... This establishes what it means to ‘make sense’ of our lives... the terms we select have to make sense across the whole range of both explanatory and life uses. The result of this search [for better terms] yields *the best account we can give at any time*, and no epistemological or metaphysical considerations of a more general kind about science or nature can justify setting this aside. The best account in the above sense trumps.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 58.

There are some human behaviors and experiences, such as suicides of dignity, which cannot be explained by biological value without severely distorting the terms in which we describe them. Rather than persist in the effort to reduce *all* human behavior to biological value, we must either embrace a pluralist approach or find a single standard of evaluation that can explain all human behavior without rendering the terms of the explanation absurd.

### Alternatives to Biological Value

Either of the options to the dilemma described above requires understanding how a new hypergood might emerge, one that is fundamentally distinct from biological value. At least three important questions immediately appear: 1) what is the character of this new hypergood, and how is it different from biological value? 2) does the new hypergood emerge and replace its predecessor, or is biological value the first (or only) hypergood? 3) what are the consequences for a theory of personal identity? Before addressing these questions, however, Taylor's definition of "hypergood" must be clarified and supplemented. Taylor makes two definitive claims about hypergoods. First, that they are qualitatively different from regular goods and, second, that they "provide the standpoint from which [regular goods] must be weighed, judged, decided about."<sup>103</sup> In addition to these, I propose a third definitive quality of hypergoods: *a hypergood always manifests itself in value-related behavior*. Again, I am *not* claiming that hypergoods are reducible to behavior, merely that, if hypergoods determine the priority of regular goods, then hypergoods always effect behavior directed towards the attainment or avoidance of those goods.<sup>104</sup> Likewise, any behavior resulting from or demanding a value judgment is, directly or

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<sup>103</sup> Taylor, 63.

<sup>104</sup> The fact that we sometimes do what we know to be "not good" that is, when we allow our desires to guide our judgment, does not diminish the claim that hypergoods always manifest in behavior. Instead, it strengthens the primacy of biological value as a hypergood. Most desires, even when they result in maladaptive behavior, probably fall under Damasio's claim of being directly or indirectly explicable by biological value and the pursuit of organic well-being.



indirectly, affected by the hypergood that serves as the critical standard of evaluation. This is precisely why rational suicide is impossible to understand through the *sole* hypergood of “biological value.”

The idea that a new “hypergood” could potentially emerge and dethrone biological value is not, in itself, a new idea. In the following sections I examine two debates from history where biological explanations of behavior have been found inadequate and new alternatives proposed. The first section covers Grace and Theodore de Laguna’s “evolutionary critique” of pragmatism in 1910, and the second covers the Marxist debate between Louis Althusser and Jacques Monod in the sixties and seventies which addresses the issues of biology, social systems, and human nature. In reviewing these debates two errors will come to light – errors that persistently plague efforts to theorize between and across the biological and social sciences. Along the way, however, we will also come to glimpse how the experience of strong evaluation is possible.

### *Grace and Thomas de Laguna*

The influence of Darwin on the early pragmatists is clear in the writings of both William James and John Dewey, the latter of whom characterized pragmatism as

“hold[ing] that all the higher achievements of individual organic life result from the stress and strain of the problem of maintaining the functions of life. Reduced to [its] simplest terms, the biological problem of the individual...is to subordinate the materials and forces of the natural environment so that they shall be rendered tributary to life-functions.”<sup>105</sup>

Yet it seems that the pragmatists of Dewey’s day (and James’s before him) overemphasized the evolution of the organism. Grace and Thomas de Laguna, whose work has been brought to light by Trevor Pearce, argued “that the pragmatists had ‘not carried their evolutionism far enough,’

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<sup>105</sup> John Dewey, “The Bearings of Pragmatism upon Education: First Paper,” *Progressive Journal of Education* 1, no. 2 (1908), 70-71, quoted in Trevor Pearce, *Pragmatism’s Evolution: Organism and Environment in American Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 319. Note the parallel between Dewey’s idea and Damasio’s conception of “biological value.”

criticizing [the pragmatists] for failing to distinguish between survival value and emotional satisfaction and suggesting that the rapidity of social evolution made it ‘increasingly independent’ of the control of natural selection.”<sup>106</sup>

The de Laguna’s account of “emotional satisfaction” is interesting and not at all dissimilar from my claim that we must posit a new hypergood to make sense of and predict human behavior. Regardless of whether they are correct to do so, the de Laguna’s accuse the pragmatists, especially James, of assuming “that the whole utility or, at least, *the ultimate utility of a newly arising function consists in its supplementation of previously existing functions*, in the accomplishment of previously existing ends.”<sup>107</sup> An end in this context is defined as “an effect which is essential to the repetition or continuance of its cause; and secondarily...an effect determining its cause.” Damasio’s notion of biological value – the striving for homeostasis – is an end in this sense. The problem is that with “the rise of consciousness a second end...emerges, namely, the satisfaction of desire, or happiness...[the pragmatist’s] fault...has been a failure to distinguish accurately between the conditions of happiness and those of survival.”<sup>108</sup>

The de Laguna’s are vague and imprecise regarding the nature of this satisfaction. It is regularly described as “happiness,” but also “emotional satisfaction,” and “satisfactoriness of conduct.” The question of what constitutes this “satisfaction” mirrors the debate between Taylor and the naturalism he rejects. “Are the sentiments” the de Lagunas ask, “to be explained as consequences of the anticipation of pleasure and pain...Or are these sentiments qualitatively peculiar?”<sup>109</sup> One would expect the pragmatists, who liked to insist on “fruits over roots,” to

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<sup>106</sup> Pearce, *Pragmatism’s Evolution*, 323.

<sup>107</sup> Theodore de Laguna and Grace Mead Andrus de Laguna, *Dogmatism and Evolution: Studies in Modern Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910), 135 (emphasis added).

<sup>108</sup> De Laguna and de Laguna, 137.

<sup>109</sup> De Laguna and de Laguna, 140. I assume qualitatively peculiar here to mean something analogous to Taylor “strong evaluation” – the feeling of a judgment that is not rendered valid by one’s personal desires, inclinations, etc.

have taken the latter option. Yet instead “it is the dead level of utilitarianism that they have sought.” The de Lagunas, however, insisted that the sentiments are qualitatively distinct. Further, since they view mental development as a social phenomenon, they claimed that the evolution of cultural circumstances likewise affects the sentiments. Nevertheless, one might think, emotional satisfaction can hardly claim to have emancipated itself from biological value. Emotions are thoroughly embodied, organic, and frequently determined by biological needs – “you’re not you when you’re hungry,” as the saying goes.<sup>110</sup> Regardless, emotional satisfaction clearly seems *better* able to explain the motivations and events that would lead to rational suicide than does Damasio’s concept of biological value, since one might say that rational suicide has an emotional motivation or state as its telos, rather than survival. More importantly, however, they are clear that a *new* normative standard can emerge from conscious activity.<sup>111</sup> Although they clearly acknowledge the role of sociocultural evolution, the de Lagunas are still primarily focused on the organism, and their idea of conscious satisfaction as a “hypergood” (to describe their position using Taylor’s terminology) cannot explain the possibility of strong evaluation. For that, we must more clearly see how social and cultural systems themselves create and maintain value, ultimately influencing their human constituents, and it is this idea that is at the heart of the next debate.

