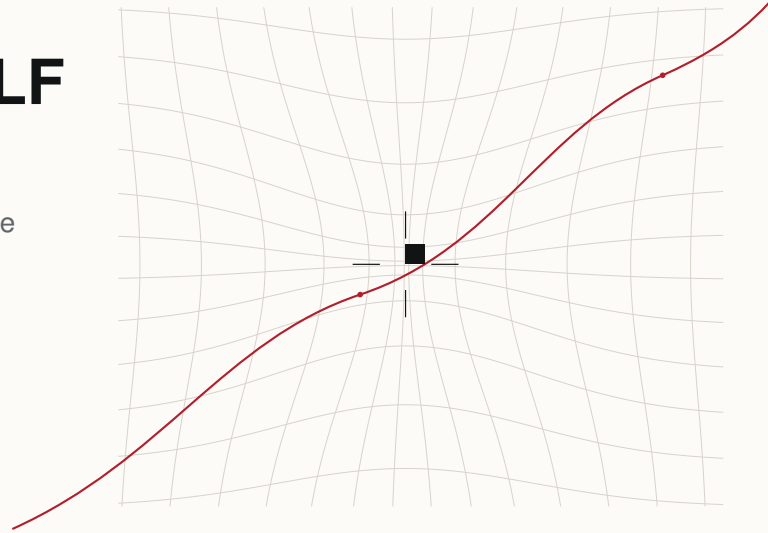


CARTOGRAPHY OF THE BECOMING SELF

Relation, resonance, habit, and recognition in the constitution of personal identity



CENTRAL THESIS

The self is a cartography of relations. It is neither a fixed object concealed within the body nor a story freely chosen by an autonomous mind, but an evolving pattern of orientation formed through embodied sensation, memory, habit, social recognition, narrative, symbolic imagination, material environments, and acts of resistance.

Contents

This paper consolidates four earlier working documents into a single argument. Sections 2 to 6 establish the relational framework; sections 7 to 11 address the constitution of persons; sections 12 to 16 treat what exceeds or resists that account. Bracketed numerals refer to the numbered references.

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Abstract

This paper develops a relational account of personal identity. Its central claim is that the self is neither an essence concealed within a person nor a story freely composed by an autonomous mind, but a recursive composition: an evolving pattern of orientation that forms where a sensing body meets a material and social world, where repeated experience becomes habit, where habit becomes expectation, where expectation is confirmed or interrupted by others, and where memory is organized into narrative and attached to names, categories, institutions, and technologies. The argument draws together phenomenology, process philosophy, relational ontology, the psychology of habit and memory, social identity theory, theories of recognition and relational autonomy, and the aesthetics of attention. It proceeds through nine linked theses: that relations are prior to objects; that resonance names a response conditioned by prior tuning; that analogy across domains illuminates organization without establishing identity; that complex forms emerge through thresholds and self-maintenance; that attention is ecological rather than private; that memory is a reconstructive practice rather than a vault; that habit is the unconscious architecture of identity; that recognition makes identity a relational achievement rather than an individual possession; and that the experiential and narrative registers of selfhood are distinct, mutually necessary, and unequally distributed. The paper closes by arguing that a relational account of the self carries an ethical consequence: because environments participate in producing attention, and archives in producing memory, and categories in producing identity, the design of environments, archives, and categories is a moral matter. Claims of interdependence are defensible only when they refuse to confuse connection with sameness, or unity with the erasure of difference.

Keywords: personal identity; relational ontology; phenomenology; process philosophy; embodiment; habit; narrative identity; experiential self; recognition; ecology of attention; memory and archive; recursion

1. Introduction

The question of how a person comes to be a self admits of at least two familiar answers, and both are inadequate on their own. The first locates identity inside: a core, an essence, a true self that may be discovered, recovered, or betrayed but which exists prior to and independent of its circumstances. The second locates identity in authorship: a self composed through choice, self-interpretation, and the stories a person tells about their own life. The first answer struggles to explain how thoroughly a life is shaped by conditions it did not select. The second struggles to explain how much of a person is in place before any story begins.

This paper argues for a third position. Identity is a cartography of relations. It is an ongoing composition produced through the meeting of body, memory, language, habit, social recognition, symbolic imagination, and the sensory and institutional environments in which a life unfolds. On this account the self is real precisely because its relations matter: because a person can be injured, recognized, misnamed, sheltered, changed, and cared for. To describe the self as relational is not to dissolve it. It is to make it temporal and accountable.

The argument requires a change of grammar. When a person asks “Who am I really?” the question imagines an object waiting to be found. A relational account substitutes a different question: what histories, attachments, practices, and conditions are active in my becoming, and which of them have become so familiar that I no longer notice them? The second question does not deny that there is someone there to ask it. It relocates the answer from an interior substance to a pattern of orientation with a history and an inertia.

Two considerations motivate this reframing. The first is philosophical. A substantial body of work in phenomenology and process philosophy has argued that relation, event, and becoming are more basic than substance, and that perception is a bodily engagement with a meaningful world rather than a detached consciousness receiving neutral data [1,3,7,8]. The second is ethical. Accounts of identity that treat the person as self-authoring tend to distribute responsibility as though everyone attended, remembered, narrated, and belonged under equivalent conditions. They do not. Poverty, threat, sensory overload, precarious labour, discrimination, displacement, and grief reorganize what can be noticed and what must be ignored. An adequate theory of the self must be able to say so.

The paper proceeds in three movements. The first, sections 2 to 6, establishes the relational and processual framework: the priority of relation over object, resonance as a model of conditioned response, analogy as an instrument of thought with its own hazards, and emergence as the mechanism by which patterns stabilize into recognizable form. The second, sections 7 to 11, turns to the constitution of persons: the ecology of attention, the politics of memory and the archive, habit as the unconscious architecture of identity, recognition and group belonging, and the relation between the experiential and the narrative self. The third, sections 12 to 16, addresses what exceeds or resists this account: symbolic and archetypal form, the mirror of computation, the ethics of opacity, the recursive structure of lived time, and the conditions under which a claim of interdependence becomes humane rather than totalizing.

