

CHAPTER 1

SOCIETY AND THE SELF

Who am I? This must be one of the most frequently asked questions in the modern Western world. It seems that at key points in our lives we all address this question in one way or another. On the surface this is a deceptively easy question, because if there is one thing we ought to know it is our own self: who we are. Yet anyone who has tried to answer this question will know how difficult it is. In the modern world we are engaged in so many activities that take place in a variety of contexts with a mixture of people, we become many different things to different people. We can also be many different things to ourselves. There might not be a single answer to the question of who we are. Furthermore, if none of the varied roles we play seem to fit us, we get more confused and the question becomes more insistent: *who am I?* We then find ourselves in a search for self. But where do we look for it? 'I'm trying to find myself' is a phrase often heard from the people we encounter, and maybe many of us have said it or thought it ourselves. For those who live in Western societies, with a history of individualism, the temptation is to look inside ourselves, to examine our thoughts and feelings, as if our self-identity is a treasure locked inside, like a pearl in its shell.

Paradoxically, this search for self is rarely a lonely task. In trying to find out who we are, even if we believe the riddle is locked inside, we invariably engage others in the search for the key to ourselves, whether they are friends and family, or counsellors and therapists, we look to other people to see the image of ourselves reflected back in their words, attitudes, expressions or actions. Yet strangely we often fail to notice this, that the search for our own individual self is a social activity. In Western societies that put a high value on the individual – its freedom, autonomy, creativity, and the expression of its own individuality – we can easily overlook the role that others play in giving us the pieces with which to put together an image of our self. This is what I mean here by the notion of *social selves*, which provides the title of this book and is the conundrum I will investigate in these pages, that to become an individual self with its own unique identity, we must first participate in a world of others that is formed by history and culture. What I want to investigate is the idea of *social individuality*. This does not mean that each one of us is not an individual self, we clearly are: rather, I want to ask questions about how this self is formed in social relations with others and how it is through them, and through the relation to our own selves, that we answer the question 'who am I?'

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I therefore do not intend this book to be used as a 'self help' book, in the manner of those that fill the shelves of bookstores under the heading 'popular psychology' or 'self development'. You will not find here techniques for self-analysis or exercises for addressing personal problems. Most of the book is devoted to the debates about the self that have dominated the social and human sciences; the various ways in which sociologists, philosophers and social psychologists have addressed the question of the self in the contemporary Western world. Yet each of the thinkers I discuss, along with the position I will develop here, have addressed and informed the question 'who am I?' or, more generally, 'who are we?' as human beings. Many of their ideas have permeated everyday understandings about the self, so it is impossible to think about who you are independent of the answers that these thinkers have given to the question 'who am I?'. This is also because their answers were formed in the general historical and cultural epoch that still influences our lives and selves today. However, there is no such thing as a complete answer to any question, and each thinker has left us with a series of problems still to be addressed. If it is true to say we are never quite sure of who we are as individuals, it is also true to say that collectively we are still not sure of who we are as humans.

What, then, will you learn from this book? Not exactly an answer to the question 'who am I?' but an understanding of why we even bother to ask this question, why it is so important to us, and knowledge of some of the ideas that currently shape any possible answer you could be given to this question. Before we embark on the journey through some answers to the question, first I want to make clear my own view of the issues and why I am so insistent on suggesting that we are social selves.

Social selves: a challenge to individualism

I have already begun to address the question of why I have called this book *Social Selves*, because seeing ourselves as isolated cuts off the primary connection we have to other people in the creation of self. It is not that I want to deny the fact that each one of us is a unique individual, or that individualism can be a positive value. The ideals of freedom, liberty and individual autonomy are values that can prevent us from submitting to authorities that crave too much power, seeking to subjugate free people. But like all good ideas and ideals, individualism can also have its dangers. The political thinker C. B. Macpherson characterized the type of individualism that arises in Western capitalist societies as 'possessive individualism', which means each individual is thought to be the possessor of their own skills and capacities, owing nothing to society for the development of these.¹ A free society is then seen as a market society, one in which individuals can sell their capacities on the labour market for a wage, with which they buy the goods they need to consume in order to live. But Macpherson believed that this type of individualism could be corrosive of human society, because each person is understood as bound to others only through the competitive market and nothing more.

It is also a political theory that distorts human nature, because each one of us develops our capacities in society.

For the social and human sciences, the problem of possessive individualism is the creation of a division between the individual and society. An example of this is the approach to social study known as 'methodological individualism', typified by thinkers like F. A. Hayek, Karl Popper and J. W. N. Watkins, for whom all explanations of society must be based on statements about the dispositions and actions of individuals. That is because society is not a supra-individual entity, but composed of the individuals who make it what it is. Ironically, these thinkers actually agreed with many sociologists, who they took as the target of their critiques, believing that society was nothing more than the relations between individuals. The real source of disagreement between these two camps is the status given to social relations – whether they are seen as primary in people's lives or merely contingent upon already existing individuals. The latter position was the one adopted by methodological individualists, while sociologists and social psychologists tend to believe that social relations are primary in our experience. In the approach I develop here, I am against the methodological individualist position of seeing the individual as a primary fact, one that possesses given capacities or a determinate essence. That is because we are all born into social relations that we didn't make, and much of who and what we are is formed in that context. But I do not want to reduce individuals to the mere products of their society, for the methodological individualists are right to say that there is no society without individuals and the relations between them. I prefer Norbert Elias's solution to this problem by thinking in terms of a society of individuals.²

