THE PRACTICING SELF:
A THEORY OF PERSONHOOD

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INTRODUCTION
Nature or nurture, ego or environment, self or social setting; personality theorists have long struggled to construct a theory of personhood that adequately embraces both influence and agency. Early theories of determinism, whether socially determined (Watson, Skinner) or internally driven (Freud) often left ego development, at best, as a mediating force with little real intentionality. Humanistic theories (Rogers) often elevated human agency without fully explaining the etiology/organizing schema of that selfsame agency in the face of social forces.

With the onset of a postmodern emphasis on the social construction of the self, personality theorists enjoy a new opportunity and challenge to adequately explain the relationship between social construction and human “novelty” (what is unique to human agency). Theorists working within Wesleyan circles understand articulating such a relationship is particularly important for a view of personhood that theologically corresponds to the Wesleyan notion of “responsible” grace. Often human participation in the life of God, best conceived through soteriological categories, include the idea of theosis or deification. Often unstated is whether this participatory nature is actually a part of our creatureliness. In other words, can “participation” be understood as a part of theological anthropology through God’s first work of grace. Beyond deterministic models of ego development and expressive articulations of human actualization, there may be a via media in the idea of personality that engages and emerges from “practice,” a term similar to participation but one that suggests a particular quality in the participatory act.

The following is a preliminary exploration of human personality through the lens of practice. This new description of the “self” anchored in the notion of “practice,” suggests a term that describes conditioned but intentional action interrelated and

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often interdependent with social influence. The sources for this approach to the self reside both within and outside traditional psychological theory. Theorists as divergent as philosophers Alasdair MacIntyre, Calvin Schrag, and ritual theorist Catherine Bell provide resources or perhaps "clues" that inform this theory. In addition, psychologist Erik H. Eriksen provides important additional theoretical support to inform this new construction of "practicing" personhood.

**CLUES TO THE PRACTICING SELF: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Any development of the theory of the practicing self should probably address several key considerations implicit in the definition and resident within the broader conversation of personality theory today (the rise of postmodernity, the organic relationship between person and community, the psychological warrants that inform theory construction). Each consideration provides clues to a more fully informed idea of the practicing self. This exploration proceeds through various frameworks, including:

- A definition of what is meant by the term practice (since it will modify notions of selfhood);
- A framework for articulating the relationship between individual practice and communal practice (explored under the rubric of ritual);
- A dialog between this view of personhood and other postmodern depictions of the self;
- An exploration of one existing approach to personality theory, particularly from a psychological viewpoint, that informs the final understanding of the practicing self.

In a contemporary climate, each of these considerations informs an authentic view of the self, beginning with the concept of practice. The study continues addressing social practice via ritual, to postmodern notions of personhood. All three reviews provide a backdrop to a conversation with personality theory.

**DEFINING PRACTICE**

The idea of practice emerges from early Greek philosophy, particularly Aristotle, but is best articulated through contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his text *After Virtue.* MacIntyre offers a cogent definition of what constitutes appropriate human practice. MacIntyre writes,

By a 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence, which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.

MacIntyre's definition reveals five basic characteristics of practice
1) Coherent activity (materially connected actions)
2) Complexity
3) Social acknowledgement and cooperation (i.e., a social fabric around the practice)
4) Goods internal to the activity provide both impetus and means for judging excellence and success (i.e., some worth intrinsic within the practice itself)
5) There are conceptual frameworks (i.e., a “grammar”) within the practice that provide the means to pursue and actually extend excellence.

Macintyre's definition will provide a later referent. For now, his articulation nuances the difference between the term “participation” and “practice.” We may participate in a number of socially engendered activities but not fully engage in practice. As Macintyre writes, “Bricklaying is not a practice, architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice, farming is. So are the inquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and so is the work of the historian, and so are painting and music.” In a sense Macintyre is arguing for an aesthetic quality to the activity that participation does not always reference.

Macintyre offers one additional definition that is helpful in describing the nature of the practicing self. In his definition of virtue, Macintyre writes,

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.\[10\]

Macintyre notes that participants must submit to the grammar of a practice and submit to other practitioners in order to obtain a level of authentic practice. The willingness to do so requires virtues like justice, courage and honesty to acknowledge both one's place and one's need in relationship to the practice and other practitioners. Macintyre writes “every practice requires a certain kind of relationship between those who participate in it.”\[11\] Regardless of personal preference, virtues define the type of relationship persons have as they share purposes and practices.

Macintyre's definitions of practice and virtue inform not only a general definition of personality, they also suggest a particular quality concerning the nature of an authentic self. This qualitative reference may suggest goals for therapeutic care as well. More will be said later.

**Practice and Ritual**

Practice may also be a common term for articulating the relationship between various aspects of the self and the social life of the community. As noted earlier, one of the postmodern challenges may well be to have a theory of relationships that describe both interpersonal and intrapersonal transactions in similar fashion, or at least acknowledges their mirrored proclivities.\[12\] If “practice” defines the emergence of the self, perhaps “ritual,” as a socially defining term, provides additional clues to the nature of practice.

