In this chapter we will develop our analysis of intimacy as an orientation emphasizing certain modes of relationship. Our inquiry will take us on an exploratory journey into our own experience, pointing out a cluster of phenomena and values probably familiar to all of us but not typically given much emphasis in cultures with a strong integrity orientation. For readers from such integrity-dominant cultures (as perhaps most readers of a book in English today are likely to be), this chapter may delineate another profile of themselves as human beings. It is as if Figure 5, the gestalt picture in chapter 1, were not of two different women but of two different images of the same person, both real, but only one of which has been given much philosophical attention up to now.

What can we say about intimacy in human life? When people hear the word “intimacy,” they may first think of lingerie, French perfume, and sex manuals. To develop any insight into this important dimension of ourselves, however, it is necessary to resist any reduction of intimacy to mere sexual intimacy. We do use the word, after all, in a variety of other ways. We commonly speak, for example, of someone’s intimate knowledge of tax laws, or of someone’s being intimate to a secret, or even of the intimate relation between inflation and unemployment. In fact, the word might seem to assume so many diverse senses that it lacks any core meaning at all. It is possible, however, to sift out a set of characteristics, or at least a set of family resemblances, in the various uses of the term,
entitling us to use the word in its multiple contexts. That is the project of this chapter: to dig into the concept and its associated phenomena until we unearth its deeper structure.

As noted in chapter 1, the Latin etymology of the term conjures up the following image: intimacy is making known (intimâre) to a close friend (intimus or intima) what is innermost (intimus). In other words: intimacy is most essentially a sharing of innermost qualities. In nonhuman relations, the inseparability derives from the inherent qualities of the things themselves. We speak of the intimate relation between flora and fauna in a particular ecosystem, for example, or between matter and energy in the context of particle physics. In such cases, we cannot fully understand one side of the pair without considering the other. Although we can conceptually isolate the two through abstraction, they are really intertwined: we cannot divorce what one is by nature from what the other is by nature.

In thinking of intimacy, people usually have in mind intimacy among persons, not things. Here is a significant difference in the way intimacy works. Among nonhuman things, intimacy derives from how things are and must be; but among humans, intimacy is achieved. Interpersonal intimacy requires opening up the innermost—one’s thoughts, feelings, and motives—in order to share them with the other. There is intimacy between lovers, between parent and child, between master and apprentice, between friends. When I know someone intimately, I know what makes that person tick. I know the person from the inside, sharing that person’s psychological space. When my desire for a closer relationship is denied, I feel shut out: the other person will not let me in. When the other person does reciprocate, however, we may eventually achieve a level of accord wherein each of us is immediately aware of the other’s inner dynamics.

In an intimate context people feel free to say anything, to share their inner secrets. Trust permeates the conversation. This interchange may be an utterly free flow of conversation because the conversants already know each other intimately and there is no need (indeed no possibility) of censuring or hiding what is innermost. Paradoxically, along with this free flow of conversation, the more profound the interpersonal intimacy, the more that can be left unsaid. The need to be explicit, the effort to explain, the urge to fill in the silence—all become muted in ever deepening levels of intimation where the slightest gesture or facial expression may express more than enough.

Moreover, intimates do not have to think about each other explicitly in discursive or step-by-step analyses. As noted in one of the vignettes
from chapter 1, a parent may deeply understand the child without being able to specify exactly how this understanding comes about. The intimate knowledge of another person is based not on detached observation and logic, but on years of sharing and caring. Intimate knowledge of the other person comes from empathy, what the Germans call *Einfühlung*, literally an entrance into the other person’s feelings.

Insofar as intimacy among human beings involves choice, the intimate bond depends on both parties’ continued consent and commitment. Unlike the intimate connections between things such as matter and energy or flora and fauna, human intimacy can always be broken: by death, by circumstance, by choice. The shattering of intimacy can contribute to the agony of a divorce, for example. The time and effort invested in the relationship were originally rewarded with the positive benefits of intimation: the most efficient, direct, and effortless form of human communication. Whenever the trust grounding intimacy erodes, however, the intimations can become vicious and stinging. Physical proximity becomes painful as each utterance, each gesture, each act suggests the underlying hostility in the alienated couple. The tension in a degenerating relationship is devastating, not because communication has broken down, but because it continues to be so good that cruelty functions at an unbearable level. As the idiom says, the two people “know how to push each other’s buttons.” Only when the formal bonds are completely severed, however, can the former intimates begin to fathom their loss. It will take years for them to form new relationships enjoying the previous levels of intimacy. In the interim, they must constantly go through the effort of having to explain themselves to nonintimates while puzzling through what their new partners might really mean.

