

When You Talk to Yourself, Who Talks Back?

Complex Selves, Complex Identities

Carl Dyke

Methodist College

identity *n., pl. -ties.* **1.** The collective aspect of the set of characteristics by which a thing is definitively recognizable or known. **2.** The set of behavioral or personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group. **3.** The quality or condition of being exactly the same as something else. **4.** The quality or condition of remaining the same. **5.** The personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity.

self *n., pl. selves.* **1.** The total, essential, or particular being of one person; the individual. **2.** The qualities of one person distinguishing him [*sic*] from another; personality or character; individuality. **3.** An individual's consciousness of his own being or identity; subjectivity; ego. **4.** One's own interests, welfare, or advantage; private or personal concerns; selfishness.¹

There is perhaps no topic in recent memory that has attracted as much attention over a wide range of the humanities and social sciences in academia as identity. Identity (generally the collective term) and self (more often used for individuals) have simultaneously been 'hot' topics in more popular literature and commentary. In both the academic and popular fields, identity and self have consistently been deployed as heavy weaponry, becoming the key terms in innumerable campaigns to carve out or deny space to be or become what the person or group is, always was, could be, or should be. Articulated in terms of being and becoming, identity and self are widely posited as the most basic and urgent terms of human existence itself.

¹*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. William Morris (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980). This is not cited for authority but for orientation.

It is certainly difficult to talk about people or things if we do not even know what they are. And there is certainly an irony here. For, as with all topics of such deep appeal, it can be very difficult to get clarity on what identity and self are or how they work, as even the dictionary's broad, fuzzy, circular definitions reveal. Part of the problem is that as fundamental concepts they tend to operate transparently: everyone has a naturalized intuitive grasp of this something that we are taught to assume each of us has (or should have) one of. As I hope to show, there are good neurological, psychological, historical, sociological, and philosophical reasons for the taken-for-grantedness of self and identity. Nevertheless, the intuitive common senses of self and identity are often misleading, and the terms' employment for therapeutic, analytical, and political purposes (when such uses can clearly be distinguished, which is rarely or never) does tend to beg more careful and detailed understanding.

My purpose in this paper is to assemble a broad array of existing resources from various disciplines to aid people interested in moving beyond the commonplaces of identity and self without getting lost in the jungles of grand theory. A great deal more is known about how identity and self happen and work than is usually reflected in discussions of them, but that knowledge is spread out across many years and specialized studies, and hidden behind many disciplinary boundaries. My own contribution here is chiefly in this assembly, but I will also suggest a series of metaphorical approaches to identity and self that should inoculate the careful reader and researcher against some of the more common and pernicious misunderstandings of identity, self, their formation, and their phenomenology.² In particular, I hope that readers of this paper will never again be surprised or scandalized when they find self and identity to be complex and even contradictory.

This paper is a synthesis of elaborated conceptual and research literatures from several fields. Direct analysis of the evidence in those literatures is accordingly out of the question. Nor can it be the purpose of the paper to be ful-

²Briefly, experience from a first-person perspective.

ly persuasive. Readers intrigued by the assertions of the synthesis are invited to explore the elaborated positions cited in the footnotes for the detailed data and reasoning by which they may be more fully persuaded. The value of the project, as I understand it, is in pointing out that it is possible to construct a synthesis of findings from these diverse fields; and that such a synthesis tends strongly to support an understanding of self and identity as complex artifacts, not simple pre-given essences. I have no doubt that many experts in the particular fields the paper covers would construct the synthesis differently, but they would need to become familiar with other fields' literatures to do so; and they might find their original field understanding transformed in the process, as I have.

This kind of paper gets its life by mapping a lot of ground in a very short format. As a result, the detail definition is necessarily fairly rough. The exchange is finely drawn landscape for broad topography. My hope is that the sketches that replace the fine details can be recognized as fair approximations, and that their value as guides to routes between distant points will outweigh their relative crudity. For those who are willing to accompany me on this Cook's tour of self and identity, I will start with two even more schematic conceptual itineraries.

I. Summary A: How Self and Identity Happen

The intuitive common sense of self and identity as primordial, fixed, and unitary can be helpful to get through busy days or loud arguments, but it is unhelpful for longer or broader purposes. Beyond the needs of the moment self and identity are constructed, relational, and complex. More precisely, they are *emergent, situated, and fractal*.³ Why introduce more 'jargon' into a world already filled with it? The language we commonly use to talk about self and identity, including the simple fact that the words are singular nouns, leads us in a

³These terms come straight out of contemporary evolutionary biology and the physics of chaos, and indeed, we are evolved, chaotic physical beings.

circle back to the isolated moment again and again. Any new terminology is bound to be counterintuitive at first.

To say that something is emergent is to say that it is to be understood in terms of its history and situation, thus as an ongoing process. Self and identity are not and cannot be fixed: they change over time, in response to changing conditions. One implication of this is that selves and identities are not primordial. No one is born with either a self or an identity; they emerge interactively.⁴ This means that self and identity are inherently relational: every ‘me’ implies a ‘not-me’, every ‘us’ implies a ‘not-us’. It is impossible even to conceive self or identity without ‘the other’. Thus, self and identity are inherently social formations — the idea of an individual self without social relationships is a contradiction in terms.⁵

This may seem obvious nowadays, but the situatedness of emergence suggests a rather more radical revision of the common sense of self and identity; for time is only one way to change situations. Insofar as the interactive fields in which selves and identities are formed and operated are differentiated, those selves and identities will also be emergently differentiated. Selves and identities do not just change over time, they change interactively over everything that changes around them.

It follows from their historical and situational conditions of emergence that selves and identities are both diachronically and synchronically fractal

4I do know what all parents know, that children differ temperamentally at birth. I will address this below, but for the moment would suggest that a mood disposition (basically happy, basically cranky) is not yet a self.

5As first Marx and then Leslie Brothers have pointed out, Robinson Crusoe was already an Englishman, hence fully formed as a particular kind of social self, when he was marooned on his island. In Marx, this was a recurring theme; see, e.g., *Capital* vol. 1, ch. 1, section 4 (“The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret”). Crusoe’s continued psychic health relied on his continuing to act like an Englishman so far as possible, not to mention finding Friday to interact with (as a good English gentleman). In this sense Brothers uses Crusoe as her organizing image in *Friday’s Footprint: How Society Shapes the Human Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Note that ‘the other’ can be any object outside ourselves; it need not be animate to create an elementary social relationship.

(for a moment, think of fractal as meaning ‘many-sided’).⁶ That is, what is simple at one moment in one situation will be complex and shifting across moments and situations. The common mistake is in taking the moment for the whole.⁷ Consider the everyday example of the self as observed in conversation with Mom, Dad, child, mate, male friend, female friend, stranger, and boss (or, even more instructively, the contortions that often result from the simultaneous presence of several such ‘others’). Different behavioral protocols and even ‘states of mind’ are often associated in a fairly regular way with these different interactive situations — we think differently, feel differently, and act differently around different people.

Are these historied evolving products of situated interactive fields different identities/selves or different dimensions of a single identity/self? In the first case, it would be appropriate to use the language of multiplicity and fragmentation; in the second, the language of fluidity and complexity. While there may be rhetorical reasons to prefer one set of images to the other, analytically this is a distinction without a difference. All of these images are contextually acceptable approximations, a bit too linear or a bit too open, of the more precise but still metaphorical understanding of self and identity as emergently, situatedly fractal.

The approximations can be awfully helpful, because the fractal quality of self and identity is (to the modern eurocentrist, at any rate) their most counterintuitive quality. To be fractal is to be elusively, perhaps frustratingly unfinalized and variable, a condition that is fundamentally alien to categorical thinking on the mainstream European model. When something is fractal it is in the state between determinacy and indeterminacy, between being something and being something else, or being nothing in particular.

⁶These terms are simply shorthands for what the preceding paragraphs said more at length: diachronic means ‘over time’, synchronic means ‘at any one time’.

⁷Incidentally, this will be the pitfall of any laboratory research on self, since the laboratory is a moment, or situation, that constructs its own self in the persons studied.