Catherine Bell notes in anthropology practice may have replaced the concept of “structure” as the dominant image for cultural analysis.\[13\] Bell writes,
In contrast to the static view of structuralism, which tends to see human activity as a matter of enacting cultural rules, practice theory claims to take seriously the ways in which human activities, as formal as a religious ritual or as casual as a midday stroll, are creative strategies by which human beings continually reproduce and reshape their social and cultural environments.14

Bell chooses to focus on ritual as a form of cultural practice that integrates cultural thought and action.

Bell asserts rituals are practices “that construct particular types of meanings and values in specific ways.”15 Bell, in her own overview of ritual, notes that her approach to ritual is relatively new. Previous studies have tended to emphasize overarching definitions that link ritual to social cohesion and intensity, to the advance of symbolic information through action, or to structured patterns of practices that spark mental concepts in individuals.16 Each approach to ritual, including social processes, symbolic meaning and value, and tactical reasoning, provide helpful insight into a specific set of cultural activities.17

Bell, however, believes that no one ritual practice exists alone but is actually part of a larger economy of practices. Bell writes,

It is usually one ceremony among many in the larger ritual life of a person or community, one gesture among a multitude of gestures both sacred and profane, one embodiment among others of traditions of behavior down from one generation to another. In other words, for each and every ritual, there is a thick context of social customs, historical practices, and day-to-day routines that, in addition to the unique factors at work in any given moment in time and space, influence whether or how a ritual action is performed.18

In this sense of ritual, each practice always exists within a larger economy of activities.

Exactly how knowledge is conveyed through ritual action is uncertain due to the diversity of interpretations on the nature of ritual. Each gesture contributes to the larger ritual. The arrangement and order of such gestures may create a different language or “grammar” of meaning.19 The symbolic meaning of each gesture in isolation must be balanced against the broader ritual or practicing context. Within the psyche of the participant the association of action and thought merge through either kinesthesia or synesthesia (or a combination of both) into a dawning awareness of greater meaning.20

Bell emphasizes that ritualized practices contribute to a world of cultural meaning. As persons participate they gain a form of ritual mastery that begins to interpret the rest of life situations in light of these practices. Mastery of ritualized practices creates a type of embodied knowing which influences other situations in life by making them “more coherent with the values of the ritualizing schemes.”21 Corporate actions provide a new perception of the world where mastery allows participants to see themselves and the world differently.22 Bell argues that the ritual process focuses on the telos of the anticipated emergence of the new person or focuses upon the new consensus of values and behaviors that should shape the community but often ignoring the very processes that may enhance or subvert this goal.23
PRACTICE AND POSTMODERN DEPICTIONS OF PERSONHOOD

As already noted, postmodern philosophical discussions have also centered upon issues of the illusory self. Calvin Schrag writes,

Confronted with the mosaic messages dealing with the death of the man (sic), the demise of the author, and the deconstruction or dissimulation of the subject, one finds oneself in a crisis of concepts relative to matters pertaining to the human self, understood as subject and agent in discourse and action.24

Schrag responds to these shifting forces by embracing a four-fold postmodern depiction of identity as the self in discourse (the narrating self), in action (the embodied/enacted self), in community (the ethical praxis of the self), and as the self in transcendence (the self before radical alterity). Each of Schrag’s depictions answers “who” instead of “what” questions concerning selfhood (not what is a self). Who is speaking, Who is acting, Who responds to other selves, and Who stands within and before transcendence.25 Schrag is not interested in reconciling all four depictions but each lend light upon a final understanding practice and personality.

Schrag’s definition of the “self-in-discourse” centers on the power of speech: past, present and future. Noting the multiplicity of “changing profiles and even the “plurality of language games,” Schrag contends some sense of the self remains present to itself, past, present and future, through discourse.26 Yet there can be numerous discourses in a person’s life. What holds multiple discourses together is the presence of narrativity, an overarching story-form that holds together various discourses across time.27 Ultimately Schrag argues that for us to name the “who” in “who is talking” is to explore the narrative self identity, overcoming the issue of time (continuity) in the telling of his/her story.28 He writes,

The story of the self is a developing story; a story subject to creative advance, wherein the past is never simply a series of nows that have lapsed into non-being, but a text, an inscription of events and experiences, that stands open to new interpretations and new perspectives of meaning.29

Ultimately Schrag calls persons homo narrans, where the concept of character becomes particularly relevant in identifying the various stages of the developing narrative concerning the self.30

Along with the narrating self, Schrag incorporates the self in action, where character is made explicit through concrete activity.31 Schrag’s definition of action seeks to overcome the mind/body split of previous philosophical traditions by naming the material, the reality that we are embodied knowers engaged in reflective (praxis) bodily involvements and activities.32 Schrag notes that embodiment provides an understanding of space the same way narrative provides a means for the self to occupy time. He writes,

The body as a dimension of selfhood does not occupy space—at least not in the sense that one would speak of a coffee cup taking up room in its being placed on a table, or being placed anywhere for that matter. The body inhabits space, it
does not simply occupy it.

Schrag’s emphasis on embodiment leads to actions. Actions, however, are not isolated, they exist in a framework of communicative praxis, deliberative decision making, via agencies of empowerment and enactment. Actions are also embedded in broader social practices (remembering and reclaiming the past), while actions are also anticipatory of future events: “of future practices yet to be performed.”

