

5-2014

Individual and Social Ontologies of the Self: Analyzing the Spectrums of Selfhood

Evan Alexander Ferguson
Dominican University of California

<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2014.HCS.ST.06>

Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Ferguson, Evan Alexander, "Individual and Social Ontologies of the Self: Analyzing the Spectrums of Selfhood" (2014). *Senior Theses*. 8.
<https://doi.org/10.33015/dominican.edu/2014.HCS.ST.06>

This Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact michael.pujals@dominican.edu.

DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Individual and Social Ontologies of the Self

Analyzing the spectrums of selfhood

Evan A. Ferguson

5/8/2014

Abstract

I propose to engage in a survey and critical evaluation of various fundamental understandings of selfhood. I will organize my analysis along two ontological dimensions. The first considers the difference between individualist and communalist understandings of the self. The second considers the difference between essentialist and non-essentialist (or socially constructed) understandings of the self. My intention is to argue for a view that is conducive to human flourishing by providing greater understanding of the self in relation to certain aspects of one's existence through which one can create meaning, and live a life directed towards the good as an individual and a member of a community.

Table of Contents

I. The Essential-Individual Self

- i) *The Soul*
- ii) *The Brain*

II. The Situated-Individual Self

- i) *Liberal Individualist*
- ii) *Classical Political Rationalist*
- iii) *Communist*
- iv) *Communitarian*

III. The Contingent Self

- i) *Construction*
- ii) *Performance*

IV. Conclusion

V. References

Introduction

The self is a common reference point in every day conversation. But what does it truly mean to be a self? When one refers to a personal taste, is that inherent to the individual, or is it determined by the culture and society in which that person is situated? Even more importantly, what about a moral reaction? Is a person's ethic embedded in them by virtue of their humanity, or dependent on their social context? And then there is the ever present question of the meaning of life. The reality is that selfhood plays a role in how we as human beings conceptualize all of these questions. The self lies at the core of our concept of our own humanity; without selfhood we would likely not ascribe any meaning to ourselves or others. Yet we do, and this is because people conceive of other people as individual selves, all with individual meanings and individual value.

But the question remains as to how this self can be defined. Over thousands of years, different philosophers, psychologists, scientists and other thinkers have all proposed different ideas of what comprises the self, in an attempt to define, more exactly, how human beings make meaning in the world, and how they can achieve some sort of good.

Of the theories that have been advanced, the great majority of them fall into two broad schools of thought; the essentialist school which holds that there is something *inherent* about the individual human that can be defined as a self, and those who hold that the self is socially constructed and entirely dependent on the context in which it exists. In conjunction with these two schools of thought are theories concerning whether the self exists as an individual or as part of a greater communal whole. I will set about exploring various conceptions of the self as they have been held to exist upon these two spectrums, wavering between each end.

This paper will be an exploration of various theories of the self that have been presented and are still regarded as valid today, as they fall into these categories. I will then argue for a more precise view that is conducive to human flourishing by providing greater understanding of the self in relation to the a greater awareness of how one can create meaning, and live a life directed towards the good as an individual and a member of a community. Aiding me in this aim will be an overview of new neuroethical findings, and some arguments regarding theory of mind research from a neurobiological standpoint.

At this point, it will be necessary to flesh out the debate surrounding the concept of selves as it has been developed today. The question most often presented is that of what, exactly, constitutes a “self.” For many people believe that they are something distinct and individual, over and above merely their bodies. They feel this, almost reflexively, in the easy way in which they refer to an “I,” as in, “I feel this way,” or “I desire this thing,” as opposed to “my body feels this way” and so forth. But the question remains. Many would, if pressed, refer to their mind as the seat of this self. As for the seat of the mind, many would argue that it is the brain. But this then leads to the question of whether the brain encompasses the whole of the mind, or if the mind (the self) exists in some form beyond that. And if that is the case, that is, if the mind exists as somewhat independent of the brain and body, how does the body influence it, if at all? Is the self so distinct that it exists as an unextended substance, or does it require a body (or at least a brain) to take any meaningful shape? The first argument is one that has been made by some theologians, for whom the self would be called the soul.

Indeed, this was Plato’s original conception of the soul; he likened this rational, thinking soul to the captain of a ship. But Plato also argued for the existence of a second, animalistic soul. The first was immortal and could reincarnate into new bodies; the second died with each body.

So would Plato be able to logically argue that the self is contained within this rational soul, and is immortal? Well, maybe. The fact of the matter is, Plato did not write much on personal individuality. So if we are to consider here that the self must also be an individual, then we must also consider whether individuation in any meaningful way occurred in the rational soul, or if it only arose out of combination with a body and the secondary vegetative soul. Similar themes will be found in other conceptions of the soul as well.

For our modern purposes, the talk of souls might seem a tad out of scope¹. However, the general concepts, questions and arguments are still quite relevant. In the past few decades, the debate has taken on a new name; the mind-brain (or mind-body) debate. While revitalized with the advent of neuroscience and consciousness studies, the discussion of how selves, souls, or minds relate to human bodies and the world in which they exist is nothing new. How much an individual is shaped by and/or dependent on his or her body, to what degree participation by that body in a society affects the individual, and what that means are questions for which the ontologies introduced above have postulated answers. In short, this will be an attempt to consolidate and continue a great and lengthy conversation on consciousness, personal identity, the soul, and how they inform the self as significant markers of meaning in human society.

As we proceed, a number of secondary, but extremely relevant concepts will come to the fore. Among these will be consciousness, intentionality and personal identity. Now, each of these could warrant significant discussion on their own merits, but here we must consider them in the context in which they are presented and evaluate their efficacy in supporting the stated end. So for example, rather than debating the existence or nature of consciousness itself, we will examine how the idea of consciousness, as presented by a certain theory, functions within that theory and

¹ Although, there are a number of modern philosophies that rely on the notion of the existence of a soul in presenting their various arguments and criticisms. These will be discussed at greater length later on.

then evaluate the validity of the argument, evidence or concept on those grounds. This, I believe, will facilitate a greater ease of conversation across these ontological dimensions.

Now, one might well ask if this investigation has any importance aside from pure intellectual curiosity. Does it really matter how we *are*, especially if how we see ourselves may, in large part, remain generally unchanged? And my argument is that yes, it matters a great deal. The implications for a more correct understanding of the self reach beyond the personal and into the social and political realms. If we are built, constructed or exist in a certain way then the nature of our interactions can have profound effects on who we are as human beings, and how we pursue meaningful lives, even to the level at which we define “meaningful.” If, for example, we are more communally constructed than essentially individual, then a liberal individualist society might not be conducive to what the ancients called *eudaimonia*, the human flourishing that is the goal of any good life. Indeed, it may even be harmful. And so, while how one person views himself introspectively might not change all that much, notions of interaction can change policy and social structure in a way that is more conducive to meaning-making and good lives.

But to avoid getting too far ahead of ourselves with these political theory arguments, we will begin with a critical survey of the underlying philosophical concepts that further theories assume to be true. I will begin with a discussion of various soul-types, arguing in favor of a dual-aspect monist view of the soul as self. I will follow with an examination of various physicalist conceptions of selfhood, in overall support of the non-reductive physicalist view as the most correct. Following that will be an examination of the necessary ontologies of selves presupposed by four major strains of political and social theory, favoring certain aspects of each. In compliment to this, a discussion of genealogical and contingent selfhood will follow, problematizing certain assumptions of the preceding political theories, while revealing inherent

discrepancies within those modes of thought. My conclusion will seek to consolidate the dual aspect monist viewpoint with the non-reductive physicalist conception of the individual, while situating that subject in a framework most closely favoring communitarian ideals, with concessions to the genealogical perspective.

The Essential-Individual Self

There are two classes of thought when it comes to conception of the self² as an essential entity. The first is known most commonly under the broad category of the “physicalist” class, though it has been given other names, such as “determinist.” The major belief here is that human beings are collections of nerves and neurons, firing in response to stimuli, and that all human events, including mental events, have physical origins. The other class of thought has no widely used title. However, these soulphiles are generally see humans as ensouled beings, in a manner of speaking, with an essential nature that is nonetheless, in some way mediated by its interaction with the physical body. These two viewpoints tend to be mutually incompatible, for the reasons of fundamental assumptions and beliefs they hold. However, in considering the two of them together, ideas concerning personal identity and consciousness, both of which are generally associated with the self, can be made more apparent, and given more thorough analysis.

The Soul

Let us begin with the soul. As a general concept, the soul is quite ancient. Homer referenced the soul, though somewhat vaguely, while Plato and Aristotle presented more advanced theories of the soul and its faculties. Our modern conceptions of the soul tend to be different in some key respects, especially from a historically Judeo-Christian perspective. But these remain conceptions influenced by the language of ancient thinkers. The following discussion will not be an attempt at proof or denial of the existence of a human soul, but rather, a discussion of the ontological assumptions necessitated by a belief in the soul as the essential self.

² At times throughout, due to the somewhat ethereal nature of the subject, I will use *self* and *identity* interchangeably, though if a distinction is necessary between the two, I will endeavor to qualify and clarify it.

As far as the soul is concerned, there are two distinct conceptions regarding its function and placement within the realm of human existence, and how it exists as the self. These two camps are the substance dualists, and the dual aspect monists. I will divide the substance dualists into two further categories: the Platonic and the Cartesian. Before discussing the differences, some commonalities between these two dualistic visions will be elucidated. Firstly, the dualist belief in a soul generally regards it as a motivating principle of the being which contains it.³ Arriving neatly at our next point, the soul is believed to, at times, reside *within* a physical system of some sort which gives rise to a complete being (i.e. soul+body=human being). Within this relationship, the soul is generally seen as providing something to the being which the physical system does not and could not possess on its own. Furthermore, the physical system is believed to have some effect on the condition of soul, which can have consequences to varying degrees. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the soul is generally believed to be immortal in some fashion.

The Platonic soul gained its greatest foundation from its namesake, Plato, through a series of dialogues, most notable the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Phaedo*. Plato described a soul that encompassed the greater part of human psychology, essentially encompassing most of what is assumed to make us human. His tripartite soul was composed of a rational part, a spirited part, and an appetitive part.⁴ Each part corresponded with a particular drive; spirit was responsible for anger and courage, appetite supplied desire and the rational was (ideally) in charge of everything. Yet these parts were generally in contention with one another, especially as the rational part

³ This may be a better understanding of the Aristotelian soul; as a sort of “life force” rather than an eternal being on its own terms.

