Multiple Selves

Rethinking Identity, Self-Fashioning, and Ethics

By

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Chapter One
Introduction

Parents, teachers, therapists, activists encourage people to discover and develop their true selves. This quest has become a dominant theme of psychology, literature, film, and social media. It rests on the false assumption that we have inner selves to discover and develop. Asking us to do something impossible is not a pathway to happiness but to frustration, anxiety, and low self-esteem. This book aims to free you of these illusions. It nevertheless offers a positive message. I describe more realistic and more satisfying ways of thinking about ourselves, our relationships, and our roles in society. Self-validation and self-esteem do not require unique selves or even continuous ones. These goals are better achieved through recognition of our confusing multiplicity and that self-fashioning is a social as well as individual project. We can develop pride and heightened self-esteem by exercising more control over our complex, evolving, and fragmented selves -- but without minimizing the extent to which so many of our self-identifications are socially imposed or encouraged.

I recognize that throwing cold water on the idea of the unique and continuous self is counterintuitive and certain to meet resistance. It is the conventional wisdom and probably something that you have taken for granted most of your life. The prospect of radically rethinking who you are and how you come to be what you are is unsettling, if not downright threatening. I nevertheless invite you to join me on a journey of discovery that will offer evidence in support of my claim, and suggest different, and, I believe, more satisfying ways of understanding yourself and your place in the world. In the process I will encourage you to take a deep and novel look at your internal and external life. Pulling up our anchors and sailing into the unknown is challenging, but worthwhile if safe and better harbors await.

In this voyage, we will turn to social psychology and philosophy, but also to literature and art. They convincingly demonstrate the impossibility of constructing an integrated self from which we can draw social and political guidance. This is because we are an everchanging composite of self-identifications based primarily on our affiliations, roles, relationship to our bodies, and individual and collective biographies. They rise and fall in relative importance over time, and their primacy at any moment is susceptible to context and priming. Random events and social manipulation by others can make us foreground certain identifications and make us feel closer to or more distant from some kinds of people, and become more or less supportive of some behavior or policy. We are less in control of ourselves and our destinies than we think. Rethinking ourselves along the lines I propose involves recognition of the limits of self-fashioning. Paradoxically, this recognition has the potential to enhance the feasibility of self-fashioning, and with it, our ability to reject identifications that others would impose on us.

Social psychology teaches us that much of our self is social. Many of our identifications are foisted on us by family, friends, schools, employers, and social media. Sometimes they are benign, but often not, as is true of racial, ethnic, national, or gender categories and stereotypes. Sometimes we can resist or reject identifications but just as often we internalize them. People who assimilate out-group stereotypes -- that is, negative depictions of themselves -- generally suffer from low self-esteem. Some socially defined identities can buttress self-esteem. This is a principal reason people are keen to adopt and internalize highly ranked ethnic, national, religious identities. It is also why we are prone to identify with successful sports teams, celebrities, companies, and institutions. We take pride in their accomplishments and feel good about ourselves when they excel -- and badly when they fail.

Identity has no more claim to existence than the soul, although there are many people who believe in both. They probably do so for the same reasons. Both illusions provide psychological comfort. The soul

signifies personal continuity and immortality, and identity continuity and personal meaning. The two are closely related as identity is the linear descendant of the soul. If we study the Middle Ages, we are struck by how seriously Christians treated the soul, god's judgment, and the afterlife. To deny the existence any of them would have been heresy, but perhaps more importantly, beggared belief. It is possible that some time in the future our descendants may look back on our belief in identity and the coherent self with the same incredulity we regard the Medieval Christian certainty about the soul and the possibility of resurrection.

I advance a number of claims in this book. The first is that we are not, and can never be, unique selves. This assertion almost invariably meets with incredulity. Over the years, I have asked my seminar students if they are unique. They are surprised, even bemused, by the question because they assume they and everyone else is in some way different. I ask them to take out a piece of paper, not to put their name on top, and to write down some of the ways in which they are unique. I collect the papers and read the answers aloud to the seminar. By the fourth or fifth response it becomes apparent that my students are unique for more or less the same reasons. They describe themselves as thoughtful, caring, imaginative, and tolerant, and one or two might mention a distinctive physical feature, immigration or a physical difference of some kind. They are struck by the similarities of their claims but still insist they are unique.

Some quick-thinking student invokes life experiences to support the claim that we differ from one another. Without much effort, I get them to agree that life experiences are mediated by memory. I then assign for the next class some of the psychological literature on the memory. They learn that memory is socially influenced, and sometimes socially constructed. People edit and update their memories in response to cues from friends, peer group, and society at large. They do so to gain or maintain acceptance, enhance their appeal or upgrade their status. This is even true of so-called "flashbulb" memories. These are recollections

of dramatic events like the breaching of the Berlin Wall or the terrorist attacks of 9.11 that we believe are seared into our minds. We remember where we were at the time, what we were wearing, and what we and others thought and said. Although often reported in exquisite detail, such memories are notoriously unreliable.[1] This may be because so-called "flashbulb memories" are not fully established at the time, but only later when the significance of the event for society has been established. For this reason, such memories, diverse at their onset, converge as months and years pass.[2] Most students are impressed by this research but resistant to its implications for their belief in their uniqueness.