2. Method and Epistemic Position

The material assembled here moves between cosmology, biology, phenomenology, psychology, social theory, and the history of symbolic form. That range creates a specific methodological hazard, and the argument depends on naming it at the outset.

A vocabulary of fields, frequencies, patterns, and recursions can be used in two incompatible ways. It can be used as shorthand for physical claims, in which case it must answer to physical evidence. Or it can be used as a conceptual instrument for thinking about relation, organization, recurrence, and transformation, in which case it must answer to conceptual clarity rather than to measurement. This paper uses such language in the second sense throughout. “Field,” “resonance,” “pattern,” “emergence,” and “recursion” are treated as philosophical images: precise about the relations they are meant to disclose, and silent about the physics they do not claim.

This discipline guards against two opposite failures. The first is scientism, the assumption that an account of the self gains value only by presenting itself as a literal mechanism. The second is mystification, the assumption that a symbolic resemblance between domains demonstrates a universal law. The position defended here occupies the interval between them. It can hold that a river, a root system, a city plan, and a neural map echo one another without claiming that they are the same kind of thing. It can ask whether perception participates in constituting a world without asserting that a mind mechanically creates one. It can treat Hermetic, archetypal, and cosmological imagery as historical and imaginative resources without presenting them as established fact.

Several specific commitments follow, and they constrain the argument at every stage.

- The proposition that everything is vibration is a productive image, but it must not be allowed to collapse the distinct meanings of frequency, rhythm, energy, sensation, and emotion into a single term.
- The brain may be described as an adaptive resonator rather than a computer without this establishing that consciousness is a cosmic field, or that external frequencies determine behavior.
- Visual and structural similarities across scales — branching, networks, spirals, lattices — do not demonstrate a shared underlying mechanism. They disclose an analogy about organization, which is a claim about how systems distribute flow and constraint, not about what they are made of.
- The claim that the universe is mental is a metaphysical proposition with a documented history, and is treated here as such rather than as a result.
- Questions about machine consciousness are approached through imitation, agency, embodiment, labour, and ethics rather than settled in either direction.

These limits are not concessions. They are what allow the argument to function as philosophy rather than as doctrine in philosophical dress. The account becomes more defensible, not less ambitious, when it distinguishes openly among evidence, analogy,

speculation, and belief.

A final point of scope. This is philosophical research, not clinical assessment. Psychological and trauma literature is used here to illuminate conceptual problems — fragmentation, meaning-making, embodiment, and the social conditions of self-narration — rather than to characterize or diagnose individuals.

3. From Objects to Relations

Ordinary experience arrives already divided. We say that a body is here and the world is there, that the mind is inside and the object outside, that a person has an identity while an environment is merely a setting. These divisions are useful and they are not simply false. But they conceal the processes through which a life is made. A body breathes an atmosphere, learns a language, adopts rhythms, eats from an economy, moves through designed spaces, receives recognition, and inherits stories. It is never a self-contained unit.

The concept of the field addresses this directly. A field is not an object but a relational condition. It names what surrounds and passes through things: force, atmosphere, pattern, opportunity, pressure, expectation, possibility. Understood philosophically, a field is what is present before it becomes a named thing — the atmosphere of a room, the inherited language of a family, the historical violence embedded in a street plan, the rhythm of a working day, the silence before speech, the expectations that accompany a face. Its conceptual function is to undo the assumption that objects are self-explanatory.

Process philosophy provides the systematic version of this shift. Rather than treating things as primary and change as something that later happens to them, process thought treats becoming, activity, temporality, emergence, and novelty as fundamental categories [7]. Whitehead's philosophy of organism understands the world as composed of interdependent occasions and events rather than isolated substances; what we call an object is a comparatively stable pattern within an ongoing process [8,9]. Relational ontologies extend the point: what something is cannot be separated from how it participates in a world.

Applied to living and cultural forms, this means that a cell, a tree, a brain, a book, a city, or a machine is better described as an ongoing event — a pattern holding itself together for a time within larger exchanges — than as a finished unit to which history is subsequently added. A tree is a happening extended through time. A city is an accumulation of decisions, infrastructures, wounds, rituals, and memories. The object becomes a temporary resolution rather than a final term.

The consequence for selfhood is immediate, and it is the hinge on which the rest of this paper turns. If durable forms are stabilized patterns rather than substances, then a person is a history of embodied encounters rather than a thing with properties. This does not make the self unreal; stability is a real achievement, not an illusion. It makes the self temporal, conditioned, and therefore open to change — though, as section 9 will argue, change that must work through habit and environment rather than through declaration alone.

4. Resonance and Embodied Perception

Resonance is the governing concept of the relational account, because it joins a physical image to a description of experience without forcing the two to be identical. In physical terms, resonance names a response to a pattern: a system answers to a frequency it is already disposed to answer to. In lived experience, resonance names the moment when something reaches us because it meets an existing disposition — a song awakens grief, a room produces calm, a gesture recalls a parent, a color becomes a season, a word becomes an injury, a face becomes familiar.

The crucial feature is that resonance is neither passive reception nor sovereign choice. It is a response conditioned by prior tuning. This makes it a more precise instrument than either the empiricist image of a mind receiving impressions or the constructivist image of a mind projecting meaning. The world offers; the body answers; culture has already taught the answer how to become meaningful.

Light and sound make the structure visible. Color is not simply a property waiting in the world: it arises through an encounter among wavelength, eye, nervous system, attention, language, and learned association. Sound is not merely pressure in air; it becomes warning, intimacy, music, command, prayer, nostalgia, or disturbance through a listener situated in a life. None of this makes the world unreal or perception arbitrary. It makes experience relational. Meaning arises through encounter rather than residing wholly at either end of it.