⁴ Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006.

(*nous* in Greek⁵) warred with the appetitive part. Plato left the soul so divided because it allowed him to explain the curious occurrence of competing desires in what appeared to be a unified being, claiming that it is not “possible for the same thing to stand still and move at the same time in the same part of itself.”⁶ This theory necessitates that the soul, as Plato sees it, be an object in a certain sense. Plato continually held that the soul was an immaterial thing, simple (without parts⁷) and unextended.⁸ These three things preserve it from physical deterioration and therefore allow its immortality. At the cost of greater detail, I think it best to sum up the Platonic soul in the following terms: i) it is immaterial; ii) it is immortal; iii) it participates in some part of the divine; and most importantly, iv) it governs the important aspects of human existence (reason, agency etc.). A final note that is worth mentioning is that Plato developed more fully the idea that the soul had a post-mortem fate that was determined largely by its activity on earth. He developed this into a greater theory of knowledge and reincarnation. However, its greatest importance lies in its legacy. This was the first time that the soul was imbued with what we might today call consciousness. This was very closely tied into ideas of meaningful human lives, agency, and immortality.

Much space has been given to Plato’s description of the soul because I believe it gives proper ground for understanding ways in which the problems inherent in belief in an immortal soul were dealt with by future thinkers. Namely, there is some supraphysical essence within a human being that contains, shapes, and defines what that person essentially *is*. Plato likened the soul to the captain of a ship (the body), insofar as the soul was the controlling and meaningful aspect of

⁵ I will use this term throughout this section when I need to refer to the rational aspect of human personality, regardless of its theoretical origin.

⁶ Pl. Rep. 436c

⁷ This may seem at odds with the previous assertion that the Platonic soul has three parts. However, I believe the rational, spirited and appetitive parts are best thought of as *faculties* as opposed to actual physical parts. In any case, as Plato’s soul is an immaterial essence, its parts would not function in similar fashion to physical objects.

⁸ Martin, Barresi

the human being, while the body was more or less a containing (and constraining) vessel.⁹ Yet what the soul did with that body under its control affected it in a real way. This is generally the simplest view of self as soul, or, later on, as mind.

This way of conceiving the self found an enormous champion in René Descartes who, while in some respects similar to Plato, espoused an entirely nonphysical mind-soul entity that comprised the entire essence of what a person is. This is the Cartesian soul, and I believe that it is the closest to the lay belief held by so many people around the world today when it comes to soul-hood, or lacking the assertion of a soul, self-hood. Descartes asserted that the ‘I’ is a “thing which thinks... a think which doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.”¹⁰ He further separated these activities from the body:

Is there likewise any one of these attributes which can be distinguished from my thought, or which might be said to be separated from myself? For it is so evident that it is I who doubts, who understands, and who desires, that there is no reason here to add anything to explain it.¹¹

Having previously shown an ability to doubt the existence of any physical attributes (i.e. body) yet an eternal inability to deny that he exists as a thinking substance in which this doubt is manifest, Descartes concludes that no part is played by the body in those activities listed above which he took to be the defining aspects and activities of the human self, the most important of which was the *nous*. And while his theories provided significant groundwork for modern philosophy of self, his conclusions also contained within them some problems, which will be discussed a bit later on.

For now, we will move on to the implications of the concept of self as soul (or eternal mind, or spirit). The first consideration that must be made is a theological one, for religion generally

⁹ Martin and Barresi, *Rise and Fall*, 17.

¹⁰ Descartes, trans. Haldane. *Works* 153.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

prescribes itself as a way to cultivate care for the soul, with the presumption that the soul is an eternal essence with a fate beyond bodily death. Due to this fact, ways of conducting oneself are laid out by these religions so that, following “earthly death” one will achieve eternal reward, or avoid eternal punishment, or be reincarnated into an equally good, if not greater station in the next life. Because of this then, and if it is to be held true, the soul must make up for a number of considerations.

Most obviously, the soul must have the ability to influence the body in a significant way. It cannot be a mere passenger, nor can it have its domain reside entirely in mental activity. If this were the case, duties of action would be comically useless, for the simple fact that there would be no connection between soul and action. Secondly, the soul must contain at least a significant portion of personal identity to justify reward or punishment. If the soul were something more like Aristotle’s motivating *psuche*, then punishing it would make no sense, as the principle of action (the unified self) had been dissolved upon bodily death.

This brings us then to two more considerations. Primarily is the degree to which this ontology is dependent on the body. For if the human being as a whole is to be considered a soul joined with a physical body, it must be further considered whether the body plays any role in defining the self. For instance, many Mosaic traditions teach of a “resurrection of the body” or “joining with new bodies” in the afterlife.¹² Such doctrine assumes that there is a significance to the body, though it is largely silent on the degree of significance, which leaves room for endless debate. On one hand, the Cartesian hand, the body is largely irrelevant, but if a body is required for participation in eternal glory, then it Descartes would not allow it to be the same body, as he holds the earthly human body to be imperfect, which would render it unworthy to participate in the divine. However, if who we are is to any degree determined by our bodies, then being joined

¹² Martin and Barresi, *Rise and Fall*, 55-75.

with new and different bodies might very well make different people. Thus, the question arises: is it moral to reward people who, though vastly similar to earthly individuals, are nevertheless different entities on the whole? Similar questions can be asked of punishment: Is punishment only for the soul? If so, then could that be considering punishment for a slightly different entity? Is the body necessary for the punishment to be just? The same body?

These endless considerations are, at least in part, resolved in what I believe to be a slightly more modern conception of the soul. The assertion developed here is that “the connection between body and soul is not simply extrinsic...Rather, the human being *is* entirely body *and* entirely soul.”¹³ In this way, the problematic insistence on substance dualism can be cleared away, instead being replaced with what can be understood as an “aspective” account of the soul wherein “each ‘part’...stands for the whole person, thought of from a certain angle.”¹⁴ This reformulation frames the human soul more as an activity than an entity in its own right. By this understanding, the soul is the *subjective aspect* of a whole human being’s interaction with some sort of divine essence or eternal reality. Pope emeritus Joseph Ratzinger described it in this way: “What we call in substantialist language ‘having a soul’ will be described in a more historical, actual language as ‘being God’s partner in a dialogue.’”¹⁵ The immortality of the soul is ensured by the immortality of the object of its participation and contemplation. This, and related ways of considering the soul fall under the category of *dual aspect monism*, which posits a single substance (human being) which nevertheless can be understood and experienced in different ways. Thus, the soul becomes de-objectified, insofar as it is no longer considered to be substance.

¹³ Casey, Thomas G.. "The Return of the Soul." *Studies Irish Review* 102. (2013); 34.

¹⁴ Nancey Murphy, “Do Humans Have Souls? Perspectives from Philosophy, Science and Religion,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 67 (1) (2013); 33.

¹⁵ Casey, “Soul” 35.

This theory of the soul meshes well with certain other, existentialist and transcendental theories of experience and consciousness. “Kant’s idea of the transcendental ego expresses the idea that the subject is a constitutive condition of objects of experience...and not a substance in itself.”¹⁶ This transcendental ego, which is the subject of experience, can be understood as a field within which experiences are had. In fact, this view asserts that such a subjective field is *necessary* for any sort of objective knowledge. In other words, there is no fact at all without an observer. It is important to note that this transcendental ego, this consciousness, this soul, contains these objects of experience, but it is not composed by them. In fact, it can never be such an object because it is “a dimension in which objects appear...No concrete content can be attributed to the consciousness, since every concrete content is an object of consciousness and not consciousness itself.”¹⁷ According to this conceptualization then, and in keeping with dual aspect monism, the soul is not something that can be experienced, but something in which experiences are had. This offers some resolution to the problems of hard line dualism espoused by the followers of Descartes¹⁸ in that it makes the ghost-in-the-machine into an aspect of the machine itself. Indeed, such dual aspect monism allows for subjectively perceived duality within human beings (the idea that one is more than just body) while at the same time being less problematic for the advances of neuroscience that relate brain functions with human states. While one might observe this, assume unidirectional causation and thus conclude that a controlling and inducing soul (or mind) that is *separate* from the body would be redundant, the “transcendental ego” allows for the reality of the subjective experience of brain states without requiring dualistic and mysterious causation.

¹⁶ Frogel, Shai. "The Soul: An Existentialist Point of View." *Human Studies* 33: 193

¹⁷ Ibid, 197.

¹⁸ Clarke writes that such a dualist “would have to assume that the soul communicates differently with different parts of the brain to explain why lesions or stimulation in different parts of the brain affect different aspects of mentality with great specificity.” (63).

One final consideration is that of identity and agency. Dual aspect monism, as I have described it above can be supplemented with the understanding that it is not only a field within which experience is had, but also where meaning is assigned to object and experience. This, obviously, cannot occur in a vacuum; this field can be cultivated, so to speak. The meaning, and thus the objective reality of an object of experience can be altered by a shift in the attitude of this consciousness towards that object and affect a change in the human's response to whatever its object is. Simply put, this field houses existential choice wherein the approach of consciousness is defined and decided. To what degree these choices are entirely free, favored by conditioning and/or made available by conversation with the divine is still a matter of great debate.

Along the same thread, identity under this view of soul or mind is best understood as a continuity of personality, resting largely in memory and association with both body and attitude. It is not so essential as to be prepackaged within a self-contained soul unit, but it is essential in the fact that a person identifies with the choices available to them, the objects of their perception and the subjective perception of these objects in a continuous way (perhaps in an unchanging field of existence). For now, we will move on to consider the implications of this particular ontology, as a whole, bearing in thought that many of the arguments advanced here in favor of soul can be applied to the mind to various degrees.

Now, most broadly, if the soul is a thing which exists (in any form) and it is believed to house the self, then a meaningful life is one most lent to the cultivation of a good soul. Some may consider this a religious life. Some may even extend it so far as to argue in favor of an ecclesial society. While this may be a slight overreach, it bears in mind a certain type of structure. The fact is, if humans are in fact embodied souls or minds that contain the essential aspects of personhood, personality, and agency, then the best society would be one that makes individuals

aware of the choices available to them and educates them in regards to the best choices to make, and how to determine what the best choices are. The question of “best” is, of course, an endless one. However, it can be narrowed by this particular ontology. For if humans are these self-contained individuals, then the best choices will always be individual ones, because the question will always be what is good for *me*, rather than what is good for society, or the community. The idea being that good individuals making good choices will lead to a good overall society.