My second claim is that we are not unitary selves but multiple ones that change over time. We are works in progress. My students are young and most have not been around long enough to have multiple life-changing experiences or to recognize the ways in which they are different people today from whom they once were. We are not so much different selves over time -- as there is never a single self -- but a constantly shifting multiplicity of identifications, some of them self-generated, others imposed from the outside and internalized. Some of these identifications are strong, others weak, some are mutually supportive, and others are in conflict. All of them evolve in substance, mostly in a subtle way, but sometimes dramatically. They also rise and fall in importance, dramatically so in the short-term, and more gradually in the longer-term.

Self is like memory in that we remake our understandings of it to serve our psychological, social, and other needs. Most of us believe that we are the same people over the course of our lives. A minority goes in the other direction. They insist they are different and "new" selves and have successfully distanced themselves from old, unattractive identities and former commitments and behavior. This too is an illusion, or at least a considerable exaggeration. We are neither consistent selves nor so disjointed as to lack any continuity. Even when our practices, beliefs, and associates change, we are no closer to being consistent selves than

before. This is not to deny change, quite the reverse. Our understandings of who we are is constantly evolving in response to changes in our life and the cues we receive from others. It is worth considering that the degree of continuity we think we have -- or lack -- may bear little relationship to what others perceive.

My third claim is that so-called identities are useless for purposes of moral or political guidance. This too flies in the face of the conventional wisdom. We are constantly urged to look into ourselves for the proper way of responding to diverse life challenges. The problem here is that we have multiple self-identifications that often provide different understandings of what is right and wrong in specific contexts. As the primacy of any self-identification is so often the result of context or priming, their moral and political imperatives are close to arbitrary. Priming can be crude and insistent, as are Russian propaganda efforts to mobilize citizens in support Putin's aggression in Ukraine. Or they can be subtle but so consistent over time that we hardly notice them. Either way, judgments that we think reflect our inner selves are more often the product of circumstance or manipulation by others. Knowing that people often act in terms of their so-called identities, political actors everywhere make strenuous efforts to make us adopt certain identifications and then appeal to them to gain or mobilize our support. By defining, and then priming self-identifications, they can shape, if not determine, our political choices.

Recognizing how open we are to manipulation is the first step in freeing ourselves from it. Psychiatrists have long known that people enact scripts. They play out scenarios that may or may not be appropriate or helpful. Often, they are destructive, make people unhappy and alienated, and may lead them to seek help. Therapy aims to help people recognize their scripts and free themselves from those considered counterproductive, even destructive. This book has the potential to serve a similar, but social psychological end. It will encourage you to recognize your multiple self-identifications, the ways they are primed and mobilized, and how this can prompt behavior that may not reflect

your real beliefs or interests. To the extent we learn about, step back, and reflect upon social conditioning and its consequences, we have the potential to reduce our vulnerability to exploitation by those pursuing their parochial ends - and often at our expense.

My fourth claim is that self-fashioning is difficult in comparison to social construction. George Herbert Mead, a distinguished pragmatist psychologist and philosopher, differentiated the "Me" constructed from the outside and imposed on us, and the "I" that represents our efforts to define ourselves. He described the "I" as relatively weak and ineffective in contrast to the "Me."[3] Social scientists and postmodernists are even more pessimistic about self-fashioning. Following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, they regard society as something akin to a prison. I consider this position extreme. Self-fashioning is to some degree possible, and some people succeed to a significant degree. However, many -- if not most -- of the changes in our self-identifications and understandings are socially motivated and constructed. We are prone to convince ourselves in the face of evidence to the contrary that these identifications were free choices.

Why is self-fashioning so difficult? Earlier I noted that most of our self-identifications arise from our affiliations, roles, relationship with our bodies, and personal and collective histories. Our affiliations are something over which we have considerable control. This is much less true of roles, most of which are assigned, as are their responsibilities and statuses associated with them. Our relationship with our bodies is also restricted. Most of us cannot imagine ourselves in the body of a different gender or of a different gender with the same body, or some combination of the two. Some people can, and major efforts are underway to create and gain acceptance for non-binary gender identities and language to go with them. Biographies are more malleable, both individual and collective. They are the principal focus of self-fashioning.

Self-fashioning has multiple pathways. The principal one, as noted, involves rewriting our past to suit our present needs. We also change

roles or try to redefine them. People, institutions, and nations aspire to new roles (e.g., team leader, non-profit, superpower) or to convince others to ascribe more freedom or status to the ones they currently enact. We have less latitude with our bodies, but as we recognize, understandings of gender, shape, age, and other characteristics are being reframed and re-evaluated. People with wealth, education, and contacts have more potential to rewrite or remake their affiliations, roles, bodies, and histories. But it is still possible for the less privileged to engage in self-fashioning, although it is correspondingly more difficult.

One of the interesting and underexplored questions of sociology, psychology, and political science is the incentives people have for attempting self-fashioning and the consequences of their efforts for themselves and their societies. The principal explanation offered by social scientists is the quest for affluence, status, and independence. There are other motives, most notably self-esteem, that receive short shrift in the literature and need to be recognized. Of equal interest are the emergence and choice pathways to self-fashioning, Most, I will argue, are products of modernity, and also helped to usher it in. Liberal philosophers like John Stuart Mill thought pathways and choice was increasing, but critics of modernity and capitalism contend they are narrowing. I will return to this question in chapter 10. Here let me note that the information revolution, and with it, the Internet and social media, have helped to redefine modernity and have opened up all kinds of possibilities for self-fashioning but also barriers against it.

