Modern Art, New

CHAPTER SIX
Self

Though man is a unique individual,—he is equally the whole, the ideal whole, the subjective existence of society as thought and experienced. He exists in reality as the representation and the real mind of social existence, and as the sum of human manifestations of life.

— Karl Marx, manuscript of 1844

I think, therefore I am. . . . But what then am I? A thing which thinks.

— Descartes, Meditations

OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Describe yourself as a character in a novel. Describe the gestures, postures, revealing habits, characteristic word phrases you use. Try to imitate yourself, by way of parody. What kind of person would you describe yourself as being?

2. Explain who you are to a visitor from another planet.

3. Who are you? Compare the descriptions you would provide

   a. on a job application

   b. on a first date

   c. in a talk with your parents, as you are trying to tell them what you have decided to do with your life

   d. in a trial with you as the defendant, trying to convince the jury of your "good character"

   e. as the "I" in the statement "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes).

4. What is involved in being a "human being"? What (or who) would be included in your characterization? What (or who) would be excluded?

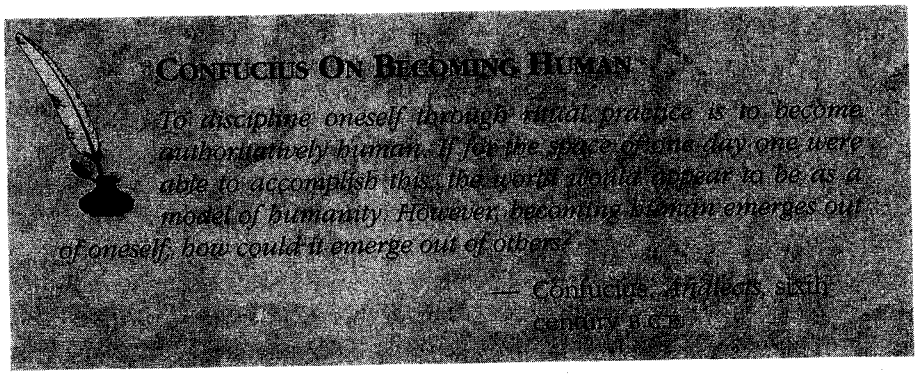
5. Is it ever possible to know—really know—another person? Imagine what it would be like to suspect that you can never know another person's true feelings, that all his or her movements and gestures are intended to fool you and that you can no longer assume that what the individual means (for example, by a smile or a frown) is what you mean by the same outward movement. How do you feel about this?

6. You say to yourself, "I am going to move my arm." You decide to do it, and—lo and behold—your arm moves. How did you do that?

The Essential Self

With the concept of rationality, we found ourselves moving away from questions about pure reality and back to questions about ourselves and our own activities. Indeed, with the concept of

"subjective truth," we found a renewed emphasis on *personal* questions, questions about the self rather than questions about the world. So we find ourselves raising a new set of issues, questioning what seemed to us so clear and unproblematic before. What is the "self"? What is it to be a person? What do you know when you "know yourself"? What is someone telling you to be when he or she tells you "just to be yourself"?



Our conceptions of self, like our conceptions of God, religion, and the nature of reality, turn out to be extremely varied, different not only for different people and cultures but for each of us from time to time and in different contexts. For example, in Opening Question 3, you probably described yourself on a job application as an industrious worker, with so many years of school and so much experience, with a certain grade point average and a certain amount of ambition. In defending yourself in court, on the other hand, you probably thought very little of your achievements in school; rather, you tried to define yourself in terms of your good deeds, your good intentions, the number of your friends, and the fact that you tend to be gentle with children and animals. To see how bound up with their context such descriptions tend to be, we need only switch them, with shocking results. Imagine yourself giving an employer the information you would more appropriately give to a person on a date. Or consider how you would feel about a supposedly close friend who told you at great length only about his or her achievements in school. What we think of ourselves and what we think of as significant about ourselves—and others—depend to a great extent on the context in which we are trying to explain who we are.

Yet we all have an undeniable sense that, beneath the various descriptions of ourselves that we produce for various occasions, there is within us a "real self," a self that does not vary from context to context. In the Judeo-Christian tradition (and before that, in some ancient religions and in the thinking of the Greeks, for example) this invariant self, our "real self," has been called the **soul**. Philosophers have called the "real self" the **essential self**—that is, the set of characteristics that defines a particular person.

The experience of our real, or essential, self is familiar to us in a great many circumstances. For example, if we are forced to go to a party with people we don't like and do not feel comfortable with, if we are forced to behave

in an artificial way, to talk in language that is more vulgar than usual or more sophisticated than usual, to talk about subjects that do not interest us at all, we will very likely describe our experience in phrases such as "I couldn't be myself," or "I felt like a phony." As another example, picture yourself filling out one of those dozens of questionnaires that are forced upon you during every school year; you dutifully list your birth date, home address, sex, major and perhaps grades, military service, awards, marital status, and so on. A natural reaction to such forms is that they are irrelevant to knowing who you really are. They don't ask the "right" questions, and they leave out any reference to what you and your friends think is most important about you. In other words, they don't even begin to get at your essential self, the personal self that is the "real you." This chapter is about the nature of this "real you" and your relationships with other people.

As we have found in other philosophical investigations, the most obvious answer often disappears as soon as we begin to follow our thinking to its consequences, and what once seemed simple turns into a wide variety of answers that sometimes compete with one another. For example, one answer to the question, "Who am I?" or "What is my real, essential self?" is the religious answer; you really are just a soul before God, and all else—your worldly goods and accomplishments, even your physical body and its various pleasures and pains—is insignificant, unimportant. Some people, on the other hand, think of themselves as just another animal, caught up in the process of staying alive and enjoying themselves. A very different answer emerges from Descartes and many other modern philosophers; they say the real self is the conscious self—that is, the thinking self, the self that is aware of itself. There is a powerful contemporary view of the self that insists that there is, ultimately, no set self, that it is a process of creation that goes on as long as we are alive. And there is an Eastern view (in Buddhism, in particular) that teaches us that the self is ultimately unreal, that there is no self at all, only an illusion of one. Finally, and perhaps most important, there is the suggestion that the self is not an individual entity at all, but rather the product of an entire society; your self, in other words, is not really your own, after all.

Self as Body, Self as Consciousness

What am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? It is a thing which doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels.

— *Descartes,* Meditations, *1641*

A person's **self-identity** is the way he or she characterizes his or her essential self. This includes both a general characterization—as a human being, as a man or woman, as a creature before God, as an American, as a Christian or

Jew, or as a member of any other large organization or group—and a particular description—as the tallest person in the class, as the winner of the Olympic gold medal in pole vaulting in 1990, as the person who is lucky enough to be married to J, and so on. Sometimes we make these essential characteristics explicit, but even when we don't, they almost always enter into our behavior and our attitudes toward ourselves. Most of us would not think of naming our height as part of our essential self-identity; but, in fact, if we think of the way we stand or walk and if we pay attention to our feelings when we are with people considerably taller or shorter than we are, it becomes evident that such seemingly unimportant characteristics may indeed enter into our conceptions of our essential self. So, too, a person's physical condition is usually a key ingredient in his or her conception of self and his or her self-identity, a fact that becomes obvious, for example, when a person has been ill for an extended period of time.

But although we generally include such physical characteristics in our self-identity, it is also clear that in our whole religious and philosophical tradition we have been taught to play down such physical traits and to emphasize instead the more "spiritual" and "mental" aspects of our existence. Suppose, to choose an extreme example, your best friend turned into a frog. What characteristics would your friend have to retain in order for you to still consider this frog as your friend? The frog would certainly have to display signs of having your friend's mind, most clearly by continuing to talk, if that were possible; then you could recognize that this was indeed your friend, trying to communicate with you and explain what it is that he or she was thinking. We tolerate considerable changes in a person's physical appearance as long as his or her mind seems to remain the same; in fact, we are used to stories, cartoons, and imaginative examples of a person turning into almost anything, from a frog to a cloud to any of a large variety of plants, as long as somehow the person's mind remains intact. On the other hand, it takes very little alteration in a person's mental capacities for us to complain that he or she seems like a different person or that we don't know that person at all anymore.

The theory that the essential self of self-identity is the mind, or self-consciousness, can be traced back to ancient times, but its best-known defender is the philosopher Descartes, who presented a simple but elegant argument that the individual self is the first thing that each of us can know for certain, and that this self, whose existence is indubitable (see pp. 134–135; 168–169) is nothing else but the **thinking self,** the self that is aware of itself. But it was in Descartes, too, that we saw the origins of the dilemma that would lead to Hume's skepticism—the possibility that we might, in fact, never know anything but our own ideas and experiences. Now, with reference to the self, a related problem emerges—can we ever know any other self besides ourselves? We find here, too, an equivalent to Hume's skepticism about knowledge of the world; it is the position called **solipsism,** which says that, indeed, nothing exists but one's own mind. And like skepticism, solipsism is a position that most philosophers find intolerable. The problem is this: If one agrees that one's self should be identified with one's consciousness and that

each person can know only his or her consciousness, how is it possible to reach out beyond ourselves to anyone else? Our bodies can touch, even "know" each other in a dubious sense, but our minds cannot.

