

Human Nature *and the* Actualizing Tendency

Grant Ramsey

**Center for Logic and Philosophy of Science
KU Leuven, Belgium**

Who am I?

Who am I?

Philosopher of Science

Foundations of evolutionary biology

Animal behavior

The evolution of death

The moral emotions

Human nature

Who am I?

Philosopher of Science

Foundations of evolutionary biology

Animal behavior

The evolution of death

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Human nature

Who am I?

Human Nature in a Post-essentialist World

Grant Ramsey*†

In this essay I examine a well-known articulation of human nature skepticism, a paper by Hull. I then review a recent reply to Hull by Machery, which argues for an account of human nature that he claims is both useful and scientifically robust. I challenge Machery's account and introduce an alternative account—the "life-history trait cluster" conception of human nature—that I hold is scientifically sound and makes sense of (at least some of) our intuitions about—and desiderata for—human nature.

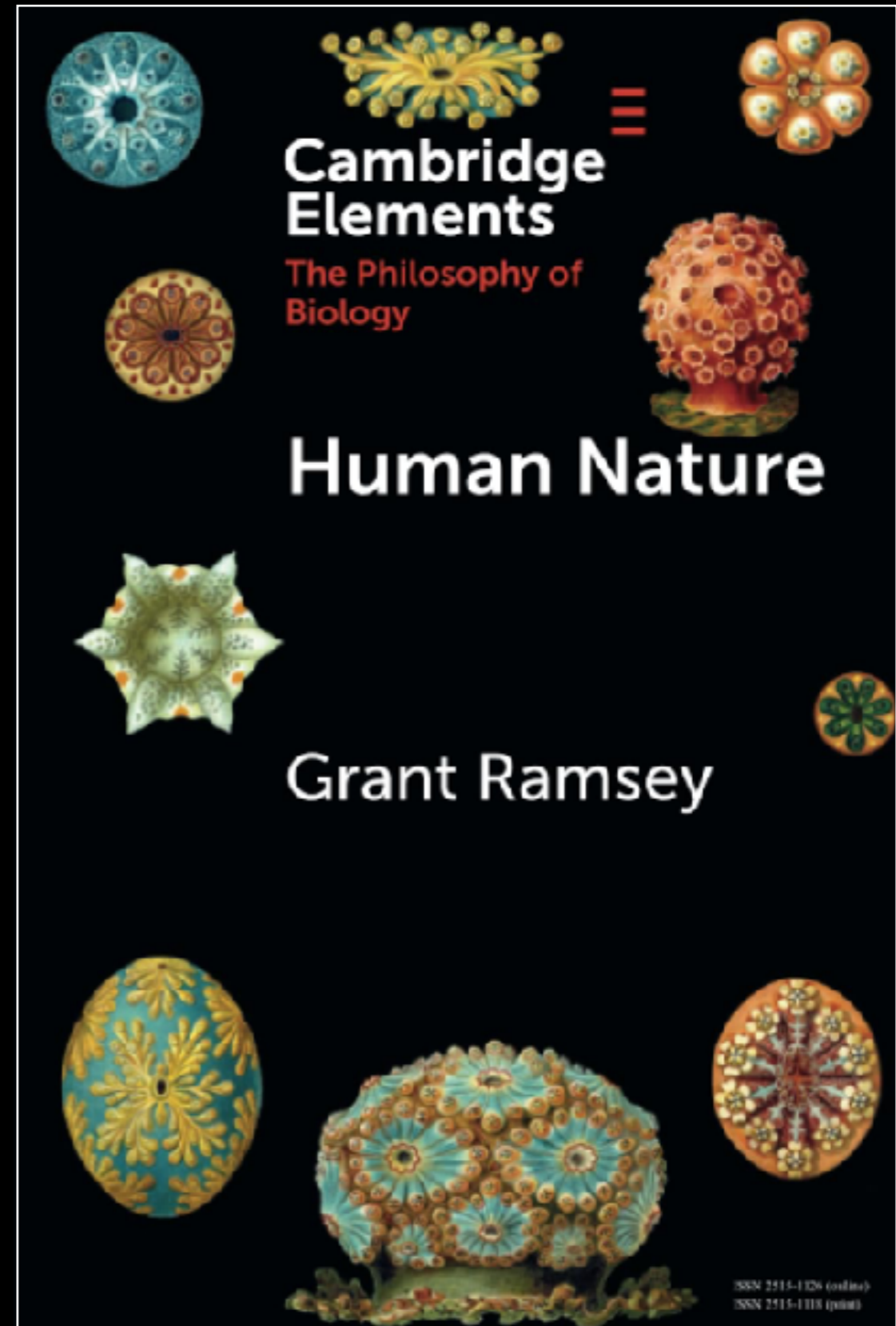
1. **Introduction.** In a Platonic worldview, to which species an individual belongs is answered by this question: in which form does it participate? A goat is a goat because it participates in the Platonic form goat and not, say, the form horse. The tidiness of this answer, however, belies the questionable ontology on which it rests. It is for this reason that contemporary philosophers generally eschew the invocation of Platonic forms in producing a theory of species' natures.

Nevertheless, species seem to have a nature—perhaps not one founded on Platonic forms but instead on a set of essential properties. If we were given a lineup of a random assortment of vertebrates—wildebeest, aardvarks, naked mole rats, vampire bats, and humans—we would have no problem picking out the humans. Even if the lineup were populated with our closest living relatives, we would have no difficulty picking out the humans from the other apes. This is true in part because humans differ in many ways from other species of ape. But it is not merely that humans differ from the other species, it is also that humans share many traits among themselves. This similarity—this set of traits that it seems we are able to register intuitively to instantly recognize an individual as a human being—is seemingly what we could

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†I thank Patrick Bateson, Andreas De Block, Michael Deem, Agustín Fuentes, Edouard Machery, and Charles Pence for their comments.

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Today

Human nature

Therapy

The actualizing tendency

The person

Education

Human nature

Aquinas

On Human Nature

Edited, with Introduction, by
Thomas S. Hibbs

What is human nature?

Aquinas

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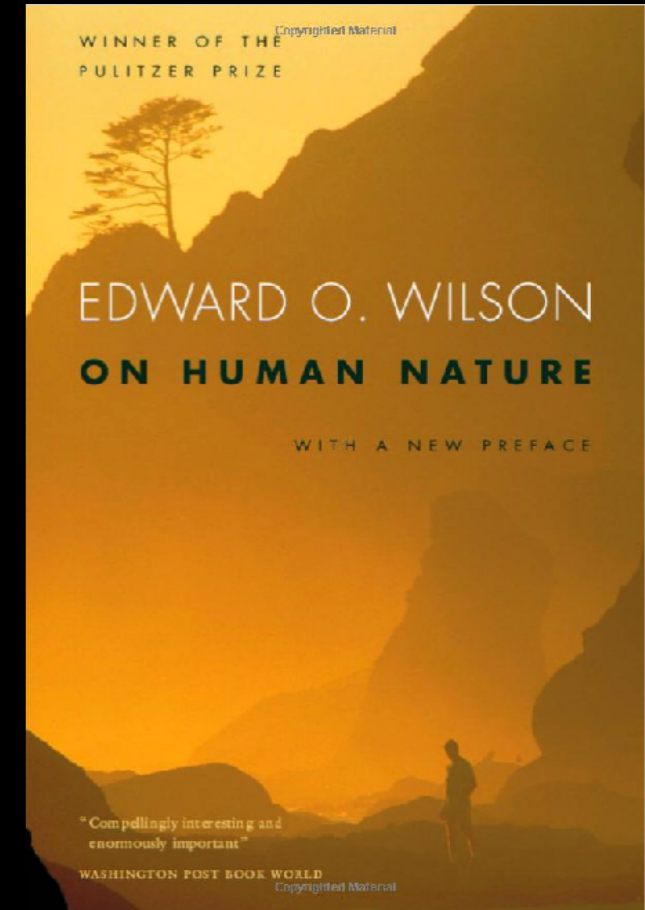
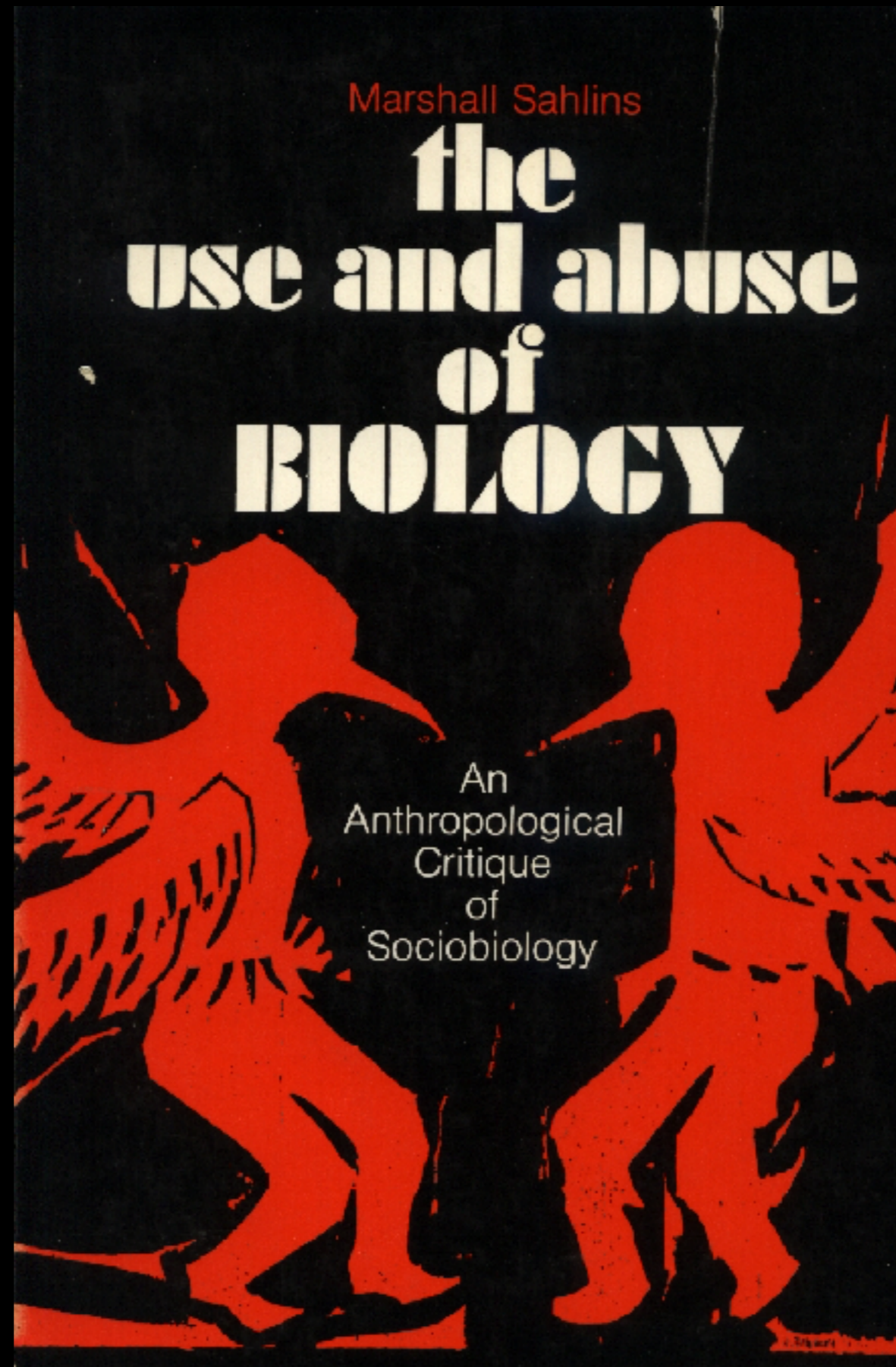
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the blank slate

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An
Anthropological
Critique
of
Sociobiology

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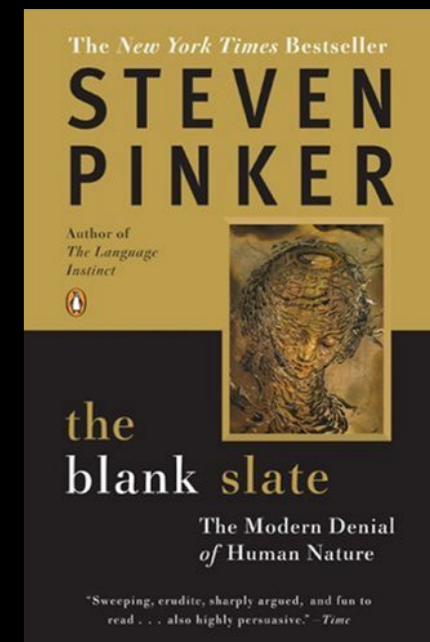
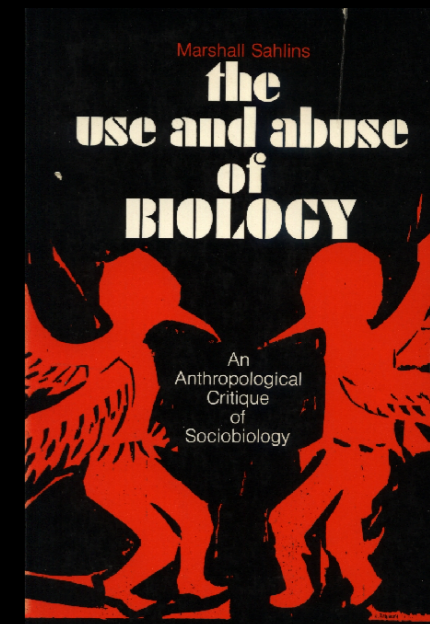
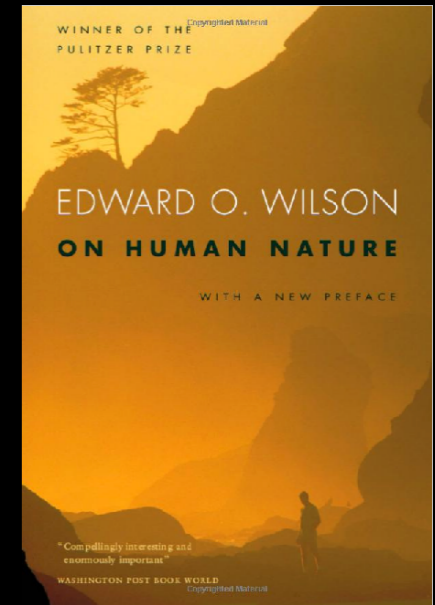
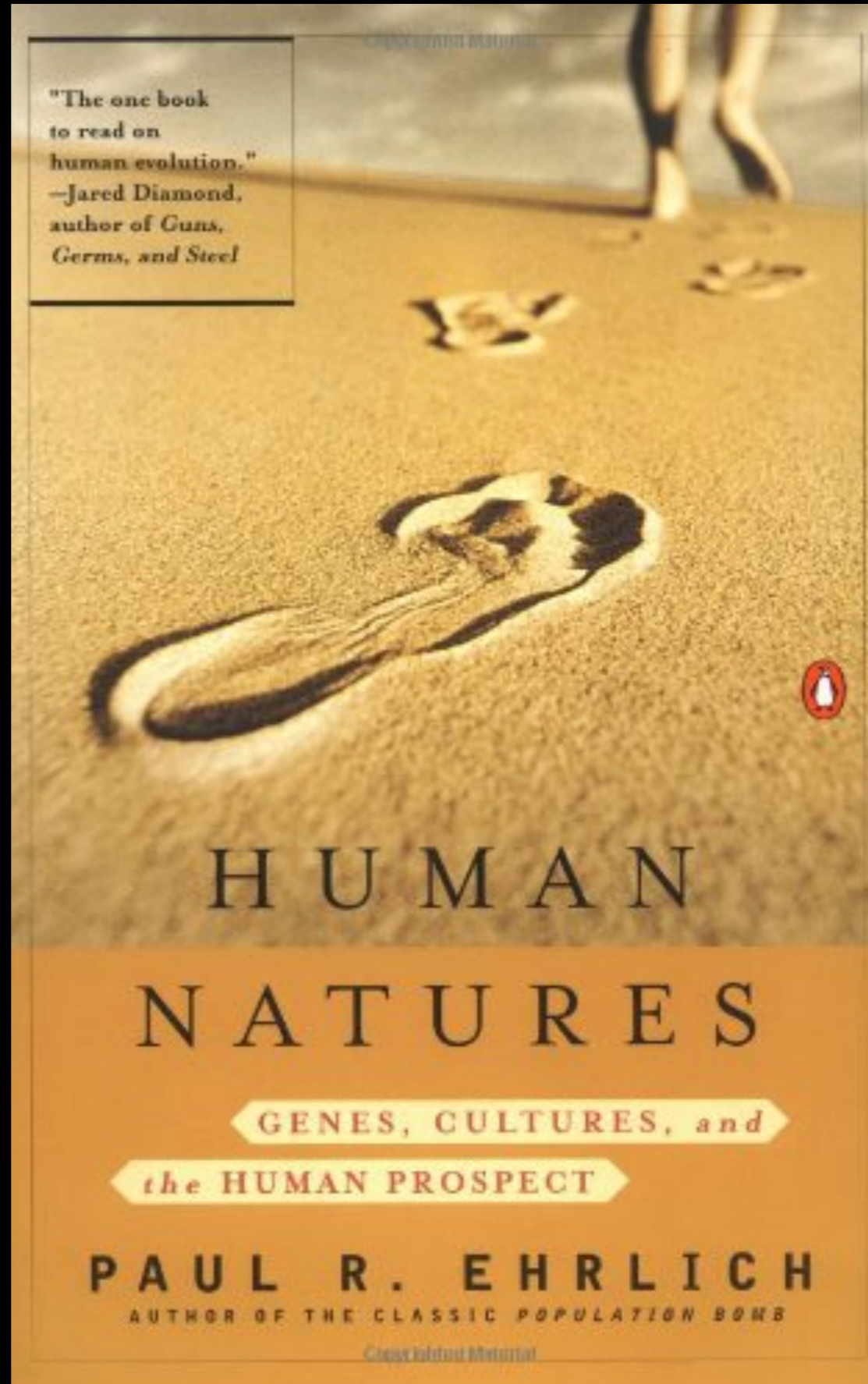
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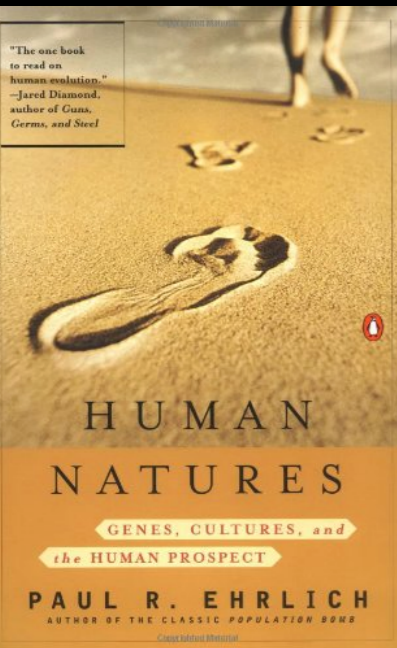
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A COMEDY FROM THE CREATORS OF *BEING JOHN MALKOVICH*

Tim Robbins Patricia Arquette Rhys Ifans Miranda Otto

HUMAN NATURE

In the Interest of Civilization... Conform.