Schrag’s emphasis on discourse and action, rhetoric and praxis, leads to political considerations of living in community. Schrag offers that narrative and action always occur in the presence of interlocutors (the “who” of community) who often influence any understanding of selfhood, “engendering a shift of focus from the self as present to itself to the self as present to, for, and with the other.” Schrag acknowledges that there is a tension between the “we-experience” and the “I-experience,” but maintains that community is crucial for narrative and action. “Community is more like the binding textuality of our discourse and the integrating purpose of our action.” Community, framed in the Greek concept of polis, implies certain ethical and moral dimensions to living, so that self-actualization always exists within communal interdependence. The desire of self-actualization introduces the function of responsivity (to the community) while the complementary necessity of interdependence calls forth the function of responsibility (with its moral implications in a social world). Discerning the relationship between responsibility and responsibility becomes the task of the conscience (supplying the moral dimension to the narrative of self in community); however, Schrag does not understand “conscience” as conjured subjectivity, but as a response to the “other.”

This hermeneutical determination of action overturns the notion that the self is purely context-determined, but leaves open the necessity of the acting self as context-conditioned.

Finishing the tour Schrag closes by exploring the self in transcendence. Schrag begins noting that each previous view carries implicit references to the transcendent. That discourse always includes a surplus of meaning, action gestures toward more than what the self has already become, and community always suggests even greater configurations of social practices and communal involvements beyond the immediate matrix. This allows Schrag to acknowledge a sense of alterity, a notion of “that which is Other.” Philosophically Schrag is reluctant to posit the full nature of the Other as distinct from, or continuous with, creation. He also notes in a postmodern world that a claim to “universality” is problematic if it flattens notions of diversity, heterogeneity and the incommensurability of certain concepts. Instead, Schrag calls for a notion of “transversal,” a concept where the alterity of the Other becomes defined by the infinite complexity of various perspectives in an open-textured gathering of expanding possibilities. He writes, “As such it is a dynamics of unification that is always an ‘ing,’ a process of unifying, rather than an ‘ed,’ a finalized result.” The interweaving and holding together of patterns characterizes a transcendent Other (God) described most by love. The existence of the personal self before this Transcendent Other is best understood as a surplus of that love, of gift, out of which the self responds.

Schrag’s definition of the transcendence probably deserves greater nuance (like the other descriptions). As a collage (with Bell’s description of ritual and MacIntyre’s definition
of practice) the various descriptions provide clues to a framing of the practicing self. However, such clues may be incomplete without resources from within the field of personality theory. Are there theorists whose views resonate with the description set forth in philosophy and social theory? One such theorist provides bridge-points, Erik H. Erikson.

**Erik Erikson, Conversations around Practice**

Within the field of psychology one theorist may prove particularly helpful in fleshing out how the concept of practice informs the self. Erik Erikson’s work is often “flattened” in many basic psychology textbooks due to his stage theory, the eight ages of the life cycle.\(^4\) Admittedly this theory is predominant in his work.\(^4\) Unfortunately the heavy influence of the universality of the stages tends to bestow Erikson with the now dubious label of modernist. Erikson, like most stage theorists, tended to fall into disrepute with postmodern critiques. Critics implicitly or explicitly assume that any theory developed on enlightenment principles that mitigate alternative theories of the social construction of the self.\(^4\) Recovering Erikson’s contributions, however, may be helpful even in the midst of postmodern critique, particularly in understanding the practicing self.

Erik Erikson’s contributions to personality theory, particularly as an extension of an admitted psychoanalytic framework, provide key insights into the notion of practice and self-hood. Erikson, from as early as 1944, tried to relate the interior world of the child in development with the circumstances of society, culture and history. In doing so he distanced himself to some degree from his contemporaries in psychoanalytic thought (including both Sigmund and Anna Freud).\(^4\) While influential in religious circles, particularly Christian education, the fullness of his theory is often overlooked in a postmodern milieu.\(^4\)

This oversight might be problematic since the psychoanalytic tradition (which shaped Erikson) remains evident in postmodern circles. Sigmund Freud’s influence is clear, particularly through such postmodern thinkers as Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault, though many struggle to reconcile Freud’s deconstructive contributions with his modern inclinations.\(^4\) Sophie Freud acknowledges the limits of her grandfather’s theories, but also recasts them in more current contextual theories of neuroscience and cognitive theory to situate him in a postmodern context.\(^4\) Carl Jung, a theorist with a long history of dialogue with Christian thought\(^4\) also undergoes reconsideration regardless of Jung’s reputation as the epitome of modernist thinking.\(^4\) Jung appears to contribute substantially to a postmodern perspective, particularly opposing the over-rational world by skirting pure scientific reasoning.\(^4\) Erikson, as a member of this tradition might stand equal re-visioning within a postmodern framework.\(^4\)

**Erikson’s Contributions**

As noted Erikson is often best known for his eight ages or stage theory that he constantly addresses in his publications. Erikson is clearly a unique theorist, combining his aesthetic interests as an artist with his scientific rationality to provide a kind of left hand (imaginative) and right hand (rational) view of human personality.\(^4\) Erikson himself emphasized the “art-and-science” of psychoanalysis.\(^4\) Contemporary psychologists often see Erikson as a helpful dialog partner to later expressions of psychoanalytic thinking such as object
relations or other transactional theories, providing both a bridge and a critique to these newer theories. One might debate whether Erikson’s own perspective changed over the years, from an early indebtedness to Freud to a later incorporation of Christian existential thought. Nevertheless, Erikson is seen as a major transitional figure in analytic thought, and his general “psychosocial” perspective makes his theory inviting.