The theory that the self is consciousness has several ingenious variations. The English philosopher John Locke, for example, argued that the self was not the whole of consciousness, but a specific part of the mind, namely our memory, so that the self is that part of the mind that remembers its past. This explains how it is that we think of ourselves as "the same person" over time, despite even radical changes. Our friend-turned-frog is certainly still our friend if the animal remembers all of the experiences it had as a person before its transformation. On the other hand, we could certainly be suspi-

The Sameness of Self

The identity of the same man consists in nothing but a participation of the same continued life, by constantly fleeting particles of matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized body. . . . If the identity of soul *alone makes the same man, and if there is nothing in the nature of matter why the individual spirit may not be united to different bodies, it will be possible that those men living in distant ages and of different tempers may have been the same man.*

But 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 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 anyone 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. *For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one 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 thought, 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 the action was done.*

— John Locke, *Essay on Human Understanding*, 1689

cious—at the least—if someone who claimed to be our friend could not remember any of the experiences we had shared in the past. (There are, of course, cases of amnesia, or loss of memory; but what is also true of such

What Is It Like, to Be a Bat?

I assume we all believe that bats have experience. After all, they are mammals, and there is no more doubt that they have experience than that mice or pigeons or whales have experience. I have chosen bats instead of wasps or flounders because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree, people gradually shed their faith that there is experience there at all. Bats, although more closely related to us than those other species, nevertheless present a range of activity and a sensory apparatus so different from ours that the problem I want to pose is exceptionally vivid (though it certainly could be raised with other species). Even without the benefit of philosophical reflection, anyone who has spent some time in an enclosed space with an excited bat knows what it is to encounter a fundamentally alien *form of life.*

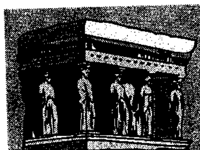
I have said that the essence of the belief that bats have experience is that there is something that it is like to be a bat. Now we know that most bats . . . perceive the external world primarily by sonar, . . . detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high-frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat. . . .

Our own experience provides the basic material for our imagination, whose range is therefore limited. It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. Insofar as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat *to be a bat.*

— Thomas Nagel, 1989

cases is that the person no longer knows who he or she is, so it is not a question of having a different set of memories but rather of having no self-identifying memories at all.)

The theory that self-identity is determined by memories has its curious difficulties. For example, suppose Mr. Jones has an emergency operation in which his injured brain is replaced by the brain of Mrs. Smith (just deceased). The resulting person has the body, face, and general appearance of Mr. Jones, but the consciousness, memories, and knowledge of Mrs. Smith. Who is the resulting person? It doesn't seem to make sense to say that it is Mrs. Smith, but neither does it make sense to say that it is Mr. Jones. The example becomes even more complicated if you picture yourself in the position of Mrs. Smith, who awakens after a mysterious lapse in consciousness to find herself with the body of a man; would she know for certain (as the self-consciousness theory would suggest) that she still is, indeed, the same person? Or has self-identity broken down entirely here?



Monty Python on Descartes

Detective-Inspector René "Doubty" Descartes absent-mindedly flicked grey-white ash from the sleeve of his only vicuna jacket and stared moodily across the pigeon-violated rooftops of Whitehall. "I muse," he thought. "Therefore . . ."

The ginger telephone shrilled its urgent demand. Descartes, rudely awakened from his reverie, snatched the receiver to his ear.

"Descartes here," he posited.

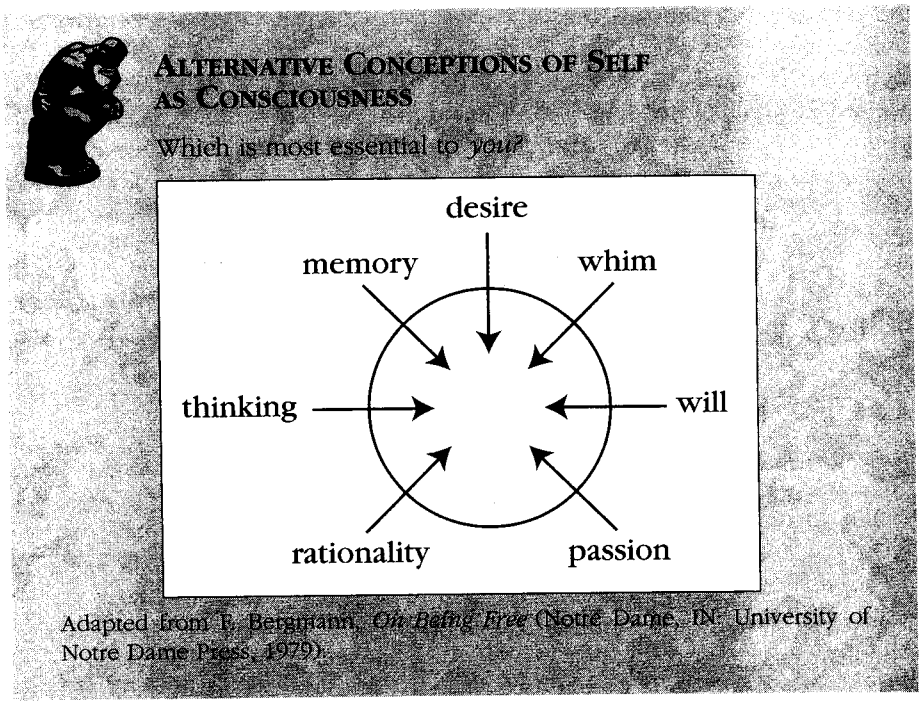
"Sorry to interrupt, sir." The familiar tones of Sergeant Warnock floated down the line. "Sergeant Warnock here."

"How can you be sure?"

"I think I am Sergeant Warnock, therefore I am Sergeant Warnock," replied Sergeant Warnock confidently. Some of Doubty's thinking was beginning to rub off.

— *Monty Python, twentieth-century English comedy troupe*

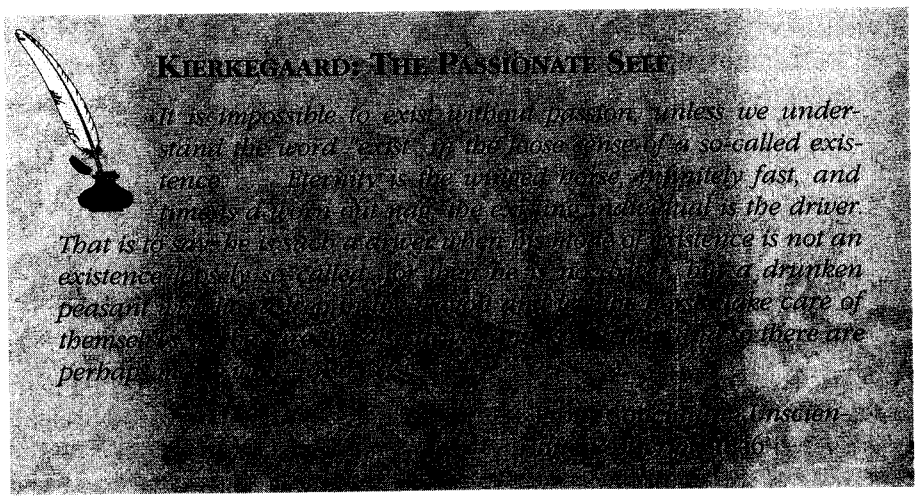
Questions of self-identity give rise to paradoxes of this sort, for what they show us is that our sense of self-identity is far more complex than it seemed at first. If a single characteristic were all there was to the essential self, then self-identity would be that characteristic, no matter what else changed. If memory alone gave us our self-identity, then any being with the same memories, even in a different body, even as a frog, even in two different people, would be the same. But the obvious fact is that we have serious reservations about these cases, and the reason is that we can see that many different



Adapted from L. Bergmann, *On Being Free* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

aspects of a person enter into our concept of self-identity. "I think, therefore I am," in all of its variations ("I remember, therefore I am who I am") is too simplistic to capture the whole of our sense of ourselves.

Although the views that the self is defined primarily through thinking and memory have dominated most self-as-consciousness theories, it is important to realize that such theories have pointed to other aspects of consciousness as well. The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, for example, defined the self as



the *passions;* several German philosophers have defined the self primarily as *will.* Russian novelist Feodor Dostoevsky defined one of his more perverse characters in terms of *whim,* and many philosophers since Plato have defined the self in terms of *rational thought* (as opposed to mere thinking, which can be rational or irrational). Emphasis on different aspects of consciousness results in very different conceptions of self, and so even if you agree that in some sense the self must be defined through consciousness, it is essential to specify what *part* of consciousness defines the self. What one considers his or her "real self" depends on this.

The Self as a Problem

What existentialists have in common is that they believe that existence comes before essence. . . . man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards. . . . to begin with, he is nothing.

— *Jean-Paul Sartre,* Existentialism as a Humanism, *1945*

If self-identity is defined by our answer to the question "Who am I?", one possible answer is "Nothing yet, still in progress." If one sees the self not as an inner soul that is in us from birth (or perhaps from conception), but rather as a *product* of our actions and thoughts, then self-identity is something to be *earned,* not an already existing fact to be discovered. Thus the existentialist **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905–1980) would say that all of those theories that take the self to be found in consciousness are misconceived. The self is not simply thinking, nor is it memory of the past. The self lies always in the future; it is what we aim toward, as we try to *make* ourselves into something. But this means that as long as we are alive there is no self—at least, no fixed and finished self. The self is an open question.