Phenomenology, which begins from experience as it is lived rather than from an abstract view from nowhere [5], supplies the rigorous vocabulary for this claim. Building on Husserl's analyses of the lived body [6], Merleau-Ponty describes perception as enacted through the lived body rather than by a detached consciousness confronting an external world [1,3]. The body is already a practical orientation — an "I can" — that reaches toward a world of possibilities. It does not first calculate a movement and then perform it; it inhabits a situation. We do not possess a theoretical image of our own bodies and then deduce how to move: we find ourselves already able to reach, turn, avoid, approach, and occupy space [4]. The lived body is neither a mere object nor a pure consciousness. It is the interface through which a meaningful world appears.

This has a direct consequence for how the human figure should be conceived in a relational account. The person is not an antenna receiving information from an environment. The person is a body of history: a body taught to expect, to avoid, to desire, to listen, to perform, to be visible, or to disappear. What might be described as sensory intensity around a body is also social exposure. What enters a body as a waveform may be music, but it may equally be language, command, trauma, prayer, a crowd, or an algorithmically repeated message. Resonance therefore becomes the bridge between aesthetic form and behavioral pattern — between how something feels and what it makes possible.

Merleau-Ponty's later work extends the point ontologically. The concept of flesh describes a primordial element in which subject and object, self and world, are intertwined rather than opposed [2]. The reversibility of touching and being touched, seeing and being visible, is

not a curiosity at the margin of perception. It is the structure of a perceiving body that belongs to the same world it perceives.

5. Geometry, Analogy, and the Desire for Order

Recurring geometries — spirals, lattices, branches, nodes, orbits, tessellations, wave fields, nested circles — are best understood as a grammar rather than as evidence of a hidden universal design. Geometry makes relations visible. A line can show transmission. A node can show encounter. A spiral can show return without repetition. A lattice can show support and constraint simultaneously. A boundary can show protection, exclusion, or identity. A branching form can show inheritance, choice, adaptation, or distribution.

Human understanding relies on analogy because the world is too complex to be met as unrelated detail. We understand one domain through another: a heart becomes a pump, a city becomes an organism, a computer becomes a brain, a root system becomes a network, a life becomes a journey. This is not a defect of thought but one of its principal instruments. A branching river can help us think inheritance; a neural network can help us think a city; an archive can help us think memory.

But analogy carries a responsibility that is easy to discharge badly, and the discipline of the second step is what separates a relational account from a mystical one. Similarity can illuminate and it can also erase. A galaxy may resemble an eye, yet it does not see. A neural network may resemble a social network, yet it does not inherit the same forms of responsibility. A river basin does not suffer; a person does. A machine can process a pattern without necessarily having a lived world. The ethical form of analogical thinking is therefore not a geometry of sameness but a geometry of relation-with-difference: forms may echo across scales while remaining irreducibly different in their histories, their capacities, and their claims upon care.

This allows a more defensible treatment of sacred geometry and comparable traditions. Rather than presenting such systems as proof that a divine blueprint governs all things, they can be understood as a record of a persistent human desire to find proportion, correspondence, balance, and intelligibility in a changing world. They document the mind's need to orient itself. Read this way they become historically rich rather than epistemically overreaching — evidence about human beings rather than evidence about the cosmos.

A further caution belongs here. A visual and conceptual grammar assembled from Renaissance diagrams, Indigenous patterns, Islamic geometries, African systems of knowledge, Asian cosmologies, and contemporary network imagery must not be blended into a vague universalism. Each tradition carries historical specificity, authorship, and conditions of transmission. Unity, if it is to be claimed at all, should be presented as a conversation among worlds rather than the absorption of all worlds into one aesthetic. The question of who is entitled to define the universal is not incidental to a relational account; it is one of its central problems.

6. Emergence and the Formation of Complexity

A relational ontology needs an account of how stability arises, or it collapses into the claim that everything is flux. Emergence supplies it. Emergence refers to the appearance of novel qualities through organized relations: an arrangement becomes capable of doing something that cannot be understood by examining any single element in isolation.

Described as a sequence, emergence is a movement of condensation. A diffuse field gathers into repeating pattern. Pattern stabilizes into structure. Structure begins to maintain itself, to adapt, and to generate further organization. Organization develops memory and responsiveness; responsiveness becomes interpretation and, eventually, self-reference. The sequence should not be read as a literal ladder on which one substance turns into another. It is a series of descriptions of stabilization, and its value is that it names thresholds rather than substances.

The self can be described as emergent in exactly this sense, and the description does real work. No single memory is an identity. No single habit is a character. No single social category explains a person. Yet repeated encounters produce dispositions, and dispositions begin to look coherent from both inside and outside. A person comes to have a characteristic way of entering rooms, narrating loss, receiving praise, imagining danger, attaching to others, or imagining a future. Statements such as “I am anxious,” “I am independent,” “I am the responsible one,” or “I am invisible” are not merely descriptions. They may be emergent summaries: condensed accounts assembled from recurring sensations, reactions, permissions, prohibitions, and recognitions.

Emergence also explains a feature of identity that essentialist and constructivist accounts both handle poorly — that it can feel simultaneously stable and fragile. It is stable because patterns repeat. It is fragile because patterns depend on conditions. Change the environment, alter the relations of recognition, interrupt a habit, sustain a loss, join a new community, survive an event, or acquire a new language, and the pattern can reorganize. The self is neither infinitely malleable nor immovably fixed. It is a living formation with history and inertia.

There is a corresponding danger, and it recurs throughout this paper. An emergent pattern can harden into destiny. What began as an adaptive response to one environment can become a general identity long after that environment has gone. The same organization that confers coherence can restrict movement; the same narrative that protects a person can confine them. A pattern that once made a life survivable is not thereby a truth about who someone is.