### *Monod and Althusser*

About fifty years after the de Lagunas’ critique of James and Dewey in *Dogmatism and Evolution*, Jacques Monod and Louis Althusser found themselves embroiled in a similar debate over the ability of biology, and science more broadly, to explain human experience. While the de

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<sup>110</sup> A phrase made famous by some clever advertiser for Snickers candy bars.

<sup>111</sup> The de Lagunas are not particularly specific about what they mean by consciousness, but they do treat it as an organic function, focusing especially on ideas and sentiments.

Lagunas' critique focused on logic and epistemology, the debate between Althusser and Monod was ultimately one between idealism and materialism. Althusser's critique of Monod's magnum opus, *Chance and Necessity*, yielded the surprising conclusion that the latter – a geneticist by training and trade – inadvertently smuggled in idealist concepts under the guise of anthropological terms like “individual” or “human species.”<sup>112</sup> On the whole, their debate between materialism and idealism is outside the scope of this thesis, yet one thread of their argument – the extent to which genes and socioeconomic forces determine human behavior – closely parallels the issues around normativity and the sufficiency of biological value that I raised earlier.

Jacques Monod published *Chance and Necessity* in 1970, arguing for the conclusion that “the ideational sphere of human culture... ‘stands at a yet greater distance above the biosphere than the latter does above the nonliving universe.’”<sup>113</sup> Monod is insistent that, regardless of the initial conditions under which it developed, cultural evolution has become totally split from natural evolution. As a result, human history is irreducible to biology, just as Monod believed biological principles were irreducible to physics. Monod's motivations are not purely philosophical or scientific, however, but also political, since his denial that culture could be scientifically explained allowed him to advocate for the separation of science and Marxism, since the latter, as a program focused on culture, deals with issues outside the scope of scientific investigation. Nonetheless, his argument ultimately rests on the keen observation that biology cannot explain all of human behavior.

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<sup>112</sup> Carsten Strathausen, *Bioaesthetics: Making Sense of Life in Science and the Arts* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 81-2. Monod's account is idealist because, according to Althusser, “any and all humanist or anthropological concepts – such as ‘man’ or ‘the essence or nature of man,’ as well as terms like ‘individual,’ ‘subject,’ ‘genus,’ ‘human species,’ ...are inherently idealist” (Strathausen, 82). Although it seems to me that Althusser is mostly worried about essentialism, and not idealism, in the rest of this section I use the term “idealism” in the sense described by Althusser.

<sup>113</sup> Monod, introduced and quoted in Strathausen, *Bioaesthetics*, 87.

Althusser agrees with this assessment. His problem with Monod is not that the latter's observations are wrong, but that they are too narrow, which leads him to draw incorrect conclusions. The aspects of human life that are inexplicable from a biological perspective, Althusser argues, are entirely explicable as results of larger social and *economic* forces working to reproduce themselves. Monod strays by "think[ing] he can account for the content of the social existence of men...as a mere effect of the play of neurobiological mechanisms."<sup>114</sup> Rather than seeing a problem in the fact that culture is irreducible to these mechanisms, Monod sees evidence of free will and winds up "promot[ing] the idealist illusion of subject-centered cultural processes severed from the real material-structural conditions...that underlie them."<sup>115</sup> Althusser denies this idealist claim by asserting that our behavior is *also* controlled by economic and symbolic systems. Unlike the original generation of pragmatists, who failed to carry their evolutionism *far enough*, both Monod and Althusser carry their evolution all the way and then some. Here is Monod on the matter:

The important point is...cultural evolution could not help but affect physical evolution; in man more than in any other animal – and owing precisely to its infinitely greater autonomy – it is *behavior* that *orients* selective pressure. And once that behavior ceased to be primarily automatic and became cultural, cultural traits themselves inevitably exerted their pressure upon the evolution of the genome.<sup>116</sup>

Althusser differs from the de Lagunas and Monod in asserting that economic systems determine cultural systems, but he has no quarrel with the claim that cultural systems influence our biological evolution and behavior. He explains that Monod overlooks the power of social institutions and economic systems to reproduce themselves because Monod limited his

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<sup>114</sup> Althusser, "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists," 149-160, quoted in Strathausen, *Bioaesthetics*, 92. Monod does not think that social existence can be reduced to these mechanisms, merely that there are no other relevant factors to consider.

<sup>115</sup> Strathausen, 92.

<sup>116</sup> Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, 126, as quoted in Strathausen, *Bioaesthetics*, 78.

conception of “reproduction” to biochemical terms. Carsten Strathausen, who reconstructs this debate in his book *Bioaesthetics*, explains that, “[f]rom a neo-Darwinian perspective it makes no sense to refer to the reproduction of social structures, because such structures are not alive.”<sup>117</sup> Strathausen then generalizes Althusser’s critique as recognition that “*the surreptitious transfer of concepts from one epistemological system to another obscures the specificity of their meaning in different contexts.*”<sup>118</sup> Just as “reproduction” functions differently from the biological to the sociocultural spheres, so too does evolution. When the de Lagunas charged the pragmatists with believing (mistakenly) that the utility of a new function lies in its reference to previously existing ends, part of what they were effectively saying was that evolution, in a *cultural context*, takes on new functions and ends, a fact which the original pragmatists failed to realize because they did not adequately address the implications of transferring the concept of evolution from a biological context to a sociocultural one.

There are two key takeaways here. First, like the de Lagunas, both Monod and Althusser reject the claim that human behavior is completely determined by biology, insisting instead that we must look to either a vague account of “free will,” or else to socioeconomic systems, in order to adequately explain behavior. This amounts to a denial of biological value as the *ultimate* or only hypergood of human life, though not a denial of its existence and impact, nor even a denial of the possibility of biological reductionism in *most* cases of human behavior. Second, Monod’s claim that cultural evolution is *totally* autonomous seems erroneous, given that these systems depend on human beings for their reproduction. True, these systems do not necessarily depend

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<sup>117</sup> Strathausen, 92. It is worth noting that general systems theory, both in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and as it has continued, persists with the claim that systems “reproduce” in a variety of senses: systems reproduce in the sense that they sustain themselves, in the sense that they promote the same behavior in their constituent (frequently human) parts, and in the sense that they evolve new structures and functions over time.

<sup>118</sup> Strathausen, 93 (emphasis added).

on the existence of any particular person(s), but without living human beings, their actions, and the webs of interlocution<sup>119</sup> that they establish, a culture will not be fully instantiated and will not continue changing and evolving. Further, since a great deal of human experience is determined by the biological organization of our species, we cannot deny that biology has at least some effects, even if they are indirect, on the evolution of culture. Rather than maintain either that biology determines cultural evolution or that the latter is completely independent of the former, it would instead be better to say that biology *limits* cultural evolution but does not determine its course in advance. However, *even if* cultural evolution is totally autonomous, sociocultural and/or socioeconomic systems still exert a force on human beings that can cause them to act in accordance with ends other than biological value.