The first reply to this is usually that it neglects the fact that we are, in fact, a certain person with a fixed identity from the moment we are born, and facts continue to define us all through our lives. Consider, as an example, a person who is born in the year 1959, born female, born blond, born of a Scandinavian family, born poor; all of these are facts that define this person and have nothing to do with "becoming." At the age of three, the child is injured at play and loses a finger; at the age of eight, the child luckily finds herself in a class with a sympathetic and inspiring teacher, who interests her in science and starts her off on the road to a brilliant career in chemistry. At the age of twenty-seven, she meets by chance a fellow on an airplane; they fall in love and are soon married. He is kidnapped and killed by terrorists. She is hounded by the press, and a popular writer turns her story into a best-selling book. She retreats to her chemistry laboratory, thinks about her life as she runs her experiments, and comes to realize that it all consists of accidental

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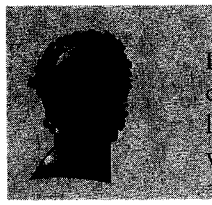

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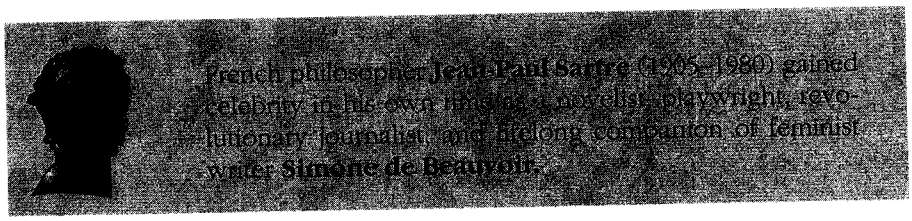
facts—the fact of her birth, her childhood accident, walking into a certain classroom, taking a certain airplane flight, and so on. Those facts are her self. There seems to be nothing else.

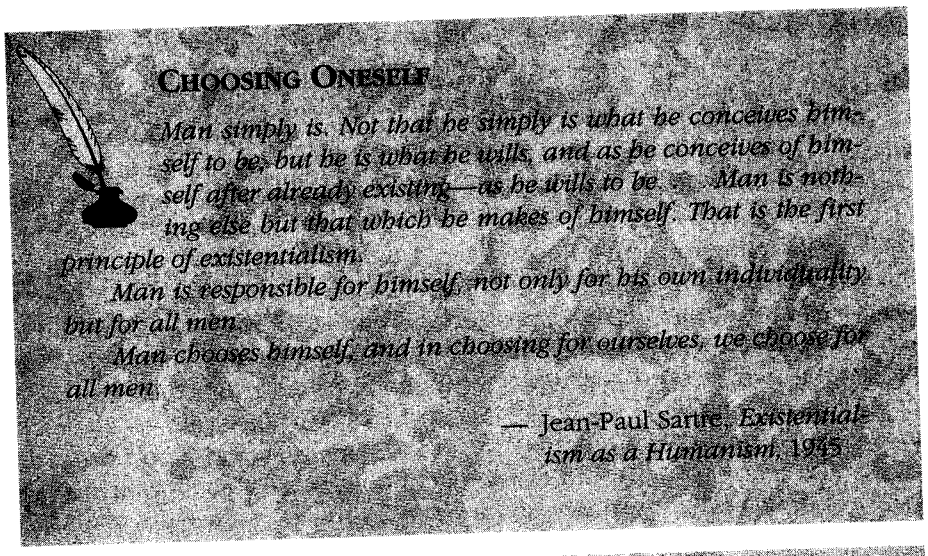
Sartre's reply to this portrait is that it leaves out an essential dimension at every turn. What is missing is choice. What is left out is the possibility, at any point in this story, of saying "No" to the facts, or, in Sartre's words, "No matter what is made of one, one is always responsible for what one makes of what is made of one." A person with an injury cannot wish away the injury, but he or she can make of it a badge of courage, a stigma of shame, a cocktail party curiosity, an excuse to keep out of the army, a handicap to be overcome. A person who is born blond and Scandinavian can be proud of that fact, embarrassed by that fact, indifferent to that fact. One falls in love (which itself has an enormous amount of choice built into it), but one can choose to ignore it, turn it into a tragedy, turn it into a marriage, even turn it into a joke of sorts. Sartre called this dimension of our existence **transcendence** (because we can always **transcend**, or go beyond, the facts that are true of us, or what Sartre called our **facticity**). Transcendence means that the self is defined not by the facts about us, but by what we make—and continue to make—of these facts. But because we can change our minds about what to make of the facts true of us for the whole of our lives, the self—which is the outcome of these interpretations and the actions based on them—is an unfinished process until the end of our lives (when both our interpretations and our actions come to a halt).



French philosopher **Jean Paul Sartre** (1905–1980) gained celebrity in his own time as a novelist, playwright, revolutionary journalist, and lifelong companion of feminist writer **Simone de Beauvoir**.

Consider, for example, a student who had once been extremely ill as a child and now (in college) intends to be a doctor. The facts of his illness are simply true; he cannot now do anything to change them. But he is obviously using those facts to motivate and justify his decision for the future, to become a doctor in order to cure other children who are afflicted as he was. But suppose in his senior year he becomes caught up in local politics, finds that he enjoys this, and, furthermore, that he does quite well at it. He postpones his plans to go to medical school and spends a year campaigning for a political ally. Then he runs for office himself and wins, postponing medical school for another four years. His political career flourishes. Answering reporters when they ask, "How did you get into politics?" he finds himself remembering his childhood talent for negotiating and arguing well. What happened to the fact of his childhood illness? It is still true, of course, but it is no longer of any significance; it no longer fits into the political project he has made for his life. But suppose at the age of forty-three he loses a critical election. His political

career is finished, and, not surprisingly, he remembers his old ambition to become a doctor. The fact of his childhood illness is reinstated as the crucial fact of his life, and his projected self is once more a medical self, not because of the facts, but rather because of his renewed intentions.



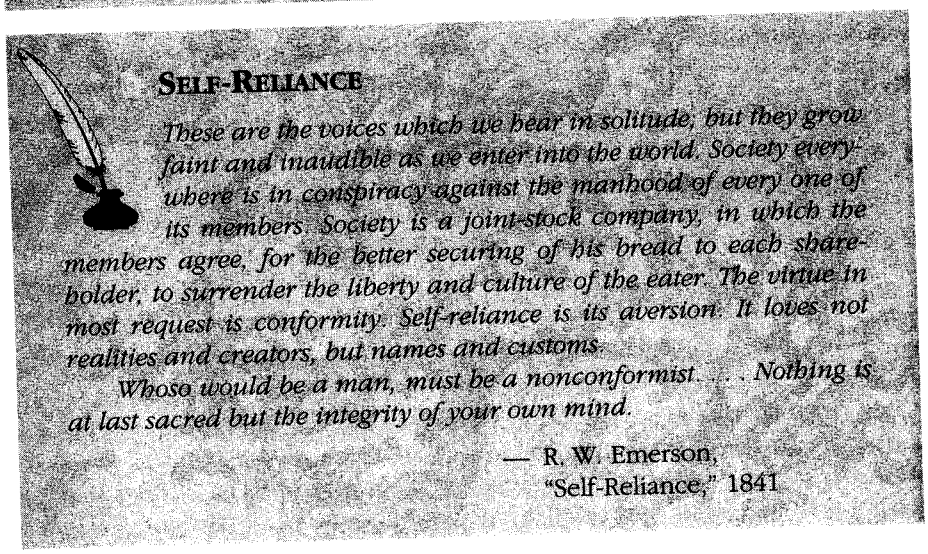
CHOOSING ONESELF

Man simply is. Not that he simply is what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives of himself after already existing—as he wills to be after that existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.

Man is responsible for himself, not only for his own individuality, but for all men.

Man chooses himself, and in choosing for ourselves, we choose for all men.

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism as a Humanism*, 1945



SELF-RELIANCE

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. . . . Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

— R. W. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 1841

What this means is that there is no "real self" other than the self that we make for ourselves. Certain facts are true of us, of course, and we cannot make them untrue. But we can make of them what we will, even if what we are able to make of them is also limited by the facts of our circumstances. Even prisoners, Sartre said, are free to make of their imprisonment what they choose; imprisonment can be injustice, or martyrdom, or an excuse for not doing anything, or a challenge to escape, or a symbol to the world, or a way of amusing

oneself, or just plain boring. But this also means that there are no "correct" choices; or, in Kierkegaard's language all choices are subjective truths, true for the person who makes them but not necessarily true for anyone else. The self is what each of us chooses *for ourselves,* our projection into our future, our intentions to *become* a particular kind of person. But as we never wholly achieve this—for even when our ambitions are fulfilled we can always change our mind, formulate new ambitions, and so on—the self never really exists in full. It is always at best our image of what we want to be, to which we strive with more or less success and persistency. And this striving, this sense of oneself as always incomplete and responsible for itself, is the **authentic self.**

BAD FAITH: ARE YOU EVER JUST WHAT YOU ARE?

Let us take an example: A homosexual frequently has an intolerable feeling of guilt, and his whole existence is determined in relation to this feeling. One will readily see that he is in bad faith. In fact it frequently happens that this man, while recognizing his homosexual inclination, refuses with all his strength to consider himself "a homosexual." His case is always "different," peculiar. He refuses to draw from the facts their obvious conclusion. But then, his friend asks that [he] recognize himself and declare, "I am a homosexual." But we ask, who is in bad faith? The homosexual or the champion of sincerity?