7. The Ecology of Attention

Attention is ordinarily imagined as an inner spotlight controlled by private will. It is better described as ecological. Attention is organized by soundscapes, built environments, schedules, screens, economic pressure, safety, fatigue, ritual, beauty, interruption, exclusion, and care. A city teaches attention through its traffic, advertising, policing, architecture, speed, crowd density, and access to rest. A digital platform teaches attention through notification, repetition, comparison, amplification, and prediction. A forest teaches attention through weather, scale, sound, seasonal change, and vulnerability.

A person does not simply choose what to notice. Their capacity to notice is cultivated, overwhelmed, disciplined, interrupted, rewarded, and exhausted by a world. A fluorescent office, an algorithmically paced feed, a crowded home, an inaccessible building, a quiet garden, a surveillance camera, a familiar song: each belongs to an ecology that teaches a body what to expect and what to ignore.

This is where a relational account of the self becomes unavoidably political. If environments participate in producing attention, then environments participate in producing conduct. The question is not whether people are responsible for their actions. It is whether responsibility can be understood at all without recognizing the worlds that train perception and possibility. A person cannot attend equally well under all conditions. Poverty, threat, sensory overload, precarious labour, discrimination, displacement, and grief reorganize what can be noticed and what must be set aside. A theory that ignores this will systematically mistake the effects of conditions for the properties of persons.

The ethical stakes follow directly. If environments co-produce attention, the design of environments is never neutral. Architecture can make bodies welcome or peripheral. Media can extend knowledge or monetize agitation. Technologies can support relationship or convert relationship into data. The point is not a simple opposition between natural purity and technological corruption: both a forest and a network can nurture or constrain, and both can be sites of care, exclusion, dependence, and possibility.

Aesthetics is relevant here in a precise rather than decorative sense. Dewey understood aesthetic experience as an intensified form of organism-environment interaction, binding practical, emotional, and intellectual dimensions into a whole [21,22]. On this understanding, aesthetic experience is not an escape from thought but a site where the experiential and interpretive layers of a life meet. It is also evidence for the broader thesis: if an arrangement of light, sound, density, distance, pacing, and legibility can demonstrably reorganize what a person notices and feels, then the claim that environments participate in making selves is not a metaphor.

A design principle follows from this, and it applies well beyond aesthetics. Sensory intensity used merely to overwhelm produces compliance, not perception. Intensity used to reveal choice — alternating density and openness, making room for rest, providing access without reducing complexity, allowing people to move at different speeds — produces the conditions under which attention can become deliberate. Any claim that worlds make selves obliges those who make worlds to act accordingly.

8. Memory, Archive, and the Politics of Continuity

Memory is indispensable to identity, and it is not a vault. It is not an untouched object stored in a container and retrieved intact. It is an active relation between past and present, reconstructed through repetition, narration, emotion, social confirmation, forgetting, and present need. This does not make memory false. It makes it living. A remembered event becomes part of identity not merely because it occurred, but because it is returned to, interpreted, shared, hidden, defended, or transformed.

Ecological images capture this better than mechanical ones. A root system does not preserve the past as a photograph does; it incorporates the past into present growth. Sediment does not narrate itself; it requires an interpreter. Layers coexist rather than succeeding one another cleanly: a childhood rhythm may shape an adult decision, a national myth may enter a private fear, a discarded object may matter more than an official record. Time is not only a sequence moving away from the past. It is a layered material continuously reorganized by the present.

This makes the archive a central concept rather than a peripheral one, and it is where the politics of memory become explicit. An archive is never neutral. It preserves through selection. It creates continuity by naming, classifying, recording, and excluding. A museum, a family album, a legal document, a library, an algorithmic database, a monument, and a ruin all decide what counts as a trace. An archive does not remember everything; it remembers what someone had the power, the resources, and the desire to preserve.

The scope of this point extends well past institutions that call themselves archives. Cities remember through monuments, laws, ruins, zoning, language, and inherited inequality. Communities remember through ritual, testimony, song, and silence. Landscapes remember through traces of extraction, war, migration, and care. To ask what a society preserves is therefore to ask who controlled the means of preservation, and the history of lost, displaced, and uncredited knowledge is a history of that control.

Identity emerges from this ecology of memory. We attach ourselves to names, stories, places, achievements, wounds, objects, relationships, and group memberships partly because they organize temporal continuity. They allow the unstable flow of a life to be narrated as someone's life. Narrative theories of personal identity hold that people constitute themselves through the stories that make experiences, actions, and characteristics intelligible across time [10,11,12].

Yet narrative must not be mistaken for control. The stories available to a person are socially distributed. Some lives are richly documented and others made invisible. Some identities are named by the self and others assigned by institutions. No one authors a self-narrative alone: others tell us who we are, institutions record us, families repeat us, images mirror us, and social categories anticipate us. An adequate account of memory must therefore hold together the intimate wound and the public record, the family refrain and the civic archive.

9. Habit: The Unconscious Architecture of Identity

One of the most difficult problems in the theory of identity is how people acquire identities without choosing them, and then attach those identities to themselves as though they were timeless facts. The first part of the answer is habit.

Habits are not merely repeated behaviors such as drinking coffee or checking a phone. They are acquired styles of orientation. A habit governs how close one stands to others, what one expects from authority, how one enters a room, how one interprets silence, which emotions are permitted, which desires feel shameful, and what kind of future seems imaginable. Habit determines what feels normal, what feels possible, what feels safe, what feels shameful, and what feels like “someone like me.”

Merleau-Ponty’s account of the habit body is the decisive resource here. The body carries sedimentations of past activity that become general, anonymous, and partly autonomous orientations toward the world [1,3]. He distinguishes the habitual body, associated with general and prereflective existence, from the actual or personal body of reflective life, and the two interpenetrate rather than remaining separate [4]. A person does not first formulate a theory and then move. They move according to a world already incorporated in posture, pace, attention, taste, and response.