Before discussing the relevance of sociocultural evolution for Taylor's claims about strong evaluation, I would first like to highlight an interesting and important difference between Monod/Althusser's accounts and that of the de Lagunas. As we saw previously, for the de Lagunas, the development of new ends besides biological value, depends on the "rise of consciousness," which first makes possible emotional satisfaction. Yet for both Monod and Althusser, the key element allowing cultural evolution to outpace biological evolution, although not necessarily break away from it altogether, is the development of language. Monod writes that the development of "symbolic language...opened the way for *another* evolution, creator of a new kingdom: that of culture, of ideas, of knowledge."<sup>120</sup> Althusser does not disagree with the claim that symbolic language opened up "a new kingdom" but does disagree with the idea that language is a tool of human beings. Instead, on Althusser's account, "the play of linguistic

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<sup>119</sup> I take the term from Taylor, who in turn seems to have been inspired to use it by the work of George Herbert Mead. For a full account of Taylor's use of the term in relation to the work of Mead see *Sources*, 525fn12.

<sup>120</sup> Monod, *Chance and Necessity*, 128, quoted in Strathausen, *Bioaesthetics*, 77.

signification far exceeds [human] conscious control...regardless of how much they try to express themselves, their ‘ideas,’ or their ‘individuality.’”<sup>121</sup> These historical discussions raise the question of pluralism – of whether there is a single hypergood for all agents, or if different agents may have different hypergoods. It has already been established that biological value is insufficient to explain all human behavior, so the question then becomes whether the hypergood that can explain rational suicide can also explain biological value. Before attempting to answer this question, however, the possibility of strong evaluation must first be explained.

### Making Sense of Strong Evaluation

Strong evaluation, according to Taylor, requires “discriminations of right and wrong, better and worse...which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.”<sup>122</sup> But if the validity of these judgments does not rest on desire or inclination – in short, on anything natural or biological – from where do they derive their validity? Let us call this the normative question. The other question is phenomenological; it asks why our experience of strong evaluation *feels* “strong,” asks why it should feel differently from ordinary evaluations such as taste or color preference, which present themselves as distinctly subjective “weak” evaluations. I hold that both questions can be answered by examining the evolution of culture. Regardless of when, how, or why, at some point in the distant past human beings began creating – art, language, music – and thus began infusing the physical environment with signs and symbols of the creative process, of the human mind, and of the various ideals and values they felt demanded expression. Today there is no escaping the influence of culture. It will affect the sounds a baby in the womb hears even before they are born, that same child will grow up with their senses being trained by the

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<sup>121</sup> Strathausen, 89.

<sup>122</sup> Taylor, *Sources*, 4.



dominant languages and artistic mediums of their culture. Consider, as an example, the pyramidal tracts connecting the cerebral cortex to the spinal cord – essential for vocalization and voluntary movement – which “are not fully formed and fixed at birth, but continue to develop during infancy through the movements a baby is made to perform.”<sup>123</sup> These movements will vary according to the particular sociocultural context, meaning that the physical organization of the baby’s body is partially determined by cultural standards. Paraphrasing Rousseau, we might say that “man is born free but everywhere is encultured.” The normative question can be answered by appealing to the “force” of cultural tradition and shared semiotic systems. Whether they are ultimately justified or not, many cultural values derive their power from the community.

Recognizing that some values are embedded in the fabric of culture also explains why we experience them as phenomenologically distinct. These values, instead of being rooted in anything the individual has to offer, are embedded in culture at large as myth, religion, formal systems of ethics, etc., and are conveyed by means of painting, storytelling, formal analysis, or other modes of representation. Because these values are presented *to us* instead of being self-generated and projected onto the world *by us*, we recognize that their existence does not depend on “our own desires, inclinations, or choices” and that their validity (at least socially) is determined by systems outside the control of any one individual. These values will feel even more distinctly communal as we become aware of the histories with which they are associated. The values of a community are, in part, a result of what Taylor calls “webs of interlocution.” Although interlocution usually refers to speech, in this context it seems appropriate to include other forms of communication – works of art and perhaps even of science and mathematics – as part of the “webs” established through the robust exchange of ideas. The creation of these values,

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<sup>123</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 29.

regardless of whether it is intentional, is an on-going process. The longer the history of the process, the less individual these values will seem. When we act in regard to these values, we are aware that we are entering a communal setting, that there is an irreducibly social component to these values and our actions. To a very large extent, we can only make sense of them in light of the sociocultural context in which they are situated. Thus, the valuations we make under this communal umbrella will not feel as if they are grounded solely in our individual inclinations and desires but will have all the hallmarks of strong evaluation.<sup>124</sup>

### Conclusion to Chapter Two: Another Alternative to Biological Value

It seems to me, however, that Althusser winds up in an even worse position to explain rational suicide than the de Lagunas. How many of those seeking medical assistance in dying would attribute their actions to economic motivations? Although there is, in my estimation, a lack of rigorous data on the motivations for physician-assisted suicide, a longitudinal study published in 2005, covering thirty-five cases, found no evidence that financial or economic motivations played a significant role in the decision.<sup>125</sup> One could argue that suicide is logical, under such a paradigm, if one can no longer function as part of the economy.<sup>126</sup> But certainly not all those who seek suicide are “economically worthless.” We are, therefore, still in need of a way to explain rational suicide without paradoxically insisting that life must “betray” itself and become that which it most fundamentally is not.

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<sup>124</sup> Taylor does not specifically mention logic (which we might consider as evaluative judgments regarding truth, rather than goodness or beauty) as a form of strong evaluation. This is a shame, as it seems to me that logical judgment is the best phenomenological evidence we have of this phenomenon. Consider a basic syllogism with which any student of logic is familiar: 1) All men are mortal. 2) Socrates is a man. 3) Therefore, Socrates is mortal. The validity of this conclusion does not depend on any individual whatsoever, and indeed, has a kind of “force” that necessarily leads the individual to accept it, so long as they agree with premises one and two.

<sup>125</sup> Robert A. Pearlman et al., “Motivations for Physician-Assisted Suicide,” *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 20, no. 3 (2005): 234–39.

<sup>126</sup> I should hope that it goes without saying how utterly repugnant it would be to hold this belief.

I propose *higher-order value* as an alternative general explanation. Higher-order value should be understood as the value placed on a person's overall axiological system, including both the hypergood and the *particular* ranking or organization of normal goods under that hypergood. There is more than one way to rank lesser values or normal goods so that they are compatible with the demands of biological value (or any other hypergood), and the ranking of these lesser values is not insignificant but forms a crucial aspect of personal identity. To value this system highly would be indicative of contentment and a desire for the system to persist. The persistence of this valuing-framework would, for the most part, be consistent with the demands of biological value. However, though biological value can still be considered good in itself, on this view it is subsumed into higher-order value as a *part* of our ultimate axiological framework.