Thus far we have considered the intimacy between two things and the intimacy between two people. What about the intimacy between a person and a nonperson? An intimate diary, for example, contains private details about oneself ordinarily shared only with intimates. An intimate café is one whose coziness lends itself to private, personal conversation. We might say a diary is an intimacy with oneself, the diary assuming the status of an imagined intimate, sometimes even personified in phrases like “Dear Diary.” The café, by contrast, is not itself intimate but a locus supporting intimacy among its patrons. Yet not all forms of intimacy between persons and nonpersons are construed in these two ways. Consider how a chess master has an intimate grasp of chess openings, or a mathematician of non-Euclidean geometries, or a historian of medieval military
history. What makes the knowledge of a theory or field intimate? Yes, the
person must command the material: intimate knowledge is always exten-
sive. Just as important, however, it is also intensive: the person displays a
personal involvement with, even a fondness or ardor for, the ideas. The
subject matter is not merely what the person understands; it is also part
of what the person is. In other words: when a person knows a subject inti-
mately, it becomes part of that person’s way of perceiving and acting in
the world. In maneuvering to get a seat on a crowded train, the chess
master may see her own actions as a gambit, the mathematician as a topo-
logical problem, the military historian as a campaign. Precisely because
they see the world through their consuming interests, everyday activities
deepen their insight into their specialty. In short: in the intimate knowl-
edge of concepts, the intimacy is imparted by one’s personal involvement
with the subject.

Similar characteristics apply to intimately knowing a physical, rather
than conceptual, object. Sculptors know their chisels intimately; cabinet-
makers know their planes. When a master artist is at work, the tools seem
to function as expressions of the hands. When a person knows a tool’s use
intimately, technique becomes second nature—that is, it becomes part of
the person’s own nature, part of her or his personal style. To an art his-
torian, the artist’s brushwork is as distinctive as a fingerprint. Indeed, the
brushwork is ultimately a gesture, a physical intimation of the artist’s
inner self.

This brings us back to the issue of openness. As we have seen, in the
case of intimate relationships among nonhuman entities the intimacy is a
given; it derives from the character of the things themselves. In interper-
sonal relationships, by contrast, both persons must open themselves to in-
timacy; intimacy for them is an achievement. What, then, can we say
about the human/nonhuman relationship? How does a person open one-
self to an intimate relationship with a thing? Let us analyze an example:

My neighbor smiled broadly as he watched me split firewood for
the first time. The job was getting done, but it was taking its toll
on my body. My arms were exhausted after splitting just a few
logs. Each blow was a great effort, ending in a shock as I
smashed the ax through the wood into the stump. Finally, I
looked at my friend with chagrin, “I’m not doing it right, am I?”
He replied, “Let the ax do the work, not your shoulders.” He
then gave me some tips on stance, on reading the checks in the
wood, and on executing the swing. The most important lesson was that I had to rear back and just start the ax on its way, letting the axhead slice right through the log. My arms and shoulders no longer pushed the ax through its flight; they just gave it an initial impetus and guided its arc. In effect, I had to relinquish my self-conscious attempt to slash the wood; I had to learn to yield to the design of the ax and the character of the log.

Even this primitive relationship between a person and a thing exemplifies the need for one to be open to the nature of the tool and its object, allowing them to become intimately connected with one’s intention. Just as I move my fingers across a typewriter without any self-conscious effort, I had to let the ax become, as it were, an extension of my body without any intruding concepts or emotions. Like all impersonal entities, the ax, just by being the ax, was ready for me to know it intimately in my log splitting. I, on the contrary, had to let myself accept the ax’s character. I had to fathom and appreciate its inner structure—its long handle, the weight and design of its head, and so on—so that its essential character could merge with my inner intent. I also had to be open to the log’s internal structure: where it would allow, and where it would resist, being split. In short: whether relating to another person or to a thing, a human being must choose to make oneself available to intimate relations. We humans are not innately intimate: intimacy is an accomplishment.

Because human beings must choose whether to engage in intimacy, we prefer to choose with whom we form an intimate relationship. We resent any coercion. A waitress is entitled to feel insulted when a male customer calls her “honey.” The term implies an intimacy that is not there and, at least on the woman’s part, not desired. In fact, to deny a person the privilege to choose one’s intimates is to deny that person’s humanity. Such sexism, racism, or classism, for example, reifies the person in the sense that it treats a human being like a thing inherently self-disclosed and accessible to any human who wants to be in some kind of intimate relation with it. By saying she is not a sex object, the waitress affirms she is not a sexual tool, a thing by nature open to the man’s intimate use.