The habit body carries social history below the threshold of explicit theory. It learns from repetitions: who is welcomed, who is interrupted, who is believed, who receives care, who must become vigilant, who may take up space, whose language is considered refined, whose body is considered out of place. These repetitions become posture, tone, taste, self-censorship, entitlement, deference, defensiveness, ambition, hesitation, and desire. The mind is resonant because it has been tuned, and every life carries tuning histories: family rhythms, languages, class codes, rituals, gendered expectations, migration, sensory sensitivities, institutions, injuries, pleasures, and collective fears.

The characteristic error follows. The self mistakes a learned response for a natural essence. “I am not a leader,” “I am always the caregiver,” “I do not belong there,” “I am difficult,” “I must be useful,” or “I am superior to them” can become compact identities. Each may contain a history of real experience. Each can also block the recognition that a pattern was produced under particular conditions. To see a pattern as a pattern is not to deny its force. It is to create a margin of freedom around it.

Habit is also the bridge between the two registers of selfhood examined in section 11. A person may narrate themselves as confident while their body repeatedly contracts in spaces associated with judgment. They may value freedom while their learned routines make certain futures feel impossible. They may identify as detached while their attention remains organized around the anticipation of abandonment. Contemporary work on narrative self-constitution as embodied practice emphasizes that selfhood is shaped through bodily processes, behavioral habits, social relations, environmental conditions, and norms, rather than through verbal self-description alone [17].

This yields the paper’s most practically consequential claim. Transformation cannot be purely verbal. A new narrative matters, but it becomes durable only when supported

by new embodied practices, relations, and environments. The model is reciprocal: experience deposits habits; habits bias perception and action; narrative interprets these patterns; narrative can guide new practices; and new practices gradually change what becomes experientially possible. Identity shifts through recursive loops, not through a single declaration.

10. Recognition, Belonging, and the Social Self

Identity is never entirely private, because it depends on recognition. We are addressed before we can reply. Names, pronouns, kinship roles, national narratives, religious affiliations, class expectations, racial categories, professional titles, and digital profiles supply coordinates through which a person becomes legible to others and, eventually, to themselves. Such categories can be oppressive, enabling, insufficient, cherished, imposed, or strategically deployed. Their power lies in the fact that they organize access to belonging.

A child does not choose the first language through which the world becomes meaningful, nor the earliest categories used to describe their body, family, class, religion, nationality, ability, or temperament. They are addressed before they can answer. Over time the address can become an attachment: the person repeats the category, resists it, modifies it, conceals it, performs it, mourns it, or turns it into a resource. The original field of recognition remains active in all of these responses.

Theories of recognition make the structural claim explicit: developing a practical identity depends fundamentally on feedback from other persons and from society. Persistent one-sided or negative depiction makes it harder for people to regard themselves and their projects as valuable, and misrecognition can damage a person's relation to self [19]. Identity on this account is a relational achievement rather than an individual possession.

Social identity theory supplies the group-level mechanism. Group membership becomes psychologically active when it is accepted, felt, and enacted, and when the values and norms of the group shape self-understanding [25]. Social categorization, identification, and comparison organize a sense of "us" and "them," with substantial effects on perception and behavior. Group identity can provide solidarity, protection, language, mourning, collective action, and dignity. It can also produce rivalry, stereotyping, exclusion, and the need to defend an "us" against a constructed "them."

Two conclusions follow, and they pull in different directions, which is why both are needed. The first is that group identity should not be treated as a problem to be overcome in favor of isolated individualism. Human beings need belonging, and identification with others is a condition of solidarity and political agency rather than a lapse from rationality. Identity politics emerges from shared experiences of injustice, even as it risks reifying the categories it exists to contest [20]. The ethical question is not whether people should have collective identities but whether belonging can remain porous, self-critical, and hospitable to difference.

The second conclusion concerns materiality. Identities are not merely psychological impressions; they are organized through material systems. Social ontology asks how social realities — groups, institutions, laws, categories, collective intentions — are constituted [18]. A passport, a border, a school, an algorithmic category, a museum label, a uniform, a housing policy, a diagnostic classification, a police encounter, or a workplace hierarchy can materialize a social identity and distribute real possibilities. The field in which a self forms is therefore institutional as well as sensory.

This explains why identity cannot be treated as a costume that may simply be removed.

Identities attach because they organize attachment itself: belonging, safety, legibility, responsibility, continuity, and love. Transformation requires more than exposure to a new idea. It requires new experiences of recognition, new habits of attention, new relations, and sometimes mourning for a former world.

11. The Experiential Self and the Narrative Self

11.1 Two registers

The word “self” names more than one phenomenon. It can mean the living subject of present experience, the remembered person who persists through time, the moral agent answerable for action, the social person named by institutions, or the symbolic image one carries of oneself. Confusion begins when these distinct questions are treated as though a single definition must answer all of them.

The experiential self concerns the immediate first-personal character of conscious life. A pain is not first encountered as an impersonal event later assigned to an owner; it is lived as my pain. A movement toward a familiar voice, a recoil from danger, an absorbed act of drawing, or a sudden feeling of shame possesses a first-personal character before it becomes an explicit claim about what kind of person one is. Phenomenological accounts call this prereflective self-awareness: an implicit self-presence built into lived experience, present before reflective inspection, self-recognition in a mirror, use of the first-person pronoun, or the construction of a self-narrative [13,14].

The narrative self concerns the organization of a life across time. It addresses how an action, experience, trait, value, or memory becomes attributable to a particular person as part of a practical self-understanding. Schechtman’s narrative approach names this the characterization question: not whether an organism at one time is numerically identical to an organism at another, but which psychological characteristics, experiences, and actions properly count as belonging to a person [11,12].

These are not rival answers to one question. They are different levels of analysis. The experiential self explains why experience is immediately lived from a first-person standpoint. The narrative self explains how a person gathers selected experiences into a meaningful, temporally extended account capable of guiding commitment, responsibility, relationship, and future action.