There are some key tenets to Erikson’s thought that might inform any theory construction of the practicing self. Each tenet in and of itself provides a nuanced understanding of personality, understood variously as the ego, identity and self (distinct but overlapping terms). However, the interplay between the personal and the social reveals particular insight. Beyond actual stage theory, the interplays addressed include: 1) Erikson’s description of the interaction between epigenesis (as a biological and psychological drive theory) with ethos; 2) his appreciation of historical actuality in conversation with an existential self/social awareness; and 3) his acknowledgement of the place of interpersonal ritual and personal virtue (a key component to MacIntyre as well). Categorical combinations may appear arbitrary and overlapping to be sure, however, they do provide a framework for exploration.

**Epigenesis and Ethos**

Erikson might best be appreciated for his underlying psycho-social theory of epigenesis in relationship. Epigenesis, a theory borrowed from embryology, addresses the step-by-step growth of fetal organs. Erikson believed the concept could analogically describe all facets of growth of the human organism (including ego development). This growth includes crucial developmental crises that affect the overall maturation project. Ultimately, Erikson’s identity development theory contains not only biological and psychological tasks; it contains social interaction as well. Erikson distinguishes his theory from the traditional psychoanalytic theory, the individual’s inner “economics” of drive and defense, opting instead for an “ecology” that includes biological, psychic and communal forces that are mutually interdependent and developmental. Erikson states:

> We must find the nexus of social images and of organismic forces—and this not merely in the sense that her images and forces are, as the saying goes, “interrelated.” More than this: the mutual complementation of ethos and ego, of group identity and ego identity, puts a greater common potential at the disposal of both ego synthesis and social organization.

Erikson’s perspective fueled his stage theory, and also introduced key social “institutions” (motherhood, parenting, school, etc.) crucial to growth. However, true to Erikson’s left-handed thinking, theorists are left with a “chicken-and-egg” question, whether the ego exists as a result of conditioning by social forces or whether social institutions exist due to the needs of the individual? Obviously any answer proves incomplete; however, it becomes clear that Erikson saw his theory informing not only ego identity but also guiding also our understanding of social organization (at least the quality of said organizations).
ACTUALITY AND AWARENESS

Erikson’s interest in the psychosocial leads him to an expanding interaction with not only the immediate social world but also with the larger historical setting persons find themselves in. This view arises from Erikson’s central conviction that the ‘socio’ part of identity requires an awareness of the community that exists/influences the individual. As Erikson says, “No ego is an island to itself.”62 Erikson develops this historical consciousness first by developing the concept of actuality in response to psychoanalysis’ emphasis upon psychological “reality” or an interior emphasis on self-awareness opposed to broader social condition (or outerworld). Erikson writes,

Maybe our habitual reference to man’s environment as an “outer world” attest, more than any other single item, to the fact that the world of that intuitive and active participation which constitutes most of our waking life is still foreign territory to our theory. This term more than any other, represent the Cartesian strait jacket we have imposed on our model of man, who in some of our writings seems to be most himself when reflecting horizontally—like a supine baby or a reclining patient, or like Descartes himself, taking to his bed to cogitate on the extensive world.63

Erikson opposes such a view, even correcting some of Freud’s insights by positing that person’s “acting out” might have meaning beyond interior drives.64 Instead Erikson argues for a reality that includes a state of being actual, present, current, and immediate.

Actuality (as an awareness of actual external events) complements rather than invalidates self-awareness. Erikson continues,

Reality, then (to repeat this), is the world of phenomenal experience, perceived with a minimum of distortion and a maximum of customary validation agreed upon in a given state of technology and culture; while actuality is the world of participation, shared with other participants with a minimum of defensive maneuvering and a maximum of mutual activation.65

This complementary awareness drives Erikson to consider not only social actuality but also historical actuality as a primary locus for understanding personal self-knowledge and personal participation. Such awareness drew Erikson into his interest in psycho-history, such as Hitler, Luther, Gandhi, and Thomas Jefferson.66 In these investigations the material actions of “psycho-historical actualities” (historical facts) have immediate impact on current health.67

Yet in the midst of Erikson’s emphasis on historical forces and participation, he was also interested in the immediate experiencing self. Erik would speak the “I” in conversation with the “we.” Erikson writes,

I mean the sense of “I” that is the individual’s central awareness of being a sensory and thinking creature endowed with language, who can confront a self (composed, in fact, of a number of selves), and can construct a concept of an unconscious ego.68
Erikson saw this "I" endowed, he writes, "with a sense of being centered and active, whole and aware—and thus overcoming a feeling of being peripheral or inactivated, fragmented and obscured." In 1982, Erikson did not see the study of this existential, "personological" and linguistic "fact" of the "I" a prominent intellectual project, even though this overarching awareness created continuity for people experiencing multiple experiencing selves over time. However the theme is the very focal point of his most in-depth treatment of Jesus' Galilean sayings. Erikson asserted that this self-experiencing also included the capacity to enter into a deep relationship of mutual understanding, a "we," that included our awareness of significant others (the "thou" of a mother) and of our own interior "self" which Erikson describes as "almost any Inner Other."67 Erikson's existential view of the self, in conversation with his belief in "actual" participation, illuminates Erikson's interest in both a personal, social and historical "awareness" in describing the experiencing self.