Returning briefly to the still heavily defended idea that the soul is a personal entity residing within a body, there arise a host of ethical implications. The best example is on the abortion front. If in fact humans are imbued with a soul that is the essence of what they are, then timeline becomes a much more important consideration. If the soul is placed in the fetus at conception, then it is a person at that very instant. If, however, it is a developed aspect of existence, then perhaps full personhood can be denied even to infants. But if it is a simple aspect of human existence, it becomes murkier in some regards. Can the dialogue with God referenced above be unidirectional (God-to-baby) and still suffice for self- or soul-hood? Is the threshold for personhood awareness or simply the potential for awareness (i.e. the potential mind)? This last question is compounded when one is forced to consider whether the source of the subjective field of experience is God, or the brain (or nervous system). This is especially important for considerations of immortality. This is not meant to resolve this debate. It simply shows how, given this particular understanding of a person, the self as the ethereal individual being, can frame certain questions and emphasize certain aspects of human existence. Still, the dual aspect monist formulation allows room for the soul without the problems inherent in Cartesian dualism, such as the fact and manner of communication between body and soul. Beyond the soul, dual aspect monism at least partly resolves the issue of how the actions of the body can affect the self,

being non-identical as they are. Additionally, it fits in well with empirical realities revealed through modern neuroscience.

The Brain

On the other side of the debate regarding an essential concept of the human self resides physicalism. It can also be called materialism, determinism, and a myriad of other titles, but most hold in common the belief that “it may...be true that each and every mental event has a (set of) cause(s) sufficient to produce it.”¹⁹ However, even with this seemingly concise definition there remains a large degree of uncertainty and disagreement over issues such as the degree of acceptable reduction, and the implications of this assertion, which makes sense when one considers that one’s understanding of the aforementioned belief can shift widely depending on one’s definition of “cause” and “mental event.” The following will focus mostly on what one author calls the “scientific”²⁰ definition of self, drawing largely (at times almost exclusively) on the advancements of neuroscience, sociobiology and psychology.²¹

The simplest position in this field falls under what I will call reductive physicalism. This view is, in its most basic form, the assertion that everything is physical. This must be understood to mean that all properties, events (even mental events) and occurrences supervene upon physical events and properties. The most extreme end of this theory posits that each and every aspect of reality, both the apparent and the invisible, are reducible to the laws of physics. “Everyone agrees that everything obeys the laws of physics. Electrons, protons, quarks, muons, and gluons appear in the laws of physics, but these things do not appear anywhere in the ‘laws’ of

¹⁹ Owen Flanagan, *The Problem of the Soul*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002, (60).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ I will, for the time being, leave out certain other reductionist theories, such as those which posit the self to be a linguistic fiction. These theories, while relevant to the discussion, hold a constructivist view of the self, which will be discussed further on.

psychology, sociology, anthropology or economics.”²² The fact that these things exist, and are inherently obedient to the laws of physics mean we can, given enough information, determine exactly the results of interactions of these smaller particles. Furthermore, since these particles make up everything in our world, from stars, to planets, to human beings, to trees, and bacteria it makes logical sense that these things can be entirely understood and determined as well, as everything is the necessary result of physical interactions. This theory expressly rejects the existence of anything nonphysical including souls, selves and minds, and even as far as psychological states. The reasoning is that psychological states are simply manifestations of physical reactions within the brain and do not, as legitimate things, truly exist. Taken to its logical conclusion, even greater systems such as society and culture are thus understood to be determined by the interaction of these particles.

For a great many people, this view is very disturbing, and for obvious reasons. The first is the total negation of any kind of will, or volition. If reductive physicalism is true, then there is no reason to even suppose that human beings will to act. They simply act. The will is an illusory concept that serves to reconcile an bodily occurrence (you lift your arm) with a mental event (synapses fire to raise the arm) within the awareness of the subject. However, there is nothing you could have done to prevent yourself from raising that arm at that point in time. In such a view, consciousness is simply the result of objective awareness combined with a retentive memory that is conducive to survival of the organism. In this case, the notion of free will may simply be epiphenomenal.

However, this theory has a couple of major flaws. Insofar as it denies the existence of anything physical, reductive physicalism would necessarily deny emergent properties resultant from experience. For example, pain is not a physical thing; a needle will activate nerves in your

²² Flanagan, *Soul*, 216.

shoulder that transmit electronic signals along your neck and into your brain, and the brain will respond in kind, releasing chemicals and sending out its own signals, tensing the muscle area, or even causing you to pull away, but none of that is *pain*. Pain is an subjective experience of these events, but it is not directly reducible to them. Additionally, reductive physicalism ignores the fact that, despite being irreducible to pure physics, such experiences *are real things* insofar as they can be experienced and understood. A slightly less reductionistic view can be found in the theory that “[o]ur conative, cognitive, and affective states, and the actions in which they issue, can be fully accounted for by structural and functional features of the brain and its connections with the rest of the central nervous system.”²³ This assertion falls short for similar reasons to those listed above, as well as others that will be discussed below.

An alternate theory that will be further expounded upon below is what I will house under the title *non-reductive physicalism*.²⁴ In this view, mental events may still very well supervene upon the physical, but they are not wholly reducible to physics themselves. Here, then, selves are better thought of as embodied and embedded concepts in their own right that nonetheless have some physical grounding.

The first important aspect of selfhood in this regard is personal identity. Rather than being an entity in and of itself, selfhood is best described as an emergent property of normal human existence. Indeed, development of an autobiographical self concept is held by some as the highest stage in developmental psychology. However, it necessarily rests on the existence of a “proto-self” that is a simple and unconscious representation of the environment to the organism,

²³ Walter Glannon, *Brain, Body and Mind: Neuroethics with a Human Face*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011. (12).

²⁴ An equally viable term is *naturalism*, which I will use at times interchangeably with NRP, with the understanding that it is defined by a belief in a natural source for all events and properties (i.e. the brain).

and a “core self” which consists in a subjective awareness.²⁵ The narrative sense arises when one can view oneself as a coherent, differentiated subject of experience with a past and a (potential) future. This requires a degree of psychological continuity that is provided by a combination of episodic memory and the ability to hold a concept in one’s mind for an extended period of time.

This concept one holds as self is the view of oneself as the first-person subject of a unique stream of conscious experience provided by an exclusive connection to one’s own nervous system. The very fact that you are so connected to your own experience in a way that you are not in terms of the experiences of others makes your own experiences much more concrete and therefore solidifies your sense of self. This particular sense is not understood as something actually concrete (though it is real), but rather as an indexical indicator; something to “situate those aspects of oneself for oneself and others in order to engage in the projects of self-knowledge, self-explanation, self-prediction, and self control, and to assist others in so doing.”²⁶ In this regard, we can see how the self might be an adaptive thing that satisfies an “organism’s need to adapt to the surrounding natural and social context.”²⁷

In properly circular fashion, this context then serves to influence the very self attempting to adapt to it. The human organism is the subject of an essentially endless stream of experience, “but selfhood is grounded in psychological connectedness, in the connections to experiences, feelings, traits of character, and actions that we pick out of the complete continuous stream as most important, as most identity constitutive.”²⁸ In some ways, these are conscious memories that we acknowledge as formative, or beliefs we hold that guide our activities; the self in this

²⁵ Flanagan, *Soul*, 220.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Glannon, *Brain, Body and Mind*, 21.

²⁸ Flanagan, *Soul*, 234.

sense is a sort of an abstraction that serves as a locus of identity in order to magnify the significant aspects of our lives, providing a more concrete meaning. It is, in short, what gives character to a particular narrative that would otherwise be simply a stream of experiences with no affective significance whatsoever.²⁹

But this process occurs at an unconscious level as well, perhaps to an even greater extent. For example, during a moment of fear, the fight-or-flight response is triggered by the release of adrenaline. “The release of adrenaline into the bloodstream also activates noradrenergic mechanisms in the amygdala, which promote the formation, consolidation, and reconsolidation of unconscious memories of fearful and other emotionally charged events.”³⁰ This contributes to what some theorists have called the “fringe” of consciousness, an unconscious halo around the stream of experience that gives it further meaning and significance. In many regards, this is a good thing, as it provides a natural and unconscious source of a socially acceptable temperament by virtue of the feedback loops that informed it. Unfortunately, it has a darker side as well: “hypersecretion of adrenaline and noradrenaline in response to a traumatic event can consolidate an unconscious memory of the event so strongly that it results in a pathological condition,” such as that experienced by those under the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder.³¹

But the experiences of those undergoing PTSD do reveal at least one important thing. PTSD is an affective disorder in that it is evidenced by a difference in behavior from a perceived norm, at a *conscious* level. It indicates awareness of particular patterns of behavior that enables us to recognize deviations from those patterns when we act “out of character.” This stable sense of character is established by autobiographical memory (we can see how we were previously) and a

²⁹ There is an extremely interesting account of a Russian soldier Lyova Zazetsky who, due to a brain injury, lost a stable sense of self and psychological continuity.

³⁰ Glannon, *Brain, Body and Mind*, 17.

³¹ *Ibid.*

psychological continuity of oneself as a continuous subject of experience, and internal and external observation (both we and others can see how we are at present). Thus patterns, and belief about oneself are formed which serve as the basis for self-evaluation, as well as a foundation for appropriate action. There is significant evidence that conscious beliefs can have real physiological effects on human beings, like the placebo effect, for example. The reduction of any symptoms is entirely due to the conscious belief that the medicine will in fact aid in symptom reduction. This belief stems from a larger integrated system of belief in regards to medicine in general and the goal and purpose of physicians.³² However, this indicates that beliefs can and do affect the way we respond to the world, right down to the physical responses we have to stimuli. Thus it is reasonable to believe that beliefs about oneself, reinforced by the perceived and actual stability of one's own character, will inform the responses that person will have to the world around them.