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* 1943

If the authentic self for Sartre was something created, rather than something found, then the traditional theories that say that the self simply *is* are not only mistaken but, in a very important sense, self-deluding ways of not recognizing our responsibility for creating the self. This denial of responsibility for one's self Sartre called **bad faith.** Bad faith *(mauvaise foi)* includes trying to excuse yourself from responsibility for what you are and what you will become by pretending that your life has been defined by the facts (by your facticity) instead of recognizing that you can try to make of those facts what you wish. Bad faith, in other words, is the negative side of having to create your self; it is the rejection of this responsibility—in effect, giving up even before you try.

American transcendentalist **Ralph Waldo Emerson** (1803–1882) has influenced scores of important writers and artists, including philosophers **Friedrich Nietzsche** and John Dewey.

No Self, Many Selves

In reality, every self is far from being a unity; it is a constellation of selves, a chaos of forms, of states and stages, of inheritances and potentialities. Man is an onion made up of a hundred layers, a texture made up of many threads.

— *Hermann Hesse,*
Steppenwolf, *1932*

There is nothing that can be called a "Self," and there is no such thing as "mine" in all the world.

— *The Teachings of the Buddha, sixth century B.C.E.*

We have assumed throughout the whole of our discussion so far what would seem to be the most indubitable and undeniable thesis, that every person has one, and only one, self. But this assumption, too, can be challenged, and at least one of the major religions of the world—Buddhism—rejects as an "illusion" the very idea of the self.

The rejection of the self can be found in Western philosophy, too. In his *Treatise of Human Nature,* the skeptic David Hume turned his critical attention to Descartes's and Locke's claims to have found the self within consciousness, and he said, with his usual irony, that he found no such self in himself; all he found was a complicated cluster of different experiences and ideas, but nothing that could be called a self.

> *There are some philosophers who imagine that we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and we are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. . . . But 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 anything but the perception.*

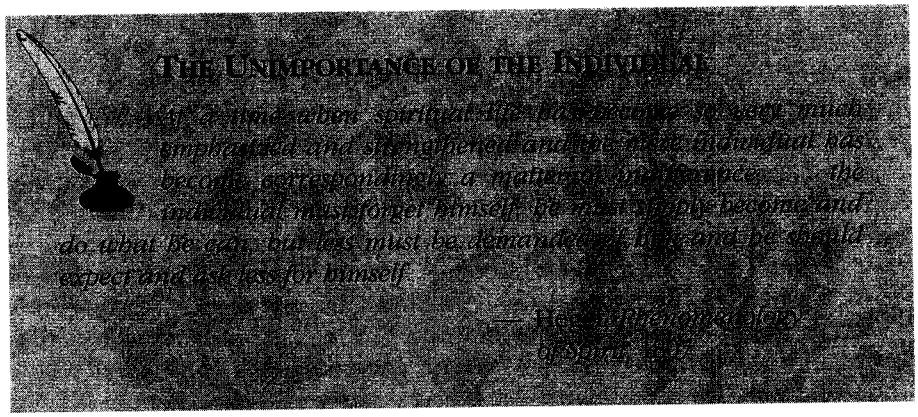
As a consistent empiricist, Hume therefore concluded that we aren't really justified in talking about a "self," because the concept can't be related to something encountered in experience.

Jean-Paul Sartre, too, rejected the idea of the existence of the self in the traditional sense. One way of reinterpreting his philosophy is to say that he, too, denied that we can find any self in ourselves; that for him the self, if it is not an illusion, at least always escapes us, always lies ahead of us in the future.

But let's take these arguments several steps further. Hume's skepticism is essentially a negative thesis: he could not find what most philosophers too confidently refer to as a self. But the negative thesis can be turned into a positive thesis, and this is what happens in Buddhism. For the Buddhist, not

being able to find the self is not a philosophical inability; rather, seeing through the illusion of the individual self is the highest act of "enlightenment," our most important single conceptual achievement. The self, in this view, is itself a false idea, a dangerous notion that cuts us off from the rest of life, from the whole picture, which the Buddhists call "Buddha-nature." (If you like, it might be called "the cosmic self," as long as we do not confuse this transpersonal self with the individual, personal self we have been discussing so far.) The idea, then, is that our real self-identity is not individual *self*-identity at all, but rather our unity with the whole of the universe. But this is to say that, in our sense, there is no self, that the self is an idea that has been imposed upon us by a certain kind of society instead of a fact that is true of us or of a soul inside of us.

This rejection of the individual self in favor of an all-embracing cosmic sense of self appears in Western philosophy, too. The nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel also rejected our emphasis on the personal, individual self. He showed, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit,* that our true self-identity is indeed a universal self-identity—all of us as One—which he called "Spirit" (Chapters 2 and 3). For Hegel, too, the individual self is an illusion fostered by a particular kind of society, and our true identity breaks through these limited boundaries to include all of us together.



The rejection of the idea that each person has a self leads to an even more astounding conclusion, found in some of the other philosophies of the East and West as well, which has been defended in the writings of the German author Hermann Hesse. According to this view, there are indeed selves, but not, as we have assumed, one self per person. Each of us is a multitude of selves. We may be a different self in any number of different circumstances, and it is only a philosophical mistake that makes us think that we have to tie all of these selves together into a single coherent package, as a single self. In a striking image, Hesse tells us that "man is an onion," with hundreds of different layers (selves). The traditional view, on the other hand, is that man is a peach, with a solid, single pit in the center (the soul). But if you peel away

the layers of an onion, you know that you find more layers; when you reach the last layer, there is nothing more, no pit, no core, no soul. There are only the layers, the many roles we play in different parts of our lives, the many selves, which is to say, no self as such at all.

The rejection of the self in any of these senses is not just a philosophical trick; it quickly becomes a way of life. Most of our plans and our behavior are based on the assumption that we have to *be* somebody, or that we ought to *make* something of ourselves. But according to the views just discussed, an integrated picture of the individual as the unit of selfhood breaks down, and self-realization becomes instead the recognition of ourself as part of something much greater than our (individual) self, or, in Hesse's view, the realization (not just the recognition but the living out) of the multitude of selves that are in us all.

The Mind-Body Problem

The identification or the location of the self in consciousness, as opposed to the identification of the self with your physical body, raises a tantalizing and very difficult metaphysical and scientific question: What is the relationship between our minds and our bodies; how do they interact? You remember that Descartes believed that mind and body were two different *substances,* but substances, by their very nature, cannot interact. What's more, Descartes insisted that he could conceive of his mind existing without a body, and it was clear that human bodies could exist (e.g., as corpses) without minds. So what is the relationship between them? Descartes never solved this problem to his satisfaction, and the elaborate metaphysics of Spinoza and Leibniz were, in part, attempts to solve it for him. If substances cannot interact, then it must be that either *(a)* mind and body do not interact or *(b)* mind and body are not separate substances. Leibniz defends the first option, arguing that mental events and physical events only *seem* to interact. In fact they stand in "preestablished harmony," like a film and its soundtrack (not his analogy). The two are perfectly coordinated and seem to be causally related, but in fact they are two separate "tracks" on the same type. Spinoza chooses the second option, suggesting that mind and body are not in fact distinct but rather are two different attributes of one and the same substance. His theory, accordingly, is sometimes called "dual aspect theory"—that is, mind and body are two different aspects of one and the same substance (according to him, the only substance).

These metaphysical speculations seem to us somewhat quaint, but they can be readily translated into extremely troubling questions with which contemporary science and philosophy continuously struggle. Mind and body may or may not be two different "substances," but we can all agree that mental events (e.g., a pain) are very different from the physical events occurring in the brain. Moreover, the question of how the one might cause the other

seems to be as much a mystery to us as it was to Descartes. Since the seventeenth century, however, there have been some momentous advances in science, and the terms of the question have altered accordingly. First of all, it is only in the twentieth century that we have gained any substantial knowledge about the workings of the brain and the central nervous system. Second, and even more recently, advances in computer technology (only dimly envisioned by Descartes and some of his contemporaries, notably Pascal) have provided a promising analog to the traditional mind-body problem.

These recent discoveries have tended to shift attention to updated versions of Spinoza's solution to the mind-body problem—his idea that mental events and physical (brain) events are not in fact so different but rather intimately related, perhaps even identical. Yet the old questions remain, and it is by no means clear exactly what it means to say that a mental event and a physical event are "identical." Indeed, one can still find defenders of each of the five traditional solutions to the problem, once discussed in the metaphysical language of "substances" but now debated in the contemporary terms of neurology, cognitive science, and computer technology:

1. Mind and body in fact do interact; physical events (a pin in the finger) do cause mental events (a pain) and mental events (deciding to go to the store) do cause physical events (walking toward the store) (Descartes). The question is how they do this.
2. Mind and body don't interact; mental events and physical events occur simultaneously, perhaps coordinated by God in a "pre-established harmony" (Leibniz).
3. There are no mental events (the materialist solution). There are only brain processes, described from the unusual perspective of the person who has the brain.
4. There are no physical events (the idealist solution). Brain processes, too, are only ideas in the mind.
5. Mental events and physical events are in fact the same (Spinoza's solution).