Precisely because they risk privacy, intimate relations can also, paradoxically, be a means of preserving privacy. In times of anguish, for instance, I may desperately need another person’s comfort, but it is hard to express my feelings nakedly, publicly, and in detail. We refer to the anxiety and embarrassment of “baring one’s soul” to another person. How consoling
it is to have someone who already knows me so intimately that I do not have to say anything to be explicitly understood. Through my intimates, I share my inner life without having to disclose it publicly. Intimate communication (“intimation”) is, in fact, an encoded expressiveness. It opens a person in such a way that only intimates can decipher the message. A person’s innermost world, like all secrets, aches to be expressed, but it might be too revealing, too risky, to do so in a public manner. Once made public, a person’s inner self may be unscrupulously used by others as objects for their own benefit or amusement. The desire to share, therefore, is outweighed only by the fear of being violated. Through intimations to those they trust, however, people can reap the benefits of self-disclosure while minimizing the risk of vulnerability: we share our inner life while maintaining some degree of privacy with respect to those outside the intimate circle, those who do not know how to read the intimations.

Now oriented to some of the experiences and ideas relevant to studying intimacy, let us examine its characteristics in a more systematic manner. In discussing such relations we have already, directly or indirectly, referred to the following:

1. Intimacy is objective, but personal rather than public.
2. In an intimate relation, the self and other belong together in a way that does not sharply distinguish the two.
3. Intimate knowledge has an affective dimension.
4. Intimacy is somatic as well as psychological.
5. The ground of intimacy is not generally self-conscious, reflective, or self-illuminating.

Let us consider each of these central features separately.

**INTIMACY AS PERSONAL**

We have already noted that intimacy makes known the innermost self. Through the indirect suggestiveness of intimation, people express themselves to another without exposure to everyone. This implies that a person within an intimate locus learns in a manner quite different from one who acquires publicly available information. Most forms of knowledge
are public insofar as their grounds are accessible to any interested party or at least anyone with the appropriate equipment. In claiming to know something, I can generally support my assertion by giving evidence that others can investigate for themselves. If I say, for example, that it is now three o’clock, I can give my reasons for saying so: both my watch and the clock on the wall back up my claim. A skeptic could check those sources and others like it (calling a time-of-day service on the telephone, for instance) to verify the reliability of my statement. This stress on public verification is a sign of modernity. The dominant modern Western orientation tends to understand truth as something that anyone can certify through her or his own experience, rather than, say, what a particular book or specially designated person might assert. The hallucinatory accusation by some person in authority is no longer an acceptable reason for burning someone at the stake as a witch. The modern West, at least ideally, has made the commonality of human experience its authority and public verifiability its method. This kind of modernism has tried to replace ignorance, superstition, and inquisition with reason, observation, and justice.

Still, we should not go so far as to reject outright all other varieties of knowing. I know, for instance, what I am now thinking and, usually, what I am now feeling (even though there may be cases in which it is difficult to explain myself adequately). It would be foolish, even insane, to deny this simple fact. Yet no known instrument can verify this inner awareness. I cannot project the image of a cross-section of my thoughts and publicly demonstrate that indeed I was thinking about how much I would like a hot fudge sundae. If you ask me to prove empirically what I was thinking about, I cannot. Despite the lack of public verification, however, I am still justifiably confident I know what I am thinking as I think it. Indeed, as any Cartesian would point out, even if I doubted that belief I would still know I was doubting it. Thus we know a great deal about our inner states. And although this knowledge is generally not publicly verifiable, it still deserves to be considered knowledge insofar as it is a legitimate basis for making claims about certain aspects of reality.

Proceeding to a more intricate example, consider the everyday situation in which two people are said to know each other’s thoughts. Spouses are often so intimately linked that each knows what the other is thinking without having to utter a word. Even without resorting to telepathy, the couple can learn to read subtle external signs suggestive of inner
phenomena. This is hardly public verification in any empirical sense. My wife may know exactly what feeling or thought accompanies my facial expression. But to someone outside my intimate circle, the same expression may be as puzzling as a map without a legend. Such an expression is communication through intimation, the encoded language which allows an intimate into my private domain without making that realm public.

The theories of knowledge currently dominant in Anglo-American philosophy tend to treat the nonpublic as nonobjective. Yet common sense can lead in a different direction. We frequently recognize expert knowledge that is not publicly verifiable, especially in fields having a marked aesthetic and stylistic dimension. In such sporting events as gymnastics, figure skating, surfing, and diving, for example, the score for the degree-of-difficulty of a performance is usually a publicly verifiable judgment based on the empirically observable sequence of movements. Given a detailed rulebook and a videotape of the performance, even a novice to the field should be able to determine such a score. For the quantitative evaluation of the style or form for the same performance, however, the spectators and performers defer to the judges’ intimate knowledge. Still, we do not consider the evaluation of style to be merely a matter of subjective taste. In the event of a great discrepancy among the judges’ decisions, we often suspect that political motivations have compromised objectivity. Normally we expect less than 5 percent deviation in the judges’ scores—more than that and we suspect dishonesty. But such dishonesty, we should note, applies only to presumably objective judgments, not to subjective opinions.