Such psychological continuity may, in part, be reinforced by a relatively new discovery in neuroscience: mirror neurons. Normally thought to play a role in empathy, mirror neurons fire in response to a perceived action or emotional state creating a somewhat reduced parallel of the observed state (i.e. I smile; you feel happy). Now, because psychological states are made sense of through observation as children (as in the correlation between happy and smiling), as mature organisms human beings we understand these states consciously in terms of observation. We, in a sense, recall observing others expressing happiness through smiles (which activated parallel circuits in our own brains) when we feel happy. Thus, while the abject feeling of happiness is a thing of its own, we only are able to comprehend it from a perspective of observation in which we posit ourselves as the subject of this observation. In other words one will “simply think at [oneself] as the one that is attached to that body that will still be followed by the gaze of

³² Ibid, 24.

others.”³³ One is one’s own object of observation and that concept becomes the self, as a continuous psychological entity. This, of course, is still in the developing stages of its formulation and will become understood as more or less formative with further testing.

One thing that is important to note is that, despite all the talk of awareness, belief and subjectivity, there truly is a way in which we exist in the world. The self is intended as an approximation of this way of being, though it is limited by our imperfect cognitive capacities.³⁴ This is not to say that the self is a fiction (though some would argue that), but simply that the self is a concept that serves as a mediator between awareness and reality. The self concept is a tool that either adjusts one’s behavior or itself in order to provide greater coherence between the experience one has of oneself and the reality of the world around one, including the perceptions and influence of peers. In summary, the self, when it is normal and healthy, is the realization (and actualization) of the life one is really living.

Now, one could reasonably ask how, despite all the discussion of physical, hormonal and structural processes that go into the formation of the self, I could have held, as I still do, that the self is not purely housed within the brain, or central nervous system, or any combination of mechanistic physical processes? The simple answer lies in *intentionality*. John Searle describes intentionality and its related problems in this way:

[It is] the feature by which our mental states are directed at, or about, or refer to, or are of objects and states of affairs in the world other than themselves. ‘Intentionality’...doesn’t just refer to intentions, but also to beliefs, desires, hopes, fears, love hate, lust disgust, shame, pride, irritation, amusement and all of those mental states...that refer to, or are about, the world apart from the mind. Now the question about intentionality is...[h]ow can this stuff inside my head be *about* anything. How can it *refer* to anything?...How, to put it crudely, can atoms in the void represent anything?³⁵

³³ Gregory de Vleeschouwer, (65).

³⁴ Flanagan, *Soul*, 244.

³⁵ John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. (16)

Thus, mechanistic processes are insufficient for explanations of mental phenomena because they ignore the very real fact that these phenomena are realized in biological, mental, and social systems. Physical sources are not ignored, but must simply be recognized as simply a part (however necessary) of a much larger process.

Which brings us to the second aspect of selfhood deemed relevant: conscious volition. Despite all the discussion above, it may still seem reasonable to think that ‘free will’ as we have conceived it may not really exist; or at most that it is epiphenomenal insofar as it is established by reflective awareness on actions which one would have undertaken regardless. A series of experiments conducted by Benjamin Libet seem to support this theory. In his tests, he noted that a readiness potential appeared in the brain of test subjects a distinct amount of time *before* a conscious awareness of the desire to move their wrists or fingers, which seemed to indicate an unconscious source for seemingly volitional activity.³⁶ However, this need not be worrisome for a number of reasons. Indeed, while free will itself might be a bit of a misnomer, there is no reason to doubt *agential causation*.

Firstly, there is the very fact of the test itself. It was conducted in a very small, discrete temporal setting and only examined that portion of time in which the readiness potential apparently lead to action. This, however, ignores distal intention, which is a conscious aspect of long-term planning which serves to inform appropriate action in accordance with that goal, even from a subconscious level. Secondly, but in relation, this particular conclusion ignores the necessarily historical component of any intention that is formed. In this way, reasons for action “involve more than proximal urges in my brain. They also involve conscious beliefs whose content reflects features of the external environment.”³⁷ Decision is not discrete. It involves a

³⁶ Glannon, *Brain, Body, and Mind*, 43.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

myriad of influences which, even simply on the merits of physical external influences on decision making, already show that there is more than the brain at play in terms of decision-making.

In addition, there is a faulty belief about the direction of causation. It rests on the assumption that causal influence within the mind is linear when, in fact, modern neuroscience has shown this is not the case at all. “The causal trajectories are best described as neither top-down nor bottom up but circular.”³⁸ The brain-mind interaction is an informational feedback loop. Beliefs inform physiological responses which cause mental states which then reinforce or adjust beliefs and intentions which then return a new series of physical inputs to the subconscious mind, including those of beliefs altered by interaction with the external world. The mind is thus a self-priming pump by virtue of its being in the world.

Finally, one must realize that a faulty argument is at play within the theories that deny agential causation. Simply because mental states have physical causes does not mean that they cannot be causes of further events. This belief in some ways actually runs counter to a great deal of scientific assertions. In essence, the argument states that causes cannot have causes outside themselves. This is a *causa sui* argument to which much of science is adamantly opposed. I think it best to consider that physical events are necessary components for further action (Libet’s readiness potential) but they are insufficient to bring it about without the proper mental event (the *decision* to move). Both are necessary components, though one may depend in some respects on the other. Now, the exact mechanism for choice is not well understood and I certainly will not endeavor to resolve that issue here. Suffice it to say that, even if further physical events have physical causes, the reason behind those physical events (the mental state)

³⁸ Ibid, 49.

as triggers is relevant to the process as a whole. This is roughly the mechanism for agential causation, allowing for conscious influence.

The scientific view, while unsettling for some, has had a good deal of positive effects in the world already. For example, epileptics are no longer thought to be demon possessed; the realization that abnormal brain functioning causes seizures enabled effective treatment. In like fashion, the discovery of physical components to psychological disorders facilitates greater understanding and more effective treatment. The danger in the reductionist mode of thought is in the tendency to treat everyone simply as a brain in need of chemical correction, which totally ignores the subjective aspects of experience and the intentionality of belief, both of which have been shown to have physiological effects.³⁹ “Cognitive-behavioral therapy is just one example of how some mental states can be causally efficacious in altering brain states and influencing actions that issue from them. Reframing our beliefs about the world can have modulating effects on cortical and even limbic regions of the brain.”⁴⁰ For one thing, this indicates that pharmacological treatment of some mental disorders may not be expressly necessary, or sufficient. But beyond the mentally disturbed, it indicates that, as much as our brains affect who we are, who we are affects our brains. Intentionality is a conscious activity and it lends itself to a moral responsibility to establish a society that enables positive environmental reinforcement. As agents imbued with causal powers to alter our environments as well as our reactions to it, we have no excuse to be moral bystanders. We are not entirely products. And even to the extent that we are constructed, we still have the ability to change the things that construct us. This world is relevant to who we are, in an extremely formative way, and this comes with an obligation to build and maintain it in a way that positively influences the patterns of behavior,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 49.

character and belief that enable healthy lives. We are self-reinforcing feedback loops within ourselves and the natural and social worlds in which we participate which absolutely commands a moral responsibility to ensure positive interactions with others in terms of justice, fairness, and care. However, these theories are more effectively lent to the political realm, rather than science, for science cannot objectively determine what is Good. Suffice to conclude here then with the assertion that we are beings with some kind of essential existence, and determine what kind of beings we are and what kind of world is most conducive to our spiritual, mental and physical flourishing in the next sections.

The Situated-Individual Self

This next method of conceiving the self tends to be more political in nature. The basic tenet of the view of the situated self as I am advancing it rests on the assumption of a human agent that possesses some quality on its own prior to integration into a social structure. However, in this view, full self-hood is defined by participation within the structure and thus extends beyond the boundaries of the individual as defined by the body, or mind, or even soul. Naturally then, theories of this nature will be less concerned with the precise origin of agency, and identity, but rather will focus on ways in which they are realized within social structures, the ways in which they affect those structures, and how the effects are reciprocated upon the selves contained therein. In spite of these similarities there are numerous ways one can conceive a self in conversation with a structured society, and each comes with its own assumptions and conclusions. For the most part, these assumptions will deal with what type of antecedent subject exists, how society affects the individuals that comprise it, and what is good for those individuals involved, as well as general society. The following will be an examination of how self-hood, understood primarily as agential identity, is defined and cultivated by different conceptions of good social structures, based on their various goals and effects. Agency, authenticity and meaningfulness are all relevant considerations of full selfhood. The primary focus will be over liberal individualist and communitarian perspectives on selfhood, often implied by the types of societies they hold as best.

Briefly, a quick aside is necessary to address those who might assert that society can be considered simply a collection of self-actualized individuals interacting mostly out of necessity. Even from the most liberal perspective which would posit an entirely antecedently individuated subject, this self is most fully realized within the boundaries of a kind of community, defined

most loosely as society in general. Liberalism holds most important the ability of an individual to freely choose and pursue his or her conception of the good, in terms of ends and values. While self is defined primarily through differentiation, this differentiation must be between nominally similar entities. As such, if this antecedently individuated subject, imbued with full capacity for rational choice, existed in a situation fully devoid of any human contact yet with sufficient leisure to consider its own goods, this capacity for free choice would be wholly negated. For choice is only relevant between two (or more) valid options. Thus if the only options available to such a person were of his or her own invention, any rational capacity at all would be meaningless. Even if we are to assume that this person has achieved the best possible life, there would be no way for this person to reflectively affirm his or her own choices. Human flourishing is determined by free choice, yet his person would be entirely contingent upon his or her own solitude. The fullest humanity is defined, by liberal adherents, to be free, rational, reflective affirmation of one's own livelihood, which is impossible outside the boundaries of a society because such an existence denies the possibility of the necessary comparison. A value freely chosen is not valuable if there are no potential alternatives. To have values then, one must be already within an environment that at the very least supports choice.