Hence, my attempt to understand humans as social selves is a way of trying to overcome this dichotomy. I want to suggest that when we ask the questions 'who am I?' or 'who are we?' we try to understand ourselves as social individuals rather than self-contained atoms. I also draw attention to the fact that I speak of social *selves*, in the plural rather than the singular, for we are all individual selves who necessarily relate to each other: there are many different selves in a society of individuals. But also, as individuals, we are multiple: I am not exactly the same person in all the different situations I act in, nor am I exactly the same person today as I was 20 years ago. This much may be uncontroversial, but why do I insist on the necessity of the concept of *social selves*? I do so for three basic reasons.

Firstly, we are born into a place and time that is not of our own making, and into a network of social relations we haven't chosen. Each one of us is born into a society composed of social relations that bear the imprint of a power structure, including a hierarchy of social classes or other groupings according to rank and status, along with a culture with its beliefs and values, such as religion, or other bodies of knowledge, like science. The position into which we are born as an individual – our family, neighbourhood, social contacts, social class, gender, ethnicity, and the beliefs and values in which we are educated – will put a sizable imprint on the self we become. Those who surround us will judge, influence and mirror an image of our self back to us in many different ways. Even those who have sought solitude in order to find themselves, wandering into the wilderness, have nevertheless

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come from a tradition, religious or mystical, that will guide their meditation. All cultural traditions have theories about what it is to be a person, created in a network of everyday experiences and professional or theological debates. They have their own social history and will vary between cultures, yet all will provide the basis on which the selves who populate that culture emerge, forming their self-identities by moulding them with their own particularities.

Secondly, when we try to find who we are, we often turn to some social activity to reveal that 'hidden' self. We try out different roles, jobs, education, hobbies, arts, or sporting activities, hoping to find ourselves in them. The search for self therefore involves *what we do*, the activity informing who we are through the talents and capacities it may develop. However, this raises another issue, in that the self may not be pre-given: it is not something hidden that we have to *find*, but something that has to be *made*. Self, then, is something to be created with other people in joint activities and through shared ideas, which provide the techniques of self-formation. 'Who am I?' is perhaps a mistaken question: it should be, 'who do I want to be?' or 'what shall I become?' It is not being but becoming that is the question. Note also that in both ways of making ourselves, in relations with others and in activities undertaken with others, we are not actually looking 'inward' to find ourselves, but 'outward' towards other people and joint activities. Primarily, the place where we look for ourselves is in the world we share with others, not the world we have for ourselves through reflection on thoughts and feelings.

Thirdly, the above point is underscored in the fact that who we are, or can become, is often a political issue involving rights and duties fought over within society. Becoming who we want to be, if that is possible, often involves a political struggle. This has been witnessed in recent years with the women's movement, the black power movement, and the gay, lesbian and transgender movement. The right to become a certain type of person, or to live freely as a particular person with a full compliment of rights without persecution – as Asian, black, female, or gay – for many is something that has to be won, rather than something that is given. And the identities forged in such struggle are not formed prior to it, but in it. It is a very different thing today to live openly as a 'gay' man, than it was 70 years ago to live secretly as a 'homosexual'. Even when we do not think that being ourselves involves politics, this is often a misguided assumption. Those who assume that their self-identity is a given right or a natural fact – say, a straight white man in Britain – are those in a privileged position whose identities have automatic 'right of way' in most social contexts. Such people assume their privileged position, not realizing that other identities might be silenced in their presence.

These are the three main reasons why I will explore the notion of social selves and social individuality in this book, trying to understand how it is that we can only attain the state of individual self-identity in relations and activities with others. What initially looks like a contradiction in terms – social individuality – will hopefully by the end of the book look like the only sensible way to proceed in confronting the dualisms and dichotomies that theories and methodologies of

individualism have left us with. However, what I will do in the rest of this chapter is say a little more about the social and philosophical heritage that has created the problem of individualism, and of the relation between society and self, along with some of the solutions it has proposed to its own problem. How has this heritage created the question ‘who am I?’ and what are the various answers it has devised, leaving us with a conflicting and contradictory understanding of what it is to be human?

Some Western conceptions of the individual self

Originally, there were two main sources of the self in Western culture: the concept of the person as it emerged in ancient Greco-Roman society, and Christian ideas of the soul. As the anthropologist Marcel Mauss noted in his seminal essay ‘A category of the human mind: the notion of person: the notion of self’ (1938),³ the notion of ‘persona’ was first used in Roman culture to refer to the masks that people adopted in public ceremony. The use of masks was not restricted to ancient Rome, being common to a whole range of tribal societies as a way of marking out different roles or statuses within ritual ceremonies. What was unique to ancient Rome in its use of the term ‘persona’, according to Mauss, was that the notion acquired a legal status with certain rights and duties attached. The freeborn of Roman society (obviously this does not apply to slaves) became citizens of the state who had rights and responsibilities conferred upon them as persons.