We can distinguish this form of expert knowledge from the subjective expertise displayed by, say, a film critic. With film critics, we expect disagreement. Their judgment may include a factor as fickle as whether the critic liked the movie’s theme, for example. Such an evaluation is inherently more subjective than that of a judge scoring a figure skating performance. In fact, if we read the opposing reviews of two critics, we feel justified in seeing the film and making our own judgment. This example shows that although we grant some expertise to the film critics, we still feel there is room for our own (subjective) judgment. On the other extreme, when a gymnastic judge determines whether the player stepped out of bounds during a free exercise performance, the basis of this decision is public, not private. If the television camera happens to have been properly placed, the videotape will conclusively prove the official’s judg-
ment right or wrong. This contrasts with the judge’s rating the figure skater’s form: no publicly accessible videotape can prove the performance was a 5.8 rather than a 5.7, for example. Unlike the film critic’s evaluation, the gymnastic judge’s ruling about the endline and the evaluation of form are both objective—we expect agreement to some degree. Yet in one case the judgment is verifiable publicly by anyone; in the other, only another expert is qualified to judge.

My third case exemplifies a complex of intimate and empirical knowledge. Most physicians would insist that diagnosis is as much an art as a science. In saying this, they mean they cannot always arrive at an accurate diagnosis simply by feeding a list of symptoms into a computer. There is more involved than just the empirically available facts. To diagnose a case, the physician must evaluate the scientific data in light of how the patient acts and speaks. (Is the patient a hypochondriac who exaggerates symptoms? A stoic who strives to ignore pain? A self-appointed expert who tries to make the symptoms fit the diagnosis? A likely candidate for a psychogenic disorder?) In traditional practice, physicians generally knew a great deal about their patients: their family situations, personalities, and habits. In other words: they were able to make medical judgments drawing on their intimate knowledge of the patient as well as the empirical knowledge gained from lab reports. It is significant that today, when our technical diagnostic devices are most sophisticated, we find a revival of the family practice system. The motive may be primarily an attempt at controlling costs, but it also suggests that physicians are more than technicians. The family physician consciously depends on forms of knowledge beyond those publicly verifiable in the simplistic scientific sense.

Let us sum up our discussion of intimacy’s personal character. In everyday life, people often justifiably trust intimate forms of knowing that cannot be publicly verified but are still, in a significant sense, objective. It is important to distinguish, therefore, between two species of objectivity. The objectivity of publicly verifiable knowledge is based on empirical evidence and logic—that is, on what is immediately available to anyone (or at least anyone who has the necessary instruments and knows how to use them). Intimate knowledge’s objectivity, by contrast, is accessible only to those within the appropriate intimate locus, those who have achieved their expert knowledge through years of practical experience. Trust in intimate knowledge’s objectivity, like that in positivistic knowledge’s objectivity, relies on an assumption of universality, but the universality has a
somewhat different formulation. That is: if we believe that any reasonable person *who spent thirty years in gymnastics* would come to the same evaluation as the gymnastic judges, then we believe their judgment is objective, though not publicly so. The universality assumption of positivism differs only in omitting the italicized phrase, making the objectivity “public” rather than “expert.” The common core of the objectivity claim in both public and nonpublic knowledge, however, is in their common phrase “any reasonable person.” If I am making a merely subjective claim, I am not assuming possible agreement from every reasonable person. In a subjective judgment, reasonable people are expected to disagree; in an objective judgment, however, the expectation is that reasonable people either agree or at least can follow a procedure so that they will eventually agree. Similarly, we would be justified in thinking that if we spent decades studying, listening to, and performing Beethoven’s sonatas, we could—like other experts—discern a difference in quality among them. Indeed, like Aunt Bessie, we could probably know what Uncle Herman was thinking if we too had lived with, and loved, the old codger for forty years. There is an objective quality to her knowledge.

**INTIMACY AS “BELONGING-WITH”**

Intimacy is not merely personal, but personal in a special way. When in the locus of intimacy, one feels he or she *belongs* there. Among those persons, places, and things with which I am in intimate relation, I am comfortable, I feel at home and at peace. Outside the locus of intimacy, I sometimes sense I do not belong. I can sometimes be amidst my surroundings without feeling part of them, thinking of myself as something separate that has entered, and been forced to relate to, an alien environment. Even in my contacts with other people, I can distinguish the sense of “I-you” or “I-Thou” from the sense of “we.” This point can be further clarified through the philosophical distinction between external and internal relations.

In an external relation, the relatents (the things in relation to each other) exist independently. As the link between these otherwise separate entities, the relationship \( R \) is in effect something added to the individuality of the things \( a \) and \( b \). See Figure 8. In an internal relation, by contrast, it is part of the essential nature of the relatents that they are connected as they are; they are interdependent, not independent, entities.