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The Precarious Self

Abstract: At any given moment, a person is defined by a set of resources that enable him to act and intervene in his own fate, to take control of his future, and to formulate his goals. His resources and his goals in turn define a horizon of affordances – possible actions that have become salient and impinge on his awareness as choices he can meaningfully make at that moment. Deploying this theoretical starting point, this article focuses on the saga about the Norwegian king Sverrir Sigurðarson and analyses the self's endless ability to perceive promising possibilities and available affordances. The close reading of *Sverris saga* reveals how king Sverrir has an unusual capacity for perceiving possibilities, how he successfully exploits and navigates all the options available to him, no matter how remote his chances are, but how at the end of his reign he is unable to escape the consequences of the precarious self.

Keywords: affordances, affordance pretence, agent system, agent pretence, cognition, cognitive capacities, conceptual integration, blending, dreams, evolutionary psychology, *kostir*, or options, narrative structure, play, placeholder self, possibility space

In the winter of 1199, King Sverrir held parliament in Nidaros, making a case to the *þingmen* – all farmers – for building ships. His rival Nikulás Árnason, bishop of Oslo, had taken the town and castle the previous year, destroyed or taken all of Sverrir's ships in his absence, and crowned a child, claimed to be the son of the previous king. The bishop's rebel army – the Baglar – burned Bergen to the ground that summer, collected taxes, and raised conscripts in most of the southern and western parts of the country in the autumn, and were now raiding in the north, murdering the king's officials and supporters. According to the saga, Sverrir addresses the parliament with these words:

“Þess er vís ván,” sagði hann, “þegar er várar at Baglar munu stefna hingat í fiðrðinn, ok munu þeir gera yðr mikinn ófagnað, því at þessi flokkur rænir yðr jafnan. En vér Birkibeinar erum nú skiplausir, sem þér vituð, ok ekki vel við látnir at verja fé yðart eða fjör. Megum vér ekki svá skjótt renna um landit it efra sem þeir róá it ytra. En nú þó at yðr þykki þetta vera nokkurr kostnaðr þá man hitt meira félátit er Baglar gera yðr.”

(*Sverris saga* 2007, 235)

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["We can expect with certainty," he said, "that as soon as spring arrives, the Baglar will sail hither into the fjord, and then they will inflict great harm on you, because this flock keeps robbing you. We Birkibeinar are now without ships, as you know, and incapable of protecting your goods or lives. We cannot run as fast inland through the country as they can row the outer way. If you think this will cost you something, the loss of goods from what the Baglar will do to you will be greater."] (My translation)

He makes no appeal to his status and authority as king. The farmers are open to this starkly pragmatic proposal, and Sverrir asks each district to be responsible for the cost of one ship, which is then agreed. At this point, King Sverrir has been excommunicated by one of his bishops, with the blessing of Pope Celestine III in Rome; that autumn, his successor Innocent III accused the king of promoting a forged document releasing him from the ban, placed Norway under interdict, and sent letters to neighboring kings to dispossess him of the throne. The pressure on the king is intense. His own claim to the throne was always tenuous; the son of a comb maker from the Faroe Islands, he was a complete outsider. His self-serving claim that he was a king's son was widely ridiculed, and he had repeatedly refused to undergo *járnburðr*,¹ or trial by fire, widely accepted as an incontestable proof of veracity – an ordeal that his purported ancestor Haraldr *gilli* had successfully undergone, as well as Sverrir's putative half-brother Eiríkr Sigurðsson. What counts for the Trønder, however, is whether he can deliver the services of a king (for a discussion, see Bagge 1996).

The reason *Sverris saga* is such a gripping tale is that his chances of success are so vanishingly miniscule and his repeated triumphs so exceedingly improbable. This is true not just at the outset, when he arrives in Norway, a nobody, to raise an army, but repeatedly throughout his pathetic yet brilliant campaign, with a tiny ragtag band of marginals and vagrants. Astonishingly, the cliffhangers continue right through his long reign, as he holds onto the crown by his nails, chronically unable to secure his grip on the whole kingdom. What draws us into this man's story is his uncanny ability to see a possibility of success where others see only certain failure, to navigate in the present and to coordinate others in such a way that they succeed against all odds, and to do so repeatedly and reliably: at turn after turn, you cannot believe he will succeed in pulling it off.