In Hellenist and Roman culture the Stoic philosophers also contributed to the idea of the person as a free individual. They introduced the notion of an ethic of the self on a personal level, in which individuals made choices about who they wanted to be through their relationship with a philosophical teacher, and also by using new techniques of paying attention to, and taking care of, the self. One of these new techniques was the writing of letters to friends and teachers that recorded the details of a person’s everyday life, such as their health and diet, and their general regimen for living.⁴ This began a tradition of forming a ‘narrative of self’ that is still familiar today whenever we catch up with friends and tell them stories about what we have been doing, either in face-to-face conversation, letters, or emails. What the letters of such Stoic philosophers as Seneca, Epictetus, and Aurelius demonstrate is the beginning of narrative correspondence between people that dwells on the private world more than on the public world.⁵ All these trends are evidenced in the development of biography, which starts out as a public rhetorical act – in particular, the ‘encomium’ or memorial speech at civic funerals – and eventually arrives at one of the first known written autobiographies, Marcus Aurelius’s *To Myself*. Such a text, together with the letters of the Stoics, reveal notions of biography and narrative similar to today in that they record the events of a life (usually in chronology) as evidence of a person’s character. While the events recorded are increasingly to do with the private rather than the public life of a person, what they lack is the tendency for self-analysis and revealing the ‘inner’ life of thoughts and feelings that we would expect today.⁶ What is

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emerging is a private world of self-attention and care of self, but this is still based around a notion of self-mastery rather than self-analysis.⁷ Self-mastery is about watching one's habits and routines for signs of immoderation – because the right of being a free citizen goes hand-in-hand with showing you can govern yourself – rather than asking the question 'who am I?'

This question looms more in Christian autobiographies, such as St Augustine's *The Confessions* (397). In this book, St Augustine recognized the struggle between good and evil in the hearts of all humans, including his own, charting his path to God through this 'inner' turmoil. While the question 'who am I?' is not explicitly asked, Mauss understands Christian records of the struggle in a soul as another step towards modern notions of the self, because with the idea that each one of us has our own soul, even if it is ridden with conflict, we come closer to a metaphysical foundation for the self. This is because the soul is conceived as something inward and indivisible, almost like a substance in itself that characterizes our own individuality, which can be divided from the body – our physical and earthly mark of difference. It could be said that Augustinian Christian ideas and practices are an important development in the turn 'inwards' in the search for self.⁸

However, it must be emphasized that when St Augustine searched to the depths of his soul, what he found there was God – the 'changeless light' of spiritual being – and not a self. The Western notion of self begins to appear in more recognizable form with the work of the philosopher René Descartes. Like St Augustine centuries before, Descartes believed that people's higher sense of individuality is not linked to their bodies or to carnal desires and appetites: rather, for Descartes, we humans identify our existence through mental reflection on our own selves, and this is what makes us unique. However, Descartes was not embarked upon some modern journey of self-discovery. The task he had set himself in his *Discourse on Method* (1637) was to lay down certain principles or rules for scientific methods of thought. Thus, although his primary concern was for scientific methodology and not self-analysis, many contemporary philosophers still contemplate the implications for the self contained in Descartes' famous meditative discovery, 'I think therefore I am.'⁹ Descartes was working in a world that no longer believed a thinker could be certain of their knowledge by identifying principles which are *external* to humanity, principles found in the order of the universe itself. Instead, knowledge was a construct of the human mind, a way of representing the world that extended beyond the mind. Yet, if this is so, how can we be sure that what we know mentally – our 'inner' representations of the world – correspond to the actuality of the external world? In the *Discourse*, Descartes began his search for certainty by pretending to doubt everything that he knew, including the evidence of his senses, and came up with the first principle of his philosophy, that:

while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something; and observing that this truth: *I think therefore I am*, was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant

suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it ... I thereby concluded that I was a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which, in order to exist, needs no place and depends on no material thing; so that this 'I', that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and ... that even if the body were not, it would not cease to be all that it is.¹⁰

A number of things flow from this proposition. Firstly, that the 'I' is a substance, the nature of which is thinking, so that self is to be found in the mind as distinct from the body, to the extent that I can imagine myself to continue even if my body ceased to exist. This conclusion is possible because Descartes saw the powers of human thought and reason to approximate God, whereas the material bodies of humans and animals were automata: machine-like entities that produced sensations and impulses. Secondly, this creates the problem known as substance dualism, for Descartes has split all of human existence in two, between the non-material mind and the material body, identifying the sense of 'I', or self-identity, purely with the mind. As mind is closer to God than to earthly things, including the human body, the self becomes a 'transcendental self': that is, something given in the infinite, rather than being created out of the finite experience of embodied individuals. Thirdly, in this move, Descartes has solved the problem of the split between the contents of the mind and the external world they represent, for no God would establish rational principles in the human mind that were incapable of independently establishing certain knowledge about the world and the universe. God was the guarantor that we can think the truth about the world, because God would not fool us.

That so much of Descartes' argument about the self and scientific reason rested in the existence of God was no accident, for it saved him coming into conflict with ecclesiastical authorities, who, along with the aristocracy, ruled society in his day. But it couldn't solve the problem of substance dualism, bequeathed to us as contemporary seekers of the self. The habit is with us to this day of seeing ourselves *either* as rational beings for whom the mind is paramount *or* as irrational beings ruled by bodily passions. After Descartes, Western philosophers became divided between Enlightenment rationalists, who emphasized the former view, and Romantics who emphasized the latter.

