

3

Who Am I?

Consciousness, Identity, and the Soul



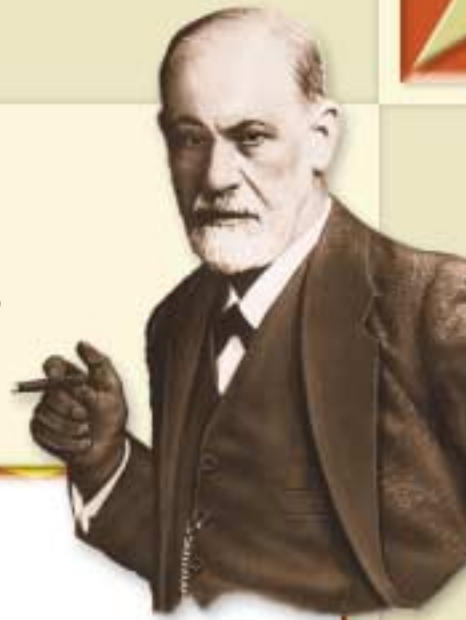


If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.

RENÉ DESCARTES

The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.

SIGMUND FREUD



KNOW THYSELF? 000

SOCRATES AND PLATO: [The Soul Is Immortal](#) 000

ST. AUGUSTINE: [Plato and Christianity](#) 000

RENÉ DESCARTES: [A Modern Perspective on the Self](#) 000

JOHN LOCKE: [The Self Is Consciousness](#) 000

DAVID HUME: [There Is No Self](#) 000

IMMANUEL KANT: [We Construct the Self](#) 000

SIGMUND FREUD: [There Are Two Selves, One Conscious, One Unconscious](#) 000

GILBERT RYLE: [The Self Is How You Behave](#) 000

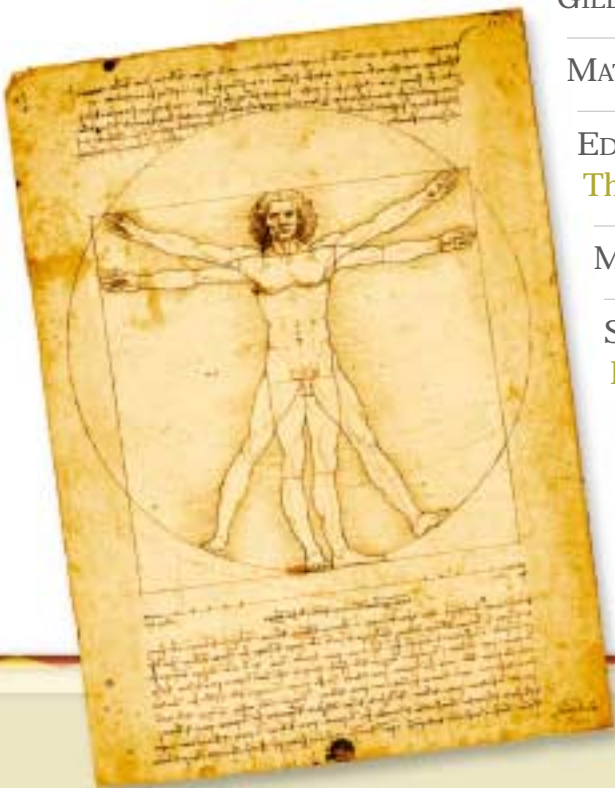
MATERIALISM: [The Self Is the Brain](#) 000

EDMUND HUSSERL AND MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY:
[The Self Is Embodied Subjectivity](#) 000

MAKING CONNECTIONS: [In Search of the Self](#) 000

STUDENTS THINKING ABOUT PHILOSOPHY:
[Perspectives on the Self](#) 000

CONCEPT REVIEW 000





People travel to wonder at the height of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.

ST. AUGUSTINE
Confessions (397–401)

Man is aware of himself, of his past and future, which is death, of his smallness and powerlessness. . . . Man transcends all other life because he is for the first time, life aware of itself.

ERICH FROMM
Man for Himself (1947)

We are unknown, we knowers, ourselves to ourselves; this has good reason. We have never searched for ourselves—how should it then come to pass, that we should ever find ourselves?

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE
Genealogy of Morals (1887)

MARCEL PROUST

(1871–1922)

French intellectual and literary figure. Author of several works, including *À la recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time)* (1913–1922). Satirical and introspective in his work, Proust's central theme involved the affirmation of life.

Know Thyself?

The cornerstone of Socrates' philosophy was the Delphic Oracle's command to "Know thyself." But what exactly does that mean? Who exactly *is* your "self"? What are the qualities that define it? What differentiates your particular *self* from all others? What is the relation of the *self* you were as a child to the *self* you are now? What is the relation of your *self* to your "body"? How does your *self* relate to other *selves*? What happens to a *self* when the body dies? In what ways is it possible for you to "know" your *self*? In what ways might you never fully know your *self*? What do you mean when you say, "I don't feel like myself today" or when you encourage someone else to "Just be yourself!"

As with many themes and issues in philosophy, the nature of the *self* is a subject that most people take for granted. Many people simply *live*, assuming the existence of their personal self-identity. And when they do think about their *self*, their concerns are typically practical rather than philosophical: How can I make myself happy? How can "I" (shorthand for my "self") develop fulfilling relationships with other selves? How can I improve myself? And so on. Yet when we go searching for our *self* with a philosophical lens, we soon discover that what we thought was a straightforward and familiar presence is in fact elusive, enigmatic, and extraordinarily complex. The French writer **Marcel Proust** captures some of this provocative mystery of the *self* in his novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913), in which the taste of a madeleine (a kind of cake) provokes memories from his childhood and reflection on the nature of his *self*:

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with crumbs touched my palate than I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me . . . at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather the precious essence was not in me, it WAS me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? How could I seize and apprehend it? . . . It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself . . . I put down the cup to examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something that does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day?"

Do you agree with Proust that it is our own minds that "alone can discover the truth"? Why do we experience an "abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself"? In what sense does our mind "create" the *self* that it is seeking, "face to face with something that does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day"?

Developing insight into the nature of the human "self" in general and into your *self* in particular is a daunting task, underscored by the less than successful efforts



VISUAL PHILOSOPHY

Our Faces
Reveal Who
We Are

Who am I? Whom should
I become?

of the best human thinkers for nearly three thousand years. Yet if we are to fulfill Socrates' exhortation to live an examined life, a life of purpose and value, we must begin at the source of all knowledge and significance—our *self*.



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

Do I Know Myself?

3.1



Answer the following questions regarding your “self” as fully and specifically as you can.

- How would you describe your self?
- What are the qualities that differentiate you from all other selves?
- In what ways has your self changed during the course of your life? In what ways has it remained the same?
- How would you describe the relation of your self to your body?
- How are you able to come to know other selves? Do you think they are similar to or different from you?
- What do you think will happen to your self after you die? If you believe that your self will continue to exist in some form, will you be able to recognize other selves who have died? How?

Did you have difficulty providing in-depth and specific responses to these questions? You should have! The difficulties that you likely encountered are an indication of the philosophical challenges posed by the concept of *self*. As your philo-



This Buddhist funeral dramatizes the profound question, “What happens to the self when the body dies?”

sophical understanding becomes deeper and more sophisticated, your appreciation for the profound nature of these questions will grow as well. Those people who provide simple, ready-made answers to questions like these are likely revealing a *lack* of philosophical understanding. (“Of course I know myself . . . I’m *me!*”) So don’t be concerned if you find that you are beginning to get confused about subjects like the *self* that you thought you understood—such confusion is the sign of a lively, inquiring mind. As the newspaperman and writer **H. L. Mencken** noted: “To every complex question there’s a simple answer—and it is clever, neat, and wrong!”

Your responses also likely reflected the cultural and religious environment in which you were raised. Cultures that originated in Europe have tended to use a common religious and philosophical framework for understanding the “self” that was first introduced by Socrates and Plato in ancient Greece.

For example, did your responses reflect the belief that your “self”

- is a unique personal identity that remains the same over time?
- is synonymous with your “soul”?
- is a very different sort of thing from your “body”?
- can be understood by using your reasoning abilities?
- will continue to exist in some form after your body dies?
- is able to connect with other selves in some personal way?

If you found that your responses reflected some (or all) of these beliefs, don’t be surprised. These beliefs form the basic conceptual framework for understanding the *self* that has shaped much of Western religious and philosophical thought. So in order to fully appreciate the way our most fundamental views regarding ourselves have been formed, it makes sense for us to return to the birthplace of those views twenty-five hundred years ago, and then to trace the development of these perspectives up to the current century.

H. L. Mencken (1880–1956)
American newspaperman, author, and literary and social critic. Born and worked in Baltimore, Maryland; known for humor and biting satire in his work.

Socrates and Plato: *The Soul Is Immortal*

Socrates was the first thinker in recorded history to focus the full power of reason on the human *self*: who we are, who we should be, and who we will become. Socrates was convinced that in addition to our physical bodies, each person possesses an immortal soul that survives beyond the death of the body. He explored this subject with his friends in the days following his trial and before his sentence of death was executed, a time in his life when the question of immortality no doubt had a special immediacy and significance. The following passage is from Plato’s dialogue, *Phaedo*.

Plato, *Phaedo*

Socrates: And were we not saying long ago that the soul when using the body as an instrument of perception, that is to say, when using the sense of sight or hearing or some other sense (for the meaning of perceiving through the body is perceiving through the senses)—were we not saying that the soul too is then dragged by the body into the region of the changeable, and wanders and is confused; the world spins round her, and she is like a drunkard, when she touches change?

Cebes: Very true.

Socrates: But when returning into herself she reflects, then she passes into the other world, the region of purity, and eternity, and immortality, and unchangeableness, which



are her kindred, and with them she ever lives, when she is by herself and is not let or hindered; then she ceases from her erring ways, and being in communion with the unchanging is unchanging. And this state of the soul is called wisdom?

Cebes: That is well and truly said, Socrates.

Socrates: And to which class is the soul more nearly alike and akin, as far as may be inferred from this argument, as well as from the preceding one?

Cebes: I think, Socrates, that, in the opinion of everyone who follows the argument, the soul will be infinitely more like the unchangeable—even the most stupid person will not deny that.

Socrates: And the body is more like the changing?

Cebes: Yes.

This brief exchange provides a cogent summary of Socrates' metaphysical framework. For Socrates, reality is dualistic, comprised of two dichotomous realms. One realm is changeable, transient, and imperfect, whereas the other realm is unchanging, eternal, immortal. The physical world in which we live—comprised of all that we can see, hear, taste, smell, and feel—belongs to the former realm. All aspects of our physical world are continually changing, transforming, disappearing.

In contrast, the unchanging, eternal, perfect realm includes the intellectual essences of the universe, concepts such as *truth*, *goodness*, and *beauty*. We find examples of these ideal forms in the physical world—for example, we might describe someone as truthful, good, or beautiful. But these examples are always imperfect and limited: it is only the ideal forms themselves that are perfect, unchanging, and eternal.

Socrates' metaphysical scheme may, at first glance, seem abstract and impractical, but it has a profound impact on the way the *self* is understood. For Socrates, our bodies belong to the physical realm: they change, they're imperfect, they die. Our souls, however, belong to the ideal realm: they are unchanging and immortal, surviving the death of the body. And although a close relationship exists between our souls and our bodies, they are radically different entities.

Our souls strive for wisdom and perfection, and reason is the soul's tool to achieve this exalted state. But as long as the soul is tied to the body, this quest for wisdom is inhibited by the imperfection of the physical realm, as the soul is "dragged by the body into the region of the changeable," where it "wanders and is confused" in a world that "spins round her, and she is like a drunkard." But reason is a powerful tool, enabling the soul to free itself from the corrupting imperfection of the physical realm and achieve "communion with the unchanging."

What is truly remarkable about these ideas is how closely they parallel modern Western consciousness. A finite body, an immortal soul, a perfect, eternal realm with which the soul seeks communion and eternal bliss: all of the basic elements of Western (and some Eastern) religions are present. Even on a secular level, the ideas resonate with modern concepts of the *self*: the notion that the thinking, reasoning *self* and the physical body are radically distinct entities that have a complicated and problematic relationship with one another.

Having described his overall metaphysical vision, Socrates goes on to elaborate his ideas and argue for their plausibility.

Socrates: Yet once more consider the matter in another light: When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve. Now which of these two functions is akin to the divine? And which to the mortal? Does not the divine appear to you to be that which naturally orders and rules, and the mortal to be that which is subject and servant?

Cebes: True.



Socrates: And which does the soul resemble?

Cebes: The soul resembles the divine, and the body the mortal—there can be no doubt of that, Socrates.

Socrates: Then reflect, Cebes: of all which has been said is not this the conclusion?—that the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intellectual, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and that the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintellectual, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable. Can this, my dear Cebes, be denied?

Cebes: It cannot. ■

Although Plato was for the most part committed to the concept of viewing the essence of the self—the soul—as a unified, indissoluble, immortal entity that remains the same over time, he also recognizes the inherent difficulties with this view. In his dialogue *The Symposium*, he cites the views of the female philosopher Diotima, who presents a very different perspective on the nature of the self.

Although we speak of an individual as being the same so long as he continues to exist in the same form, and therefore assume that a man is the same person in his old age as in his infancy, yet although we call him the same, every bit of him is different, and every day he is becoming a new man, while the old man is ceasing to exist, as you can see from his hair, his flesh, his bones, his blood, and all the rest of his body. And not only his body, for the same thing happens to his soul. And neither his manners, nor his dispositions, nor his thoughts, nor his desires, nor his pleasures, nor his sufferings, nor his fears are the same throughout his life, for some of them grow, while others disappear. . . . Thus, unlike the gods, a mortal creature cannot remain the same throughout eternity; it can only leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left as it passes away. . . . And so it



3.8 Plato, *Phaedo*, Immortality of the Soul



VISUAL PHILOSOPHY



The Faces of Michael Jackson

In what sense does the self change as the body changes? In what sense does the self remain the same?



is no wonder that every creature prizes its own offspring, since everything is inspired by this love, this passion for immortality.

This quote penetrates to the core of the problem of personal identity. How is it possible to say that a self remains the same when it is obvious that every self is defined by a process of continual change and evolution? This is visibly apparent in our physical bodies, and contemporary science has revealed that even on the cellular level, old cells are dying and being replaced by new cells on an ongoing basis. In what sense can we say that an infant at the age of six months is the same person at the age of sixty years, when so much of their physical body has changed? And Diotima astutely points out that this same process of continual growth and evolution also defines your “soul.” It is analogous to completely renovating an old house, gradually replacing every part of it over time: at what point does it lose its “original” identity and become a “new” house? For Diotima, this dynamic, changing quality of the soul leads her to a very different conclusion than Plato’s: unlike the Gods, the human soul is not immortal, though we fervently want it to be. And it is this doomed passion for immortality that inspires the “prizing” of our children. They will become our living legacy as we “leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left as it passes away.”



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

The Soul and the Self

3.2



Record your responses to the following questions in your Philosopher’s Notebook.

- Compare Socrates’ concept of the “soul” with your concept of the *self* which you described in the Think Philosophically activity on page 000. Did you view your “self” as a unified identity that remains the same over time?
 - an indissoluble entity that is immortal and will survive death?
 - an entity that is very different in kind from your physical body?
 - an entity that strives to achieve communion with some ultimate reality?
- In characterizing the relationship between the soul and the body, Socrates explains that the soul uses the body as “an instrument of perception,” and that the soul “rules” the body in the same way that the divine rules the mortals. Do you agree with this analysis? Why or why not? How would you characterize the relationship between your soul/*self* and your body?
- Socrates argues that because the soul is of a unified, indissoluble form, we should not be concerned about death because the soul is incapable of being dispersed into nonexistence—it must be eternal. Does this argument address your fears about the potential death of your *self*/soul? Why or why not?
- For Socrates, our physical existence on earth is merely an imperfect reflection of ultimate and eternal reality, and our purpose in life is to achieve communion with this ultimate reality. How do his views compare with your perspective on the purpose of life? Do you believe that our goal in life is to achieve spiritual transcendence and/or intellectual enlightenment? If not, what do you believe is the purpose of your life?

Plato elaborates his concept of the soul (the Greek word is *psyche*) in his later dialogues such as the monumental *Republic* and the *Phaedrus*. In particular, he introduces the idea of a three-part soul/*self* constituted by



- **Reason**—our divine essence that enables us to think deeply, make wise choices, and achieve a true understanding of eternal truths.
- **Physical Appetite**—our basic biological needs such as hunger, thirst, and sexual desire.
- **Spirit or Passion**—our basic emotions such as love, anger, ambition, aggressiveness, empathy.

These three elements of our selves are in a dynamic relationship with one another, sometimes working in concert, sometimes in bitter conflict. For example, we may develop a romantic relationship with someone who is an intellectual companion (Reason), with whom we are passionately in love (Spirit), and whom we find sexually attractive, igniting our lustful appetites (Appetite). Or we may find ourselves in personal conflict, torn between three different relationships, each of which appeals to a different part of our self: Reason, Spirit, Appetite. When conflict occurs, Plato believes it is the responsibility of our Reason to sort things out and exert control, reestablishing a harmonious relationship between the three elements of our selves. Plato illustrates his view of the soul/self in *Phaedrus* with a vivid metaphor: the soul is likened to a winged chariot drawn by two powerful horses: a white horse, representing Spirit, and a black horse, embodying Appetite. The charioteer is Reason, whose task is to guide the chariot to the eternal realm by controlling the two independent-minded horses. Those charioteers who are successful in setting a true course and ensuring that the two steeds work together in harmonious unity achieve true wisdom and banquet with the gods. However, those charioteers who are unable to control their horses and keep their chariot on track are destined to experience personal, intellectual, and spiritual failure. These are themes that we will explore more fully in chapter 4 when we deal with the subjects of human nature and personal freedom.

Phaedrus, *The Chariot Analogy*

We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and [246b] of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome. Now we must try to tell why a living being is called mortal or immortal. Soul, considered collectively, has the care of all that which is soulless, and it traverses the whole heaven, appearing sometimes in one form and some-

times in another; now when it is perfect [246c] and fully winged, it mounts upward and governs the whole world; but the soul which has lost its wings is borne along until it gets hold of something solid, when it settles down, taking upon itself an earthly body, which seems to be self-moving, because of the power of the soul within it; and the whole, compounded of soul and body, is called a living being, and is further designated as mortal. It is not immortal by any reasonable supposition, but we, though we have never seen [246d] or rightly conceived a god, imagine an immortal being which has both a soul and a body which are united for all time. Let that, however, and our words concerning it, be as is pleasing to God; we will now consider the reason why the soul loses its wings. It is something like this.

The natural function of the wing is to soar upwards and carry that which is heavy up to the place where dwells the race of the gods. More than any other thing that pertains to the body [246e] it partakes of the nature of the divine. But the divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and all



"We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer:" Do you find Plato's metaphor for the soul to be useful in understanding your *self*? Why?



such qualities; by these then the wings of the soul are nourished and grow, but by the opposite qualities, such as vileness and evil, they are wasted away and destroyed. Now the great leader in heaven, Zeus, driving a winged chariot, goes first, arranging all things and caring for all things. [247a] He is followed by an army of gods and spirits, arrayed in eleven squadrons; Hestia alone remains in the house of the gods. Of the rest, those who are included among the twelve great gods and are accounted leaders, are assigned each to his place in the army. There are many blessed sights and many ways hither and thither within the heaven, along which the blessed gods go to and fro attending each to his own duties; and whoever wishes, and is able, follows, for jealousy is excluded from the celestial band. But when they go to a feast and a banquet, [247b] they proceed steeply upward to the top of the vault of heaven, where the chariots of the gods, whose well matched horses obey the rein, advance easily, but the others with difficulty; for the horse of evil nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth the charioteer whose horse is not well trained. There the utmost toil and struggle await the soul. For those that are called immortal, when they reach the top, [247c] pass outside and take their place on the outer surface of the heaven, and when they have taken their stand, the revolution carries them round and they behold the things outside of the heaven.

But the region above the heaven was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be. It is, however, as I shall tell; for I must dare to speak the truth, especially as truth is my theme. For the colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region [247d] and is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul. Now the divine intelligence, since it is nurtured on mind and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving that which befits it, rejoices in seeing reality for a space of time and by gazing upon truth is nourished and made happy until the revolution brings it again to the same place. In the revolution it beholds absolute justice, temperance, and knowledge, not such knowledge as has a beginning and varies as it is associated with one [247e] or another of the things we call realities, but that which abides in the real eternal absolute; and in the same way it beholds and feeds upon the other eternal verities, after which, passing down again within the heaven, it goes home, and there the charioteer puts up the horses at the manger and feeds them with ambrosia and then gives them nectar to drink.

Many and wonderful to see are the orbits within the heavens and the blessed gods constantly turn to contemplate these as each busies himself with his special duties. There follows whoever will and can, for envy has no place in the company of heaven. But when they proceed to the divine banquet, they mount the steep ascent to the top of the vault of heaven; and here the advance is easy for the gods' chariots, well balanced and guided as they are, but the others have difficulty: the horse of evil nature weighs down their chariots, pulling heavily toward the earth any charioteer who has not trained him well. And here the extremity of toil and struggle awaits the soul.

Such is the life of the gods; but of the other souls, [248a] that which best follows after God and is most like him, raises the head of the charioteer up into the outer region and is carried round in the revolution, troubled by the horses and hardly beholding the realities; and another sometimes rises and sometimes sinks, and, because its horses are unruly, it sees some things and fails to see others. The other souls follow after, all yearning for the upper region but unable to reach it, and are carried round beneath, [248b] trampling upon and colliding with one another, each striving to pass its neighbor. So there is the greatest confusion and sweat of rivalry, wherein many are lamed, and many wings are broken through the incompetence of the drivers; and after much toil they all go away without gaining a view of reality, and when they have gone away they feed upon opinion. But the reason of the great eagerness to see where the plain of truth is, lies in the fact that the fitting pasturage for the best part of the soul is in the meadow there, and the wing [248c] on which the soul is raised up is nourished by this. And this is a law of Destiny, that the soul which follows after God and obtains a view of any of the truths is free from harm until the next period, and if it can always attain this, is always unharmed; but when, through inability to follow, it fails to see, and through some mischance is filled with forgetfulness and evil and grows heavy, and when it has grown heavy, loses its wings and falls to the earth.





Plato believed that genuine happiness can only be achieved by people who consistently make sure that their Reason is in control of their Spirits and Appetites. This harmonious integration under the control of Reason is the essence of Plato's concept of justice, both at the individual level and, as we shall see in chapter 10, at the social and political level as well.