Selves and identities are clearly something, but not a simple something. If we think of the boundary of self or identity as the boundary between being and not being X (or 'being and nothingness'), then the common sense of self and identity is that one either is or isn't X. But a fractal boundary does not allow that kind of judgment in most cases. Rather than hard, straight borders, selves and identities emerge from the interactive environment with borders that change shapes and add (or subtract) angles to fit the situation. The fractal boundaries of self and identity do have insides and outsides (I am neither Marie Antoinette nor Black, I am my parents' son and left-handed), but they are able to stretch and inflect quite flexibly. The permutations of such 'border work' are potentially as infinite or as narrowly stereotyped as the permutations of the significant interactive field. Practically speaking, then, understanding self and identity as fractal means that all claims about the formation and operation of self and identity must be passed through questions about when, where, under what conditions, and around whom.

I.Summary B: How Self and Identity Work

The interactive field is basically an arrangement of objects in space and time. As a general principle, emerging selves and identities can be expected to expand to fit the available space within the field of interactive possibilities. This suggests a continuous structuring dialectic between expansion and available space. Like water hitting the ground, people and peoples find an interactive field already in place, and flow into the basins, gaps, and cracks therein, soaking in, pooling, or running off. In general, we become what it is possible for us to become, filling the space that is there to fill. ('Failure to become' is hence immediately diagnostic of a saturated or blocked field in some dimension.) With this image in mind, we may think of identity as the principle that no two objects can occupy exactly the same space at the same time and remain two objects. Objects are identical to themselves, or identifiable, only insofar as they can be distinguished from other objects. "Social identity lies in differ-

ence, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat.”⁸ Identity is at the core a name for differentiation.

Previous occupancy is obviously a huge advantage in the availability and desirability of space for self and identity to emerge into. Latecomers fill up the spaces that are left (finding their place in the sun, so to speak), unless they are possessed of sufficient expansive power to shove the previous occupants aside. This is as true in sibling dynamics as it is in international politics. Conflicts occur over space along the borders. When pressure is low borders are fractally diffuse and are hence readily permeable (affording the possibility of reciprocal ‘assimilation’). Borders become less fractal and more durably, linearly compressed, one-sided, and impermeable the more pressure is put on them, with results ranging from accommodation to genocide. In some sense, then, recognizable selves and identities are always signs of pressures at the borders, without which selves and identities would tend to blur into one another. The first few weeks of a love affair should be an evocative illustration of such a state.

Selves and identities can be extraordinarily resourceful in finding spaces to expand into, although this is no more remarkable, intentional, or romantically dignified than the resourcefulness of water in finding a route to the sea. Nevertheless, the configurations produced by such resourcefulness are inherently more exotic and exciting than the comparatively smooth, placid surfaces produced by privileged access to space. Formative resourcefulness also obviously constructs more sensitivity to the way space works. It is precisely this dynamic of self and identity formation that leads critical theorists of class, race, and gender to argue that marginality enables better social theory. Of course, any constraint on self and identity formation (including, for example, a rich tradition) will tend to produce this effect, and the total privilege of unlimited space is rare indeed.

⁸Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984 [1979]), 479.

I. Philosophy and Neuroscience

As emergent objects, self and identity are functions of knowledge and memory — that is, they are both products of and organizing frameworks for what we know and remember we know. Knowledge need not be self-reflexive for there to be a self (otherwise the famous injunction to ‘know thyself’ would simply be redundant), but there must be some kind of durable cognitive process in operation — William James famously called this the “stream of consciousness” — or we would have no intelligible relationship to ‘the world’ and our actions would be patternless accidents. There is no requirement that these organizing memories be ‘true’ or ‘accurate’, or even consistent over time, but there do need to be some. The most basic question of self and identity, then, is epistemological: how do we know what we know?⁹ (Accordingly, where self and identity are unproblematic, epistemology does not come up as a privileged philosophical field.)

From a modern scientific standpoint, the physical workings of sensory uptake, cognition, memory, and how they enable self are simply puzzles to figure out experimentally. The branch of science that does this is called cognitive neuroscience. However, for most of human history it has been impossible to get inside people’s heads without mashing them up beyond repair, so what was happening inside there in the unmashed state was not subject to direct examination. Where evidence lacked, religious dogma and philosophical speculation stepped in to fill the void.

“The soul” is one familiar religious end-run around the question of what’s happening inside heads. Since this and other religious solutions to the question of self are matters of faith, there would be little point and much needless discourtesy in engaging them here (and I would appreciate a reciprocal courtesy). However, as religion began to shade into secular philosophy in mod-

⁹At this point the machiavellian and nietzschean traditions point out that knowledge and power go together. “It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.” Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 52.

ern Europe, philosophical speculation based on introspective thought experiments, in addition to or even rather than reasoning from doctrine, began to take over center stage.

French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) was a famous transitional case in this movement. Living in politically and religiously uncertain times,¹⁰ he turned his thoughts inward on an introspective quest for a foundation of certain knowledge and found — himself, thinking (“I think, therefore I am”).¹¹ Deeply imbued with a Christian confidence in the integrity of his being and moral agency, it never occurred to him to wonder, as Nietzsche did for him 300 years later, why he assumed that what was thinking was him.¹² However, based on his elementary conversion of the Christian soul into philosophical ‘mind’, Descartes established an authoritative dualism of mind and body that structured the philosophy of self for hundreds of years and has even deeply penetrated contemporary pop culture, spawning such absurd pseudo-paradoxes as chocoholics whose taste buds have minds of their own.¹³ Since he reduced the foundational content of mind to rational reflection, Descartes’ self is quintessentially one-dimensional. This is the master image that has to be overcome if the complexity of self is to be grasped.

“Descartes’ error” is the topic of a recent book by that name, in which cognitive neuroscientist Antonio Damasio summarizes and elaborates on current brain research.¹⁴ People working directly with brain damaged patients

¹⁰For the influence of Descartes’ times on his thought, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1992 [1990]), 56-62.

¹¹This train of thought first left the station in *Discourse on Method* (1637).

¹²Nietzsche said “it” thinks, anticipating Freud. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966 [1886]), 24 (section 17).

¹³For an interesting elaboration of Descartes’ thoughts on how a soul of completely different substance than the body can move and be moved by it, see his correspondence with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia in Atherton, ed., *Women Philosophers*.

¹⁴Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994). Furthering the same line of argument see also Damasio’s even more recent *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emo-*

have difficulty sustaining a dualistic position, because specific brain injuries (or ‘insults’, as they are charmingly called by practitioners in this field) produce specific mental effects, and do so with a reliability that turns mere correlation into strong causal inference.¹⁵ Damasio’s particular finding is that patients with brain injuries that leave their memory, attention-giving, and reasoning powers intact, but impair their ability to feel emotions, experience profound and debilitating degradation of their decision-making abilities. While they can reason their way through alternative plans and consequences just as well as before, they cannot bring themselves to *care* enough about them one way or the other to choose one and devote effective effort to it. Thus, mind and body (to which emotion is often assigned, incidentally, including by Descartes) are shown to be deeply conjoined.¹⁶

After Descartes, the new philosophical arguments about the nature of cognition and self spread out along a continuum perhaps most famously represented by Englishman John Locke (1632-1704) on one side and German G.W. Leibniz (1646-1716) on the other.¹⁷ Locke’s empiricist theory of the *tabula rasa* (blank slate) was that humans are born into the world empty of any substantive content, possessed only of sensory organs and a capacity for reflection upon their observations. We learn, then, through experience; and the self is the reflective memory-trace of those experiences.

tion in the Making of Consciousness (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

¹⁵Neurologist Oliver Sacks has made a second career out of humane, engaging mass-market reporting on such exotica. See, e.g., *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

¹⁶Such a conjuncture is still consistent with a sophisticated dualism, as shown for example by John Foster, *The Immaterial Self: A defense of the Cartesian dualist conception of the mind* (New York: Routledge, 1991). At this point I can also allow that I have nothing to add to age-old debates between materialists and idealists; and my discussion of complex self and identity is only enhanced by, not predicated on, their embodiment. So I will move on.

¹⁷Locke’s classic text on this subject is *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Leibniz is approachable through the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686). A sophisticated series of contemporary reflections on these and other arguments can be found in Margaret Atherton, ed., *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1994).