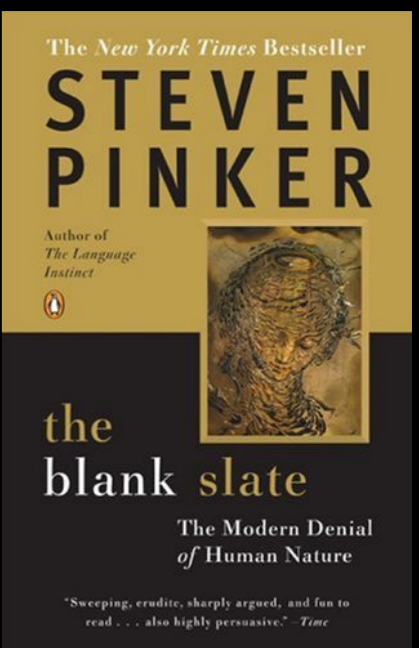
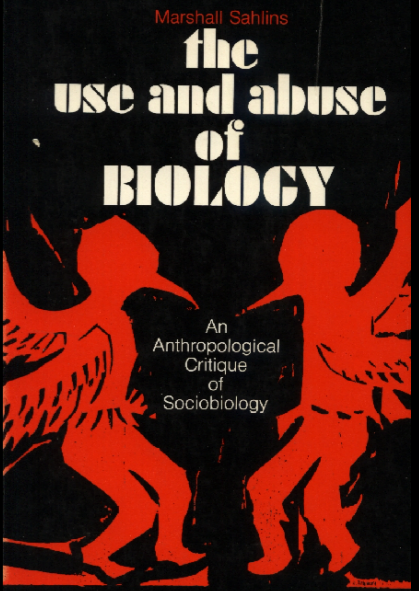
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What is human nature?

The Problem With Fixing WhatsApp? Human Nature Might Get in the Way



Doug Chayka

By **Farhad Manjoo**

Oct. 24, 2018



[Leer en español](#)

Should the world worry about WhatsApp? Has it become a virulent new force in global misinformation and political trickery?

Or, rather, should the world rejoice about WhatsApp? After all, hasn't it provided a way for people everywhere to communicate

Blame Human Nature, Not Guns

Nov. 9, 2017

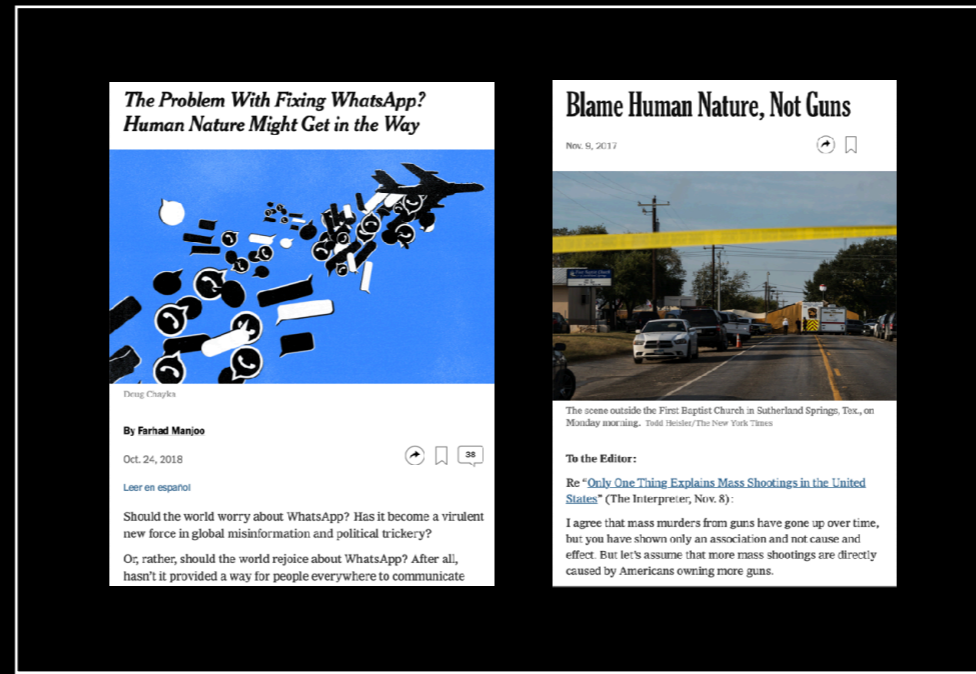


The scene outside the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Tex., on Monday morning. Todd Heisler/The New York Times

To the Editor:

Re "[Only One Thing Explains Mass Shootings in the United States](#)" (The Interpreter, Nov. 8):

I agree that mass murders from guns have gone up over time, but you have shown only an association and not cause and effect. But let's assume that more mass shootings are directly caused by Americans owning more guns.



Explication

Elimination

Their use of HN is incoherent, therefore they should stop using 'HN'.

Grounding

What is a rigorous foundation for their use of HN?





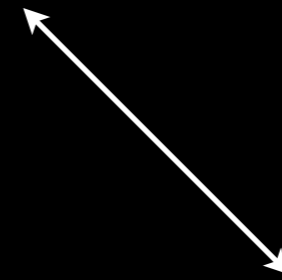
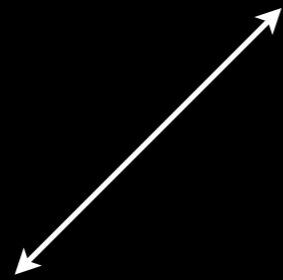


Find the *essence* of our species

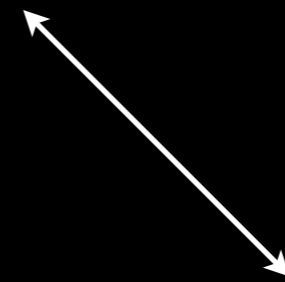
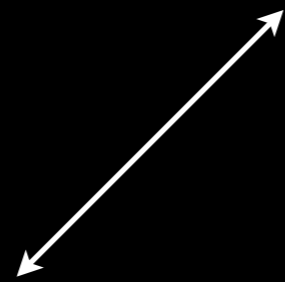
The Problem of Essences



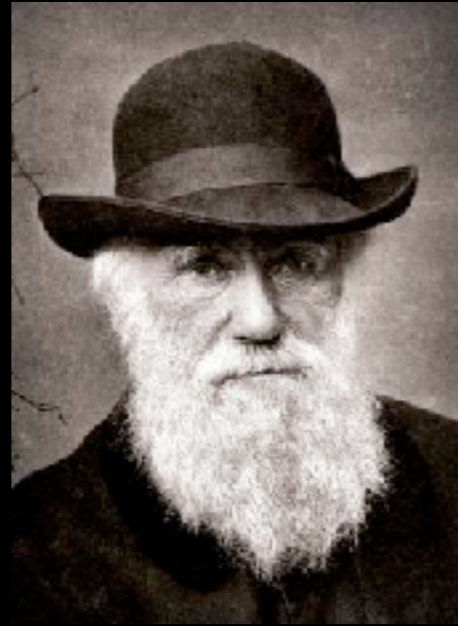
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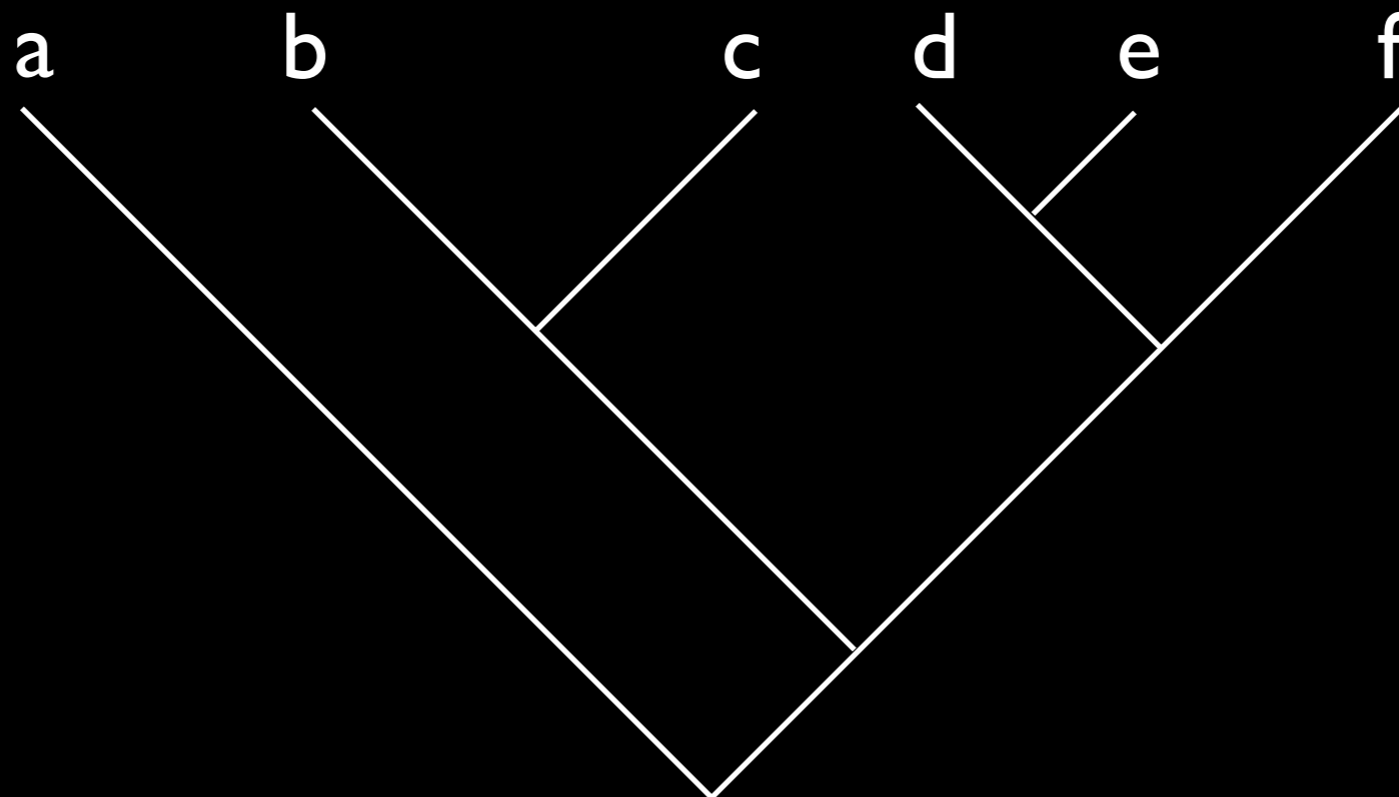
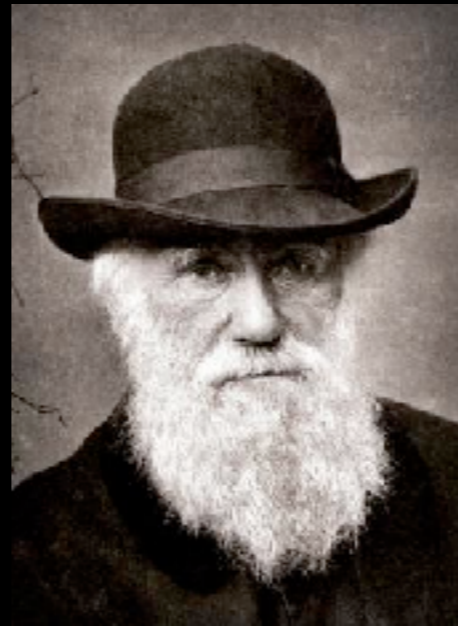
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The Problem of Essences



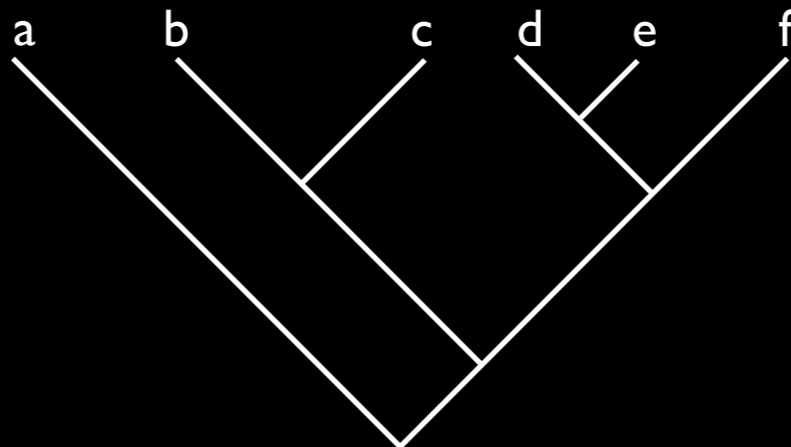
The Problem of Essences



The Problem of Essences



1. Speciation requires branching
2. Species membership determined by position, not by traits



The Problem of Essences



(1935-2010)

On Human Nature

David L. Hull

Northwestern University

Generations of philosophers have argued that all human beings are essentially the same, that is, they share the same nature, and that this essential similarity is extremely important. Periodically philosophers have proposed to base the essential sameness of human beings on biology. In this paper I argue that if 'biology' is taken to refer to the technical pronouncements of professional biologists, in particular evolutionary biologists, it is simply not true that all organisms that belong to *Homo sapiens* as a biological species are essentially the same. If 'characters' is taken to refer to evolutionary homologies, then periodically a biological species might be characterized by one or more characters which are both universally distributed among and limited to the organisms belonging to that species, but such states of affairs are temporary, contingent, and relatively rare. In most cases, any character universally distributed among the organisms belonging to a particular species is also possessed by organisms belonging to other species, and conversely any character that happens to be limited to the organisms belonging to a particular species is unlikely to be possessed by all of them.

The natural move at this juncture is to argue that the properties which characterize biological species at least "cluster." Organisms belong to a particular biological species because they possess enough of the relevant properties or enough of the more important relevant properties. Such unimodal clusters do exist, and might well count as 'statistical natures,' but in most cases the distributions that characterize biological species are multimodal, depending on the properties studied. No matter how desperately one wants to construe biological species as natural kinds characterizable by some sort of "essences" or "natures," such multimodal distributions simply will not do. To complicate matters further, these clusters of properties, whether uni- or multi-modal, change through time. A character state (or allele) which is rare may become common, and one that is nearly universal may become entirely eliminated. In short, species evolve, and to the extent that they evolve through natural selection, both genetic and phenotypic variation are essential. Which particular variations a species exhibits is a function of both the fundamental regularities which characterize selection processes and numerous historical contingencies. However, variation as such is hardly an accidental characteristic of biological species. Without it, evolution would soon grind to a halt. *Which* variations characterize a particular species is to a large extent accidental; *that* variation characterizes species as such is not.

The preceding characterization depends on the existence of a criterion for individuating species in addition to character covariation. If species are taken to be the things which evolve, then they can and must be characterized in terms of ancestor-descendant relations,

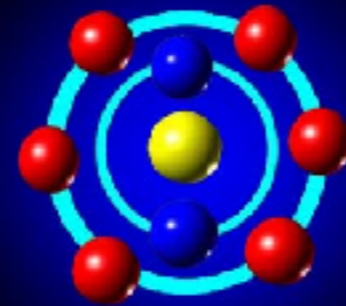
The Problem of Essences



1. Species membership is determined by position on the tree of life, not by a set of necessary and sufficient traits
2. *Natures* denote essential (necessary and sufficient) traits

∴ Species lack natures

The Problem of Essences



Traditional Chinese medicine text describing the historical use of essences.



Modern scientific text describing the current understanding of essences.



Future-oriented text describing the potential of essences.

The Past

Now

The Future

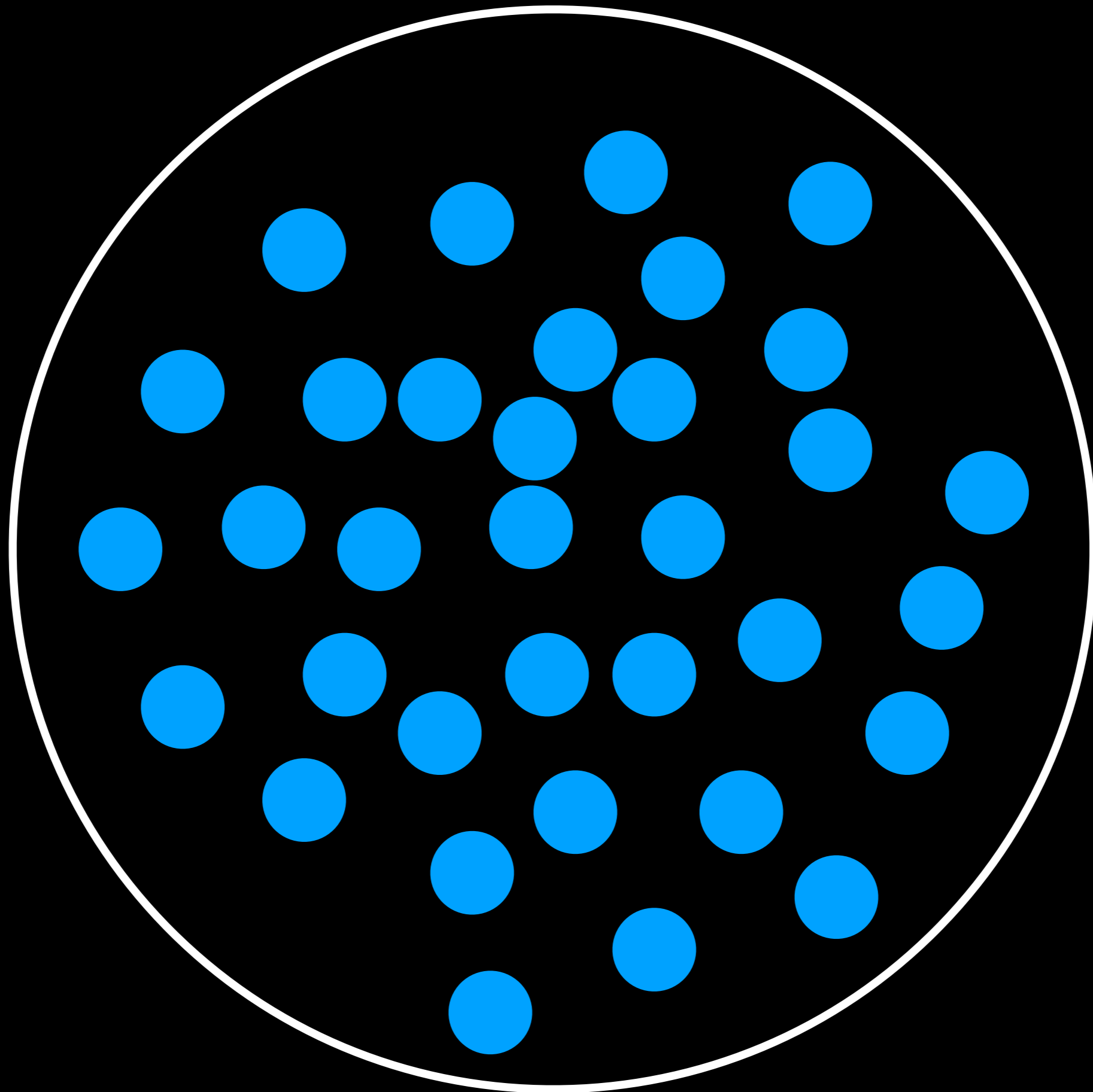
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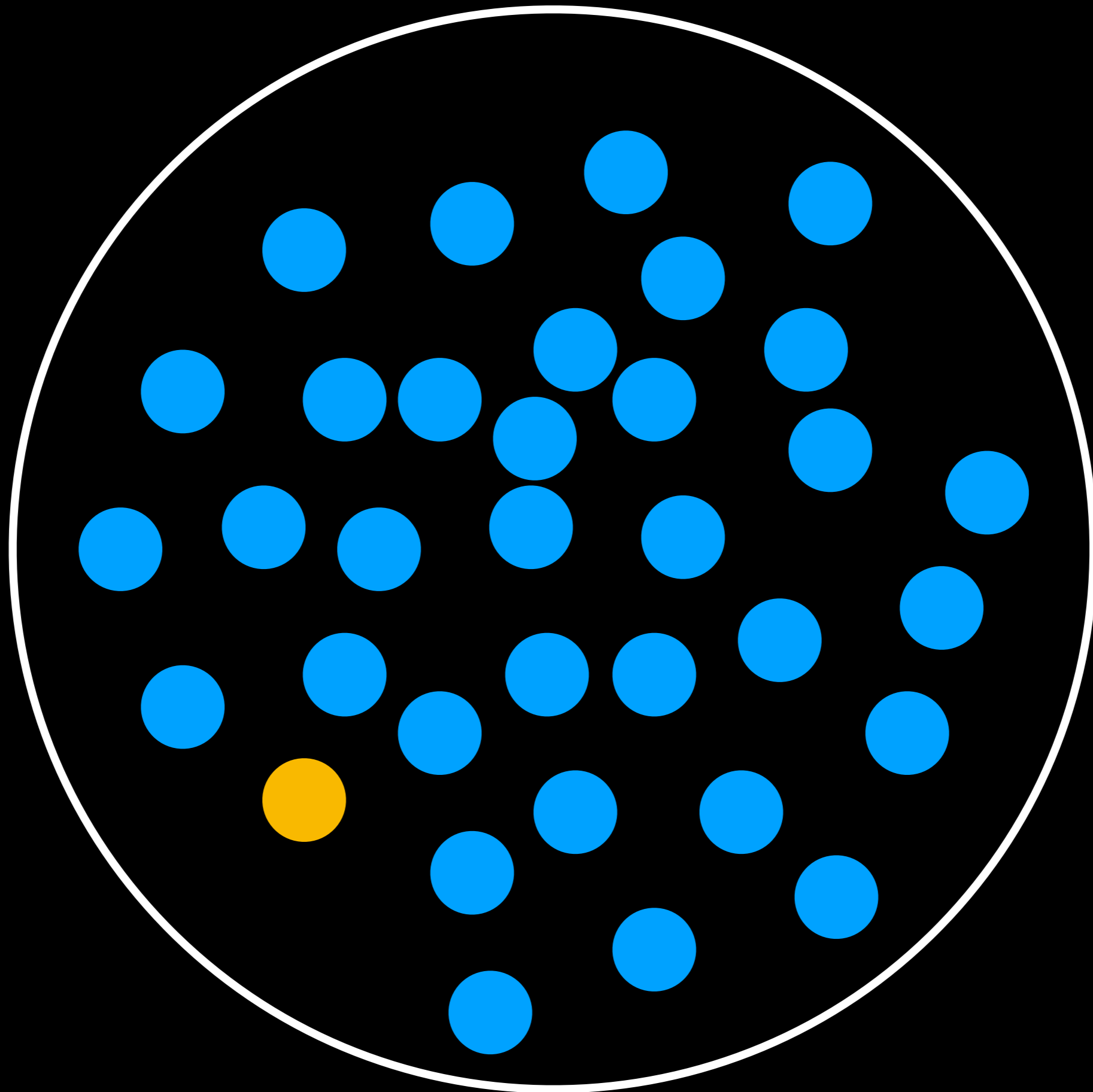