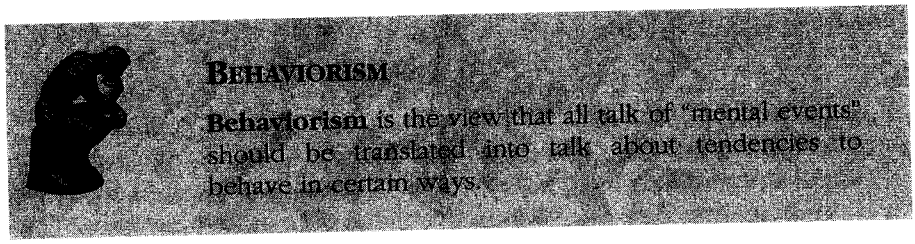
All five solutions are clumsy and obscure. Some seem to be nonsense—for instance, the claim that there are no mental events—but great philosophers (and psychologists), driven to desperate lengths by Descartes's problem, have often chosen this solution as the most palatable alternative. One sophisticated denial that there are any mental events, coupled with the insistence that there are only various patterns of behavior (which we label with mentalistic names such as "belief," "desire," and "anger"), is called **behaviorism.** Both the view that mind and body interact and the view that they do not seem to cause insurmountable paradoxes. There are still a great many **dualists** around—that is, those who continue to argue that mental events and physical events are wholly separate. There are still idealists and there are still some behaviorists who flatly insist that there are no mental events, or at least, no such events that can legitimately function in a scientific theory. But today, even most

behaviorists tend to defend the last solution and argue that what we call mental events are really a special category of physical events.

Today, views about the mind-body problem tend to fall into one of three camps, each of them a version of the thesis that mind and body are not really separate substances. Not surprisingly, Spinoza is often invoked as the ancestor of all such solutions. The three types of solution, each to be discussed in turn, are **behaviorism**, **identity theory**, and **functionalism.**

Behaviorism

The crude behaviorist might simply deny the existence of mental events, but it is obvious to anyone who thinks that thoughts exist, at least while he or she is thinking them. (Thus Descartes's famous "I think, therefore I am," in which he denies that it is possible to think and intelligibly deny that one is thinking.) The modern behaviorist is more subtle. Of course mental events exist—that is, desires, beliefs, emotions, moods, impulses, and the like are real and undeniable—but they don't exist in the way that most people think they do. They are not "ghosts in the machine" writes philosophical behaviorist Gilbert Ryle, nor are they "occult" or "mysterious" occurrences of any kind. What we call "mental," in fact, is a pattern or a disposition to behave in certain ways. To name a "mental event" is actually to make a prediction about a person's behavior. Thus, to say a man is thirsty is not to name some unseen event in his mind but rather to predict that he will get a drink as soon as he can. To say that a person is in love is not to name a feeling but to predict a familiar sequence of activities, from agitation in the presence of the loved one to writing long letters in the middle of the night. The existence of mental events is not denied; they are relocated, no longer in some mysterious place called "the mind" but in the perfectly tangible body of an acting organism.



For some mental events, behaviorism is perfectly reasonable. For example, a person's intelligence is not anything he or she experiences; it is a tendency to perform well in certain kinds of tests. A person's motives—we know since Freud—might not be known at all, but we can tell what they are by the acts they motivate. Behaviorism runs into more of a problem with such sensations as pain, seeing bright light, or hearing a tune in the key of C. We can agree that these sensations may be manifested in dispositions to behave in certain ways—wincing, putting on sunglasses, or starting to whistle—but we will probably insist that there is still something irreducibly mental that lies

behind these dispositions, that behaviorism can't be the whole story. Much of what we call "the mind" may indeed be better understood as dispositions to behave in certain ways. But some mental events seem to be *felt,* and with them the mind-body problem emerges once again, as tough as ever.

Identity Theory

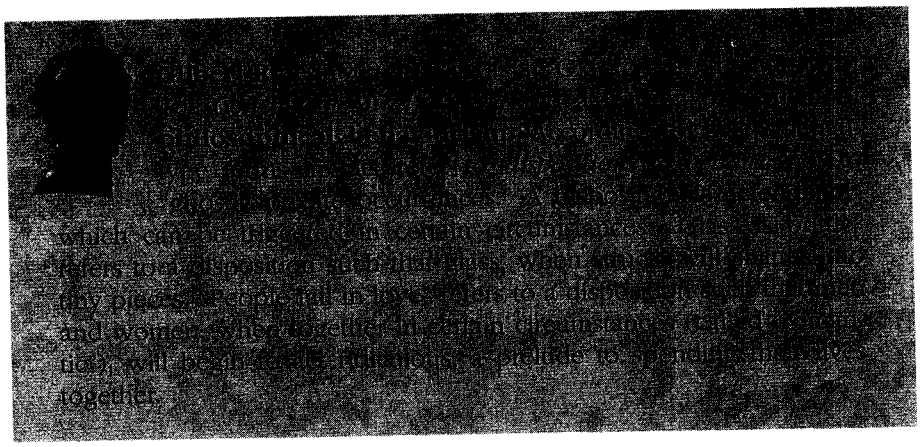
For many years, the ever more refined research in neurology has made clear something Descartes and his friends could not have known: that specific mental events are exactly correlated with specific brain events. This picture is made much more complicated by the fact that a single mental event may involve several alternative brain events and, in the case of brain damage, it is even possible for some mental events to be correlated with entirely new brain events. Nevertheless, we now know that there is a strict correlation between mental events, from simple pains to raging ambition, and certain processes in the brain. The mind-body problem is: How are these connected?

Correlation is not the same as connection. Two things can be correlated (the mayor of New York eats lunch every day at exactly the same time that the mayor of San Diego eats breakfast) without having any connection. Correlated mental and brain events might be like that, but if they were it would make any scientific understanding of the mind from the physical (as opposed to psychological) standpoint impossible. Perhaps mental events and physical events do cause one another, but then we are still faced with the question of how such different things can do so. The identity theory cuts through all such questions and says that mental events (pains, for example) and brain processes are *the same thing.* They have different properties and deserve different descriptions ("It hurts" versus "The sodium level is back down now") but, nevertheless, they are the same. Here is another case of identity:

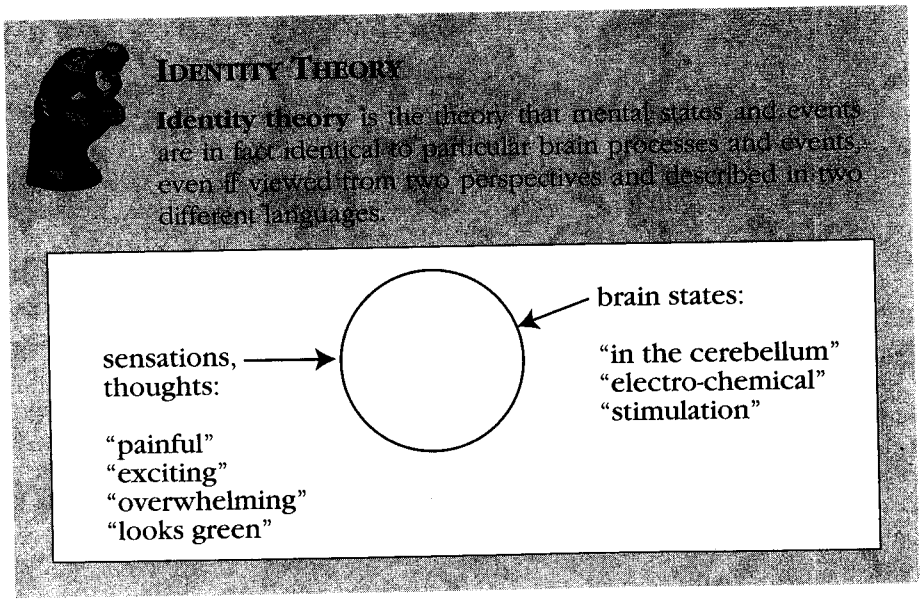
Water is H_2O.

Now, it is clear that a description of water—as "wet," as "cold," as "filling the basin"—is quite different from the description of hydrogen and oxygen atoms and the way they combine to form a certain molecule. Nevertheless, it makes perfectly good sense to say that water is H_2O, even if the properties of water—as we normally describe it—and the properties of the molecules—as a scientist would describe them—are different.

Identity theory is still much debated. It solves the mind-body problem, but it raises other questions just as perplexing. For example, it is usually argued that two things are identical only if they have *all* properties in common (a principle propounded by Leibniz and sometimes called "Leibniz's Law"). But it is clear that pains and brain processes do not have most properties in common; for example, we can locate a brain process at a certain place in the brain. There is no such exact localizability for pains. (But then again, if you are in Seattle, it is clear that your headache is not in Portland.) On the basis of such arguments, some theorists have rejected the identity theory.



They would say that water and H_2O *can* be described in the same terms, even if they often are not, but that there is no way to describe a pain in the language of brain science, and no way to describe a brain process in the language of sensations. Still other theorists have suggested that the languages we use to talk about pains and brains, respectively, are just curious remnants from the old days, when people knew much less about brains. In the future, they suggest, we will drop the language of sensations and talk comfortably about "having an F-stimulation of my cerebral cortex, process 4.21-B." But whatever form the theory takes, the central claim is this: What we call a "mental event" is not a particular type of event, but just a particular way of describing some brain process.