Leibniz thought, probably rightly, that this idea was fundamentally inconsistent with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent God who had created time, space, and us, but was outside of this empirical realm. Instead, he argued that humans are born possessed already of all they will ever know and be. This latent knowledge is destined to be activated at the properly simultaneous point with its corresponding experience, but in actuality quite independently of it. Thus, we are deeply predisposed to live our lives as we actually do lead them, although Leibniz did accord us the limited freedom of recognizing and choosing our fated place in God's plan. I sometimes think of this and all other innateness theories (or rationalisms, as they are called, perhaps strangely in view of current 'new age' variants) as 'toy robot' theories: we are born with a headfull of toy robots, and over the course of our lives they switch on and go whirring and whizzing about their business with preordained results.¹⁸

This contrast between innate capacity to learn and innate substantive knowledge remains the structure of the debate to this day, now familiar as the 'nature or nurture' question. But for almost 300 years now, the good answers have avoided either extreme of the contrast. For example, German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), responding to Scotsman David Hume's (1711-1776) sophisticated postlockean empiricism, staked out something of a middle position. We are not born with knowledge *per se*, he argued, but neither are we blank slates that merely "treasure up" (as Hume put it) experience.¹⁹ Instead, we are born with a basic set of interpretive screens, which he called the "categories *a priori*," which we apply to experience in order to understand it. These

¹⁸It is interesting to note that there is no practical difference between these arguments: they account identically for the same observed facts. Whether knowledge is learned or is 'switched on' at the proper time, the results are indistinguishable. The substance of the contrast is perhaps best located in the ethical implications: blame is harder to allocate if our knowledge and hence our selves are innate; Leibniz struggled with this problem of 'intentionality'. But it is unclear why experientially learned knowledge should be any less exculpatively deterministic; modern-day liberals struggle with this problem of 'intentionality'.

¹⁹For a (relatively) concise statement of Hume's position, see *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Kant's full argument is in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/87), but he concisely presented his analytical conclusions in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783).

include basic categories of judgment (distinction, classification) like space, time, quantity, quality, relation, and modality: i.e., the basic ability to perceive identity and difference.

Our ability to tell things apart (including ourselves) and to interact intelligibly with each other as selves is hence for Kant based on the universality of our interpretive apparatus and procedures, or reason, rather than the mere contingent commonality and difference of formative experiences, as in Hume. The contrast between Hume and Kant is hence the contrast between knowledge that always comes from a perspective or standpoint, hence a particular (emergent) self or identity position, and knowledge that can be checked against universal categories, to which selves and identities are accordingly nearer or farther. For Hume, the situated particularities of self and identity make knowledge possible; for Kant, they pollute it.²⁰

Interestingly, current cognitive neuroscience takes seriously and has built firm support for Kant's intuition that there needs to be something in there already that enables and structures the construction of knowledge — and hence, self and identity — out of the chaotic overload of raw sense data. This is sometimes called 'the editor', and apparently starts in newborns with very simple interpretive screens (schemata, or categories) like the ability to distinguish faces from other moving things. But even with all of this help, Kant ends up looking way less right than Hume. This is because although the brain is 'wired up' to process sensory input in some specific ways, nevertheless there is nothing in the cognitive structure of the brain that warrants very specific judg-

²⁰It has not escaped notice that the kind of apparently-unsituated reasoning mandated by Kant's 'universal' categories, and the knowledge produced by it, are conveniently monopolized by white European men. See, e.g., Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1984]). For a brilliantly balanced discussion of the significance of gendered experience for epistemology, see Marnia Lazreg, "Women's Experience and Feminist Epistemology: A Critical Neo-Rationalist Approach," in Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (New York: Routledge, 1994). "Monopolized by" and "uniquely characteristic of" are not, of course, the same thing.

ments about whether the ‘knowledge output’ of these procedures is ‘True’ or not.

Quite the contrary. It is intrinsic to the brain’s structure that it is dynamically adaptive to experiences (from even before birth), so that each new experience rewrites the processing loop. The categories very quickly get customized. “The brain at birth, we now know, is not a tabula rasa but an elaborate structure with many of its parts already in place. Experience then tunes this rough-and-ready apparatus until it can do a precision job.”²¹ And since not just the situated details of experiences but their rate, sequence, and so on vary from person to person, this feedback looping can very quickly produce variations of interpretive process and knowledge-generation that are mighty loopy with respect to each other. That is, an identical initial process can ‘naturally’ produce any number of outcomes. Hence, the particularities that for Kant were pollutants to ‘pure reason’ are, we now know, physiologically intrinsic to the way the brain does its business in a differentiated interactive field. The only thing that saves us from a complete cognitive anarchy is the relative standardization of experiences and interpretive feedback enforced by culture.

This is the physiological substrate of the emergent, situated, fractal nature of self and identity. Our basic cognitive adaptability guarantees that there will be a ‘stratification of perspectives’ in the formation and operation of indi-

²¹Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 10. By the way, Crick’s astonishing hypothesis is that selves are “the detailed behavior of a set of nerve cells,” 7. This leaves relatively unexplored the levels of complexity generated by the interactions of these cells with each other and environments of increasing generality; for a brilliant critique of the sort of positivistic explanatory reductionism Crick tends to slip toward, see Alan Garfinkel, *Forms of Explanation: Rethinking the Questions in Social Theory* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981). Nevertheless, the research Crick is summarizing disposes definitively, for those who find science compelling, of mind/body dualism and categories *a priori*. See also Daniel C. Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Toward an Understanding of Consciousness* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), esp. 73-80. Dennett argues that organisms, including humans, are embodied information — from enzymes and DNA on up — and accordingly that mind is a level, not a distinct.

vidual selves and group identities as cognitive moments occur across a differentiated interactive field.²²

I. Developmental Psychology: Processes and Images

It is awfully tempting to think of infants as ‘naturally’ selfish, reading back into them the accomplishments and organized emotional responses of adulthood. Famed developmental psychologist Jean Piaget captured the greater subtleties of the question when (reacting to Freud) he described the infant’s as a “narcissism without a Narcissus,”²³ that is, a demand for attention without awareness or intent. Infants do not have selves yet.

What they do have, as every parent knows, is a disposition (or ‘temperament’) on a continuum of attention-getting strategies with happy at one end, cranky at the other. Both smiles and wails attract attention, but in different ways under different conditions. Parents vary quite a bit in their willingness and preparation to provide care, which after all is optional, inconvenient, and sometimes detrimental where their own survival is concerned; but infants *must* be attended to if they are to survive. Evolution, including cultural evolution, has not left this important matter solely to some nebulous maternal or parental ‘instinct’, and our frequent observation of bad parents should indicate the wisdom of this strategic diversity (other backups include extensive socialization in ‘mothering’, which would obviously be unnecessary if it were natural or instinctual, and social/ political pressures to provide care). For infants each attention-getting strategy has its evolutionary advantages, and the diversity along the continuum is useful at the species level, creating a built-in survival adaptation to diverse initial conditions (including parental attitude) across at least part of a given population of infants.

²²For the source of this phrase see George Herbert Mead, “The Objective Reality of Perspectives,” in Andrew J. Reck, ed., *Selected Writings* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1964).

²³Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*, 22.

There are two key points here. The first point is that the strategy deployed by any particular infant need not be ‘conscious’, hence meaningfully ‘selfish’, at all. Mood dispositions are at the outset a relatively simple function of brain chemistry. Your happy smiley baby’s brain is producing good chemicals for happiness; your cranky waily baby’s brain isn’t. Parents can take neither credit nor blame for this at the outset (which does not stop them from doing just that).

Soon, however, they can accept their measure of responsibility with better reason. The second and more important point is that the infant’s disposition instantly structures her participation in a cycle of interactions with ‘significant’ others — those persons and things which respond to the smile or the wail.²⁴ It is through interactions with others that the growing infant goes from a basically happy/ basically cranky bundle of chemico-physical attention-getting behaviors to a more sophisticated participant in social arrangements — an emergent self.