For one reason or another, we can imagine that part of this framework might come into tension with biological value. Emotional satisfaction, social values, or some other value then becomes more than instrumentally good, becomes considered good in itself, and starts to affect the way in which we prioritize normal goods, thus transforming into a hypergood. In the case of the self-interested rational suicide, it does not particularly matter what part of the framework becomes elevated to the status of hypergood, though it will almost surely be the part that most defines the individual as a person placed within their particular sociocultural context. Higher-order value introduces the phenomenological view that biological value lacks, while offering an interesting solution to the “problem” of rational suicide, which can then be explained as a kind of creation through preservation – not the preservation of *life*, but of a specific mode of life. The “aim” of rational suicide (death) should not be understood as significant in itself but for its ability to create a unified whole.<sup>127</sup> It is the attempt of a person to preserve their identity, not

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<sup>127</sup> To use an old cliché, death is like the period which, by giving closure, gives definitive meaning to a sentence.

their life. The rational suicide – such as a person seeking MAiD before degenerative neurological conditions like dementia or Alzheimer’s can advance – can be considered an example of the ideal self, an ideal we all more or less consciously hold in some form, guiding behavior. People seek not only to ensure that their history is remembered, but that their future action remain consistent with their present values. The aforementioned study identified three categories of motivation for physician-assisted suicide: (1) illness-related experiences, such as concerns about pain, the effects of medications, and other physical symptoms or changes associated with the illness and the course of treatment. (2) The loss of sense of self. “Almost two thirds of participants pursued a hastened death because they were concerned about how dying was eroding their sense of self.”<sup>128</sup> The authors of the study included the “desire for control” in this category, stating that “[in] 21 cases, the patient’s desire for a hastened death was linked to a...desire to maintain control over future events.”<sup>129</sup> (3) Fears about future quality of life and dying, which were distinguished from the prior to categories by their “anticipatory nature.”<sup>130</sup>

Higher-order value and the appearance of new hypergoods have significant consequences for personal identity, which I shall more closely examine in the next chapter. Before moving on, however, it is worth taking the time to review the major flaw with Taylor’s account. Taylor resists naturalism because naturalists have a habit of reducing strong evaluation to weak evaluation, of claiming that all values are “projected” onto the world by the organism. If we take the existence of strong evaluation seriously, as I believe we should, the naturalist is then placed in the position of explaining how strong evaluation develops out of the capacity for weak evaluation, without reducing the former to the latter. Taylor, however, resists any naturalist

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<sup>128</sup> Pearlman et al., 237.

<sup>129</sup> Pearlman et al., 237.

<sup>130</sup> Pearlman et al., 238.

explanation of strong evaluation, which fundamentally breaks the continuity between the human and the natural world. It is primarily for this reason that Taylor's account of personal identity as a matter of moral frameworks lacks the explanatory power of more biologically driven or naturalist approaches. Enactivists seek to tell a continuous story about the development of identity from the simplest living systems (i.e., single-celled organisms) all the way up to the most complex forms of selfhood of which we are aware (i.e., human beings). Taylor, admittedly, is concerned with the *human* self, but by rooting human individuality in strong evaluation and moral frameworks, and then insisting that these evaluations are irreducible in any sense to the natural world, Taylor precludes any possible explanation of the evolution of human identity prior to the introduction of culture. I have attempted to show that strong evaluation is not some mysterious quality but can be explained by appealing to the force of the symbolically laden sociocultural systems that human beings have constructed. What remains, then, is to work out the implications of these positions for a theory of selfhood and personal identity that can feasibly explain how the self persists and individuates itself in both the natural and the sociocultural world.

## CHAPTER THREE: The Axiological Individuation of Selfhood

### The Conflicts in Need of Resolution

In the first chapter of this thesis, I explored an autopoietic-enactivist approach to selfhood, one heavily influenced by fields such as biology and cognitive science, but also more distinctively philosophical traditions, such as phenomenology, complex systems theory, and Buddhism. Perhaps the most notable trait of autopoietic enactivism, as it pertains to the question of selfhood, is that it gives priority to the organization of things instead of the substance of those things.<sup>131</sup> After critiquing the sufficiency of this approach, which struggles to account for the individuation of selfhood in a social context, I proceeded to further examine, in chapter two, the constitutive role of social relations in the individuation of the self, especially the role played by moral values in the work of Charles Taylor. Values, especially moral values, are a necessary, central, and constitutive part of human identity; if biology cannot adequately explain these values, then it cannot adequately explain selfhood and identity. Yet the view espoused by Taylor lacks the explanatory power of the first approach. For, although it may more accurately describe the human self as those of us alive today experience it, unless such an approach is reconciled with naturalist accounts of identity, it is unable to explain how the self as a general phenomenon has developed into the human self in particular, how the sense of having a personal identity has developed.

Part of what drives the conflict between these different approaches – Damasio’s emphasis on biological value contra Taylor’s insistence on strong evaluation and moral frameworks, or the debates between Monod and Althusser or Maiese and Kyselo – is a fundamental disagreement about what the term “human” signifies. For Damasio and Maiese, the biological aspects take

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<sup>131</sup> In this respect, enactivism closely resembles the movement towards a “processual philosophy of biology” spearheaded by John Dupre and Daniel Nicholson. For more on this movement see Nicholson et al., 2018.

precedence over moral or social ones, but the opposite is true for Taylor and Kyselo. Monod and Althusser both deny that human beings can be fully explained by biology, but while Monod reaffirms the old idealist picture of human individualism – that is, of humans as always containing a “free” or undetermined element – Althusser believes human beings, and their actions, are fully determined by economic principles in conjunction with those of biology. Obviously, the choice of discipline determines which aspects of the self will be most closely examined – biologists will inevitably look most closely at the organic parts of the self, such as the body and brain, while sociologists or psychologists will naturally emphasize aspects such as action, mental states, and social relationships. The aim of this chapter, however, is to articulate a general notion of selfhood that can be used across the range of inquiry – an interdisciplinary definition which explains how the self develops in various contexts. Attempting to do this within an enactivist framework brings several problems to light, which any attempted definition must overcome.

### *Problems*

Factoring in the discussions from the previous chapters, the problems, in brief, are as follows.

An adequate conception of the self must:

- 1) Explain the apparent persistence and continuity of the self across time.
- 2) Resolve the body-social problem, which involves explaining how the self:
  - a. Can be individuated *both* biologically *and* socially, that is to say, *what* identity is such that it can sensibly be studied as both a biological and a social or cultural phenomenon.
  - b. Is actually individuated in both natural and sociocultural contexts.

- c. Can be socially constituted, which is to say constituted by external factors outside the organism's physiology, without breaking the strong continuity between mind and life.
- 3) Attend to the body-social problem and the problem of individuation/persistence in a way that avoids conflating life and self, but nevertheless explains their close connection and continuity.

### Self as Axiological Organization: A More General Approach

Just as I critiqued Damasio and Taylor for being too focused on biological and moral value, respectively, I believe that Althusser over-emphasizes economic value. While Althusser can deny the existence of subject-centered cultural processes and idealist accounts of human nature, he cannot deny that there is an axiologically-centered subject without undermining his claim that economic values have real effects on individuals. The reason for this is that, regardless of how they are determined and represented, values and norms must be *embodied* to affect human activity. Values that are represented but not embodied are simply signs denoting dead relationships and dead possibilities for action. A value is not simply a thing represented, but something lived for and taken into the consciousness of a subject. Thus, regardless of the context, the embodied subject that creates, receives, and (potentially) reflects on value should remain the central matter of concern.<sup>132</sup>

Value plays a central, even foundational role in both Maiese and Damasio's work. Agency, Maiese tells us, "comprises three interrelated, necessary aspects: i) individuality, ii) interactional asymmetry, and iii) normativity."<sup>133</sup> What goes mostly unacknowledged in

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<sup>132</sup> Note, however, that we cannot simply say, as Damasio does, that self involves a focusing of the mind on the body, since understanding our embodied response requires focusing also on the external values which impact us.