A man moves in a multidimensional state space where space and time are only two of the factors, a state space of possible actions and outcomes so vast that he cannot become cognizant of more than a tiny fraction of them. At any given moment, a person is defined by a set of resources that enable him to act and intervene in his own fate, to take control of his future, and to formulate his goals. His resources and his goals in turn define a horizon of affordances –

¹ For a general discussion of trial by fire and water in the Middle Ages, see Bartlett (1986).

possible actions that have become salient and impinge on his awareness as choices he can meaningfully make at that moment. Judging by *Sverris saga*, the king is exceptionally skilled at perceiving, formulating, and communicating a wide range of potentially attractive affordances in any given situation. These are the numerous and repeated *kostir* or options that he proposes to his followers or to his opponents as possible ways forward, demonstrating a strikingly acute awareness of navigating life in a multifarious and complex possibility space. This skill lies at the heart of his success, and his remarkable ability to move forward in the face of unpromising situations and adverse conditions.

In the following, I develop a systematic and stepwise argument about the development of the cognitive capacities that underlie the human capacity to exploit concealed opportunities through the construction of a precarious self. The ability to perceive promising possibilities, I suggest, is the chief challenge and function of cognition, rooted in a series of complex and surprising cognitive operations with a deep evolutionary history. I then apply this conceptual framework to a reading of the first year of the saga's narrative, describing his swift rise to power, approaching the text as a cognitive scientist without a background in Norse historiography and literature. It is worth noting that Sverrir himself is portrayed as acutely aware of his unusual ability to perceive possibilities that others do not; this evidence of self-awareness in the saga makes him a rewarding and fascinating cognitive study.

On the Self as a Gateway to the Possible

Human beings are unique among animals in our ability to access and explore the possible. The possible must be distinguished from the imaginary or counterfactual, with which it only partially overlaps. What is possible is actual: it is actually the case that I can get up from my desk and walk to the window. The space of the possible is vast; manifest reality is only an infinitesimal fraction of it. At this very moment, you could straighten your right little finger while you look left and upwards, a simple action you may never have done before and may never do again; you could get up and start cooking one of many trillion possible meals; you could write a letter that begins or ends a friendship; you may suddenly realize the solution to a problem. What is possible is mostly junk: you could at this moment count to 13, or call a random number, or read this sentence backwards. Much of it is harmful: you could stick a finger in your eye, or bang your head against a wall, or cross the street blindfolded. Yet within the space of the possible is also located your future happiness, your next meal,

a good night's sleep, an unborn child. Navigating in these vast possibility spaces is the chief task of cognitive processes.

In physics, the space of the possible is called a state space. The state space of a pendulum is the sum total of all of the positions and states that a pendulum can occupy. Note that this state space is not a historical summation: whether the pendulum ever has occupied a particular state is not a factor in determining its state space. Rather, the intrinsic properties of the pendulum determine this state space and can be calculated from these properties. The different parts of the state space require different amounts of energy to access; the downward position of the pendulum is accessed with no added energy, others are accessed with a small push. If given a sufficiently strong push, Foucault's famous 28-kilo pendulum suspended from its 67-meter wire from the dome of the Panthéon in Paris could smash the dome itself – even though this will almost certainly never happen, it is part of its state space.

Living organisms navigate in their possibility spaces using metabolic energy. Variations in navigational behavior are governed at several levels: genetic, phenotypic, neuronal, semantic. Natural selection culls organisms that stray into the destructive parts of their possibility spaces, and allows those that only venture into the beneficial parts to thrive and reproduce. Darwinian evolution in this way slowly explores and expands the organism's possibility space, adding new structures and behaviors. Perceptual systems provide information not only about facts, but about possibilities: the absence of an obstacle implies the possibility of movement, the presence of a chemical gradient implies a possible food source.

It was the psychologist J. J. Gibson (1986, chapter 8) who first explicitly formulated the idea that vision has two distinct components: the perception of manifest facts and the perception of latent possibilities, or “affordances.” An affordance is a perceived possibility of action. A bee may perceive a tree canopy as an affordance for gathering nectar from flowers, a bird as an affordance for making a nest, and a giraffe as an affordance for browsing. According to Gibson, the perception of affordances is strictly a function of the animal's physiology, which enables it to act in specific ways. In order to act successfully, you need an accurate sense of your body's capabilities. As Shel Silverstein (1964) explores in *The Giving Tree*, an apple tree may be perceived as having a wide range of affordances for a human being over the course of a lifetime: a child may see the tree as an affordance for climbing, while an old man may see the stump as an affordance for resting on.