Early on this can only happen by chancing upon refinements of the original routine that produce more or less satisfactory results. Experience begins to pile up about when, where, and with which objects (such as people) various refinements succeed and fail (memory becomes crucial here). Experience also begins to pile up about different forms of success and failure, so that desirable and undesirable outcomes expand from the physical essentials to include various kinds of more abstractly ‘personal’ rewards and punishments like retrieval or removal of a pleasantly familiar object (including persons). Especially meaningful interactions are further abstracted as rules of conduct that later

²⁴The interactive (or ‘discursive’) emergence of self is an insight over a hundred years old, older than and at the root of the organized field of developmental psychology itself. Among the earliest and most ongoingly influential thinkers and researchers in this field, in addition to Piaget (who as a structuralist was a bit of a mixed case), see George Herbert Mead, e.g. “The Social Self” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Andrew J. Reck (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1964 [1913]) (more on him below), and L.S. Vygotsky, e.g. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole et. al. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978). More recently, see Rom Harré and Grant Gillett, *The Discursive Mind* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994) (citing Mead and Vygotsky as precursors).

may serve as foundations for calculations of self-interest or for ‘morals’, depending on what is valued in the interactive milieu.

In the process, these interactions, depending on their content, frequency, and intensity, may strengthen or weaken the original chemical disposition.²⁵ But more significantly for the emergence of self, interaction normally adds *dimensions* to the original disposition. These dimensions then ongoingly interact with each other, the physical makeup of the person, her ‘environment’ in its many internal and external dimensions, and other persons, to create an incredibly complex interactive field. This interactive field builds and is built into selves — not just ‘internalized’ but *embodied* — as a necessary consequence of learning and adaptation. Selves are correspondingly complex.

At this point a couple of images may be helpful for visualizing the process of self development. One familiar image of the developing self is a house to which rooms (skills, knowledge, character traits) are added as situations calling for them arise, and materials for their construction become available. This image seems appropriately developmental, and satisfies a minimal definition of interactivity by its reference to perceived needs and possibilities. Plus, houses are comfortingly solid. However, the development of houses by room addition is not very dynamic; rather, it is merely cumulative and linear. We certainly know people who stay rooted to the same spot, always eat in the same place, and can’t sleep in anything but their familiar bed — dreaming of a rec. room or a screen porch. But such stolidity is highly dependent on unchanging environmental conditions, since building new rooms is slow business, tearing down old ones is a major, structurally dangerous enterprise, and when the flood comes, the whole house can’t be moved to higher ground no matter what.

²⁵There is now strong evidence that formative social interaction can actually shape long term brain chemistry and structure (basically happy babies born into highly conflictual situations may become lifelong worriers right down to a reduction in their endorphin output, for example). Brains actually learn which chemicals to produce and which networks to lay down in response to stimulus, including social stimulus. For a summary see, e.g., McCarthy and Warrington, *Cognitive Neuropsychology* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1990).

The self that fits the house image is accordingly produced by and best suited to stable, unchanging times.

Another common image of self is a crystal.²⁶ We often talk about people as having ‘facets’. New experiences cut new facets, which both reflect and re-refract the surrounding environment. Such faceting is nicely dynamical, because each new one rearranges the reflection and refraction of the whole, as does the specific rotation of the facets with respect to the world. The main problem with this image, dazzling though it may be, is that its complexity is all on the surface. The interior of the crystal (the depth of the self) is solid, simple, and unchanging, never touched by the play of light at the edges, never transformed by the rays ‘just passing through’. Like the ‘house self’, the crystalline self had better hope there are no drastic changes of environment, or it may wind up shattered.

Another possible image of self, and the one that most closely approximates the full range of human possibilities as emergent, situated, and fractal beings, is the Calder mobile. Mobiles are durable, stable structures, but unlike houses and crystals they have no particular ‘core’ or solid configuration. They are highly interactive, both with themselves and with their surroundings. Like crystals, they can be rotated to present different facets to situations; and which facet is presented has tremendous impact on how the mobile receives and delivers interaction. They are not infinitely malleable but they can be added to, subtracted from, and reconfigured on the fly, with spectacularly beautiful results if care is taken with balance, with spectacularly bizarre results if not.

Each of these images has something to recommend it, and each can be misleading if taken too literally. Just so with our most common image of self,

²⁶This image is used to striking effect by Antonio Gramsci in his prison notebooks, regarding teaching and learning. He points out that to get a similar refraction from a single ray of (en)light(en)ment through different prisms, it is necessary to rotate each one just right. *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991 [1985]), 416-7.

the body. The singularity of the body (strange to think so when it has so many parts), its apparent stability (actually it's dying and being rebuilt cell by cell all the time), and its clear normal association with a single mind, encourage the common sense notion that the self is a singular entity. So far, O.K. The danger of this image is in the small conceptual step from singularity to simplicity. It is well to remember that many things called single for the sake of convenience, like countries, planets, and bodies, are actually complex manifolds. So too is the self.

Whether visualized as rooms, facets, mobile elements, or even melody lines,²⁷ dimensions of self are added as experiences and reactions to them become habits. William James (1842-1910) was perhaps the first modern psychologist to call attention to the importance within the self of habits as mediators of complex yet ordinary experience. If we actually had to think about every detail of our lives (will I put my shoes on sock-shoe-sock-shoe or sock-sock-shoe-shoe today, or even wear shoes at all; will I drive on the right or the left of the road today; will I dare to eat a peach) we might never get out of bed. "There is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision...."²⁸ James concluded from this obvious fact that our selves are, and must be, bundles of habits with a thin layer of reflection on top to handle unfamiliar situations and transcend the ordinary. For people with restricted, routine lives ('house selves'), that layer of reflection may be very thin indeed, but even for creative geniuses the dimensions of self that handle ordinary situations without the distracting bother of reflection must necessarily be legion. Of course, we get the habits that fit the conditions of our lives; indeed, those conditions can be read back off of our habits, if, that is, we can suspend judgment long enough to do so.²⁹

²⁷This image is Damasio's.

²⁸*Principles of Psychology* (1890), vol. I, (i) "Habit."

²⁹The impact of differing life conditions on habitual competence, and the dangers of cross-conditional judgment, are the focus of a school of ethnographic psychology called "cultural ecology." For a characteristic analysis see John U. Ogbu, "Origins of Human Competence: A Cultural-Ecological Perspective," in

I. Cross-cultural Psychology: Is Self Universal?

Cultures are collective habits, of mind and of practice; therefore, the sorts of habits we get, and accordingly the sorts of selves, are as much as anything a matter of culture. “When a person is socialized in a given culture, the person can use custom as a substitute for thought, and save time.”³⁰ Even more than this, cultures give shape to life: “[u]ndirected by culture patterns... man’s behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless.”³¹ Current research in cross-cultural psychology has confirmed the intuition of the traveler in finding that the conceptions, orientations, and dimensions of self, the *shapes* of self, vary quite a bit across cultures, although a minimum sense of separate bodily existence does seem to be universal.

As a striking illustration, not all languages even have an easy way to say what ‘self’ means in English. Spanish and Italian, for example, have reflexive references to personhood (*mi mismo, io stesso*), but these are bare references to an object among others, not to some transcendent entity (for that purpose they would use words properly translated as ‘soul’, or ‘spirit’).³² On the other hand, Japanese has over twenty different ways of referring to self, all of which specify a relationship with others in terms of status, honor, and deference.³³ In fact, the self conceived as embedded in and incomplete without relations with others (family, clan, ancestors, age cohort, warrior band) is far more common in world cultures than the robustly autonomous, self-esteeming individual famil-

Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jody Bennet Veroff, eds., *The Culture and Psychology Reader* (New York: NYUP, 1995).

³⁰Harry C. Triandis, “The Self and Social Behavior in Differing Cultural Contexts,” in *The Culture and Psychology Reader*, 342.

³¹Clifford Geertz, “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (BasicBooks, 1973), 46.

³²The Spanish example is given in Harré and Gillett, *The Discursive Mind*, 101; confirmed by Juliana Suso, personal communication (2000).

³³Ryuta Sasaki, personal communication (1997).

iar from U.S. pop psychology. For members of such cultures, the suggestion that self and identity are complex and relational would seem almost comically obvious.