11.2 The minimal self is not an interior core

The experiential self should not be confused with an isolated ego or a metaphysical substance. It is not a small observer hidden inside the head. It is the structural fact that experience is lived from somewhere: a body situated in space, engaged in activity, exposed to others, and oriented toward possibilities, whose schema organizes action before it is represented [16]. Minimal experiential selfhood is immediate and non-thematic rather than an objectified awareness of oneself [15].

This matters for the argument of the paper as a whole. A relational account of identity is sometimes read as denying that there is anyone there at all — as though the self dissolved into its conditions. The phenomenological claim blocks that inference. There is an irreducible first-personal dimension to experience, and it is embodied and world-involved rather than interior and self-sufficient. The body is not only a processor of stimuli.

It is a vulnerable center of orientation: the place where sound becomes interruption or comfort, where light becomes exposure or shelter, where a city becomes navigable or hostile, where a memory returns before it has words.

11.3 Narrative identity and its constitutive claim

Narrative identity addresses a different human requirement: continuity. A person does not merely have momentary experiences; they locate them within an account of a life. They ask what a childhood event means now, whether a past action expresses their values, which commitments should be preserved, what future can be imagined, and which losses or relationships remain formative. A narrative links time without eliminating change.

The strong version of the thesis holds that self-narration is constitutive rather than merely descriptive. On this view a person does not discover a pre-written identity; they develop and revise interpretive accounts of who they are, and those accounts help constitute their practical identity. Traits, actions, and experiences become a person's own in the relevant sense by being incorporated into a self-told life story that meets appropriate constraints of reality and social understanding [12].

Narrative therefore carries ethical weight. It grounds self-concern, responsibility, compensation, promise-keeping, grief, loyalty, and aspiration. A person can take ownership of a past act not merely because it happened to the same body, but because it is intelligibly connected to the values, reasons, and commitments through which they understand their life. Narrative makes it possible to say not only that something happened, but that it matters to who one is and to what one owes.

A narrative is nevertheless never a neutral transcript. It selects, arranges, and emphasizes. It creates beginnings, turning points, antagonists, losses, and anticipated endings. This selective power is enabling: it makes chaotic experience bearable and communicable. It is also constraining: it can convert a provisional interpretation into a fixed role — the survivor, the failure, the caregiver, the exile, the outsider, the genius, the person who cannot change.

11.4 Why the registers must be distinguished

The distinction matters because experience exceeds what can be said about it. An infant, a person in acute pain, an absorbed dancer, a person in a panic state, or someone responding to another's face exhibits a form of self-involvement even without producing a coherent autobiographical account. If identity is defined exclusively by narrating capacity, then those whose lives are non-linear, inarticulate, cognitively altered, culturally non-narrative, or temporarily fragmented may be treated as having diminished selfhood.

Critiques of narrative self-constitution have pressed this objection directly, arguing that requirements of linearity, articulability, and realism can carry ableist or exclusionary implications, particularly for people affected by abuse, disempowerment, or alternative cultural conceptions of personhood. The point is not that narrative is worthless. It is that narrative must not become a gatekeeping criterion determining whose life counts as coherent, responsible, or fully human.

At the same time, an experiential account alone cannot explain the normative and social dimensions of personhood. People must often give accounts of themselves, make promises, repair harms, maintain relationships, interpret memories, and choose among possible futures. Narrative is one important way in which a lived present becomes an ethically organized life. The appropriate conclusion is not to choose experience over story, but to refuse to confuse the story with the whole life.

11.5 Trauma and the limits of coherence

Traumatic experience makes the limits of narrative coherence especially visible. Trauma can interrupt the capacity to integrate events into a continuous life story, and fragmented memory and diminished narrative cohesion may result. Narrative can help rebuild meaning and connection, but it must not be imposed as an obligation to produce a tidy redemptive plot. Crossley's work on trauma and narrative warns against approaches that lose contact with phenomenological and experiential realities by treating selfhood as nothing but cultural discourse; trauma reveals both the need for narrative configuration and the experience of disorder that resists it [26].

The philosophical lesson is restraint. A person's inability or refusal to tell a coherent story is not evidence that their experience lacks reality or moral significance. The experiential self may carry what the narrative self cannot yet — or cannot ever — integrate.

11.6 Agency without the myth of total self-creation

A central risk in contemporary language of self-making is the fantasy that individuals author themselves from nothing. This fantasy ignores dependency, embodiment, history, unequal power, recognition, and material constraint. The opposite view, that people are simply products of their conditions, fails equally: it cannot account for interpretation, refusal, imagination, solidarity, or change.

A relational account of agency avoids both errors. Agency is not absolute independence. It is the capacity to take up, revise, resist, and redirect inherited conditions from within them. It grows where a person has sufficient recognition, material support, safety, language, practice, and social space to regard themselves as entitled to form judgments and commitments. Autonomy on this view is relational: enabled by the very relationships and institutions that can also constrain it.

Narrative supports agency when it allows a person to reinterpret events, claim values, connect actions to commitments, and imagine alternative futures. It impairs agency when it becomes a compulsory script, when social power dictates the only available story, or when a person is blamed for failing to narrate an experience that has overwhelmed their capacity for coherence. The ethical question is not whether people should have narratives. It is whether they have the conditions for narrating, revising, refusing, and being heard without coercion.

12. Archetype, Dream, and Symbolic Form

A relational account of the self must say something about symbolic imagination, because a great deal of identity is carried in images rather than propositions. Dream logic is the clearest case. In dream, a city may become a body, a childhood room may become a galaxy, a book may become a fossil, an ocean may become possibility. These transformations need not be treated as errors of knowledge. They are symbolic operations: ways of allowing one realm of experience to illuminate another, and they refuse the false clarity that insists a single form can carry only one meaning. Dream images are compressed. Many times, fears, wishes, histories, and contradictions occupy one shape.