Neuroscientists have since confirmed Gibson's distinction between the perception of facts, or percepts, and the perception of affordances, or possibilities of action. Anatomically, the object-processing pathway of the visual system

splits into a ventral object-processing stream, mediating percepts and visual object recognition, and a dorsal object-processing stream, mediating spatial analysis and affordances (Goodale and Milner, 1992; Ungerleider and Mishkin, 1982). The ventral stream gives rise to our conscious experience of the visual world: the trees, the room, a face. The task of the dorsal stream is to generate an awareness of possible actions. It doesn't have as obvious an output into the field of conscious awareness, but may generate a sense of freedom or constrained enclosure, an urge to move, to freeze, a movement to turn your head or grasp. The importance of the possible is built into our nervous system, deeply integrated into the architecture of the brain.

The reason for this is on the face of it obvious: we navigate the possible to survive and thrive. What is perhaps less intuitively obvious is how astronomically large our possibility spaces are. We can get a feel for this by considering the surprising logic of combinatorics. A monkey that knows how to walk, grasp, and jump can form six different action sequences, expressed mathematically as $3!$ (three factorial). By learning two more skills – say climbing and hanging from a branch – the number of sequences rises dramatically to 120 ($5!$). Add two more – say running and eating – and the behavioral sequences shoots up to $5,040$ ($7!$). The numbers increase very fast as you add more elements to be combined. A simple deck of fifty-two playing cards can be arranged in $52!$ different ways – that's $80,658,175,170,943,878,571,660,636,856,403,766,975,289,505,440,883,277,824,000,000,000,000$, a number so large that it's beyond astronomical, larger than the number of seconds since the Big Bang.² Note again that this means in practice that most sequences have never happened; every time you shuffle a deck of cards you create a sequence that has likely never occurred before. The possible is largely unexplored.

The permutations of an ordinary deck of cards, its four suits a ludicrously simplified representation of four royal houses, is clearly not an adequate proxy for the real complexity of life. Every moment in a human life has many more than fifty-two elements that can be sequenced at will, creating possibility spaces that are infinitely larger. These spaces are not only a potential for events that are concealed from us; they are more radically unknown unknowns, events that have never been imagined and never happened. Even if most of what is possible is useless or harmful, the space of the possible also contains the uniquely valuable, diamonds in the coal mine.

² See <https://boingboing.net/2017/03/02/how-to-imagine-52-factorial.html> (accessed April 17, 2020).

In most animals, the perception of affordances is largely constrained by a temporal window so narrow we may call it the present. A female cheetah may see an inattentive gazelle as affording a meal, an affordance that strengthens as she approaches him. In order to generate the correct affordance and accurately estimate the likelihood of a successful capture, the cheetah must learn not only how fast the gazelle reacts and runs when alerted, but how fast she herself can accelerate (typically, to 75km/h in two seconds), how fast she can run, and for how long. Constructed in part by past experience, in part by the immediate awareness of the body, this proprioceptive or self-sensing self opens up and constrains the envelope of affordances or possible actions; for instance, if a paw has a splinter, the cheetah will leave the hunt to others in her coalition, and she will still share in the kill.

Yet the affordances visible to the proprioceptive self risks trapping the animal in a routine that makes it excessively predictable. Organisms that rely exclusively on known successful strategies may find that they become too predictable to their pathogens and other adversaries; what used to work after a while no longer does. Sex scrambles genetic sequences to stay ahead, but in mammals natural selection has also generated a spectacular set of cognitive adaptations to explore the possible. Accessing and discovering new strategies in this absolutely unbelievably large space that are actually useful is often not only a promising opportunity; it may be a requirement for survival. Since these are unknowns located in unknown spaces, nature has generated a host of surprising and creative strategies to open up and explore the coal mine of the possible in search for diamonds of successful action.