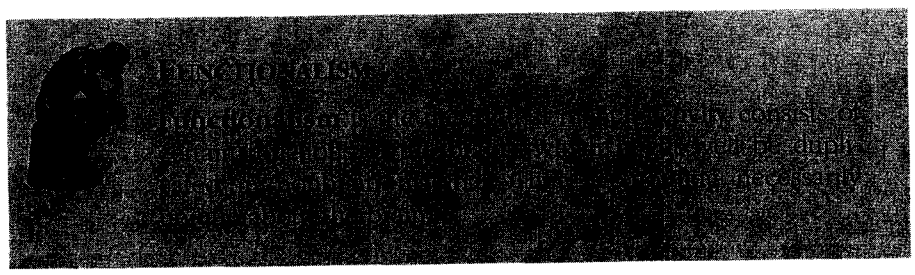


Functionalism

Dissatisfaction with both behaviorism and identity theory as well as the rejection of all the old dualist theories of mind and body, coupled with recent discoveries about the workings of computers and the manufacture of artificial intelligence (AI), have led to a new solution to the mind-body problem, called **functionalism**. Behaviorism stresses the importance of behavior, but it cannot account for the nature of such sensations as pain and does not talk about the brain and its functions at all. Identity theory emphasizes the sameness of mental events and brain events, but it does not address the question of why this one particular organ should have such remarkable properties. The identity theorist refers to certain processes, but why, one might ask, are they peculiarly *brain* processes? What is so special about the brain? Is it the special material of the brain that makes what we call "mental events" possible? Or is it simply the nature of the processes themselves, without regard for the material in which they occur?

The functionalist answers these questions by insisting that it is the processes themselves that explain the special properties of mental events. The brain is special because it is such a marvelous piece of machinery—or "hardware." But other pieces of hardware not made out of brain material may someday do just as well, and may have minds to match. Twenty years ago, skeptics were confidently insisting that no computer could ever play chess; now computers are beating chess masters. Today, skeptics say that no computer will ever feel or think for itself; ten years from now, they may be apologizing to an indignant Apple. Functionalists point out that mental activity is indeed identical to certain processes, but it is the *function* that counts, not the material in which the function takes place. There is no reason to suppose that a computer cannot be built that exactly duplicates the human brain—and the human mind. There is no reason, apart from practicality, why one could not build a brain out of paper clips and rubber bands, so long as it included all the circuits needed to perform all proper functions.

Functionalism, it might be noted, still leaves open some questions. How do pain and other sensations fit in? Does the theory of functions explain how it is that one sees red or hears a melody? And might not a confirmed dualist come back once again and ask, "I agree that there is an impressive correlation between certain functions and mental events, but how does that explain how the one *causes* the other?" Like the identity theorist, the functionalist tries to



solve the mind-body problem by asserting that the one thing (in this case a function) simply *is* the other. But couldn't it be that pains and great ideas are not identical to anything but themselves, and that their place in a material universe is still a mystery our immaterial minds can't quite grasp?

Functionalism, its advocates argue, is a great advance in the efforts to solve the mind-body problem because it expands our vision to consider increasingly complicated processes of the brain (and its computer analogs) instead of the older, more atomistic image of some comparatively simple event in the brain causing (or being identical to) some discrete mental event. But this same argument can be expanded further, and several philosophers in America and Europe have argued that the whole idea of reducing the mind-body problem to questions about the brain is a step in the wrong direction. We cannot understand human consciousness, the argument goes, apart from the *whole human being*. The dichotomy of "the mind and the body" is already a mistake, given this way of thinking, for what we are is *embodied consciousness*—not a mind *in* a body—and to argue about interaction and identity is already to misunderstand the terms in which human beings must be understood.

This argument against the mind-body problem is also a powerful argument against many of our favorite ideas about the self. To think of the self as an isolated individual consciousness, aware primarily of itself, is, according to similar arguments, a serious misunderstanding of selfhood. The self must be conceived of in terms of the **whole** person. (The position is sometimes called "holism," accordingly.) In ancient times, Aristotle argued for such a view of the self as nothing less than the "complete" person; today, too, there are many philosophers who argue that nothing less can give us an adequate understanding of the self. The self is not just consciousness aware of itself but the flesh-and-blood person who is part of a family and a community and a soldier or a shoemaker or a politician. A person is a self not just for one's self, but with and for other people as well.

The Egocentric Predicament

The mind-body problem is just one of several quandaries we get into when we start thinking about the nature of the self. What makes the problem so intractable is that we seem, in some hard-to-define metaphorical sense, to be "inside" of ourselves, in juxtaposition to the "external" world and other people. And so we wonder how the mind is connected to that bit of the physical world closest to us, namely our own bodies. And so, too, we wonder whether we can ever really know if the experiences we have in our minds in fact correspond to the world outside us—the problem of skepticism we discussed in the preceding chapter. This problem also gives rise to the awful possibility of *solipsism,* which we introduced at the beginning of this chapter as the view that only one's own mind exists. What, then, of other people? This odd question has been designated by philosophers as the **egocentric predicament.** "Egocentric" because it begins with the claim that the individual self is at the center

of all our experience; "predicament" because it is indeed an intolerable idea that we cannot ever get beyond our own self to know the existence of others. In recent Anglo-American philosophy, the same problem has been called the "problem of other minds," which is, essentially, "How can I ever know of the existence of any mind other than my own?"

This curious problem begins with an assumption we have taken for granted throughout most of this book: we know our own mind directly and beyond any doubt. (There may be—according to Freud, for example—certain aspects of our mind that are "unconscious," or unknown to us, but even Freud accepted the claim that we *generally* know what directly is "in our mind," which is why the idea of "unconscious mental processes" became such a startling discovery.) Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" is essentially a statement of this direct and indubitable knowledge we have of our own consciousness; but even Hume, who rejected the existence of the self, and Sartre, who thought that the self is created, began with this assumption. ("Consciousness is transparent," wrote Sartre. "It has no corners and nothing in it can hide from us.") But if we know our own mind directly and without any doubts, it does not follow that we know other people's minds directly at all. We have to *infer* what other people are thinking or feeling; we have to figure it out. How can we do this?

The standard answer, first formulated as a theory by John Stuart Mill a century ago, is that we know what is going on in other people's minds—indeed, that we can figure out that other people have minds at all—by **analogy.** An analogy is a comparison in which certain similarities are pointed out with the conclusion that there must therefore be other similarities as well. For example, if someone draws an analogy between a college and a business (because, let us say, both need some principles of good management), we may expect other similarities to appear as well: the fact that both produce something that is purchased by consumers, the fact that both are subsidized by our system of taxation and therefore have to answer to the larger community, the fact that both employ a workforce whose responsibility it is to produce the product as efficiently as possible. But, of course, there are **disanalogies,** too, comparisons in which the apparent similarities break down. Knowledge, for example, isn't like most products; any number of people can "have" the same knowledge, whereas only a limited number of people can share a particular automobile, television set, or toothbrush.

The argument that we can know of other people and their minds by analogy proceeds according to the comparison between our bodies and other people's bodies, or our own faces and gestures and other people's faces and gestures. Our bodies, faces, and gestures are quite obviously similar; this similarity is the basis of the analogy. I sometimes frown; you sometimes frown. I sometimes wince in pain; you sometimes wince, too, and in much the same circumstances in which I would wince. Now I know that when I frown it is usually because I disapprove of something or because I am worried about something. I know, therefore, that my mental state is correlated with certain features and movements of my body: throughout my life I become more and

more aware of what these correlations are. I also see that you have similar features and make similar movements with your body, and so I infer from these similarities a further similarity: namely, that you are feeling or thinking as I am when your features and movements are similar to my features and movements. That is, I know that, in my own case, my mental states (M) and my bodily movements (B) are correlated like this:

M:B ("M is related to B")

I also know that your bodily states are similar to mine:

M:B::*x*:B

What I must infer, then, is the *x,* and what I infer, of course, is another M. By analogy, from the similarities between our bodies and the correlation between my mental states and my body, I infer that you have similar mental states. You, too, have a mind.

This argument seems persuasive until we consider the possibility of disanalogies. Is it possible, for example, to imagine a being with human form which does everything that I do, and in the same circumstances, but which does not have any mind at all? Many philosophers have argued that robots are just like this; they can be programmed to behave just as we do, but they have no minds. (Of course, the argument is now turned around the other way, too: because robots can be made to behave as we do in similar circumstances, the argument goes, robots must have the same thoughts and feelings we do.) But at least this much is clear: we can imagine without difficulty that the people who surround us are not in fact human, do not in fact have minds. We cannot doubt, Descartes said, the existence of our own mind. But we can, by this argument, doubt the existence of other minds. Because we can never get into another person's mind, to see if indeed he or she has one, how can we ever check our analogy? How can I ever know that I myself am not the only conscious being, the only mind, the only self, in the universe? On the one hand, this solipsistic conclusion is obviously absurd; on the other hand, the argument that we know of other people and their minds by analogy seems to leave it, at least in theory, an open possibility. What has gone wrong here?

One possibility is that the argument from analogy goes wrong in the very place we most expected it to be unquestionable, in its very first premise, in the idea that we know our own mind directly and beyond any doubt. Let's take another look, therefore, at the assumption we have so far nowhere questioned. Are we indeed "directly" aware of our own minds? Is the existence of our own self indubitable, while the existence of all other selves is an open question? What is the presupposition of this seemingly unquestionable assumption, "I think, therefore I am"?

It has been suggested by a number of philosophers that the proper formulation of Descartes's famous slogan ought to be just "There are thoughts." Descartes was not justified, they have argued, in assuming that if there are thoughts, there must be a thinker. And this, of course, is just what we have been assuming, too, in talking about the individual self. Each of us, the

assumption goes, must have a self. Hume, Hesse, and Sartre threw this assumption into disarray, but they did not reject the basis upon which it was formulated. It is still through individual self-awareness that we come to recognize that there is no self, or that each of us may be many selves, or that the individual self must be created. But where do we get this idea of individual self-awareness? Why are we so sure that, for each of us, there are not just thoughts but an "I" as well? In fact, how did we ever learn even to identify "thoughts"?