Recognizing these several problems about popular conceptions of identity can have important practical consequences. It provides conceptual and empirical incentives for challenging "we're better than you" framings of nationalism and religion, and the alleged "truths" on which they depend. The most important assumption made by almost all political, religious, and identity extremists is that we construct ourselves in opposition to others. This notion was first theorized by the eminent eighteenth and early nineteenth century philosophers

Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel. It is deeply embedded in the identity literature and central to social identity theory. There is strong literary and psychological evidence indicating that healthy identity construction is dialectical more than it is confrontational. In the best of circumstances, we draw closer to those from whom we are separating. "Self' and "other" are accordingly misleading categories of analysis. Those who resort to them fail to realize how the "self' and "others" are more often mutually constitutive. Recognition of the dialectical nature of identity construction provides the basis for new understandings of interdependence at every level of society.

Nationalists and religious extremists attempt to frame our identities vertically. They want us to have a primary identification as a member of a nationality or sect, have positive associations with others who share - or are allowed to share - this identification, and negative, or less positive, responses to those characterized as outsiders. I urge us to frame identity in horizontal terms. By this I mean recognizing that our many self-identifications make us multiple selves. Each of these identifications creates links with others who share it. These links connect us in positive ways to many more people than vertical framing does. When we recognize our diversity and the many connections it creates to different people, we come to see ourselves as part of an expanding and intricate web of connections. Thinking of ourselves this way also challenges the notion of "in-" and "out-groups" because our membership in one or the other changes depending on the self-identification we prioritize. A horizontal perspective greatly expands the circle of people we believe should be treated as we ourselves would like to be.

Identity politics is similar to nationalism in important respects. It prioritizes single identities, creates in-groups who share that identity, and out-groups who do not. Like nationalism, it is more concerned with policing who is allowed into the in-group and how the in-group is defined, than it is in opposing out-groups. Again, like nationalism, it is undemocratic, and even authoritarian, and restricted and rigid in its

conceptions in the name of self-expression and personal development. These several contradictions have been noted by others, but less so the fundamentally indefensible understanding of identity on which they rest.

Modernity is welcomed by liberals and Marxists, although they have diametrically opposed views of what is good about it and the mechanisms and institutions that will realize its promise. Modernity is rejected by some conservatives, who only see its downside. Many of these critics want to return to a world where there is belief in a cosmic order based on natural law and man-made laws allegedly based on it governing women, sex, and the elimination of abortion. None of these responses to modernity are convincing. Marxism in its many forms has been in decline since its heyday in the early twentieth century, although Marxist critiques of late capitalism are gaining currency. Liberalism is under increasing attack in the West as inequality has increased and globalization is believed to have promoted more misery than happiness. Natural law appeals only to religious Christians and a few conservative intellectuals.

We need new ways of thinking about modernity and its possible benefits. It is not about to go away or be transformed by revolution into a utopia. The proper starting point, I maintain, is to free ourselves from the liberal and romantic framings of the self. They are fundamental to existing conceptions of modernity but err in confusing ideology with reality. Contra liberals, people are not -- nor should they be -- autonomous, egoistic actors. People who approximate this ideal -- or think they do -- act in ways that are dangerous to them and their societies. Those who free themselves from social values, norms, commitments, and constraints cannot enter into meaningful relationships, formulate interests intelligently, or ever really feel secure. Self-fulfilment can only be achieved within society, not outside of it. Following Rousseau, Romantics falsely credit us with the ability to extract ourselves from societies and to reincarnate a version of an earlier world in which people lived in harmony without conflict. Post-

modernists are more realistic in rejecting liberal and Romantic projects but offer no alternative beyond resistance.

I draw on, but also differentiate my approach, from much of the existing literature on identity. Social psychology, in my view, exaggerates the social construction of people, leaving little room for self-fashioning. In philosophy and pop psychology, there is a large literature on authenticity, much of it now focused on sexual identities. Those emphasizing LGBT identities talk about people discovering and developing their "true selves." There are no true selves and appeal to them results in aporia or false consciousness. This recognition is not in any way intended to lessen respect and support for people with all kinds of gender, ethnic, and other identities - quite the reverse.

In the chapters that follow I attempt to substantiate and expand on my four claims about identity and explore their consequences. Chapter 2, on the invention of identity, contrasts the ancient and modern world. It introduces the concept of thin- and thick-selves. They refer respectively to the relative absence of interiority and its heightened presence. The latter is a produce of modernity. In Greece and Rome, a person was the sum of the socially approved roles that he or she performed. In the modern world, we also engage in some degree of self-definition. This difference is due to the greater importance of the internal self, whose socially sanctioned emergence began in the late Middle Ages. Stepping back and reflecting on our life, and especially on the roles we play, we feel some degree of alienation and wonder which of them, if any, represents the real self. As our roles expand in number and diversity, our alienation deepens, and we seek to overcome it by discovering or fashioning a true self.

The growing importance of the inner self was evident in philosophy, literature, portraiture, and the development of autobiography. The foregrounding of the inner self required a new framing of being. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke took a giant step forward in coining the concept of the person. For Locke, continuity was no longer provided by the soul but by memory. Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel were

the first to associate this change with modernity and to theorize why it had occurred.

Chapter 3 addresses the consequences of the thick-self for order. I argue that heightened interiority constituted a challenge and opportunity for political orders. It gave rise to four political projects. All of them were envisaged as a means of overcoming the growing tension between our social and inner selves. Two were anti-modem in the sense that they sought to do away with the inner self or make a mere reflection of the social self. The other two welcomed and valued the inner self and attempted to develop it through society or in conflict with it. These four approaches to identity found expression in religious fundamentalism, Marxist socialism, liberalism, and Romanticism.