Cross-cultural comparison requires that we be willing to accept that there are different culturally reasonable ways to ‘do self’, not one ‘right’ way and a lot of ‘mistaken’ or ‘evil’ ways. If we do, the autonomous, self-contained self of the dominant western tradition is revealed a cultural artifact like any other tool or potsherd. The local designs can then be held side by side and assessed for their ‘fit’ with the tasks they are asked to perform. For example:

[I]n many Asian cultures, self-effacement lends itself to psychological adaptation and is highly regarded as a cultural ideal. In contrast, self-enhancement, American style, is seen as a manifestation of one’s childishness or immaturity. In the United States, however, where self-enhancement leads to psychological adjustment and is seen as a sign of self-esteem, a person who engages in self-effacement will be regarded as wishy-washy and indecisive, or perhaps even as untrustworthy or abnormal.³⁴

Of course, any competent native observer of United States cultures will recognize that this is a bit too pat. “The United States” is too gross a matrix. Is (some of) our cultural ideal of the ‘selfless’ Mother included in this analysis, for example? Even short of such heroics of self-denial, many U.S. Americans have a deeply ingrained cultural value of deference to authority and ‘selfless’ action — *in certain situations*. Fractally across situations, our selves are *both* self-enhancing and self-effacing, defiantly autonomous and respectfully compliant, selfish and selfless.

I.History: Through the Lens of Political Identity

“As emergent objects, self and identity are functions of knowledge and memory — that is, they are both products of and organizing frameworks for what we know and remember we know.” This confident, apparently universal statement opened the philosophy section of this paper. Cross-cultural compari-

³⁴Shinoby Kitayama and Hazel Rose Markus, “Culture and Self: Implications for Internationalizing Psychology,” in *The Culture and Psychology Reader*, 381.

son should introduce a doubt. Historical comparison reinforces that doubt. In fact, this statement is intelligible only in the context of the emergence of the self and identity as historical formations during the process of European modernization. This historical movement was consonant with the reorientation of western philosophy toward epistemology, but we must look elsewhere for the dynamics of its emergence. While there is too much ground to cover here in any responsible kind of way (I assume readers who have made it this far have suspended the fictitious omniscience requirement anyway and are just enjoying the ride), as an organizing test case the transformation of political identity is at least suggestive and possibly emblematic of these dynamics.

The intense attention to political identity in contemporary social and political theory — often as ‘identity politics’ — is a historical peculiarity. In the European *ancien regime*, political identity was closely tied to positions in traditional hierarchies of duties and privileges, political action to narrow elites; consequently, neither was particularly problematic. The emergence of mass politics changed all of this as, in a striking way, ‘difference’ was activated, noticed, and increasingly negotiated as ‘identity’. As the complicated, dialectical relationship between the history of capitalism and the history of mass politics played out, the success of capitalism in producing ‘goods’ — both material and symbolic — began to create and extend systems of material and symbolic entitlements to consume or control them.³⁵ Unlike the privileges of the *ancien regime*, these new entitlements were to market positions and access to consumption (in the process, the notion of duty tended to fall away, as Tocqueville lamented). As capitalist success multiplied negotiable surpluses, market positions and modes of consumption, so too were visible, legitimated ‘subjectivities’ or ‘identities’ multiplied. During the last two hundred years, more people have become legitimate, identified ‘consumers’ of political ‘goods’ (and then moved on to more hedonistic ‘accomplishments’).

³⁵Contemporary taxpayers in the U.S. welfare state have been taught to think of ‘entitlement’ in a very particular way, as licensed access to public assistance. As I use it here, however, the word is intended to evoke its original meaning, derived from grant of titles of nobility and thus conferring pride, not shame.

This dynamic of inclusion, which began during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, was marked by the emergence of ‘the masses’ as a relevant identity within Western history. A large group of people previously irrelevant to politics were elevated together to the barest liminal threshold of legitimate participation in the public sphere, precisely as ‘the masses’. From the standpoint of political relevance (and only from this standpoint), they were undifferentiated, a mere aggregate by default. Highly disparate sociologically, their political unity was a pure artifact of their liminality. Their power was correspondingly limited, crude, and spasmodic. Often, especially at first, they fought for the restoration of *ancien regime* distinctions and patterns of privilege and obligation in resistance to the painful dislocations of the transition to new sources of political identity (as Karl Polanyi, E.P. Thompson, and many others have documented³⁶).

On this account, ironically, Marx was the theorist of the very initial stages of disaggregation of this mass. The industrial proletariat, as such, arose as actually quite a specialized and uniquely entitled position within ‘the masses’. The proletariat’s political identity was correspondingly distinct from that of, say, the peasantry. Marx understood this, but rather than seeing the proletariat’s political emergence as the beginning of a process of disaggregation, he thought that he had discovered a principle of transition to a higher unity. Later marxists first sought to create the missing proletarian unity by sleight of hand or brute force,³⁷ then, at least in the West, began casting about for alternative metaidentities, finally ending up with “the acknowledgment that capitalism produces, not socialism, but pluralism.”³⁸

³⁶Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon, 1957 [1944]); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964). See also Ira Katznelson and Aristide R. Zolberg, eds., *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986).

³⁷I have discussed this point at length in relation to Lukács and Lenin in my manuscript *Prehistoric Postmodernisms: Gramsci, Durkheim, Weber*, chapter 2.

³⁸Robert Meister, *Political Identity: Thinking Through Marx* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 21. Meister argues that all possible candidates for revolutionary metaidentity have to pass through this process.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the political disaggregation of the masses was far enough along that any number of groups that had formerly belonged by default began actively to resent inclusion, and to feel entitled to separate political ‘representation’. These, famously, were the shock-troops of fascism, but also early populists, Christian Democrats, communists, suffragists, and so on. All of this was tied to spreading entitlements enabled by expansion of capital wealth, exploitation of colonial resources and the gradients of affluence that this made available within internal markets, popular gradients of culture made available by imperialistic anthropology, pseudo-anthropology, travel literature, and so on. Moving well outside the classic market paradigm of short-term profit maximization, business began to make increasingly ‘productive’ political and cultural reinvestments.³⁹ The ‘luxury’ of disaggregated mass political identities and the culturalization of politics was, and is, just one of the many entitlements (or one might say ‘empowerments’) that these reinvestments have generated.

Over the last two hundred years, the original ‘mass’ has spun out into a variety of ‘submasses’ categorically homogeneous in terms of some contingently decisive, politically freighted feature (e.g. class, gender, race, nationality, ethnicity). It is now virtually a commonplace that there is no essential political consciousness attached to the ‘raw’ features that ‘identify’ what I am calling submasses.⁴⁰ These submasses too are sociologically heterogeneous and have tended to disaggregate as soon as spaces of entitlement to separate political identities open up. Each group introduced as a ‘mass’ into legitimate political life during the 20th century — women, African Americans, native Americans, various immigrants, gays and lesbians, ethnic nationalities, etc. — goes

³⁹For modern business’ interest in optimizing profits over the long term, *not* self-destructively maximizing them over the short term, see John Kenneth Galbraith’s classic *The New Industrial State* (1967), e.g. ch. XV, “The Goals of the Planning System.”

⁴⁰Stuart Hall captures this when he notes that he did not become ‘black’ until he left Jamaica for England: therefore, he argues that ‘race’ is a “floating signifier.” “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference.” *Radical America* vol. 23, n. 4, October-December 1989.

through this artifactual stage of aggregate unity ('imagined community'⁴¹ or 'constructed identity') during the initial period of entitlement and comes out the other side politically disaggregated (or 'deconstructed'). Precisely in Lyotard's sense, they become suspicious of — or oblivious to — their own meta-narratives.⁴²

These metanarratives were fictions all along that described, not the groups in their diversity, but the historically compressed conditions under which they were first able to assert themselves politically. 'The masses' is the original, quintessentially modern political fiction unifying sociologically and culturally diverse people. The history of 'the masses' consequently offers a parental homology to the many histories of group political identity formation and disintegration in the 19th and 20th centuries.

In this context, it makes sense to define political identity precisely as the fictional screen, or 'self' in G.H. Mead's sense, that actively (albeit often habitually) mediates between the complex, often contradictory and ambiguous multiplicity of the person or group and the specific demands of the world. Such 'stereotyping', or symbolic reduction, is necessary simply on a practical basis: in history as yet, very few people have had the luxury of time and material resource to explore and understand 'themselves' fully, let alone everyone else. The political problem of domination is not that such symbolic reductions or 'constructions of the other' occur — indeed, this is ordinary, reciprocal, and inescapable — but that they are rigidified and attached to gradients of power.⁴³

41On "imagined community" as an account of nationalism, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

42For the famous analysis of postmodernity as incredulity toward metanarratives, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984 [1979]), xxiv.