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

Balancing Reason, Appetite, and Spirit

3.3



- Describe an experience in your life in which you experienced a vigorous conflict between the three dimensions of your *self* identified by Plato: Reason, Appetite, and Spirit. What was the nature of the conflict? How was it resolved?
- Describe an experience in your life in which Reason prevailed over Passion and Appetite. How was Reason able to prevail? Did you gain increased wisdom from the experience?
- Describe an experience in your life in which the three elements of your *self* identified by Plato worked together in a productive and harmonious fashion, enabling you to achieve a great success.

ELIZABETH V. SPELMAN

Barbara Richmond (1940) Professor of the Humanities, Smith College. Prominent figure in both contemporary feminist and African philosophies. Author of several books, including *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988) and *In Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World* (2002).

Some contemporary feminist philosophers have criticized Plato for overemphasizing the power and authority of reason, and underemphasizing the importance of the body and emotions. They believe that this view is particularly insidious because Plato—and other traditional philosophers—have tended to identify men with the superior capacity of reason, while relegating women to the “inferior” areas of physical responses and emotions. This perspective is expressed in an excerpt from the essay “Woman as Body” by the philosopher **Elizabeth V. Spelman**.

Elizabeth V. Spelman,
Woman as Body

Plato's Lessons About the Soul and the Body

Plato's dialogues are filled with lessons about knowledge, reality, and goodness, and most of the lessons carry with them strong praise for the soul and strong indictments against the body. According to Plato, the body, with its deceptive senses, keeps us from real knowledge; it rivets us in a world of material things which is far removed from the world of reality; and it tempts us away from the virtuous life. It is in and through the soul, if at all, that we shall have knowledge, be in touch with reality, and lead a life of virtue. Only the soul can truly know, for only the soul can ascend to the real world, the world of the Forms or Ideas.

Plato also tells us about the nature of beauty. Beauty has nothing essentially to do with the body or with the world of material things. *Real* beauty cannot “take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh.” Yes, there are beautiful things, but they only are entitled to be described that way because they “partake in” the form of Beauty, which itself is not found in the material world. Real beauty has characteristics which merely beautiful *things* cannot have; real beauty

Is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other.



Because it is only the soul that can know the Forms, those eternal and unchanging denizens of Reality, only the soul can know real Beauty; our changing, decaying bodies only can put us in touch with changing, decaying pieces of the material world. . . .

Plato's View of the Soul and Body, and His Attitude Toward Women

Plato, and anyone else who conceives of the soul as something unobservable, cannot of course speak as if we could point to the soul, or hold it up for direct observation. At one point, Plato says no mere mortal can really understand the nature of the soul, but one perhaps could tell what it resembles. So it is not surprising to find Plato using many metaphors and analogies to describe what the soul is *like*, in order to describe relations between parts of the soul. For example, thinking, a function of the soul, is described by analogy to talking. The parts of the soul are likened to a team of harnessed, winged horses and their charioteer. The body's relation to the soul is such that we are to think of the body vis-à-vis the soul as a tomb, a grave or prison, or as barnacles or rocks holding down the soul. Plato compares the lowest or body-like part of the soul to a brood of beasts.

But Plato's task is not only to tell us what the soul is like, not only to provide us with ways of getting a fix on the differences between soul and bodies, or differences between parts of the soul. As we've seen, he also wants to convince us that the soul is much more important than the body; and that it is to our peril that we let ourselves be beckoned by the rumblings of the body at the expense of harkening to the call of the soul. And he means to convince us of this by holding up for our inspection the silly and sordid lives of those who pay too much attention to their bodies and do not care enough for their soul; he wants to remind us of how unruly, how without direction, are the lives of those in whom the lower part of the soul holds sway over the higher part. Because he can't *point* to an adulterated soul, he points instead to those embodied beings whose lives are in such bad shape that we can be sure that their souls are adulterated. And whose lives exemplify the proper soul/body relationship gone haywire? The lives of women (or sometimes the lives of children, slaves and brutes).

For example, how are we to know when the body has the upper hand over the soul, or when the lower part of the soul has managed to smother the higher part? We presumably can't see such conflict, so what do such conflicts translate into, in terms of actual human lives? Well, says Plato, look at the lives of women. It is women who get hysterical at the thought of death; obviously, their emotions have overpowered their reason, and they can't control themselves. The worst possible model for young men could be "a woman, young or old or wrangling with her husband, defying heaven, loudly boasting, fortunate in her own conceit, or involved in misfortune or possessed by grief and lamentation—still less a woman that is sick, in love, or in labor." . . .

To anyone at all familiar with Plato's official and oft-reported views about women, the above recitation of misogynistic remarks may be quite surprising. Accounts of Plato's views about women usually are based on what he says in book 5 of the *Republic*. In that dialogue, Plato startled his contemporaries, when as part of his proposal for the constitution of an ideal state, he suggested that

There is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all. . . .

Well now, what are we to make of this apparent double message in Plato about women? What are we to do with the fact that on the one hand, when Plato explicitly confronts the question of women's nature, in the *Republic*, he seems to affirm the equality of men and women; while on the other hand, the dialogues are riddled with misogynistic remarks? . . .



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

3.4

Analyzing Elizabeth Spelman

Elizabeth Spelman contends that traditional Western philosophy, beginning with Plato, has tended to view women as more “emotional” than men and thus less able to achieve true knowledge through rational analysis and exploration.

- Do you believe that true knowledge is best achieved through the ability to think logically and rationally? What is the role of emotions—and what the psychologist Daniel Goleman calls “emotional intelligence”—in achieving authentic knowledge? Explain your view and provide examples to support your reasoning.
- Do you think that it is accurate to say, as the author seems to suggest, that in general men are seen as more “logical” and “rational” and women are more “emotional”?
- How would you explain the apparent contradiction in Plato’s writings regarding the capacity of women to achieve genuine knowledge and serve in leadership positions?

St. Augustine: *Plato and Christianity*



Plato’s (and Socrates’) metaphysical views were revolutionary:

- The existence of an immaterial reality separate from the physical world
- The radical distinction between an immaterial soul and physical body
- The existence of an immortal soul that finds its ultimate fulfillment in union with the eternal, transcendent realm

But these ideas would have died with the decline of Greek civilization had they not been adopted and perpetuated by subsequent cultures. The Roman Empire both conquered and absorbed Greek culture, preserving much of its extraordinary accomplishments in the arts, philosophy, and politics. Plato died in 347 B.C.E., and more than five hundred years later a Roman philosopher named **Plotinus** (205–270 C.E.) breathed new life into Plato’s ideas, spearheading an intellectual movement that came to be known as **Neoplatonism**. Plotinus based his views on Plato’s core concepts believing, for example, that “the soul, since it is a spiritual substance in its own right and can exist independently of the body, possesses a categorical superiority over the body.” Plotinus was so fervently committed to his Platonic ideas regarding the imperfection of his physical body, in contrast to the perfection of his eternal soul, that he refused to celebrate his birthday. His reasoning was that he was ashamed that his immortal soul had to be contained in such an imperfect vessel as his body, and that celebrating its birth was a cause for regret, not celebration. Similarly, he refused to have his physical likeness painted or sculpted as he wanted no permanent record of his physical self. His disdain for his body led to his neglect of his physical health, resulting in the loss of his voice and pus-laden sores and abscesses covering his hands and feet. Because he was a teacher with his own school and had a penchant for embracing his students, his physical deterioration ended up driving his students away.

Plotinus (205–270 B.C.E.) Roman founder of Neoplatonism, influential in medieval Christian, Islamic, and Renaissance thought. Believed that all being flows from one ultimate and immaterial reality, and that being is expressed in terms of modes of descending order and value: from mind, to soul, to nature.

Neoplatonism Belief that the world emanates from a divine, true being, and that the human soul searches for unity with that divine truth.

In any case, Plotinus’ ideas had a profound influence on the last of the great ancient philosophers, **St. Augustine** (354–430 C.E.), and through him on all of Western consciousness. This extraordinary and far-reaching influence was the result of Augustine integrating the philosophical concepts of Plato with the

tenets of Christianity. Augustine was convinced that Platonism and Christianity were natural partners, going so far as to contend, “If (the Platonists) could have had this life over again with us . . . they would have become Christians, with the change of a few words and statements.” He enthusiastically adopted Plato’s vision of a bifurcated universe in which “there are two realms, an intelligible realm where truth itself dwells, and this sensible world which we perceive by sight and touch,” but then adapted this metaphysic to Christian beliefs. Thus, Plato’s ultimate reality, the eternal realm of the Forms, became in Augustine’s philosophy a transcendent God. In the same way, Plato’s vision of immortal souls striving to achieve union with this eternal realm through intellectual enlightenment became transformed by Augustine into immortal souls striving to achieve union with God through faith and reason. The transient, finite nature of the physical world described by Plato became in Christianity a proving ground for our eternal destinies. Plato’s metaphysical framework thus provided philosophical justification for Christian beliefs that might otherwise have been considered farfetched.

Augustine was a complex and fascinating figure. Born to successful parents in northern Africa, he spent much of his youth and young adulthood carousing with friends, indulging in numerous love affairs, and even fathering an illegitimate child. But he also had a powerful and curious intellect, and his explorations ultimately led him to conversion to Christianity when he was thirty-three years old. His personal odyssey is recorded in one of the most extraordinary and compelling books of its kind, his *Confessions*. He spent the remainder of his life in his home country, serving as Bishop of Hippo and writing books and letters that helped shape the theology of Christianity for subsequent centuries.

Like Plato and Plotinus, Augustine believed that the physical body was both radically different from and inferior to its inhabitant, the immortal soul. Early in his philosophical development he describes the body as a “snare” and a “cage” for the soul. He considers the body a “slave” to the soul, and sees their relation as contentious: “The soul makes war with the body.” As his thinking matured, Augustine sought to develop a more unified perspective on body and soul. He ultimately came to view the body as the “spouse” of the soul, with both attached to one another by a “natural appetite.” He concludes, “That the body is united with the soul, so that man may be entire and complete, is a fact we recognize on the evidence of our own nature.” Nevertheless, as for Plato, Plotinus, and all the other Neoplatonists, body and soul remain irreconcilably divided, two radically different entities with diverging fates: the body to die, the soul to live eternally in a transcendent realm of Truth and Beauty.

In melding philosophy and religious beliefs together, Augustine has been characterized as Christianity’s first **theologian**, a term derived from the Greek *theos* (God) and *logos* (study of)—the study of God. His ideas defined and shaped the structure of Christianity for the next fifteen hundred years, but by serving as a conduit for Plato’s fundamental ideas, Augustine’s influence extended beyond Christianity to the cultural consciousness of Western civilization as a whole. We will see his direct impact on the thinking of the next individual we consider, the French philosopher René Descartes. In addition to establishing the groundwork for Descartes’ thinking regarding the soul and the body, Augustine also foreshadowed Descartes’ theory of knowledge. Engaging in a similar quest for certainty that was to consume Descartes twelve hundred years later, Augustine identified as a first principle, “I am doubting, therefore I am,” a statement eerily prescient of Descartes’ famous pronouncement, *cogito, ergo sum*—“I think, therefore I am.”



St. Augustine of Hippo

ST. AUGUSTINE

(354–430)

Christian philosopher. Augustine’s influence on Christian philosophy and theology was unparalleled in the Middle Ages. Augustine’s work in philosophy was quite extensive covering many areas such as philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and the philosophy of religion.

Theology The study of God or religion.



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

Platonic Concepts of the Self

3.5

Though you may not have realized it, many of your fundamental ideas about your *self* have been likely influenced by Plato and Augustine through the cultural consciousness they helped create. Consider your views on the following Platonic concepts:

- There is an immaterial reality that exists separate from the physical world.
- There is a radical distinction between an immaterial soul and physical body.
- There are immortal souls that find their ultimate fulfillment in union with the eternal, transcendent realm (for Augustine, this is God).

In each case, compare and contrast your beliefs with those of Plato and Augustine.

René Descartes: A Modern Perspective on the Self

RENÉ DESCARTES

(1596–1650)

French philosopher. Descartes is considered the founder of modern philosophy. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1637) he dealt with issues surrounding skepticism, mind/body dualism, and he applied the geometric method to philosophy. The influence of this work was not only important to the modern period, but is also incredibly influential to this day.



Although Socrates is often described as the “father of Western philosophy,” the French philosopher **René Descartes** (1596–1650) is widely considered the “founder of modern philosophy.” As profoundly insightful as such thinkers as Socrates, Plato, and St. Augustine were regarding the nature of the *self*, their understanding was also influenced and constrained by the consciousness of their time periods. Descartes brought an entirely new—and thoroughly modern—perspective to philosophy in general and the *self* in particular. Earlier philosophers had focused on exploring the fundamental questions of human existence, such as:

- What is the nature of reality?
- What is the “good life” and how ought we to behave?
- Does God exist? If so, what is God’s nature and relation to humankind?
- What is the nature of the soul?
- What is the ideal society?

Although Descartes recognized these as significant questions, he was more concerned with understanding the *thinking process* we use to answer questions such as these. He agreed with the great thinkers before him that the human ability to *reason* constitutes the extraordinary instrument we have to achieve truth and knowledge. But instead of simply *using* reason to try to answer questions, Descartes wanted to penetrate the nature of our *reasoning process* and understand its relation to the human *self*. He was convinced that to develop the most informed and well-grounded beliefs about human existence, we need to be clear about the thinking instrument we are employing. For if our thinking instrument is flawed, then it is likely that our conclusions will be flawed as well.

As an accomplished mathematician (he invented analytic geometry) and an aspiring scientist, Descartes was an integral part of the scientific revolution that was just beginning. (His major philosophical work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, was published in 1641, the year before Galileo died and Isaac Newton was born.) The foundation of this scientific revolution was the belief that genuine knowledge needed to be based on independent rational inquiry and real-world experimentation. It was no longer appropriate to accept without question the “knowledge”



Descartes applied the geometric method to philosophy.

handed down by authorities—as was prevalent during the religion-dominated Middle Ages. Instead, Descartes and others were convinced that we need to use our own thinking abilities to investigate, analyze, experiment, and develop our own well-reasoned conclusions, supported with compelling proof. In a passage still relevant today, Descartes contrasts the process of learning to construct knowledge by thinking independently with simply absorbing information from authorities.

For we shall not, e.g., turn out to be mathematicians though we know by heart all the proofs others have elaborated, unless we have an intellectual talent that fits us to resolve difficulties of any kind. Neither, though we may have mastered all the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, if yet we have not the capacity for passing solid judgment on these matters, shall we become Philosophers; we should have acquired the knowledge not of a science, but of history.

But reasoning effectively does not mean simply thinking in our own personal, idiosyncratic ways: that type of commonsense thinking is likely to be seriously flawed. Instead, effective use of “the natural light of reason” entails applying scientific discipline and analytic rigor to our explorations to ensure that the conclusions that we reach have genuine merit.

So blind is the curiosity by which mortals are possessed, that they often conduct their minds along unexplored routes, having no reason to hope for success . . . it were far better never to think of investigating truth at all, than to do so without a method. For it is very certain that unregulated inquiries and confused reflections of this kind only confound the natural light and blind our mental powers. . . . In (method) alone lies the sum of all human endeavor, and he who would approach the investigation of truth must hold to this rule.

For to be possessed of good mental powers is not sufficient; the principal matter is to apply them well. The Greatest minds are capable of the greatest vices as well as of the greatest virtues, and those who proceed very slowly may, provided they always follow the straight road, really advance much faster than those who, though they run, forsake it.

One of the reasons Descartes is such an influential and enduring figure in philosophy is his willingness to test his reasoning powers to their limit, and to record with absolute candor the results of his explorations. To this end, Descartes typically writes in the first person, inviting us to participate in his reasoning process and compare it with our own. He’s saying, in effect: “This is what makes sense to me—do you agree?” In his most well-known work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes shares with us his own Philosophical Journal, analogous to the Philosopher’s Notebook that you have been encouraged to keep as an integral part of using this text. In an opening passage that virtually every young adult can appreciate, Descartes confesses that he has come to the conclusion that virtually everything he has been taught from authorities and other adults is questionable and likely false. His radical solution? To establish a fresh start on gaining true, well-supported beliefs by simply erasing his endorsement of anything he has previously been taught. What a bold and extraordinary project!

1. SEVERAL years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted,



René Descartes



3.1 Descartes, René,
Discourse on Method

René Descartes,
Meditations on First Philosophy



Do you agree with Descartes that “if you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things”?

and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences. But as this enterprise appeared to me to be one of great magnitude, I waited until I had attained an age so mature as to leave me no hope that at any stage of life more advanced I should be better able to execute my design. On this account, I have delayed so long that I should henceforth consider I was doing wrong were I still to consume in deliberation any of the time that now remains for action. To-day, then, since I have opportunely freed my mind from all cares [and am happily disturbed by no passions], and since I am in the secure possession of leisure in a peaceable retirement, I will at length apply myself earnestly and freely to the general overthrow of all my former opinions.

2. But, to this end, it will not be necessary for me to show that the whole of these are false—a point, perhaps, which I shall never reach; but as even now my reason convinces me that I ought not the less carefully to withhold belief from what is not entirely certain and indubitable, than from what is manifestly false, it will be sufficient to justify the rejection of the whole if I shall find in each some ground for doubt. Nor for this purpose will it be necessary even to deal with each belief individually, which would be truly an endless labor; but, as the removal from below of the foundation necessarily involves the downfall of the whole edifice, I will at once approach the criticism of the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Descartes is convinced that committing yourself to a wholesale and systematic doubting of all things you have been taught to simply accept without question is the only way to achieve clear and well-reasoned conclusions.

More important, it is the only way for you to develop beliefs that are truly *yours* and not someone else’s. He explains, “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” This sort of thorough-going doubting of all that you have been taught requires great personal courage, for calling into question things like our religious beliefs, cultural values, and even beliefs about your *self* can be, in the short term, a very disruptive enterprise. It may mean shaking up your world, questioning the beliefs of important people in your life, perhaps challenging your image of yourself. Yet there is a compelling logic to Descartes’ pronouncement: for if you are *not* willing to question all that you have been asked to accept “on faith,” then you will never have the opportunity to construct a rock-solid foundation for your beliefs about the world and your personal philosophy of life. What’s more, you will never have the experience to develop the intellectual abilities and personal courage required to achieve your full potential in the future.

This, then, is the beginning of Descartes’ quest for true knowledge that leads to his famous first principle: *cogito, ergo sum*—“I think, therefore I am.” We will be exploring his epistemological odyssey in some detail in the section on Knowledge and Truth (chapters 8 and 9). For now, we’re going to focus on Descartes’ analysis of the *self*, the theme of this chapter.

Cogito, ergo sum is the first principle of Descartes’ theory of knowledge because he is confident that no rational person will doubt his or her own existence as a con-

scious, thinking entity—*while we are aware of thinking about our self*. Even if we are dreaming or hallucinating, even if our consciousness is being manipulated by some external entity, it is still my *self-aware self* that is dreaming, hallucinating, or being manipulated. Thus, in addition to being the first principle of his epistemology, *cogito ergo, sum* is also the keystone of Descartes' concept of *self*. The essence of existing as a human identity is the possibility of *being aware of our selves*: being self-conscious in this way is integral to having a personal identity. Conversely, it would be impossible to be self-conscious if we didn't have a personal identity of which to be conscious. In other words, having a *self identity* and being *self-conscious* are mutually dependent on one another. Here's how Descartes explains this phenomenon in his *Meditation II*.

Thinking is another attribute of the soul; and here I discover what properly belongs to myself. This alone is inseparable from me. I am—I exist: this is certain; but how often? As often as I think; for perhaps it would even happen, if I should wholly cease to think, that I should at the same time altogether cease to be. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true. I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, understanding, or reason, terms whose signification was before unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing, and really existent; but what thing? The answer was, a thinking thing. . . .

But what, then, am I? A thinking thing, it has been said. But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses; that imagines also, and perceives.

For Descartes, then, this is the essence of your *self*—you are a “thinking thing,” a dynamic identity that engages in all of those mental operations we associate with being a human *self*. For example,


- You *understand* situations in which you find yourself.
- You *doubt* the accuracy of ideas presented to you.
- You *affirm* the truth of a statement made about you.
- You *deny* an accusation that someone has made.
- You *will* yourself to complete a task you have begun.
- You *refuse* to follow a command that you consider to be unethical.
- You *imagine* a fulfilling career for yourself.
- You *feel* passionate emotions toward another person.

But in addition to engaging in all of these mental operations—and many other besides—your *self identity* is dependent on the fact that *you are capable of being aware you are engaging in these mental operations while you are engaged in them*. If you were consistently *not* conscious of your mental operations, consistently *unaware* of your thinking, reasoning, and perceiving processes, then it would not be possible for you to have a *self identity*, a unique essence, a *you*.

But what about your body? After all, a great deal of our self-concept and self-identity is tied up with our physical existence: our physical qualities, appearance, gender, race, age, height, weight, hair style, and so on. Despite this, Descartes believes that your **physical body** is secondary to your personal identity. One reason for this is that he believes you can conceive of yourself existing independently of your body.

Physical body Material, mortal, nonthinking entity.


René Descartes,
Meditations on First Philosophy



**THINK
CRITICALLY**

3.6

PROLOGUE: NOTEBOOK



Seeking after Truth

- Explain your reaction to Descartes' challenge, "If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? If so, how?
- Describe some important areas of your life in which you would consider yourself to be a "real seeker after truth." Identify several examples of beliefs you had been taught or raised with which you questioned for the purpose of developing your own independent conclusions.
- Describe some important areas of your life in which, in your opinion, you *fell short* of being a "real seeker after truth." Identify several examples of beliefs you have been raised with that you have been reluctant to question. What factors have made it difficult for you to doubt these beliefs? Do you think you will critically analyze them at some point in the future?



René Descartes,
Meditations on First Philosophy

The question now arises, am I anything else besides? I will stimulate my imagination with a view to discover whether I am not still something more than a thinking being. Now it is plain I am not the assemblage of members called the human body; I am not a thin and penetrating air diffused through all these members, or wind, or flame, or vapor, or breath, or any of all the things I can imagine; for I supposed that all these were not, and, without changing the supposition, I find that I still feel assured of my existence. But it is true, perhaps, that those very things which I suppose to be non-existent, because they are unknown to me, are not in truth different from myself whom I know. This is a point I cannot determine, and do not now enter into any dispute regarding it. I can only judge of things that are known to me: I am conscious that I exist, and I who know that I exist inquire into what I am. It is, however, perfectly certain that the knowledge of my existence, thus precisely taken, is not dependent on things, the existence of which is as yet unknown to me: and consequently it is not dependent on any of the things I can feign in imagination.

Nevertheless, even though your body is not as central to your *self* as is your capacity to think and reflect, it clearly plays a role in your self-identity. In fact, Descartes contends, if you reflect thoughtfully, you can see that you have clear ideas of both your *self as a thinking entity* and your *self as a physical body*. And these two dimensions of your *self* are quite distinct.