Liberal Individualist

Here now, we will venture further into this liberal perspective. Beginning at one extreme with Immanuel Kant, one finds an assertion of a transcendental self as the fundamental unit of interaction with the world, morality and the good. Kant envisioned a subject totally separated from any contingent circumstances engaging in pure rationality with the Universal moral law. In this way, one could know the right thing to do in a way that was not dependent on any prior fact,

insuring an objective morality.⁴¹ At first glance, this seems to indicate a totally free self that exists prior to any connection to any other individual or circumstance that is capable of reason and agential action. And while the existence of this subject is assumed to be true, it is not a self in the fullness that the term requires. For just as morality based upon the Universal law would be wholly irrelevant outside of its application in the real world, so would the rational agent be incomplete without engaging in both transcendental reason *and* interaction with other individuals. In fact, it is precisely that interaction that requires the application of a moral law in the first place. For Kant, full realization of one's identity as a moral actor only comes in the midst of other individuals. However, the Kantian self is deeply unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons, most notably that it separates the agent entirely from contingencies which, instead of leading to total rationality, leads simply to arbitrariness.

In response, John Rawls advanced a theory of justice designed to be more empirically valid. In his view, justice was the primary virtue of a good society, and it was best reached through application of certain principles that would be agreed upon behind a "veil of ignorance."⁴² In such a situation, individuals would be blind, not to all contingencies as in Kant's theory, but only to those deemed morally irrelevant in order "to make vivid to ourselves the restrictions that it seems reasonable to impose on arguments for principles of justice and therefore on these principles themselves."⁴³ Ideally, they would not know anything particular (such as their individual conceptions of the good) but would be fully aware of the need for primary goods, these assumed to be universally human goods. From here justice could, in theory, be readily achieved.

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, *Ethical Philosophy*, trans. James W. Ellington.

⁴² John Rawls, *The Theory of Justice*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

This particular theory presumes a number of things about the self it requires. Primarily, it presumes an agent capable of choice that exists prior to circumstance. As a deontological liberal who favors equal liberty above all else, Rawls necessarily holds that what is right is superior to what is good, because goods are contingent and right can be an absolute, as in the case of justice. But such a conclusion further requires that a person exist prior to his or her ends, such that “what is most important to our personhood is not the ends we choose but our capacity to choose them.”⁴⁴ Such a person is “always, irreducibly, an active, willing agent, distinguishable from [one’s] surroundings and capable of choice.”⁴⁵

In addition to existing prior to ends, the self must be *possessive*. By this, one should understand “the self as a subject of possession, for in possession the self is distanced from its ends without being detached altogether.”⁴⁶ These ends are objects of choice to which one relates purely through acts of the will. In such a way, the agency of the self is affirmed as the grounding for identity, insofar as ends are the chosen preferences of a prior self that exists as the possessor of interests. The life of this self is authentic almost by reflexive definition, provided the choice of ends is not coerced in some way. It is further authentic insofar as the goals and activities chosen by this self relate to his or her conception of the good. Meaningfulness is a subject many liberals shy away from, for it demands a standard of comparison that asserts a superiority that is in conflict with their support of difference. Thus by this view, a life is considered meaningful only internally, at most.

However, this leaves open the question of whether this type of self really, empirically exists, is created by a liberal regime or is simply necessary for the regime to function as envisioned.

⁴⁴ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 19.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 54.

This raises the further question of whether a self in this manner should be valued and if so, whether it should be cultivated by the state.

Liberal regimes favor a self of capacities. By this I mean that, at bottom the subject is understood to have capacity for choice and autonomy that is essential to the realization of a full identity. Indeed, agency is presumed to exist prior to integration into a society. Digeser argues that “agency itself implies that we already have some capacity to exercise practical reason. An individual who was unable to relate means to ends would hardly qualify as an agent.”⁴⁷ The liberal self is thus defined as a chooser, with an identity further constituted by the ends he or she chooses (which may or may not presuppose natural inclinations). But the liberal conception of self, as its name would suggest, is not very strictly defined. What is important to the liberal notion of personhood is liberty and the respect for difference.

Autonomy, for example, may be important to a particular individual, though it is not necessary for a flourishing life. One can conceive a culture wherein goals are shared to the extent that critical reflection is unnecessary, or frowned upon, that would still enable an agent to live a perfectly content life.⁴⁸ This is no problem for liberal society, so long as the identity as constituted by life within that particular community is not directly harmful and was freely chosen. Authenticity meets a similar fate, in that liberalism declines to make a judgment regarding a standard of authenticity. In fact, liberalism sees assertions of authenticity and inauthenticity as inherently dangerous, as they threaten to marginalize those that fall outside of a set category defined as ‘authentic.’

At the end of the day though, Digeser acknowledges that selfcraft is unavoidable within a politically grounded society. “Paradoxically, all sides agree that whatever social and political

⁴⁷ Peter Digeser, *Our Politics, Our Selves?* 198.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 176.

practices we devise, some conception of the self will be perceived as advantaged or disadvantaged.”⁴⁹ For this and other reasons, Digeser argues for a “qualified permission” of the state to engage in selfcraft. This is understood as not precluding talk of the self from entering politics (socially realized as it is) but not making a requirement of it, as this runs the risk of either marginalization or normalization.

In summary, the liberal individualist self is an antecedent agent capable of choice that is fully realized within society through a variety of chosen goods and ends that may nonetheless stem from natural attributions and/or desires/inclinations. Society is required because respect for difference, a fundamental liberal principal, requires differences to exist, and a suitable platform for differentiation to take place.

Classical Political Rationalist

A second political tradition that, while not large in the public mind, nonetheless deserves a place in the discourse is defined by the category “classical political rationalist.”⁵⁰ These neo-classicists generally posit the soul as the given character of a human being; the essential essence beyond choice. “The preference for soultalk harkens us back to the claim that nature may be able to provide a standard for judging the character and quality of communal life.”⁵¹ As such, they adhere to a belief that there is a proper hierarchy of the drives of the soul, of values and of society. Reason is given the privileged position at the top of this hierarchy, and all is properly ordered when reason actually resides there. Inherent in this natural order is a capacity for human excellence, understood in various ways, but most basically “an engagement in and a concern

⁴⁹ Ibid, 248.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid, 24.

with politics” as well as a “capacity for noble actions” accorded with intellectual and moral virtue.⁵²

In short, the classical political rationalists see a definite conception of a person as an entity imbued with agential capacity (though not to equal degrees⁵³) that nonetheless has a natural order. One’s life is authentic when lived in pursuit of the noble virtues. It is important to note that the rationalists, like Plato, believed in an absolute truth of things, which is the goal of contemplation. Similarly, a meaningful life is one that is engaged with politics, ruled by reason and aimed at the achievement of noble action and virtue. In like fashion, the classical political rationalists show disfavor to liberalism for a number of reasons. Primarily, they see it as disordering. Reason is no longer accorded the supreme place they believe it deserves because other passions have been allowed to become too relevant. Additionally, the emphasis on equality that is so favored by liberal democracy is seen as over-individualizing, which leads to resentment and dis-involvement with political life. Thus, the classical political rationalists see the cultivation of a particular type of self, the well-ordered and engaged citizen, as an absolute obligation of the state. This assertion again shows that a self is very often believed to be, to at least some degree, circumscribed by the society within which it exists.

Communist

At this point we will move on from these more individualistic conceptions of the situated self and briefly look over what is perhaps the most famous conception of a self defined by community ever advanced: Communism. The most fundamental way in which Communism differentiates from the previous theories is in the assertion that a person is not, at base, an

⁵² Ibid, 30.

⁵³ Many classical political rationalists favor a sort of ‘aristocracy’ as opposed to a democracy, wherein the most fit rule. This aristocracy is based upon expression of intellectual virtue through wisdom. Thus, certain people were believed superior for this purpose, in theory, though democracy was espoused by some as the best practical solution.

individual but a *constituted* being with individual qualities. Marx held that, above all else, a human being was a producer, and it was through the manner of production that the self was made. “This sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as ‘substance’ and ‘essence’ of man.”⁵⁴ Marx thus asserts that a self is not antecedently individuated, but rather is antecedently situated, within a historical and productive context.

It is this productive context that holds the greatest presence in Marx’s mind for, as he writes, “By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”⁵⁵ It is then the way in which humans are situated in relation to this production that further defines selfhood, either as fully realized or, to use Marx’s term of art, alienated. Personal identity was considered entirely constituted by and residing within the material realities of any given human’s existence which are, of necessity, interactive. Thus, one’s personal identity, insofar as it consists in individual activity, can be viewed either as a rationalization or a justification of one’s position in relation to the material reality understood in the means of production and division of labor. However, Marx necessarily would view this identity as a falsehood, because a “communal interest does not exist merely in the imagination, as ‘the general good,’ but first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labour is divided.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the proper grounding for one’s identity is as a communal being. This brief overview encapsulates agency within humanity’s productive capacity, authenticity in a notion of a life lived in accordance with greater equality of ownership and labor, this being an accurate reflection of true material conditions, and meaningfulness in the interests

⁵⁴ Marx, Stevenson, 152.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 142.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 149.

one pursues beyond one's communal obligations. However, Marx acknowledges the difficulty of transitioning to such a self understanding because it is embedded in a social reality that one inherits.

Communitarian

This now brings us to our final consideration in the investigation of the situated individual, which is communitarianism. The primary concern of communitarians regards what they see as the necessary embeddedness of the self, within a historical context and a cultural framework that orients one towards the good. These in turn supply the necessary horizon for the definition of identity, the application of moral judgment and the standard for determining a life to be meaningful.

According to Charles Taylor, a framework is the necessary background for the various judgments one must make in regard to the life one is living (e.g. is it good, is it meaningful, is it moral). He writes that in various modes of living "some framework stands unquestioned which helps define the demands by which they judge their lives and measure, as it were, their fullness or emptiness; the space of fame in the memory and song of the tribe, or the call of God," etc.⁵⁷ These frameworks supply ideals of the "incomparable" forms of life to which one aspires when one attempts to live a meaningful life. It assumes, by its very nature, that there is a higher good, to which one is oriented in terms of the framework within which this good acquires meaning.

For example, Taylor writes about the framework of "ordinary life." This holds as its incomparable goods, among other things, the development of children, the solidarity of the family and familial love. These are not transcendental universals in these terms, but rather are given significance and meaning within the framework of ordinary life. From the perspective of another framework, these goods may seem trivial.

⁵⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 16.