43Some would say that domination is not even a 'problem', in the pragmatic sense that it can be solved, but rather is an inescapable feature of human relations that can at best be rearranged. Perhaps the most powerful articulation of this view is Max Weber's political sociology, most fully elaborated in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978 [1968]), esp. ch. III, "The Types of Legit-

Modern ‘political culture’, then, can be defined as the practices and performances by which symbolically reductive political identities are produced, reproduced, interacted and managed under conditions of tendentially unequal power. The apparent singularity of such identities is an artifact of their compression within such conditions.

Now that global capitalism operates quite openly in the West by creating endless variants of market niche and by spreading enough wealth around to sustain a general sense of entitlement to occupy them, dispersion of political identity is virtually structural (managed in this country by the fictitious unities of the two parties, in most of Europe by the proliferation of splinter parties). In consequence, the basic historical logic of mass disaggregation and fractal identity formation has become separated from its initial enabling conditions. With political culture in the Western democracies now structured to accommodate fragmentary political identity as its basic category, even groups that are marginal to the entitlements of distinct market positions are able routinely to enter and to become legitimate ‘interest groups’ within the increasingly differentiated public sphere. Even so, relatively stable cultural politics remains basically conditioned by the availability of significant negotiable surpluses over mere subsistence, and as a thought experiment we might try imagining what Western politics would look like if such were not the case. Would there be resources of time or energy to ‘spend’ on gay and lesbian political mobilization, e.g.? Who would have these resources?

Recent geopolitical developments supply plentiful test cases. For example, it may be drably unsurprising that a socialist politics based on Marx’s original miscalculation (in supposing that the proletariat represented a new universal principle of unity) would be forced to stamp out any sense of entitlement, in order to maintain a tenuous alternative unity of misery. The spectacular disaggregation and moral collapse of the ‘Eastern bloc’ would, on this

imate Domination.”

view, be a logical outcome of the building pressures of deferred entitlement.⁴⁴ Similarly, the renewed vigor of liberalism can be understood in part as a victory of plausibility: since the liberal utopia is a completely disaggregated mass of equally-entitled individuals, present conditions can easily be interpreted as a historical curve tending toward that asymptotic ideal, the ‘end of history’.⁴⁵

A great deal of 20th-century social thought can also usefully be understood as a response to or even reflection of this disaggregation of ‘the masses’. The fascination with meaning, interpretation, language, text, and symbolic forms in general of so much 20th-century social theory is directly linked to the proliferation of instruments and practices of symbolic distinction between entitled and dispersed identities.⁴⁶ Indeed, ‘difference’ is the Swiss Army knife of the 20th-century intellect. The cultural juxtapositions and admixtures of globalization (what Paul Gilroy discusses, for example, as the “hybridity” of the ‘Black Atlantic’⁴⁷) have also played a central role in this symbolic proliferation, especially as decolonization has reduced the West’s ability to manage ‘other’ cultures as exotic, subaltern lab specimens or savages awaiting civilization and salvation.⁴⁸

44J.K. Galbraith seems to suggest as much in *The Culture of Contentment* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993).

45The most (in)famous example of this argument is Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Morrow, William, 1993). To assess the plausibility of such declarations see also Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties*, rev. ed. (New York: Collier, 1962). Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (W.W. Norton, 1979) remains a powerful analysis and moral critique of American social psychology in opposition to this perspective.

46See Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976), for a suggestion that capitalism is totemism unbound.

47*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993).

48See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

I. Difference and Power: Race, Gender, and the Social Self

The relation of self to other is the fundamental form of all human relations, as well as the basis of the very possibility of self-consciousness, even as the content of self, other, and their relations varies enormously. Hegel had argued this fundamental relationality of self in the early 19th century: “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’.”⁴⁹ With more or less reference to Hegel, this is the shared insight of a wide spectrum of 20th century Western thinkers, notably George Herbert Mead, W.E.B. DuBois, and Simone de Beauvoir. For them, self is always constructed out of difference, often invidiously; and it is always a performance in company, even if only its own.

While William James recognized material (the body), spiritual (psychic dispositions), and pure Ego (the feeling of personal identity) components of the self, his greatest contribution was his attention to the social dimensions of self. “Properly speaking, *a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind.”⁵⁰ This insight was directly antecedent to the work of George Herbert Mead, whose general theory of the social self in turn inspired more limited but focused investigations of self-constitutive symbolic interactions including verbal and nonverbal communication, labeling, roles, scripts, masks, accomplishments, situated knowledges, emotional displays, and many others.

Mead’s theory of self formation emphasizes dynamics, perspectives, and interactions (his is not a static or one-dimensional view). Babies are born physically dynamic, with a perspective focused by their attention, ready to interact. They start bouncing off of things (he calls this ‘gesturing’), including people, the walls, their bodies and internal states (of course they have no way

⁴⁹G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967 [1807]), 229 (“Lordship and Bondage”). The master-slave dialectic is the most (in)famous instance of this mutual self-definition.

⁵⁰James, *The Principles of Psychology*.

of knowing at first what states are ‘internal’ to), with consequences that they soon begin to interpret as “meanings.” “Thus the consciousness of meaning... is a consciousness of one’s own attitudes of response as they answer to, control, and interpret the gestures of others.”⁵¹ Through this process they locate themselves in a meaningful interactive matrix, the shape and dimensions of which are the shape and dimensions of their emerging self. Meaningful relations with others become embodied in the self, which is originally little but a compendium of accumulated interaction traces.

As it emerges the self (the memory trace of meaningful interactions) becomes partly habitual, partly reflective. The habitual part is what we call ‘character’, since “[a]s a mere organization of habit the self is not self-conscious.”⁵² “In fact it is essential to the economy of our conduct that the connection between stimulation and response should become habitual and should sink below the threshold of consciousness.”⁵³ Concurrently, the reflective part starts to bounce off of itself, a development Mead described in terms of the difference between “I” and “me.” Thus, Mead argued that thinking is an inner conversation between components of self layered in by interactions with various others and reflective of their perspectives, often collated into a ‘generalized other’.⁵⁴

Thus, the reflective component of self emerges to integrate the complexity of interactions and their lingering traces, sorting through meanings to reconstruct the gestures and attitudes of others into a coherent ‘generalized other’ within and with respect to which the self is defined.

⁵¹Mead, “Social Consciousness and the Consciousness of Meaning” (1909), in *Selected Writings*, 132-3.

⁵²Mead, “The Social Self,” in *Selected Writings*, 147.

⁵³Mead, “Social Consciousness and the Consciousness of Meaning,” 127.

⁵⁴“Our thinking is an inner conversation in which we may be taking the roles of specific acquaintances over against ourselves, but usually it is with what I have termed the ‘generalized other’ that we converse, and so attain to the levels of abstract thinking, and that impersonality, that so-called objectivity that we cherish.” Mead, “The Genesis of the Self and Social Control” (1924-5), in *Selected Writings*, 288.

The generalization is simply the result of the identity of responses. Indeed it is only as he has in some sense amalgamated the attitudes of the different roles in which he has addressed himself that he acquires the unity of personality. The 'me' that he addresses is constantly varied. It answers to the changing play of impulse, but the group solidarity, especially in its uniform restrictions, gives him the unity of universality. This I take to be the sole source of the universal.⁵⁵

Since it is constructed as a reflective integration of the attitudes of the group, the density and diversity of groups within which the self is formed will directly determine the complexity of self. It is certainly possible to create simple selves by locking infants in dark cellars, or less dramatically, by restricting their access to diversity. Once the interactive matrix opens out, however, a complex self is necessary to adapt to and integrate the diversity of situations and meaningful interactions with others that the self will encounter.

DuBois' classic contribution to this line of thinking was to add reflection on the impact of unequal power to the dynamics of complex identity formation with his theory of racial 'double consciousness'. Black Americans, he said, because of their situation of historical oppression and ongoing second-class citizenship, live with two self-concepts, Black and American.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁵⁶

How they are seen and see themselves, what they mean and how they construct meaning, are split in two. In the terms I have been proposing, Blacks' self is

⁵⁵Mead, "A Behavioristic Account of the Significant Symbol" (1922), in *Selected Writings*, 245.

⁵⁶*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903.

not simple, integral, and unchanging, but rather emergent, situated, and fractal. This fact of complex self is brought into brutal focus, “second-sight,” by the oppressive racism of the situation and the humiliating stereotypicality of the formative interactions.