<sup>133</sup> Maiese, *The Life Shaping Thesis*, 359.



Maiese's account is how all these aspects are interrelated by the process of evaluation.

"Individuality," Maiese writes, "centers on the autonomous, internal organization of the living organism...A living organism is an example of an agent that defines itself as an individual via the actions it generates."<sup>134</sup> As we have seen, this self-definition in terms of action is captured by both autopoiesis and Damasio's concept of biological value – a biological individual becomes individuated precisely because it establishes its own persistence as a normative good (hypergood) and then evaluates environmental affordances according to their impact on the organism's homeostatic efforts. It is the role of the selectively semi-permeable boundary to carry out these evaluations, which is precisely why the boundary is an essential component of autopoietic systems.

Interactional asymmetry refers to the fact that organisms are not just "equal partner[s] in the mutual coupling with [their] environment," but are sometimes the very source of this activity. An organism is not just an input-output network but, "an agent [that] as a whole drives itself."<sup>135</sup> Agency, therefore, "derives from the ways in which we establish, lose, and re-establish *meaningful* interactions between ourselves and our environment."<sup>136</sup> Agency requires evaluative activity, otherwise it is not agency but simple stimulus-response. The selective boundary that partially defines autopoietic systems is an example of this evaluative activity, without which the boundary could not function and the interdependent self-producing parts within the boundary would dissolve. Finally, when addressing the third aspect of normativity, Maiese seemingly slips into an approach that is in tension with the basic ideas of enactivism – no small irony given that she accuses Kyselo of the same error.

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<sup>134</sup> Maiese, 360.

<sup>135</sup> Barandiaran, Di Paolo, and Rohde quoted in Maiese, 360 (emphasis added).

<sup>136</sup> Buhrmann and Di Paolo as quoted in Maiese, 360.

Normativity thus *arises from* the self-production and self-maintenance of a precarious system; and ‘through its ongoing individuation, the system intrinsically determines’ which interactions support its continued existence, and which interactions threaten its survival...normativity, like individuality and interactional asymmetry, *presupposes* a biologically individuated self.<sup>137</sup>

If we follow the typical position of the enactivists, it should not be said that norms “arise from” the self, but are co-enacted *with* the self, at least in the first instance.<sup>138</sup> Normativity may presuppose a biologically individuated self, but a biologically individuated self also presupposes normativity, neither can exist without the other, so they are mutually interdependent.

Maiese enlists biological normativity to help explain value but downplays the role of value in the individuation of biological processes. Biological processes, so she seems to think, create value because they have an identity, and possess an identity in virtue of the fact that they “make sense” of their environment. Yet the fundamental insight should be that self and value are co-enacted or co-dependently originated, to express the point in either Thompson’s or Buddhist terminology, because we cannot make sense of anything without first making some kind of evaluative judgment that directs our attention. It is possible that a general bias against teleological explanation accounts for the dismissal of value as a constitutive phenomenon, although enactivists like Varela and Thompson remain deeply concerned with the relation of teleology to both life and systems theory.<sup>139</sup> As Damasio aptly shows, biological systems persist *because* of biological value – persistence is valued as an end in itself, an immanent hypergood,

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<sup>137</sup> Maiese, 361-2 (emphasis added).

<sup>138</sup> It is crucial to recognize that, although values are enacted *with* the self, this does not preclude the self from recognizing and adopting values already found in the environment after its initial enactment, such as those represented in various sociocultural mediums (language, art, etc.). Only by explicitly recognizing this point can enactivism escape the charges which Taylor levels at “projectionism” and other naturalist approaches, which deny that values exist outside of the organism.

<sup>139</sup> Varela, in one of the last essays published before his death, defended the real, and not merely explanatory, role of immanent purposiveness. See Weber and Varela *Life After Kant*, 2002. Kant’s problem, in brief, was to be “stuck” between an unacceptable theological hylozoism and a mechanical physics that lacked sufficient power to explain the origin of life (which should not be confused with the origin of *species*).

which thus establishes the normative backdrop against which all other goods are evaluated.

Normativity is not just a part of agency, but its very foundation. The fact that organisms engage in evaluative activity is what allows them to persist at the most basic level, but it is also what enables other organisms, such as humans, to individuate themselves socially as well as biologically, because values are even more prevalent in the sociocultural environment.

Here, then, is my proposal: *selfhood, understood as the basic individuation and persistence of a system across space and time, should be conceived of as the axiological organization of a system; its more or less definitive traits, characteristics, and habits of evaluation.* Evaluation in this context includes the value assigned to objects in that environment by the system (weak evaluation), values perceived as already present in the environment (strong evaluation), and the prioritization and/or ranking of established values. All living systems are situated in a vast environment that affords nearly infinite possibilities for action and reaction. The ways in which a living system makes sense of and prioritizes these different possibilities reflects its overall axiological organization, which always has at least one hypergood serving as the critical standard for evaluation.<sup>140</sup> As circumstances demand, living systems will variously orient themselves towards different valuable states, such as satiation, shelter, or hydration. The overall set of values towards which an organism consistently orients itself and the particular configurations that these values take in the organism's scheme or framework of prioritization come to define that system. Identity, in the strong (read: human) sense of the word, is a result of what I previously called "higher-order" valuing. This occurs when an organism comes to consciously value not only the hypergood that guides evaluation but also the particular configuration of values that has been established, therefore resisting changes which would

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<sup>140</sup> Hypergoods are defined in detail on page 36 of this thesis.

significantly alter its overall axiological organization or its defining hypergood. If this notion of selfhood still seems vague, hopefully its application to the previously outlined problems will further clarify the meaning and significance of my proposal.

### *The Problem of Persistence and Continuity*

In chapter one I explored the enactivists' insistence that there is no fixed, unitary, and absolute self to be found in experience – that is, the denial of our “naïve” sense of self which cannot be supported upon reflection. Yet, even if we define selfhood non-reductively, as a system or process and not a substantial thing, we still must explain why we feel that the self persists through time, why we feel as though the person we were yesterday and the person we are today, while perhaps not absolutely identical, are still fundamentally the same. This continuity can be explained by recognizing that the axiological organization of a living system is not created afresh each day, but always reflects the evaluations made in the past, evaluations which can then become incorporated into experience again.<sup>141</sup> Persistence is further explained by appeal to hypergoods. Although one day I might value food more highly than water, and the next day value water more highly than food, the overall habit of my evaluative activity remains the same, for it remains explicable in terms of biological value as a *hypergood*. Such a view explains the feeling of persistence, since we are always engaged in some kind of evaluative activity so long as we are alive, and this activity is always governed by a hypergood. This also explains how and why the self seems to change incrementally over time, since both the particular evaluations we make, and the overall organization of evaluative activity, naturally shift as we encounter new ideas and experiences. Despite this change, however, we still feel ourselves to be “the same”

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<sup>141</sup> I say *afresh* here because autopoietic systems continually re-enact themselves *anew* with each passing moment. What is important, here, is that the enaction is not new in the sense of being original or independent of the past. Further, while the current organization has been shaped by the past, this does not mean that the organism must necessarily remember past experiences in the same way that a human being might.

precisely because, even though our day-to-day evaluations shift, they eventually start to stabilize into recognizable patterns and the hypergood by which we assess and prioritize regular goods is even more likely to persist.<sup>142</sup>