An important aspect of communitarian theory is the necessity of relationships within these frameworks. The argument is that these relationships are, to a certain degree, inevitable, unavoidable, and inescapable. Community in this regard supplies attributes that are not possessed by, but *constitutive of* the self that resides therein. “To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments...is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth.”⁵⁸ It is these connections that enable one to justify one’s own desires and ends beyond mere arbitrariness that results of the unencumbered self.⁵⁹

For some communitarians, one’s identity is intimately connected to judgments about a good and meaningful life, which are the qualitative distinctions defined by the framework that exists in relation to a moral stance towards the world. The framework is what allows one to declare something worthwhile, good, worthy of respect, constitutive of our dignity, by providing a standard orientation. The framework is what places one in a knowable orientation between certain moral responses⁶⁰ and one’s conception of the good. The self then, in part at least, exists within this horizon wherein significance is attached to things. Thus the self, according to Taylor is, in part an orientation to the good.

Additionally, this self is understood and made sense of through the use of language which also serves to reflexively reinforce and define certain other parts of the self identity. This constitutive language is only utilized and maintained “within a language community. And this indicates another crucial feature of a self. One is a self only among other selves. A self can

⁵⁸ Michael Sandel, *Liberalism*, 179.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 180.

⁶⁰ I think it important to note that Taylor uses “moral” to include a greater variety of value judgments. I mirror that use here.

never be described without reference to those who surround it.”⁶¹ This is especially important to note if one is to consider the possibility of leaving a particular language community or background. This is possible, though only if one aligns with another language community, or else uses the original community as a starting point for innovation. In this way, we are never free from what Taylor calls “webs of interlocution.” There is no way to be a self outside of a defining community. Sandel makes a similar claim:

But we cannot regard ourselves as independent...without great cost to those loyalties and convictions whose moral force consists partly in the fact that living by them is inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are – as members of this family or community or nation or people... Allegiances such as these are more than values I happen to have or aims I ‘espouse at any given time’... They allow that to some I owe more than justice requires or even permits...in virtue of those more or less enduring attachments which taken together partly define the person I am.⁶²

One’s self definition is influenced by the supplying of initial definitions for qualitative distinctions by the primary language community. Basic things like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ acquire meaning initially through one community, and are then understood similarly or differently later on in relation to that initial definition. So then is the framework within which one finds one’s identity via relation to the good constructed. It is important to remember that, as far as Taylor and other communitarians are considered, these meanings are not creations, but *articulations* of an experienced reality. They can never be made fully explicit, being dependant on language as they are, but they are nonetheless truths. This assertion lends itself to the communitarian belief that there can, and should be, standards that define what is good outside of an unencumbered individual self and its preferences.

There is a final sense in which the communitarians see the self, which is the narrative sense. A life, lived within a framework as it is, is directed in terms of an aspiration to fullness relative

⁶¹ Taylor, *Self*, 35.

⁶² Sandel, *Liberalism*, 179.

to the good of that life. It is a desire to attain a degree of perfection in relation to that good, and this can be seen as a sort of quest. The narrative sense allows one to know, more or less objectively, where one stands in relation to the goods of one's life. But even beyond that, the narrative encompasses the aspect of being that persons hold to be a defining aspect of their humanity. If the good is a goal, then we are changing in relation to it, and the narrative allows one to make sense of and acknowledge this change. The narrative sense of self gives one fixity within the framework, without sacrificing unity. "But then what counts as a unit will be defined by the scope of the concern by just what is in question. And what is in question is, generally and characteristically, the shape of my life *as a whole*."⁶³ One's whole life is thus unified through the narrative sense.

One final thing that necessitates explication is the notion of the punctual and fractured self that is espoused by communitarianism. This type of self can occur in a number of ways. First, the self is truncated when the narrative sense is ignored. This is often called the "punctual" self understanding and, in communitarian eyes, most notably Taylor's, it separates from the temporal and spiritual orientation that actually constitutes a self, and thus loses any meaning by falling outside the realm of questions about the good, which can only be understood temporally.⁶⁴ The self can be further fractured through unintegrated roles. These can be seen as facets of identity, strands of the web, sides of the framework. When one considers them alone, one may feel that one's identity changes with circumstance. I spoke above of ordinary life as a framework. But there are simpler frameworks, each with their own goods and values. One can identify as an American, or Muslim, or a member of the Green Party. And there is no reason one person cannot abide within all three. The problem arises when they are considered one by one, rather

⁶³ Taylor, *Self*, 50.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

than concurrently. This compartmentalization leads, according to communitarian thinkers, to a loss of wholeness in one's life, or to a life with no sense of what is truly good.⁶⁵ The solutions can vary. Some, notably Alasdair MacIntyre, argue for immersion within a particular tradition that can provide the necessary telos for a meaningful life. Others, such as Taylor, argue that we must consider all components of our identities, including modern ones.⁶⁶ In this way, acknowledging the historical, natural and/or theistic sources of our moral judgments, as well as seeing ourselves as the locus of convergence of these various traditions, we can achieve a greater unity and sense of wholeness and meaningful life.

It is worth noting in conclusion that these various conceptions are not very compatible. Communitarianism faults liberalism for ignoring morally relevant contingencies concerning the situation of a historical, narrative and conversationally defined self. Liberalism faults communitarianism for its preference for "horizons of meaning," stating that such an attitude necessarily marginalizes those who do not fall within the horizon, thus making difference a problem and tending to disjoint identity on its own terms. Classical political rationalism faults liberalism for allegedly degrading the place of reason and encouraging a disordered view of the soul. Liberalism finds fault with the rationalists on the grounds that they establish a particular and exclusive standard of an authentic and "true" self that may marginalize others. Communism rejects any tradition that creates a false relationship between humanity and the material reality, be it a physical or spiritual justification. These modes of political thought are quite often mutually exclusive in terms of how they define what constitutes a self most fully within their particular spheres, and what they believe to be the best mode of life. While I will refrain from making a definitive judgment on the efficacy and value of each of these various understandings, I

⁶⁵ Digeser, *Politics, Selves*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

will assert that I hold the communitarian perspective to be a more accurate approximation of how we really are as selves in the world. This perspective acknowledges the “always-already” aspect of cultural embeddedness as formative to the self. Furthermore, communitarians argue (and I agree) that engagement with the tradition within which one finds oneself is the surest way to come to a fuller understanding of one’s identity and orientation to the world and the good and thus take a greater agential part in one’s life and selfhood. However, simple acknowledgement of, and engagement with, a particular tradition is insufficient, for it ignores the numerous, and often hidden, contingencies of identity and life, which will be discussed at greater length in the following section.

The Contingent Self

Above, I discussed various ontological assumptions required by several political philosophies. Each one presupposes a particular way of being at bottom, or else that there is a standard toward which one can reach, if not both. One thing that is neglected by these traditions, however, is an even greater degree of reflection upon the structures that inform these conceptions of selfhood and the good. It is just such a manner of reflection that philosophical genealogists declare to provide. By elucidating the historical contingencies of values and conceptions of identity, they seek to problematize any declaration of grounded truth, and reveal the underlying constructions that inform and shape values and identities today. As such, many deny the existence of a “true” identity or an absolute good, instead choosing to engage in ironic participation in the activities of formation, while maintaining conscious awareness of the relationship of power, resentment, and contingency to the ways in which selves are understood and formed.

Construction

Let us begin with the world. The primary assumption is that the world is indifferent to human beings. It is not predisposed to discovery, manipulation, or attunement by us. It simply exists, and we exist within this world. As beings, we are constituted with various drives and desires. In order to make sense of our place in the world, to interact with it well, to assign meaning and value, and to understand how we are in the world, we require identity. Of course, our existence is limited by our own finitude. Humanity is unified by the limiting power of mortality. One’s temporal relation to death establishes necessary limits on the possibilities of life and results in the necessary foreclosure of possibilities throughout life. In some ways, this relationship is a resentful one, which will be important later on. For now, it is sufficient to note that death is the primary contingency of life.

Before moving any further, I must make one crucial, if subtle, distinction between ‘self’ and “identity.” Because of the indifference of the world to human endeavors, identity is rendered ambiguous, and thus cannot be entirely equated with the self. Rather, from this perspective, the self exists in the space between existence and actualization. The self is realized (in part) through identity. The indifference of the world means any constructed categories of identity will not correspond directly with selfhood, thus leaving something uncaptured by articulation. Because of this, the following will primarily use identity in discussions of selfhood because, while an incomplete articulation of the self, it is the best possible approximation that the contingency theorists will allow.

William Connolly identifies four types of contingencies that mediate identifying⁶⁷ traits: i) physical and/or locational contingencies; ii) historical and relational contingencies; iii) the contingency of relative cruciality to identity; and iv) the contingency of the strife between “incipient formations/presentations of self and intersubjectively constituted modes of identification.”⁶⁸ In sum, one’s identity is contingent, by the understanding that the traits considered constitutive of one’s identity (and therefore expressed selfhood) are subject to change by virtue of the innumerable contingencies definable under the above categories, indicating that even identity is not stable.

At any rate, this identity is initially and unreflectively viewed possessively; it is something *had* by a subject, rather than something given, assigned, or constructed. It is seen as intrinsic, and therefore natural. Furthermore, and insofar as this identity aligns with cultural standards, it is seen as *normal*. Normality is an important concept for contingency theorists because many of

⁶⁷ *Identifying* here has two meanings: being identified by others, and the act of constructing identity. This distinction runs throughout this school of thought.

⁶⁸ William E. Connolly. *Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. (176)

them expressly deny it as a real thing. Instead, normality is the result of a drive to naturalize one particular identity as “right” or “true” that itself results from the unsettling presence of *difference*. Difference is unsettling because it represents a threat to the self-certainty of one particular identity. The drive to naturalize one’s own identity can cause one such identity “to construe a range of differences as *intrinsically* evil, irrational, abnormal, mad, sick, primitive, monstrous, dangerous, or anarchical – as other. It does so to secure itself as intrinsically good, coherent, complete or rational,”⁶⁹ in short, to protect itself (and thereby, it’s *self*).

Now, this othering does not take place simply between individuals, but occurs quite pervasively at the institutional level. As one type of identity becomes socially recognized as normal, institutional policies and practices are initiated to enforce this conception:

health professions ferret out a conception of how the healthy body must appear and act. Jurists and criminologists establish the standard of rationality. Liberal theorists advance an autonomous, interest-driven individual with broad capacities to choose and control his or her destiny.⁷⁰

The trouble is that these categories are established by knowledge that is not discovery, but creation.⁷¹ These categories, as standards, create what Michel Foucault called “disciplinary power.” This power forges identity through the establishment of restrictive norms, and observation (both of oneself and by others) that can lead to disciplinary correction in the form of either self-discipline as one attempts to change one’s own nature, and/or threat of marginalization.