I focus primarily on the two approaches that welcomed modernity and the inner self. Liberalism embraced the fiction of the autonomous, egoistic self, and its British and American spokesmen regarded civil society as the venue for self-fashioning. People would experiment by modelling themselves on others, all or in part, and in due course develop unique selves. Romantics regarded society as stifling and believed individuals had to escape from its clutches to become themselves. They could do so by looking inwards and communing with nature. Contemporary framings of identity draw on both liberalism and Romanticism.

Neither liberalism nor Romanticism has lived up to its promises. Liberalism's depiction of an autonomous, egoistic actor is an ideology, not a reality. A world of such actors would be a horrifying place, and the closest thing to Hobbes' imagined state of nature.

The liberal expectation that society would be diverse, offer useful role models, and welcome those who created new identities, has not been fulfilled. The media and various commercial interests have successfully narrowed, not enlarged, available and acceptable role models. The Romantic project has proven even more unrealistic. There is no true self to be discovered by looking inward, immersing oneself in nature, or

anywhere else. Romantics exaggerate the evil of society to the same degree liberals praise it. Cutting off one's connections to it leads to the same aporia as the fantasy of the egoistic, agnostic actor.

Chapter 4 takes a close look at modern people and their so-called "identities." There is compelling evidence in support of the idea that we are fragmented selves. We are a composite of multiple identifications based primarily on affiliations, roles, relationships with our bodies, and individual and collective biographies. These identifications change in substance, are sometimes replaced by others, rise and fall in importance. Some are mutually reinforcing while others are in conflict. At any given moment, we are only aware of or responsive to a small number of our identifications. We are not only fragmentary, but momentary, selves. Our attempts at autobiography are motivated in part by our desire to convince ourselves of our "wholeness." They may create satisfying narratives, but they invariably obscure our multiple and often irreconcilable selves. They follow single story lines to the present, when our lives are in reality non-linear with numerous pathways, some of them dead ends, hiving off in numerous directions.

Chapter 5 looks at how contemporary philosophers have tried to make sense of the self. They address the question from logical, phenomenological and metaphysical perspectives. They disagree about whether the self has any substance or is pure illusion. I offer a short overview of this debate to demonstrate the extent to which these thinkers for the most part disassociate themselves from Cartesian, Lockean and Romantic selves. Some, turning to Buddhism, deny the existence of the self. Others make the case for a "minimal" self, based on the principle of self-awareness. A few still defend thicker conceptions of selves embodied, narrative, pragmatic or social selves.[4] My other goal in reviewing this literature is to show how some of these interpretations map nicely on to the strategies of identity I identified in chapter 3.

Chapter 6 examines the social self. I document the extent to which we are social creations. I argue that even fundamental biological drives like

sex are channeled in quite diverse ways by social conditioning. Societies direct our appetites and quest for status down particular pathways. They impose, or at least encourage, certain kinds of self-identifications. They police our thoughts and memories through collective and official memory. Societies even convince us that what we believe, how we think of ourselves, what we seek, and how we behave are matters of free choice.

Fortunately, society is not totalizing. It does not fully succeed in shaping us and our identifications. In the West, society is a collection of institutions with varying degrees of authority over different aspects of life. These institutions send mixed messages because of internal conflicts, and are often in conflict with one another. This plurality, diffusion of power, and the limited reach of all these institutions, creates space in which we can to some degree shape ourselves. Critical to this effort is the support of family and friends. It can provide the strength to resist external social pressures. When it reinforces those pressures, it can dramatically reduce the potential for self-fashioning in the absence of rebellion.

Chapter 7 takes up the process of self-fashioning. I make the case for a sophisticated form of self-fashioning that rejects the notion of a single, coherent, enduring self, and accepts the difficulties of escaping from social constraints. It recognizes that for the most part our images or fantasies of whom we want to be are themselves socially inspired. I distinguish the socially imposed "Me" from the self-chosen "I." I start with the recognition that our affiliations, roles, relationships to our bodies, and our autobiographies are more social than we think. However, we have some leeway in constructing or reconstructing them as we wish. We have the most freedom with affiliations and autobiographies, and somewhat less so with roles and bodies. The other problem is deluding ourselves that our preferences with regard to all of these identifications are our choice when many of them in practice are socially conditioned. True self-fashioning requires us to recognize this phenomenon and do our best to think for ourselves.

critique the liberal and Romantic identity projects, but each has a germ of truth at its core. Liberals stress role playing and other forms of experimentation and the beneficial aspects of society. Romantics are overly critical of society but do make us aware of the many ways in which we are its prisoner. I build on these insights, but also on the many connections between the "Me" and the "I." They indicate that self-fashioning is at least in part, perhaps in large part, a social project. This sounds like an oxymoron, but it is not. Constructing a meaningful "I" often requires overcoming negative stereotypes or reformulating socially imposed identities to make them more multifaceted, nuanced, and positive. This is, of necessity, a collaborative project. Success creates the space for more social experimentation and construction of meaningful "I"s, and ones that are more likely to gain social acceptance.