### *Resolving the Body-Social Problem*

The first part of the body-social problem is understanding *what* the self is such that it can be subject to processes of individuation in both natural and cultural environments. Further, this explanation is necessary to understand how the self can be a unified object of study for both the sciences and the humanities. By defining the self as axiological organization and acknowledging that it is engaged in constant evaluative activity, we can see that it is capable of being individuated in either realm because both the natural and the sociocultural world are laden with affordances for possible action, and organisms must evaluate these possibilities if they are to survive. Thus, both types of environments have effects on the axiological organization of said organism. I previously argued that the experience of “strong evaluation”<sup>143</sup> could be explained as the perception of values embedded in a sociocultural system of signs and symbols. Although these values must be individually embodied to be values in the fullest sense – things for which’s sake we act – we can also be aware that their meaning and significance do not derive solely from our individual needs and desires, but, in some cases, may be entirely the product of relatively autonomous cultural evolution, perhaps most familiar to us in the (now clichéd) phrase “art for art’s sake.” If we define the self as axiological organization in general, not purely as a generator or assigner of values but also as an interpreter or receiver of values, we can then easily explain how the experience of strong evaluation is possible, since it is fundamentally the same activity

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<sup>142</sup> Of course, sometimes hypergoods do not persist, such as when biological value is replaced by higher-order value in the case of rational suicide. I further discuss the implications of this for identity (in the distinctively human sense) in the section on transformative experiences in the concluding considerations to this chapter.

<sup>143</sup> The kind of evaluation in which individual desires and impulses play no part.

that was already taking place in the biological, organic, or natural environment. Of course, placing the activity of evaluation in a new context somewhat alters the meaning of the term and the function it indicates, and one of those changes is that the “normative hypergood” no longer needs to be biological value, and does not even have to be internally generated. The first part of the body-social problem, outlined above, has now been dealt with. Values serve as reliable descriptors of biological behavior and systems, and though we should not and cannot reduce them to mere descriptions, it is this function that allows us to begin bridging the gap between biological research and the direct experience with which psychology and phenomenology are more concerned. For example, I might say that I satisfy my hunger because I value living. In recognizing food as a normal good, I reveal the ulterior hypergood behind my actions. Similarly, a biologist can attribute the nutrient-seeking action of bacteria to the hypergood that organism has enacted. Only by understanding the self as a cluster or center of evaluative activity with a distinct axiological organization can we see how it comes to be explicable in both biological and phenomenological terms, in other words, how selfhood bridges the difference between the organic world of nature and the symbolic world of human culture.

The role value plays in social individuation, however, still needs explaining. By looking at social relations through the lens of value, we see that they are not categorically different from other relations that organisms have with the environment. Human beings live in a world that offers many goods, some of which are mutually exclusive. Resolving the conflicts between various goods requires establishing elaborate systems of priority, although we do not necessarily need to be capable of clearly articulating these arrangements. While we all prioritize things somewhat differently and no two arrangements are likely to be exactly the same, groups form when individuals share values and an overall normative framework, and the degree to which we

affirm or deny the values of any given group constitutes the degree to which we identify with, or are distinguished from, that group. This is the set of phenomena that Kyselo refers to as “participation” and “distinction.” The degree to which one feels loyalty and a sense of belonging to a political party is a good example of this. Further, it is now possible to understand how a human being can undergo “social death” without having to take the absurd position that all forms of selfhood are impossible without social relations, thus preserving the identity of organisms that lack distinctively social environments.<sup>144</sup> The evaluations we make are the means by which we become socially individuated from our peers, and it is this same capacity that individuates living systems in general from their environment. Without biological value, autopoietic organisms would be unable to regulate the selective activity of the autopoietic boundary and would lose their distinctive configuration, thus dissolving back into the environment. Autopoiesis is only possible in systems that generate their own norm of self-persistence, and which are capable of assigning values to environmental affordances, otherwise the selective action of the semi-permeable boundary would not be possible. The fact that the self is the kind of thing that makes evaluative judgments is what explains how selves are individuated biologically and socially, and it is the particular evaluations that are made which carry organisms along the process of individuation into unique entities.

If we say that self involves a focusing of mind on the evaluative activity of the organism, this approach also preserves the continuity of mind and life. Since values must always be embodied to be values in the fullest sense, the body still occupies a central role while also allowing us to look beyond it. We cannot understand evaluation apart from the evaluator, and

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<sup>144</sup> This is one of the points on which Maiese criticizes Kyselo, claiming that it would be foolish to think that a human being would stop existing just because all of their social relations disappeared. A criticism which, as I noted in the first chapter, is both uncharitable and rests on an equivocation over the term “human.”

while it is true that focusing on the process naturally carries us from evaluator to evaluated, when we embrace the evaluative process as a whole we are never left “out there” in the external, social world, but always return back to the embodied individual. Maiese’s worry that Kyselo’s view of the body as “mediator” strays too far from the embodied individual is resolved when we see that the body is both creator *and* mediator, and that such mediation is neither focused “out there” nor is restricted to “inside” the organism, but rather concerns the whole complicated relationship between a body and its environment. Kyselo’s conception of the human self as an interpersonal system is an outgrowth of the more fundamental fact that the self is more accurately described as the axiological organization of an autopoietic system, an organization that systematically regulates evaluative activity. This more general notion alleviates the charges that Maiese levies at Kyselo because it is compatible with even the most basic organisms. If life is defined in terms of autopoiesis, then self comes to be defined as the organization of that system relative to either the environmental values that system enacts (weak evaluation) or otherwise discovers (e.g., cultural value represented through language/art; strong evaluation).

### *The Problem of Distinguishing Self from Life*

Yet it is still not clear in what way being a self is different from being alive. As I previously explained, we cannot simply identify the self with the process of life and biological value because doing so amounts to a contradiction. If life is to be understood as a system self-enacting its persistence, and the self is identical with this living form, what accounts for instances where organisms (humans) willingly end their life out of concern for their sense of self? This problem becomes even more pressing when biological value is considered constitutive of living systems. Assuming we act *for the sake of an end*, that end cannot be biological value – that is, persistence – if the conditions for success involve the termination of that persistence. In



chapter two I proposed that, in rational suicide, the action was undertaken for the sake of the higher-order value. If the self is *not* directly identified with either persistence or autopoiesis, but rather as the axiological organization *of* an autopoietic system, then we can explain rational suicide as the system coming to value its own organization, the particular ranking or ordering of values, and not just valuing the ability to meet the demands imposed by the operative hypergood. It is the ability to keep the present ranking or organization of value intact that would then influence action. The emergence of self-awareness or personal identity, then, is tied in with the conscious recognition, not only that we have hypergoods and that there are multiple ways to satisfy the demands they place on us, but that we are not restricted to biological value as a kind of “default” hypergood but are instead free to adopt new ones. When we adopt a new hypergood, the way in which we relate to environmental affordances changes, and we may find ourselves in a very different position than before regarding the value judgments we are inclined to make. This explains why consciousness, particularly self-reflective consciousness, plays such an important role in human identity, without needing to make the claim that such consciousness is essential to the idea of selfhood in all organisms.