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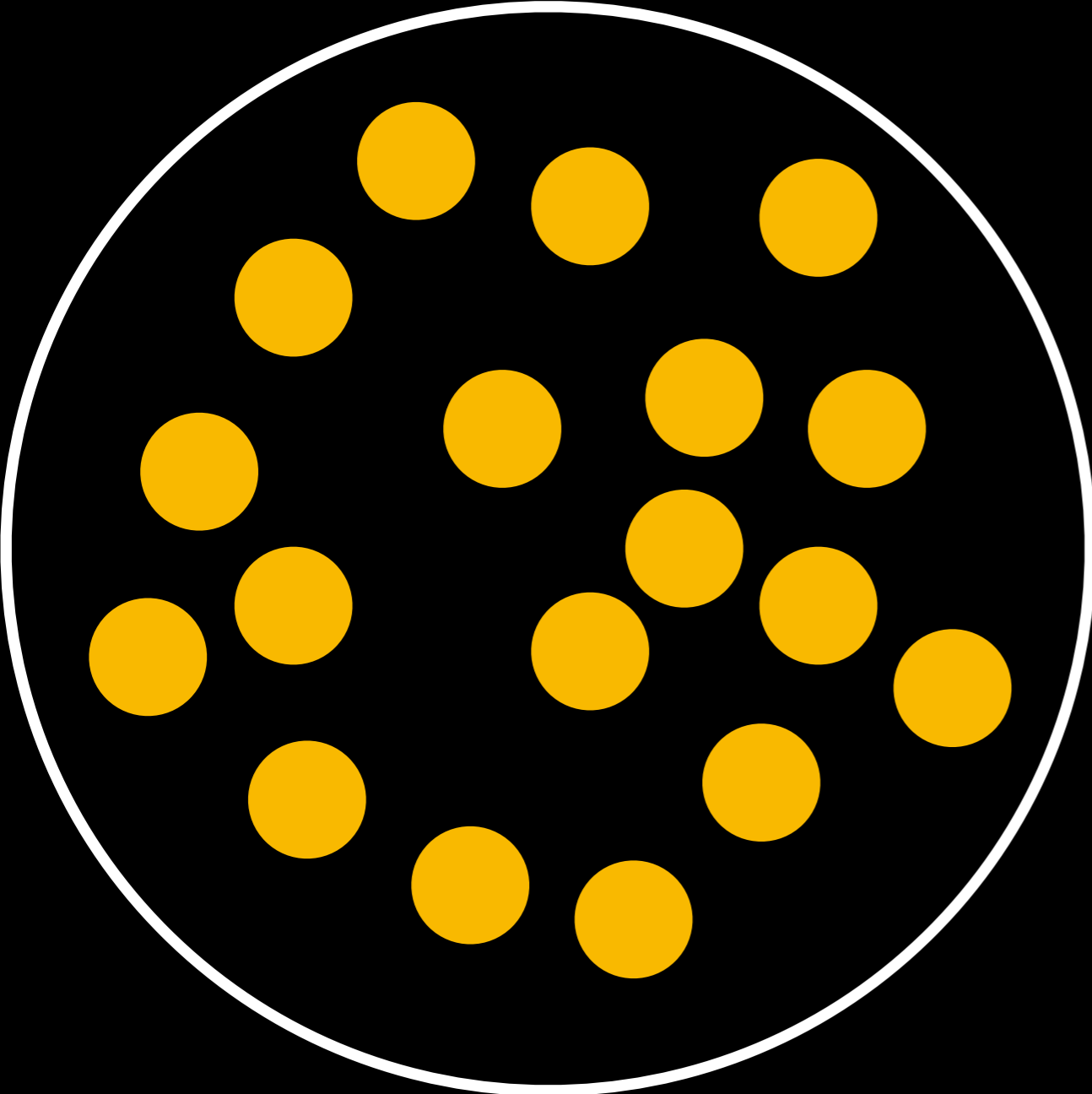
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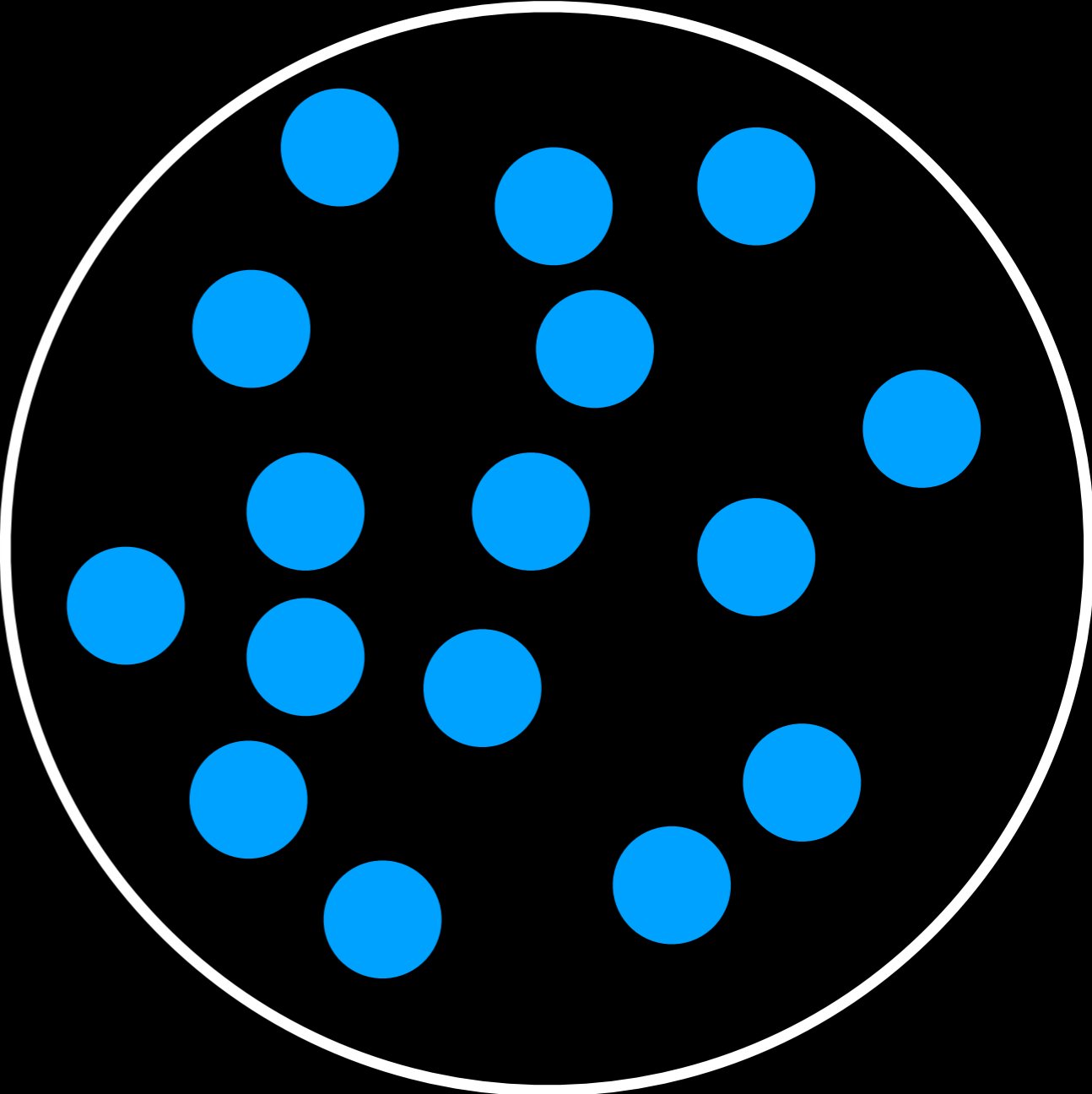




Human Nature Traits

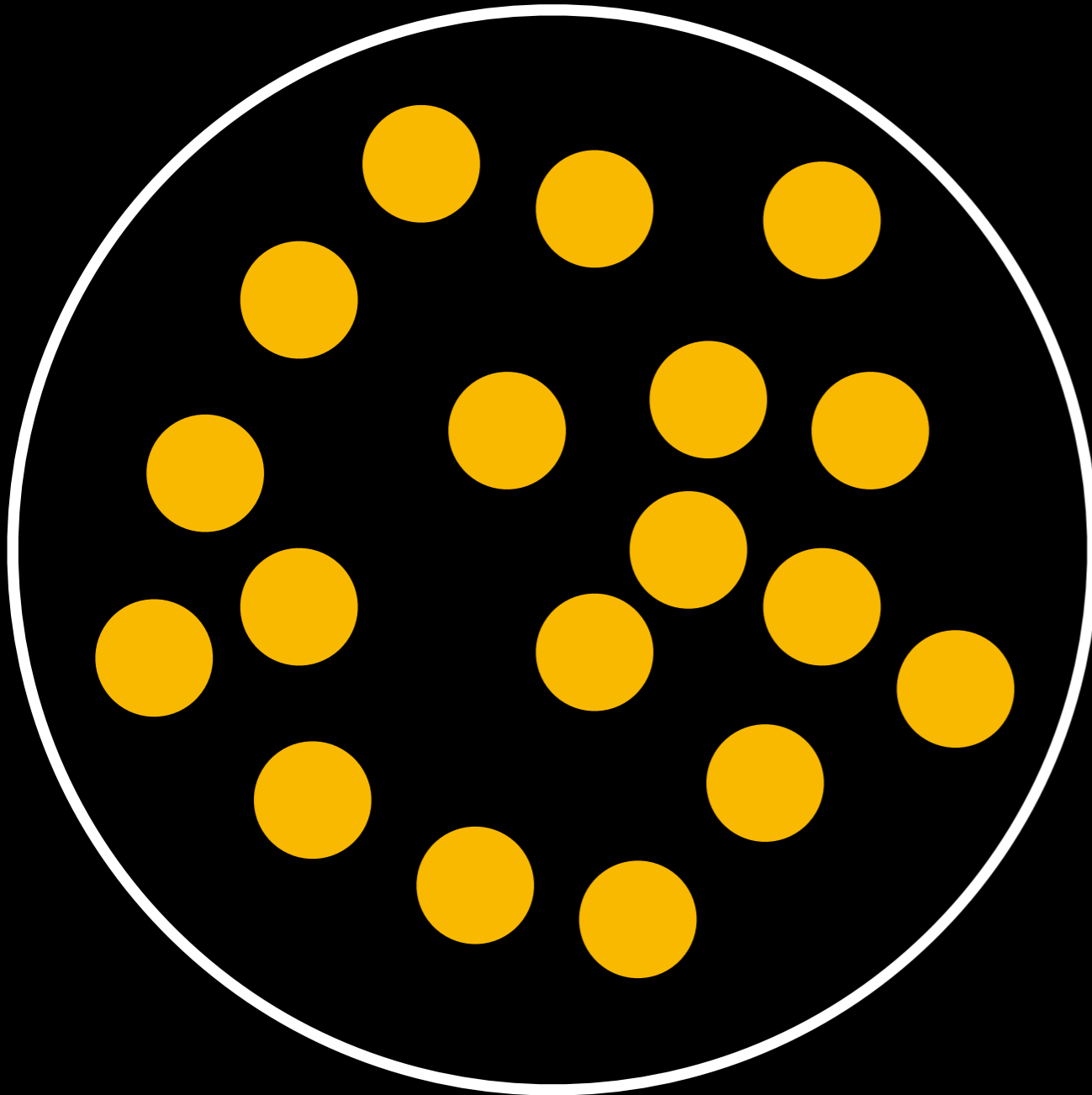


Other Traits

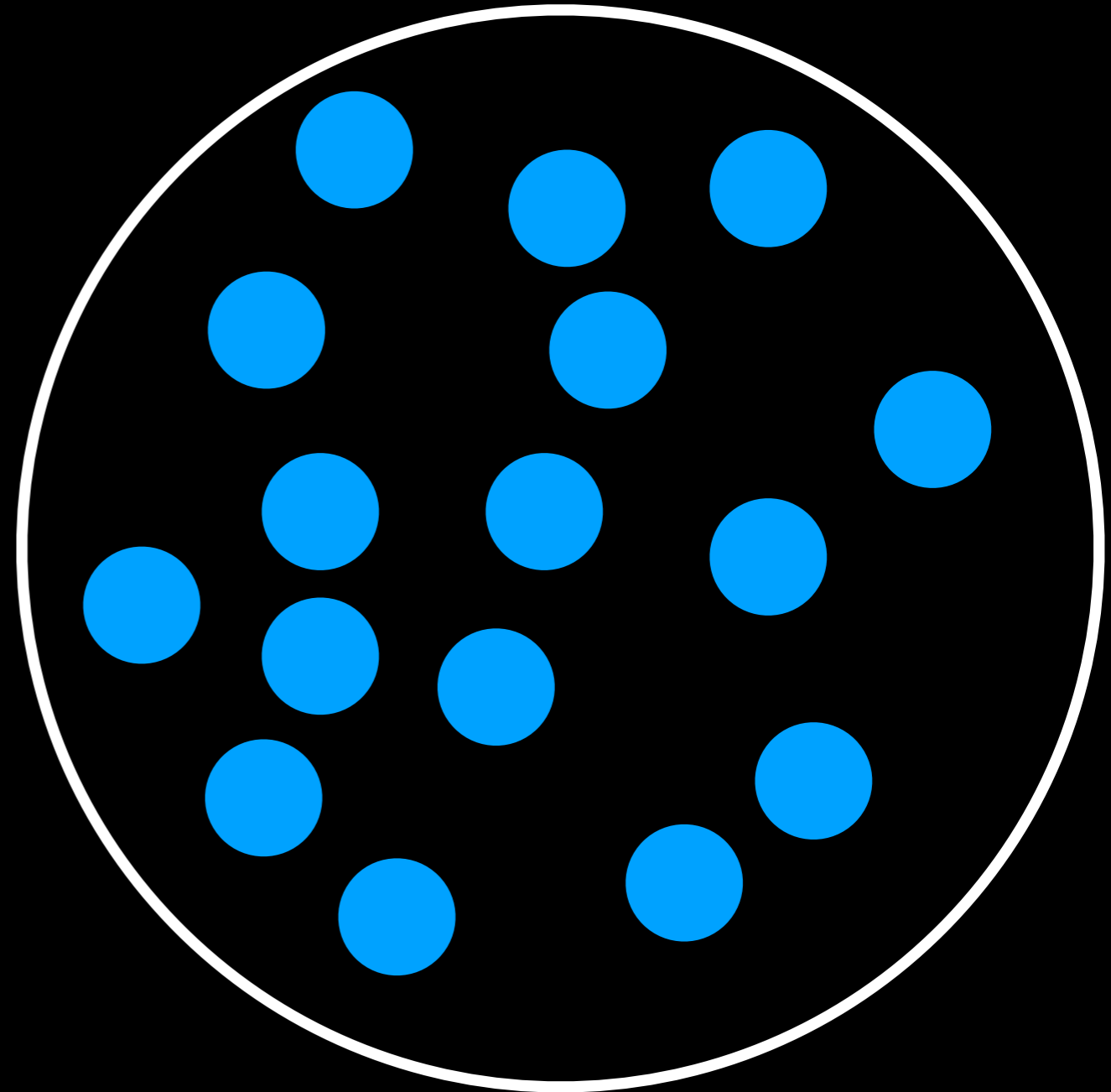


The Trait-Bin Approach

Human Nature Traits



Other Traits



The Trait-Bin Approach



Philosophical Psychology
Vol. 21, No. 3, June 2008, 321–329

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A Plea for Human Nature

Edouard Machery

Philosophers of biology, such as David Hull and Michael Ghiselin, have argued that the notion of human nature is incompatible with modern evolutionary biology and they have recommended rejecting this notion. In this article, I rebut this argument: I show that an important notion of human nature is compatible with modern evolutionary biology.