Chapter 8 analyzes identity politics. I begin with a brief account of the concept and its history. I go on to explore the psychological and political consequences of making a single identification so central to one's life. My critique of identity politics differs from those of liberals, conservatives, and Marxists. It should in no way be construed as opposition to recognition, equality, and equal opportunity for everyone in a society.

Current identity politics mimics nationalism in important ways. It promises liberation, recognition, and respect, but cannot deliver these goals. At best, it can make some of the people whose identifications it foregrounds feel better about themselves. This is, of course, admirable, but it comes with a high price tag. Like nationalism, it imposes a single, or at least dominant identity on them. It imprisons while liberating. Again, like nationalism, it has largely negative political consequences. The most pressing forms of inequality are economic, and are growing, hollowing out the middle class.

Chapter 9 explores the relationship between our self-identifications and ethical and political choices. They do not offer much in the way of a moral or political compass. The principal reason for this is the fragmented nature of the self. Different identifications offer different,

sometimes conflicting, kinds of guidance. These self-identifications, moreover, are not necessarily a matter of free choice. Some of them have been imposed on us from the outside, and those that have not may have been shaped in part from the outside. They are also susceptible to priming. Those who aim to make us think of ourselves in a particular way want us to believe that we have acted on the basis of free will.

I develop a horizontal versus a vertical approach to identity. Framing identity this way starts from the recognition that we have multiple identifications and that none of them should be allowed to dominate and ride roughshod over the others. Most of them must also be understood in inclusive ways to expand their boundaries to welcome, not exclude, others from sharing these identifications. The next, and perhaps most important, step is to recognize that any identity we momentarily prioritize will include some people and exclude others. This arrangement will change when other self-identifications come to the fore; different people will be included and excluded. If we run through our most important self-identifications -- inclusively framed -- we recognize the links we have with all kinds of people. We have the potential to expand the circle of people we think should be treated the way we want to be.

At the outset, I argued that heightened importance of interiority and identity are features of modernity. In chapter 10, I review the four strategies that emerged to cope with the anxiety and uncertainty aroused by our reflection on our multiple roles and focus on strategy three, liberalism. Despite some of liberalism's flawed assumptions and failure of some of its key expectations to materialize, I believe in an open, tolerant society that offers diverse role models and is open to new ones is the only kind in which people can engage in meaningful self-fashioning. It is currently under threat in the West, but I offer some grounds for optimism.

This book is a challenging read because it situates identity in its historical, philosophical, and psychological context. It is also critical of identity politics, and to make my case I must introduce some subtlety

in my arguments. I do not offer simple answers, but complex and uncertain ones. I do not do your thinking for you but offer you tools to do it for yourself.

The book tacks back and forth between theory and practice. The former makes intellectual demands, and the latter psychological ones. There is the inevitable tension between theory and practice, between the desire to say something original and produce a book of interest and use to everyday readers. This tension is productive if it allows us to offer a guide to readers thinking about themselves and who they are.

The book is also challenging because it is multi-disciplinary. My principal arguments rest on psychological research, but also on political science, philosophy, and sociology. I frequently draw on art and more often, literature, to illustrate these arguments. I integrate these disciplines in my approach to "identity," the self, and self-fashioning. However, I also turn to them individually when appropriate. Thus, chapter 2 on the self relies largely on evolving understandings of it by philosophers. Chapter 3, that describes the emergence of inferiority and its political consequences is a mix of psychology and political science. Chapter 7, to offer another example, rest on sociology, political science, and social psychology. You do not require any kind of expertise in these several disciplines to understand and evaluate my arguments. I provide enough background information and keep my arguments straight-forward and jargon free.

One final caveat. I am very clear in my judgment that there is no self to be found beyond the jumble of our multiple self-identifications. There is, however, a rich reflexive self, which, I argue, is the product of modernity. We constantly think about, mull over, evaluate our actions and thoughts. The reflexive self should not be confused with an inner self that provides uniqueness, unity and continuity. The term identity is thus problematic because in common parlance it incorporates all three. I frequently use the term identity in this book, but invariably to describe something people think they have or when referring to literature on the subject of identity. My references to identity should not

mislead the reader into thinking there is one. I occasionally put the word in "scare quotes" to remind readers that it is a concept I find dubious. I recognize that it is problematic to refer so often to a concept whose substantive existence and analytical utility I reject. However, it would be all but impossible to write a book on a subject that most people and so many thinkers over the centuries have described as identity without using the term.

Endnotes

[1] Ulric Neisser, *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1982).

[2] J. N. Bohannon and V. L. Symons, "Flashbulb Memories: Confidence, Consistency, and Quantity," in n E. Winograd, and U. Neisser, eds., *Affect and Accuracy in Recall* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 65-91.

[3] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962 [1934]).

[4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962); Evan Thompson, *Mind and Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[5] Aaron Gurwitsch, "Nonegological Conception of Consciousness," in Aaron Gurwitsch, *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology* (Evanston, Hl: Northwestern University Press, 1966), pp. 287-300.

Chapter Two
The Unsettling Self

This chapter uses literature and art to track increased awareness and encouragement of interiority, and with it, the quest for personal autonomy. These changes helped to define modernity and for some philosophers and historians to distinguish it from anything that has gone before. Interiority, autonomy, conceptualization of the self, and attempts at self-fashioning were welcomed by many Enlightenment thinkers. They were rejected by others, who regarded them as threatening to civil and religious order. I close with a comparative discussion of self and identity. They are related, but different, and it is useful for the rest of my presentation to have a clear idea of what they are, how they are related, but also how they differ.