This final aspect, the threat of marginalization, of being othered, is particularly harmful because it imposes a broad category of abnormality upon a person who, for whatever reason, is unable to align themselves with a standard that, at its core, is almost entirely arbitrary. Indeed, such

⁶⁹ Ibid, 65.

⁷⁰ Digeser, *Politics, Selves*, 45.

⁷¹ Ibid, 204.

practices often lead to the repression of difference. The irony is that difference is *necessary* for the formation of identity. For example, the male-female duality is considered entirely natural by most cultures. However, if one were to imagine (however far-fetched) a world comprised entirely of biological men, then to distinguish oneself by sex would not only be senseless; it would be impossible. Thus, sex would play no part in the constitution of identity and the understanding of the self. The dictates of a standard only exist because of the existence of a category they seek to alter, subjugate, or do away with entirely. Contingency theorists use this to reject the notion of a transcendental ground for selfhood.

There is a particularly striking notion that results from the preceding analysis, and the conclusion that institutional practices determine identity in large parts, and it is this: choice is rendered all but *meaningless* in terms of identity if one is defined by existing categories and one's fit, or lack thereof. An individual's choice instead will reside in conformity to the culturally endorsed (and enforced) identity, or else resistance and discipline. While conformity might be easier for some due to their identification with certain "entrenched contingencies,"⁷² each option comes with its own set of resentments that compliment a host of resentments that contingency theorists see in the interactions of modern life. I identify six distinct types.

The first type of resentment is prevalent even in those who find little divergence between the normalized self and their own lived self. It is resentment stemming from benefits conferred by alignment with standards. One feels one's identity, not as chosen, but confirmed and validated by the "disciplinary powers" and thus any benefits experienced because of this identity are felt to be owed to the standards, rather than earned. One begins to resent the requirements of identity.⁷³

⁷² Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 176.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 22.

The second type of resentment is more obvious. It is resent of feeling forced to conform to standards with which one does not identify. One feels compelled by external and internal discipline and observation to avoid being othered, and therefore cast out of acceptable society and all its benefits.

The third type of resentment is that experienced by a subjugated subject. This is one who, for whatever reason, does not conform to standards set down by society. Their self-expression is thus deemed abnormal and in need of treatment or removal. Such individuals resent being placed in a lower (or even entirely external) social position.

The fourth type of resentment is similar to the first. This resentment stems from an observation that the capabilities of the state to achieve self-determined mastery and reach the goal of a particular future have faded in the onset of increasing globalized contingency. Thus restraints on identity seem more arbitrary than strongly linked to a particular future. Individuals in this state resent being subjected to restrictions deemed necessities of a future in which they no longer feel invested.⁷⁴

The fifth type of resentment is rather an exacerbation of a type of resentment that already exists inherently in the modern identity. According to Connolly, the modern identity is the result of resentment towards existential suffering inherent in the human condition, combined with a drive to establish a ground for meaning. This resentment results of one's orientation to the fact of one's own mortality and a culturally defined need to establish responsibility for suffering.

The sixth type of resentment is somewhat related to the fifth and first types. This is a resentment that arises from the realization that one's values no longer correspond accurately to the experienced reality. For example, one has a culturally informed value for self-responsibility and the capacity for free, autonomous choice. However, it quickly becomes apparent that these

⁷⁴ Ibid, 25.

values are *presupposed* by liberal democracy. Additionally, self-responsibility appears to stem from the resentment of one's own mortality. Seeking to establish linear meaning to their lives, human beings establish a standard of self-responsibility as a critical part of their identity. However, these and other values are not good of their own accord, but because they are seen as efficacious for a desired end. But even the end is contingent on what is deemed good by the prevailing standard of normality. If death is to be feared, then it engenders resentment. But if death were to be approached nobly, à la Nietzsche, then that resentment would vanish and a particular aspect of the formulation of the self might cease to be meaningful. Or it would remain meaningful for different reasons.

In any case, these resentments indicate, to contingency theorists, that there is something seriously wrong with the modern identity. These are taken as indications that the self is not being properly expressed. There are a number of suggestions on how to alleviate this and achieve better, fully, or more meaningful selfhood. First among these is the outright rejection of any concept of the "natural" or "true" self/identity. Both Connolly and Foucault emphatically resist this notion. Connolly writes, "If humans are not predesigned, and if they therefore are ill suited to fit neatly into any particular social form, then any set of enabling commonalities is likely to contain corollary injuries, cruelties, subjugations, concealments, and restrictions..."⁷⁵ In a similar vein, Foucault argues that "[b]ecause we are not naturally suited to be one kind of person or another, there is always something about us that resists the imposition of form."⁷⁶ Furthermore, the imposition of form and establishment of standards of normality create closure, eliminating space for contesting differences that challenge the efficacy and surety of established identities.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 93.

⁷⁶ Digeser, *Politics, Selves*, 43.

This resistance returns us to the indifference of the world to our machinations. If the world truly is not made to be understood by us, then it cannot be exhausted by any particular identity. Furthermore, if this is so then the best thing to do is to affirm this inexhaustibility and begin to recognize the contingency of our own identities. Both Connolly and Foucault argue for the cultivation of care towards difference, acknowledging differing identities as valid interpretations of the mysteries of an inexhaustible existence, and deserving of at least a voice in common discourse. Connolly develops this into an ideal of “agonistic respect” wherein every difference is not treated as lesser or other, but is engaged and appreciated, but approached with the same irony and awareness of contingency with which one must approach one’s own identity. This is so because identity is contingent, but inescapable. So the most one can do is acknowledge those contingencies, avoid the urge to naturalize one or another form of identity as ideal. Thus, while society may inadvertently cause harm to some formulations of identity, through agonistic dialogue, those injured voices can be heard and rectification can be sought. In short, the best selves are those that do not take themselves too seriously.

Performance

There is one other way in which the self can be understood from the perspective of contingency, and that is as a form of performance. Judith Butler first advanced the notion of performativity as it was exhibited in gender roles, asserting that such roles were not natural aspects of the expressions of different sexes, but were more like scripts that were assigned to particular individuals.⁷⁷ These scripts rose out of the desire for coherence in identity, but in achieving such coherence, complexity was sacrificed. And complexity is one of the defining characteristics of life, related in kind to the inexhaustibility of the world to a particular identity. For Butler, then, one can reclaim some selfhood by performing the scripts parodically in order to

⁷⁷ Digeser, *Politics, Selves*, 50-51.

problematize the assumed naturalness assigned to those roles and reveal the underlying contingencies. One cannot escape this identity entirely, for contingency theorists and genealogists like Butler, Foucault, and Connolly deny the existence of any sort of transcendent or antecedently individuated subject that would be necessary for such a separation. Once again, the best selves are those that subvert their own implicit claims to essentiality, recognizing that articulation is only part of the whole self, and performance is only part of articulation and realization.

Foucault offers another, though similar, way to construe the self as a performance of sorts. However, his is more a literary project. Because he denies that a person can be both a transcendental subject and an object of observation/knowledge, a person should not be understood as both author and subject. He advocates a form of expression similar to “a certain form of writing, which he called *écriture*, [which] is not about reference to a signified, but is a play among signifiers.”⁷⁸ In this way, Foucault argued that life should not be about cultivating a particular kind of self, but rather that one should engage in care for oneself throughout the course of life so as to give *form* to one’s life and identity. His view of the self is concerned primarily with expression, rather than Truth.

When all is said and done, these theorists do not contradict one another, for to do so would be to declare an absolute, or to deny one identity as inferior. As Connolly puts it, the alienation and resentment inherent in modern society resides in “wrong ways of living identity, not in the absence of individual and common identities. It resides in the closure of identities in response to the fragility of things more than in nihilism, anarchy, or relativism estranged from identity as such.”⁷⁹ For these theorists and thinkers, the best solution to modern ills is the proliferation of

⁷⁸ Martin, Barresi, *Rise and Fall*, 259.

⁷⁹ Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 172.

identities and differences, of particularities and contingencies, rather than a narrowing of identity in search for a transcendental truth. Now, while there are noteworthy facets to each of these theories, and they certainly shed light on some hidden social ills, I do not think that the conclusion here can be unqualifiedly endorsed. There are numerous reasons for this, which will be elaborated further in the concluding section to follow. Suffice it for now to say that I believe this goal of limitless proliferation and acceptance of difference would lead to a radical particularization that would instill a nihilistic and profoundly disinterested worldview in subjects, and actually serve to undermine the very goods it purports to provide, as in the revelation and resolution of harm to individual selves.

Conclusion

So far I have laid out a number of ontologies of selfhood, describing assumptions, conclusions, and requirements of each particular theory. Up to this point, support offered for particular viewpoints has been limited in the interest of space and concision. Now however, I will expand earlier arguments to lend further credence to my initial conclusions, offer challenges to opposing viewpoints and respond to challenges posed by those same theories. My hope is that I will effectively consolidate aspects of various theories into one that is more unified and effective in explaining what we are as selves, and how we can flourish as that type of self.

I will begin back at the beginning. A good number of the naturalist arguments, not the least of which is that advanced by Owen Flanagan, expressly and explicitly argue against the existence of a non-physical mind. I do not believe this to be a good argument, nor do I think it should be considered as an argument on its own terms. Rather, this argument is best seen as a reaction to the Cartesian dualism that is prevalent in lay belief today, and the theories that inform that belief. Rather than arguing against the non-physical mind *per se*, this argument is rendered against a particular formulation of such a mind.

However, the mind can very easily be non-physical. The mistake arises in thinking it to be a non-physical *entity*. Instead, the mind is best understood as the expression of underlying systems of the brain, body and environment. According to John Searle:

In the case of liquidity, solidity, and transparency, we have no difficulty at all in supposing that the surface features are *caused by* the behaviour of elements at the micro level, and at the same time we accept that the surface phenomena *just are* features of the very systems in question. I think the clearest way of stating this point is to say that the surface feature is both *caused by* and *realised in* the system that is made up of the micro-elements.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Searle, *Minds*, 21.