### Objections and Considerations

I have shown how conceiving of selfhood as the axiological organization of an autopoietic system can begin resolving many of the key problems that enactivist accounts of selfhood and personal identity face. In doing so, however, several concerns have likely arisen in the mind of the reader. I will now address what I believe to be some of the most pertinent objections and considerations to my argument.

*Is the continuity of mind and life really preserved?*

Someone, such as Maiese, might argue that my account does not actually fare any better than Kyselo's at maintaining the continuity of mind and life. Whether or not one agrees with this conception depends on how we define the relevant terms of *mind*, *life*, *self*, and *body*. Maiese's initial objection to Kyselo's account is that the *self* escapes the *body*, which can only break the continuity of mind and life if we identify the self with *mental* processes, and the body with *living* ones.<sup>145</sup> I have argued that focusing on selfhood necessarily carries us beyond the distinctively physical or biological body (system) into the sociocultural world of conventional values, but that we are always returned back to the physical body; identity "bridges the gap" as it were. On Maiese's account, however, this would seem to imply that the continuity between mind and life is broken, since the continuity between self and body is broken.

I believe, however, that this is not necessarily true. Let us, for now, grant the premise that self or mind goes beyond the biological organism into a sociocultural "world" laden with signs and symbols. Let us also grant the enactivist premise that life and mind are always co-present, that *mind is in life*, as Thompson says. If both of these premises are taken to be true, then the only conclusion we can reach is that life goes beyond biological systems and into the sociocultural environment along with mind; that there is life somewhere in the sociocultural world. Maiese, I suspect, would reject this conclusion, and thus deny the validity of the first premise. But this conclusion is not so implausible as it may first seem if we remember that the transfer of concepts from one epistemological context to another alters their meaning. If we understand life in a purely biological or physiological sense, then of course it is absurd to say life is carried into the symbolic, sociocultural environment. But, if we adjust the meaning of the

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<sup>145</sup> This identification is problematic in itself, and it seems to go against the idea of mind being embodied to associate the self with the mind but not body. Nevertheless, if we operate under the assumption that the self, like the mind, is *embodied*, the extension of selfhood beyond the physical body poses a problem for an enactivist account of identity.

relevant terms associated with life, such as growth and reproduction, this claim is no longer absurd, but completely feasible.

Charles Sanders Peirce once wrote that “every symbol is a living thing, in a very strict sense that is no mere figure of speech. The body of the symbol changes slowly, but its meaning inevitably grows, incorporates new elements and throws off old ones.”<sup>146</sup> Winfried Nöth has more closely examined this idea, arguing that we should understand Peirce to be claiming that “on the life/nonlife continuum...symbols are very close to living beings.”<sup>147</sup> According to Nöth, symbols share several key characteristics with biological organisms. First, they are endowed with a general purpose akin to biological value, which is their self-replication and, like biological organisms, “their goals are not predetermined with exact precision.”<sup>148</sup> Closely related is Nöth’s claim that symbols “act autonomously in the process of semiosis,”<sup>149</sup> they are not merely instruments, but genuine agents. Second, symbols not only replicate themselves, but grow and procreate. “The growth of symbols in this sense is the growth of the meaning of ideas or concepts.” Further, “words have an autopoietic potential... a self-regenerative ability that is manifested through the creation of new symbols.”<sup>150</sup> For example, a sentence (which is a kind of complex symbol composed of multiple symbolic parts) can generate a new symbol within itself (e.g., by defining a new term). In the interest of keeping this reply appropriately brief, I will not elaborate further on these ideas, but I hope to have shown that, once properly recontextualized, the claim that there is genuine life (and mind) in the symbolic world is not as implausible as it may initially sound, although it certainly presents a great many difficulties.

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<sup>146</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 2.222.

<sup>147</sup> Winfried Nöth, “The Life of Symbols and Other Legisigns: More than a Mere Metaphor?,” in *Peirce and Biosemiotics* (Netherlands: Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 171–81, 173.

<sup>148</sup> Nöth, 175.

<sup>149</sup> “Semiosis” refers to the actions and processes associated with the use and development of signs.

<sup>150</sup> Nöth, 178.

*Do organisms have selves or do selves have organisms?*

In chapter one it was mentioned that it is counterintuitive to say, “I *am* a body,” and that we are much more inclined to say, “I *have* a body.” Thompson et al. bring up this consideration in *The Embodied Mind* when discussing why the self cannot be simply equated with the body. It is, of course, a mistake to think of organisms as bodies in a strictly physical sense. Organisms are autopoietic *systems*, and thus not strictly identified with the physical. Likewise, to the extent that an organism is defined as a living system, we cannot flatly equate self with life, for selves can exhibit characteristics antithetical to life. Damasio’s approach to the self clearly makes selfhood a *part* of the organism, and thus a *part* of life. Someone like Taylor, or Kyselo, however, would want to argue that the body or the organism is just a part of the self. One virtue of my account is that it enables us to make sense of this seeming contradiction. From the perspective of biology, that is, from any perspective which places the organism qua living system first and foremost, axiological organization is a property *of* organisms. From a phenomenological view, however, which begins from the inside, as it were, the body is a part of the self because it is something which must be considered in the process of evaluation. The physical body of an organism is not merely an instrument *of* evaluation, but also an object that must be subject *to* evaluation. Whether or not the self is a part of the organism or visa-versa, then, depends entirely on the perspective taken and there is no further truth to the matter.

*What happens to the self in transformative experiences?*

Philosopher L. A. Paul has argued that we cannot make rational decisions about “transformative experiences,” which are those experiences that “radically [change] what it is like to be you, perhaps by replacing your core preferences with very different ones.”<sup>151</sup> Rational

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<sup>151</sup> L. A. Paul, “What You Can’t Expect When You’re Expecting,” *Res Philosophica* 92, no. 2 (April 2015), 8.

decisions involve determining possible outcomes, assigning value to those outcomes, calculating the probability of each outcome's occurrence, and deciding on the action with the highest expected value.<sup>152</sup> Transformative experiences, however, are not just personally but *epistemically* transformative. They are epistemically transformative because we cannot know what it is like to have the experience prior to actually having it.<sup>153</sup> Since we cannot know what the experience will be like in advance, we cannot accurately assign it an expected value, and thus have no rational grounds for preferring one course of action to another.

Earlier in this thesis I argued that we can best see the difference between self and life in the extreme example of rational suicide.<sup>154</sup> A necessary part of living organisms, and/or autopoiesis, is an immanent purposiveness akin to what Damasio calls “biological value,” which is characterized by a striving for homeostasis and self-persistence. Damasio argues that this is the critical standard that guides organisms in the evaluative process – a hypergood. In cases of rational suicide, although certainly *not only* in such cases, the hypergood of biological value is replaced by some other critical standard. The most deeply transformative experiences an individual can have, those which significantly alter someone's personal identity, are precisely those which modify our “core preferences” – the hypergoods that shape our axiological organization. Yet this raises a powerful question concerning the integrity and persistence of identity. If a person goes through a transformative experience which alters their entire axiological organization, do they quite literally become a new person?

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<sup>152</sup> Paul, 3.

<sup>153</sup> Paul uses the well-known thought experiment of black and white Mary as an example. Mary, having been raised in entirely black and white surroundings, cannot know what it is like to see red, even though she knows all the relevant facts about color and redness, until she leaves the room and directly experiences red for the first time.