Emergence of the Self

By self, I mean the recognition that we are beings distinct in our bodies and minds from others. Some sense of self must always have been present in our species, and it may well exist in others. It only requires some degree of consciousness. In this connection it is useful to distinguish between thin and thick conceptions of self. The former merely implies understanding that one is a physically and mentally independent being. The latter includes the ability to step back from one's current life and reflect on it and its possible meaning.

In Mesopotamian, early Hebrew, and Greek literature persons are distinct but there is no indication of interiority. The Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides are heavily psychological but never describe an inner life. Tragic heroes are archetypes, not people who struggle to discover and express themselves.[1] They are important because of what they share in common with others, not by virtue of what might make them different or unique. Like the Greeks, the Romans understood people in terms of roles. They were the sum of their roles. The Greek

word *proposon*, which described the mask worn by actors, entered Latin as *persona*, where it assumed the wider connotation of the roles consciously performed by people.[2] *Persona* defined the self in others' eyes, but also in the mind's eye. Cicero defined "propriety" as acting in accord with the demands of one's roles.[3]

Christians were forced to confront what we commonly refer to as identity in ways Greeks and Romans had not because of their belief in heaven as the reward for a lifetime of piety. If people were judged on the basis of their behavior, their uniqueness and continuity had somehow to be established. The soul served both ends; it provided uniqueness, as everyone was assumed to have their own soul, and also continuity in this world and the next by virtue of the soul's unchanging nature and ability to survive death of the body.[4] The insubstantiality of the soul was not a serious obstacle in a pre-scientific age. Christians did speculate, however, about the relationship between the body and the soul and whether the two would be reunited at the Last Judgment. Medieval literature is full of debates in verse between body and soul in which they exchange reproaches and also express gratitude to each other.[5]

A new discourse about identity emerged in the seventeenth century. Rene Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (1649), Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) and John Locke's *Essay Concerning on Human Understanding* (1690) are generally regarded as its starting points. Descartes used the word mind (*mens*) in lieu of soul (*anima*). His writings imply that the soul was irrelevant to understanding the self, which was in reality the product of sensation, perception and imagination. Hobbes differentiated artificial from natural selves. Locke introduced the concepts of "person" and "self," the latter defined as "that conscious thinking thing. . . which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extents." Locke insisted that memory provided continuity and distinctiveness to individual selves.[6] Even more than Descartes, Locke shifted the locus of identity from the soul to

consciousness. All three philosophers began the process by which the soul became an increasingly problematic concept in Europe.

As people came to be understood as reflexive individuals with legal identities, it became necessary to find an empirical basis for their continuity and uniqueness. Hobbes took an important step in this direction. His *Leviathan* and *De Give* drew on Cicero, Roman law and new scientific ideas to provide a theoretical account of selfhood that distinguished moral from natural selves. Much like Sophocles in *Antigone,* Hobbes depicts stable political orders as the product of numerous compromises among different, conflicting, actors.[7]

John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1689, tackled the problem of continuity. He equated the person with the self and famously called the former a "forensic term" in recognition of the concept's use in criminal law. Locke reasoned that human beings enter the world as blank slates and become persons by virtue of their life experiences and reflections on them. He acknowledged the problematic nature of selfhood because imperfect and punctuated memories result in an incomplete understanding of ourselves. Only God understands us perfectly, he lamented, and hoped the deity would one day make us more transparent to ourselves.[8] Locke's understanding of identity does not stress uniqueness. It is primarily concerned with the "identically" of the person across time that memory provides.[9] Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau follow Locke in making memory the locus of selfhood.[10]

Locke's emphasis on memory invited criticism. The Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid devised several thought experiments to demonstrate its inadequacy. The best known is the brave officer paradox. The boy Jones is flogged for stealing apples and remembers this event as an adult when performing a brave deed as an officer. Years later, as a general, he has forgotten all about the flogging. By Locke's logic, the brave officer is the boy, and the general is the brave officer, but the general is not the boy, a conclusion that strikes us as absurd. Reid insists that memory cannot account for personhood, which must

be justified somehow on its own terms.[11] The Earl of Shaftesbury, Locke's pupil, rightly suggested that "Memory may be false."[12] John Sargent, Samuel Clarke, and Bishop Butler draw attention an equally serious logical fallacy: memory includes the concept of personal identity, so using it as the basis for identity makes it tautological.[13]

The soul lost much of its credibility among intellectuals in an increasingly skeptical eighteenth century Europe.[14] David Hume dismisses soul and self alike as comforting "fictions." He rejects the idea of a persisting, self-identical object, distinct from our punctuated, imperfect impressions of it, and the corollary that time could pass without there being change.[15] The mind, he suggests, is best conceived as "a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and motion." It follows that "there is no impression constant and invariable," and no continuous self.[16]

Hume nevertheless believes that people are generally predictable in their behavior, without which it would be impossible to sustain a society.[17] This stability, he suggests, derives from a set of universal internal motives (e.g., ambition, avarice, vanity, friendship, generosity) that are constantly moderated and channeled by external constraints and opportunities.[18] These motives are social in origin and dependent on society for their definition and enactment. Hume's understanding of people reflects the widespread belief in eighteenth century Britain that people were fundamentally alike and could still be described in terms of archetypes. Hume's rejection of soul and identity encouraged him to frame his inquiry around the question of why people believed in identities and continuous selves. This is also a central question for me.