René Descartes,
Meditations on First Philosophy

And, firstly, because I know that all which I clearly and distinctly conceive can be produced by God exactly as I conceive it, it is sufficient that I am able clearly and distinctly to conceive one thing apart from another, in order to be certain that the one is different from the other, seeing they may at least be made to exist separately, by the omnipotence of God; and it matters not by what power this separation is made, in order to be compelled to judge them different; and, therefore, merely because I know with certitude that I exist, and because, in the meantime, I do not observe that anything else necessarily belongs to my nature or essence beyond my being a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists only in my being a thinking thing [or a substance whose whole essence or nature is merely thinking]. And although I may, or rather, as I will shortly say, although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I, [that is, my mind, by which I am what I am], is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.

It is at this point that we can see the pervasive influence of the metaphysical framework created by Socrates and Plato, and perpetuated through the centuries by such thinkers as Plotinus and St. Augustine. Following directly in their footsteps, Descartes declares that the *essential self*—the *self as thinking entity*—is radically different than the *self as physical body*. The *thinking self*—or soul—is a non-material, immortal, conscious being, independent of the physical laws of the universe. The *physical body* is a material, mortal, nonthinking entity, fully governed by the physical laws of nature. What's more, your soul and your body are independent of one another, and each can exist and function without the other. How is that possible? For example, in the case of physical death, Descartes believes (as did Plato, Plotinus, and St. Augustine) that your soul continues to exist, seeking union with the spiritual realm and God's infinite and eternal mind. On the other hand, in cases in which people are sleeping or comatose, their bodies continue to function even though their minds are not thinking, much like the mechanisms of a clock.

René Descartes,
Meditations on First Philosophy

And as a clock, composed of wheels and counter weights, observes not the less accurately all the laws of nature when it is ill made, and points out the hours incorrectly, than when it satisfies the desire of the maker in every respect; so likewise if the body of man

be considered as a kind of machine, so made up and composed of bones, nerves, muscles, veins, blood, and skin, that although there were in it no mind, it would still exhibit the same motions which it at present manifests involuntarily, and therefore without the aid of the mind, and simply by the dispositions of its organs. . . .

Thus Descartes ends up with Plato's metaphysic, a **dualistic** view of reality, bifurcated into

- a spiritual, nonmaterial, immortal realm that includes conscious, thinking beings, *and*
- a physical, material, finite realm that includes human bodies and the rest of the physical universe.

In the case of the human *self*, the soul (or mind) and the physical body could not be more different. For example, you can easily imagine the body being divided into various parts, whereas it is impossible to imagine your soul as anything other than an indivisible unity (precisely the point that Socrates makes when he's arguing for the immortality of the soul):

To commence this examination accordingly, I here remark, in the first place, that there is a vast difference between mind and body, in respect that body, from its nature, is always divisible, and that mind is entirely indivisible. For in truth, when I consider the mind, that is, when I consider myself in so far only as I am a thinking thing, I can distinguish in myself no parts, but I very clearly discern that I am somewhat absolutely one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet, when a foot, an arm, or any other part is cut off, I am conscious that nothing has been taken from my mind; nor can the faculties of willing, perceiving, conceiving, etc., properly be called its parts, for it is the same mind that is exercised [all entire] in willing, in perceiving, and in conceiving, etc. But quite the opposite holds in corporeal or extended things; for I cannot imagine any one of them [how small soever it may be], which I cannot easily sunder in thought, and which, therefore, I do not know to be divisible. This would be sufficient to teach me that the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body, if I had not already been apprised of it on other grounds.

This dualistic view of the *self* is particularly useful for Descartes, who was faced with a serious conflict in his personal and professional life. As previously noted, Descartes was first and foremost a scientist in his professional life, committed to establishing true knowledge through rigorous reasoning, experimentation, and analysis. Many scientists of the time—physicists, astronomers, biologists—were inclined to view the human *self* in terms of the physical body, governed by the same laws of physics that defined the operation of the rest of the physical universe. However, if the *self* is seen exclusively in terms of the physical body, the *self* is terminated when the body dies. There is no spiritual, immortal soul that continues to exist beyond death. If the *self* is only a physical being, life in any form ends with death. (This philosophical perspective is known as **materialism**, *the view that all aspects of the universe are composed of matter and energy and can be explained by physical laws*.) In addition, because the *self* is governed exclusively by the cause-and-effect laws of the universe, there is no room for free will to exist. You are no more capable of making free choices in your life than the hands of a clock can choose their movements—every choice that you make is determined by previous events.

As a devout Catholic who believed in God, immortal souls, eternal life, and free will, this materialistic view of the world was completely unacceptable to Descartes. However, by advocating a dualistic metaphysic, Descartes was able to maintain both his scientific integrity and his religious convictions. The *physical self* is a part of nature, governed by the physical laws of the universe, and available to scientific analysis and experimentation. At the same time, the *conscious self* (*mind, soul*) is a

Dualism The view that both material substance (physical body) and immaterial substance (mind or soul) exist.

Materialism The view that all aspects of the universe are composed of matter and energy and can be explained by physical laws.

René Descartes,
Meditations on First Philosophy



The relationship of the physical self and the thinking self is intimate and complex. Can you think of some examples of this relationship?

part of the spiritual realm, independent of the physical laws of the universe, governed only by the laws of reason and God's will. And because it exists outside of the natural world of cause-and-effect, the conscious *self* is able to exercise free will in the choices it makes.

Although a bifurcated view of the universe solves some immediate problems for Descartes, it creates other philosophical difficulties, most notably the vexing question, "What is the relationship between the mind and the body?" In our everyday experience, our minds and bodies appear to be very closely related to one another. Our thinking and emotions have a profound effect on many aspects of our physical bodies, and physical events with our bodies have a significant impact on our mental lives. For the most part, we experience our minds and bodies as a unified entity, very different from the two different and completely independent substances that Descartes proposes. As the writer and humorist Mark Twain noted, "How come the mind gets drunk when the body does the drinking?" Even Descartes recognized the need to acknowledge the close, intimate relationship between mind and body, as the following passage reveals:

René Descartes,
Meditations on First Philosophy

Nature likewise teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely a thinking thing, but should perceive the wound by the understanding alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged; and when my body has need of food or drink, I should have a clear knowledge of this, and not be made aware of it by the confused sensations of hunger and thirst: for, in truth, all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc., are nothing more than certain confused modes of thinking, arising from the union and apparent fusion of mind and body.

3.2 Descartes, René,
*Meditations on First
Philosophy*

Descartes' believed that the "intermingling" point of contact was through the pineal gland, a small gland located at the base of the skull. It was here that he believed that the thinking self connected to the physical brain. Why the pineal gland? Descartes found its physical location appropriate and it had no known biological function at Descartes' time. Ever the scientist, Descartes dissected a variety of animals to learn more about this mysterious gland. Interestingly, Descartes' fascination with the pineal gland is mirrored in the Hindu belief that the pineal gland is the seat of the highest *chakra*, the connection between the individual body and mind to God.

Recognizing the problem of the mind/body relationship in a dualistic system and solving the problem in a satisfactory way are two very different things. Most philosophers agree that Descartes' efforts to provide an integrated model of his concepts of the mind and body were not successful, and it's a problem that has challenged thinkers in every discipline ever since. We will continue our exploration of the mind/body "problem" later in this chapter.

How did Descartes' views regarding the *self* relate to his personal life? In a fascinating way: Descartes was plagued by frail health, a condition that caused him throughout his life to sleep late into the morning. A financial inheritance from his parents meant he didn't have to work. Instead, he

THINK CRITICALLY

3.7



My Body, My Self?

- Describe some of the ways your mind significantly affects your body: for example, when you are anxious, elated, depressed, in love (or lust), and so on.
- Describe some of the ways your body significantly affects your mind: for example, when you are feeling sick, deprived of sleep, taking medications, or finding yourself in a physically dangerous/threatening situation.
- Create your own metaphysical framework for the "self" by describing
 - your *self* as *thinking subject*.
 - your *self* as *physical body*.
 - your analysis of how these two aspects of your *self* relate to one another.
- Reconsider your views on human souls—what do you believe happens to the *self* after the death of the body? Why do you believe it? What would Descartes think of your views and your justification for them?

devoted his life to study and experimentation, spending much of his time alone, and moving from place to place on a regular basis (he lived in twenty different houses in one twenty-year period). Descartes preferred the company of himself because it provided him the opportunity to fully devote himself to his scientific, mathematical, and philosophical activities, without the distraction of social relationships (although he did find time to father an illegitimate child with a servant). Ironically, it was an error in judgment that hastened the death of his body. Against his better judgment, he accepted the invitation of Queen Christina of Sweden to come to Stockholm and tutor her. Unfortunately, the Queen turned out to be an early riser, depriving Descartes of his beloved sleep. That, combined with the cold and damp climate of Stockholm, led to pneumonia and his premature death at the age of fifty-three, providing him with a first-hand opportunity to test his theory of an immortal soul.

John Locke: *The Self Is Consciousness*

The English philosopher—and physician—**John Locke** (1632–1704) continued exploring the themes Descartes had initiated, both in terms of the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of the *self*. He shared with Descartes a scientist’s perspective, seeking to develop knowledge based on clear thinking, rigorous analysis, and real-world observation and experimentation. However, Locke brought a very different approach to this epistemological enterprise. Descartes believed that we could use the power of reason to achieve absolutely certain knowledge of the world, and then use this rationally based knowledge to understand our world of experience. His extensive work in mathematics served as a model, convincing him that there were absolute truths and knowledge waiting to be discovered by reasoned, disciplined reflection.

Locke’s work as a physician, rather than a mathematician, provided him with a very different perspective. The physician’s challenge is to gather information regarding the symptoms a patient is experiencing, and then relate these symptoms to his (the physician’s) accumulated knowledge of disease. Although a successful doctor uses sophisticated reasoning abilities in identifying patterns and making inferences, his conclusions are grounded in experience. Knowledge, in other words, is based on the careful observation of sense experience and/or memories of previous experiences. Reason plays a subsequent role in helping to figure out the significance of our sense experience and to reach intelligent conclusions.

To sum up: for Descartes, our *reasoning ability* provides the origin of knowledge and final court of judgment in evaluating the accuracy and value of the ideas produced. For Locke, all knowledge originates in our direct *sense experience*, which acts as the final court of judgment in evaluating the accuracy and value of ideas. As a result, Descartes is considered an archetypal proponent of the *rationalist* view of knowledge, whereas Locke is considered an archetypal advocate of the *empiricist* view of knowledge.

Rationalism The view that reason is the primary source of all knowledge and that only our reasoning abilities can enable us to understand sense experience and reach accurate conclusions.

Empiricism The view that sense experience is the primary source of all knowledge and that only a careful attention to sense experience can enable us to understand the world and achieve accurate conclusions.

JOHN LOCKE

(1632–1704)

British philosopher. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) Locke lays the groundwork for empiricist philosophy. His theory that the mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate, on which experience writes, challenges the rationalist philosophy that preceded him.

Rationalism The view that reason is the primary source of all knowledge.

Empiricism The view that sense experience is the primary source of all knowledge.

These are themes that we will be exploring in depth in chapters 8 and 9, *What Is True? What Is Real?* For now, we will focus on the way in which these contrasting approaches to the world influence their views on the nature of the *self*.

True to his philosophical commitment to grounding his ideas in sense experience, Locke, in his essay entitled “On Personal Identity” (from his most famous work, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) engages in a reflective analysis of how we experience our *self* in our everyday lives:

Locke, On Personal Identity

To find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what *person* stands for;—which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without *perceiving* that he does perceive. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is to himself that which he calls *self*:—it not being considered, in this case, whether the same *self* be continued in the same or divers substances. For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes everyone to be what he calls *self*, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thing, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same *self* now it was then; and it is by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.

In this initial passage, Locke makes the following points, implicitly asking the question of his readers, “Aren’t these conclusions confirmed by examining your own experiences?”

- To discover the nature of *personal identity*, we’re going to have to find out what it means to be a *person*.
- A *person* is a thinking, intelligent being who has the abilities to reason and to reflect.
- A *person* is also someone who considers itself to be the *same* thing in different times and different places.
- *Consciousness*—being aware that we are thinking—always accompanies thinking and is an essential part of the thinking process.
- *Consciousness* is what makes possible our belief that we are the same identity in different times and different places.

Reflect carefully on Locke’s points—do you find that his conclusions match your own personal experience? Certainly his first three points seem plausible. What about points 4 and 5? Does *consciousness* always accompany the thinking process? Locke explains: “When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is to himself that which he calls *self*. . . .” Consider what you are doing at this moment: you are thinking about the words on the page, the ideas that are being expressed—are you also aware of yourself as you are reading and thinking? Certainly once the question is posed to you, you’re aware of your *self*. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that when you think, you are either conscious of your *self*—or *potentially* conscious of your *self*. In other words, are there times in which you are fully immersed in an activity—such as dancing, driving a car, or playing a sport—and not consciously aware that you are doing so? Analogously, are there times in which you are fully engaged in deep thought—wrestling with a difficult



Do you agree with John Locke that consciousness is what makes possible our belief that we are the same identity in different times and different places?

idea, for example—and not aware that you are doing so? But even if there are times in which you are unreflectively submerged in an activity or thought process, you always have the potential to *become* aware of your *self* engaged in the activity or thought process.

What about Locke's fifth point, that *consciousness* is necessary for us to have a unified self-identity in different times and places? This seems like a point well taken. You consider your *self* to be the same *self* who was studying last night, attending a party at a friend's house two weeks ago, and taking a vacation last summer. How can you be sure it's the same *self* in all of these situations? Because of your *consciousness* of being the same *self* in all of these different contexts.

These points become clearer when we contrast human thinking with animal thinking. It's reasonable to believe that mammals such as chipmunks, dogs, and dolphins are able to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel, just like humans. But are they *conscious* of the fact that they are performing these activities as they are performing them? Most people would say "no." And because they are not *conscious* that they are performing these activities, it's difficult to see how they would have a concept of *self-identity* that remains the same over time and place. So *consciousness*—or more specifically, *self-consciousness*—*does* seem to be a necessary part of having a coherent self-identity. (Some people believe that higher-order mammals such as chimpanzees and gorillas present more complicated cases.) Here is how the psychoanalyst and philosopher **Erich Fromm** (1900–1980) explains this crucial point:

Man has intelligence, like other animals, which permits him to use thought processes for the attainment of immediate practical aims; but Man has another mental quality which the animal lacks. He is aware of himself, of his past and future, which is death, of his smallness and powerlessness; he is aware of others as friends, enemies, or as strangers. Man transcends all other life because he is for the first time, life aware of itself.

ERICH FROMM

(1900–1980)

German psychologist and humanist philosopher. Author of many works, including *Escape from Freedom* (1941). Taught in Germany, the United States, and Mexico. Fromm praised humans for using their own reason to establish moral codes rather than simply following authoritarian moral values.



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

Analyzing John Locke

3.8

Here's an opportunity for you to analyze your own views on the *self*, using Locke's conclusions as a guide:

- How would you define your *personal identity*? How would you define you as a *person*? How would you describe the relationship between the two?
- What do you think are the essential mental qualities that define all *people*?
- What do you think is the relationship between your *consciousness* and your *thinking process*?
- What do you think is the relationship between your *consciousness* and your concept of *self-identity* as something that remains the same in different times and places?

Descartes would agree with Locke's view that a *person*—or *self*—is a thinking, intelligent being that has the abilities to reason and to reflect. And he likely would be sympathetic to Locke's contention that *consciousness* accompanies thinking and makes possible the concept we have of a *self* that remains the same at different times and in different places. But in the following passage, Locke expresses a belief that many people—including Descartes—would likely disagree with. Let's examine his unusual belief regarding the *self*.

Locke, *On Personal Identity*

Consciousness Makes Personal Identity.—But it is further inquired, whether it be the same identical substance. This few (*Locke refers here to Descartes*) would think they had reason to doubt of, if these perceptions, with their consciousness, always remained present in the mind, whereby the same thinking thing would be always consciously present, and, as would be thought, evidently the same to itself. But that which seems to make the difficulty is this, that this consciousness being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our lives wherein we have the whole train of all our past actions before our eyes in one view, but even the best memories losing the sight of one part whilst they are viewing another; and we sometimes, and that the greatest part of our lives, not reflecting on our past selves, being intent on our present thoughts, and in sound sleep having no thoughts at all, or at least none with that consciousness which remarks our waking thoughts,—I say, in all these cases, our consciousness being interrupted, and we losing the sight of our past selves, doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing, i.e. the same *substance* or no. Which, however reasonable or unreasonable, concerns not *personal* identity at all. The question being what makes the same person; and not whether it be the same identical substance, which always thinks in the same person, which, in this case, matters not at all: different substances, by the same consciousness (where they do partake in it) being united into one person, as well as different bodies by the same life are united into one animal, whose identity is preserved in that change of substances by the unity of one continued life. For, it being the same consciousness that makes a man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only, whether it be annexed solely to one individual substance, or can be continued in a succession of several substances. For as far as any intelligent being *can* repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same personal self. For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions, that it is *self to itself* now, and so will be the same self, as far as the same consciousness can extend to actions past or to come; and would be by distance of time, or change of substance, no more two persons, than a man be two men by wearing other clothes to-day than he did yesterday, with a long or short sleep between: the same consciousness uniting those distant actions into the same person, whatever substances contributed to their production.

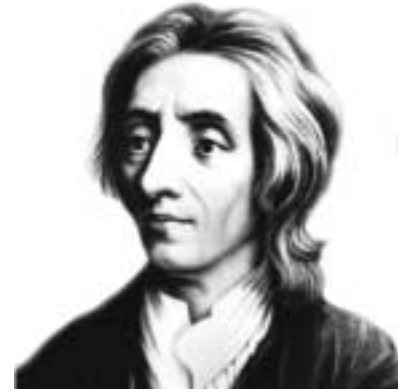
As this passage makes clear, Locke is proposing a radically different version of the *self* than the philosophical tradition before him. Plato, Plotinus, St. Augustine, Descartes—they all had agreed that the *self* existed in the form of an immortal, non-material soul that continues to exist following the death of the body. In a fascinating twist, Locke denies that the individual *self* necessarily exists in a single soul or substance. For Locke, the essence of the *self* is its conscious awareness of itself as a thinking, reasoning, reflecting identity. But this in no way means that this *self* is necessarily imbedded in a single substance or soul—it might very well take up residence in any number of substances or souls. Let's see how Locke arrives at the rather surprising conclusion.

In Locke's mind, conscious awareness and memory of previous experiences are the keys to understanding the *self*. In other words, you have a coherent concept of your *self* as a personal identity because you are *aware* of your *self* when you are thinking, feeling, and willing. *And*, you have memories of times when you were aware of your *self* in the past, in other situations—for example, at the party two weeks ago, or your high school graduation several years ago. *But*, as we noted earlier, there are many moments when we are *not* consciously aware of our *self* when we are thinking, feeling, and willing—we are simply, unreflectively, *existing*. What's more, there are many past experiences that we have forgotten or have faulty recollections of. All of which means that during those lapses, when we were not aware of our *self*, or don't remember being aware of our *self*, we can't be sure if we were the same person, the same substance, the same soul! Our personal identity is not in doubt or jeopardy, because we are aware of our *self* (or remember being aware of it). But we have no way of knowing if our personal identity has been existing in one substance (soul) or a number of substances (souls). Let's examine again how Locke explains his reasoning:

But that which seems to make the difficulty is this, that this consciousness being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our lives wherein we have the whole train of all our past actions before our eyes in one view, but even the best memories losing the sight of one part whilst they are viewing another; and we sometimes, and that the greatest part of our lives, not reflecting on our past selves, being intent on our present thoughts, and in sound sleep having no thoughts at all, or at least none with that consciousness which remarks our waking thoughts,—I say, in all these cases, our consciousness being interrupted, and we losing the sight of our past selves, doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing, i.e. the same *substance* or no. Which, however reasonable or unreasonable, concerns not *personal* identity at all. The question being what makes the same person; and not whether it be the same identical substance, which always thinks in the same person, which, in this case, matters not at all.

So for Locke, personal identity and the soul or substance in which the personal identity is situated are two very different things. Although the idea seems rather strange at first glance, Locke provides a very concrete example to further illustrate what he means:

Personal Identity in Change of Substance—That this is so, we have some kind of evidence in our very bodies, all whose particles, whilst vitally united to this same thinking conscious self, so that we feel when they are touched, and are affected by, and conscious of good or harm that happens to them, are a part of ourselves; i.e. of our thinking conscious self. Thus, the limbs of his body are to every one a part of himself; he sympathizes and is concerned for them. Cut off a hand, and thereby separate it from that consciousness he had of its heat, cold, and other affections, and it is then no longer a part of that which is himself, any more than the remotest part of matter. Thus, we see the *substance* whereof personal self consisted at one time may be varied at another, without the change of personal identity; there being no question about the same person, though the limbs which but now were a part of it, be cut off.



John Locke

Locke, *On Personal Identity*

Locke, *On Personal Identity*



It's a rather gruesome example Locke provides, but it makes his point. Every aspect of your physical body (substance) is integrated with your *personal identity*—hit your finger with a hammer and it's *you* that is experiencing the painful sensation. But if your hand is cut off in an industrial accident, your *personal identity* remains intact, although the substance associated with it has changed (you now only have one hand). Or to take another example: the cells of our body are continually being replaced, added to, subtracted from. So it's accurate to say that in many ways you are not the same *physical person* you were five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago, and so on. Nevertheless, you are likely convinced that your *personal identity* has remained the same despite these changes in physical substance to your body. This leads Locke to conclude that our *personal identity* is distinct from whatever substance it finds itself associated with. He continues his provocative analysis with the notions of time-travel, reincarnation, and the end-of-time resurrection.

Locke, *On Personal Identity*

If the same consciousness (which, as has been shown, is quite a different thing from the same numerical figure or motion in body) can be transferred from one thinking substance to another, it will be possible that two thinking substances may make but one person. For the same consciousness being preserved, whether in the same or different substances, the personal identity is preserved. Whether the same immaterial being, being conscious of the action of its past duration, may be wholly stripped of all the consciousness of its past existence, and lose it beyond the power of ever retrieving it again: and so as it were beginning a new account from a new period, have a consciousness that *cannot* reach beyond this new state. All those who hold pre-existence are evidently of this mind; since they allow the soul to have no remaining consciousness of what it did in the pre-existing state, either wholly separate from body, or informing any other body; and if they should not, it is plain experience would be against them. So that personal identity, reaching no further than consciousness reaches, a pre-existent spirit not having continued so many ages in a state of silence, must needs make different persons. Suppose a Christian Platonist or a Pythagorean should, upon God's having ended all his works of creation on the seventh day, think his soul hath existed ever since; and should imagine it has revolved in several human bodies; as I once met with one, who was persuaded his had been the *soul* of Socrates (how reasonably I will not dispute; this I know, that in the spot he filled, which was no inconsiderable one, he passed for a very rational man, and the press has shown that he wanted not parts of learning)—would any one say, that he, being not conscious of any of Socrates' actions or thoughts, could be the same *person* with Socrates? Let any one reflect upon himself, and conclude that he has in himself an immaterial spirit, which is that which thinks in him, and, in the constant change of his body keeps him the same: and is that which he calls *himself*.