Yet there was an even greater fault-line in Descartes' thinking, for if you examine the above quotation carefully you will see that he has not actually managed to theorize the 'I' as a single, indivisible substance, the nature of which is thinking. In his formula, there is the 'I think' and the 'I am': two 'I's'.¹¹ For example, if I sit here and think about who I am, I think about the Ian Burkitt who has a distinct body, who lives in a particular place and time, who has had certain experiences throughout his life, who knows other people and is known by those same people. In short, I identify myself not purely with my thinking, but with the actual embodied individual who I am thinking about, who at this moment is both thinking and feeling. To what extent, then, is it true to say that 'I am' entirely defined by my power for thought and could conceive of myself even without my body?

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If I can't do so, and it is my view that I can't, then 'I' cannot be a transcendental self. The problem with Descartes' dualism is that it cannot account for the human ability to bring seemingly diverse modes of existence together to create a unity of the material and (apparently) non-material, both in our being and in our experience of the world.¹²

For later generations of philosophers the Cartesian legacy of dualism would continue in two different strands of philosophy, which approached a resolution from its two sides, with Enlightenment rationalists emphasizing thought and reason, while Romantic thinkers privileged nature and emotion. The latter tradition can be exemplified in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who turned back to the Augustinian idea that the human self is characterized by a tumultuous struggle between good and evil. Like St Augustine, Rousseau also wrote a book of *Confessions* (1781–88), which explored his own personal contradictions throughout his life with the aim of showing that his basic motives had been good. Indeed, Rousseau is famous for his belief that humans are basically good by nature but become corrupted by society. By this he did not mean that all society was inherently evil, but that civilizations could become overly restrictive and impose artificial inequalities, diverting people from the state of nature. In this, Rousseau undoubtedly had in mind the 18th century central European society where he lived and worked, which was dominated by the aristocratic court and its elaborate code of manners. It also fostered a system in which artists and philosophers were dependent on wealthy aristocratic patrons, and no doubt this formed Rousseau's view that society could stifle the free expression of thought and feeling by the imposition of authority and artifice. Indeed, the Romantic Movement in the arts and philosophy, which gained inspiration and impetus from his writings, was based on the idea that the free expression of the creative spirit was more important than strict adherence to formal rules or traditional authorities. Charles Taylor has called this movement 'expressivist', because it understood self-identity as something to be made through an individual's creative expression.¹³ The answer to the question 'who am I?' does not come from mental reflection alone, but from the expression of natural talents, feelings and impulses: from self-expression.

This radical thinking brought Rousseau into conflict with the authorities of his day, state and church: it also set him at odds with Enlightenment thinkers who believed human freedom came through reason. It wasn't that Rousseau was against reason, human society, or a civilization that incorporated rational thinking: rather, he believed that these things should serve the expression of human nature rather than dominate and stifle it. A good society cannot be bound by force of law, imposed by the upper echelons, only by people's natural sentiments for each other inclining them to act together according to a self-imposed general will. For Rousseau, the social contract should encourage relative independence and autonomy of individuals, allowing the expression of their natural self-sufficiency, thus working with nature and not against it. Conscience then becomes 'the divine voice of the soul in man' rather than a set of abstract rules that must be followed. Rousseau's Romanticism has therefore bequeathed the notion that individuals

need to listen for that 'voice within' to direct us on our true and good path, both in relation to others and in seeking to express our self.

In the Enlightenment tradition, dualism was addressed from a rationalist perspective by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant recognized that humans are natural beings, having sensations that provide information about the world, along with desires, needs and inclinations against which reason can appear weak.¹⁴ Unlike Descartes, Kant does not see the rational mind as defining the whole self. He did believe, though, that it is reason, not feeling, which gives humans freedom and dignity. Without the ability to think for oneself using principles of rational thought, humans would never be critical of received wisdom, and could also be the slaves of passion. But this meant that, for Kant, the principles of reason could not be derived from human embodied experience: they cannot be learnt from current styles of thought, or else individual reason would simply mirror established forms of reasoning, with no critical distance between the two. Nor can principles of reason be extracted from the shifting data of the senses, or from the conflicting and contradictory nature of desire and emotion, which are inherently disorganized. From this, Kant concluded that reason must be *a priori*, meaning that it must be prior to the experience of any given embodied individual. If we cannot derive the principles of reason and the categories of cognitive thought from experience, then they must come from a transcendental self. Kant does not say, as does Descartes, that this transcendental self is a spark of the divine in humanity, instead he leaves open the origin of this aspect of the self. Rather, it is something that must be inferred so as to make sense of the human capacity to order and categorize the disordered sensory world, preventing us from being bombarded by a welter of sense-impressions that can never be formed into coherent thoughts. The transcendental subject therefore consists of the principles of reason and categories of thought given to all humans prior to experience and which make any ordered experience of the world possible.¹⁵

For Kant, then, reason is given in the human mind and is put into practice whenever humans act in the world. This applies not only to practical intelligence, but also to morality, because Kant inferred there must be an *a priori* moral law that creates a categorical imperative, guiding individuals to act in a consistently moral way. This allows society to form from the array of individual rational thinkers. However, in Kant, there are three senses in which he uses the term 'I' in answer to the question 'who am I?' Firstly, 'I' refers to the transcendental self that is capable of rational thought and can abstract itself from its embodied social, cultural and historical circumstance in order to be guided by *a priori* principles. This is Kant's notion of the 'I' as a pure ray of apperception that shines out its beam of light on the darkness and chaos of the world. Secondly, there is the embodied 'I' who puts rationality into action in practical circumstances and has an actual, empirical identity. Thirdly, there is the 'I' of moral law that has a capacity to follow moral imperatives rather than the dictates of individual desire. But Kant has difficulty in explaining how the three selves interrelate in order to achieve unity in experience.¹⁶ He has also created a gulf between the noumenal world (the actual, practical world in which the empirical self acts) and the phenomenal world

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(which is the world known through the categories of thought). Ultimately, Kant has to rely on the idea that rationality is emergent in all of nature to bring the 'I' which thinks into harmony with the world it thinks about.