Prominent among these are dreams and play, adaptations that date back at least to early mammals. Stickgold proposed the dreaming mind is “looking for unexpected, novel and potentially highly creative and useful connections that otherwise we would not notice” (Young 2000; cf. Stickgold 2000), and Tononi and Cirelli (2016) demonstrated that synaptic connections between neurons are weakened during slumber. Dreams may function to weaken the familiar order of labels, objects, and events, readying them for new combinatorial sequences, relations, and actions in the waking state. In play, the perception of affordances can be recruited for a surprising purpose: to simulate and train skills (Steen and Owens 2001). A cat can treat a ball of yarn as if it were a mouse, a child can run away from her father as if he were a monster. This affordance pretense provides the cat with a cheap and readily available opportunity to practice her hunting skills. In our ancestral environment, a child inept at escaping from predators would have a high chance of being killed. The problem faced by mammalian juveniles, including human children, is that their skills are built through practice: if at first you don’t succeed, you try and try again. However,

for some dangerous situations you do not get a second chance – once the predator turns up, it is too late to practice. Play solves this seemingly intractable problem: to be an expert at something the very first time it happens. Play allows you to move into the present a scenario you need to be prepared for in the future, simulating an encounter that has not yet happened, and building the skills required to survive (Steen and Owens 2001).

In affordance pretense, the criteria for accepting something as an affordance are relaxed, allowing the player to simulate an ancestrally recurring problem while maintaining the proprioceptive self. Humans appear to be unique in their ability to extend play into the construction of the self itself, in agent pretense. Children will pretend to be cheetahs, adopting some of their characteristics in a creative blend: living in trees, hunting deer, protecting cubs. Agent pretense involves an intuitive grasp of narrative structure: an agent with certain resources and a horizon of goals, a set of obstacles, strategies for overcoming these obstacles. Humans can map themselves onto fictive characters in stories, taking on their qualities and goals (Steen 2005). In its playful operations, agent pretense dramatically expands the scope of affordance pretense: a table can become a landing pad for an astronaut's space mission, a gesture can become a material anchor for the wolf that speaks to you as Little Red Riding Hood. The pretend self is a conceptual integration, inheriting some features from your own proprioceptive self and blending them with selected features from the other self to generate an emergent narrative structure (for an exposition of conceptual integration, see Eriksen and Turner in this volume).

In reconstructing a blended narrative, agent pretense requires imagination – the ability to call up memories into waking consciousness. A surprising feature of the imagination is that it exceeds the possible. This spillover may be modality-specific: we may fail in the attempt to imagine an onion that tastes like chocolate. What is certain is that the visual imagination is spectacularly unconstrained by the possible: imagine an acorn lying in your hand, sprouting as you watch into a giant baobab tree with leaves that turn into the tongues of thousands of birds. No problem – however impossible. Deeper constraints of object design persist, but the impossible is no hindrance. The ability of the visual imagination to overflow the possible is a risky adaptation, exposing us to fantasies unmoored from reality. At the same time, an imagination constrained by what we already know to be possible would be less innovative: we need the unconstrained imagination to explore the larger field within which the unexpected and undiscovered possible is concealed. The ability to pretend to be someone else is in turn a powerful innovation that leverages the unconstrained characteristics of the imagination, giving us access to a new level of cognitive flexibility. It allows us to explore the world of

possible actions from novel perspectives, as a function of new sets of resources and new goals.

Agent pretense, the creation of a pretend or virtual self that blends your proprioceptive self with your understanding of another's life situation, is a core component of human play. A cat playing always remains a cat, tied to the capacities and interests of a cat. A human child will spontaneously map herself onto another, playfully adopting his gait, speech, and mannerisms, and pretend to be adults and perform grownup tasks, thus laying the foundation for skillful action. We call it 'imitation,' but this is a misnomer; it is a complex blend of the proprioceptive self and the other at the level of narrative structure. Indeed, a child may playfully use agent pretense to gain the cat's perspective on a piece of yarn, experience something of the cat's intent, infer something about the cat's narrative structure, enact being a cat, and practice and learn from its behaviors. By understanding the cat from a first-person perspective, the child gains the ability to engage and interact with it in its own world. In play, this construction is improvisational – the pretend self is established in a secure environment only and abandoned as soon as any real danger appears. It is like a bubble in a fast-flowing river, formed only to vanish and reappear, spectacular and evanescent. This precariousness of the pretense self is part of its attraction: it can be dropped in a heartbeat, yet while it is open it functions as a gateway to other worlds.

Neurobiological evidence indicates that autobiographical memories associated with a sense of self are handled by a distinct subsystem subject to selective failure (Tulving 1989; Hennig-Fast 2008; Steen 1998). The content of the self is contingent on the local situation a person is born into, but it is not fixed: the self is an arena of creativity and innovation. Goffman (1956) famously argued that life is theatrical: our social identities are formed, improvised, and performed like roles in a play. A corollary is that we can, should, and do have multiple functional selves, each tailored for the occasion.