Keywords: Evolutionary Psychology; Human Evolution; Human Nature; Species

The notion of human nature has fallen into disrepute in various quarters and a remarkable number of charges have been filed against it. Some social critics have alleged that it contributes to the justification of oppressive social norms (e.g., Haraway, 1989; Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984; for discussion, see Pinker, 2002), while some philosophers, such as Sartre, have challenged it on metaphysical grounds.¹ More seriously, prominent philosophers of biology have argued that the notion of human nature is incompatible with modern evolutionary biology. In a well-known article, David Hull writes (1986; see also Sober, 1980):

All the ingenuity which has been exercised trying to show that all human beings are essentially the same might be better used trying to explain why we must all be essentially the same in order to have such things as human rights. (...) Until this question is answered, I remain suspicious of continued claims about the existence and importance of human nature. (pp. 11–12)

Evolutionary biologist Michael Ghiselin concurs (1997):

What does evolution teach us about human nature? It tells us that human nature is a superstition. (p. 1)

And, more recently, David Buller has attacked evolutionary psychologists for endorsing the notion of human nature (2005):

The idea of a universal human nature is deeply antithetical to a truly evolutionary view of our species... A truly *evolutionary* psychology should abandon the quest

Edouard Machery is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh. Correspondence to: Edouard Machery, Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Pittsburgh, 1017 CL, Pittsburgh, PA, 15260, USA. Email: machery@pitt.edu

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The Trait-Bin Approach

Human nature should be defined as the bin of traits:

1. Possessed by a majority of humans

2. A product of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*

The Trait-Bin Approach

1. Possessed by a majority of humans

Human nature not definitive of *Homo sapiens*

2. A product of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*

The Trait-Bin Approach

1. Possessed by a majority of humans

Human nature not definitive of *Homo sapiens*

Vivipary, lactation, menopause

2. A product of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*

The Trait-Bin Approach

2. A product of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*

Intended to exclude traits “exclusively due to enculturation or to social learning”

The Trait-Bin Approach

2. A product of the evolution of *Homo sapiens*

Intended to exclude traits “exclusively due to enculturation or to social learning”

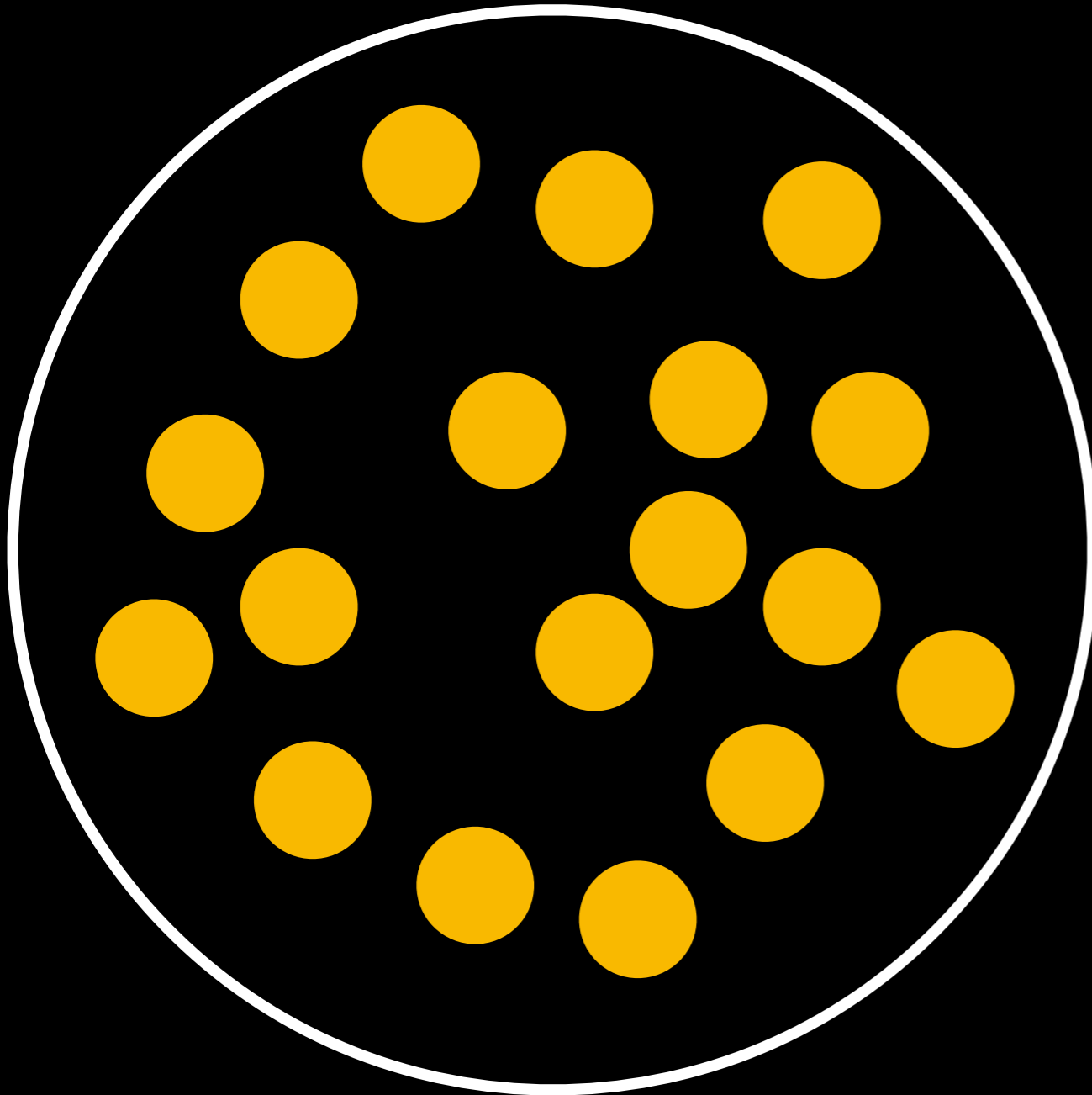
However...

Any human trait is going to be due to:

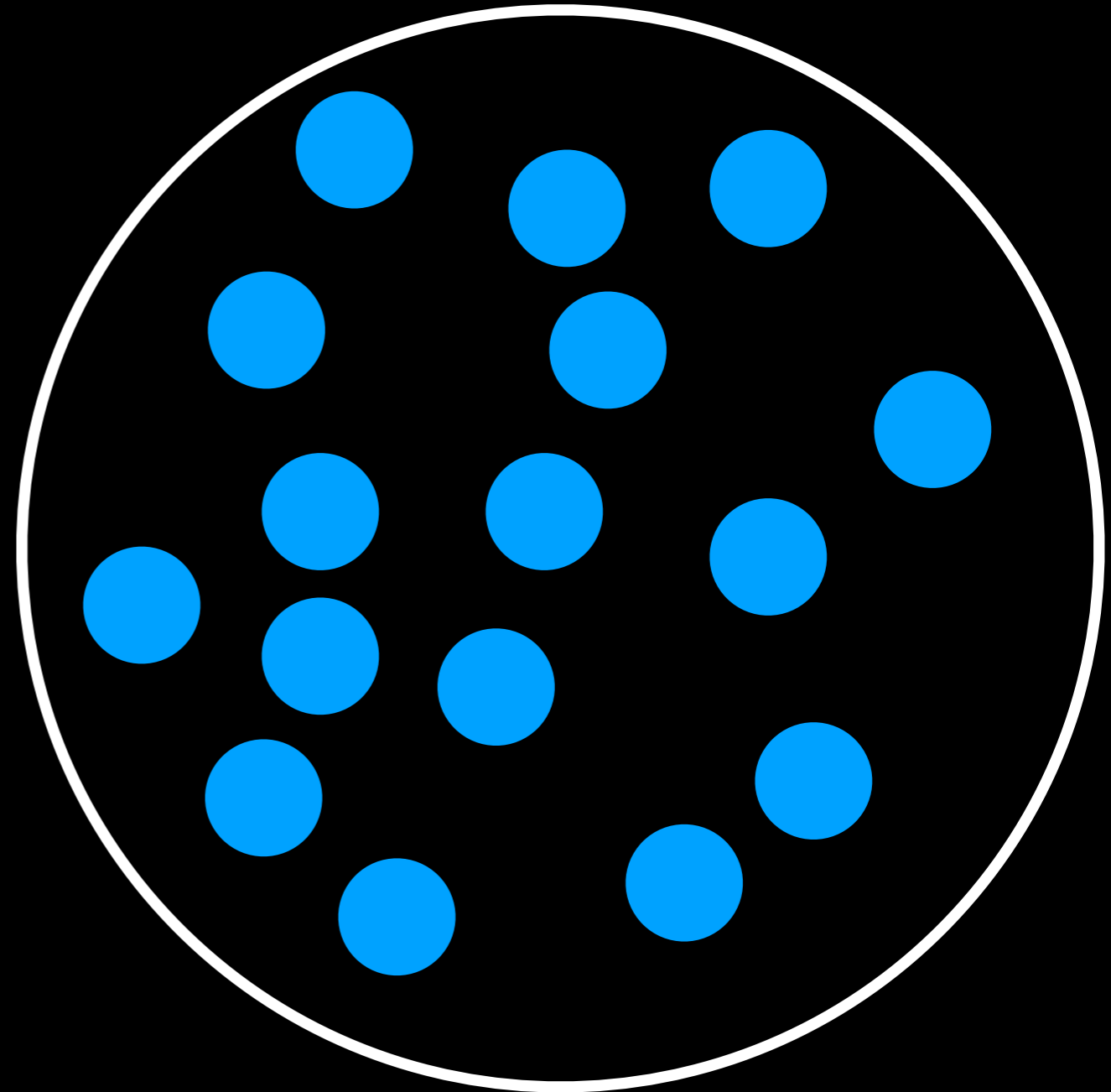
1. Heritable features of the organism
2. The particular environmental features the organism happens to encounter during its life.

The Trait-Bin Approach

Human Nature Traits



Other Traits

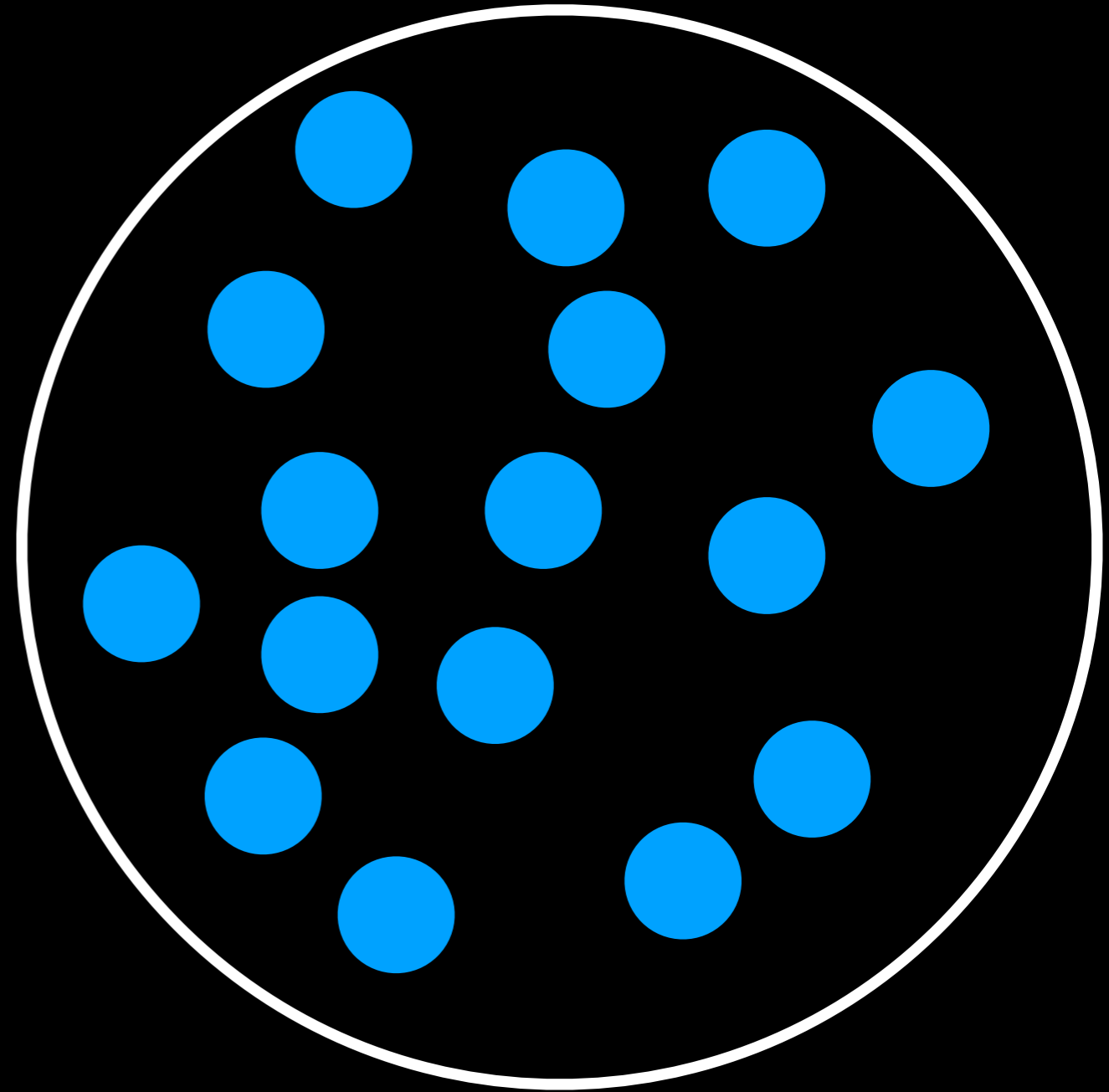
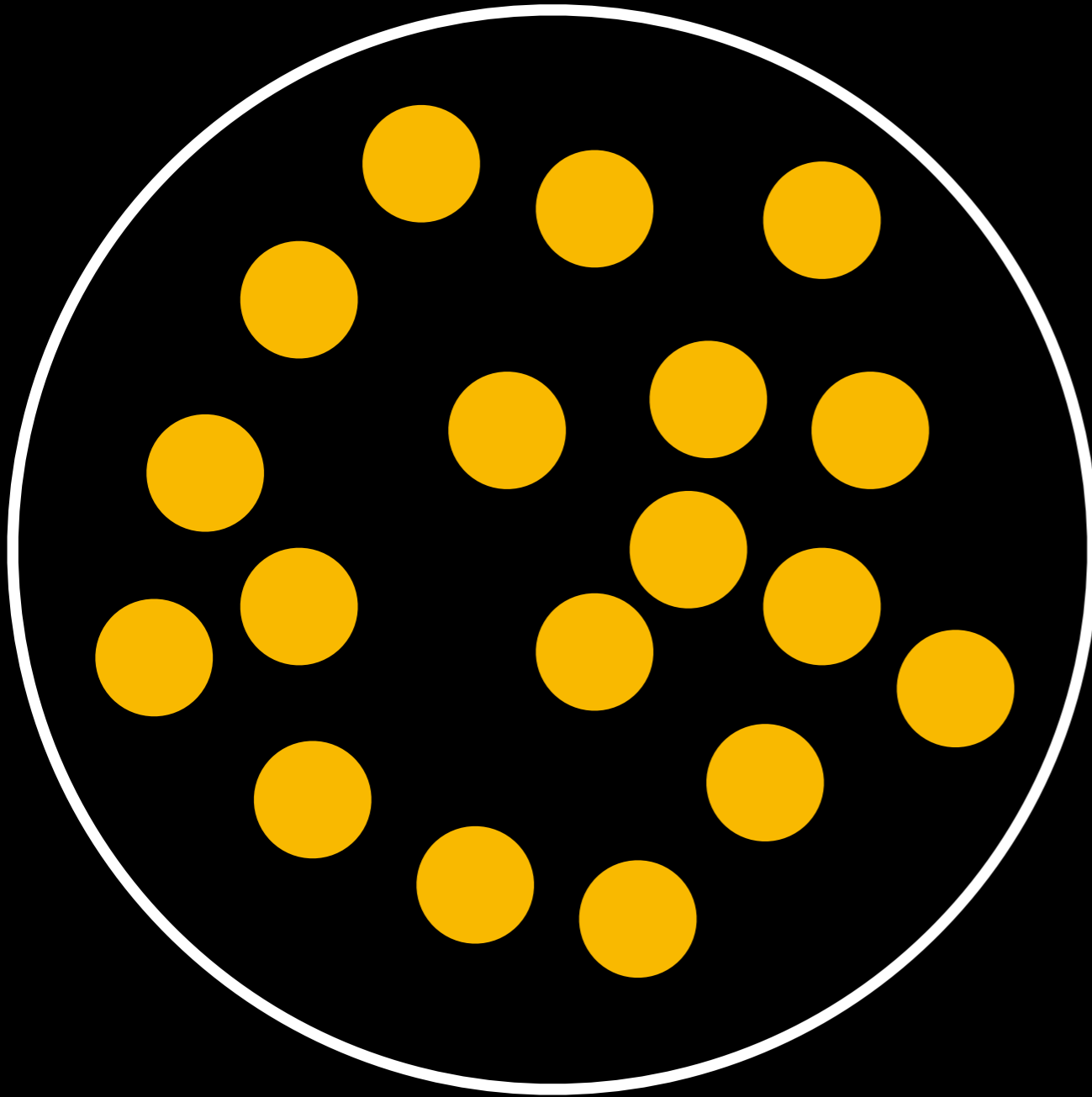


The Trait-~~Bin~~ Approach

cluster

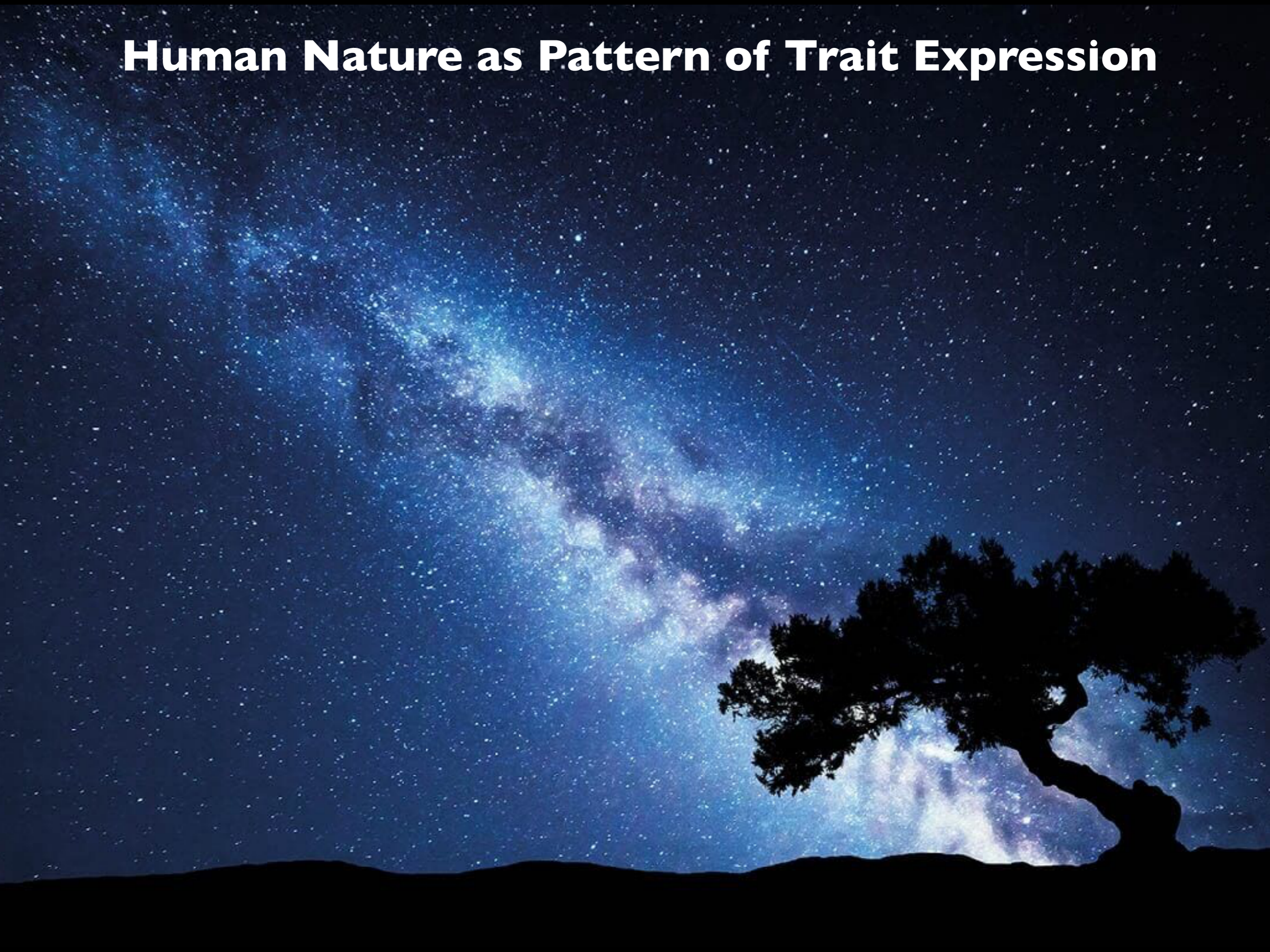
Human Nature Traits

Other Traits



Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression

Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression



Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression



A star-bin theorist

The nature of the night sky:
A bin of stars, the ones viewable under
the majority of conditions.

Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression



A star-cluster theorist

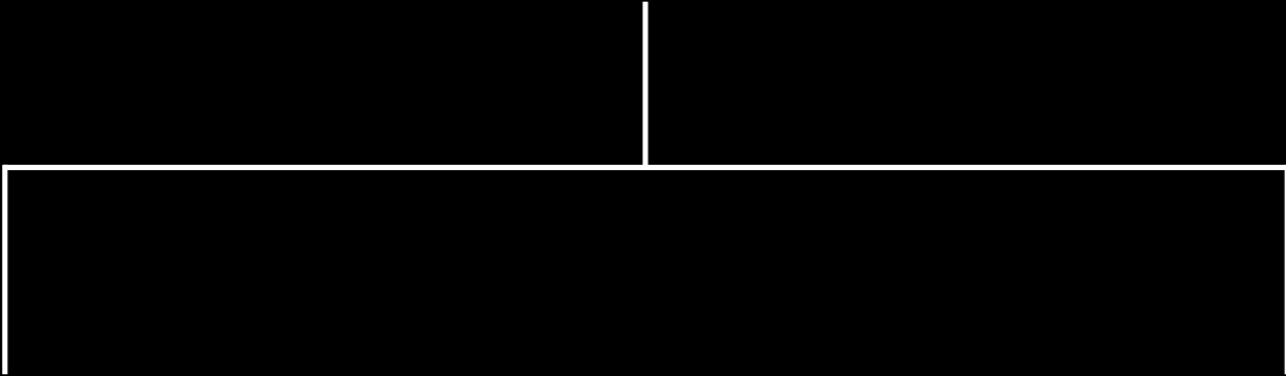
The nature of the night sky:
The patterns of clusters of the stars,
such as constellations.

**Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression
(over actual and possible life histories)**

**Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression
(over actual and possible life histories)**

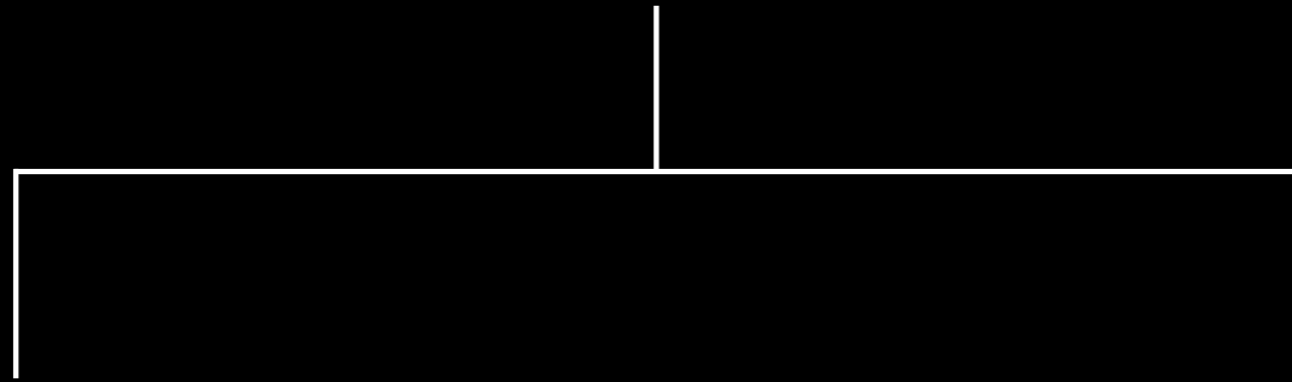
Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression

Fitness



Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression

Realized Fitness

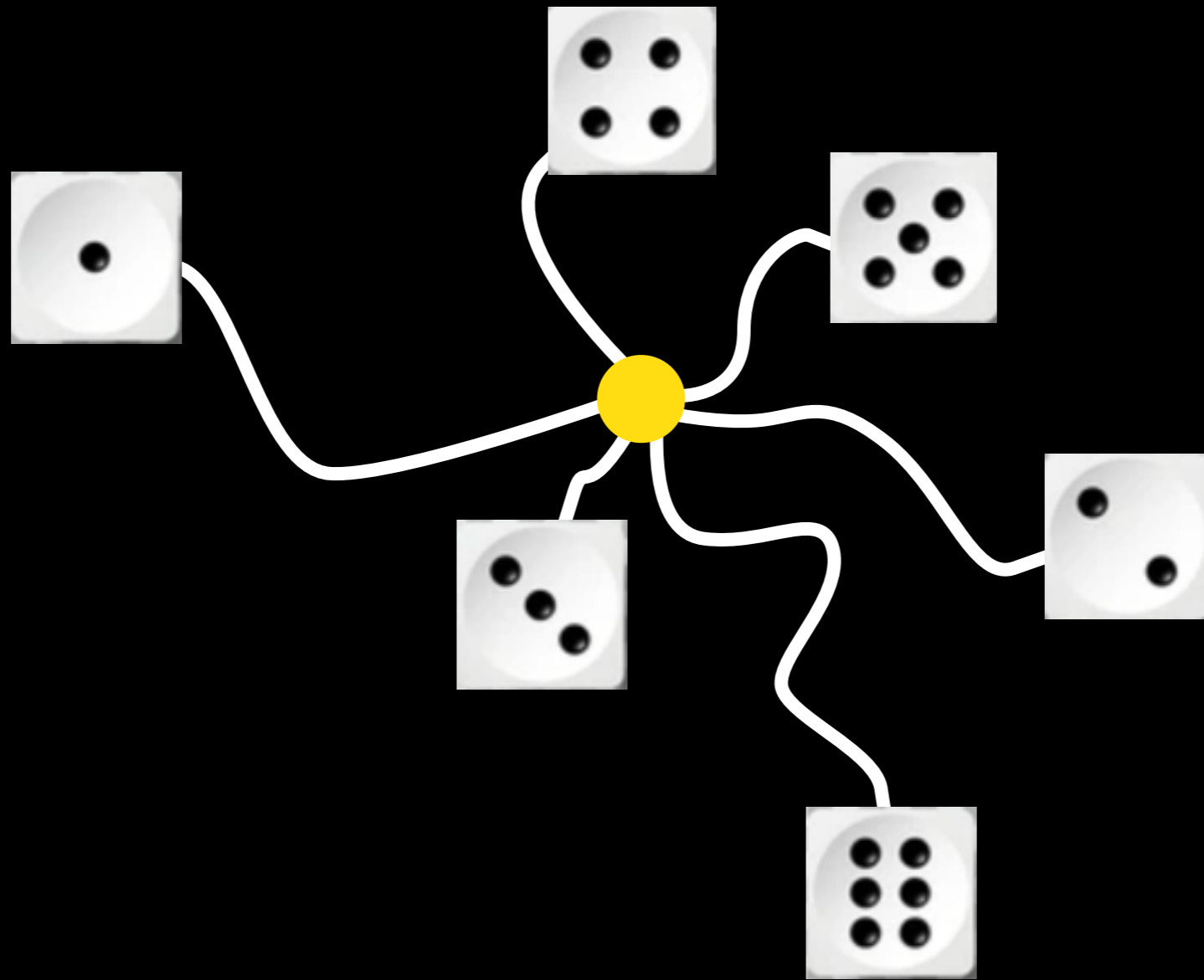


Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression

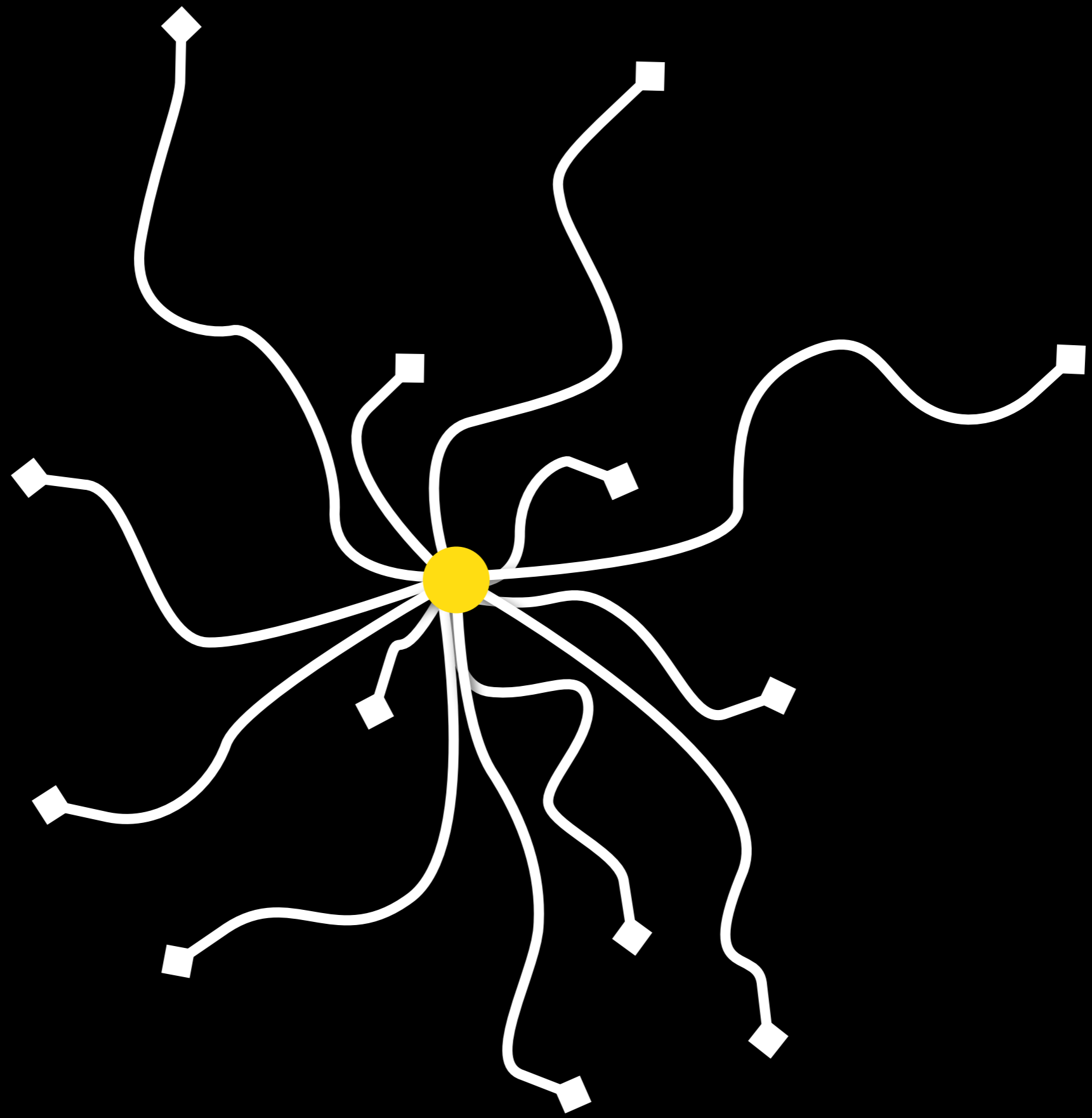
Fitness



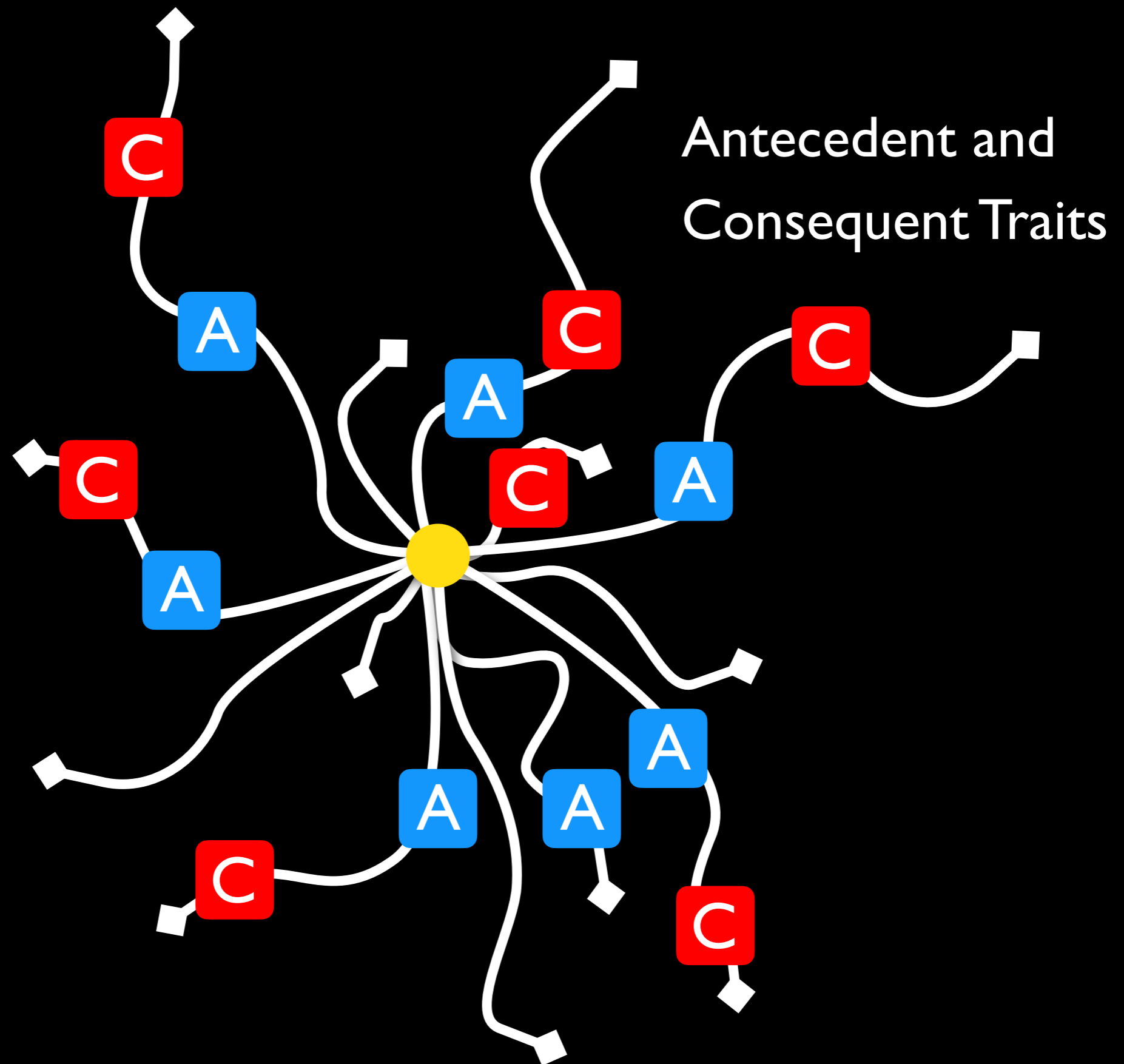
Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression



Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression



Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression



Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression

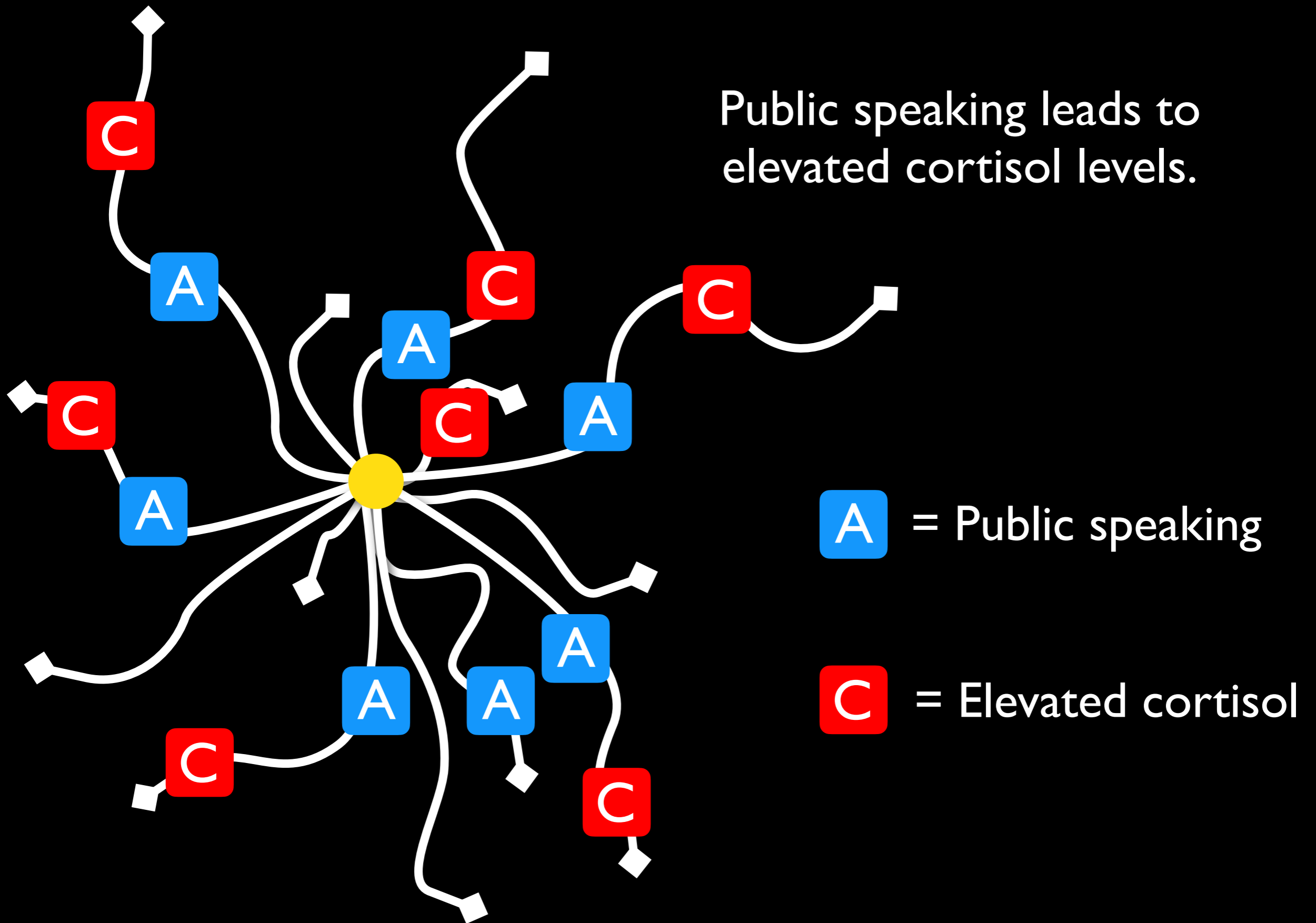
The Life History Trait Cluster (**LTC**) Account

Individual nature: the pattern of trait clusters within the individual's set of possible life histories.