RITUAL AND VIRTUE

Erikson's depiction of actuality (actual social/historical influences in people's lives) leads him to an understanding that personal identity is deeply conditioned by one's response to these same influences via rituals. Human beings are homo ludens as well as homo sapiens. Erikson defines ritual as a "certain kind of informal and yet prescribed interplay between persons who repeat it at meaningful intervals and in recurring contexts." Ritualization (beginning with the ritual interplay between mother and newborn) does more than describe the activities of interchange that meet needs of babe and mother. The everyday distinctive patterns between parent and child also frame the child's emergent understanding of the "Other, (indeed the primary Other according to Erikson) and the "I" (as distinguished as the Not Other). Ritualization, as concrete human activity, forms more than informs self-identity.

Erikson finds correspondence between everyday ritualizations and the grand rituals of the culture in which these activities take place (including the institutions that sustain persons on their journey through the life course). The correspondence of personal and cultural practice becomes particularly important as it ushers in a sense of the numinous for Erikson, which he calls "the aura of hallowed presence." Erikson continues, "the numinous assures us, ever again, of separateness transcended and yet also of distinctiveness confirmed, and thus of the very basis of a sense of 'I'." The concept of ritualization reveals a form of self that emerges from practice, not only in the engagement of child and mother, but in the engagement with other meaningful expressions of human action and interaction.

Erikson notes that rituals are "playful," yet they also embody serious responses born out of human interaction. However Erikson indicates it is a myth to assume that "play" is only a childhood mode. Erikson also acknowledges that these actions can be harmful, distinguishing between dynamic ritualizations and compulsive ritualisms that restrict human vision and action. Even grand ritual patterns run this danger. Erikson writes,

The greatest ritualizations can eventually become repetitive and the minutest daily rituals compulsive—whereupon devotion to revered images can become idolism, adherence to detailed laws can become legalism, and reliance on dogma can become dogmatism.
Overall, however, Erikson sees ritualization as an active process that not only situates relations between persons but also with society and the boundaries of transcendence.

Erikson's emphasis on activity (ritualization) is complemented by one additional theory, the role of virtues. Erikson ties virtues directly to the psychosocial stages, but their overall characteristics are particularly helpful for this investigation. ^80 Erikson was aware that there would be a tendency to associate his idea of virtue with genetic predisposition (character "traits") and tries meticulously to avoid this misunderstanding while also acknowledging virtues remain a "natural" process. Erikson's basic definition of virtue would be adaptive strength, the ability to negotiate and resolve the key turning points (crises) along the life cycle. Yet adaptive strength remains more than merely covert survival theory (following Freud or Darwin), and resists placing humanity at the center of all things. ^81 Virtues are susceptible to aberration, but they remain necessary to Erikson's understanding of personhood. He writes,

The basic virtues enumerated here have their illusory side which can develop into grand delusions of vain virtuosity, and lead to specific rages of disillusionment. Yet each is indispensable, and each is necessary for the ensemble which is man at his most balanced; while all in moment of humor and wisdom, in prayer, meditation, and self-analysis, can be charitably transcended. ^82

These virtues, like ritualizations, are vitally connected to the person's life cycle and social relationships. ^83 The virtues speak to both inward capacity (strength, though an ineffable quality for Erikson for all his precision with other concepts) and interpersonal mutuality. ^84

Erikson's concepts are helpful in a construal of the practicing self that takes seriously both the "outer-world" and the "inner-world" of identity. There does seem to be resonance with a number of theorists on the notion of practice as a social (ritual) as well as personal strategic activity (ritualizations), a concept that dialogs with constructive postmodern deliberations about the nature of the self. Collectively these theories interweave to form a mosaic of personality that emerges through practice.

**PERSONALITY AND PRACTICE**

Keeping in mind the four theoretical streams reviewed one might begin to construct or describe a personality theory under the rubric of practice, both as a hermeneutic for individual and social behavior. The practicing self begins in biological actions that are embedded within a social matrix much like Bell's larger ritual actions always occur in a matrix of social practices. As the body grows and adapts (following Erikson's notions of epigenesis) the child also interacts with surrounding sources of care and influence. Human "personality" emerges in patterned interactions or micro-practices (ritualization for Erikson) reveal coherent and consistent exchanges between child and care-giver/environment. These smaller ritual practices resemble broader rituals embedded in the fabric of society. Meaning is bestowed in both circumstances as the ritual micro-practices situate themselves and personal responses encourage a sense of mastery (empowerment) and meaning.