The body, as well as the soul, goes to the making of a Man.—And thus may we be able, without any difficulty, to conceive the same person at the resurrection, though in a body not exactly in make or parts the same which he had here,—the same consciousness going along with the soul that inhabits it. But that makes the soul the man, be enough to make the same man. For should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, every one sees he would be the same *person* with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions: but who would say it was the same *man*? The body too goes to the making the man, and would, I guess, to everybody determine the man in this case, wherein the soul, with all its princely thoughts about it, would not make another man: but he would be the same cobbler to every one besides himself. I know that, in the ordinary way of speaking, the same person, and the same man, stand for one and the same thing.

Uncoupling *consciousness* or *personal identity* from the *soul* or *substance* in which it resides opens up a universe of possibilities. The same *consciousness* (*person*) can be transferred from one substance to another, and different substances can combine

to make one *consciousness* (person). So at the end of time, when all people of faith are resurrected, if the *consciousness* of a prince has assumed the physical body of a cobbler (retaining memories of the prince's past life), Locke maintains that we would still consider him to be the *same person*, in spite of his different physical forms. Conversely, if the *consciousness* of a previous life is *not* maintained, there is no reason to believe that the same *person* has existed in the earlier form. Locke cites—with good humor—the example of a person he knows who claims to have been Socrates in a previous life, though he has no memory of the actions or thoughts of Socrates. Even though, Locke observes (with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek) “he passed for a very rational man, and the press has shown that he wanted not parts of learning,” there still is no good reason to believe that this man's consciousness did in fact inhabit the physical body of Socrates. *Consciousness* is the key ingredient needed to unite *self-identity* over time. If you have the same memory of Noah's flood as you did the flood you recently experienced, then you may very well be the same *person* existing in different physical bodies many thousands of years apart.

Consciousness alone unites actions into the same Person.—But though the same immaterial substance or soul does not alone, wherever it be, and in whatsoever state, make the same *man*; yet it is plain, consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended—should it be to ages past—unites existences and actions very remote in time into the same “person,” as well as it does the existences and actions of the immediately preceding moment: so that whatever has the consciousness of present and past actions, is the same person to whom they both belong. Had I the same consciousness that I saw the ark and Noah's flood, as that I saw an overflowing of the Thames last winter, or as that I write now, I could no more doubt that I who write this now, that saw the Thames overflowed last winter, and that viewed the flood at the general deluge, was the same *self*,—place that self in what *substance* you please—than that I who write this am the same myself now whilst I write (whether I consist of all the same substance, material or immaterial, or no) that I was yesterday. For as to this point of being the same self, it matters not whether this present self be made up of the same or other substances—I being as much concerned, and as justly accountable for any action that was done a thousand years since, appropriated to me how by this self-consciousness, as I am for what I did the last moment.

And just when you think Locke has reached the apex of far-out strangeness in his ideas, he surprises us once again. Imagine that your little finger was hacked off (!) but that your *conscious self* remained with your little finger rather than the rest of your body: then we would have to say that your *self* resides in your little finger, that *you are* your little finger. Fascinating!

Self Depends on Consciousness, not on Substance.—*Self* is that conscious thinking thing,—whatever substance made up of (whether spiritual or material, simple or compounded, it matters not)—which is sensible or conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness or misery, and so is concerned for itself, as far as that consciousness extends. Thus every one finds that, whilst comprehended under that consciousness, the little finger is as much a part of himself as what is most so. Upon separation of this little finger, should this consciousness go along with the little finger, and leave the rest of the body, it is evident the little finger would be the person, the same person; and self then would have nothing to do with the rest of the body. As in this case it is the consciousness that goes along with the substance, when one part is separate from another, which makes the same person, and constitutes this inseparable self; so it is in reference to the substances remote in time. That with which the consciousness of this present thinking thing *can* join itself, makes the same person, and is one self with it, and with nothing else; and so attributes to itself, and owns all the actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches, and no further.

Locke, *On Personal Identity*

Locke, *On Personal Identity*



3.6 Locke, John, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

The Conscious Self

3.9



- Evaluate Locke's claim that your *conscious self* is not permanently attached to any particular body or substance. Do you agree with this view? Why or why not?
- Do you know anyone personally who has claimed to have lived a past life in another body? If so, do you think they would pass Locke's "test" for determining if their claim is authentic (having a clear memory of the *consciousness* of thinking and behaving as the previous individual)? Have you ever suspected that *your personal identity* lived a previous life? If so, how would Locke evaluate your belief?
- Locke believes that it is our memory that serves to link our *self* at this moment with our *self* in previous circumstances. But people's memories are often faulty. How can we distinguish between accurate memories of our *self* and inaccurate memories? To do so, don't we have to assume that we have a continuous *self* that is performing the evaluation? But since memory is supposed to explain the existence of our *self*, doesn't this mean that Locke's reasoning is circular? Explain your analysis of this dilemma.

David Hume: *There Is No "Self"*

DAVID HUME

(1711–1776)

Scottish philosopher. Hume's philosophy is seen as drawing out the logical consequences of a thoroughgoing empiricism. His skepticism concerning causation, induction, and religion is still widely influential today.

David Hume (1711–1776) continued in the empiricist tradition of John Locke, believing that the source of all genuine knowledge is our direct sense experience. As we have seen, this empiricist approach had led Locke to a number of surprising conclusions regarding the *self*, including the belief that the *self's* existence is dependent on our *consciousness* of it. In Locke's view, your *self* is not tied to any particular body or substance, and it only exists in other times and places because of our *memory* of those experiences. Using the same empiricist principles as Locke, Hume ends up with an even more startling conclusion—if we carefully examine our sense experience through the process of introspection, we discover that *there is no self!* How is this possible? From Hume's perspective, this astonishing belief is the only possible conclusion consistent with an honest and objective examination of our experience. The following passages are from Hume's essay "On Personal Identity."

Hume, *On Personal Identity*

There are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF (*Hume is referring to Descartes and Locke, among others*), that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. The strongest sensation, the most violent passion, say they, instead of distracting us from this view, only fix it the more intensely, and make us consider their influence on *self* either by their pain or pleasure. To attempt a farther proof of this were to weaken its evidence; since no proof can be deriv'd from any fact, of which we are so intimately conscious; nor is there any thing of which we can be certain, if we doubt of this.

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of *self*, after the manner it is here explain'd. For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd? This question 'tis impossible to answer with out a manifest contradiction, and absurdity; and yet 'tis a question, which must necessarily be answer'd, if we wou'd have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible. It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd

to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv'd; and consequently there is no such idea.

According to Hume, if we carefully examine the contents of our experience, we find that there are only two distinct entities, "impressions" and "ideas":

Impressions—Impressions are the basic sensations of our experience, the elemental data of our minds: pain, pleasure, heat, cold, happiness, grief, fear, exhilaration, and so on. These impressions are "lively" and "vivid."

Ideas—Ideas are *copies* of impressions, and as a result they are less "lively" and "vivid." Ideas include thoughts and images that are built up from our primary impressions through a variety of relationships, but because they are derivative copies of impressions, they are once removed from reality.

If we examine these basic data of our experience, we see that they form a fleeting stream of sensations in our mind, and that nowhere among them is the sensation of a "constant and invariable" *self* that exists as a unified identity over the course of our lives. And because the *self* is not to be found among these continually changing sensations, we can only conclude that there is no good reason for believing that the *self* exists. Hume goes on to explain:

But farther, what must become of all our particular perceptions upon this hypothesis? All these are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other and may be separately consider'd, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing to support their existence. After what manner, therefore, do they belong to self and how are they connected with it? For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are remov'd for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions remov'd by death, and cou'd I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I shou'd be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect nonentity. If any one upon serious and unprejudiced reflexion, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me.

"I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception." Even when we actively look for the *self*, Hume contends, we simply can't find it! All of our experiences are perceptions, and none of these perceptions resemble a unified and permanent self-identity that exists over time. Furthermore, when we are not experiencing our perceptions—as when we sleep—there is no reason to suppose that our *self* exists in any form. Similarly, when our body dies and all empirical sensations cease, it makes no sense to believe that our *self* continues to exist in some form. Death is final. And what of people who claim that they *do* experience a *self* in their stream of perceptions? Hume announces that "I must confess I can reason no longer with him. . . . He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me." In other words, as an empiricist, Hume cannot do more than provide an honest description and analysis of his own experience, within which there is no *self* to be found.

But if Hume is right, then why does virtually everybody but Hume believe with certainty that they *do* have a *self-identity* that persists through time and serves to unify their life and give it meaning? After all, it's not enough to say to the rest of the



David Hume

Hume, *On Personal Identity*

world—you're wrong and I'm right, and I'm not going to discuss the issue if you insist on disagreeing with me. Let's examine Hume's explanation of the *self* that most people would claim they experience.

Hume, On Personal Identity

But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions. Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment. The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.

There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind: nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos'd.

The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies. It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon his objects.

Our last resource is to . . . boldly assert that these different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable. In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continu'd existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation. But we may farther observe, that where we do not give rise to such a fiction, our propension to confound identity with relation is so great, that we are apt to imagine something unknown and mysterious connecting the parts, beside their relation; and this I take to be the case with regard to the identity we ascribe to plants and vegetables. And even when this does not take place, we still feel a propensity to confound these ideas, tho' we are not able fully to satisfy ourselves in that particular, nor find any thing invariable and uninterrupted to justify our notion of identity. . . .

3.4 Hume, David, *Treatise on Human Nature*



The Buddha uses the *Mudra* (a sacred gesture) to represent the Karmic wheel of birth, death, and rebirth.

What is the *self* we experience according to Hume? A “bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” Humans so desperately *want* to believe that they have a unified and continuous *self* or *soul* that they use their imaginations to construct a *fictional self*. But this fictional *self* is not real; what we call the *self* is an imaginary creature, derived from a succession of impermanent states and events. What is our mind? According to Hume, it's “a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”

Comparisons are often made between Hume's concept of the *self* as a unified bundle of thoughts, feelings, and sensations and Buddhism's concept of *anatta* or “no-self.” Although there are surface similarities between the two views of the *self*, a deeper analysis reveals significant differences. For Hume, a close examination of our stream of consciousness reveals no *self*, soul, or “I” that exists continually through time. We each create a “fictional *self*” to unify these transient mental events and introduce order into our lives, but this “*self*” has no real existence.

Buddhist doctrine agrees with Hume that the notion of a permanent *self* that exists as a unified identity through time is an illusion. For Buddhists, every aspect of life is impermanent and all elements of the universe are in a continual process of change and transition, a process that includes each “*self*” as well. The *self* can best be thought of as a flame that is continually passed from candle to candle, retaining

a certain continuity but no real personal identity. But if the *self* or “I” doesn’t refer to a continuous identity, then what does it signify? According to Buddhist philosophy, the *self* is composed of *five aggregates*: physical form, sensation, conceptualization, dispositions to act, and consciousness. Each “*self*” is comprised of the continual interplay of these five elements, but there is no substance or identity beyond the dynamic interaction of these five elements.

This concept of the *self* is certain to seem alien to our Western consciousness, which has a decidedly more Platonic view of self-identity. And, in fact, there was a famous debate regarding these two points of view that occurred in the second century B.C.E., between King Menander, a Greek who ruled northwestern India, and a Buddhist monk Nagasena. Witnessed by five hundred Greeks and thousands of monks, the argument hinged on a chariot simile, though in a much different fashion than that employed by Plato!

Then King Menander went up to the Venerable Nagasena, greeted him respectfully, and sat down. Nagasena replied to the greeting, and the King was pleased at heart. Then King Menander asked: “How is your reverence known, and what is your name?”

“I’m known as Nagasena, your Majesty, that’s what my fellow monks call me. But though my parents may have given me such a name . . . it’s only a generally understood term, a practical designation. There is no question of a permanent individual implied in the use of the word.”

“Listen, you five hundred Greeks and eighty thousand monks!” said King Menander. “This Nagasena has just declared that there’s no permanent individuality implied in his name!” Then, turning to Nagasena, “If, Reverend Nagasena, there is no permanent individuality, who gives you monks your robes and food, lodging and medicines? And who makes use of them? Who lives a life of righteousness, meditates, and reaches Nirvana? Who destroys living beings, steals, fornicates, tells lies, or drinks spirits? . . . If what you say is true there’s neither merit nor demerit, and no fruit or result of good or evil deeds. If someone were to kill you there would be no question of murder. And there would be no masters or teachers in the (Buddhist) Order and no ordinations. If your fellow monks call you Nagasena, what then is Nagasena? Would you say that your hair is Nagasena?” “No, your Majesty.”

“Or your nails, teeth, skin, or other parts of your body, or the outward form, or sensation, or perception, or the psychic constructions, or consciousness? Are any of these Nagasena?” “No, your Majesty.”

“Then are all these taken together Nagasena?” “No, your Majesty.”

“Or anything other than they?” “No, your Majesty.”

“Then for all my asking I find no Nagasena. Nagasena is a mere sound! Surely what your Reverence has said is false!”

Then the Venerable Nagasena addressed the King.

“Your Majesty, how did you come here—on foot, or in a vehicle?”

“In a chariot.”

“Then tell me what is the chariot? Is the pole the chariot?”

“No, your Reverence.”


“Or the axle, wheels, frame, reins, yoke, spokes, or goad?”


“None of these things is the chariot.”

“Then all these separate parts taken together are the chariot?” “No, your Reverence.”

“Then is the chariot something other than the separate parts?” “No, your Reverence.”

Milindaphana,
The Simile of the Chariot



3.10
PHILOSOPHY 

Empiricism and the Self

- Perform your own empiricist investigation by examining the contents of your consciousness. What do you find there? Fleeting and temporary sensations, perceptions, and ideas, as Hume describes? Is your *self* anywhere to be found?
- Hume uses the terms *I* and *myself* throughout his writings, words that seem to suggest a continually existing *self-identity* that he is denying. Does Hume contradict himself? Why or why not?
- Descartes’ key point was that even if we are dreaming, fantasizing or being deceived, the *act of doubting* proves that I have a *self* that is engaged in the activity of doubting. Is the same true for Hume? By denying the existence of a *self*, is he at the same time *proving* that his *self* exists, the *self* that is engaged in the act of denying? Why or why not?
- If you believe that you have a unifying and conscious *self* that exists through time, but you can’t “catch yourself” when you examine your immediate experience, then where does your *self* exist? What is the nature of your *self* if you can’t perceive it? (This is precisely the challenge taken up by our next philosopher, Immanuel Kant.)
- Imagine that you were present at the debate between King Menander and the monk Nagasena. How would you critically evaluate the arguments being made by both men? Do you think a chariot is an appropriate simile to the human self? Why or why not? How would you have responded to Nagasena’s argument?
- Compare how Plato (in the *Phaedrus*) and Nagasena use the analogy of a chariot to explain the nature of the *self*. What are the similarities? What are the differences?



3.7 Milindaphana, *The Simile of the Chariot*

“Then for all my asking, your Majesty, I can find no chariot. The chariot is a mere sound. What then is the chariot? Surely what your Majesty has said is false! There is no chariot! . . .

When he had spoken the five hundred Greeks cried “Well done!” and said to the King, “Now, your Majesty, get out of that dilemma if you can!” “What I said was not false,” replied the King. “It’s on account of all these various components, the pole, axle, wheels, and so on, that the vehicle is called a chariot. It’s just a generally understood term, a practical designation.”

“Well said, your Majesty! You know what the word ‘chariot’ means! And it’s just the same with me. It’s on account of the various components of my being that I’m known by the generally understood term, the practical designation Nagasena.”

Immanuel Kant: *We Construct the Self*

Brilliant and idiosyncratic, the German philosopher **Immanuel Kant** (1724–1804) helped create the conceptual scaffolding of modern consciousness in the areas of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Kant was alarmed by David Hume’s thoroughgoing skepticism, derived from his extreme empiricism: the mind is simply a container for fleeting sensations and disconnected ideas, and our reasoning ability is merely “a slave to the passions.” If Hume’s views proved true, then humans would never be able to achieve genuine knowledge in any area of experience: scientific, ethical, religious, or metaphysical, including questions such as the nature of our *selves*. For Kant, Hume’s devastating conclusions served as a Socratic “gadfly” to his spirit of inquiry, awakening him from his intellectual sleep and galvanizing him to action:

I admit it was David Hume’s remark that first, many years ago, interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my inquiries in the field of speculative philosophy.

Kant was convinced that philosophers and scientists of the time did not fully appreciate the potential destructiveness of Hume’s views, and that it was up to him (Kant) to meet and dismantle this threat to human knowledge.

Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

Since the origin of metaphysics so far as we know its history, nothing has ever happened which could have been more decisive to its fate than the attack made upon it by David Hume. He threw no light on this species of knowledge, but he certainly struck a spark by which light might have been kindled had it caught some inflammable substance and had its smouldering fire been carefully nursed and developed. . . . However hasty and mistaken Hume’s inference may appear, it was at least founded upon investigation, and this investigation deserved the concentration of the brighter spirits of his day as well as determined efforts on their part to discover, if possible, a happier solution of the problem in the sense proposed by him. . . .

But Hume suffered the usual misfortune of metaphysicians, of not being understood. It is positively painful to see how utterly his opponents . . . missed the point of the problem; for while they were ever taking for granted that which he doubted, and demonstrating with zeal and often with impudence that which he never thought of doubting, they so misconstrued his valuable suggestion that everything remained in its old condition, as if nothing happened.

How did Hume’s empirical investigations lead him to the unsatisfying conclusion that genuine knowledge—and the *self*—do not exist? Kant begins his analysis at Hume’s starting point—examining immediate sense experience—and he acknowledges Hume’s point that all knowledge of the world begins with sensa-

tions: sounds, shapes, colors, tastes, feels, smells. For Hume, these sensations are the basic data of experience, and they flow through our consciousness in a torrential rushing stream:

(The sensations in our senses) succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement. . . . The mind is a kind of theatre where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”

But in reflecting on his experience, Kant observes an obvious fact that Hume seems to have overlooked, namely, *our primary experience of the world is not in terms of a disconnected stream of sensations*. Instead, we perceive and experience an organized world of objects, relationships, and ideas, all existing within a fairly stable framework of space and time. True, at times discreet and randomly related sensations dominate our experience: for example, when we are startled out of a deep sleep and “don’t know where we are,” or when a high fever creates bizarre hallucinations, or the instant when an unexpected thunderous noise or blinding light suddenly dominates our awareness. But in general, we live in a fairly stable and orderly world in which sensations are woven together into a fabric that is familiar to us. And integrated throughout this fabric is our *conscious self* who is the knowing subject at the center of our universe. Hume’s problem wasn’t his starting point—empirical experience—it was the fact that he remained fixated on the starting point, refusing to move to the next, intelligible level of experience. Here’s how Kant explains the situation:

There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our sense partly of themselves produce representations, partly arouse the activity of our understanding to compare these representations, and, by combining or separating them, work up the raw material for the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is entitled experience? In the order of time, therefore, we have no knowledge antecedent to experience, and with experience all our knowledge begins.

But though all our knowledge begins with experience, *it does not follow that it all arises out of experience*. (italics added) For it may well be that even our empirical knowledge is made up of what we receive through impressions and of what our own faculty of knowledge (sensible impressions, serving merely as the occasion) supplies from itself. If our faculty of knowledge makes any such addition, it may be that we are not in a position to distinguish it from the raw material, until with long practice of attention we have become skilled in separating it.

This, then is a question which at least calls for closer examination, and does not allow of any off-hand answer:—whether there is any knowledge that is thus independent of experience and even of all impressions of the senses. Such knowledge is entitled *a priori*, and distinguished from the *empirical*, which has its sources *a posteriori*, that is, in experience.

Where does the order and organization of our world come from? According to Kant, it comes in large measure from *us*. Our minds actively sort, organize, relate, and synthesize the fragmented, fluctuating collection of sense data that our sense organs take in. For example, imagine that someone dumped a pile of puzzle pieces on the table in front of you. They would initially appear to be a random collection of items, unrelated to one another and containing no meaning for you, much like the basic sensations of immediate unreflective experience. However, as you began to assemble the pieces, these fragmentary items would gradually begin to form a coherent image that would have significance for you. According to Kant this meaning-constructing activity is precisely what our minds are doing all of the time: taking the raw data of experience and actively synthesizing it into the familiar, orderly, meaningful world in



Immanuel Kant

Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

which we live. As you might imagine, this mental process is astonishing in its power and complexity, and it is going on all of the time.

How do our minds know the best way to construct an intelligible world out of a never-ending avalanche of sensations? We each have fundamental organizing *rules* or *principles* built into the architecture of our minds. These dynamic principles naturally order, categorize, organize, and synthesize sense data into the familiar fabric of our lives, bounded by space and time. These organizing rules are *a priori* in the sense that they precede the sensations of experience and they exist independently of these sensations. We didn't have to "learn" these *a priori* ways of organizing and relating the world—they came as software already installed in our intellectual operating systems.

Kant referred to his approach to perception and knowledge as representing a "Copernican Revolution" in metaphysics and epistemology, derived from the breakthrough of the Polish astronomer Copernicus (1473–1543) who was one of the first and most definitive voices asserting that instead of the sun orbiting around the earth, it's actually the reverse—the earth orbits the sun.

In a similar fashion, empiricists like Hume had assumed that the mind was a passive receptacle of sensations, a "theatre" in which the raw data of experience moved across without our influence. According to Hume, our minds conform to the world of which we are merely passive observers. Kant, playing the role of Copernicus, asserted that this is a wrong-headed perspective. The sensations of experience are necessary for knowledge, but they are in reality the "grist" for our mental "mills." Our minds *actively* synthesize and relate these sensations in the process of creating an intelligible world. As a result, the sensations of immediate experience conform to our minds, rather than the reverse. We *construct* our world through these conceptual operations, and as result, this is a world of which we can gain insight and knowledge.

Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*



3.12 Kant, Immanuel, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them by means of concepts have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must, therefore, make trial whether we may not have more success if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. ■

This is a brief overview of Kant's epistemological framework, which we will examine in more depth in chapters 8 and 9 on *What is True? What is Real?*. For now we are interested in how this framework influences Kant's conception of the *self*. Actually, from Kant's standpoint, it's our *self* that makes experiencing an intelligible world possible, because it's the *self* that is responsible for synthesizing the discreet data of sense experience into a meaningful whole. Metaphorically, our *self* is the weaver who, using the loom of the mind, weaves together the fabric of experience into a unified whole so that it becomes *my* experience, *my* world, *my* universe. Without our *self* to perform this synthesizing function, our experience would be unknowable, a chaotic collection of sensations without coherence or significance.

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

Sensations would be nothing to us, and would not concern us in the least, if they were not received into our (orderly) consciousness. Knowledge is impossible in any other way. . . . For perceptions could not be perceptions of anything for me unless they could at least be connected together into (my) one consciousness. This principle stands firm *a priori*, and may be called the "transcendental principle of unity" for all the multiplicity of our perceptions and sensations.

The *unity of consciousness* is a phrase invented by Kant to describe the fact that the thoughts and perceptions of any given mind are bound together in a unity by

being all contained in *one* consciousness—*my* consciousness. That's precisely what makes your world intelligible to you: it's *your self* that is actively organizing all of your sensations and thoughts into a picture that makes sense to you. This picture is uniquely *your* picture. You are at the center of your world, and you view everything in the world from *your* perspective. For example, think about a time in which you shared an experience with someone but you each had radically different experiences: attending a party, viewing a movie, having a communication misunderstanding. Reflect on the way each person instinctively describes the entire situation from *his* or *her* perspective. *That's* the unity of consciousness that Kant is describing.

Your *self* is able to perform this synthesizing, unifying function because it *transcends* sense experience. Your *self* isn't an *object* located in your consciousness with other objects—your *self* is a *subject*, an *organizing principle* that makes a unified and intelligible experience possible. It is, metaphorically, “above” or “behind” sense experience, and it uses the categories of your mind to filter, order, relate, organize, and synthesize sensations into a unified whole. That's why Kant accords the *self* “transcendental” status: because it exists independently of experience. The *self* is the product of reason, a *regulative principle* because the *self* “regulates” experience by making unified experience possible. Other such “transcendental regulative ideas” include the ideas of *cosmos* and *God*.

Everything that has its basis in the nature of our powers must be appropriate to, and consistent with, their right employment—if we can only guard against a certain misunderstanding and so discover the proper direction of these powers. We are entitled, therefore, to suppose that transcendental ideas . . . have an excellent, and indeed indispensably necessary, regulative employment, namely, that of directing the understanding towards a certain goal upon which the routes marked out by all its rules converge.

The first (regulative) idea is the “I” itself, viewed simply as thinking nature or soul . . . : in a word, the idea of a simple self-sustaining intelligence. (Reason operates) to represent all determinations as existing in a single subject, all powers, so far as possible, as derived from a single fundamental power, all change as belonging to the states of one and the same permanent being.

So where did Hume go wrong, from Kant's standpoint? How could Hume examine his mind's contents and not find his *self*, particularly because, in Kant's view, the *self* is required to *have* intelligible experience? Hume's problem (according to Kant) was that he looked for his *self* in the wrong place! Contrary to what Hume assumed, the *self* is not an object of consciousness, one of the contents of the mind. Instead, the *self* is the transcendental activity that synthesizes the contents of consciousness into an intelligible whole. Because the *self* is not a “content” of consciousness but rather the invisible “thread” that ties the contents of consciousness together, it's no wonder that Hume couldn't find it. It would be analogous to you going to a sporting event and looking in vain to see the “team,” when all you see are a collection of players. The “team” is the network of relationships between the individuals that is not visible to simple perception. The “team” is the synthesizing activity that creates a unity among the individuals, much like the *self* creates a unity in experience by synthesizing its contents into an intelligible whole. And because experience is con-

THINK CRITICALLY

3.11

Sense, Perception, and Your Self

- Reflect on your mind and identify the contents that you are experiencing as Hume would describe them: isolated and fleeting sounds, images, tastes, smells, etc. Did this require a special effort on your part? Why or why not?
- Now reflect on the contents of your mind and identify the contents that you are experiencing as Kant would describe them: an integrated world of objects, relationships, space, and time. How did this mental “experiment” compare with the previous one?
- Describe a time in your life in which your experience was very much as Hume describes it, and then how it changed into an experience that was more Kantian.

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*



3.5 Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*

THINK CRITICALLY

3.12



Searching for the Self

Here's an opportunity for you to be a philosophy detective engaged in a "missing person" investigation—looking for your *self*. If Kant is right, you should not be able to find your *self* among the contents of your consciousness. Instead, your *self* should be revealed as the synthesizing principle that unites your experience. Launch a reflective investigation into your *self*, and then describe as clearly as you can what you find. Did you discover your *self*? How would you describe the qualities of your *self*? In what ways is your *self* similar to all other selves? In what ways is your *self* different from all other selves?

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) Swiss developmental psychologist interested in the development of knowledge in persons.


tinually changing, this intelligible picture of the world is being updated on an instantaneous basis.

We can also see Kant's refinement of Descartes' concept of the *self*, which he interprets as a simple, self-evident fact: "I think, therefore I am." Kant was interested in developing a more complex, analytical, and sophisticated understanding of the *self* as a thinking identity. To begin with, Descartes was focusing on one dimension of the thinking process: our ability to reflect, to become aware of our *self*, to be *self-conscious*. But from Kant's standpoint, the thinking *self*—consciousness—has a more complex structure than simple self-reflection. The *self* is a dynamic entity/activity, continually synthesizing sensations and ideas into an integrated, meaningful whole. The *self*, in the form of consciousness, utilizes conceptual categories (or "transcendental rules") such as *substance*, *cause and effect*, *unity*, *plurality*, *possibility*, *necessity*, and *reality* to construct an orderly and "objective" world that is stable and can be investigated scientifically. It is in this sense that the *self* constructs its own reality, actively creating a world that is familiar, predictable, and, most significantly, *mine*.

Kant's "Copernican Revolution" accompanied by his comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the central themes of philosophy helped usher in a modern consciousness. In fact, many of his foundational premises have been supported by research in the sciences and social sciences. For example, the renowned developmental psychologist **Jean Piaget** (1896–1980) conducted painstaking empirical research on the way the human mind develops, an interactive process involving both sensory experience and innate cognitive structures. His seminal book *Construction of Reality in the Child* (1950) (published almost 150 years after Kant's death), could very easily have been written by Kant had he been a modern developmental psychologist. Similarly, work in language development by linguists such as Noam Chomsky have also supported the Kantian idea that human experience—such as language abilities—are the product of both exposure to a specific language and innate, *a priori* intellectual rules or categories that are "hard-wired" into each human being.

Kant's dominant influence on Western philosophy and the intellectual framework of modern consciousness was in sharp contrast to his quiet, limited life. Never traveling more than sixty miles from his birthplace in Germany, Kant never married and lived a life of such precise habits that it was said the citizens of his hometown could set their watches based on his daily walks. He was a popular university professor, and his passion for understanding both the universe and human nature is reflected in the inscription he wrote for his tombstone: "The starry heavens above me; the moral law within me."

Sigmund Freud: *There Are Two Selves, One Conscious, One Unconscious*

 Our explorations of the *self* have, until this point, focused almost exclusively on the *conscious self*. Of course, Kant's idea of the *self* as a "transcendental unifying principle of consciousness" is certainly not "conscious" in the traditional sense. But nor is it hidden from reflective awareness, if we know where to look for it. This *transcendental self* (or *ego*) is not to be found as an entity

in consciousness—it is the dynamic organizing principle that makes consciousness possible. One problem with this view of the *self* is that there is nothing *personal* about it. As an abstract organizing principle, it appears to be difficult to distinguish one *transcendental self* from another. As a result, Kant identifies *another self*, the *empirical self* (or *ego*), which includes all of those particular aspects of our *selves* that make us uniquely different people: bodies, memories, personalities, ways of thinking, emotional patterns, and so on. The obvious problem is that this model of consciousness leaves us with *two selves*, leading to some disquieting questions: How do these two *selves* relate to one another? Is one *self* more primary or fundamental than the other? Which *self* is our “true” *self*, our identity, our soul? Are we condemned to be metaphysical schizophrenics? Kant tries mightily to answer these troubling and enigmatic questions, but it’s a very difficult challenge.

Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) view of the *self* leads to an analogous dualistic view of the *self*, though the contours and content of his ideas are very different from Kant’s. Freud is not, strictly speaking, a philosopher, but his views on the nature of the *self* have had a far-reaching impact on philosophical thinking, as well as virtually every other discipline in the humanities and social sciences. Naturally, his most dominant influence has been in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. Freud’s view of the *self* was multitiered, divided among the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. He explains his psychological model in the following passage from his *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*:

There is no need to characterize what we call *conscious*: it is the same as the consciousness of philosophers and of everyday opinion. Everything else that is mental is in our view *unconscious*. We are soon led to make an important division in this unconscious. Some processes become conscious easily; they may then cease to be conscious, but can become conscious once more without any trouble: as people say they can be reproduced or remembered. This reminds us that consciousness is in general a very highly fugitive condition. What is conscious is conscious only for a moment. . . . Everything unconscious that can easily exchange the unconscious condition for the conscious one, is therefor better described as “capable of entering consciousness,” or as *preconscious*. Experience has taught us that there are hardly any mental processes, even of the most complicated kind, which cannot on occasion remain preconscious, although as a rule they press forward, as we say, into consciousness. There are other mental processes or mental material which have no such easy access to consciousness, but which must be inferred, discovered, and translated into conscious form in the manner that has been described. It is for such material that we reserve the name of the unconscious proper. Thus we have attributed three qualities to mental processes: they are either conscious, preconscious, or unconscious. The division between the three classes is neither absolute nor permanent. What is preconscious becomes conscious, as we have seen, without any activity on our part; what is unconscious can, as a result of our efforts, be made conscious, though in the process we may have an impression that we are overcoming what are often very strong resistances. . . . A lowering of resistances of this sort, with a consequent pressing forward of unconscious material, takes place regularly in the state of sleep and thus brings about a necessary precondition for the formation of dreams.

It is by no means an exaggeration to assert that the concept of the **unconscious** forms the central core in Freud’s theory of the structure and dynamics of the human personality. And though the **conscious self** has an important role to play in our lives, it is the *unconscious self* that holds the greatest fascination for Freud, and which has the dominant influence in our personalities. Freud’s focus on the

SIGMUND FREUD

(1856–1939)

Psychologist. Freud founded the school of psychoanalysis which became one of the most influential theories of psychology and therapy in the twentieth century. Especially important was his theory of sub-conscious motivation.

Freudian concepts of the conscious and unconscious

In Freudian psychoanalytic theory, consciousness refers to mental processes of which we are aware; unconsciousness refers to mental processes which are not easily accessible to our awareness.



unconscious self marks a significant departure from previous efforts in philosophy to understand the nature of the *self*. Although Freud is generally given credit for the extensive articulation and subsequent popularization of the concept of the *unconscious*, it was his sincerest conviction that the *unconscious* was not a concept that he invented, but rather a reality characterizing human functioning that he discovered.

The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied.

Essential to an understanding of Freud's conception of the *unconscious* is the psychoanalytic model of "split-level" human functioning. When such a model is employed, human experience is viewed as the product not simply of our *conscious* wishes, desires, and intentions, but also of our *unconscious* wishes and desires. Our behavior is thus seen to be the result of several different levels of functioning, at least one of which we are unaware, as summed up by the psychoanalyst Norman Cameron:

We are all so organized that we have active infantile and magical processes going on within us, at the same time that we are behaving adequately as mature adults. There is not the slightest possibility of eliminating all these irrational unconscious components. We all operate simultaneously at different levels of maturity and rationality: irrational and often infantile unconscious processes are normal components of everyday behavior and experience.

According to Freud, these two levels of human functioning—the *conscious* and the *unconscious*—differ radically both in their content and in the rules and logic that govern them. The *unconscious* contains basic instinctual drives including sexuality, aggressiveness, and self-destruction; traumatic memories; unfulfilled wishes and childhood fantasies; thoughts and feelings that would be considered socially taboo. The *unconscious* level is characterized by the most primitive level of human motivation and human functioning. At this level, the most basic instinctual drives seek immediate gratification or discharge. Unheeded of the demands and restrictions of reality, the naked impulses at this level are governed solely by the "pleasure principle." As Freud's definitive biographer, Dr. Ernest Jones, explains:

There reigns in it a quite uninhibited flow towards the imaginary fulfillment of the wish that stirs it—the only thing that can. It is unchecked by any logical contradiction, any causal associations; it has no sense of either time or of external reality. Its goal is either to discharge the excitation through any exit, or, if that fails, to establish a perceptual—if necessary, an hallucinatory—identity with the remembered perception of a previous satisfaction.

Our *unconscious self* embodies a mode of operation that precedes the development of all other forms of our mental functioning. It includes throughout our lives the primitive rock-bottom activities, the primal strivings on which all human functioning is ultimately based. Our *unconscious self* operates at a prelogical and prerational level. And though it exists and influences us throughout our lives, it is not directly observable and its existence can only be inferred from such phenomena as neurotic symptoms, dreams, and "slips of the tongue."

In contrast, the *conscious self* is governed by the "reality principle" (rather than the "pleasure principle"), and at this level of functioning, behavior and experience are organized in ways that are rational, practical, and appropriate to the social environment. Although the ultimate goals of the *conscious self* are the same as the



VISUAL PHILOSOPHY



“The Sleeping Gypsy” by Rousseau

Why did Sigmund Freud believe that “Dreams are the royal road to the unconscious”?
What have you learned about yourself by reflecting on your dreams?

unconscious self—the gratification of needs and the reduction of tensions to optimal levels—the means of achieving these goals are entirely different. Instead of seeking these goals by means that are direct, impulsive, and irrational, the *conscious self* usually takes into account the realistic demands of the situation, the consequences of various actions, and the overriding need to preserve the equilibrium of the entire psychodynamic system. To this end, the *conscious self* has the task of controlling the constant pressures of the *unconscious self*, as its primitive impulses continually seek for immediate discharge.

What is the evidence for this split-level, “two-self” model of functioning? Freud believes that evidence of a powerful *unconscious self* can be found in the content of our dreams, inadvertent “slips of tongue,” and techniques—such as free association—used by Freudian psychoanalysts in clinical treatment. However, the most compelling evidence for an *unconscious self* is to be found in pathological, neurotic behavior. From Freud’s standpoint, the neurotic symptom has three essential aspects: it is a sign that the balance of forces within the personality system is disturbed; it is a sign that infantile conflicts have been reactivated; and it is itself an attempt at a spontaneous cure,



an attempt at adaptation, although the individual may be worse off with his or her neurotic adaptation than without it. For example, an individual who experienced traumatic frustration, conflict, and guilt centering on his toilet training may “adapt” to this potentially threatening situation by compulsively washing his hands several hundred times a day in an effort to assuage his guilt and resolve his emotionally charged conflicts. Although such an adaptation may forestall the disruption of his conscious level of functioning by the anxiety generated by his unconscious conflicts and painful emotions, from the standpoint of normal overall functioning, it could not be considered to be a particularly successful one.

People whose psychological defenses are defective will react to many situations simultaneously at two levels: an adult conscious level, and an infantile unconscious level. Any situation that resembles a traumatic emotional situation of early childhood will call out a repetition of the childhood response at the same time that it calls out the adult response. The adult response is likely to be direct and overt; the childhood response is likely to be covert and derivative. This mingling of different levels of experience may be accomplished without undue stress or trouble, as in the case with normal, well-adjusted behavior and experience. However, it may lead to an exaggerated reaction that is otherwise appropriate, to ambivalent feelings and ambiguous behavior, or to neurotic symptom formation. When this last is the case, the specific form of the symptom will depend both on the person’s specific vulnerability and on the situation that disturbs his internal equilibrium.

Because the *unconscious self* plays such an important role in our daily lives (according to Freud), why does it remain inaccessible to conscious awareness? Freud’s explanation for this is the psychological activity of “repression,” which serves as the theoretical keystone of defensive organizations in both normal and neurotic persons. Although it is thought to be related to the conscious “suppression,” repression is assumed to operate at unconscious levels, like most of the psychological defenses. Repression is used to help contain the potentially disruptive aspects of unconscious functioning, and as a consequence it is usually the main defense mechanism for maintaining the ego boundaries necessary for normal conscious functioning. If a deep and inclusive regression to unconscious levels does occur while a person is awake—a situation often referred to as “the return of the repressed”—the effects can be devastating.

The purpose of psychotherapy (the therapeutic method created by Freud) is to enable the patient to acknowledge the conflicts, emotions, and memories at the root cause of his or her disorder. By acknowledging and understanding the traumatized memories, emotions, and conflicts, most of which date back to infancy and early childhood, the individual not only attains a cathartic emotional release, but also is able to resolve basic emotional conflicts that were never before resolved and that lay festering unconsciously as the cause of abnormal maladaptive behavior. As the individual begins to see the reason for the particular symptom or cluster of symptoms that has formed, these symptoms will (in theory) tend to lose their efficacy, as their success lay precisely in the fact that they were unconscious attempts to deal with the specific traumatic contents existing unconsciously. When they and their purpose are disclosed to the individual, they will tend to be discarded as maladaptive forms of behavior, and a normal resolution and adaptation to the repressed and unconscious material will be attained. However, the acknowledgment and affirmation of the patient is not simply an intellectual understanding. Instead, she must recall the original memories with all of their emotional charge and trauma, and work through the emotions involved until she is able to adopt a new and more adaptive attitude both toward the past of childhood and toward her present and future adult life.



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

Analyzing Sigmund Freud

3.13



Although the contents of the unconscious cannot be observed directly (according to Freud) we can observe them indirectly, like observing footprints in the sand or dusting for fingerprints. There are several areas in which unconscious influences are evident. This is an opportunity for you to look for evidence of unconscious functioning in each of these areas. Record your reflections in your Philosophy Notebook.

- *Slips of the tongue*: Think about a time in which you unexpectedly said what you *really* thought rather than what you intended to say: for example, “I think your new haircut looks *atrocious*” instead of your intended “I think your new haircut looks *attractive*.” Do you think this is persuasive evidence for Freud’s concept of the unconscious?
- *Dreams*: Describe a particularly disturbing dream, or a recurring dream, that expressed surprising or disturbing themes. What do you think the dream really meant? Do you think the dream is persuasive evidence for Freud’s concept of the unconscious?
- *Neurosis*: Describe one sort of neurotic behavior in which you engage. (Don’t worry, everyone has at least *one* neurosis!) For example, do you have a compulsion to check and recheck locks? To eat *too* much or *too* little? To perform superstitious rituals? To be overly suspicious (“paranoid”) about others’ intentions? To feel excessively guilty about something? To be chronically depressed? And so on. What do you think is the origin of this neurosis? Do you think this syndrome is persuasive evidence for Freud’s concept of the unconscious?

Freud’s Topographical model of the mind divided it into systems on the basis of their relationship to consciousness: conscious, preconscious, and unconscious. Freud later developed a Structural model of the mind that divided it according to mental functions: the id, the ego, and the superego. Freud emphasizes the fact that although the Structural model has certain similarities with the earlier Topographical model, the two are not the same. Although the id has virtually the same place as the unconscious in the sense of being the reservoir for the primal instinctual forces responsible for all human motivation, the ego and superego systems consist of aspects that are both conscious and unconscious in the psychoanalytic sense—in other words, they are inaccessible to consciousness except under unusual circumstances. Freud believed that the strength of the Structural model was its ability to analyze situations of mental conflict in terms of which functions are allied with one another and which are in conflict (analogous to the conflicting elements in Plato’s division of the soul into Reason, Spirit, and Appetite).

Freud’s penetrating and systematic analysis of the complexity of the human mind had a far-reaching impact on modern understanding of our *selves*. However, from a philosophical perspective, there are significant problems with the models of the mind that he developed. Freud’s concept of the unconscious is of a “place”—a timeless, unknowable realm—or “entity” that exerts a profound and continual influence on our conscious thoughts, emotions, and behavior. But “where” exactly does this realm exist? “Who” exactly is this entity, and what is its relation to our conscious *self*? Doesn’t Freud’s model fragment the human mind into a collection of parts, multiple *selves* with enigmatic relationships to one another? Don’t we end up with two “I thinks,” one conscious and one unconscious?

ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

(1929–)

Communitarian philosopher. Currently teaching at the University of Notre Dame. Author of several works, especially on ethics and moral theory, including *A Short History of Ethics* (1966), *After Virtue* (1981), and *Whose Justice, Which Rationality* (1988).

Seen from another perspective, it's one thing to say that someone is "unconscious" of the true purpose, motive, or intention of their behavior; it's quite another to say that the behavior is "caused" by influences from "the unconscious." According to the philosopher **Alasdair MacIntyre** (1929–) in his book *The Unconscious*, Freud was not merely offering us an instructive model in terms of which conscious thought and behavior could be envisaged. Instead, he was making an existential claim, propounding a hypothesis, asserting that "the world includes an entity hitherto undiscovered," a claim that is unwarranted and conceptually confused.

To put the same point into linguistic terms, the use of "unconscious" as an adjective or as an adverb is quite normal and acceptable in ordinary language. The problem for Freud is that he uses the concept of "unconscious" not only as an adverb and an adjective, but also as a *noun*. As MacIntyre explains it:

For where Freud uses "unconscious" and "unconsciously" he extends earlier uses of these words; but when he speaks of "*the* unconscious" he invents a new term for which he has to prescribe a meaning and a use. And in this innovation he is curiously dominated by a picture of the mind which he at many points explicitly rejected.

This "picture of the mind" that Freud embraces by his use of "the unconscious" as a noun is that derived from Descartes, who considered the subject as a rational spiritual entity, an entity quite different and distinct from the physical substance of the body. It is this view of the mind that has been described by the philosopher Gilbert Ryle as "the ghost in the machine," and by Jacques Maritain as "the angel in the machine." The new twist that Freud gave it, according to MacIntyre, is that of transferring the notion of the separate substance of the mind from the rational consciousness of Descartes to the irrational unconscious.

Now Freud clearly does not think of man as possessing this kind of rational self-knowledge in his ordinary consciousness, and in so far as he does not do this he rejects the Cartesian picture of the mind. But Freud retains from the Cartesian picture the idea of the mind as something distinct and apart, a place or a realm which can be inhabited by such entities as ideas. Only he makes dominant not "the conscious" mind but "the unconscious." He introduces "unconscious" as an adjective to describe what we may have hitherto observed but have not hitherto recognized or classified. He introduces "the unconscious" as a noun not to describe, but to explain.