This realization, however, is not reducible to the elements from which it arises. Take cold, for example. Cold is a manifestation of the behaviors of air particles. It is measurable, and even empirically observable. But *cold* in and of itself is not the object. You could not grab a handful of *cold*. You could, in theory, grab a handful of air that expressed cold, but cold is both inseparable from, and differentiated from the system within which it originates and is realized. This analogy holds for the mind. It is not an entity of its own accord, but an aspect of human existence.

In like fashion, we are able to return to the dual-aspect monist view, and the aspective account of consciousness and the soul. It should be readily apparent how this understanding of consciousness, as a subjective field of awareness, fits neatly within the concept of mind as manifestation. This is important for two reasons. First, it allows us to cease viewing consciousness as something possessed by our selves, and instead acknowledge it as an aspect of human life. Secondly, it makes room for the soul. For the sake of argument, let us suppose the existence of a divine. Let us further suppose that human beings can participate in this divine by way of their subjective awareness. If the divine is then supposed to be eternal, then that part of the person that contains the experience of the divine may very well be eternal as well. Now, whether this is the entire self is another matter entirely, and depends on the nature of the divine encountered. Nevertheless, this could be, and should be, considered an accurate portrait of the soul. Now once again, for the sake of argument, let us suppose that there is no divine whatsoever. In this case, *nothing need change* in terms of our understanding of consciousness and selfhood. For if selfhood is defined at this level by the awareness of experience related to one's own body over time, and with intentionality, then Occam's razor is satisfied, for our account of human nature no longer *requires* the existence of a divine, unextended, simple

substance embedded within our bodies that somehow communicates with the rest of our being. The ontological assumptions are reduced to those that fit more with the reality of the person, and thus the reality of the emergent self.

As mentioned above, the self is in part defined by the content of its consciousness. This is what John Searle calls “semantic content.” It goes beyond intentionality insofar as it ascribes *meaning* to the object of its awareness. For example, if I were to go to your house, knock on your door, pull out a gun, and point it at you, a number of things would happen. Your kidneys would release noradrenaline into your bloodstream, your heartbeat and breath would quicken, your pupils would dilate, and your muscles would tense. But why? There is nothing *intrinsic* about a gun that should cause that reaction. Objectively, it is just a hunk of metal with a particular shape. An ape which had never seen a gun before would likely exhibit no fear response at all. Rather, it is the *meaning* that your mind gives the object of experience and observation, the semantic content related to the input (“Guns are dangerous”) that causes the reaction. This is exactly in line with Glannon’s assertion that our conscious and unconscious beliefs influence our physiological and psychological reaction to the world. It is these types of feedback loops that allow a human self to be, against the Foucauldian claim, both a transcendental subject and an object of observation. Transcendental in that the subject (the field of awareness) is not what it contains, but also an object in that one can look at one’s own reactions and see whether they align with considerations of propriety and character, established by the coherent narrative sense of self.

So far we have established that the self is, at bottom, a manifestation of physical systems, possessed of conscious awareness, and the ability to form intentions and attach semantic meaning to experience. Further, it has been established that actions of consciousness can alter

the system within which the self is situated. This self establishes narrative unity through autobiographical attachment to past experiences and extrapolation out to future events. This allows the establishment of a continuity of character that the self can then reference as it plans to act in the future, or examines present behavior. This is part of what Flanagan referred to as the “fringe” of consciousness. In short, the self can best be understood at this level as a sort of indexical participant in the story of one’s own existence. It is the site (though perhaps not source) of meaning, possibility, and action.

However, this meaning cannot be acquired in a vacuum. As I declared above, the self needs a social structure to be fully realized. Even the antecedently individuated subject favored by Rawls, endowed with capacity for autonomous choice and freedom to realize oneself, requires certain assumptions. For these things cannot be valuable on their own; they require context. If we ask why these capacities are to be preserved and valued, the standard must arise from somewhere outside the subject; transcendent existence justifies nothing. Freedom is valuable because it is God-given, it is fundamentally human, or what have you, but each and every justification requires placement within a larger set of structures. It *requires* a framework.

This is where the acknowledgements of the communitarians come to the fore. They realize this necessity and, rather than attempting to create distance from these frameworks in the hopes of achieving a more *transcendent* good, they seek to engage more fully with them so as to achieve a more *real* good. Rather than simply accepting the values one presumes in oneself, by examining the cultural, historical, and social context that informs these values, one is able to plumb the depths of those values most fully. The self is informed by them still, but the awareness of their origins, whether in humanity, nature, God, or any other “moral source” reorients one to the intrinsic goods therein.

This, I believe, is the best way to combat the resentment and fragmentation felt in the modern identity today. Take, for example, the type of resentment elaborated above that results from a discontinuity between value and reality. This discontinuity may not result from reality affecting the expression of that value, but from a misunderstanding of the good intended to arise from the value, and the deeper reason of the value, beyond its own sake. For example, Taylor speaks on the value of material productivity, like that prevalent in American society. The good has shifted to productivity for its own sake, whereas Taylor argues that this was not the case initially. Rather, productivity was valued because it indicated a good in one's own character.⁸¹ This shift of focus between the goods results from a skewed framework, and a superficial examination of culturally informed values. One must instead examine one's place within the framework and see the goods towards which the structure actually leads.

I cannot, however, go as far as Connolly and other contingency theorists suggest is necessary for true flourishing. This inability originates in the fact that the assertions made are, at times, mutually incompatible. These theorists assert that to deny a place to difference is to do harm. However, any assertion of harm requires a standard by which this is to be measured, which is a form of the normalization that they so explicitly reject. Of course, if mere non-acceptance of difference is enough to qualify as harm, then this requires assuming that all difference deserves to be respected and acknowledged as valid, which is an assumption I am not, at this time, willing to make. Nor, do I think, would a great number of others, for the simple fact that it is easy to think of an extreme example, like a child molester, who expresses a difference that nonetheless no one would argue should be legitimized, or even politicized. But this establishes at one

⁸¹ Charles Taylor, "Alternative Futures: Legitimacy, Identity, and Alienation in Late Twentieth Century Canada." *Constitutionalism, Citizenship and Society in Canada*.

extreme, a limiting standard of what is acceptable. Thus categories form, perhaps out of expressions of power, but it is a morally legitimate power.

But even beyond the extreme example, I find one more danger in the agonistic respect advocated by Connolly. If we allow for radically particularized identity, as he seems to indicate, and do not allow for the establishment of broader standards for judgment, even at the level of whether a life is worthwhile, meaningful, or good, then we will find ourselves mired in a society of individuals stricken with a profound mutual disinterest qualified as “respect.” Thus, even standards of justice become impossible to apply.

Now, this is not to advocate for an outright rejection of difference in favor of one or another arbitrary standard. I will not even make the lesser argument, like Alasdair MacIntyre, that there is one particular tradition that is best suited to a good self. I simply believe that, since these frameworks are inescapable and necessary to identity and selfhood, we ought to engage them as fully as possible as members of one such community. Then, even if one seeks to disengage from a tradition with which one does not identify, this disengagement is undertaken beyond the level of the particular individual, and thus understood with support. For this reason, there is still a need to recognize the contingencies of our identities, so that we are continually made aware of the frameworks within which our selves are formed. Likewise, there should be a politically protected space for the discourse of difference to take place, such as that advocated by Digeser. Just as the mind is a feedback loop with body, brain, and environment, so the self is a feedback loop between mind and society. Once this is known, we can begin to view ourselves, perhaps not as authors of our lives, but at the very least, as editors.

References

- Cairns, Alan, and Charles Taylor. "Alternative Futures: Legitimacy, Identity, and Alienation in Late Twentieth Century Canada." In *Constitutionalism, Citizenship, and Society in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985.
- Casey, Thomas G. "The Return of the Soul." *Studies* 102: 31-42.
- Clarke, Peter. "Neuroscience and the Soul - A response to Malcolm Jeeves." *Science and Christian Belief* 21: 61-64
- Connolly, William E.. *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*. Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press, 1991.
- De Vleeschouwer, Gregory. "Mirror Neurons and the Formal Unity of the Self." *Philosophical Frontiers* 4: 57-68.
- Descartes, Rene, Elizabeth S. Haldane, and G.R.T. Ross. *Philosophical Works of Rene Descartes*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1955.
- Digeser, Peter. *Our Politics, Our Selves?: Liberalism, Identity, and Harm*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Meaning of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Flanagan, Owen J.. *The Problem of the Soul: Two visions of Mind and How to Reconcile Them*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Forrest, Peter, "The Identity of Indiscernibles", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/identity-indiscernible/>>.
- Francescotti, Robert . *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed., s.v. "Supervenience and Mind." 2006.

- Frogel, Shai. "The Soul: An Existentialist Point of View." *Human Studies* 33: 191-204.
- Glannon, Walter. *Brain, Body, and Mind: Neuroethics with a Human Face*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Grube, C.M.A., and C.D.C. Reeve. *Plato: Republic*. ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992.
- Gutting, Gary, "Michel Foucault", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/foucault/>>.
- Hepler, Justin, Ryan S. Ritter, and Jesse Lee Preston. "Neuroscience and the soul: Competing explanations for the human experience." *Cognition* 127: 31-37.
- Irwin, Terence. *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Pub. Co., 1999.
- Jung, C. G.. *The Undiscovered Self*. New York.: Signet, 1957.
- Kenny, Anthony. *The Self*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1988.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair C.. *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.
- Martin, Raymond, and John Barresi. *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: an Intellectual History of Personal Identity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- McCormick, Matt. "Against the Immortality of the Soul." *California State University*.
<<http://www.csus.edu/indiv/m/mccormickm/NoSoulsWeb.htm>>
- Nancey Murphy, "Do Humans Have Souls? Perspectives from Philosophy, Science and Religion," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 67 (1) (2013); 30-41.
- Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.

- Sandel, Michael J.. *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*. Cambridge [Cambridgeshire: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Searle, John. *Minds, Brains, and Science*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Stevenson, Leslie Forster. *The Study of Human Nature: a Reader*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Stoljar, Daniel, "Physicalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/physicalism/>>.
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Young-Eisendrath, Polly, and James A. Hall. *The Book of the Self: Person, Pretext and Process*. New York: New York University Press, 1987.

© Evan A. Ferguson, 2014
Some rights reserved.

Estimated total cost of production of this work: \$216,384