Among the soul's last influential defenders were the late eighteenth-century philosophers Bishop George Berkeley and Moses Mendelssohn. Both insisted that the soul is simple, immaterial, indestructible and necessary to account for the unifying nature of consciousness. Without a soul, Mendelssohn wrote: "We would be able neither to remember nor to reflect nor to compare nor to think, indeed, we would not even be the

person who we were a moment ago, if our concepts were divided among many and were not to be encountered somewhere together in their most exact combination."[19] His claim is important because it would later be grafted onto the secular concept of identity.

While not denying the existence of the soul, Kant challenges Mendelssohn's belief that the soul is immortal because of its indivisibility. Indivisible bodies, he suggests, could wax and wane in their intensity. The soul could disappear through the gradual expiration of the clarity of consciousness without any violation of its simplicity.[20] Like Hume, Kant moves away from the conception of identity as a substance. He associates it instead with the "noumenal self," a "supreme principle of cognition that provides unity to the consciousness and is the basis for all reflection." The "phenomenal self," which it enables, is the "I" we consciously recognize.[21] Following Kant, German Idealism treats persons as continuous by virtue of their identity.[22]

The principal exception in Germany was Friedrich Nietzsche, as he was to almost everything else. Nietzsche famously proclaimed that god was dead and made the more profound observation that perhaps so too was the self. The one followed from the other because in the absence of a deity there was nothing else to provide continuity and uniqueness.[23] In his *Genealogy of Morals,* Nietzsche argues against Kant's dualistic deduction of morality and attempts to develop an alternate justification for what he considers the stifling Christian-based morality of his Europe.[24] Nietzsche insists that "virtue must be *our own* invention." Everyone must "find *his own* virtue, *his own* categorical imperative."[25]

The most profound expression of Nietzsche's anti-dualism concerns the subject. In a dualistic worldview like that of Plato or Kant, eternal forms exist beyond the shadow world, and one of them is posited to be an eternal soul. With Nietzsche's refusal to accept any distinction between essences and appearances comes a rejection of a reified soul. Just as there is no essence behind the appearance, there is no otherworldly soul behind the worldly actor -- no doer behind the deed. "'The doer is

merely a fiction added to the deed -- the deed is everything." The "subject" -- in an abstract, metaphysical sense -- is an invention of the weak, who turn to it as part of their retreat from the worldly struggles for domination. Only the slave "needs to make this distinction in order to create the illusion of freedom in impotence." This illusion encourages the organization of the world and its actors into stable objects and identities.[26]

Nietzsche would have us believe that strong people are "free spirits" who do not need refuge in the illusion of stable truths and identities. Invoking Schopenhauer's idea of a will to power, he imagines that free spirits are endowed with a sense of self that is too powerful to be constrained.[27] They find freedom and fulfilment in the very absence of stability of any kind. Such people have no recourse to the fictions of a soul or transcendental unity. Absent an underlying subject, the achievement of self is reserved for those whose words or deeds reflect a consistency of style.[28]

I offer a much-modified version of Nietzsche's approach. I recognize that people need neither stable truths nor identities and can lead happier lives in their absence. They do require some social stability, and meaningful relationships to make themselves into the kind of people they want to become. I also follow Nietzsche in believing that true agency requires distancing ourselves from at least some identifications that have been imposed on us, although this is a harder task than he imagined.[29]

The Inner Self

The thick conceptualization is the product of heightened interiority, and with it the ability to reflect upon one's life and relationship to others and society. Heightened interiority is identifiable, from the Renaissance on, in literature, art, and the emerging genre of autobiography. It is hard to know the extent to which these manifestations reflected changes in thinking and life or helped to bring them about. I suspect representation and practice were to a significant degree mutually reinforcing. A

modern example of this "chicken and egg" phenomenon is the relationship between rock 'n roll and a distinctive youth culture. Arguably, each facilitated the other.[30]

Interiority, the first component of internal autonomy, was to some degree always present in people, although I noted it is absent in Mesopotamian, early Hebrew, and Greek literature. There are hints of it in Roman writings, most notably in Augustine, Cicero, Seneca and Terence (Publius Terentius Afer). Self-discovery and inwardness showed a rapid rise in medieval literature and art between 1080 and 1150, and then again midway through the thirteenth century.[31] Several students of medieval literature and history maintain that the foundations of the modem individual were laid in the High Middle Ages.[32] J. B. Schneewind sees a connection between interiority and the Christian invocation of the soul. By making the soul the locus of morality, it became possible to shift primary responsibility for control and restraint from the state and church to the individual.[33] Michael Allen Gillespie also emphasizes the vision of man as a creature capable of self-mastery and self-perfection, but he attributes it to Petrarch.[34] By the sixteenth century, people were understood to have an internal core that was not necessarily reflected in their behavior. The verb "to fashion," long in use, took on a new meaning: the action of making or shaping things, styles, patterns and selves.[35] "Self' with its modern meaning first appeared in English in 1620, and the noun "consciousness" debuted in 1630.[36] The "self' increasingly lost its negative connotation, especially in hyphenated constructions like self-knowledge, self-regard and self-interest.[37] Self-fashioning was nevertheless associated with restless change, hypocrisy and deception by many Renaissance commentators.[38] The concern for deception was a product of the widespread understanding, which we find in Shakespeare, that the world had become a kind of stage on which self-fashioned actors perform.[39] Key to this metaphor was the assumption that identity was conferred externally, not internally or physically, by the clothes people wore and the mannerisms they adopted. This association would continue well into the eighteenth century.[40]