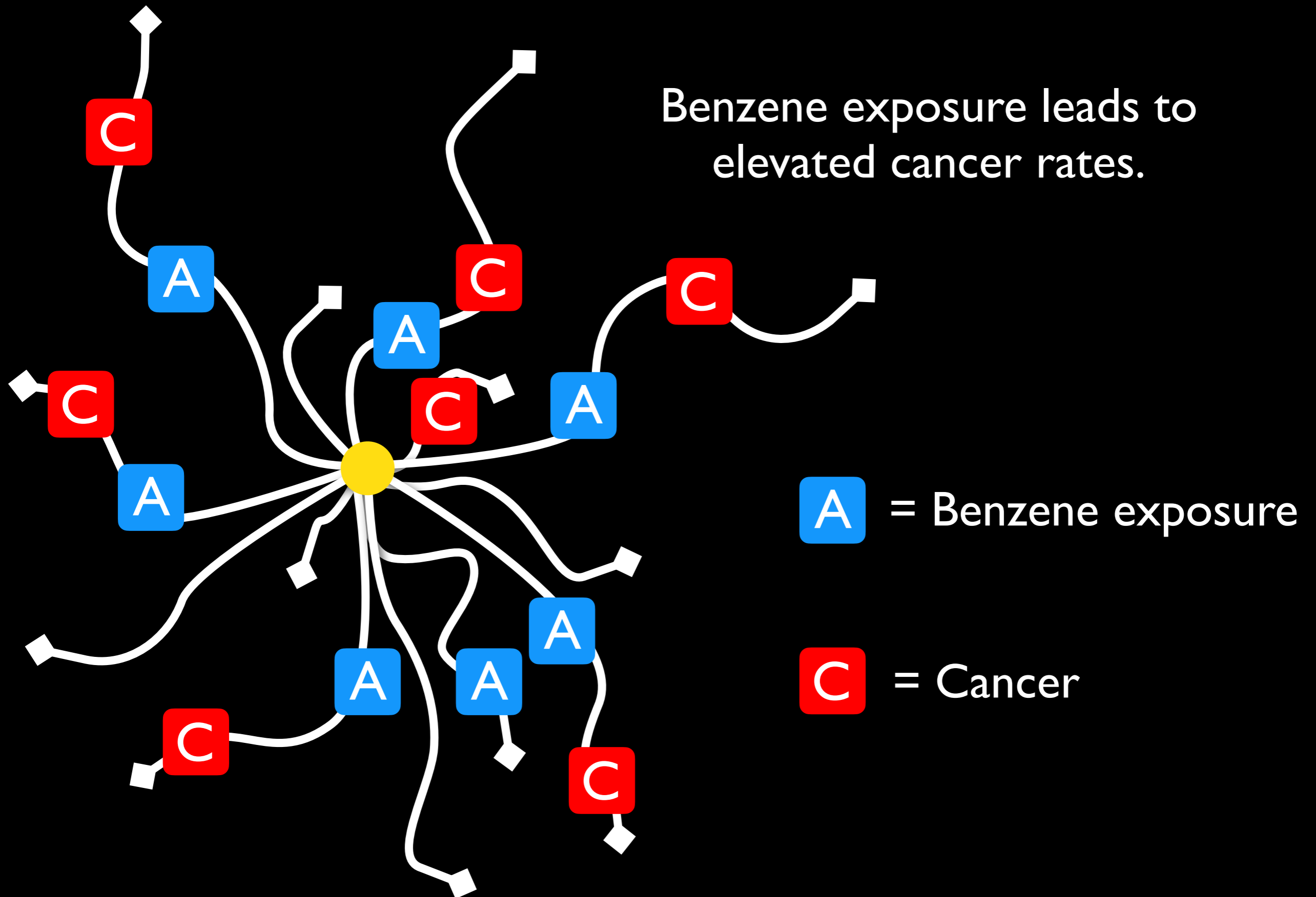
Human nature: the pattern of trait clusters within the totality of extant human possible life histories.

Uniquely human nature: the subset of human nature unique to *Homo sapiens*.

Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression

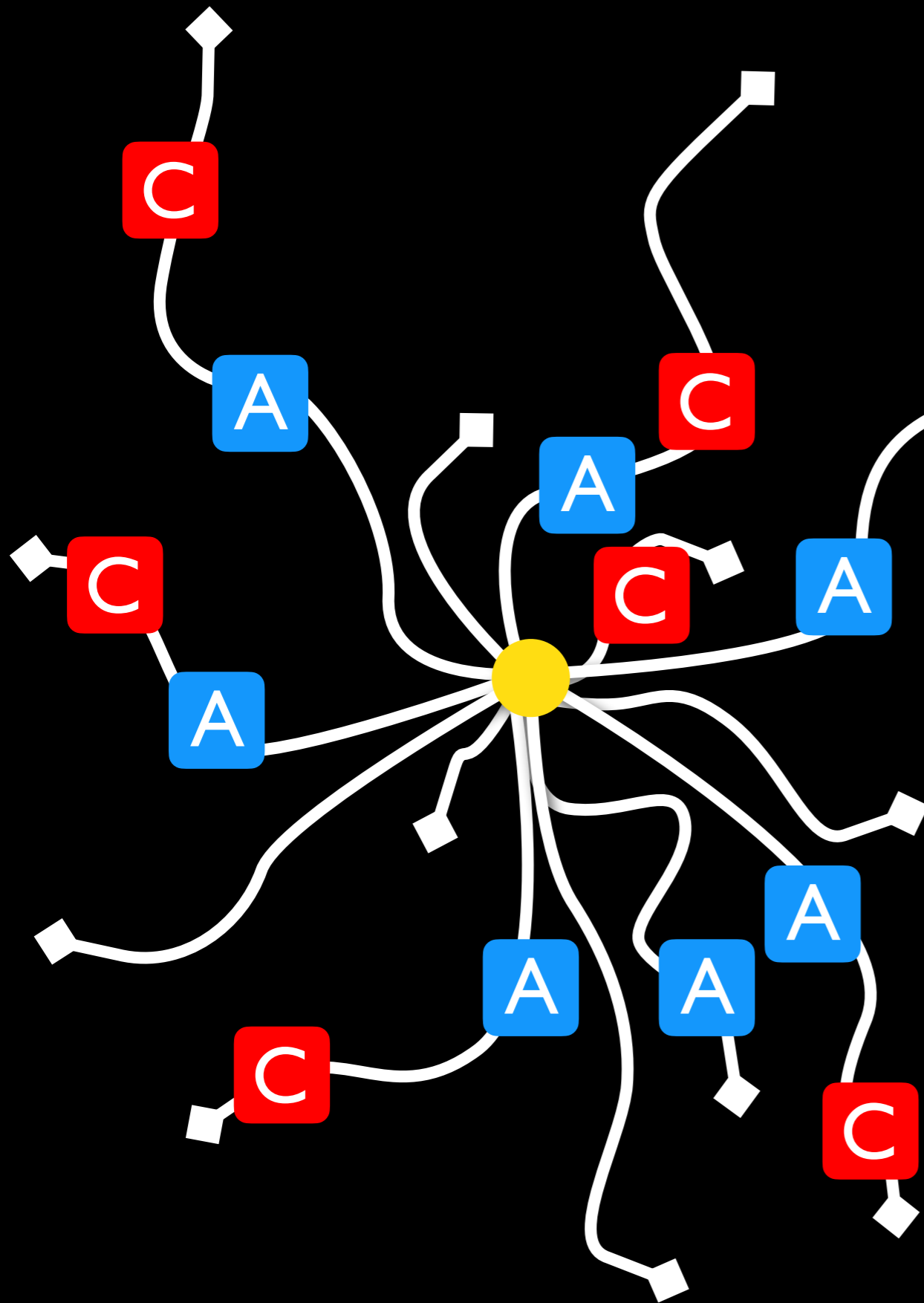


Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression



Human Nature as Pattern of Trait Expression

Benzene exposure leads to elevated cancer rates.





Carl Rogers

A Note on 'The Nature of Man' (1956)



Carl Rogers

A Note on 'The Nature of Man'

I do not discover man to be well characterized in his basic nature by such terms as fundamentally hostile, antisocial, destructive, evil.

I do not discover man to be, in his basic nature, completely without a nature, a tabula rasa on which anything may be written, nor malleable putty which can be shaped into any form.

I do not discover man to be essentially a perfect being, sadly warped and corrupted by society.

A Note on 'The Nature of Man'

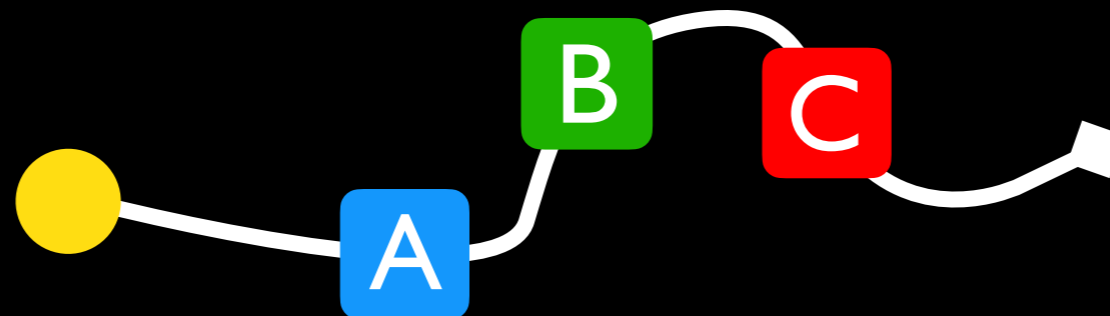
In my experience I have discovered man to have characteristics which seem inherent in his species, and the terms which have at different times seemed to me descriptive of these characteristics are such terms as positive, forward-moving, constructive, realistic, trustworthy.

I maintain that each has a basic nature, a common set of attributes generally characteristic of the species. Thus the sheep is by far the most gregarious or group-minded, the mouse the most generally timorous. No amount of training — therapeutic or otherwise — will make a lion out of the mouse, or vice versa, even though a wide degree of change is possible.

A Note on 'The Nature of Man'

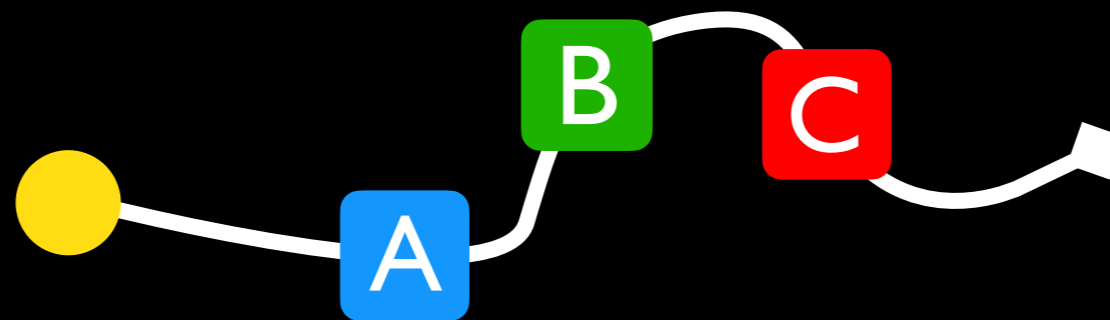
In my experience I have discovered man to have characteristics which seem **inherent in his species**, and the terms which have at different times seemed to me descriptive of these characteristics are such terms as positive, forward-moving, constructive, realistic, trustworthy.

I maintain that each has a basic nature, a common set of attributes generally characteristic of the species. Thus the sheep is by far the most gregarious or group-minded, the mouse the most generally timorous. **No amount of training — therapeutic or otherwise — will make a lion out of the mouse, or vice versa, even though a wide degree of change is possible.**



A Note on 'The Nature of Man'

I maintain that each has a basic nature, a common set of attributes generally characteristic of the species. Thus the sheep is by far the most gregarious or group-minded, the mouse the most generally timorous. **No amount of training** — therapeutic or otherwise — will **make a lion out of the mouse, or vice versa, even though a wide degree of change is possible.**



To get the same outcome, a different set of interventions is necessary.

On Becoming a Person (1954)

Christian religions and Freud:



Surface good

Underlying bad

(sin, the id)

On Becoming a Person

“Underlying the bitterness and hatred and the desire to get back at the world which has cheated her, is a much less anti-social feeling, a deep experience of having been hurt. And it is equally clear that at this deeper level she has no desire to put her murderous feelings into action. She dislikes them and would like to be rid of them.”



Surface good

Underlying bad

Deep good

On Becoming a Person

“Underlying the bitterness and the desire to get back at the world is the experience of the growing recognition that the deepest experience of having been deceived is equally personal, at the deepest level of human nature, is opposite in nature, is basically an action. Sales is like with the man, or a like to be a distichem.”

Surface good

Underlying bad

Deep good



On Becoming a Person

“One of the most revolutionary concepts to grow out of our clinical experience is the growing recognition that the innermost core of man’s nature, the deepest layers of his personality, the base of his “animal nature,” is positive in nature - is basically socialized, **forward-moving**, rational and realistic.”

Surface good

Underlying bad

Deep good

The actualizing tendency

The actualizing tendency



Sea palm (*Postelsia palmaeformis*)

The actualizing tendency



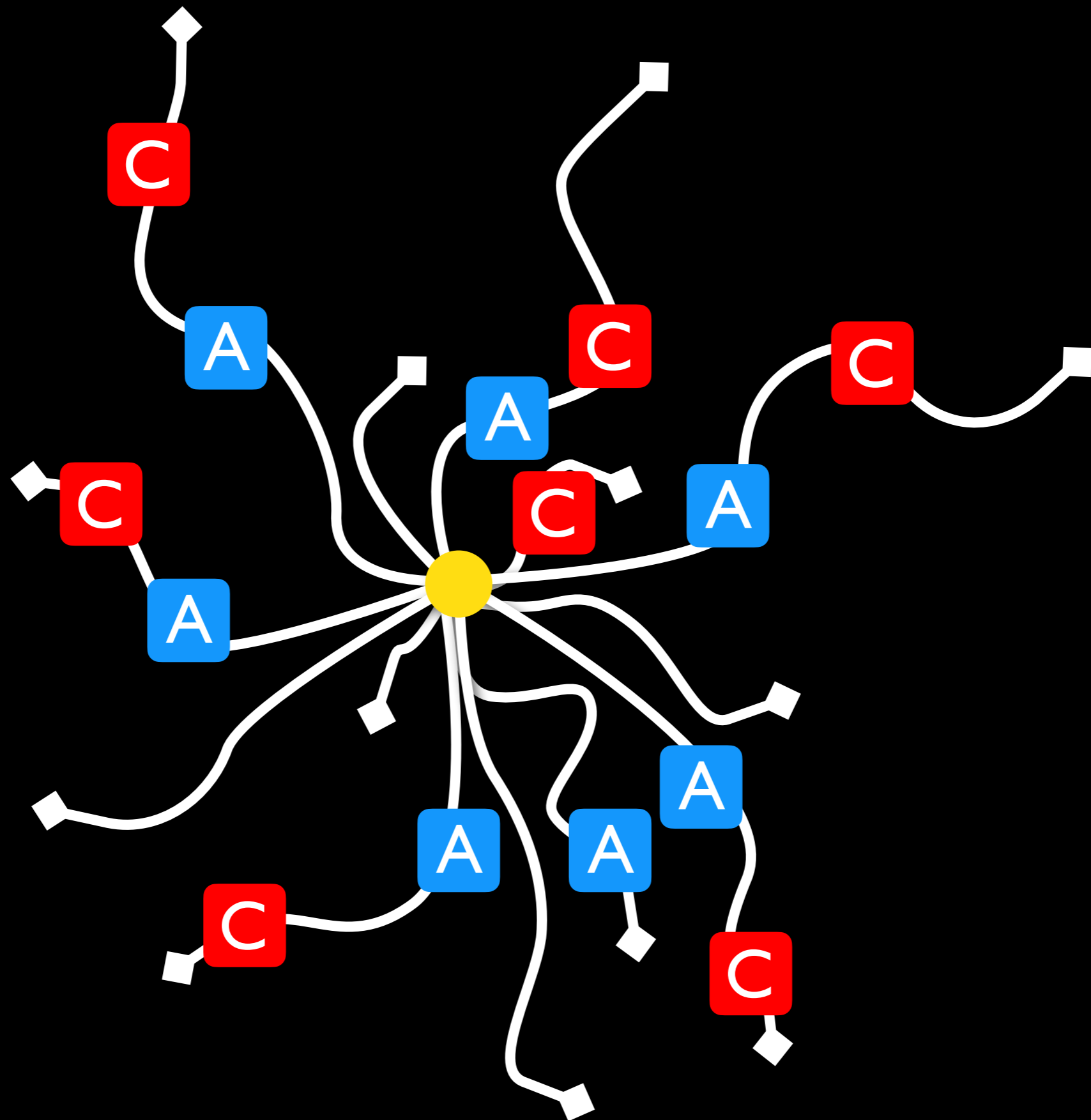
The actualizing tendency



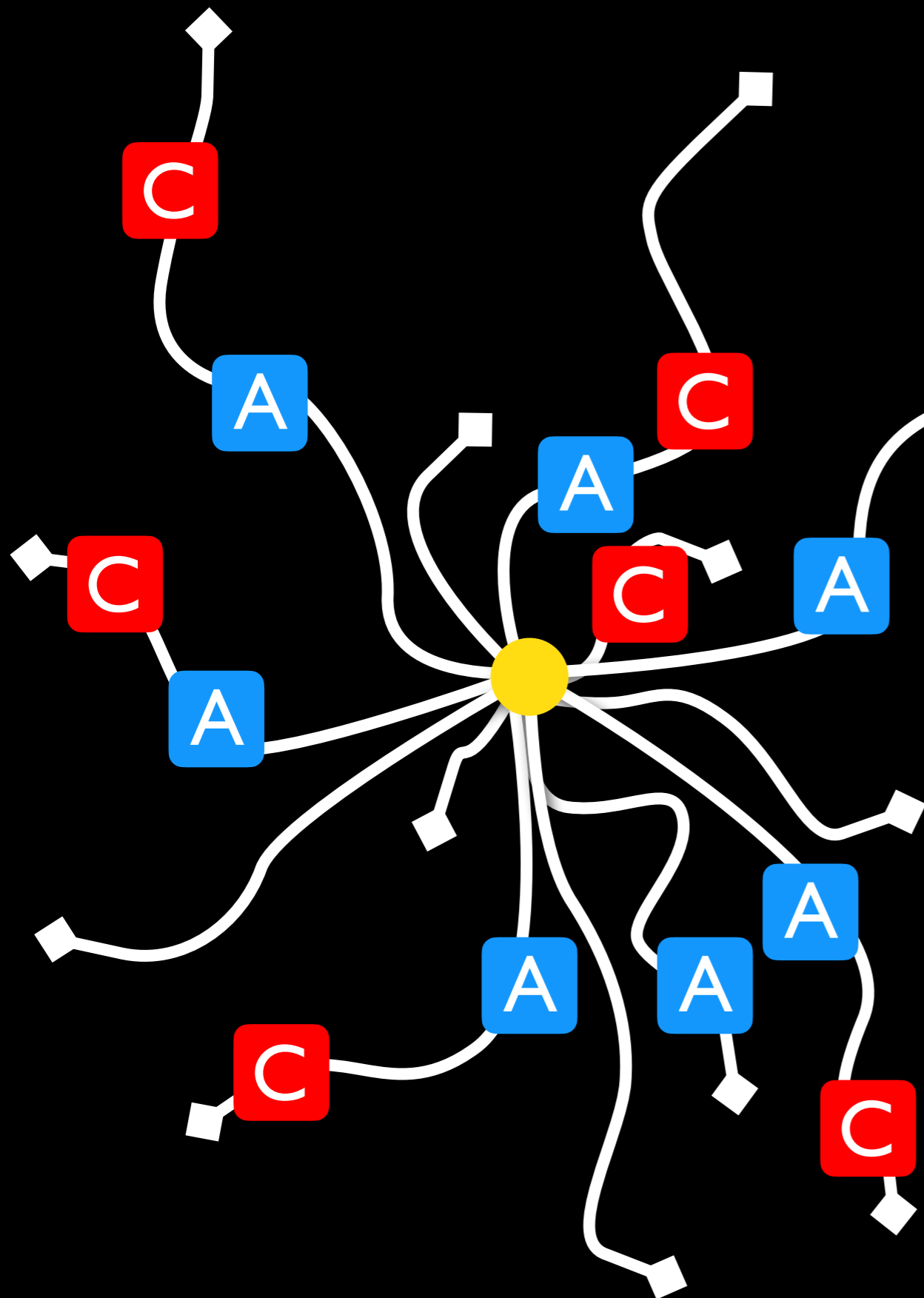
The actualizing tendency

“the directional trend which is evident in all organic and human life - the urge to expand, extend, develop, mature - the tendency to express and activate all the capacities of the organism, or the self.”