This sense of twoness, of being the second term in a forced relation of self and Other, and of getting only the leftovers at the table of self, is characteristic of the view from below — a perspective from which the underbelly of identity can be seen. “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”⁵⁷ Fanon denied that this relation had any reciprocity, but Hall disagrees: “The English are racist not because they hate the Blacks but because they don’t know who they are without the Blacks.”⁵⁸ Locked in Otherness, western Blacks experience a fragmented self while contributing relational solidity to White self-definition.

As Blacks are Whites’ Other, women are men’s Other, said Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Second Sex* she drew this parallel explicitly: “One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to *feel* superior; thus, a ‘poor white’ in the South can console himself with the thought that he is not a ‘dirty nigger’ — and the more prosperous whites cleverly exploit this pride [e.g. by flying the Confederate flag over the South Carolina capitol]. Similarly, the most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women.”⁵⁹ This relationship is mutually identity-defining, but obviously not reciprocal, relying as it does on the treatment of one side as a means to the other side’s end.

As with ‘Black’, ‘Woman’ is defined oppressively as a single essence (but an inessential one), a stereotype with people living inside. “Thus, as against

⁵⁷Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), ch. 5, “The Fact of Blackness.” Fanon’s erasure of the black *woman* has often been remarked.

⁵⁸Hall, “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference,” 16.

⁵⁹Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974 [1949]), xxviii. It has been remarked that wealthy White women enjoy the ‘up’ side of this feeling with respect to Blacks and poor Whites; hence, many contemporary feminists have felt the need to add race and class dimensions to Beauvoir’s analysis.

the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless.” That these people are complex and leak out of the stereotype in various dimensions is hidden, stigmatized, and punished. “If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: We are told not that Femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine.”⁶⁰ ‘Woman’ is accordingly a distinct, simple identity only because it is compressed under the weight of historical/cultural definitions of the situation, enforced by habit, custom, training, and at the root, unequal distribution of power.⁶¹

I. Bourdieu and Identity Space

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work is not explicitly focused on identity, but nevertheless his studies and linked theoretical reflections offer the most sophisticated account of identity and identification available. This is because his focus is *distinction*, the many ways in which humans in societies both cluster and differentiate themselves from each other in patterns of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Bourdieu uses metaphors of ‘space’ and ‘field’ to describe the positions people take in relation to each other, creating a particularly vivid image of self and identity as attempts to establish location with respect to similarly occupied companions and competitors.⁶²

⁶⁰Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 286.

⁶¹A wonderful example of how such compressed identity-definitions can spin out as soon as the power relations shift is offered by Monique Wittig in “One is Not Born a Woman,” *Feminist Issues* 2. She argues that lesbians are not women since they are not defined by their relationships to men.

⁶²Good interpretive work on Bourdieu, not all of it fully convinced, includes Rogers Brubaker, “Rethinking Classical Sociology: The Sociological Vision of Pierre Bourdieu,” *Theory and Society*, 14, no. 6 (Nov.); Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma and Moishe Postone, eds., *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993); and Richard Harker, Cheleen Mahar, and Chris Wilkes, eds., *An Introduction to the Work of Pierre Bourdieu: The Practice of Theory* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

For example, Bourdieu uses analyses of varieties of ‘capital’ to track the practical logics that make ‘class’ effective as an identifying structure and practice. In his concrete, specific studies (often collaborative) on ‘high’ and ‘middlebrow’ art, education, academic culture, games and sports, language, and the sociology of cross-cultural communication, among others, Bourdieu has shown that ‘cultural’ fields are sites of competition and domination in which practical oppositions of class distinction are played out.⁶³ Within these fields, social actors strategically position and identify themselves according to symbolic ‘tastes and preferences’ that contain their practical assessment of the types and weights of capital (economic, political, cultural, intellectual, physical) that they are able to deploy or ‘cash in’ for identifying social distinction.⁶⁴

Knowledge then, in the form of cultural codes, is at the heart of social identification and hence, of the social self. People sort themselves and are sorted (become people of a certain sort, or find themselves out of sorts) by their ability to decipher and distinguish the nuances in complex social texts such as German idealist philosophy, professional wrestling, modern art, muscle cars, classical music, Harlequin romances, vintage wines, and shotgun ammunition. “Knowing the difference” is the key to it all, and as good a definition of identity as there is. As things about which one could know the difference (or *not* know, since inappropriate knowledge is stigmatized) proliferate in complex, global modern societies, specific identity positions also proliferate and become increasingly fractal even among class/ status equals. Academic readers, a tiny class fraction in our own right, may wish to reflect for a moment on the creation of the modern academic disciplines out of the disaggregation of philoso-

⁶³Although this section is about ‘Pierre Bourdieu’, a distinct person and author of record, the collaborative nature of his work cannot be overemphasized. In a strong sense, ‘Bourdieu’ is actually a public persona for a research consortium. See Derek Robbins, *The Work of Pierre Bourdieu: Recognizing society* (Boulder and San Francisco: Westview, 1991), 182. Of course, if ‘Bourdieu’ is right about the definition of individuals in relation to groups, this could be said of any author and text. So sayeth ‘Dyke’.

⁶⁴*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984 [1979]).

phy during the last several hundred years, the huge difference this makes to us as we learn our discipline, subdiscipline, and research field in order to distinguish ourselves within the academy, and the vanishingly tiny difference this makes to the checkout guy at the supermarket where we buy our groceries.⁶⁵

Along these lines, Bourdieu demonstrates what I have called above the ‘disaggregation of the masses’ by showing that modern classes are internally divided into ‘class fractions’ by the dispersion of capitals (calling intellectuals, for example, the “dominated fraction of the dominating class”). Gender, cultural formation (or generation), social position, social origin, and ethnic origin are some of the factors that may sort and distribute capitals into class fractions. Once positioned, each class fraction has an interest in fortifying and normalizing its position with respect to other competing positions, *distinguishing* itself from ‘others’ by using them (and being used by them) to describe what it is *not*. These distinctions produce networks of strategic binary judgments like us/them, good/evil, man/woman, black/white, young/old, urban/rural, and so on almost infinitely, at the complex intersections of which in social space individuals (selves) are located as multidimensional embodiments. Of course, such distinguishing practices cannot be well understood in isolation, but only in relation to particular social-historical spaces of possible positions.⁶⁶ “King of France” and “merchant of Carthage” are not currently available identity positions, for example.

This practical logic of identity-constitutive distinction with respect to competing positions produces what Bourdieu calls the ‘habitus’, a situated

⁶⁵For an account of this history that similarly foregrounds the constitutive power of systems of knowledge see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1970 [1966]).

⁶⁶The complexity of this multilocal, intersectional, networked theory of identity can be compared to Harré’s and Gillett’s progressive observation in *The Discursive Mind* that “[t]o have a sense of one’s personal individuality is to have a sense of having a place or places in various manifolds, that is, systems of locations,” 103. They offer a bare minimum of four dimensions in which the self must have locations: space, time, agency, and sociality. These dimensions establish a coordinate system for self, but of course the details of possible locations within each one can be extraordinarily intricate and dynamic, especially in the dimensions of agency and sociality.

commonsense conception of the world (or ‘feel for the game’⁶⁷) that structures knowledge and action, and reciprocally reinforces the structural positioning that produced it.⁶⁸ In this sense, all social actors participate actively in their positioning, ‘choosing’ what they already are by making virtue of necessity.⁶⁹ Through this necessary virtue social actors also reproduce their positions through time by rejecting other positions on ‘moral’ grounds (‘that’s not for the likes of us’) and by practicing moral bonsai on the young.

For example, in his early work on the sociology of education, investigating the cultural politics of communication and misunderstanding, Bourdieu pointed out that structural relations of social class are reproduced homologously in the classroom by (among other things) lectures that communicate only to students already bearing cultural capital accumulated via their families’ position in class hierarchies. The lecture form reflects a politics of knowledge: the lecturer speaks at people presumed already to be like her, reproduces herself in those few who are pre-equipped to respond at the ‘proper’ level, and reassigns the rest (bad students) to silence and respectful/ resentful meniality.⁷⁰ Of course, silent students also may not care a lick because they already have a job lined up at a country club for twice the teacher’s pay — evidence that the disaggregation of the masses and their access to purchasing power has commodified certain kinds of physical capital at a very high rate of exchange with respect to traditional intellectual capital.