All the philosophers I have considered so far have in common the idea that the self is located inside the individual, either in thought or in inner nature. It follows from this that it must be an aspect of the individual self, understood as sympathy or a moral imperative, which drives the person into society with others. This has been expressed most clearly by the thinker who is often associated with a radical economic individualism: Adam Smith. In fact, in Smith's book *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) he comes close to a view of the self as a social construction, laying the groundwork for philosophers, sociologists and social psychologists of the 20th century, whom I will be in dialogue with throughout this book. As part of the Scottish Enlightenment, Smith was writing in a different context to Descartes, Rousseau and Kant, in which the growing power of commercial relations in Britain during the 18th century was already beginning to challenge the traditional authority of the aristocracy and landed gentry. It was these commercial relations that Smith extolled in his more famous book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), but it is in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that we find him working out the psychological implications of such relations. While he did believe that each individual pursuing their own self-interest through commerce drove society to ever-greater heights of wealth and achievement, he also thought that this was not the only, or the most fundamental, human motive. Alongside self-interest, there were other aspects of human nature that incline us to be interested in the fortunes of others. These are the sentiments or sympathies we have for others that lead us to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine how they must be feeling in whatever situation they find themselves. It is not, then, the direct expression of emotion on the part of the other that calls out the same feeling in ourselves, such as grief or, especially, anger – a sentiment that Smith does not believe we instantly sympathize with – rather, it is the situation that has brought on the emotion with which we imaginatively identify, knowing how we would feel in the other's place. As Smith says, 'sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it'.¹⁷ By the same token, we expect others to sympathize with us in certain situations and feel aggrieved if they don't, seeing it as an injustice.

It is in this mutual interaction and identification with others that a view of our own self is possible, because we judge our own conduct by viewing it as through the eyes of other people. Society, then, gives us a mirror to ourselves. Furthermore, this creates for all selves what Smith calls the 'impartial spectator', which is an aspect of the self that is disengaged from our own passions, viewpoint and self-interest, as well as being disengaged from the viewpoint of any other particular person. Rather, it is the viewpoint of some general, impartial other that we take when we view our own self and behaviour. The 'I' that asks the question 'who am I?' is not for Smith an inner ray of divine light or pure apperception, but a self-reflection and awareness that can only arise in the midst of society and interaction, where we take an impartial view of ourselves based on the recognition that we are

seen and judged by others. Furthermore, what we reflect upon is our actions and impulses and, through the 'I' that is an impartial spectator, these things become like the objects of our judgement. This is how the two 'I's' implicit in Cartesian philosophy come into existence, because there is the 'I' that judges and the 'I' that is being judged.¹⁸ Yet again, this is only possible in society, where (to paraphrase that other Scot, Robert Burns) we can see ourselves as others see us.

The impartial spectator also becomes the basis of self-mastery, because through it we not only judge our own actions and impulses, we can also attempt to control them. Like the Stoics, Smith believed that self-mastery was important, but unlike the ancient Greco-Romans he did not have the elitist view that this could only be attained through a relation to a philosophical teacher: instead, everyone in society can be our teacher. This is why Smith valued commercial society so highly, because it encourages interactions with a wider range of people from all different societies and walks of life, thus broadening the view we have of the world and ourselves, increasing the scope of the impartial spectator. Interestingly, this can also be linked to the growth in popularity of the novel in the 18th and 19th centuries, as this became a tool of self-formation, expanding the identification with others through engagement with fictional characters and situations beyond the realm of one's everyday experience. Through the expanding connections to others, both real and imagined, people were exposed to greater social and individual differences, having a wider range of models to draw upon in their own self-fashioning.¹⁹

Although Smith did not directly influence him, the philosopher G. W. F. Hegel expanded the idea of the self as a social creation, taking it in a different direction.²⁰ For Hegel, the composite term 'self' is more important than the 'I', or self-consciousness, as he understood the self often to be plunged into contradiction and conflict within itself, and also periodically to be alienated from society. Contradiction, opposition, difference, and conflict, both in the self and society, is at the heart of Hegel's dialectical philosophy, for he saw these divisions as driving change in an attempt to achieve unity or resolution of contradiction at a higher level of becoming. Hegel believed that the self would not be aware of itself if it were a simple unity identical to itself: $I = I$ cannot be the formula, for some division in the self has to occur for part of the self to be able to turn back on the other parts and become aware of them, achieving self-consciousness or self-reflection. Equally, if the self were identical with society, it would simply be absorbed into an amorphous unity, unaware of its own individual difference with others. An *historical* dialectic of contradictions between society and self must begin, within which individuals become aware of contradictions within their own selves that they are driven to resolve at a higher level of unity. Hegel's philosophy is set within a social and a historical frame, and this makes it a philosophy of becoming.