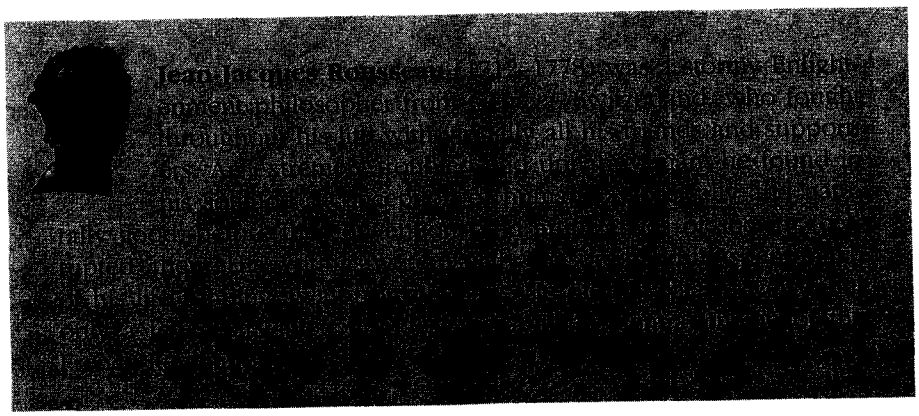
What has been left out of our account of the self is precisely what we have now come to see as the problem: the existence of other people. In our discussion so far, we first have tried to understand the nature, or essence, of our individual selves. Once we have done this, we ask how it is that we know that there are other selves in the world, too. But if we proceed this way, and if we believe that self has anything to do with consciousness or the way we think of ourselves or the way we project our existence into the future, it looks as if the existence of others will become a problem; and that is absurd.

The Self as Social

Man is by nature a social animal. . . . Anyone who is unable to live a common life or who is so self-sufficient that he has no need to do so is no member of society, which means that he is either a beast or a god.

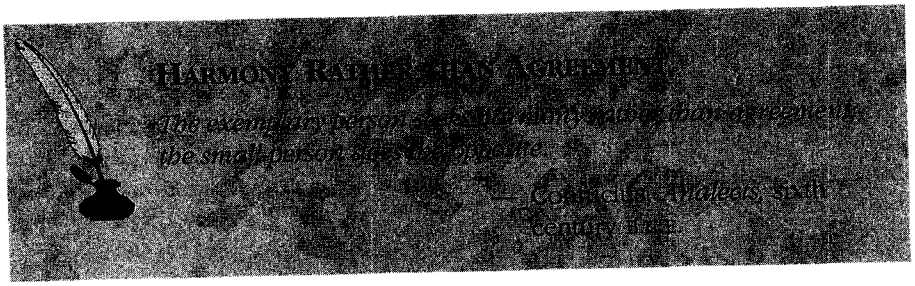
— *Aristotle,* Politics, *fourth century* B.C.E.

It is true, no doubt, that each of us has a conception of our self as an individual self, and we do indeed have some sense of having an "authentic," or "real," self beneath the roles and postures we are taught to adopt in work and society, which sometimes make us feel uncomfortable, "not ourselves." But we have concluded too quickly that our real self is an individual self and that the social roles we play and the conventions we learn in society are distortions and distractions from our true self. Indeed, this is a very old view; it is



central to the Christian teaching that the inner soul before God is the real self and that our social position and power are, by comparison, of no real significance. Descartes taught this view when he declared that the real self is oneself as a "thinking thing," as opposed, for instance, to a social being, a son, a father, a daughter, a mother, and so on. The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau set forth the same thesis again in the mid-eighteenth century when he declared with vehemence that natural, individual human beings are good and innocent until society "corrupts" them, and we in America are still sympathetic to this philosophy, that what is "natural" and "individual" is essentially good.

Paradoxically, the image we have of ourselves as *individuals* is an image that we have been taught collectively, by society, precisely because we are *not* mere individuals. It is one of the premises of our culture, for instance, that the general welfare will best be served by everyone pursuing his or her own interests. This is a premise that is still much debated, of course, but it serves in particular as one of the assumptions of **capitalism** and is certainly central to much of our thinking. But this is a very recent idea; indeed, it would not even have been considered plausible until the middle of the eighteenth century, and the point to be made again is that, though the idea emphasizes the importance of individuals (and individual initiative, individual interests), it is an idea created by a specific kind of society. Our certainty of ourselves as individuals, in other words, is a modern invention though with its roots in early Christianity. And if today we see our own existence as indubitable, that is itself a matter of philosophical curiosity and investigation.



Even in early Christianity, with its emphasis on the individual soul, there was a powerful emphasis on the spiritual community, within which that soul could discover itself and through which it could earn its salvation. Before Christianity, Judaism was far more concerned with the integrity of the Jewish community than with the isolated identity of its members; indeed, Jewish identity was identity in the community, and nothing more. Until modern times our idea of individual identity—as thinker, as existential hero, as "Buddha-nature," or as Hesse's onion—would have been unintelligible. Today, too, when we think about the question "Who am I?" we are all too likely to forget that we are something more than our individual characteristics and talents, more than an isolated atom cut off from the community within which our

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The view that a society of individuals, each working only with his or her own interests in mind, might collectively serve to improve society as a whole and increase the general welfare was not seriously proposed as a theory of society until 1776, when the Scot **Adam Smith** (1723–1790) published his epoch-making *Wealth of Nations*. Smith is universally considered to be the "father of capitalism" and the first great spokesman for laissez-faire ("leave alone") economics. Smith hypothesized that an "invisible hand" would guarantee the overall good of society through the workings of a free and competitive market. But such a market itself was not possible until modern times, when the medieval suspicion of "usury" and profit-seeking was replaced by the recognition of money-making as a legitimate activity and the desires of the individual—by way of supply and demand—would be allowed to determine what was produced and in what quantities.

existence, our characteristics, and our talents acquire their significance. What does it mean to be "attractive" or "good-looking," for instance, outside of the context of a particular society? What does it mean to be "smart," "charming," or "fun to be with" except among other people who have similar conceptions of these traits? What does it mean to be "trustworthy" or "generous" except within a community in which these traits make sense and are generally praised? In other words, most of the characteristics we ascribe to ourselves as individuals already presuppose the existence of other people and our living with them.

This observation can be repeated at a deeper philosophical level, too; in our presentation of the difficulties of solipsism and the "egocentric predicament," we ended up questioning whether we are indeed directly and indubitably aware of our own self, our own mind, prior to our knowledge of the existence of other people. The first part of that question had started to come out negative; we may be aware of thoughts, but it does not follow that we are aware of ourselves as thinker, aware of the "I." How do we recognize thoughts, however? It can be argued that we recognize thoughts only because we have words and concepts that allow us to. (Ancient peoples, archaeologists tell us, did not have such words and concepts, and so could only refer to what we call "thoughts" as "voices," presumably from the gods.) But where did we get these words and concepts? From our language, which we could have learned only within a community of other people who taught us that language, who gave us that concept, who taught us to say, in effect, "I think, therefore I am"—and not to doubt it.

What this means is that we do not know of our own existence with certainty and that we know of our own existence only because we have been

Martin Heidegger ([illegible]) was a German existentialist [illegible] influence on many [illegible] American philosophers [illegible] this century. His best-known book is *Being and Time* (1927). The concept of "authenticity" (or "authentic self") has become popular largely because of his work.

Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. The "they" which supplies the answer to the question of the "who" . . . is "nobody."

The Self of everyday [man] is the they-self, *which we distinguish from the* authentic self, *that is, from the self which has been taken hold of in its own way.*

—*Being and Time*, 1927

taught by our society to recognize our own existence. But this also means that the existence of other people is not in question; it is not a doubtful belief that needs to be backed up with a problematic and probably inadequate argument from analogy. The existence of others, along with the existence of ourselves, is in fact one of the *premises* of our thinking, not one of its doubtful conclusions. Thus the German existentialist **Martin Heidegger** says that we are originally part of a community, and "nobody" in particular, and that we learn,

Karl Marx (1818–1883) is usually thought of primarily as a social reformer and revolutionary. In fact, he was an accomplished philosopher and one of the leading economic theorists of all times. He was a student of **G. W. F. Hegel** (though Hegel had died just before Marx started college in Berlin) and borrowed Hegel's concept of "dialectic" as a way of understanding social evolution, through conflict and resolution. But where Hegel's main concept was "Spirit," Marx emphasized the more material aspects of human life—the need for food, shelter, and security, for instance. But Marx also stressed the spiritual needs of individuals, especially art and creativity and the appreciation of nature. (He did not include religion among these "spiritual" needs, however.)

As society itself produces man as man, so it too is produced by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their origin; they are social activity and social mind. . . . The individual is the social being.

— manuscript of 1844

within that community, how to be an individual, how to be "authentic." Thus Karl Marx tells us that we are essentially social beings and gain our identity only within a society (of a particular kind) and, ultimately, within the whole context of humanity. (He called us "species-beings," beings who live and work not just for ourselves but for the whole.) Hegel wrote that we find our true identity in "Spirit." So we all find, as we push our thinking further, that no matter how important our existence as individuals may seem to us, this individual existence gains its significance only through the larger picture of ourselves in a society, and through our relations with other people.

Self and Relationships

The essence of our relations with other people is conflict.