Freud's idea of an existent, spatially located "unconscious" leads to other difficulties as well, including those associated with the Freudian concept of "repression." Repression for Freud clearly refers to a datable event, an occurrence that actually happens when the memory of an experience is denied a place in consciousness and instead relegated to the unconscious. Yet by definition, repression is something of which we are unconscious, and as such is inaccessible to direct observation. As a consequence, we can only infer that something has been "repressed" from subsequent behavior and feelings: for example, neurotic behavior. But the claim that repression has occurred is logically dependent on the fact that certain alleged childhood experiences did in fact take place; yet simply to show that they did take place is not enough to show that repression occurred, and it is indeed difficult to see what would be enough proof. It would therefore appear that no direct empirical evidence can be brought directly to bear on the situation to either validate or falsify the theoretical notions of "repression" and "the unconscious." And if such is the case, then it is indeed untenable to contend that repression is a datable event and that the unconscious is a place in which repressed events exist timelessly,

exerting causal influence on our conscious functioning. Because such claims are in principle neither verifiable nor falsifiable, they are therefore empty. Hence any attempt to treat the unconscious as an actual existent realm containing actual repressed mental events, emotions, ideas, and so on will not only run into the traditional problems plaguing any such dualistic conception of human functioning, but also be hard put to produce any empirical evidence in its favor.

Some philosophers—such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and William Barrett—are convinced that we can develop a model of the human mind—and *self*—that will explain the unconscious dimensions of human experience without falling prey to the philosophical difficulties that Freud encountered in his models. And even some therapists believe that Freud’s concept of the *self* is much too restrictive and one-dimensional, such as psychiatrist Dr. **Willard Gaylin** in the following essay, “What You See Is the Real You.”

It was, I believe, the distinguished Nebraska financier Father Edward J. Flanagan who professed to having “never met a bad boy.” Having, myself, met a remarkable number of bad boys, it might seem that either our experiences were drastically different or we were using the word “bad” differently. I suspect neither is true, but, rather that the Father was appraising the “inner man,” while I, in fact, do not acknowledge the existence of inner people.

Since we psychoanalysts have unwittingly contributed to this confusion, let one, at least, attempt a small rectifying effort. Psychoanalytic data—which should be viewed as supplementary information—are, unfortunately, often viewed as alternative (and superior) explanations. This has led to the prevalent tendency to think of the “inner” man as the real man and the outer man as an illusion or pretender.

While psychoanalysis supplies us with an incredibly useful tool for explaining the motives and purposes underlying human behavior, most of this has little bearing on the moral nature of that behavior.

Like roentgenology (*brain scans*), psychoanalysis is a fascinating, but relatively new, means of illuminating the person. But few of us are prepared to substitute an X-ray of grandfather’s head for the portrait that hangs in the parlor. The inside of the man represents another view, not a truer one. A man may not always be what he appears to be, but what he appears to be is always a significant part of what he is. A man is the sum total of *all* his behavior. To probe for unconscious determinants of behavior and then define *him* in their terms exclusively, ignoring his overt behavior altogether, is a greater distortion than ignoring the unconscious completely.

Kurt Vonnegut has said, “You are what you pretend to be,” which is simply another way of saying you are what we (all of us) perceive you to be, not what you think you are.

Consider for a moment the case of the 90-year-old man on his deathbed (surely the Talmud must deal with this?) joyous and relieved over the success of his deception. For 90 years he has shielded his evil nature from public observation. For 90 years he has affected courtesy, kindness, and generosity—suppressing all the malice he knew was within him while he calculatedly and artificially substituted grace and charity. All his life he had been fooling the world into believing he was a good man. This “evil” man will, I predict, be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Similarly, I will not be told that the young man who earns his pocket money by mugging old ladies is “really” a good boy. Even my generous and expansive definition of goodness will not accommodate that particular form of self-advancement.

It does not count that beneath the rough exterior he has a heart—or, for that matter, an entire innards—of purest gold, locked away from human perception. You are for the most part what you seem to be, not what you would wish to be, nor, indeed, what you believe yourself to be.

Spare me, therefore, your good intentions, your inner sensitivities, your unarticulated and unexpressed love. And spare me also those tedious psychohistories which—by exposing the goodness inside the bad man, and the evil in the good—invariably establish a vulgar and perverse egalitarianism, as if the arrangement of what is outside and what inside makes no moral difference.

WILLARD GAYLIN

(1925–).

Practicing psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. Educated at Harvard University (A.B., 1947) and Columbia University; cofounder and president of the Hastings Center, which researches ethical issues in the life sciences.

Author of several books including *The Rage Within: Anger in Modern Life* (1984) and *The Male Ego* (1992).

Gaylin,

What You See Is the Real You

Saint Francis may, in his unconscious, indeed have been compensating for, and denying destructive, unconscious Oedipal impulses identical to those which Attila projected and acted on. But the similarity of the unconscious constellations in the two men matters precious little, if it does not distinguish between them.

I do not care to learn that Hitler's heart was in the right place. A knowledge of the unconscious life of the man may be an adjunct to understanding his behavior. It is *not* a substitute for his behavior in describing him.

The inner man is a fantasy. If it helps you to identify with one, by all means, do so; preserve it, cherish it, embrace it, but do not present it to others for evaluation or consideration, for excuse or exculpation, or, for that matter for punishment or disapproval.

Like any fantasy, it serves your purposes alone. It has no standing in the real world which we share with each other. Those character traits, those attitudes, that behavior—that strange and alien stuff sticking out all over you—*that's the real you!*



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

3.14

Analyzing Willard Gaylin

- When Gaylin observes the “prevalent tendency to think of the ‘inner’ man as the real man and the outer man as an illusion or pretender,” he clearly has Freud’s views regarding the dominant influence of the unconscious in mind. How do you imagine Freud might respond to Gaylin’s contention that such a view is false and dangerous?
- Do you have a concept of an “inner self” that the world does not completely see or fully appreciate? If so, how does your “inner self” differ from the “outer self” that is available to others?
- Gaylin states, “A man is the sum total of *all* his behavior. To probe for unconscious determinants of behavior and then define him in their terms exclusively, ignoring his overt behavior altogether, is a greater distortion than ignoring the unconscious completely.” Do you think a combined version of your “inner self” and “outer self” is a more accurate version of who you *really* are? Why or why not?
- “The inner man is a fantasy. . . . Like any fantasy, it serves your purposes alone. It has no standing in the real world which we share with each other.” People have a tendency to use their “inner people” to explain their mistakes and failures of achievement in life. How would Gaylin respond to those complaints? How would *you* respond to those complaints?

Gilbert Ryle: *The Self Is How You Behave*

GILBERT RYLE

(1900–1976)

Analytic Philosopher. An important figure in the field known as ‘Linguistic Analysis’ which focused on the solving of philosophical puzzles through an analysis of language. He mounted an attack against Cartesian mind/body dualism and supported a behaviorist theory of mind.



he dualistic metaphysic of mind and body initiated by Plato, perpetuated by Descartes, and given an “unconscious twist” by Freud leads, as we have seen, to challenging conceptual questions and vexing enigmas. Some philosophers and psychologists, in an effort to avoid the difficulties of viewing the mind and body as two radically different aspects of the *self*, have decided to simply focus on observable behavior in defining the *self*. Their solution to the mind/body “problem” is to simply deny—or ignore—the existence of an internal, nonphysical *self*, and instead focus on the dimensions of the *self* that we *can* observe. No more inner selves, immortal souls, states of consciousness, or unconscious entities: instead, the *self* is defined in terms of the behavior that is presented to the world, a view that is known in psychology as **behaviorism**.

In philosophy one of the chief advocates of this view is **Gilbert Ryle** (1900–1976), a British philosopher whose book, *The Concept of Mind*, had a dramatic

Behaviorism The view that the “self” is defined by observable behavior.

impact on Western thought. Ryle's behaviorism was a different sort from that of psychology. He thought of his approach as a *logical* behaviorism, focused on creating conceptual clarity, not on developing techniques to condition and manipulate human behavior.

Ryle begins his book by launching a devastating attack on "Descartes' myth," characterizing it as the "official doctrine" that has insidiously penetrated the consciousness of academics, professionals, and average citizens alike. According to Ryle, it's high time that this destructive myth of dualism is debunked once and for all, and replaced with a clearer conceptual and linguistic understanding of the true nature of the *self*.

There is a doctrine about the nature and place of minds which is so prevalent among theorists and even among laymen that it deserves to be described as the official theory. Most philosophers, psychologists and religious teachers subscribe, with minor reservations, to it's main articles and, although they admit certain theoretical difficulties in it, they tend to assume that these can be overcome without serious modifications being made to the architecture of the theory. It will be argued here that the central principles of the doctrine are unsound and conflict with the whole body of what we know about minds when we are not speculating about them.

The official doctrine, which hails chiefly from Descartes, is something like this. With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind. Some would prefer to say that every human being has both a body and a mind. His body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function.

Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space. Bodily processes and states can be inspected by external observers. So a man's bodily life is as much a public affair as are the lives of animals and reptiles and even as the careers of trees, crystals and plants.

But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one mind are not witnessable by other observers; its career is private. Only I can take direct cognizance of the states and processes of my own mind. A person therefore lives through two collateral histories, one consisting of what happens in and to his body, and other consisting of what happens in and to his mind. The first is public, the second private. The events in the first history are events in the physical world, those in the second are events in the mental world.

It has been disputed whether a person does or can directly monitor all or only some of the episodes of his own private history; but, according to the official doctrine, of at least some of these episodes he has direct and unchallengeable cognizance. In consciousness, self-consciousness and introspection he is directly and authentically apprised of the present states and operations of his mind. He may have great or small uncertainties about concurrent and adjacent episodes in the physical world, but he can have none about at least part of what is momentarily occupying his mind.

In these passages Ryle summarizes the essential elements of the dualistic view of the *self*—mind and body as distinct entities—first articulated by Plato and then perpetuated in various incarnations through St. Augustine, Descartes, and others. Under this view, the body is seen as a physical entity, subject to the physical laws of the universe, whereas the mind (soul, spirit) is a nonphysical entity and exempt from the laws of the universe. As a result, the body is mortal and dies, whereas the mind is at least *potentially* able to continue existing beyond the death of the body.

According to Ryle, this dualistic view has serious implications for what we can know and not know. Although each person has direct knowledge of his or her mind, it is impossible for us to have *any* direct knowledge of other minds. Each mind is its own private, personal universe.

Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*



Our physical bodies are just the opposite of our minds: our bodies and their movements are available to everyone, including ourselves. Our bodies can be observed, photographed, measured, analyzed, and their movements can be recorded. Although our minds are completely private, our bodies and their movements are completely public.

Analyzed in this fashion, the dualistic division of mind and body seems rather odd, and this is precisely Ryle's point: "It will be argued here that the central principles of the doctrine are unsound and conflict with the whole body of what we know about minds when we are not speculating about them." In other words, although the majority of people assume a mind/body dualism as a general theory, on a practical level we act and speak in a much different fashion. This "ghost in the machine" dualism (Ryle's central metaphor) conflicts directly with our everyday experience, revealing itself to be a conceptually flawed and confused notion that needs to be revised. Ryle continues his argument in the following passages.

Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

It is customary to express this bifurcation of his two lives and of his two worlds by saying that the things and events which belong to the physical world, including his own body, are external, while the workings of his own mind are internal. This antithesis of outer and inner is of course meant to be construed as a metaphor, since minds, not being in space, could not be described as being spatially inside anything else, or as having things going on spatially inside themselves. But relapses from this good intention are common and theorists are found speculating how stimuli, the physical sources of which are yards or miles outside of a person's skin, can generate mental responses inside his skull, or how decisions framed inside his cranium can set going movements of his extremities.

Even when "inner" and "outer" are construed as metaphors, the problem of how a person's mind and body influence one another is notoriously charged with theoretical difficulties. What the mind wills, the legs, arms and the tongue execute; what affects the ear and the eye has something to do with what the mind perceives; grimaces and smiles betray the mind's moods and bodily castigations lead, it is hoped, to moral improvement. But the actual transactions between the episodes of the private history and those of the public history remain mysterious, since by definition they can belong to neither series. They could not be reported among the happenings described in a person's autobiography of his inner life, but nor could they be reported among those described in someone else's biography of that person's overt career. They can be inspected neither by introspection nor by laboratory experiment. They are theoretical shuttlecocks which are forever bandied from the physiologist back to the psychologist and from the psychologist back to the physiologist.

"Where" precisely is the mind located in Cartesian dualism? Because the mind is conceived to be a nonmaterial entity, this question is problematic. People often use spatial metaphors or images to characterize the mind/soul/spirit: it's the "inner person" somehow contained "within" the body. But as Ryle points out, this way of thinking doesn't make a great deal of conceptual sense. The mind and the body seem connected in complex and intimate ways that spatial metaphors simply don't capture.

And to make matters worse, people tend to "forget" that these are metaphors and instead assume that they are providing an accurate description of the way things are. But this *really* doesn't make conceptual sense. If the mind and body are in reality two radically different substances, then how precisely do they connect to one another? And how could we ever discover such a connection? Neither the personal history of the mind's experiences nor the public history of the body and its movements can describe the moment of their intersection. Each realm—mental and physical—is locked within its own universe, lacking the vocabulary to observe and describe the convergence of these alien worlds with clarity and precision. As

Ryle observes, these transactional events “can be inspected neither by introspection nor by laboratory experiment. They are theoretical shuttlecocks which are forever bandied from the physiologist back to the psychologist and from the psychologist back to the physiologist.” And in Ryle’s mind (note the commonly used spatial metaphor!) there are even more serious implications of a dualistic perspective.

What sort of knowledge can be secured of the workings of a mind? On the one side, according to the official theory, a person has direct knowledge of the best imaginable kind of the workings of his own mind. Mental states and processes are (or are normally) conscious states and processes, and the consciousness which irradiates them can engender no illusions and leaves the door open for no doubts. A person’s present thinkings, feelings and willings, his perceivings, rememberings and imaginings are intrinsically “phosphorescent”; their existence and their nature are inevitably betrayed to their owner. The inner life is a stream of consciousness of such a sort that it would be absurd to suggest that the mind whose life is that stream might be unaware of what is passing down it. . . .

On the other side, one person has no direct access of any sort to the events of the inner life of another. He cannot do better than make problematic inferences from the observed behaviour of the other person’s body to the states of mind which, by analogy from his own conduct, he supposes to be signalled by the behaviour. Direct access to the workings of a mind is the privilege of that mind itself; in default of such privileged access, the workings of one mind are inevitably occult to everyone else. For the supposed arguments from bodily movements similar to their own to mental workings similar to their own would lack any possibility of observational corroboration. Not unnaturally, therefore, an adherent of the official theory finds it difficult to resist this consequence of his premises, that he has no good reason to believe that there do exist minds other than his own. Even if he prefers to believe that to other human bodies there are harnessed minds not unlike his own, he cannot claim to be able to discover their individual characteristics, or the particular things that they undergo and do. Absolute solitude is on this showing the ineluctable destiny of the soul. Only our bodies can meet.

The privileged knowledge that we have of our own mental *self* means that others are necessarily excluded from any direct understanding of what we’re thinking or who we are. Unfortunately the same logic applies to us: we are prevented from having any direct knowledge of other minds/selves/spirits. Although we can observe the bodies and actions of others, we can only make *inferences* regarding the mind that is producing these actions. In fact, there is no way we can be ensured that there even *are* other minds functioning in ways similar to ours. We observe someone waving and smiling at us and we say to ourselves: “When I wave and smile, that means I’m happy to see someone, so that’s what this waving and smiling must mean: the mind inside that body is happy to see me. And I’m assuming that there *is* a mind inside that body because the body is acting like I do, and I’m a mind.” Of course, we can’t really be sure that other minds exist, or that the movement of their bodies really expresses the meaning that we are projecting on to it.

Once again: if you’re thinking that this description sounds rather peculiar, this is exactly Ryle’s point. In our everyday experience, we act and speak as if we have much more direct knowledge of other minds and what they’re thinking without having to go through this tortured and artificial reasoning process. We encounter others, experience the totality of their behavior, and believe that this behavior reveals directly “who” they are and what they’re thinking. Ryle goes on to analyze how this apparent conflict between the theory of Cartesian dualism (“the ghost in the machine”) and our everyday experience of others is actually the result of confused conceptual thinking, a logical error that he terms a “**category mistake**.”

Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

Category mistake Representing the facts or concepts as if they belonged in one logical category when they actually belong in another.

Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

Such in outline is the official theory. I shall often speak of it with deliberate abusiveness, as “the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine.” I hope to prove that it is entirely false, and false not in detail but in principle. It is not merely an assemblage of particular mistakes. It is one big mistake and a mistake of a special kind. It is, namely, a category-mistake. It represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type of category (or range of types or categories), when they actually belong to another. The dogma is therefore a philosopher’s myth.

I must first indicate what is meant by the phrase “Category-mistake.” This I do in a series of illustrations.

A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks “But where is the university? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University.” It has then to be explained to him that the University is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which all that he has already seen is organized. When they are seen and when their coordination is understood, the University has been seen. His mistake lay in his innocent assumption that it was correct to speak of Christ Church, the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean Museum *and* the University, to speak, that is, as if “the University” stood for an extra member of the class of which these others units are members. He was mistakenly allocating the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong. . . .

In the same way that the *university* is a concept expressing the entire system of buildings, curricula, faculty, administrators, and so on, Ryle believes that the *mind* is a concept that expresses the entire system of thoughts, emotions, actions, and so on that make up the human *self*. The *category mistake* happens when we speak about the *self* as something independent of the physical body: a purely mental entity existing in time but not space. According to Ryle, this “self” does not really exist, anymore than the “university” or “team-spirit” exist in some special, nonphysical universe.

This is certainly a compelling argument against Cartesian dualism. However, having made the case for an integrated mind/body perspective on the human *self*, Ryle then focuses his attention primarily on human behavior. From his perspective, the *self* is best understood as a *pattern of behavior*, the *tendency* or *disposition* for a person to behave in a certain way in certain circumstances. And this inevitably leads him to the same difficulties faced by psychologist behaviorists such as John Watson and **B. F. Skinner**.

B. F. SKINNER

(1904–1990)

Philosopher of Psychology. Skinner advanced two important philosophies of psychology, ‘radical behaviorism’ and ‘scientific behaviorism’ in which he held the mind itself and unobservable entities in general were not important to scientific explanation.

Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*

To say that a person knows something, or aspires to be something, is not to say that he is at a particular moment in process of doing or undergoing anything, but that he is able to do certain things, when the need arises, or that he is prone to do and feel certain things in situations of certain sorts. . . . Abandonment of the two-world legend involves the abandonment of the idea that there is a locked door and a still to be discovered key. Those human actions and reactions, those spoken and unspoken utterances, those tones of voice, facial expressions and gestures, which have always been the data of all the other students of men, have, after all, been the right and the only manifestations to study. They and they alone have merited but fortunately not received, the grandiose title “mental phenomena.”



3.11 Ryle, Gilbert, *Concept of Mind*, Introduction

Like the behaviorists before him, Ryle has ended up solving one problem—the conceptual difficulties of Cartesian dualism—but creating another problem just as serious. For example, is the experience of “love” equivalent to the tendency

to act in a certain way under certain circumstances? When you say “I am deeply in love with you,” is that reducible to a series of behavioral tendencies or dispositions: I will share experiences with you, procreate children, attend you when you are sick, give thoughtful cards and gifts on your birthday, say on a regular basis “I love you,” and so on? Although your proposed partner may appreciate your detailed commitments, he or she is unlikely to respond in the passionate, intimate way that you likely hope for. Reducing the complex richness of our inner life and consciousness to a list of behaviors and potential behaviors simply doesn’t do the job conceptually for most people.

Ironically, Ryle ends up being his own most incisive critic. He bases his criticism of Cartesian dualism on the premise that “the central principles of the doctrine are unsound and conflict with the whole body of what we know about minds when we are not speculating about them.” But exactly the same criticism can be made of Ryle’s logical behaviorism: it attempts to define and translate the *self* and the complex mental/emotional richness of the life of the mind into a listing of behaviors (and potential behaviors) that “conflicts with the whole body of what we know about minds when we are not speculating about them.” As the Australian philosopher J. J. C. Smart notes, “There does seem to be, so far as science is concerned, nothing in the world but complex arrangements of physical constituents. All except for one place: consciousness.” In the final analysis, despite his devastating critique of Descartes’ dualism, Ryle hasn’t been able to provide a compelling philosophical explanation of Descartes’ “I think.”

Ryle’s denial of inner *selves* causes a difficulty analogous to that engendered by Hume’s denial of a similar entity—namely, that Ryle writes, speaks, and acts as if the existence of *their inner selves* is not in doubt. In fact, it’s not clear how a person who truly believed what behaviorists say they believe would actually function in life. The philosopher **Brand Blanshard** (1892–1987) provides a biting analysis of the behaviorists’ denial of consciousness along with their stated belief that the *self* is the same as bodily behavior.

Consider the behaviorist who has a headache and takes aspirin. What he means by his “headache” is the grimaces or claspings of the head that an observer might behold. Since these *are* the headache, it must be these he finds objectionable. But it is absurd to say a set of motions . . . is objectionable . . . except as they are associated with the conscious pain. Suppose again, that he identifies the pain with the grimaces and outward movements then all he would have to do to banish the pain would be to stop these movements and behave in a normal fashion. But he knows perfectly well that this is not enough; that is why he falls back on aspirin. In short, his action implies a disbelief in his own theory.

This is not to deny that humans are profoundly influenced by their experiences, that we can in fact control and manipulate human behavior to a certain extent through systematic conditioning, and that these facts have significant implications for the possibility of personal freedom. These are issues that we will explore more thoroughly in chapter 4, “Am I Free? Freedom and Determinism.”

THINK CRITICALLY

3.15

PHILOSOPHY NOTEBOOK

Self as Behavior

- Think of someone you know and try to describe her solely in terms of her observable behavior. Then analyze your portrait: What aspects of her *self* does your description capture? What aspects of her *self* does your description omit?
- Now think about yourself. Assume the perspective of someone who knows you well and describe your *self* as he might see you, *based solely on your observable behavior*. What aspects of your *self* do you think his description would capture? What aspects of your *self* do you think his portrait of you would omit?
- Identify several of the defining qualities of your *self*: for example, empathetic, gregarious, reflective, fun-loving, curious, and so on. Then, using Ryle’s approach, describe the qualities in terms of “a tendency to act a certain way in certain circumstances.”
- Analyze your characterizations. Do your descriptions communicate fully the personal qualities of your *self* that you identified? If not, what’s missing?

Brand Blanshard (1892–1987)
American philosopher. Taught for over 20 years at Swarthmore College. Identified as rationalist philosopher, drawing from classical philosophy, notably Aristotle, in his own work on epistemology.