⁶⁷Here Bourdieu’s debt to both James and Wittgenstein is apparent.

⁶⁸See *Distinction*, ch. 3; *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977 [1972]); and *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990 [1980]).

⁶⁹See *Distinction*, ch. 7.

⁷⁰See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977 [1970]), and Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron, and Monique De Saint Martin, *Academic Discourse: Linguistic Misunderstanding and Professorial Power*, trans. Richard Teese (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994).

I. Postmodernity: Diversity and Metanarrative

In postmodernist terms, self and identity are ‘metanarratives’.⁷¹ That is, they are fictitiously coherent stories told to bind together discursively a contingent, disparate, elusive, and ambiguous manifold of qualities, attributes, accomplishments, attitudes, ascriptions, and so on.⁷² Self is a tale we tell ourselves (and retell a little differently each time); identity is a just-so story about the community imagined out of the common holders of some arbitrary descriptor. “Collective identities, in short, provide what we might call scripts: narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and telling their life stories.”⁷³ Lest it seem that postmodernism seeks to cut ground from beneath our feet, it is important to add that for postmodernists, *everything* is a story and there is nothing more ‘really real’ than a conventional narrative. We need not feel groundless when self is redescribed as a story we tell ourselves; the ground has simply changed.

As I detailed in the section on modern political identity, modernity has created the conditions that enable this sort of chaotic proliferation of self and identity, and make narrative reintegrations necessary. In addition to the factors discussed in that section, the crude material basis of postmodern self and identity is the modern demographic revolution that has seen population densities worldwide explode. The rise in raw numbers and density has stimulated a variety of dispersing effects on the interactive matrices in which self and identity are formed: social complexification and increased division of labor,⁷⁴ popu-

71Or, in slightly more goffmanesque terms, postmodern identity “is constituted theatrically through role-playing and image construction.” Douglas Kellner, “Popular culture and the construction of postmodern identities,” in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman, eds., *Modernity and Identity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992).

72Accordingly, every attempt to deny this thesis will be read as another symptomatic metanarrative of spirit, or integrity, or authenticity, or free will, or whatever other metaphysical principle of unity is proposed.

73K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in Appiah and Amy Gutmann, *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996), 97.

74Emile Durkheim first analyzed this effect in *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: Free Press, 1984 [1893]).

lation pressures and migration,⁷⁵ market and imperial expansion, cultural interactions both willing and not. These conditions multiply the dimensions in which we are identified, and require us to develop complex selves to adapt to the diversity of our life situations. Adaptation across situations then becomes constitutive, so that “what we call ‘identity’ is perhaps better thought of as the more persistently recurring elements of multiple and situationally contingent *processes of identification*.”⁷⁶

While for many the nostalgic ideal remains the small, uncomplicated country town, where everyone (including yourself) knows exactly who you are, this sort of restricted formative matrix is vanishing, not to return short of a massive extinction.⁷⁷ Even where such communities still exist, they cannot resist encroachment from broader contexts. The gated community is instructive as an attempt to reinvent such insularity with the brute power of money — but that money must be obtained outside the gates, rendering them unavoidably permeable. This does not prevent the marketers from selling a narrative of sheltered, autonomous, optional community, however.⁷⁸

This dynamic points to one of the characteristic features of postmodern identity: its implication in the market. As formative matrices become too dense and chaotic to produce comfortably integral self-narratives, a plot vacuum is created that sucks in all sorts of semiotic debris. Industries arise to produce consumption goods for people exuberantly or desperately in search of themselves. Feathers and dream catchers sell to discoverers of their distant Cherokee heritage (along with new/old back-to-nature names — always ‘Hawk’, never ‘Turtle’). “Kiss Me, I’m Irish,” says the T-shirt sold to the guy

⁷⁵See, e.g., Wang Gungwu, ed., *Global History and Migrations* (Boulder: Westview, 1997).

⁷⁶Robert G. Dunn, *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 4.

⁷⁷Warning: this dream was the Unabomber’s dream. His “Manifesto” was quite eloquent, and erudite, on this point.

⁷⁸The sport utility vehicle (SUV) is often the (relatively) poor folks’ gated community — momentary insulation from a complex and scary world, a paradoxically mobile and kinetically unstable psychic testament to solidity and stability.

who drinks green beer on St. Patrick's day, wouldn't know a shillelagh if he got cracked across the skull with one, and fervently kisses the Blarney Stone on his pilgrimage to the 'homeland', unaware that local wags regularly piss on it after hours. "That's a Spicy Meatball," says the fast-food plug to would-be Italians who have no idea that in the chronically depressed agricultural regions of southern Italy their tightlipped old grandmas were from, the kind of people who emigrated would never have seen big globs of meat in their diet, and used hot spices to mask the flavor of rotting food. Historical memory is rewritten to fit the available inventory of identity-conferring goods on the shelves of the Self Lion.

The use of commodities as interchangeable representations of self and identity is both liberating and perilous. For groups historically barred from autonomous self-construction, like women and stigmatized minorities, the identity market is the great equalizer. Madonna, Michael Jackson, and RuPaul became objects of pop culture fascination, and raked in the dough, by publicly thematizing the plasticity of identity for women, people of color, and sex/gender minorities. Their only claim to 'authenticity' was a claim to self-authorship. This was heady stuff, and an undeniable step forward for those whose 'authentic' traditional identities had been prisons — for those who could afford it, anyway ('poor' remains a singularly intractable identity).

The peril of fetishized commodity identity is its evanescence. The market lives by the planned obsolescence of inventories, so the turnover rate for approved identity-conferring goods has to be fairly rapid.⁷⁹ This can be a little dizzying and exhausting after a few cycles. "An oversupply and rapid turnover of images [also] have the effect of reducing their meaning quotient, inflating the semiotic currency."⁸⁰ Furthermore, the autonomy of self-construction is al-

⁷⁹This turnover rate is especially characteristic of the post-Fordist "flexible accumulation" mode of advanced capitalism, characterized by rapid response and small-batch production, as analyzed by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

⁸⁰Dunn, *Identity Crises*, 126.

ways illusory, since it is only in relation to ‘others’ that ‘self’ has any meaning at all. But then the success of the self construct is dependent on fickle fashion and budget. No wonder the market for self-help and self-esteem manuals is booming, not to mention the proliferation of grab-baggy neo-spiritualisms.⁸¹

Yet, no matter how postmodern we get, completely chaotic identity is not an option; the coherence of identity, no matter how fictive, cannot be jettisoned. Without it there is no leverage. “What is the point of an identity if it isn’t one thing? That is why we keep hoping that identities will come our way: because the rest of the world is so confusing; everything else is turning, but identities ought to be some stable points of reference that were like that in the past, are now and ever shall be, still points in a changing world.”⁸² The deeper meaning and historical traction of stable communities, constraining though they may be on individual autonomy, at least offered continuities of situation that kept the emergent complexity of self and identity within tolerable limits.⁸³ They also exerted pressure to make the self an ethical construct rather than an aesthetic one.

Despite the deeply troubling implications for ethically substantive community of fetishized, aestheticized commodity identities, however, reactionary critiques like the call for ‘family values’ or a return to prayer in schools simply miss the point. We cannot go back.⁸⁴ And even if we could, traditional identi-

81For a pithy critique of such “conceptual entrepreneurship,” see John P. Hewitt, *The Myth of Self-esteem: Finding Happiness and Solving Problems in America* (St. Martin's, 1997).

82Stuart Hall, “The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity,” in Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat, eds., *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 175.

83For an example of this kind of diagnosis, see Robert N. Bellah, William M. Sullivan, Steven M. Tipton, Richard Madsen, and Ann Swidler, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996).

84Actually we could, but this would involve closing our borders, injecting all women back into the home, killing or forcibly converting religious and moral minorities, demolishing the cities, and either killing their inhabitants or driving them into the countryside. Recent examples of such attempts, similarly motivated, are the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, Khomeini’s Iranian revolution, and the current Taliban regime in

ties mean something completely different when they are optional, not historically given. The choice of tradition is the same sort of choice, with the same opportunity for revision, as the choice of hair color. Like it or not, many of our communities have become intentional, many dimensions of our identities plural and fluid. The challenge is to recognize this, and to build stabilizing frameworks and ethics that fit this new situation.