Renaissance philosophy, art, theater and literature were vehicles for constructing and exploring autonomy. Many Renaissance portraits were commissioned to assert or advertise their sponsors' status and authority.[41] They emphasized their subject's clothing, jewelry, and other signs of status and authority. Some artists, among them Leonardo, Rembrandt, Parmigianino, Titian and Rubens, began to focus instead on what their subject's character as revealed by the facial and body features. The two forms of representation combine in Raphael's portrait of *Pope Julius II* (1511-12), which hangs in London's National Gallery. The pope's clothes, jewels and markers of rank are sharply outlined and exquisitely detailed, and they provide a sharp contrast to the slouching, aged, and more loosely defined figure they adorn. Julius had been an energetic pope notorious for his temper. Raphael broke sharply with tradition; his pope is clearly in a reflective mood, pondering perhaps his physical frailty or what he feared would be the short life of his notable political and administrative accomplishments. Julius appeared so real to contemporaries that the great art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511-74) used the verb *temere* [to fear] to describe the response of those who viewed the painting.[42] A similar development had occurred earlier in sculpture. The first dated Renaissance busts are a pair of portraits of the Medici brothers sculpted by Mino de Liesole in 1453. Both emphasize the unique facial features and personalities of their subjects and established a precedent that was widely followed.[43]

In literature, Petrarch's distinctively introspective poetry speaks of his struggle to free himself from the passion of love. His *Seretum* [My Secret Book] is an intensely personal and guilt-ridden dialogue with Augustine. Spenser, Marlowe and Shakespeare forged a new relationship between literature and identity. Spenser and Marlowe place their characters in situations where their individuality comes to the fore and explore identity as the product of both social influences and self-fashioning. In Shakespeare's tragedies we encounter characters like Hamlet, whose rich but troubled mental lives help drive plots forward. Hamlet's soliloquy reveals a strong sense of interiority, as does Cordelia's insistence on speaking in her own voice in lieu of playing a

socially ordained role. In Shakespeare, as in Machiavelli, there is a renewed emphasis on agency and fortune. In the bard, it is tempered by pessimism about the traditional concern about divine justice and the emerging commitment to meaningful agency.[44]

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the inner self became more developed and explicitly revealed in the tragedies of Corneille, Racine, Schiller and Goethe. Thomas Carlyle attributed to Goethe's characters "a verisimilitude, and life that separates them from all other fictions of late ages."[45] Autobiography was made popular by Rousseau and Franklin, although the term for the genre was not coined until 1809.[46] Other forms of writing became more personal.[47] In his account of the Hebrides, James Boswell describes island features primarily in terms of the impressions they made on him.[48] In England, the most modern of countries at the time, there was as yet no strong notion of an inner core, identities were considered malleable and socially determined. Individuals were still seen as representative of archetypes, and not in any meaningful way unique. This understanding was manifest in portraits, masquerades, literature and the law courts. Beginning in the 1790s, there was new emphasis on the self and interiority, and this shift was so rapid as to constitute a radical discontinuity. The portraits of Sir Joshua Reynolds are strikingly different and more personal than those of his predecessors.[49]

In the nineteenth century, literature, philosophy and art throughout Western Europe was increasingly focused on individual character. Writers and artists speak about their inner lives and voices to which they give rise, a phenomenon many found unsettling. Wordsworth described this voice as "a presence that disturbs me," for Shelley it was an "unseen power," and for Baudelaire, a "luminous hollow."[50] By the end of the century, Oscar Wilde could assert with confidence that "All artistic creation is absolutely subjective."[51]

The second component of the inner self is reflexivity. It describes our thoughts about our feelings, roles, experiences and relationships, and our thoughts about these thoughts. Kant and Hegel were among the

first to observe that reflexivity not only makes us more aware of ourselves but distances us from ourselves by creating a tension between our reflective and empirical selves. Kant recognized that reflective self-consciousness gives rise to the "I" as both a subject and an object. Much of Hegel's philosophy revolves around the tension between these two kinds of self and how it might be overcome. He also values this tension because he considers it the animating principle of self. Hegel's formulation, although embedded in a highly idiosyncratic theory of history, identifies a key psychological dynamic of modernity. Reflection and alienation are co-constitutive because one often prompts the other. Not surprisingly, from Rousseau on, alienation and the search for oneself became an increasingly important, if not dominant theme, of philosophy, literature and art, especially on the continent.

For Rousseau and many philosophers and writers who followed, alienation inspired a search for authenticity. It was conceived as the project of making ourselves whole. This task appears critical when people reject many of their society's guiding beliefs and behavioral conventions, as did so many nineteenth century intellectuals and artists. One of the key premises of the alienation literature developed by the Romantics is the belief that society has molded people into beings who are different from and at odds with who they would naturally want to be. Rousseau insisted in his *Emile* that "the heart receives laws only from itself."[54] He attributed the unhappy state of modern man to the introduction of property, which gradually transformed society and corrupted people by encouraging them to acquire possessions as a means of gaining esteem in the eyes of others. This transformation for Rousseau was the product of our reflexive capability; instead of possessions leading us to greater fulfillment it removed us from our happier, primitive state.[55]

The modern economy requires people to enact a greater variety of roles than its medieval or ancient predecessors. Some of these roles involve interactions with people never encountered face-to-face. The recognition that we present different and sometimes contradictory