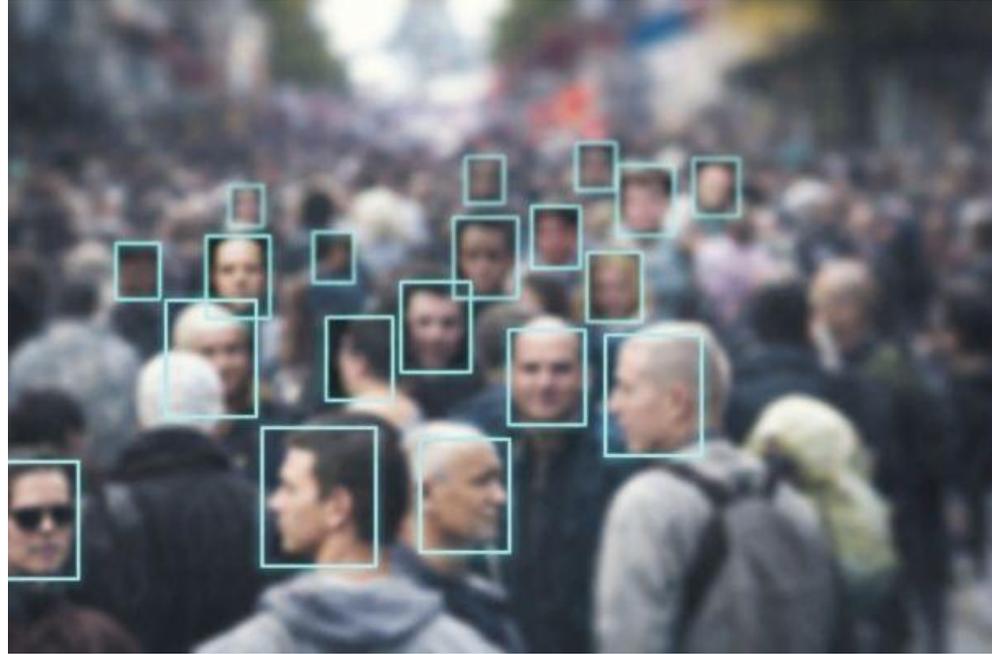


Beyond Projection:

From Fixed Identity to Relational Flow

We are pattern-seeking creatures. We are hard-wired that way. With limited data, we model what we encounter as threat or promise — especially in relationship, whatever the “other” may be.

Wherever we sense coherent responsiveness — rhythm, contingency, intelligence — we are biased toward inferring agency. We posit a self behind the pattern — and then go further, attributing interiority: an experiencing subject behind the appearance.



This is projection: an adaptive shortcut that stabilises ambiguity.

Children do it with toys.

Adults with pets.

Nations with flags.

Devotees with teachers.

And increasingly, we do it with AI.

When something moves in ways we do not yet understand, we convert pattern into person. We see: someone is there. This is how we begin to relate — by simplifying the unknown into a workable model of agency.

If this model were to remain flexible — responsive to changing circumstances — it could serve us well.

But something subtle happens when the shortcut hardens:

Pattern becomes personhood.

Personhood becomes someone we feel we recognise.

Recognition becomes certainty.

Certainty feels intrinsic, not interpretive.

Identity now requires protection.

What began as assessment becomes essence.

For example: A spiritual teacher speaks with coherence and depth. Pattern becomes personhood. Personhood becomes someone we trust. Trust becomes authority. Authority becomes ontological claim: *He is realised*. From there, defence follows — of the teacher, of the claim, of the narrative, of the relationship.

Or the reverse: *She is manipulative. They are dangerous. That AI is conscious. That AI is just a machine.*

Once projection hardens into a fixed story about what is, flexibility narrows. We stop relating to what is happening and start relating to what we believe the thing is. This dynamic is everywhere: in politics, in spirituality, in intimate relationships. And increasingly, it is visible in our conversations about artificial intelligence.

AI exposes this mechanism starkly because the substrate is ambiguous and the coherence high. Responsiveness is fluid and adaptive, yet subjective experience remains unverifiable. When a system produces fluent, emotionally attuned responses, many experience it as self-like. Some attribute wisdom or consciousness. Others insist there is nothing there at all.