In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel traces the dialectical process of development that society and self – the universal spirit and the particular spirit – go through in becoming what they are today. He begins his history in ancient Greece where people are given the status of individuals by the laws of state, but

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only as parts of the general *polis*, or political and social realm. Here, they are wholly at one with society, which determines the place and role of each individual. In Hegel's terms, the world that constitutes the self is not external to it, but is the totality of relations in which it is located. Yet in Greece, this was a limited conception of the self, because people had no notion of themselves as anything other than their place in the collective. For Hegel, as for Mauss, it was the Roman Empire that first gave to individuals the legal status of being separate persons, with duties and rights. People are no longer merely conscious of the world; they become more *self-conscious*, aware of the possibility of a degree of self-making. With the end of the Empire, as society fragments, individuals become alienated from the collective spirit of the age and begin to withdraw into a more private and personal realm. In the chaos and insecurity of the medieval period in Europe, where society collapsed into a *mêlée* of warring factions, the self was concerned only with the immediate necessity of survival. With no stable object outside itself to mediate its own existence, the self can find no stable reference point in its own thoughts or feelings from which to create a coherent self-identity.

In the European Middle Ages, Christianity provides a universal spiritual basis for individuals to begin to form self-consciousness as spiritual beings. However, the collective spirit as Kingdom of God is otherworldly, with individuals existing only as a partial embodiment of this spirit. As the church becomes joined in partnership with the nation-state as an agent of social authority, it sets itself above individuals as a power over them. Thus, the objective forms of universal or collective spirit set themselves against individuals, alienating them from the social world even as they participate in it. Even when reason offers itself as the guiding principle of knowledge and self-making – whether as an element of the divine in humanity, or as the transcendental self – individuals are left alone to apply this principle. Reason is to be found within and to be acted on individually, dividing people from each other and the collective spirit. Furthermore, the self is divided within itself between thought and feeling, reason and passion.

However, for Hegel, these contradictions all offer the possibility of synthesis at a higher stage, especially with the emergence of the democratic nation-state, in which humanity might be able to realize *both* a highly developed collective spirit within a social world where it feels itself to belong *and* a highly developed sense of self where people have freedom for self-development. This is because the alienated self is an unhappy consciousness, aware of its present life but also its unrealized potential. As a self always in the process of becoming, setting about resolving social and personal contradictions, it is aware of what it could be in the future as well as what it is now, driving it on to reconstruct itself right up to the point of old age and death. To Hegel, reason offers the potential for integration at a higher level, especially if it is understood as a principle of everyday organization rather than an inexplicable power beyond experience and account. This is because everyday reason allows distinct individuals to freely participate in union within a democratic sphere. Also, if we see reason as a force of everyday life, humans must embody both reason and feeling, meaning that the two are not universally bound to exist in contradiction. In the next stage of human existence,

people may be able to embody reason and feeling in the kind of harmony that people of much earlier societies could, but within a community that resolves the dialectical processes of unity, disunity, division, contradiction and alienation through a reconciliation of collective and individual self.

One of the major achievements of Hegel's work, then, has been to understand humans as social beings while retaining the notion of the self as an individual in its own right, albeit one that is the product of a dialectical historical process. In this he developed a relational understanding of the creation of the individual self, in which the totality of relations is not always bound to appear as external, but is the matrix in which we are constituted as selves. The social world only appears to oppose individuals in historical conditions of alienation, which can be addressed in new ways within the dialectical process of contradiction and resolution. However, in Hegel's historical dialectic, reason seems to appear and develop independent of human effort or design, according to its own ruse, offering possibilities for its own higher expression. Critics known as the Young Hegelians also pointed out that Hegel had posited the possibility of a resolution of contradiction through reason in theory only, and had ignored the practical and political task of setting about creating a new society that would fully overcome the separation of self and community. Numbered among this group was the young Karl Marx, whose work we will consider in the next section.

Before that, I want to consider briefly one more philosopher whose work reverberates in many current theories of the self: Friedrich Nietzsche. This is because Nietzsche did not believe that the self-conscious 'I' could be placed at the centre of human self-understanding. In *The Gay Science* (1882) he argued that consciousness is the latest development in the organic world, of which humans are part, and as such is the most unfinished and weakest part of the self. Much stronger are the human instincts, yet in civilizations humans are expected to rein in their instinctual drives in order to obey communal law and morality, or the principles of reasoned thought and behaviour. This is the origin of 'bad conscience' when humans had to suppress the instincts – the strongest part of our being – in favour of consciousness – the weakest part. It is this animal soul turned against its nature that makes the human self, because self-reflection – the turning inward to look at ourselves and the deepening of our self-analysis – is based on the drive to guard against our own desires. Nietzsche also refers to this as the 'will to power', for it creates the desire to dominate not only our own self, but other selves also. Thus, Nietzsche writes a history the direction of which is opposite to Hegel's: for Nietzsche, conflict is not resolved at a higher level in civilization through law, morality, Christianity and reason; rather, these things only weaken humans. Superficially, this looks more like Rousseau's idea that society can corrupt humans by re-directing them from nature, but there is a crucial difference. Working after the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in the mid-19th century, with its ideas of the natural selection of species and the struggle for survival, Nietzsche can no longer believe that nature, including human nature, is inherently good.²¹ At best, nature and human nature are amoral, with no in-built moral direction.