<sup>154</sup> Note that I have used the term rational primarily to indicate that the person is of sound mind and has made the decision without being manipulated or coerced, not in the stronger sense of the word as Paul uses it.

The changing of hypergoods alone is not enough to entail a completely new identity. Although the critical standard that informs evaluative activity will be different, that does not necessarily mean the entire system needs to be rearranged. Combined with the value placed on the historical process which led the person to their present state, this is enough to explain the persistence of identity even through the change of hypergoods. Yet what about a more serious case, one where the entire axiological organization *is* rearranged, such that no two competing values were afforded the same priority as before?

To begin, it is important to recognize that the axiological organization of any living system can only be altered so much before the system collapses. Even if biological value is not the operative hypergood, biological value must still influence the prioritization of environmental affordances and the internal demands of the system, or else death would be swift. The fact that biological value can be superseded by another hypergood means only that voluntary death becomes a possibility, not that death will necessarily occur as a result. Keeping this limitation in mind, we might say that the personal identity of a person can be destroyed through axiological transformation. They would still be *a* self, in the sense of being an autopoietic organism with an axiological organization of some sort, but they would no longer be the *same* self, would no longer retain their previous personal identity.

#### *Hypergoods: One or Many?*

Throughout this thesis I have mostly talked about hypergoods as though they are singular, as if there is only one hypergood influencing the axiological organization of an autopoietic system. This is certainly the more parsimonious strategy, and to the extent that we can sensibly understand an organism's activity solely in terms of one hypergood (i.e., biological value) I believe we should do so. However, I have also endeavored to show that biological value cannot

be the only possible hypergood, and that, in the case of rational suicide, it is replaced by an alternative. But while some hypergoods may be mutually exclusive, I do not believe that this is a necessary condition. In chapter two the three primary traits of hypergoods were laid out: (1) Hypergoods are qualitatively different from regular goods. (2) They serve as the critical standard from which we judge and decide about regular goods. (3) A hypergood always manifests itself in behavior. Clearly, if this definition is correct, there is no reason hypergoods must necessarily conflict, although of course they will certainly do so from time to time.

This raises a rather difficult question, however. At what point do we decide that one hypergood, say, biological value, is *insufficient* for our explanations of organic behavior? The de Lagunas asserted that the pragmatists had mistakenly assumed that all new functions must serve previously existing ends, and instead argued that the genuinely new end of emotional satisfaction emerged with consciousness. At first glance, there seems to be no reason that biological value and emotional satisfaction are mutually exclusive, so how do we know whether an organism's behavior is attributable to one, the other, or both hypergoods? It may be, that in most cases, we can never hope for an answer, as we could only know for certain by accessing the inaccessible inner world of the organism in question. Yet I believe we should strive for the explanations which require the least modification to the meaning of terms. As an extreme example, as I have argued, biological value *cannot* account for suicide because the aim of suicide is completely antithetical to the end which biological value designates – the survival or homeostatic persistence of the organism. Of course, the hypergood to which one first attempts to refer an action for explanation will likely be determined by the perspective of the inquirer. A biologist will seek an explanation that accords with biological value, an artist will seek one that accords with emotional satisfaction, etc. Part of the aim of philosophers, then, should be to ensure that the terminology of

any one domain does not become unduly invasive or imperialistic, and to attribute behavior to the hypergood which makes the most logical sense.



## Conclusion

*...a philosophy of mind comprises ethics – and through the continuity of mind with organism and of organism with nature, ethics becomes part of the philosophy of nature.*

*–Hans Jonas*

I have argued that the self is best conceived of as the axiological organization of an autopoietic system, an organization which reflects the systematic prioritization of the various values which an organism holds, projects, or encounters, and which is dominated by a hypergood or critical standard that provides the normative backdrop against which value judgments are made. Organisms are individuated from their environment in virtue of the value judgments they make, and the persistence of a particular perspective – a hypergood – explains the apparent persistence of the self across time. By recognizing that values are not only projected by organisms but, at least in some cases, are found “out there” in the symbolically mediated social structures that human beings have created, we can see how biological and social individuation, instead of being totally separate processes, have a common denominator in an organism’s capacity, not only to create, but to engage with and react to value. Finally, by identifying the self with the organization of these values, rather than with the body or physiological processes that are only individuated by certain types of value, we see how rational suicide is not driven by life or biological value, but by a self’s valuing of its own unique evaluative processes.

But what is the significance of understanding the self as a matter of axiological organization? To begin with, by identifying the mechanism of individuation as evaluation, we gain insight into which processes we should examine in our investigations, regardless of the particular lens under which the self is being studied. Conceived biologically, we should see how organisms evaluate natural affordances in their environment. Conceived socially, we should see how the evaluations of an organism lead it to participate in, or distinguish itself from, various

groups. One perspective that I have not addressed in detail is a psychological view of selfhood and identity. Yet here, too, evaluation plays an important role. John Locke, for example, held that personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity, emphasizing the role played by memory. Yet we remember but a small portion of all that we experience, and what we remember most are those experiences which hold value for us. Likewise, the role that any particular memory will play in one's sense of self depends on the value assigned to it.

More significantly, however, I believe that this thesis also makes a convincing argument for the expansion of the field of biology. To the extent that biologists concern themselves with organisms as genuine wholes and not mere assemblages or aggregates of parts, they must concern themselves with the study of selves. Yet the human self, as I have endeavored to show, is partially constituted by strong evaluations rising from the social and symbolic systems created by human beings, systems which, to an extent, operate independently of the human beings who first created them. A thorough biological understanding of human beings, then, will necessarily include an understanding of how organisms create, use, and evaluate these systems. This is one of the central aims of the interdisciplinary field of *biosemiotics*, which studies the relationship between living beings and semiotic processes. As biosemiotician Jesper Hoffmeyer said in 1996, “[the] key question lying at the root of all this is: How could natural history become cultural history? Or, to put it another way...*How did something become ‘someone?’*” There are, however, potential dangers to widening the field of biology to include the study of value and evaluative activity. From a scientific perspective, it should remain a purely descriptive endeavor. Those who would look to biology, or biosemiotics, to inform a prescriptive ethics must remain mindful of the is/ought distinction. Yet this should not distract one from the fact that value, in its fullest sense, is a part of the natural world, and deserves rigorous study and attention.

Throughout this thesis I have endeavored to avoid making *justificatory* claims regarding value. For example, I have remained silent on the question of whether or not strong evaluations, as Taylor insists, actually exercise any greater obligation over us than weak evaluations. The section on rational suicide was intended to show how life and self finally pry themselves apart (to the extent that they can), and sought to explain how living systems, supposedly predominated by “biological value,” could engage in activity that clearly contradicts this value, but I did not attempt to justify the activity (although I certainly believe there are instances where such actions are justified). Despite this silence, I believe my conception of the self has some important consequences for axiological studies more broadly conceived. As an example, it is worth considering what significance self-cultivation takes on in light of the claim that the self is a matter of axiological organization. Self-cultivation is a common theme in many systems of religion and morality. If selfhood is principally a matter of one’s axiological organization, then the cultivation of self becomes a matter of closely examining the values we hold, our reasons for holding them, and figuring out how to make our actions better accord with our highest values.

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