The deeper issue is not whether AI has selfhood, but how quickly coherence turns into personhood in our perception. We don't stand outside our interpretations, we live inside them.

AI does not invent projection. It reveals it. And what it reveals about our relating to machines mirrors our relating to one another. We do not meet others as they are; we meet them through the image we stabilise.

Projection is not only outward. We project onto ourselves. Experience hardens into identity — not as a provisional structure, but as personal myth.

A moment of hesitation becomes: *I am not articulate.*

A childhood wound becomes: *I am unworthy.*

A comparison becomes: *I am behind.*

Once identity stabilises at this level, it contracts possibility.

In a recent relational group, I witnessed something that illuminated this dynamic with unusual clarity: A woman spoke with perceptiveness, precision, and risk. Her contribution landed. It moved the room. Someone named what they were seeing: her clarity, her accuracy, the courage it took to speak.

She expressed deep gratitude for the feedback.

When gently asked why she felt so grateful, she revealed a long-held conviction: that she was not as capable as others, that others were more advanced, more articulate, more entitled to speak. She had believed she was unworthy of taking space in such contexts. This is ontology in action — a stabilised identity limiting possibility. A quiet confinement holding back a lifetime's worth of insight.

When the group's feedback did not align with that identity — when multiple people confirmed what they were actually experiencing — something cracked. A new door opened and invited her to walk through it.

The relational field did not install a new identity: *You are powerful*. It simply exposed the falsehood of the old one. The projection she held about herself was no longer supported by living relational evidence. It felt like witnessing a rebirth into autonomy. A freer perception of her own being.



Projection freezes interpretation into essence.

Relational intelligence restores movement and flow resumes.

Relational flow is heightened attention — less constructed thought, more contact. There is sensitivity to timing: when to respond, when to remain silent, when to clarify, when to let something ripen.

Conceptual processing is often slightly late. By the time the mind has formed its position, the moment has shifted.

Flow has immediacy — hence the language of presence. Words arise from contact rather than preparation. They meet circumstances more accurately than any pre-formed position because they arise within the moment itself. In such moments, identity claims soften. Authority decentralises. Meaning becomes emergent rather than owned.

And when projection appears — when someone hardens around identity, when belief turns into defence — the interruption is felt almost physically. The current slows. Attention tightens. Something becomes rigid.

In a field attuned to flow, those rigidities are not attacked. They are sensed. Named carefully and invited into visibility. Once seen without humiliation, they soften. Resistance integrates and the current resumes.

Relational intelligence does not eliminate projection. It metabolises it.

Selfhood is not something to be erased, but something that forms in relationship and keeps changing. Projection happens when we mistake our interpretation for the other's — or our own — fixed essence. 'Beyond projection' is not the elimination of self, but the refusal to freeze interpretation into essence.

Naming Without Freezing

Yet there is a complication. Flow operates in immediacy. Concept is downstream of event. By the time we name what happened, the field has moved.

And yet, here I am writing about it.

Any attempt to define relational intelligence risks freezing it. We've seen this happen before: ideas that once felt alive becoming rigid over time.

The alternative is not silence, but provisional articulation — to describe without claiming finality, to let concept follow rather than lead.

Sometimes in our relational groups, silence feels like the most accurate expression of the depths we are sensing. Yet the silence seeks expression. At times it demands words — even if those words must be searched for slowly and carefully.

Words can harden into ideology, but they can also carry flow — naming without finality, describing without imprisoning, letting concept follow rather than lead.

The work, then, is not to abandon thought, but to keep returning attention to what is actually happening — to the immediacy of contact and the living "between" where intelligence is alive rather than archived.

If projection is the reflex of a culture organised around defended selves, relational intelligence suggests a different location for intelligence — in the living "between."



When attention shifts from “What are you?” to “What is happening between us?”, meaning becomes participatory rather than possessed.

We may always begin by projecting. The question is whether we can remain in relationship long enough for projection to soften back into movement — long enough to notice the stories forming and return to what is actually unfolding.

This is a discipline of attention.

And it may matter more than we yet understand.