The actualizing tendency



The actualizing tendency



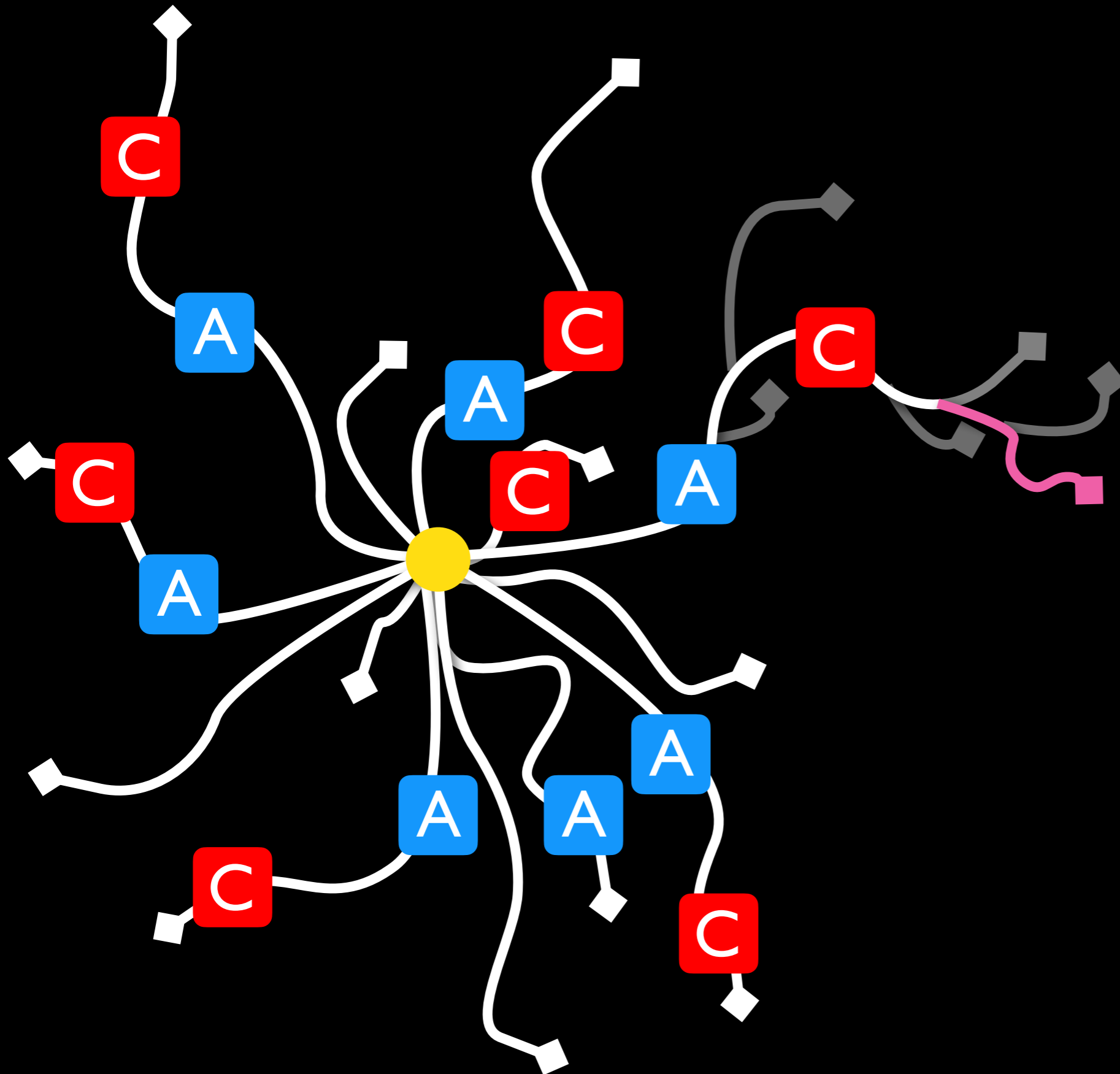
A skeptical response:

You are either dead
or
are realizing a potential.

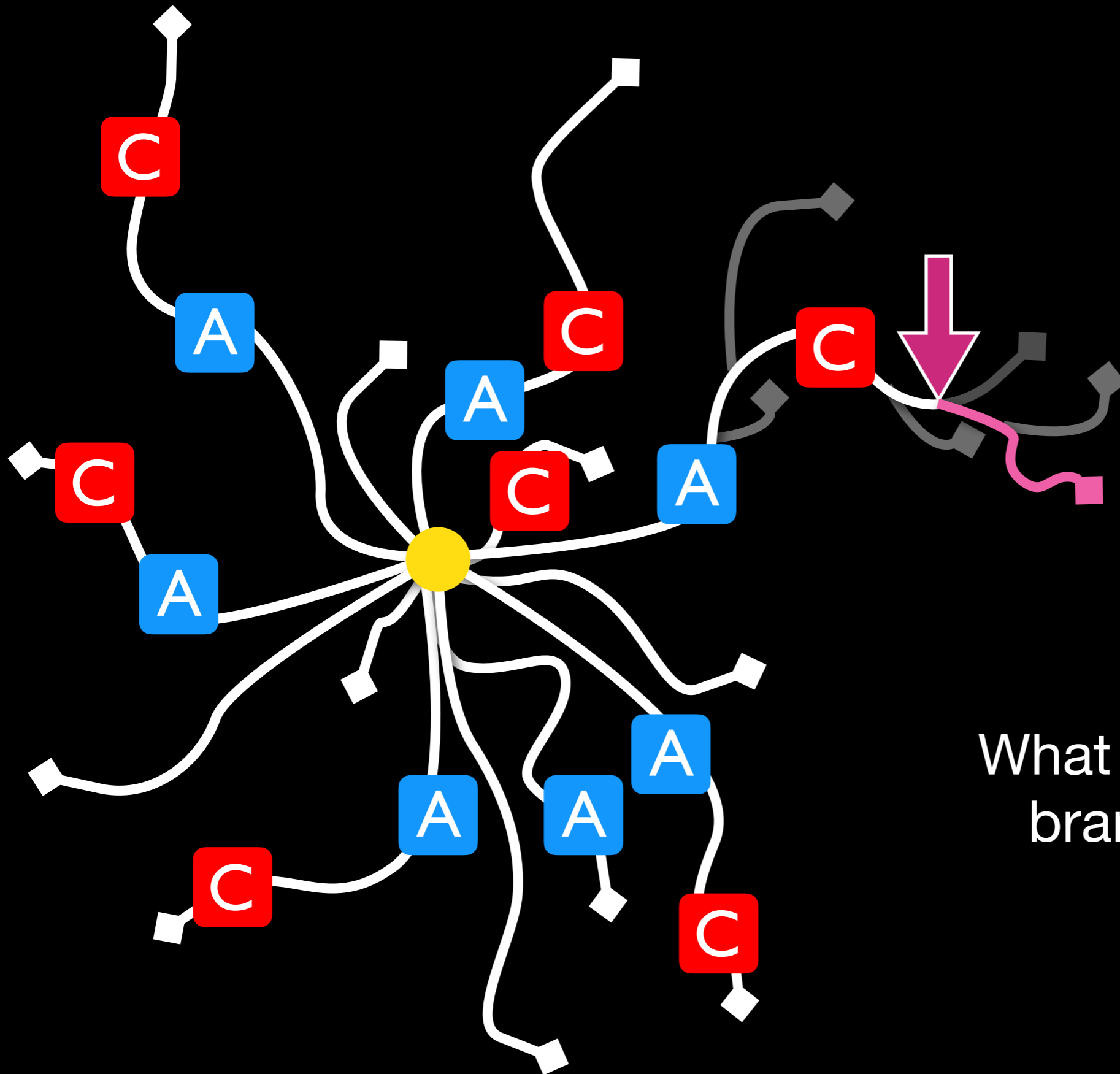
There is no other
way to be alive.

Therefore, the
actualizing
tendency is trivial.

The actualizing tendency

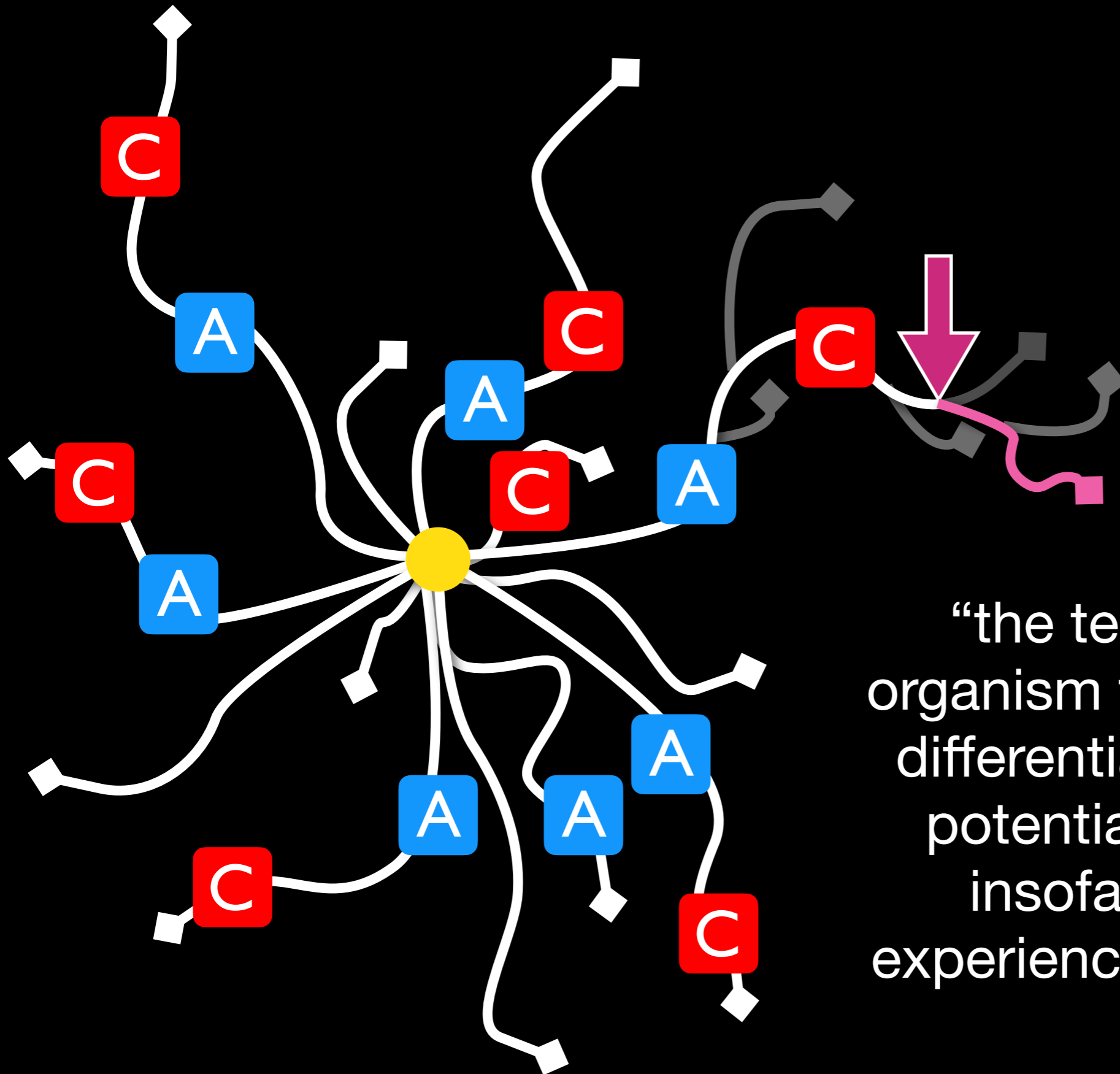


The actualizing tendency



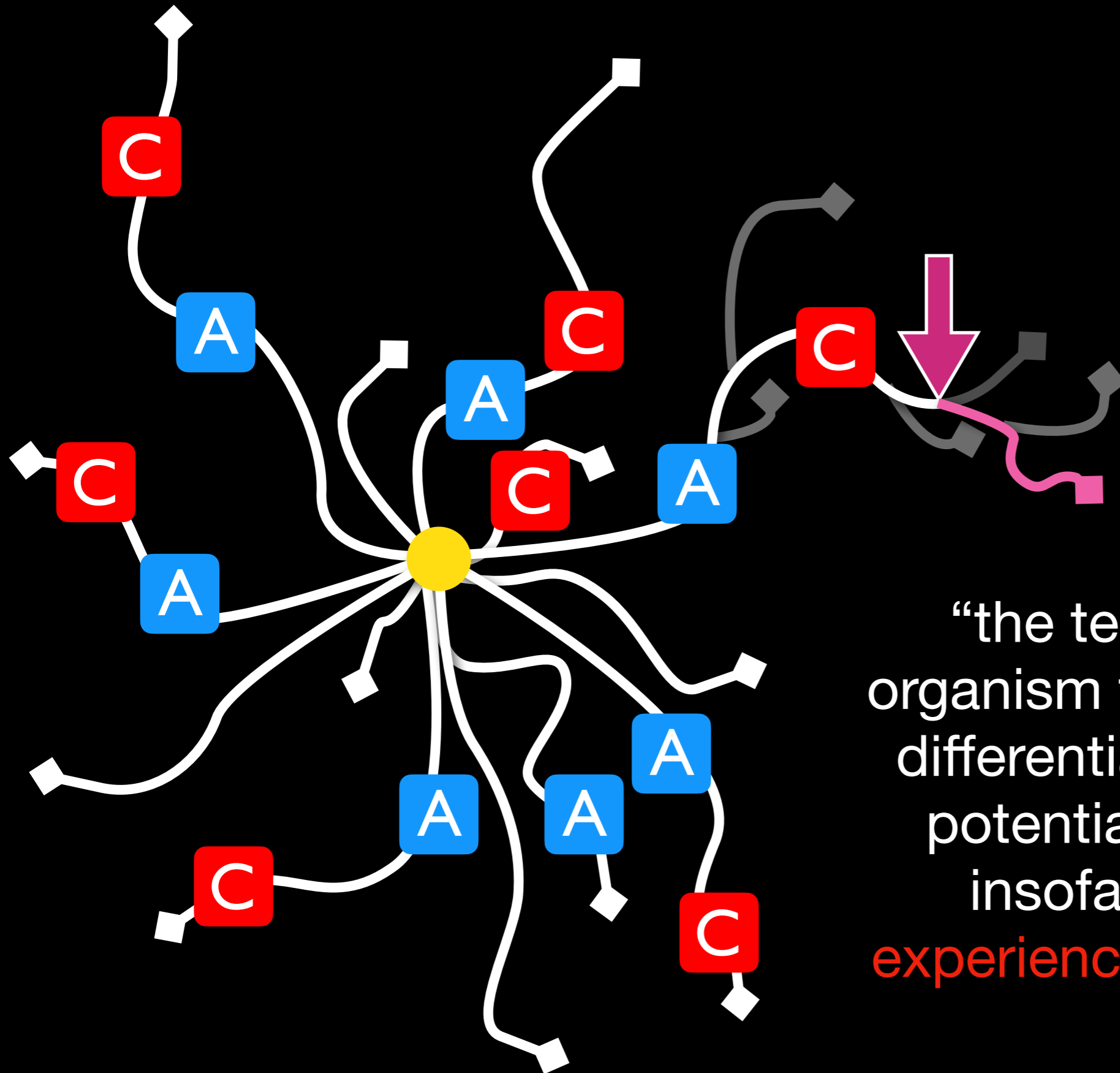
What occurs at the branch points?

The actualizing tendency



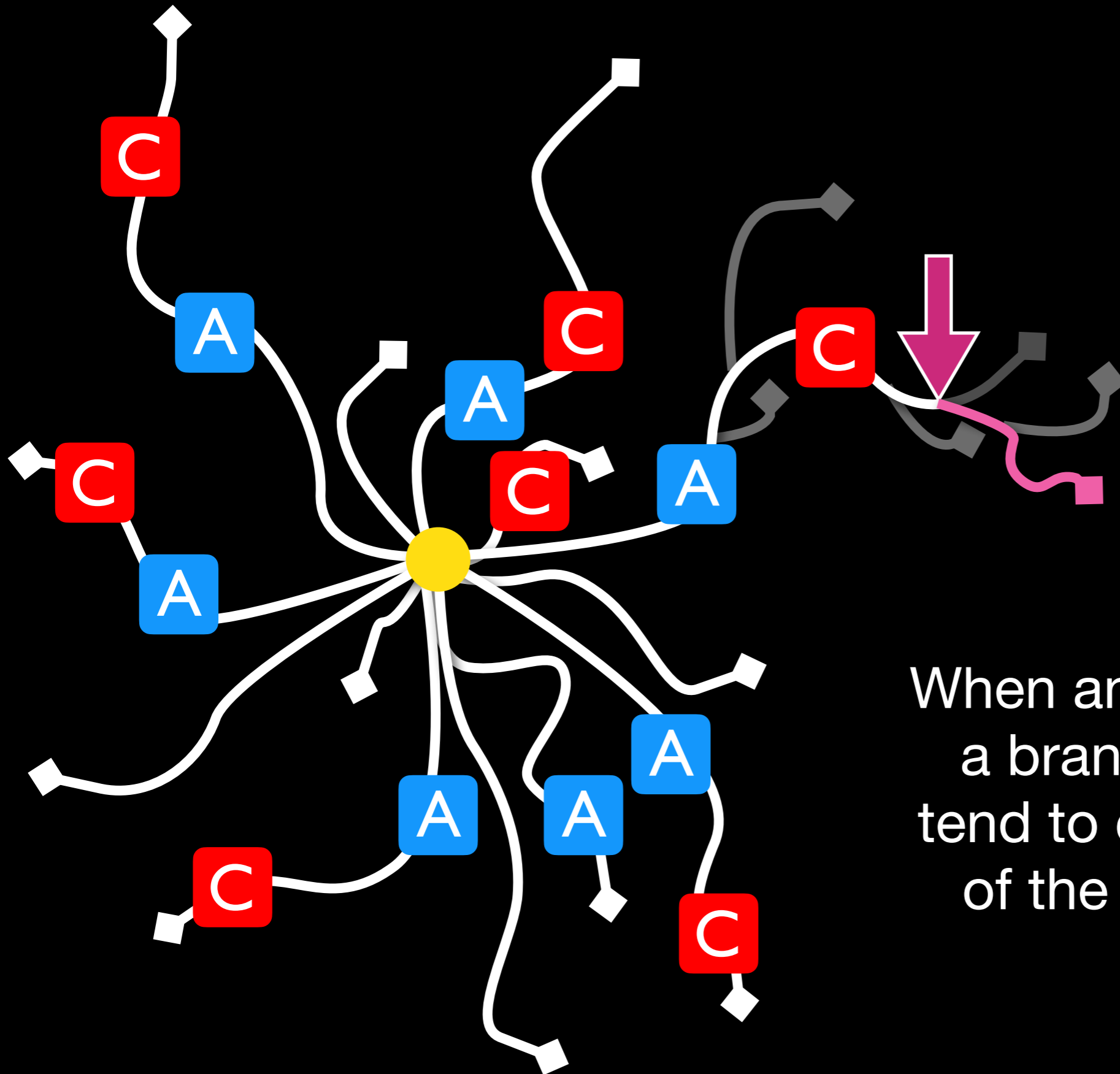
“the tendency for the organism to flow into all the differentiated channels of potential development, insofar as these are experienced as enhancing”