Materialism: *The Self Is the Brain*

Earlier in the chapter we introduced *materialism*, the philosophical view that all aspects of the universe are composed of matter and energy and can be explained by physical laws. Many philosophers and psychologists view the *self* from a materialistic point of view, contending that in the final analysis mental states are identical with, reducible to, or explainable in terms of physical brain states.

Humans have known since recorded history of the close, intimate relationship between the mind and the body. The health of our bodies, the things we ingest, the experiences we endure—all of these dimensions of our physical *self* have a profound effect on our mental and emotional functioning. Similarly, our emotional states, the way we think about things, our levels of stress, the optimism (or pessimism) we feel—all of these dimensions of our mental *self* have a dramatic impact on our physical condition. As an example, just consider how the single word *heart* is used to display this intimate connection between the emotional and the physical: heartfelt, heartache, heartsick, heartened, large-hearted, heartless, lighthearted, hard-hearted, heartbroken.

Modern science is now able to use advanced equipment and sophisticated techniques to unravel and articulate the complex web of connections that binds consciousness and body together into an integrated *self*. In fact, one of the most dynamic areas of scientific research currently is that devoted to exploring the mind/brain relationships, and the information being developed is fascinating. Scientists are increasingly able to correlate specific areas in the brain with areas of mental functioning, both cognitively and emotionally. Psychotropic drugs are being developed that can influence emotional states such as depression or extreme social anxiety. Brain scans can reveal physical abnormalities that are related to personality disorders. And discoveries are being made in the reverse direction as well, detailing the physical affects of emotional states such as anxiety, depression, anger, pessimism, and optimism on the health and well-being of the body. The assumption of this approach is that to fully understand the nature of the mind we have to fully understand the nature of the brain.

The impressive success of such scientific mind/brain research has encouraged many to conclude that it is only a matter of time before the mental life of consciousness is fully explainable in terms of the neurophysiology of the brain. The ultimate goal of such explorations is to link the *self*—including all of our thoughts, passions, personality traits—to the physical wiring and physiological functioning of the brain. Although such thinkers recognize that achieving such a goal will take time, they are confident that we will progressively develop ways of describing the mind, consciousness, and human experience that are physiologically based. The philosopher **Paul Churchland** articulates such a vision in the following essay. He begins by acknowledging that a simple identity formula—mental states = brain states—is a flawed way in which to conceptualize the relationship between the mind and the brain. Instead, we need to develop a new, neuroscience-based vocabulary that will enable us to think and communicate clearly about the mind, consciousness, and human experience. He refers to this view as “eliminative materialism.”

PAUL CHURCHLAND

(1942–)

American philosopher (Ph.D., University of Pittsburgh, 1969); Areas of interest include philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, cognitive neurobiology, epistemology, and perception. Authored several works on mind, including *The Engine of Reason*, *The Seat of the Soul: A Philosophical Journey into the Brain* (MIT, 1995).

Churchland,
On Eliminative Materialism

The identity theory was called into doubt not because the prospects for a materialist account of our mental capacities were thought to be poor, but because it seemed unlikely that the arrival of an adequate materialist theory would bring with it the nice one-to-one match-ups, between the concepts of folk psychology and the concepts of theoretical neuroscience, that intertheoretic reduction requires. The reason for that

doubt was the great variety of quite different physical systems that could instantiate the required functional organization. *Eliminative materialism* also doubts that the correct neuroscientific account of human capacities will produce a neat reduction of our common-sense framework, but here the doubts arise from a quite different source.

As the eliminative materialists see it, the one-to-one match-ups will not be found, and our common-sense psychological framework will not enjoy an intertheoretic reduction, *because our common-sense psychological framework is a false and radically misleading conception of the causes of human behavior and the nature of cognitive activity*. On this view, folk psychology is not just an incomplete representation of our inner natures; it is an outright *mis*-representation of our internal states and activities. Consequently, we cannot expect a truly adequate neuroscientific account of our inner lives to provide theoretical categories that match up nicely with the categories of our common-sense framework. Accordingly, we must expect that the older framework will simply be eliminated, rather than be reduced, by a matured neuroscience.

Historical Parallels

As the identity theorist can point to historical cases of successful intertheoretic reduction, so the eliminative materialist can point to historical cases of the outright elimination of the ontology of an older theory in favor of the ontology of a new and superior theory. . . .

It used to be thought that when a piece of wood burns, or a piece of metal rusts, a spiritlike substance called “phlogiston” was being released: briskly, in the former case, slowly in the latter. Once gone, that “noble” substance left only a base pile of ash or rust. It later came to be appreciated that both processes involve, not the loss of something, but the *gaining* of a substance taken from the atmosphere: oxygen. Phlogiston emerged, not as an incomplete description of what was going on, but as a radical misdescription. Phlogiston was therefore not suitable for reduction to or identification with some notion from within the new oxygen chemistry, and it was simply eliminated from science.

* * *

The concepts of folk psychology—belief, desire, fear, sensation, pain, joy, and so on—await a similar fate, according to the view at issue. And when neuroscience has matured to the point where the poverty of our current conceptions is apparent to everyone, the superiority of the new framework is established, we shall then be able to set about *reconceiving* our internal states and activities, within a truly adequate conceptual framework at last. Our explanations of one another’s behavior will appeal to such things as our neuropharmacological states, the neural activity in specialized anatomical areas, and whatever other states are deemed relevant by the new theory. Our private introspection will also be transformed, and may be profoundly enhanced by reason of the more accurate and penetrating framework it will have to work with—just as the astronomer’s perception of the night sky is much enhanced by the detailed knowledge of modern astronomical theory that he or she possesses.

The magnitude of the conceptual revolution here suggested should not be minimized: it would be enormous. And the benefits to humanity might be equally great. If each of us possessed an accurate neuroscientific understanding of (what we now conceive dimly as) the varieties and causes of mental illness, the factors involved in learning, the neural basis of emotions, intelligence, and socialization, then the sum total of human misery might be much reduced. The simple increase in mutual understanding that the new framework made possible could contribute substantially toward a more peaceful and humane society. Of course, there would be dangers as well: increased knowledge means increased power, and power can always be misused.

Churchland’s central argument is that the concepts and theoretical vocabulary we use to think about our selves—using such terms as *belief, desire, fear, sensation, pain, joy*—actually misrepresent the reality of minds and selves. All of these concepts are part of a commonsense “folk psychology that obscures rather than clarifies the nature of human experience. Eliminative materialists believe that we need to



For Churchland, this couple’s emotional connection should be understood with reference to the neurophysiology of the brain.



develop a new vocabulary and conceptual framework that is ground in neuroscience that will be a more accurate reflection of the human mind and self. Churchland proceeds to state the arguments that he believes support his position.

Churchland,
On Eliminative Materialism

Arguments for Eliminative Materialism

The arguments for eliminative materialism are diffuse and less than decisive, but they are stronger than is widely supposed. The distinguishing feature of this position is its denial that a smooth intertheoretic reduction is to be expected—even a species-specific reduction—of the framework of folk psychology to the framework of a matured neuroscience. The reason for this denial is the eliminative materialist's conviction that folk psychology is a hopelessly primitive and deeply confused conception of our internal activities. But why this low opinion of our common-sense conceptions?

There are at least three reasons. First, the eliminative materialist will point to the widespread explanatory, predictive, and manipulative failures of folk psychology. So much of what is central and familiar to us remains a complete mystery from within folk psychology. We do not know what *sleep* is, or why we have to have it, despite spending a full third of our lives in that condition. (The answer, "For rest," is mistaken. Even if people are allowed to rest continuously, their need for sleep is undiminished. Apparently, sleep serves some deeper functions, but we do not yet know what they are.) We do not understand how *learning* transforms each of us from a gaping infant to a cunning adult, or how differences in *intelligence* are grounded. We have not the slightest idea how *memory* works, or how we manage to retrieve relevant bits of information instantly from the awesome mass we have stored. We do not know what *mental illness* is, nor how to cure it.

In sum, the most central things about us remain almost entirely mysterious from within folk psychology. . . .

This argument from explanatory poverty has a further aspect. So long as one sticks to normal brains, the poverty of folk psychology is perhaps not strikingly evident. But as soon as one examines the many perplexing behavioral and cognitive deficits suffered by people with *damaged* brains, one's descriptive and explanatory resources start to claw the air. . . . As with other humble theories asked to operate successfully in unexplored extensions of their old domain (for example, Newtonian mechanics in the domain of velocities close to the velocity of light, and the classical gas law in the domain of high pressures or temperatures), the descriptive and explanatory inadequacies of folk psychology become starkly evident.

The second argument tries to draw an inductive lesson from our conceptual history. Our early folk theories of motion were profoundly confused, and were eventually displaced entirely by more sophisticated theories. Our early folk theories of the structure and activity of the heavens were wildly off the mark, and survive only as historical lessons in how wrong we can be. Our folk theories of the nature of fire, and the nature of life, were similarly cockeyed. And one could go on, since the vast majority of our past folk conceptions have been similarly exploded. All except folk psychology, which survives to this day and has only recently begun to feel pressure. But the phenomenon of conscious intelligence is surely a more complex and difficult phenomenon than any of those just listed. So far as accurate understanding is concerned, it would be a *miracle* if we had got *that* one right the very first time, when we fell down so badly on all the others. Folk psychology has survived for so very long, presumably, not because it is basically correct in its representations, but because the phenomena addressed are so surprisingly difficult that any useful handle on them, no matter how feeble, is unlikely to be displaced in a hurry. . . .

Churchland's point is that the most compelling argument for developing a new conceptual framework and vocabulary founded on neuroscience is the simple fact that the current "folk psychology" has done a poor job in accomplishing the main reason for their existence—explaining and predicting the commonplace phenomena of the human mind and experience. And in the same way that science replaces outmoded, ineffective, and limited conceptual frameworks with ones that can

explain and predict more effectively, so the same thing needs to be done in psychology and philosophy of mind. This new conceptual framework will be based on and will integrate all that we are learning about how the brain works on a neurological level.

Although he believes strongly in the logic of his position, Churchland recognizes that many people will resist the argument he is making for a variety of reasons.

Arguments Against Eliminative Materialism

The initial plausibility of this rather radical view is low for almost everyone, since it denies deeply entrenched assumptions. That is at best a question-begging complaint, of course, since those assumptions are precisely what is at issue. But the following line of thought does attempt to mount a real argument.

Eliminative materialism is false, runs the argument, because one's introspection reveals directly the existence of pains, beliefs, desires, fears, and so forth. Their existence is as obvious as anything could be.

The eliminative materialist will reply that this argument makes the same mistake that an ancient or medieval person would be making if he insisted that he could just see with his own eyes that the heavens form a turning sphere, or that witches exist. The fact is, all observation occurs within some system of concepts, and our observation judgments are only as good as the conceptual framework in which they are expressed. In all three cases—the starry sphere, witches, and the familiar mental states—precisely what is challenged is the integrity of the background conceptual frameworks in which the observation judgments are expressed. To insist on the validity of one's experiences, *traditionally interpreted*, is therefore to beg the very question at issue. For in all three cases, the question is whether we should *reconceive* the nature of some familiar observational domain.

* * *

A final criticism draws a much weaker conclusion, but makes a rather stronger case. Eliminative materialism, it has been said, is making mountains out of molehills. It exaggerates the defects in folk psychology, and underplays its real successes. Perhaps the arrival of a matured neuroscience will require the elimination of the occasional folk-psychological concept, continues the criticism, and a minor adjustment in certain folk-psychological principles may have to be endured. But the large-scale elimination forecast by the eliminative materialist is just an alarmist worry or a romantic enthusiasm.

Perhaps this complaint is correct. And perhaps it is merely complacent. Whichever, it does bring out the important point that we do not confront two simple and mutually exclusive possibilities here: pure reduction versus pure elimination. Rather, these are the end points of a smooth spectrum of possible outcomes, between which there are mixed cases of partial elimination and partial reduction. Only empirical research . . . can tell us where on that spectrum our own case will fall. Perhaps we should speak here, more liberally, of "revisionary materialism" instead of concentrating on the more radical possibility of an across-the-board elimination.

Churchland's ultimate concession that the psychology-based conceptual framework currently used by most academic disciplines and popular culture may not end up being completely eradicated and replaced by a neuroscience framework appears to recognize the fundamental differences between the life of the mind and neuroscientific descriptions of the brain's operation. Many people believe that no matter how exhaustively scientists are able to describe the physical conditions for consciousness, this does not mean that the mental dimensions of the *self* will ever be *reducible* to these physical states. Why? Because in the final analysis, the physical and mental dimensions of the *self* are qualitatively different realms, each with its own distinctive vocabulary, logic, and organizing principles. According to this view, even if scientists were able to map out your complete brain activity at the moment you

Churchland,
On Eliminative Materialism

were having an original idea or experiencing an emotional epiphany, that neurobiological description of your brain would provide no clue as to the nature of your personal experience at that moment. Articulating and communicating the rich texture of those experiences would take a very different language and logic.



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

Analyzing Eliminative Materialism

3.16

- Explain the reasons why materialists believe that to fully understand the nature of the mind we have to fully understand the nature of the brain.
- Based on your own experience, describe some examples of the close, interactive relationship between the physical dimensions of your *self* and the psychological aspects of your mind and experience.
- Explain why Paul Churchland believes that a close examination of the history of science suggests that we are at the beginning of a conceptual revolution in understanding the nature of the mind.
- Explain the arguments against eliminative materialism. Which arguments do you find most persuasive? Why?

Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Self Is Embodied Subjectivity*

EDMUND HUSSERL

(1859–1938)

Philosopher. Husserl founded the field of phenomenology, thereby becoming one of the most influential philosophers of the Twentieth Century. In his *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901) he advocated getting back to things in themselves, that is, objects as they are presented in actual perception.



Philosophers such as the German thinker **Edmund Husserl** (1859–1938) and the French philosopher **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** (1908–1961) take a very different approach to the *self* and the mind/body “problem.” From their standpoint, the division between the “mind” and the “body” is a product of confused thinking. The simple fact is, we experience our *self* as a unity in which the mental and physical are seamlessly woven together. This unity is our primary experience of our *selves*, and we only begin to doubt it when we use our minds to concoct abstract notions of a separate “mind” and “body.” But these ideas of “mind” and “body” as radically different entities that need to be connected in some way—the “ghost in the machine”—are not real, any more than ghosts or Leprechauns are real. They’re mental constructions of our imaginations, not expressions of reality or even accurate descriptions of our experience. As Merleau-Ponty observes, “I live in my body”—there is no mystery of “my body” to be explained. At the basis of our explicit, theoretical knowing, there is an implicit, pretheoretical knowing that includes our lived body and lived-situation in the world. This gives rise to the distinction between the “body as object” on the one hand, and, on the other, the “lived body” that can never be objectified or known in a completely objective sort of way.

For example, when you first wake up in the morning and experience your gradually expanding awareness of where you are and how you feel, what are your first thoughts of the day? Perhaps something along the lines of “Oh no, it’s time to get up, but I’m still sleepy, but I have an important appointment that I can’t be late for” and so on. Note that at no point do you doubt that the “I” you refer to is a single integrated entity, a blending of mental, physical, and emotional structured around a core identity: your *self*. It’s only later, when you’re reading Descartes or discussing the pos-

sibility of reincarnation with a friend that you begin creating ideas such as independent “minds,” “bodies,” “souls,” or, in the case of Freud, an “unconscious.” According to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, it’s these mental creations that result in the apparent mysteries and paradoxes such as the mind/body “problem.” But if we honestly and accurately examine our direct and immediate experience of our *selves*, these alleged mysteries, paradoxes, and “problems” fall away. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “There is not a duality of substances but only the dialectic of living being in its biological milieu.” In other words, our “living body” is a natural synthesis of mind and biology, and any attempts to divide them into separate entities are artificial and nonsensical.

The underlying question is “What aspect of our experience is the most ‘real’?” Is it the experience we have of our *selves* in moments such as when we are first arising, or the experiences we have when we are thinking abstractly with such concepts as “mind” and “body”? From Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s vantage point, it’s the moments of direct, primal experience that are the most real, what they call the *Lebenswelt* or “lived world,” which is the fundamental ground of our being and consciousness. To take another example, consider your experience when you are in the midst of activities such as dancing, playing a sport, or performing musically—what is your experience of your *self*? Most likely, you’re completely absorbed in the moment, your mind and body functioning as one integrated entity. For Merleau-Ponty, this unified experience of your *self* is the paradigm or model you should use to understand your nature.

This approach to philosophy is known as **phenomenology**, and it is derived from the conviction that all knowledge of our *selves* and our world is based on the “phenomena” of experience. After centuries of elaborate religious and philosophical systems of thought, phenomenology sought to return “to the things themselves” something that many established philosophies had lost sight of. In the words of philosopher **John Bannan**:

This return was accomplished primarily by beginning with a careful description of *things* as they appear and of the *consciousness* in which they appear—a description sensitive to the richness and complexity that characterize both things and consciousness before they are refined by philosophical analysis. It is this richness, the phenomenologist feels, that previous philosophies have let slip away by attempting to analyze reality as if it were fashioned according to some mechanical, biological, or spiritual model. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty argues that “every philosophy should begin with an inventory, a description of consciousness . . . as it appears immediately, the ‘phenomenon’ of consciousness in all its original variety.”

Phenomenologists do not assume that there are more “fundamental” levels of reality beyond that of conscious human experience. Consistent with this ontological (having to do with the nature of *being* or *existence*) commitment is the belief that explanations for human behavior and experience are not to be sought by appeal to phenomena that are somehow behind, beneath, or beyond the phenomena of lived human experience, but instead are to be sought within the field of human experience itself, utilizing terminology and concepts appropriate to this field. And when we examine our *selves* at this fundamental level of direct human experience, we discover that our mind and body are unified, not separate. It is this primal consciousness Merleau-Ponty notes in his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, that is the foundation for our perception of the world and our knowledge about it.

Consciousness must be reckoned as a *self-contained system of Being*, as a system of *Absolute being*, into which nothing can penetrate and from which nothing can



Edmund Husserl

JOHN BANNAN

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Phenomenology The study of conscious experience. Phenomenologists do not assume any reality beyond conscious human experience.

MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY

(1908–1961)

Phenomenologist. In his major work *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) Merleau-Ponty argues, like Husserl, that perception is fundamental to our knowledge of the world. Consciousness is a dynamic form that actively structures our experience.

escape. On the other side, the whole spatio-temporal world, to which man and the human ego claim to belong as subordinate singular realities, is *according to its own meaning mere intentional Being*, a Being, therefore, which has the merely secondary, relative sense of a Being for a consciousness.

For Merleau-Ponty, everything that we are aware of—and can possibly know—is contained within our own consciousness. It's impossible for us to get “outside” of our consciousness because it defines the boundaries of our personal universe. The so-called real world of objects existing in space and time initially exists only as objects of my consciousness. Yet in a cognitive sleight-of-hand, we act as if the space/time world is primary and our immediate consciousness is secondary. This is an inversion of the way things actually are: it is our consciousness that is primary and the space/time world that is secondary, existing fundamentally as the object of our consciousness.

Nor is science exempt from condemnation, according to the phenomenologists, for scientists are guilty of the same flawed thinking as expressed in abstract philosophical and religious theories. Too often scientists treat their abstract theories as if they take precedence over the rich and intuitive reality of immediate lived experience. In cases when the two worlds conflict, scientists automatically assume that the scientific perspective is correct, and the direct experience of the individual wrong. This is the difficulty we pointed out with the concept of the unconscious: it was considered by Freud and many of his followers to be of such supreme authority that no individual's contrasting point of view can measure up to the ultimate truth of the unconscious interpretation. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes the crucial point that these theories couldn't even exist without the primal reality of lived experience to serve as their foundation. And *then* these theories have the arrogance to dismiss this fundamental reality as somehow secondary or derivative.

Scientific points of view are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted without explicitly mentioning it, that other point of view, namely that of the consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me.

As a philosophical theory of knowledge, phenomenology is distinctive in the sense that its goal is not to *explain* experience, but rather to *clarify our understanding* of it. A phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty sees his aim of describing what he sees and then assuming that his description will strike a familiar chord with us, stimulating us to say, “I understand what you're saying—that makes sense to me!” From this perspective, the responsibility of philosophy is not to provide explanations but to seek the root and genesis of meaning, “to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason,” to help us think and see things more clearly. For example, to develop a clear understanding of your “being in love,” you need to delay using elaborate psychological theories and instead begin by describing the phenomena of the experience in a clear, vivid fashion, trying to uncover the meaning of what you are experiencing. *Then* you can begin developing concepts and theories to help you make sense of the phenomena of “being in love.” The danger of using theories prematurely is that you may very well distort your actual experience, forcing it to conform to someone else's idea of what “being in love” means instead of clearly understanding *your* unique experience. Concepts and theories are essential for understanding our *selves* and our world. It's simply a question of which comes first—the concepts/theories or the phenomena of experience that the concepts/theories are designed to explain. For phenomenologists, it's essential that we

always begin (and return regularly to) the phenomena of our lived experience. Otherwise, we run the risk of viewing our experience through conceptual or theoretical “lenses” that distort rather than clarify. For instance, in providing a phenomenological analysis of “being in love,” you might begin by describing precisely what your immediate responses are: physically, emotionally, cognitively. I’m currently in love and,

- I feel
- I think
- My physical response
- I spontaneously

By recording the direct phenomena of our experience, we have the basic data needed to reveal the complex meaning of this experience, and begin to develop a clearer understanding of what “being in love” is all about, by utilizing concepts and theories appropriate to the reality of our lived experience.

What exactly is “consciousness”? For Merleau-Ponty it is a *dynamic form* responsible for actively structuring our conscious ideas and physical behavior. In this sense it is fundamentally different from Hume’s and Locke’s concept of the mind as a repository for sensations, or the behaviorists’ notion of the mind as the sum total of the reactions to the physical stimuli that an organism receives. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of consciousness as a dynamic form that actively organizes and structures our mind and body (our *self*) resembles Aristotle’s idea of *soul*, which he conceived of as nothing other than “the form of the body”:

One can no more ask if the body and the soul are one than if the wax and the impression it receives are one, or speaking generally the matter of each thing and the form of which it is the matter; for admitting that the terms unity and existence are used in many senses, the paramount sense is that of actuality. We have then, given a general definition of what the soul is: it is substance expressed as form. It is this which makes a body what it is.



THINK PHILOSOPHICALLY

Applying Phenomenology

3.17

PHILOSOPHER'S NOTEBOOK



Accomplished writers often have a special talent for representing human experience in a rich, vibrant, and textured way. The French novelist **Marcel Proust** is renowned for articulating the phenomena of consciousness in a very phenomenological way. Consider the following descriptions of experiences and analyze their effectiveness from a phenomenological perspective on the *self*. Then compose your own description of an experience from a phenomenological point of view by detailing the phenomena of consciousness.