In cognitive terms, the self has a narrative structure – that is to say, a self is the notion of an agent that is endowed with or has access to certain resources, is capable of formulating goals and strategies to reach them. A goal exists precisely in the liminal space of the possible: to be achievable, it must be realistic, or grounded in actuality, yet it exists as a potential rather than as a reality. By developing strategies, the agent of a narrative can plan complex sequences of actions that allow otherwise highly unlikely or improbable events to unfold, overcoming obstacles and arriving at the goal. In agent pretense, one can adopt a new identity, which is to say adopt a new set of assumptions about the resources, dispositions, and goals of the agent, leading to the formulation of new goals and new strategies. What makes this novel dimension of creativity possible is

what we may call a flexible agent system. It is a highly sophisticated innovation, an extension of affordance pretense that vastly expands the possibility space opened up in play.

The flexibility of the human agent system means that the organism's top-level control system is programmable. The perception of affordances, of the set of possible actions, is a function of the content of the agent system – that is to say, the skills and resources available to the agent, which in turn condition the agent's goals. In play, this agent definition can be dramatically changed: you can pretend to be a bird, spreading your wings and soaring over the sea, seeing the earth from above. As the imagination soars into the impossible, new areas of the possible nevertheless open up: a map routinely adopts the perspective of a bird, and imagining flight gives you surprising access to information about the affordances of air for flight. Mapping yourself onto other agents is a uniquely powerful vector for discovering useful features of the possibility space, especially if the organism you map yourself onto actually exists, since it has learned to exploit affordances in its environment that may also be accessible to you. Yet this programmable self also means that there is no definition of a true self that can be discovered; the self is a placeholder, a verb rather than a noun, a function rather than an essence. Your true being is the underlying potential; the manifest self is no more than foam in a vast ocean of possibilities.

Mapping your agent system imaginatively onto others allows you to understand them better and generate predictions about how they may act. By forming a pretend agent blending elements of yourself with elements of the other makes the narrative that animates the other more accessible to you, and you can use that information to cooperate or to compete more effectively. By projecting yourself onto virtual, pretend selves, you can simulate a social possibility space that depends on the beliefs and narratives held by others, exploring these affordances for your own action.

Over time, culture generates a repertoire of standardized and impersonalized pretend selves that are made available to all through art and storytelling. These function to structure the actions and aspirations of the individual, guiding him and her in tracks that are predictable and normatively endorsed. While cognitively grounded in play, these social roles often become part of relatively fixed social hierarchies. They become the nexus of a social struggle for resources, and its players lose track of the inescapable precariousness of the pretend self.

In these ways, the human mind has been constructed by natural selection over hundreds of thousands of years to gain access to useful affordances within the astronomically large possibility space that confronts us. The self that is formed by a proprioceptive awareness of the immediate capacities of the human body remains the foundation of action, but this sensory self on its own

is incapable of accessing more than a tiny portion of the useful possibility space. Early in the evolution of mammals, play evolves as a system for accessing useful possibilities of action through affordance pretense, allowing juveniles to practice complex skills in domains where the cost of failure is unacceptably high. Humans have learned to access additional promising dimensions of the possible by developing a playful pretend self that recruits the imagination, blending, and a flexible agent system. These cognitive capacities deal with state spaces so vast that we cannot have an intuitive grasp of their entirety; instead, we are blind sailors buffeted by waves catching winds that blow us towards the scent of pine in the distance, navigating a sea we cannot fathom.

The Pretender

Let us position ourselves at the start of Sverrir's adventure in 1176, when he arrives in Norway from the Faroes with nothing but a story to his name. Our main source of information for this moment is *Sverris saga*, which notes that the first part was written by Abbot Karl Jónsson of Þingeyraklaustur while “yfir sat sjálfir Sverrir konungr ok réð fyrir hvat rita skyldi” (King Sverrir himself sat over him and settled what should be written) (*Sverris saga* 2007, 3). His mother, the saga claims, had traveled to Rome, and in confession said that the father of her son was a king. This reached the ear of the Pope, who commanded she reveal this to her son. This is the story he brings with him to Norway: he is the son of King Sigurðr Haraldsson, called Sigurðr *munnr*. Neither his contemporaries nor subsequent historians have been able to demonstrate this claim to be definitively false. Its likelihood is a different matter; no details are supplied to enhance the credibility of the story.