If Erikson is correct, identity (ego) emerges both as a differentiation between a personal awareness of "self" and external "others" (caregivers) and between self and "inner-other"
(representations of caregivers and child) by means of these actual rituals/practices. Human acting (practice) and human identity intertwine, much like human empowerment and social identity intertwine in social ritual. "I" do not possess practices, "I" am also constituted as a result of practices that occur in a social/relational environ. Human practice and human identity mutually intertwine within an interpersonal web of relationships. The practices constitute an "I" alongside a "We" (if Erikson is accurate) as complex relations (interpersonal and intrapersonal 'grammar') expands over the life course.

The emergence of the practicing self always occurs in conversation with the historical/cultural circumstance, with the existential awareness of who "I" am in relation to "we," and with an anticipation of future growth since the epigenetic process does not stop. These temporal stages reveal the ongoing story of the "my" life in narrative fashion. Negotiating between these three temporal influences (past, present and future) requires adaptive strength or "virtue" to insure internal impetus in the face of contextual forces. In this framework of personhood, virtue may serve both MacIntyre's and Erikson's definitions of authenticity, empowerment, as well as adaptive strength. Virtue enables the practicing self to achieve a quality of development (the "goods") necessary to be authentic. Virtue allows one to "seek the good within the practice" as MacIntyre alludes, by seeking the good (adaptation) of emerging personality in the face of contextual forces. The concept of virtue emerges as an important bridging category, since personal agency and contextual participation become inter-joined via enactment. One can acknowledge that the quality of the self's "response" (virtue) to contextual forces includes interior consideration or agency which mitigates against social construction as purely social manipulation.

Existentially "I" emerge from the practices (ritualizations) embedded in society. However, "I" become self-aware and aware of the "other" through interpersonal, intrapersonal, and transversal practices all resident in life. Ultimately "I" become aware how one's life must conform to some intuited grammar construed through the various practices, and can conceive of my own life as a given practice (operating in society as a matrix of rituals as well). This nuanced concept of personhood acknowledges that human response must always be authentic to personal practice as well as social/historical influence. Such a view helps to differentiate this approach from a strict behaviorism. It also opens the door to therapeutic concerns as counselors and ministers attend to the authenticity of personal practice.

Education and counseling the practicing self would take into consideration the "actuality" (Erikson) or social fabric (MacIntyre), as well as the psychological state of the person. Counseling questions might actually attend to MacIntyre's emphasis on the person's sense of coherence and the person constitutes their sense of intrinsic worth. Attending to this type of "grammar" reveals the range of practices necessary to pursue wholeness. The language of "grammar" might actually guide the counselor's selection of appropriate therapeutic methods. This hermeneutic might be more fruitful than other strategies that acknowledge the range of therapeutic practices, but do little to guide counselors beyond advocating for "responsible eclecticism." Therapy itself might be seen as a ritual action but also one that occurs in a myriad of practices that contribute to health.

Beyond counseling strategies, MacIntyre's typology, in conversation with Schrag, might provide a fruitful postmodern personality theory. For instance, considering the practicing
self as a coherent activity raises questions concerning the forces that hold personhood together with some material connectedness. One might begin with Schrag’s treatment in how the practicing self’s actions cohere over time (through narrative), space (embodied action) and relationship (character). Personal development is not merely a series of stages; instead development continues with an ever increasing complexity of the self, often based on the number of rituals and emergent virtues that are always in conversation. This ongoing complexity may graciously mirror the complex relations of the triune God, relations whose transversal complexity far exceeds human complexity, expressed in humans as a form of “gift.” This need not imply a natural continuity between divinity and humanity, as Schrag notes, the sheer range of complex relationships in the transversal/triune God creates a different sense of transcendence but one perhaps more radical than previously imagined. However, the potential complexity resident in this view of human personhood does suggest that the “image and likeness” of the triune God, a gift to humanity, might reveal itself in the myriad practices that bring persons and communities together in specific ways. Certainly particular social “rituals” (liturgy) might then transform via the Spirit of God in rewriting the “grammar” of one’s life in dramatic fashion. Yet this transformative process (and the dramatic “events” resident within them) would not be alien to those practices that do influence/constitute the self. Transformation of persons involves the transformation of the social/ritual matrix that form and inform personal practices. No matter how immediate and dramatic transformative moments might be, ultimately persons would need to be adopted into communities where more redemptive practices form and inform their own sense of personhood via myriad practices resident in the community and emergent in themselves.

**Conclusion**

As originally noted, Maddox’s notion of Responsible grace (or John Cobb’s *Grace and Responsibility*) portrays Wesley’s proclivity to explain human transformation as a response to the prevenient grace of God in its various expressions. The idea of practice tries to take such activity seriously by noting this responsive “participation” becomes constitutive of our creatureliness or at least a significant aspect of our humanity. This view of selfhood is somewhat similar to James Fowler’s attempt to make faith a human universal, a style of knowing and valuing that results in meaning-making. If Fowler’s notion of faith is important, though primarily as a cognitive exercise (open to the same critique Erikson gives psychoanalytic preoccupation with a cognitive view of reality), then “practice” may be a complementary, or perhaps a more satisfactory, notion of selfhood.