Jungian psychology is useful here provided it is treated as a tradition of symbolic interpretation rather than as a settled biological doctrine. Jung used the term archetype for recurring patterns of image and situation and connected them to the collective unconscious; later scholarship has emphasized archetypal imagination as a cultural, psychological, and metaphorical phenomenon rather than a literal inherited catalogue of images [23,24]. Read in this cautious register, archetype does not assert that all cultures share one fixed symbolic code. It directs attention to recurring human problems of orientation: origin, separation, loss, integration, terror, longing, and transformation.

Particular figures can then be read without metaphysical overreach. The tree can figure lineage, growth, loss, shelter, rootedness, and hierarchy. The ocean can figure possibility, danger, grief, birth, migration, and the ungraspable. The library can figure memory, authority, exclusion, forgetting, and the hope of transmission. The mandala deserves specific attention, because it is the figure most often pressed into cosmic claims. Understood psychologically rather than metaphysically, a mandala is not proof of cosmic perfection but an image of the desire for integration. It gathers scattered elements around a center, and it represents the work of holding contradiction: conscious and unconscious, personal and collective, organic and technological, memory and possibility, care and power. Its center need not be stable. It may be an absence, a wound, a question, or an observing body.

The shadow, similarly, can be read as the unintegrated remainder of a system — the excluded body, the extinguished knowledge, the ecological damage, the human cost of technological power — rather than as a private moral failing. This reading connects symbolic psychology to the political arguments of sections 8 and 10: what a person or a culture cannot integrate is rarely random, and is usually what its arrangements were built to exclude.

13. Nature, Computation, and Artificial Intelligence

Computational images of mind occupy an unusual position in a relational account. They are neither simply true nor simply mistaken; they are revealing, and what they reveal is mostly about their makers.

Artificial intelligence can be understood as an extension of human patterning. It is built from classifications, archives, language, images, labour, infrastructures, energy, and decisions about what counts as relevant. It is therefore never simply other. It carries human histories, including their biases and exclusions, into a new scale of mediation. Treating it as an alien intelligence obscures the more interesting fact that it is a concentrated deposit of human choices.

The analogy between neural networks, ecosystems, cities, and computational systems can be productive so long as it remains critical. Networks distribute information, and they distribute power as well. A root system may suggest mutuality while a platform network profits from extraction. A computational image may promise clarity while its categories conceal bias. The thesis is not that ecosystems are literally computers or computers literally ecosystems. It is that both images expose an appetite for intelligibility. Human beings see roots as circuitry and circuitry as roots because they seek forms that connect complexity to comprehension. The relevant question is whether the desire to map life can coexist with humility before what remains untranslatable.

The question of machine consciousness should remain open, and the openness is principled rather than evasive. Similarity in pattern processing does not resolve questions of embodiment, vulnerability, mortality, sensation, or first-person experience. A system may resemble cognition in one respect while lacking a lived world in another. Sections 4 and 11 supply the reason this matters: if the experiential self is constituted through an embodied, vulnerable, situated engagement with a world, then functional resemblance in information processing is not evidence of the relevant kind.

What remains philosophically tractable is the encounter itself. Why does a system that appears to respond awaken hope, anxiety, affection, authority, or dread? What do human beings seek in the mirror of a nonhuman intelligence — companionship, authority, escape from finitude, a mirror that cannot leave, a new archive of collective desire? These questions can be pursued rigorously without settling the metaphysics, and they return the inquiry to its proper subject: the human patterns that build and interpret such systems.

14. Silence, Opacity, and the Ethics of the Unsaid

Silence is not merely the absence of sound, and it is not a single thing. It can be rest, reverence, attention, exhaustion, refusal, mourning, secrecy, or possibility. It can also be imposed — through censorship, social shame, unequal power, trauma, or the refusal of archives to preserve certain lives. Any account of the self that treats articulation as the measure of personhood will misread both kinds.

The distinction matters because the two are easily confused in aesthetic and theoretical treatments alike. The same open space that gives a composition breath can also resemble an archive with missing names. Some silences are chosen and nourishing; others are the residue of violence. A relational theory of identity must be able to tell them apart, which means attending to the conditions under which speech was or was not possible rather than to the fact of silence alone.

This yields what may be called an ethics of opacity. Not every person, culture, memory, or wound should be rendered fully legible for consumption. Opacity is not the enemy of relation; it is one of its conditions. To meet another person ethically is not to possess a complete explanation of them. A theory of the self that aspires to total transparency has already made an error about what persons are.

Compression is the formal counterpart of this claim. A seed contains a future forest in latent form. A book condenses a civilization's knowledge and its prejudice. A face condenses a history of social reading. The body itself is a compression of ancestry, habit, memory, language, and expectation. To describe a person as a compression is to say that what presents itself as a single, simple fact is the sedimented result of many processes — which is precisely the thesis of sections 6 and 9 restated at the scale of the individual.

The humanitarian implication is direct. Respect for others includes respect for what cannot or will not be made transparent. An account of universal patterns becomes most humane when it leaves room for what refuses pattern, what remains singular, and what cannot be translated without loss.

15. Time, Recursion, and Transformation

The final structural concept is recursion, and it is what distinguishes this account from a merely layered or additive one. Recursion does not mean repetition without change. It means that a process returns to itself and is altered by the return. A memory revisited is not the same memory. A symbol encountered after a life event carries another meaning. A person who narrates their past is changed by the act of narration.

Lived time is recursive in this sense rather than simply linear. A past scene can return through smell, music, architecture, gesture, or fear. An inherited story can shape a future choice before it is consciously named. A trauma can be experienced as repetition; a ritual can make recurrence a source of repair; a tradition can preserve possibility or enforce closure. Human time is not only clock time. It is also waiting, recurrence, ritual, ageing, delayed recognition, transmission, mourning, anticipation, and unfinished repair.