Sigurðr *munnr* is a strategic choice of father: two of his illegitimate sons have already successfully claimed the throne. The boy king Hákon II Sigurðarson, known as Hákon *herðibreiðr*, was king of Norway from 1157 until 1162; in the spring of 1159, the twelve-year-old with his flock of lawless deplorables plundered the Møre coast; according to Snorri Sturluson, it was the first time in over 150 years that the land had been ravaged. Sigurðr Sigurðsson, his half-brother and also a young teen, succeeded him, and was proclaimed king at Øyrating in Nidaros in 1163, but was decapitated by King Magnús Erlingsson only months later (*Magnúss saga Erlingssonar* 1951, ch. 18). Magnús made no claim to be the son of a king, though his mother was the daughter of Sigurðr *Jórsalafari*; he made

a series of concessions to the Church and leaned on his powerful supporters, including the Danish king.

In the political landscape of 1176, Sverrir's opportunities were meager. Once a man has assessed his opportunities and formulated a distant goal, the challenge is to develop an understanding of the obstacles facing him in reaching that goal. This requires constructing a rich and accurate model of the world; only such a model will make it possible to develop new and effective strategies that marshal his limited resources effectively to achieve the goal. Sverrir had remarkable dreams, the saga tells us, but on his arrival, he lacked an understanding of the world he was about to engage with. He spent the first year gathering information while carefully concealing his intentions:

Ok af sinni ræðu ok vitrleik gróf hann svá undir þeim at hann varð margra hluta þeira viss af þeim er þeir vildu eigi hafa í ljós látit ef þeir vissi hverr þar hefði verit eða við hvern þeir höfðu rætt. (Sverris saga 2007, 11)

[By prudent speech and craftiness he dug below them and became assured of many matters which they would never have disclosed if they had known who was among them or with whom they conversed.] (My translation)

He learned that opposition to Magnús Erlingsson centered in Trøndelag, where the Birkibeinar crowned Eysteinn *meyla* Eysteinnsson as their king at Øyrating in Nidaros. Eysteinn claimed to have been the son of Eysteinn Haraldsson, Sigurðr *munnr*'s half-brother and co-regent. This left little room for Sverrir; the major players were all committed. Finding no base in Norway, he followed Eysteinn *meyla*'s example and sought support in Sweden, where Sigurðr *munnr*'s daughter Brigit was married to the Swedish earl Birgir *brosa*. The Swedes, at war with the Danes, had an interest in a friendly Norwegian king, but had already committed their support to Eysteinn. By the time Sverrir had continued his journey in the winter of 1177 to Värmland – and to meet King Sigurðr's second daughter Cecelia – he learned that the Birkibeinar had just lost a battle against Magnús in Viken and Eysteinn was dead. With the help of his putative Swedish kin, he was proclaimed the new leader of the Birkibeinar.

In this way, Sverrir positioned himself optimally in what had appeared to be a hopeless situation – that is to say, a situation in which there was no realistically possible path to the throne. He was lucky, we might say, implying that he could not have known beforehand that Eysteinn, with the nickname “*meyla*” or “little girl,” would fail as the leader of the Birkibeinar and soon perish in battle. Yet luck is clearly not the whole story; of the infinitude of possible actions that Sverrir could have engaged in after his arrival in Norway, he very deliberately selects one particular horizon of possibilities that he correctly conjectures might allow him to position himself within striking distance of the throne. His developing

understanding of the situation suggested to him that the most promising path to the throne lay through Sigurðr's sisters and their connections among the Swedish noblemen to the Birkibeinar faction and their base in Trøndelag. Sverrir's actions are informed by a mental model of the contemporary political situation, enriched by his initial information gathering. He models not only the facts, but the potential actions and outcomes that these facts make possible; he models conjectures and opportunities in the form of scenarios that could unfold from these facts, triggered by specific interventions that it might become in his power to perform and through which the course of history might be changed to his advantage.

The area surrounding the Trondheim fjord had the strongest and most unified political structure in Norway and had served as its center of political power and legitimacy ever since its unification under Haraldr *inn hárfagri*. This regional political unity provided the only credible base for an effective opposition to King Magnús. Of all of the affordances in the situation he faced, Eysteinn's failure may have struck him as the least improbable outcome that could open doors for him. All he had to do was to position himself so that if and when Eysteinn failed, Sverrir would be ready to step into his role.