However, it may be that Erikson’s cautionary approach proves equally helpful since theorizing from human experience is always a perilous task. Remarking on a meeting he once held with Jean Piaget, Erikson reflects the differences between empiricism and clinical method. He then notes the tenuousness of his own clinical approach. Erikson writes,

Much less cautious [than empiricists], we speak with relative ease of the core of man’s personality and of stages in its development. But then, our subjects want to become whole; and the clinician must have some theories and methods which offer the patient a whole world to be whole in. Mistaking our patients’
gratitude for verification, we are sometimes sure that we could explain or even
guide mankind if it would only consent to be our collective patient.  

The desire to help people become "whole," in a theological sense to be fully participatory
with God, may also influence this depiction. This theory of personhood certainly needs to
be challenged for its potential theoretical limitations, as well as its experiential "gaps."
Hopefully, however, this new view of personhood provides a departing point for a fresh
investigation of personality and theology.  

The idea of "being" woven into the theological construal of creation is the logic of
practice. This view of a "practiced" personality theory corresponds to a theological
anthropology of responsible grace, where the very "practice" of response corresponds to
the fabric of human personhood (creative grace) as well as divine influence (preventive
grace). Identity and responsive action are intertwined in the constitution of our humanity
as well as in the salvation of our personhood. This definition of personhood might also
support the idea that salvation is not just the restoration of the image of God (in the
primitive sense of the first Adam) but a continuation of the initial project, thesis, woven in
the fabric of our being.  

NOTES
1. Originally presented at the annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Psychology and
2. Roger F. Hurding. The Tree of Healing: Psychological and Biblical Foundations for Counseling
and Pastoral Care (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 56; Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman,
Modern Psycho-Therapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press,
1991), 65, 148. The author acknowledges that the descriptions offered in this first paragraph are
based on broad generalizations of major theoretical families. These generalizations deserve greater
nuance, yet the assertions are consistent with other secondary reviews and hopefully acceptable to
some degree for the sake of this presentation.
the Theology of Culture (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 61-93; Carl Rogers, "The Place of the
Individual" in On Becoming a Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 384-401 Again, the intro-
duction relies on generalization. Rogers acknowledges social forces as part of his central values on
certain occasions, particularly in the face of rival psychological paradigms like behaviorism. He elab-
orates that he values, "(1) Man as a process of becoming; as a process of achieving worth and dignity
through the development of his potentialities; (2) the individual human being as a self-actualizing
process, moving on to more challenging and enriching experiences; (3) the process by which the
individual creatively adapts to an ever-new and changing world; (4) the process by which knowl-
dge transcends itself, as for example the theory of relativity transcended Newtonian physics, itself
to be transcended in some future day by new perceptions" (395-96). Rogers' explanation concern-
ing the relationship between the ever-changing world and the actualizing individual are not always
clear. nor is his identification of the source of self-actualization as a prescribed moral good
(Browning, 69).
(Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing 1989); Duane P. Schultz and Sydney Ellen Schultz,
Theories of Personality, 7th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 4-5; Calvin O. Schrag,
The Self After Postmodernity New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 3; Defining "self" or "per-
personality" has been difficult even before the postmodern turn, yet the idea seems to stem as far back as Aristotle's dictum "I think, therefore I am" (Schrag, 3); Many personality texts almost accept personality as a "given" beginning with the reader's self awareness (Schultz & Schultz, 4-5). Perhaps Maddox's definition may suffice for the moment. "Personality is a stable set of tendencies and characteristics that determine those commonalities and difference in people's psychological behavior (thoughts, feelings, and actions) that have continuity in time and that may not be easily understood as the sole result of the social and biological pressures of the moment" (8).


8. MacIntyre, 187 The author acknowledges his indebtedness to Henry W. Spaulding II for pointing out this definition of practice. Dr. Spaulding, a friend and colleague, has been an invaluable resource for this work.

9. Ibid.

10. MacIntyre, 191.

11. Ibid.

12. Carol Markstrom, Rachel C. Berman, Vicki Sabino and Bonnie Turner, "The Ego Virtue of Fidelity as a Psychosocial Rite of Passage in the Transition from Adolescence to Adulthood," Child and Youth Care Forum, 27, no. 5 (October 1998), 337-54. This article explores how traditional rites have been translated into psychosocial stages.


14. Ibid.

15. Bell, Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions, 82; Catherine Bell, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); 69-74. Bell acknowledges the tension between identifying ritual as a particular symbolic action while maintaining continuity with the communicative nature of all activity (Ritual Theory, 72-73). Bell resists imposing categories on what is or what is not ritual, instead allowing a phenomenological approach where ritual categories emerge from the practice (Ritual Theory, 74).

16. Ibid., 23-72.

17. Ibid., 89.

18. Ibid., 171.


20. Ibid., 74. Bell defines kinesthesia as, "the sensations experienced by the body in movement." Bell defines synesthesia as, "the evocation of a total, unified, and overwhelming sensory experience."