Time is therefore better modeled as sedimentary than as a line moving away from the past. Time does not merely empty; it deposits traces. What we call a personality may be one such deposit — an accumulated response to conditions that have not entirely passed. This restates, at the level of a life, the account of emergence given in section 6 and of habit given in section 9.

Recursion also supplies an image of transformation that avoids both fatalism and fantasy. The self returns to its histories, but return does not require captivity. A person can recognize a repeated pattern — an inherited fear, a group story, a survival habit, a social role — and meet it differently. This is not instant liberation, and the argument of section 9 rules out treating it as one: a pattern sustained by habit, environment, and recognition will not dissolve on being named. It is a practice of observing the observer: noticing the relations through which one sees, and gradually widening the field of possible response.

This is also the reply to the closure problem raised in section 11.3. A coherent story is comforting, but a life exceeds every account of it. Recursion destabilizes finality. A person can revisit a formative event and discover a different meaning, see a family pattern in a personal choice, or recognize an inherited fear as an environmental adaptation rather than an essence. Recursion is, in this sense, a method of release from the tyranny of the first explanation.

16. Toward a Humanitarian Account of Interdependence

An account of interdependence becomes humane only when it returns to the concrete conditions of bodies and communities. Claims of unity have often failed precisely when they erased the differences through which people suffer, love, survive, and make claims upon one another. It is not enough to say that everything is connected. The question is: connected by whom, through what systems, at whose cost, and with what capacity to refuse?

The distinction that must be preserved is between interdependence and sameness. A child, a forest, an archive, a machine, a river, and a city are entangled in shared systems, but they do not have identical needs or moral claims. Humanitarian attention begins with this asymmetry. It recognizes that care must be specific, and that a universal description becomes ethical only when it does not erase the singular life in front of it. If everything is said to be one, then real distinctions — between trauma and comfort, oppression and freedom, human and machine, human and nonhuman — are flattened, and flattening them is not a neutral theoretical simplification. It is a way of making power invisible.

Connections are unequal. Some bodies are overexposed and some histories erased; some voices are amplified and some environments made toxic; some identities are treated as universal while others are required to explain themselves. A relational theory that cannot register this asymmetry has failed by its own standard, since asymmetry is itself a relation.

The practical ethics of the account can be stated directly, and each clause follows from an earlier section rather than being appended to it.

- Environments shape attention; therefore design matters.
- Archives shape memory; therefore preservation and omission matter.
- Categories shape identity; therefore language and institutions matter.
- Technologies shape relations; therefore governance and accountability matter.
- Recognition shapes the capacity for self-relation; therefore how people are named, classified, and addressed matters.

None of these is a metaphor. Each states that a determinable set of arrangements participates in producing determinate capacities in persons, which is the paper's central thesis applied to the conditions under which people actually live. If a city shapes attention, then planners, institutions, owners, and citizens carry responsibilities. If technologies shape habits, designers and users are implicated. If archives shape memory, preservation and omission are political acts. If identity is relational, recognition is not a private courtesy but a condition of social life.

This gives the relational vocabulary a grounded purpose. Field, pattern, resonance, and recursion are not escapes from human reality. They are instruments for widening moral imagination. They make it possible to see that a person is never only an individual unit, never only a data point, and never only a member of a category. A person is a singular history of relations — and singularity is precisely what deserves care.

17. Conclusion: The Pattern That Calls Itself “I”

The largest question addressed in this paper is not whether reality is fundamentally relational, computational, or material. It is how a human being comes to experience a world at all, and how that world becomes attached to the word “I.”

The answer developed here is that identity is neither discovered intact nor invented from nothing. It is assumed, rehearsed, recognized, inherited, felt, narrated, defended, altered, and sometimes released. It is carried in the body as habit, in the mind as expectation, in culture as category, in memory as story, in institutions as record, and in technology as a changing distribution of attention and power. We attach identities to ourselves because they offer continuity, belonging, legibility, and protection. We may also suffer under them when they become too rigid to contain the complexity of a life.

We inherit rhythms before we articulate them. We are named before we name ourselves. We learn to attend through environments we did not design. We accumulate memories, roles, images, group memberships, and habits until the accumulation begins to speak in the first person. The “I” that results is real, but it is not solitary. It is a living pattern: embodied, historical, relational, vulnerable, and unfinished. It is made of resonances — some chosen, some imposed, some cherished, some painful, and many invisible until something gives them form.

To describe the self this way is not to diminish personhood. It is to make personhood more complex and more humane. An essentialist account protects the person by placing a core beyond the reach of circumstance, but it does so at the cost of explaining almost nothing about how lives actually go. A constructivist account restores agency but overstates authorship and quietly penalizes those whose conditions do not support it. The relational account defended here keeps what each gets right: there is an irreducibly first-personal dimension to experience, and there is a genuine capacity to revise, but both are conditioned, both are embodied, and both are unequally supported.

The recursive structure of the argument is its final claim rather than a stylistic feature. Each concept returns transformed. The field that opens the account as a description of relational conditions returns in section 10 as an institutional reality. Emergence, introduced as a general account of stabilization, returns as the sedimentation of habit and then as the deposit that a life leaves in a person. Recursion, introduced as a formal property, returns as a practice: the observation of one’s own conditions of observation.

This yields the paper’s concluding proposition, which is ethical rather than metaphysical. Every world we make becomes, in some measure, a world inside someone else. To create environments, images, archives, technologies, categories, and stories is to participate in the making of attention, and therefore in the making of selves. To attend to that fact is the beginning of a more responsible account of what a person is — and of what is owed to one.

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Note on Sources

This paper consolidates four earlier working documents by the author into a single argument. Those documents cited a number of sources through internal reference tokens that could not be resolved to retrievable publications. Where a claim depended on such a source, the claim has been retained only if it is either argued directly in the text or supported by a source that a reader can locate; the unresolvable tokens have been removed rather than reproduced. One entry, reference 17, is listed by title and publisher alone, as the source documents recorded no further detail. Readers should treat it accordingly.

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