At the heart of the narrative structure that allows Sverrir to navigate in a complex world is his understanding of himself. As discussed above, at an elementary level, this self-understanding is grounded in his proprioceptive awareness: his awareness of his own body. In the saga, this level of awareness is largely elided; Sverrir's physical presence is almost completely edited out. We are not given a sense of how he experienced himself or his physical prowess, and the history of his marriage, marital life, and becoming a father four times before arriving in Norway are absent from the story. These aspects of his being are implicitly treated as the characteristics of a private man, a distraction from his social identity as a king. In the many instances where his physical endurance is stretched to the limit, the saga emphasizes the objective hardship, without giving us access to a first-person perspective. Yet this proprioceptive self lies at the base of his actions and determines to a significant degree what he decides to undertake. Repeatedly, the saga describes how he “*fekk mikít vás ok erfiði*” (endured much fatigue and toil) (*Sverris saga* 2007, 11) on his travels. As he travels north through Sweden, they had to endure both hunger and freezing conditions; they did not have any food apart from tree-bark and berries hidden under the snow (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 8). These descriptions emphasize the cost Sverrir and his men had paid, hinting at an underlying cost / benefit analysis and perhaps an implicit justification of the privileges Sverrir and his men eventually achieved. They make no claim that Sverrir is unusually strong,

dexterous, enduring, or tolerant of suffering; the physical self is not highlighted as having any special qualifications. By eliding the physical self, the Sverrir behind the story may be betraying a lack of confidence in his material and physical royal ancestry, emphasizing instead an exceptionally foresightful intellect as his qualification for the kingship.

Sverrir's royal self is given rich expressions through his dreams long before it becomes a social reality. This imaginary self is a blend of his present self and the social role of a king, like a child's pretend self in play. In the saga, however, Sverrir experiences this particular self as an actual possibility. Several dreams are described in great detail and presented as evidence that Sverrir is destined for greatness. The narrative is also explicit in pointing out that Sverrir himself interpreted the dreams as both a foreshadowing of his glorious future and a transcendental endorsement of his aspirations (Schach 1971; Busygin 2003). As soon as he has accepted the leadership of the Birkibeinar, he dreams Samuel tells him he is sent by God: he "smurði hendr hans" (sanctified his hands), as if to anoint him as God's chosen "at stjórna mǫrgum lýðum" (to govern many people) (*Sverris saga* 2007, 17). The self in the dream is not simply identified with Sverrir's waking self – he has not literally been told by God that he will be king (for a discussion, see Lönnroth 2006). Rather, he seeks to demonstrate that it is his royal self that motivates and organizes his actions and leads to his achievements; the gap between what he is and what he could be generates a narrative tension filled with desire. Sverrir clearly does not believe that these dreams simply present what is going to happen (for the epistemic status of dreams at the time, see Turville-Petre 1958). There is no one-to-one correspondence between the content of the dreams and the facts on the ground; rather, Sverrir's dreams show us that he is motivated by the idea that he is destined for greatness, that he sees an advantage to claiming he is chosen by God, and that he wishes to convey his determination to prevail against the odds. The playful self has morphed into an aspirational self that generates powerful emotions in response to vividly imagined scenarios; these reach far beyond the facts and even far beyond the possible. It occupies spaces that guide his aspirations and spur his desires, serving to make becoming king appear at once more salient and more likely. At the same time, the ideal self makes no contribution to developing successful strategies for how to achieve that goal.

His pragmatic waking imagination, in contrast, represents the self in terms of its actual resources, situated in its actual state space; it is ruthlessly realistic in exploring and assessing what he has to do to move his project forward. This is where we see Sverrir's core strength: he uses his mind to model the world in precise detail and cheaply simulate multiple strategies and their

likely outcomes. He realizes early on that his men lack his vision and cannot be relied on to provide the way forward:

ok hann varð at bera vanda fyrir þeim er honum þjónuðu, með því at engi var sá annarr er ráð kunni gera nema hann sjálfir í þessu liði er hann hafði við tekit ok sitt ráð við bunnit.
(*Sverris saga* 2007, 18)

[and he had to take care of them who served him, since there was no one else who could be in charge, except for him, amongst these men, who he had accepted and to whom he had committed.] (My translation)