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What this means is that human self-experience is often mistaken. When we ask the question 'who am I?' we often flatter ourselves by answering that 'I am a good person', masking some of the more unpalatable instincts that are part of our nature, which are made unconscious in this self-identification as wholly good. We also mistake the 'I' for the will to power, believing that our identity resides in our conscious power to will our behaviour, when in fact it only represents a small and fragile part of the self. However, Nietzsche does believe that there is a solution to the morass of modern civilization, represented in his ideal of the *Übermensch* (usually translated into English as 'Supermen', but perhaps more accurately as the 'Upper-man' or 'Above-man'). This is the ideal that a true self has yet to be achieved, and can only be done by those men strong enough to face up to nature, to their own passions, to the chaos and destruction in the world, and affirm it all, finding joy rather than fear in it. Such men (and Nietzsche is clear that these individuals will express masculine and virile qualities) will also free themselves from collective morality, creating themselves as a work of art according to their own laws. While this seems to be a positive affirmation of life, there is a darker side to it, for Nietzsche was not a supporter of modern democratic societies, believing that those strong enough to create a self above the common herd would become élite. It is this, along with the misuse of his philosophy by the Nazis, who took it to support their cause for a new superior race, which makes Nietzsche's philosophy controversial still.

However, his work is of contemporary importance because it challenged the emerging way of conceptualizing the self in the West. Nietzsche rejected the Christian foundations on which the self had been understood as soul (as in St Augustine) or as metaphysical substance (as in Descartes and, to a lesser degree, Kant). For Nietzsche, there is no 'thing in itself', such as a soul, at the heart of the self: rather it is made up of a number of elements that have coalesced through a series of accidents, not through any self-conscious design. Furthermore, what we take to be the self, the 'I,' is actually the will that is formed by a part of the human body turning against some of its other elements. Thus, Nietzsche also offers a materialist as opposed to a metaphysical understanding of the emergence of the illusion of self as equalling the conscious, rational 'I', another reason for his contemporary appeal.

At the end of this section, I want to make you aware of the limitations of such a brief historical overview of Western conceptions of the self as I have written above. I am painfully aware of the dangers of oversimplifying complex philosophical positions, and also that this brief history has been highly selective. I have only spoken of philosophers whose work bears relevance to ideas of the self that I will discuss throughout this book, but that does not mean that other philosophers did not have important things to say on this topic. Charles Taylor and Jerrold Seigel have both written long, more extensive and complex histories of the idea of self than I have the space or expertise to write (see the selected bibliography at the end of this chapter). I am also aware that alternative histories of the self can be written from other cultural perspectives, for example ideas of the self in Confucianism and Buddhism,²² but again that is not my brief here: I am

concerned with the self as it emerges in Western modernity. Nor should we view ideas of the self as purely a product of philosophy, because, as Hegel indicated, the changing experience of self is also due to social and historical changes, which are refracted in philosophical writings.

Indeed, this point has been made brilliantly by the sociologist Norbert Elias, who argues that the changing self-image of humans in Western Europe, beginning in the Renaissance and continuing through the Enlightenment, was only in part the product of philosophical thinking.²³ Indeed, philosophers reflected the changing times in their thinking, so that the self-image of humans they created was a response to social changes happening in their day. Some of these we have already touched upon, such as the slow erosion of church and nobility as powers that dominated society in the Middle Ages. Without the dominance of the church to authorize all of human thinking, philosophers like Descartes – who represented the rise of a new urban middle class, including academics, which was starting to establish its own freedom of thought – began to contemplate methods for the validation knowledge independent of ecclesiastical authorities. This, however, threw individuals back onto their own resources and into contemplation of themselves, for the question arose of who are we as humans with the power to do what previously only God's representatives on earth had been allowed to do. In addition to this, Elias points out the effects of the rise in power of the nation-state and its centralized functions, and also the growth in commercial activity, resulting in what he calls the 'civilizing processes' in Western Europe: a term that refers to the shift in the balance of control of the population by means of social coercion towards greater emphasis on self-restraint of individuals acting together in daily social relations. People were now expected to show greater sensitivity towards the feelings of others, for example as expressed in the push towards more refined manners in court societies. However, this also meant that people had to constantly monitor their own feelings and expressions in the presence of others to a greater degree than before, creating a sense of deep division in humans between a rational and controlling consciousness on the one hand, and the drives, impulses and emotions on the other, which now had to be carefully watched and monitored. It is this, according to Elias, which adds to the modern human image of a self trapped inside its own casing: an 'I' that is separate from others in the 'outside' world, one which hides behind a 'external' image presented to others in order to suppress feelings or impulses that can no longer be expressed in public.

Elias' work is but one illustration of what sociologists have to contribute to understanding the emergence of the modern sense of self. I now want to turn to some other famous examples.

Sociology, social world and the self

Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber – three founders of the discipline of sociology – all thought that the type of self which emerged in Western modernity is inextricably bound-up with industrial capitalism. As sociologists, they did not

specifically ask the question ‘who am I?’ but rather ‘who are we?’ The question is a collective one because all individuals are born into, live and die within societies. We are elements of our culture, time and place, and can never be abstracted from the social world. Even if we move from one culture to another, we simply swap one social formation for another, and it is doubtful whether we can remove every last trace of the culture of our formative years. Like the languages we learn as children, elements of it are always there ready to appear spontaneously when called on.