Waking from Sleep

When a man is asleep, he has in a circle round him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly host. Instinctively, when he awakes, he looks to these, and in an instant reads off his own position on the earth’s surface the time that has elapsed during his slumbers; but this ordered procession is apt to grow confused, and to break its ranks . . . suppose that he

dozes off in an armchair, for instance, after dinner: then the world will go hurtling out of orbit, the magic chair will carry him at full speed through time and space, and when he opens his eyes again he will imagine that he went to sleep months earlier in another place . . . for me it was enough if, in my own bed, my sleep was so heavy as completely to relax my consciousness; for then I lost all sense of the place in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness: I was more destitute than a cave dweller; but then the memory—not yet of the place in which I was, but of the various other places where I had lived and might now possibly be—would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of non-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself: but in a flash I would traverse centuries of civilization, and out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, then of shirts with turned-down collars, would gradually piece together the original components of my ego. (Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time 20*)


Recognizing Another Person

But then, even in the most insignificant details of our daily life, none of us can be said to constitute a material whole, which is identical for everyone, and need only be turned up like a page in an account-book or the record of a will; our social personality is a creation of the thoughts of other people. Even the simple act which we describe as “seeing someone we know” is to some extent an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the person we see with all the notions we have already formed about him, and in the total picture of him which we compose in our minds those notions have certainly the principal place. In the end they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice as if it were no more than a transparent envelope, that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is these notions which we recognize and to which we listen. (Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time 5–6*)

Describing a Previous Relationship

I have said that Albertine had not seemed to me that day to be the same as on previous days, and that each time I saw her she was to appear different. But I felt at that moment that certain modifications in the appearance, the importance, the stature of a person may also be due to the variability of certain states of consciousness interposed between that person and ourselves . . . and each of these Albertines was different, as is each appearance of the dancer whose colours, form, character, are transmuted according to the endlessly varied play of a projected limelight . . . I ought to give a different name to each of the selves who subsequently thought about Albertine; I ought still more to give a different name to each of the Albertines who appeared before me, never the same, like those seas—called by me simply and for the sake of convenience “the sea”—that succeeded one another. (Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove 1010*)

Making Connections: *In Search of the Self*

 hat is the *self*? We have seen in this chapter that this seemingly innocent question is anything but simple. It's certainly curious that this entity that is so personal and always present to us turns out to be so elusive and enigmatic. It should be some comfort to realize that the greatest minds in history have wrestled with this question without reaching conclusive answers. Is the *self* an immor-

tal soul, distinct from the physical body? Is the *self* simply a receptacle for the stream of sensations moving through our consciousness? Is the *self* defined by its ability to think and reflect? Is the *self* an organizing principle that integrates all of the elements of experience into a personal unity? Are there unconscious dimensions to the *self*? Is the *self* defined by its observable behavior? What is the relationship of consciousness and the physical body? Is the mind/body “problem” the result of confused thinking? Is the *self* identical with the brain or some part of the brain?

Some thinkers have argued that it is a mistake to try to understand the *self* in isolation from others. Instead, we can only be understood in the context of the complex web of social relations that constitute and define us. This was the view of Aristotle, who observed:

If there were a being who could not live in society or who did not need to live in society because he was self-sufficient, then he would have to either be animal or a god. He could not be a real part of the state. A social instinct is implanted in all people by their nature.

Feminist philosophers have also advocated this point of view, as expressed in the following passage from **Eve Browning Cole’s** book *Philosophy and Feminist Criticism: An Introduction*:

We have already noted the extraordinary isolation of Descartes’ metaphysical musings; he cuts off not only the instructions of his perceptive faculties, but also the entirety of his human social surroundings, to seek a certainty accessible only to the lone and insular conscious node “I.” A feminist critique of Cartesian method might well begin with just this feature of his project.

The Cartesian ego, rather than being the ground for certainty and the Archimedean point which some philosophers have taken it to be, may in fact be the result of a mistaken abstraction. Feminist philosophers such as Caroline Whitbeck and Lorraine Code have convincingly argued that a preferable starting point for understanding the contents of human consciousness is *the relational self*, the self presented as involved in and importantly constituted by its connectedness to others. Each of us at this moment is connected as it were by invisible threads to an indefinite number of specific other human beings. . . .

Starting with the concept of the relational self would greatly have changed the course of Descartes’ meditations. If other persons are not just colorful wallpaper the design of which I contemplate from inside a mental fishbowl but actually part of who I am, then distancing myself from them in thought and supposing that I am the only consciousness in the universe becomes, if not impossible, extremely illogical. What would I hope to accomplish? If on the other had I begin by granting them mentality and humanity, I will proceed by considering the specific ways in which their contributions to my mental life are made.

And, of course, this was the view of Karl Marx who observed “the real nature of man is the totality of social relations.” Rather than having a fixed human nature, Marx believed that, “All history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature.” Humans can only be understood by the cultures in which we live, and the social and economic forces that shape these communities. These themes are the focus of chapter 10, “What Is Social Justice?”

Other philosophers, including existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, believe that human selves are unique in the world because we exist in time, living in a past, present, and future. To truly understand the *self*, it is necessary to grasp the notion

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Do you agree with Karl Marx that, “the real nature of man is the totality of social relations”? Why?

that we are continually projecting ourselves into the future. We are not static organisms waiting to be analyzed and dissected—we are dynamic living creatures, changing and evolving on a daily basis, propelled by a future that exists only in our imaginations. As Sartre explains in *Existentialism as a Humanism*:

What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing—as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. . . . But what do we mean to say by this, but that man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table? For we mean to say that man primarily exists—that man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so.

We will be exploring this perspective on the *self* in depth in chapter 4, “Am I Free? Freedom and Determinism.”

These are some of the questions that we have explored in this chapter, and that we will continue to examine throughout this text. But in a larger sense, these are questions that you will continue to explore throughout your life. Your *self* is a wonder, a miracle, an extraordinary creation. When Socrates urged each of us to “Know thyself” and warned that “The unexamined life is not worth living,” he was issuing a challenge that requires a lifetime commitment and our mind’s best work. But it is in the process of striving to understand our *self* that we may also discover the purpose of our existence and the path to living a productive and fulfilling life.

Students Thinking About Philosophy: *Perspectives on the Self*

This chapter has explored the deceptively complex question, “Who Am I?” One of the great ironies of life is that though we have spent our entire waking lives with ourselves, the precise nature of our “*self*” remains elusive and enigmatic. The philosophers and psychologists we have studied in this chapter have endeavored to unravel the mysteries of consciousness, personal identity, and the soul. It is likely you have found that in studying them you have gained both insight and confusion as your understanding of these issues has deepened and your questions have become more intellectually sophisticated.

This essay is an opportunity to express your own views on the nature of the “*self*” in a form that is thoughtful and coherent. After reviewing, discussing, and reflecting on the various perspectives regarding the *self* that you read about and discussed in this chapter, compose a paper which reflects your own synthesis of these issues. Your point of view should be well-reasoned and seek to integrate a variety of different philosophical perspectives. In addition, you should weave into your analysis your own personal reflections and life experiences to illustrate the conceptual points that you are making. One such student synthesis follows, entitled “Perceptions of Self.”

Perceptions of Self

Jessie Lange

Years ago my parents met in an elevator in Manhattan and in an instant my existence was made possible. Had my father missed that elevator, had his dentist been running late, he might never have stepped on and seen my mother in her rainbow-striped socks and mini skirt, struggling with a stack of boxes. If she had not smiled, or he had not held the lobby door or gotten up the guts to suggest coffee sometime, or if my mother had not stood next to him on Fifth Avenue and leapt the boundary of timidity to say, "How about right now?" because she knew how easily "sometime" could become "never" as memories of encounters faded and crumpled phone numbers in wallets slipped unnoticed between the cracks of every day life—if not for everything falling into place: no love, no marriage, no me. When I was two-years-old at a garden party, I made my way precariously across the lawn towards the sparkling rectangle of swimming pool and toppled in. All backs turned, and only one woman saw me. She leapt in with all of her clothing on to pull me free of the suffocating water.

These are the stories of how I was created that circle my consciousness, and that have shaped who I am today, my *self*. It is these stories and experiences that have made me a strong believer in fate: a sensation that things fall into place eventually. This is my perception, this is my overarching belief, and this is myself. Because really, there are so many reasons that none of us should be here, but here we all are, all of these free floating entities miraculously arrived at this place, what Kurt Vonnegut calls "beams of light." Our inner self, our core: invisible and fluctuating and strong. But where do we find this "self"? Where is it contained? And where does it come from? From my experience, it comes partially from our history. From the stories that we have been told that shape what we believe and how we see the world. A chance meeting, a near drowning.

A friend once professed that our self is simply our perceptions. That *all* we are is just a collection of these perceptions: nothing more and nothing less than what we see, smell, taste, touch, and hear. There are moments when this seems valid. In Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the protagonist tastes a madeleine cookie dipped in tea, and is all of a sudden transported, through the taste and texture, to his childhood and everything contained within it. As B. F. Skinner claims, to a certain extent our perspectives on the world are at the mercy of our conditioned responses to our experiences. I walked in a garden one day under trees that came together over the path like a pointed Gothic arch. Or, perhaps, like a small wooden skull overturned on a shelf. I had taken up rowing months before, and all of a sudden trees looked like boats and my present seemed like nothing more than the sum total of all of my past perceptions. What would that arch of trees been before I learned what rowing meant? Perhaps at the age of four or five, I would have looked up on that garden walk and seen an empty tunnel awaiting the clatter of the silver subway in New York City, or the valleys between the humps of cement in Washington Square Park that I ran through on the way home from school. But once I knew the weight of the wooden edge of a boat overturned on my shoulder as I carried it dripping back inside and slid it carefully into its slots, once I had seen the wooden shells all stacked, all in rows, I walked under those trees and they were the enormous ghosts of those overturned boats. My perception, the world as only I see it, myself.





As much as stories, memories of my past, and my sensory perceptions of the world have shaped who I am, I believe that ourselves must be more than *only* our memories and our perceptions, the stories that we have heard and things we have seen. Who we are is also defined by our ability to take these things in, to observe them and to understand where these beliefs and perceptions came from. We are not helpless victims of conditioning because we have the ability to *reason* and to *challenge* our life experience. Only then can we arrive at our true “self,” a self that is, to use Kant’s term, “created” through contemplation and analysis. For example, many people might see coincidences in life as nothing more than coincidence, and near accidents as nothing more than chance. I have thought about my parent’s meeting, about the things in my own life that have fallen into place, and come to the conclusion that there is some order to things. This belief is not solely rational and not solely empirical but rather a combination of Descartes’ *rationalism* and Locke’s *empiricism*. As humans, we experience life, we think through what we have experienced *because we can*, and we arrive at a conclusion, a belief. It is this belief that is our own and that defines us. Are we always conscious of ourselves? Are we always aware of where our beliefs come from? No, of course not. Often we are caught up entirely in *doing* or we see an arch of trees and the pattern becomes something that we cannot define or put a finger on. However, the potential for examination, consciousness and understanding is always there. The potential to bring to light the forces that have shaped our lives and to examine them critically is what makes us conscious beings.

Making the unconscious conscious, however, is not where self-understanding and growth ends. Once we are able to recognize where our impressions have come from, once we step outside of our selves and become aware of *how* we are seeing the world and *why* we are seeing it as we do, we then have the opportunity to act on this analysis and to make choices that shape and form the selves that we most want to become. Sartre’s view of the self is as an entity that is being always projected towards the future, creating and recreating itself as it goes through reflection and choices. When we have acknowledged what has been conditioned, it is this self-consciousness that gives us the freedom to reshape our lives, to envision our ideal future self and to make the choices that will launch us in that direction. Sartre’s theory of the human experience is self-perpetuating: the more insight you have into your self the more freedom you have to create who you want to become, and the more freedom you have, the deeper your insights into what it means to create and live a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Many philosophers have suggested that the self is something that is separate from the physical body. That the self is somehow something that lives on after our body fails. While I do not believe the two are entirely separate, I do believe that our spirits do not just disappear with our bodies. One way I define myself is as a writer. I write because it is the best way I know to work through life in an active way, bringing energy to the world around me rather than passing throughout it unthinking, using it as a backdrop for a vacuous existence. I also write to preserve both my own perspective and what I know of the world I live in and the people who are important to me. Like Marcel Proust’s endless striving to capture an entire life in a volume (he was still writing on his deathbed), writing is an obsession to capture everything so that it is not lost with the physical self.

For me, the issue of how our selves continue to exist after death is best understood by a belief of the ancient Romans. On a trip to the Vatican Museum in Rome, a guide explained why the Romans created so many tombs and monuments, and carvings dedicated to a single life. The ancients, he said, did not



believe in a conventional afterlife, so all that remained after death was non-existence. But if you could capture even a single part of an individual—in art, in writing, in stone—so that years later, centuries later, one person would see that little bit of lost soul, then in that moment of recognition, the person who had died would continue to exist like a flash of light in the settled dust of the universe; a non-entity that flickers on like a light in the dark void of nothingness. Similarly, the Greek Olympians competed not only for a crown, for money, and for fame in their lifetime, but for something far more pressing—immortality: for a way in which to be remembered and so “conquer” death.

Locke goes further than many philosophers in the soul/body issue to make the claim that the self is not even tied to a single being, a single soul, but is rather a consciousness that passes from person to person—from a prince to a cobbler, from one being to another over the centuries. This makes sense in that it is the evolution of humankind, the consciousness and understanding of self that has grown and changed and evolved over thousands of years through interactions, experiences, and the questioning of life’s purpose. It is a growth of self-awareness that is the product of philosophic study as ideas pass from one mind to the next.

How do our “selves” fit into a “social” context? Are we defined by our “social” selves? What is a more accurate measure of self—who we *think* we are, or whom others see us as? I believe that our self is not *only* defined by those around us, but the people in our lives certainly impact who we are becoming, and how we see ourselves. You only need to think of the people who have played a key role in your life, changing, in sometimes just a moment, the whole way in which you view the world. And, of course, there are individuals who know better than most who we *are*. These are the people in our lives who recognize us not simply for what we believe we are, but also for what we value about our selves—they see us for what we can become. Like holding up a mirror, these people who take the time and have the insight and empathy to understand enough of the many facets that make up our personalities to allow us to see ourselves more clearly.

I can recall vividly an evening, in which an acquaintance who had at some point become a friend said to me, “You know, it’s funny: you’re so much different than what I first thought. You were so quiet. I thought you were just this nice quiet person, but you turned out to be not that at all. All of a sudden you just popped out. You’re so crazy!” In that instant, I had the bizarre sensation of myself “popping out,” springing forth. It is odd to think of it that way, but she was right—that is exactly how it felt. People have images of self: who they want to be; who they want people to think they are; what they think they truly are underneath—hidden away, trapped and unrecognized. But once that “hidden person” emerges, “pops out,” it is often not what you might have thought it was. Not as serious, not as profound, but *you*. Comfortably you.

Somehow this friend saw me, recognized me, and held up the mirror. And for the first time, perhaps, I had an almost physical sensation of myself—as though I could see it and feel it, a glowing beam of light before me. Not perfect, not profound, not all that I aspired to be and was moving towards, but me nonetheless. And at the same time, I had a sense of all the other selves around me and thus the smallness and inconsequence of my existence. It was a glimmer of me emerging as something different than what I’d once imagined: a wavering dot on the map, a flash of light somewhere in time, and one of the millions of beams of light being projected towards the future that really shouldn’t be here but are here simply because an elevator arrives just when it should, or a pair of hands pulls us from the suffocating waters of non-existence.

Concept Review

- The concept and nature of the *self* has been an ongoing, and evolving, subject of inquiry among philosophers since the time of Socrates. To grapple with the concept of *self* is to begin to explore what it is to know, to believe, to think, to be conscious.
- For Socrates and Plato, the *self* was synonymous with the *soul*. Every human being, they believed, possessed an immortal soul that survived the physical body. Human souls belong to the realm of ideas, the Platonic *ideal*. Plato, in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus*, further defines the soul or self as having three components: Reason, Physical Appetite, and Spirit (or passion). These three components may work in concert, or in opposition; although Reason is always striving toward truth and knowledge, Physical Appetite is often yearning to satisfy basic material needs.
- Neoplatonism, a third-century Roman intellectual movement, was based on the dualistic Platonic concept of an immortal soul within a mortal body. Roman Christians, most notably St. Augustine (354–430 C.E.), connected Platonic and Neoplatonic concepts of a separate and immortal soul with emerging Christian doctrine.
- Early modern European philosophers, including René Descartes (1596–1650), expanded the concept of the “self” to include the thinking, reasoning mind. Descartes and other rationalist philosophers believe the natural world—and human nature—is to be subjected to independent rational inquiry. For Descartes, the act of thinking about the self—of being *self-conscious*—is in itself proof that there is a “self.” However, Descartes still demonstrates the powerful influence of Platonic thought and Christian theology in his distinction between the physical body (which he believes is material, mortal, and nonthinking) and an immortal, nonmaterial thinking *self*, governed by God’s will and the laws of reason.
- John Locke (1632–1704) approached the problem of the *self* from the perspective of an empiricist—someone who believes that sensory experience is the primary source of our knowledge of the world and the *self*. Consciousness—or, more specifically, self-consciousness—of our constantly perceiving *self* is necessary to what Locke called “personal identity,” or knowledge of the *self* as a person. However, Locke sharply breaks with the continuous tradition from Plato to Descartes that the *self* is immortal and separate from the body; instead, he argues, our personal identity and the immortal “soul” in which that identity is located are very different entities. Memory—often faulty—is one frail link that connects our “self” at any one moment to our “self” at any past time.
- David Hume (1711–1776) went radically further than Locke to speculate that there is no “self” at all. Our memories and experiences, Hume argued, are made up of *impressions* and *ideas* with no one “constant and invariable,” unified identity. When we are not actively perceiving, or conscious of ourselves perceiving, Hume notes, there is no basis for the belief that there is any “self” at all. In a further rupture with earlier philosophy and doctrine, Hume concludes that if there is no “self” while the body is living, then there can certainly be no immortal “self” or “soul” that goes on after the death of the physical body.
- Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) found Hume’s views about the potential for further human development to be alarmingly cynical. In returning to Hume’s starting point—that the self is made up of its sensory experiences—Kant speculated that those experiences, far from being random and disconnected, are in fact arranged and given order by the conscious self based on *a priori* organizing rules. If Hume’s view of the mind was a kind of passive “theatre” across which random experiences flitted, Kant proposed an actively engaged and synthesizing intelligence that constructed knowledge based on its experiences. This synthesizing faculty—Kant’s version of the “self”—transcends the senses and unifies experience. In addition, Kant proposed a second “self,” the *ego*, which consists of those traits that make us each a unique personality.
- Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, proposed a radical new way to consider the *self*. For Freud, the *self* is composed of both rational, thinking consciousness and a more primitive and impulsive unconscious. The conscious self constantly monitors the unconscious—yet the unconscious still bubbles up through slips of the tongue, dreams, and neurotic behaviors.
- The behaviorist approach to the self holds that the “self” is best observed and defined through individual behavior. The great advantage of behavior—unlike an invisible “soul” or transcendent consciousness—is that it can be controlled, observed, collected, and analyzed. How you behave is “who” you are. The behaviorist Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976) attempted to finally discredit what he called “Descartes’ myth”—that the soul is independent from the body, a belief Ryle classifies as a “category mistake”—by seeing the *self* as a “pattern of behavior,” not some abstraction caught up in a false spatial metaphor. However, Ryle acknowledges that this reconciliation of Cartesian dualism still does not adequately address the nature of the *self*—which is surely more than a collection of observable behaviors.
- Materialism holds that the “self” is inseparable from the substance of the brain and the physiology of the body. Contemporary advances in neurophysiology allow scientists to observe the living brain as it works to process information, create ideas, and move through dream states. Philosopher Paul Churchland has worked to

resolve the complexities of the relationship between mind and brain through the theory of “eliminative materialism.” Churchland argues that “folk psychology,” or more traditional “commonsense” ways of understanding psychology, will not find neat and obvious parallels through the discoveries of contemporary neuroscience. In fact, he claims, that “older framework will simply be eliminated” by advances in neuroscience. This new, accurate, objective, and scientifically based understanding of our “selves” will, in Churchland’s view, “contribute substantially toward a more peaceful and humane society.”

- Phenomenologists Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) simply dismiss Cartesian dualism as a product of our imagination. The living, physical body and its experiences are all one, a natural synthesis, what Husserl and Merleau-Ponty called the *Lebenswelt* (a German word meaning “lived world”). Phenomenology seeks not to explain experience, but rather to clarify our understanding of it. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), also a phenomenologist, further developed the concept of the primacy of lived existence through the philosophy of existentialism.

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www.researchnavigator.com

Chapter 3 explores important questions in metaphysics, or questions of those things that transcend the limits of experience and ordinary knowledge. Hence, important questions about the nature of the self arise in metaphysical inquiry. For further research on questions of the self, use the tools available to you in Research Navigator.

As you investigate this topic, consider this question: "In what ways can our identity, philosophically speaking, transform over our lifetime?"

- **ContentSelect:** search in the Philosophy, Religion, and Sociology databases using the search terms "identity," "self," and "consciousness."
- **Link Library:** search in the Philosophy database under terms “determinism,” “free will,” and the names “David Hume,” “Immanuel Kant,” and “John Locke.”
- **New York Times on the Web:** search in the Philosophy database using the search terms “consciousness” and “self.”

For additional study resources for this chapter, go to: www.prenhall.com/chaffee/chapter3



The Primary Source: Philosophical Readings and Commentary

- 3.1 St. Augustine, *City of God*,
- 3.2 St. Augustine, *Confessions*
- 3.3 Descartes, René, *Discourse on Method*
- 3.4 Descartes, René, *Meditation I*
- 3.5 Descartes, René, *Meditation II*
- 3.6 Descartes, René, *Meditation IV*
- 3.7 Descartes, René, *Meditation V*
- 3.8 Descartes, René, *Meditation VI*
- 3.9 Descartes, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy*
- 3.10 Freud, Sigmund, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Two Selves: Conscious and Unconscious
- 3.12 Hume, David, *Treatise on Human Nature*
- 3.13 Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
- 3.14 Kant, Immanuel, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*
- 3.15 Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*
- 3.16 Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Practical Reason*
- 3.17 Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*
- 3.18 Locke, John, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*
- 3.19 Milindaphana, *The Simile of the Chariot*
- 3.20 Plato, *Phaedo*, Immortality of the Soul
- 3.21 Plato, *Phaedrus*, The Chariot Analogy
- 3.23 Ryle, Gilbert, *Concept of Mind*, Introduction