Most of the men who join him, he realizes, are just interested in plunder, and will not be good companions for his desire to win the crown: “Eigi hafði hann lengi þeim flokki stýrt áðr en hann sá þat er fyrr hafði hann grunat, at eigi myndi hann mjök mega styðjask við þeira ráðagerð” (He had not been in charge of this troop for a long time, before he started to suspect that he would not be able to lean on their advice) (*Sverris saga* 2007, 19). He attentively gathers information about his men to discern their true intentions, constructing a rich world model in which his simulations can operate. By accurately representing the qualities of his men and connecting these with the challenges that lie ahead, Sverrir is able to select a small number of men he actually leads on his first expedition north. Imagining the difficulties he would encounter in Norway, now that his claim to the throne is known, he decides instead to go north through the deep and largely uninhabited forests of Sweden. This strategy is successful, though he nearly starves his men to death, and he arrives in Trøndelag undetected and unopposed.

As a chieftain, his task is to make good decisions and demonstrate his fitness by winning battles; Sverrir’s actual skills are what carries him forward. After a confusing campaign in central Norway, where his opponents consistently outnumber him and he repeatedly outwits them, he succeeds in gaining control of Nidaros and is hailed as king at the Øyrating (*Sverris saga* 2007, ch. 12) in June of 1177. It is a year since he landed.

Conclusion

The study of the self reveals a layer of foundational cognitive flexibility that makes it possible for the son of a comb maker to become king. The self functions as a door to creativity because it allows a human agent system to “host” an infinity of identities in a playful simulation space. Each identity has a narrative structure that includes a conception of the resources available for

action, a range of possible goals, and a set of flexible strategies for overcoming obstacles and reaching an implausible goal. While non-human animals rely on the proprioceptive or literal self, human beings have developed the ability of simulating scenarios from the point of view of a pretend self that blends features from the literal self and another perceived or imaginary self. The core function of this pretend self is to open up the possibility space of play, to enable the child to become aware of novel and potential beneficial actions; it is a search function, designed to help us step out of the familiar and contemplate new perspectives.

In a social context, however, this capacity for pretense morphs into a capacity for social roles that are assigned material power. What was pretend play migrates into the executive mode, and the roles themselves become fiercely gated. *Sverris saga* is the story of the thoughts and actions that allowed an unknown young man from the Faroe Islands to gain access to the throne. It is fascinating as a story precisely because it explores the far reaches of the possible, with a confident grip on reality. Its peak moments are the discovery and execution of strategies that require very limited resources and achieve exceptional outcomes.

At the outset, Sverrir was faced with an exceedingly low probability of success; he is a social nobody without friends or resources. However, as portrayed in the saga, he has an unusual capacity for perceiving possibilities, however remote their chances of success may appear. Presenting himself as a champion of his purported father's family, he opens up a possibility space for them in which he becomes useful for their own interests. Acquiring a small rag-tag army, he soon realizes his best chances lie in being crowned by the pragmatic Trønder. In battle, he locates strategies that take his opponents by surprise and repeatedly wins. He is self-consciously aware of his unusual ability to navigate in complex and multidimensional state space, learning to trust his own judgment.

Sverrir very successfully exploits the upside *kostir* or opportunities of the precarious self, but during his 25-year reign he is also unable to escape its downside consequences. In spite of his hypertrophied ability to look ahead and make good decisions that allow him to realize the remote and implausible goal of becoming king, Sverrir is never able to quell the sizable opposition to his rule. During his long reign he faces continued and recurring opposition. The strongest argument he makes for people to support him is simply his pragmatic skills; these ensure that Sverrir benefits those who follow him. Arrayed against him was the king of Denmark and the Church, championing a traditionalist view of social roles as grounded in nature.

Sverris saga itself can be understood as the king's concerted attempt to justify his kingship, telling the story of his life with a clear focus on bringing out

his exceptional capacity to understand the world as a vast unfolding space of possibilities, in which low-probability possibilities can be systematically targeted in order to achieve extraordinary outcomes. This, he implies, is what you want in a king. “Ok em ek sá” (I am that man), he proclaims, who combines multiple social identities and roles into one:

“Aldaskipti er mikit orðit, sem þér meguð sjá, ok er undarliga orðit er einn maðr er nú fyrir þrja: einn fyrir konung ok einn fyrir jarl, einn fyrir erkibyskup, ok em ek sá.”

(*Sverris saga* 2007, 61)

[“The times have changed greatly, as you can see, and it is extraordinary that one man now takes the place of three: a king and an earl and an archbishop, and I am that man.”]

(My translation)

It really makes you wish he actually was an impostor, a nobody who realized that anybody could be king.

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