The actualizing tendency



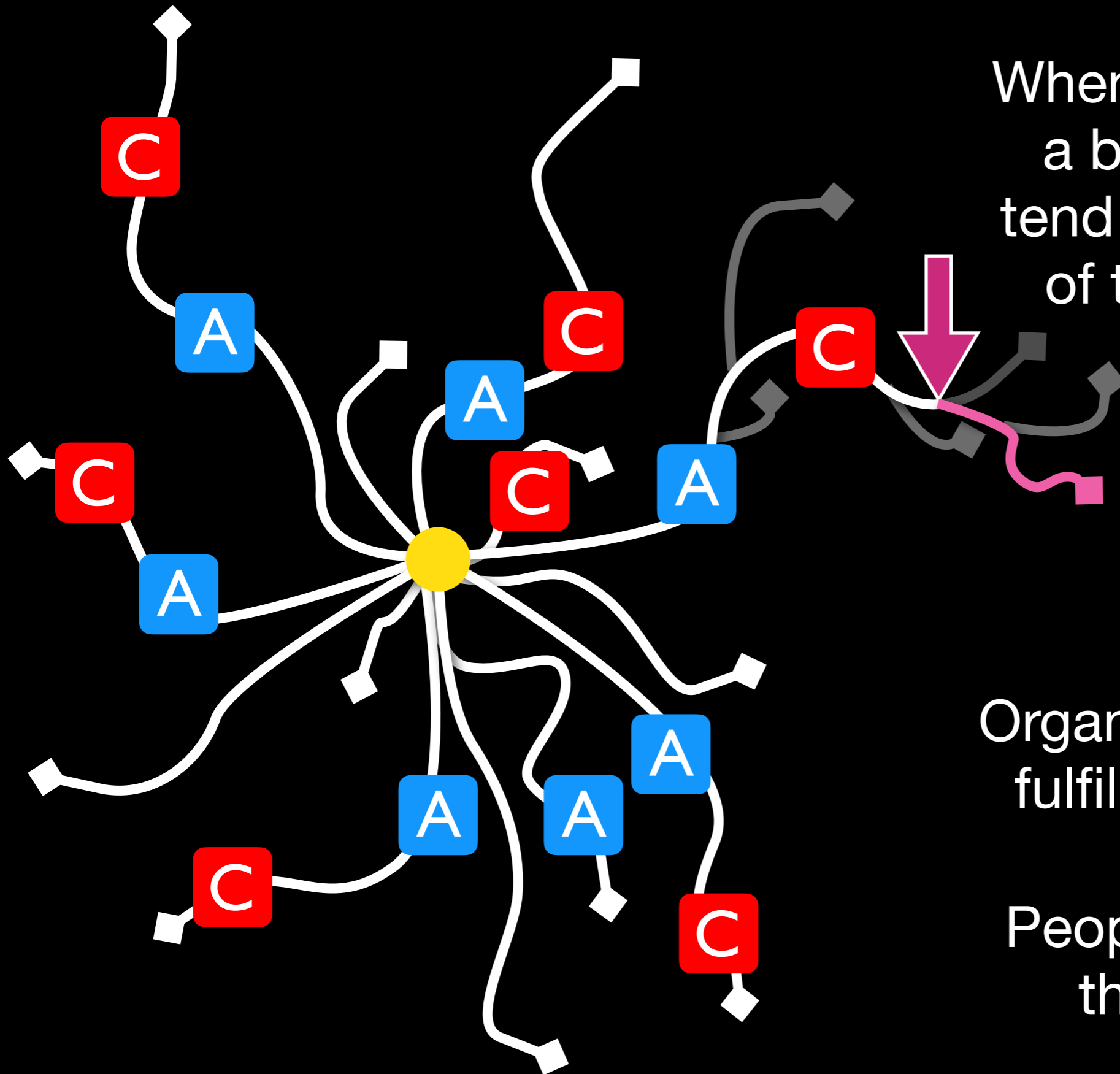
“the tendency for the organism to flow into all the differentiated channels of potential development, insofar as these are experienced as enhancing”

The actualizing tendency



When an organism faces a branch point, it will tend to choose the better of the two branches.

The actualizing tendency



When an organism faces a branch point, it will tend to choose the better of the two branches.

As a result:

Organisms will tend to fulfill their potential.

People will actualize their ideal self.

The actualizing tendency

Organisms will tend to fulfill their potential.

People will actualize their ideal self.

Challenges:

Organisms lack a singular potential.

People lack a singular ideal self.

The actualizing tendency

Organisms lack a singular potential.



The actualizing tendency

Organisms lack a singular potential.

Krummholz

(German 'krumm' meaning crooked and 'holz' meaning wood)



The actualizing tendency

Organisms lack a
singular potential.

“to be that self which one truly is”
—Søren Kierkegaard



The actualizing tendency

Organisms lack a
singular potential.

tree it

“to be that ~~self~~ which ~~one~~ truly is”



The actualizing tendency

Organisms lack a singular potential.

However:

“a person is a fluid process, not a fixed and static entity; a flowing river of change, not a block of solid material; a continually changing constellation of potentialities, not a fixed quantity of traits.”



The actualizing tendency

Organisms lack a singular potential.

Organisms exhibit *adaptive plasticity*



The actualizing tendency

Organisms lack a
singular potential.

Organisms exhibit *adaptive plasticity*

When faced with novel circumstances,
they tend to respond in adaptive ways.

The actualizing tendency

When faced with novel circumstances, they tend to respond in adaptive ways.

Tropisms

Phototropism

Gravitropism

Hydrotropism

Thigmotropism



The actualizing tendency

Tropisms

Phototropism

Gravitropism

Hydrotropism

Thigmotropism

Is the actualizing tendency a unitary tendency?

The actualizing tendency



Is the actualizing tendency a unitary tendency?

Different substrates and mechanisms

Different metrics (biological fitness vs. contentedness)

The actualizing tendency

Is the actualizing tendency a unitary tendency?

Do organisms choose the best path forward?



The actualizing tendency

Is the actualizing tendency a unitary tendency?

Do organisms choose the best path forward?



“the tendency for the organism to flow into all the differentiated channels of potential development, insofar as these are experienced as enhancing”



The actualizing tendency

If we tend to choose the best path for ourselves, why is therapy useful?

Doesn't the self-actualizing tendency undermine the need for therapy?

Client-centered therapy

Client-centered therapy

Analysis



Prescription

Client-centered therapy



Client-centered therapy



Client-centered therapy

The core conditions

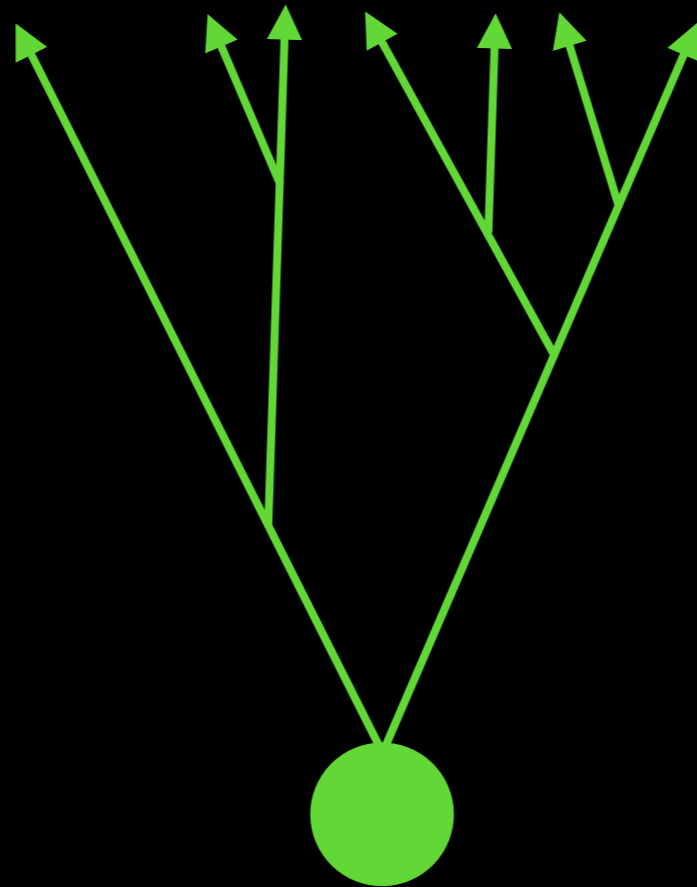
Congruence
(genuineness)

Unconditional Positive Regard
(acceptance without judgment)

Empathic Understanding
(seeing through the client's eyes)



Client-centered therapy

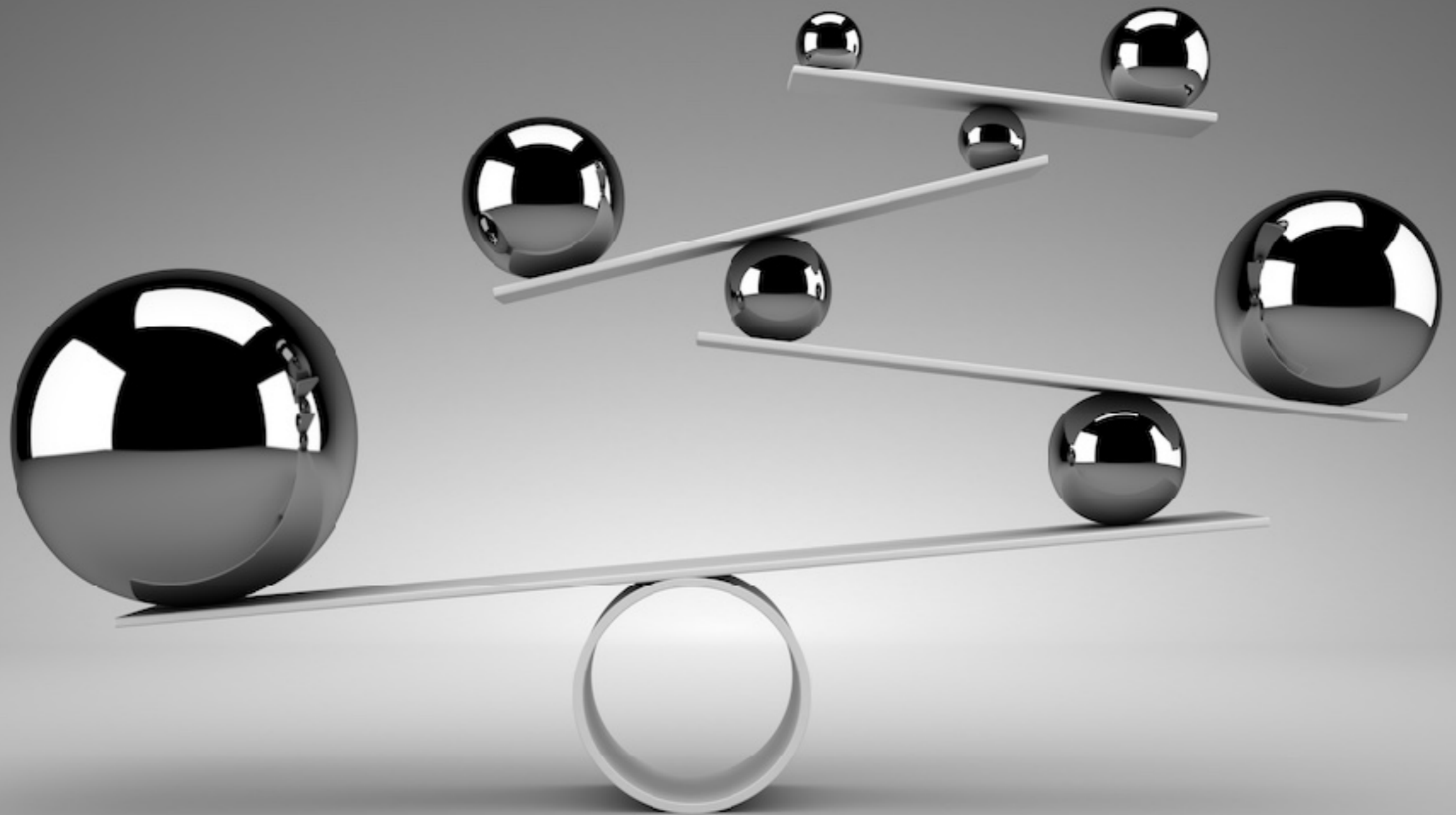


Vision



Vision

Evaluation



**Vision
Evaluation**

Boost



Vision

Transform

Boost

Evaluation

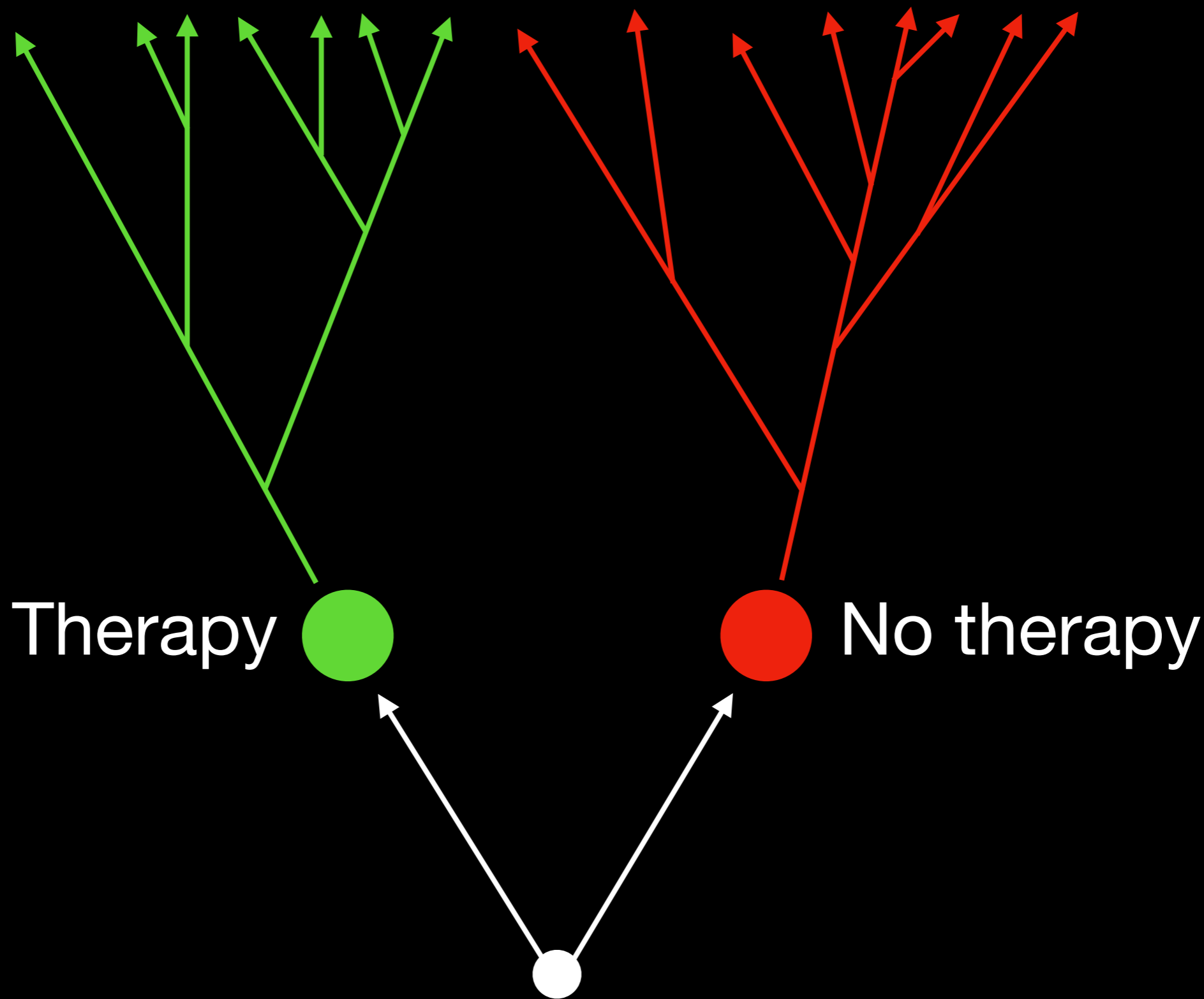


Vision

Boost

Evaluation

Transform



Possible effects of client-centered therapy

Vision

Evaluation

Boost

More clearly see
one's possible
futures

More adeptly
evaluate
one's possible
futures

Transform

Change
one's possible
futures for the
better

Change the
weights used in
possible future
assessments

Student-centered education

Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning (1952)

“do away with teaching”

“do away with the exposition of conclusions”

“do away with examinations”

“do away with grades and credits”

“do away with degrees as a measure of competence”

Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning

(1952)

(1967)

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“do away with degrees as a measure of competence”

Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning



the
evergreen
state college

“do away with teaching”

“do away with the exposition of conclusions”

A focus on seminars in which teachers are participants

“do away with examinations”

“do away with grades and credits”

No graded exams and no course grades

“do away with degrees as a measure of competence”

No majors or degrees (other than BA/BS)

The bottom line for the actualizing tendency



The bottom line for the actualizing tendency

Not a single tendency

Different:

Mechanisms (such as tropisms)

Substrates (plant and animal tissues)

Success measures (fitness vs. meaning or contentedness)

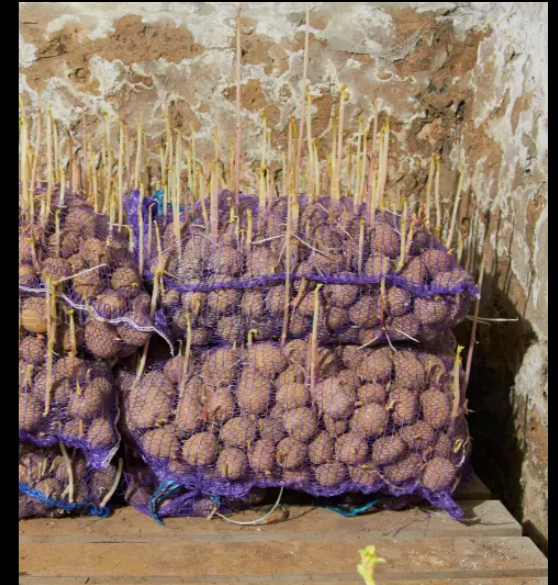


The bottom line for the actualizing tendency



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Different:



Mechanisms (such as tropisms)

Substrates (plant and animal tissues)

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The bottom line for the actualizing tendency

Plants and animals exhibit the actualizing tendency.

In fact, all life exhibits the actualizing tendency.

Therefore, humans exhibit the actualizing tendency.

Because humans have an actualizing tendency, they don't need prescriptive therapy or education.



The bottom line for the actualizing tendency

Plants and animals exhibit the **actualizing tendency**.

In fact, all life exhibits the actualizing tendency.

Therefore, humans exhibit the actualizing tendency.

Because humans have an **actualizing tendency**, they don't need prescriptive therapy or education.



The bottom line for the actualizing tendency

Plants and animals exhibit the **actualizing tendency**.

What this means:

Plants and animals will adapt to a **wide range of circumstances**.

Because humans have an **actualizing tendency**, they don't need prescriptive therapy or education.

What this means:

Humans do best in a **specific kind of circumstance**, one free of certain kinds of measures and prescriptions.



The bottom line for the actualizing tendency

Overview

This symposium brings together researchers and practitioners across disciplines to revisit Carl Rogers' (1963) proposition that the **actualising tendency**—the inherent drive of living systems towards growth, differentiation, and fulfilment—may offer a foundational account of **human motivation**.



The bottom line for the actualizing tendency

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This symposium brings together researchers and practitioners across disciplines to revisit Carl Rogers' (1963) proposition that the **actualising tendency**—the inherent drive of living systems towards growth, differentiation, and fulfilment—may offer a foundational account of **human motivation**.



The bottom line for the actualizing tendency

Nevertheless

It may be true that:

We tend to know best what is good for us.

We can come to this knowledge more readily in the presence of someone realizing the core conditions.

Education is best when students are in control of their trajectory and are not subject to grades and exams.



Lingering questions

To what extent do people choose the best path forward when given the opportunity?

To what extent does client-centered therapy and student-centered education enhance their choice making?

Are such approaches the best for all (clients and students)?



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Thank You!



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EVOLUTIONARY ORIGINS & ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

HUMAN SUCCESS

EDITED BY HUGH DESMOND & GRANT RAMSEY