— *Jean-Paul Sartre,* Being and Nothingness, *1943*

Man is a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him.

— *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, 1900–1944, author of* The Little Prince

The vision we have of ourselves determines the relations we will have with others. Poets and philosophers have often written that love begins with self-love, and social critics have pointed out that hate often begins with self-hate. But it is a matter for serious reflection that in our self-absorbed, individualistic society, so much is written and said on self-realization and individual self-identity, while somewhat less has been written, at least on the same level of self-conscious philosophical profundity, on the nature of our relations with one another. Of course, we know the reason for this: our conceptions of self are such that we tend to think that our real or essential or authentic self is ours and ours alone, while relations with other people are secondary to selfhood and, in some sense, "external." We talk about "reaching out to someone"; our poets and psychiatrists tell us about the plight of our loneliness, each of us having been born into the world alone and trying desperately to find refuge with another person through love. But if the self is social, then all of this might very well be untrue: rather than reaching out to people, we may need to realize the bonds that are already there. And it is simply false that each of us is born into the world alone; it is a matter of biology that even our first grand entrance is staged with at least one other person (our mother), and usually the delivery room is rather crowded. The question then becomes: What is the nature of these bonds between us, with which our conception of selfhood begins?

The bonds between us are of a hundred varieties, of course—love, hate, dependency, fear, admiration, envy, shared joy or suffering, kinship, parenthood, patriotism, competition, sexual attraction, team spirit, being in jail together, running on the same political party ticket, and sitting next to each

other in class. Each of these requires its own analysis and understanding. But in general, we can break our conceptions of relationships into two very broad views: "us versus them" (or "me versus them") on the one hand, "we" on the other. The first presumes some basic difference, even antagonism, between us and them; the second presupposes a shared identity (within which, of course, there can be any number of differences).

The first, "us versus them," view can be illustrated, as an extreme case, by most wars. There are wars, perhaps, in which one or both sides retain some sense of kinship with the other, but even in most civil wars the other side is conceived of as "the enemy" and is often depicted as inhuman, barbarian, and uncivilized. On a more personal and less belligerent scale, the "us versus them" view emerges at least temporarily in competition with strangers (for the same job, for the same seat in a bus, or at a track meet). In every case, the emphasis is on the differences between sides; the presumption is usually that one person's gain is very likely another person's loss, and the self-identity of one is defined independently of or in opposition to the other.

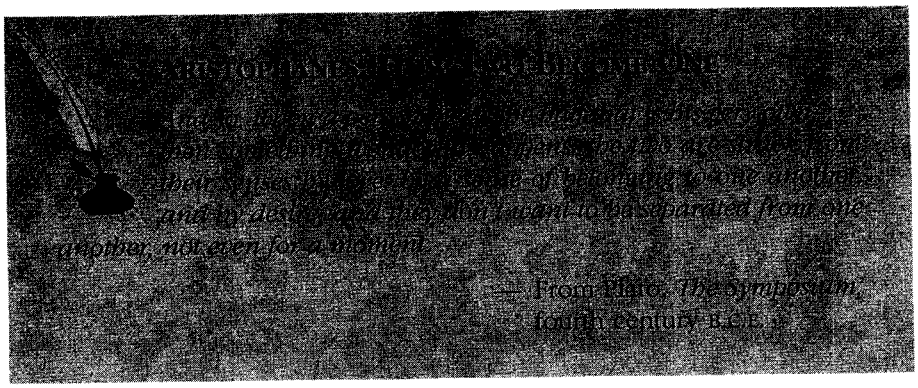
The second view, however, takes mutual identity to be primary and differences to be secondary. There is a presumption of cooperation: what helps one will help the other, and self-identity is defined by this mutual identity. A familiar example is the sense of shared identity we have when we are playing on the same team. There are differences between us, of course; we play different positions, we have different skills and different personalities. But what is primary is the team; indeed, we have all seen how a team falls apart when individual players begin to think more of their own performance than of the performance of the team. A second example would be love, whether the love of a mother for her child, the love of a married couple, or the love of a person for a country. Love, too, is the presumption of a shared identity; a person defines self-identity in terms of the relationship (at least in part), and it is assumed that one person's interest is the other's, too. (Even when this is not the case, one person typically takes up the other's interest as his or her own.)

These two views have their roots deep in philosophy. The first can be seen quite clearly, for example, in the "problem of other minds" and the "egocentric predicament" of the solipsist, for whom all other people are literally other, actually unknowable and unreachable. There is more than a hint of solipsism, for example, in those social speakers who urge us to "escape our loneliness" and "reach out to someone." The presupposition of this popular (American) message is that we begin alone and that we desperately try to overcome this aloneness. But imagine telling that to the seventh child in an enormous tribal family. The truth is that our sense of loneliness is not universal or part of the "human condition" but an inevitable consequence of our extremely mobile and individualistic society. And yet, as we have seen, we tend to take the view that the isolated individual self is not only the real self but the only thing of which we can be absolutely certain. Not surprisingly, therefore, our view of relations with other people tends to be that knowing and relating to other people is a problem.

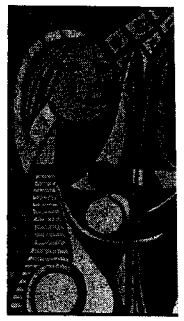
This view was brutally argued, for instance, by Jean-Paul Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness* (and in many of his novels and plays). Relations with others, Sartre argued, are essentially conflict. But we can see how he must conclude that this is so. He began by defending a conception of self that is strictly individual, in which each of us tries to create ourselves in a certain image and to be authentic to ourselves. Other people, accordingly, tend to be external to this creation of self; or they serve as the instruments or raw materials for the creation of self; or they may become impossible obstacles to the creation of self. For example, other people often restrict our abilities by making their own demands and setting up expectations, and they tend, therefore, to interfere with our freedom of self-creation. In a relationship between a man and a woman, Sartre argued, this mutual interference and antagonism reach their pinnacle; sex and even love are but weapons in the competition for independent self-realization. Each person tries to force the other to agree with his or her conception of self. Thus all of our relations are essentially conflict, even when they seem to be perfectly pleasant and mutually agreeable. (It is worth noting that Sartre reconsidered these views later in his life and that he himself had a lifelong and romantic relationship with Simone de Beauvoir.)

This tragic view of relationships, however, is based on a view of the individual self which itself has its problems. If we turn to the second conception of relationships, the "we" view of already existing bonds between us, we solve some of these problems and discover a much less tragic conception of relationships. We refer to this second conception, for example, when we declare that "we were made for each other," in the sense that, before we met, the connection between us had already been established. Similarly, people say "marriages are made in heaven." As a sociological theory, this is seriously challenged by current divorce statistics, but as a philosophical viewpoint, it has much to recommend it. From the moment we are born, we establish and reestablish bonds with others, not just particular people but *types* of people. Thus one adult or one teacher replaces another in our lives; one friend takes the place of another, and one boyfriend or girlfriend seems remarkably like the last. This is not to say, of course, that we are incapable of particular commitments or of sticking with a single friend or spouse, but it is to say that our relations with others are *types* of bonds that we carry from one person to another, some of which we have from infancy. Thus Freud was not being perverse when he insisted that every man falls in love with his mother and every woman falls in love with her father; the bonds and expectations and likes and dislikes that one learns as an infant stay with us through life, usually much modified and even reversed in some significant ways. But, according to this view, we are not isolated individuals searching desperately for other people; we already have networks of relationships, which are fulfilled in different ways at different times by different people. Our conception of ourselves—our self-identity—is determined in turn by these networks, without which we are ultimately nothing.

A marvelous illustration of this second view of relationships, as "made for each other," is a short story told in Plato's dialogue *The Symposium*. Asked to



tell his fellow dinner guests about the nature and origins of love, the playwright Aristophanes invents a wonderful fable, in which we were all long ago "double-creatures," with two heads, four arms, four legs, and enormous intelligence and arrogance (or what the Greeks called *hubris*). To teach humans a lesson, Zeus, the king of the gods, struck the creatures down and cleft them in two—"like an apple," Aristophanes says—so that each resulting half-person now had to walk around the world, looking for his or her other half. That is the origin of love, Aristophanes concludes, not the search of one isolated individual for another, but the urge to reunite with someone who is already, as we still say, one's "other half." The fable is pure fiction, of course, but the point is profound. Relations with others do not begin when people first meet; they began, in a sense, with the very beginning of our species. The complete self, in other words, is not just the individual person. It is people *together* and, sometimes, in love.



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CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. When a person says, "I think such and such . . . " is there necessarily reference to a self there, or is the word "I" simply a function of grammar? Would it make sense to say, as Bertrand Russell once suggested, that "It thinks in me" or "There is a thought here" instead?

2. In his play *No Exit,* Jean-Paul Sartre had one of his characters exclaim, "Hell is other people." What he might have had in mind is that people interfere with each other to such an extent that Hell might simply be people torturing each other forever with their comments and their gestures, just as we torture each other here on earth. Do you agree with this picture of human relationships? Why or why not?

3. If a teenager commits a crime and is sent to reform school for a few years, what justification might the individual have, twenty years later, in explaining, "I am an entirely different person now?"

4. Which aspects of your self (or self-identity) do you attribute directly to your upbringing in a particular family, in a particular society, or in a particular neighborhood, city, or other environment? Which do you attribute to "nature" (that is, to instincts and inherited characteristics)? Which aspects of your self (if any) would you say are entirely your own, independent of other people and your biological nature?