22. Ibid., 116. Bell defines ritual mastery as the ability to reconstruct shared schemes from culture (positively or negatively), deploy these new schemes into a ritualized formula and then impress them upon persons to address a variety of cultural circumstance.

23. Ibid., 110.

25. Schrag, 4 ff.
26. Schrag, 17
28. Schrag, 34.
29. Schrag, 37
30. Schrag, 39.
31. Schrag, 42.
32. Schrag, 47-48.
33. Schrag, 61.
34. Schrag, 71.
35. Schrag, 78.
36. Schrag, 87
37. Schrag, 100.
38. Schrag, 108.
39. Schrag, 111
40. Schrag, 129.
42. Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: A Review* (New York: W W Norton 1982). Erikson’s book was originally only one of two introductory chapters (the other by Anna Freud) written for a three-volume study of the course of life published by the National Institute of Mental Health. This is just one indicator of the prevalence of Erikson’s contribution to life-span/life-cycle theory.
and Freud himself are entrenched in the dominant paradigms and worldviews of the modern era."

47. Sophie Freud, "The Baby and the Bathwater: Some thoughts on Freud as a Postmodernist," Families in Society 79:5 (Sept/Oct. 1998), 455-64. Sophie Freud stresses that, while some of the Freud's theories may be discarded, the psychoanalytic tradition contributed to the postmodern notions of the multiplicity of the human mind and the importance of narrative (the "talking cure") for reconstructing life experience.


51. Richard Kearney The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 2-20. Neatly fitting these analysts into postmodern categories, however, is not fully necessary from a postmodern perspective. Postmodern theorists are not obligated to jettison all of modernity as enlightenment colleagues did of the pre-modern period. In a postmodern world, "strands" of postmodernity, modernity, and premodern narratives carry validity. Kearney notes "that one of the main traits of postmodernism is a suspicion of historical chronology," resulting in a preference for diverse styles rather than progressive movements so that "history as contingency becomes history as collage" (p.20). The result is that a modernist categorization ("post" modern "following" the modern movement) may be problematic in attempting to locate whether any theological or philosophical movement is "pre" versus "post" modern.


56. Browning, 207-09.

57. It might be noted that the pairing of these tenets may seem odd in their arrangement. The intent is to bring existing concepts into conversation in such a way to yield new insight, hopefully this will be accomplished during the process.


59. Ibid., 21.


63. Erik H. Erikson, Insight and Responsibility: Lectures on the Ethical Implications of Psychoanalytic
64. Erikson, Insight and Responsibility, 168-71.
65. Ibid., 164-65.
66. Erik H. Erikson, “The Legend of Hitler’s Childhood,” in Childhood and Society (New York: W W Norton, 1950), 284-315; Young Man Luther: Study of Psychoanalysis and History (New York: W W Norton, 1958, 1962); Gandhi’s Truth: On the Origins of Miliitant Non-Violence (New York: W W Norton, 1969); Dimensions of a New Identity: The 1973 Jefferson Lectures in the Humanities (New York: W W Norton 1974); Life History and the Historical Moment: Diverse Perspectives. See also Donald Capps, Walter H. Capps, M. Gerald Bradford, eds. Encounter with Erikson: Historical Interpretations and Religious Bibliography (Santa Barbara, CA: Scholars Press, 1977); Robert Jay Lifton “Entering History: Erik Erikson’s New Psychological Landscape” Ideas and Identities 99-114; Neil J. Smelser, “Erik Erikson as a Social Scientist,” Ideas and Identities, 49-57 Wright, 29-30. Erikson’s historical method is not without critique, often by church historians like Roland Bainton, or theologian George A. Lindbeck. However, the criticisms often come with a grudging acceptance of Erikson’s portrayals having a ring of truth (see Wright). The method may be best summarized Lifton. “There was first the clear principle of individual experience being associated with something much larger, indeed with the historical process itself. That principle informed Erik’s entire essay I “The Problem of Ego Identity” in Childhood and Societal. The second point was the sensitive dialectic of sameness and change. If you define identity as only inner sameness and continuity you are missing half of it. The other half is the involvement of the self with some process of change, flux, newness. And I found Erik’s work to be constantly immersed in precisely that dialectic” (100-101).
69. Ibid., 86.
72. Erikson, Galilean Sayings, Ideas and Identities, 287
74. Erikson, Life Cycle Completed, 43.
75. Ibid., 44-45. It is at this point that Erikson also takes issue with the concept “object relations,” claiming the term can lead to misunderstandings. Erikson writes, “The most passionately loved person is called an ‘object,’ and this misnomer takes the word object away from the world of factual things; the world in which the child must also invest uniquely important emotional as well as cognitive interests” (44-45).
76. Erikson, Life Cycle Completed, 45.
77. Ibid.
78. Erikson, Toys and Reasons, 90.
79. Erikson, Galilean Sayings, 296, see also The Life Cycle Completed, 46. Erikson defines ritualisms as ritual-like behavior patterns marked by stereotyped repetition and illusory pretenses that obliterate the integrative value of communal organization.”
80. Friedman, 361.
82. Erikson, Insight and Responsibility, 149-50.
83. Wright, 44.
84. Browning, 206.
85. Jones and Butman, 379-97
86. Schrag, 133.