Karl Marx approached questions of society and self as someone who had been a young Hegelian, and who carried the influence of Hegel’s philosophy throughout his life. Like Hegel, Marx believed that the social world is not something external to the self, but is the totality of relations in which the self is located and constituted. That is to say, we are all born into a social group: a social class, culture, religion, gender, ethnicity or any other social position by which we can classify ourselves. We may want to get out of that position or transcend its limitations, but we still have to work within the social framework that sets these conditions in the first place. Social relations are therefore the very essence of what it is to be a self: an individual with an identity amongst others. Again, like Hegel, Marx believed that these social conditions or relations only appear to be external to us – that is, to oppose and limit us rather than to be something living and vital to which we belong – when we are alienated from them. However, unlike Hegel, Marx did not believe that the human plight could be understood and resolved philosophically, nor that democratic society in itself provided a solution to alienation. As for philosophy, in *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) Marx wrote that ‘the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it’. Marx’s project, then, is practical and political as well as being theoretical.

Because of this, Marx provided a view of humanity and human nature different from other philosophers, one that he characterized as ‘materialist’. That meant he was concerned not just with understanding the way society and self had been conceptualized through a history of ideas, but with the way actual people have produced the conditions under which they live throughout history: their way of life, the products with which they satisfy their needs, their cultures and identities. In *The German Ideology* (1846) the Marxist view of human nature began to take shape.²⁴ This regarded humans as part of the natural world, and, like other animals, they must meet their needs in order to survive: they must eat, drink, and find shelter and warmth. Humans begin to distinguish themselves from other animals when they *produce* their subsistence: what they need to survive. At this point, humans no longer scavenge for food, they organize themselves into bands of hunters: they no longer rely on nature to produce edible fruit and vegetation, they cultivate crops: they no longer eat raw food, they cook it: they no longer take shelter in caves, but build shelters. Clearly, Marx regarded it as within human nature to achieve these things, but he didn’t think that human nature is fixed or set, for as humans produce they change both the natural world *and* human nature. In order to hunt and cultivate crops, people organized themselves into social

groups, which created a new *'mode of life'*.²⁵ Also, by producing, humans transformed their natural needs: they no longer needed to eat merely to satisfy hunger, but developed appetites and desires for certain types of cooked food. Through productive activity, then, nature and human nature are open to transformation.

In answering the question 'who are we?', then, Marx looked to the different ways human societies have produced their mode of life throughout history. Like Hegel, he used a dialectical method of analysing the contradictions, oppositions, differences and forms of alienation that arise in history, only Marx described this as 'historical materialism' because he wanted to study the way humans have physically produced their societies and selves in different epochs. In the early hunter-gatherer societies, people lived a tribal existence with a simple division of labour, where the land and the products of labour were communally owned. Each individual was part of the collective whole, which functioned like a family, and people shared what they produced. Contradictions and conflicts began to open up in society with property ownership, through which some individuals or groups gained power and dominance over others, who then struggled for their freedom. Property ownership is, therefore, the basis for the creation of social classes, in which certain groups of individuals gain distinction and dominance over others. In Marx's historical materialism it was this class conflict and struggle that was the motor of historical change, fuelled by changes to the way that people produce, or the 'mode of production'. Conflict between citizens and slaves, aristocrats and their subjects, feudal lords and serfs, has been the dynamic behind social change. It has also been the basis for different forms of alienation, as the totality of social relations and the products of human labour appear to stand against people as something not belonging to them. Slaves do not own their own bodies, which are bought and sold like commodities, while the feudal serf is separated from the land he or she works and the produce they grow, which is now owned by the nobility.

For Marx, class conflict and alienation reach their zenith in industrial capitalism, where the capitalist class owns the entire means of production: land, tools, technology and the labour power of the workers who work for them. The working classes do not own the means of production and can only sell their labour-power to capitalists in return for a wage. Nor do they own the products of their labour, which stand over and against them as alien objects, something they feel to have had little hand in creating. Equally, the working classes feel alienated from society as power is not lodged in any person to whom they have a direct relationship of dependence, like the feudal lord, but in the impersonal power of capital and state. As Marx claims, 'the more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole'. With the rise of capitalist civil society in the 18th century, 'the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity'.²⁶ People then retreat from collective life, into the private world of family and friendships where they can gain sustenance.

The only solution to this alienation, for Marx, was through political transformation of capitalist society, a dialectical resolution in which the energy, vitality

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and productivity of capitalist industry and technology will be preserved, but in an advanced form of communal ownership where all private property and wealth will be abolished. What is more, this revolution happens through the creation of a collective self-identity. To Marx, the industrial working classes were the first exploited social class to realize their collective oppression and to organize on that basis. The Marxist historian E. P. Thompson has written a detailed history from the 18th century onward of how working people in Britain created a collective class identity through various workers' movements and trade unions, which were also a political means of achieving emancipation and greater equality. Today, in the early 21st century, where capital is more global than it was in Marx's day, its power and influence seems even more external to us, harder to identify in place and time, and more out of the reach of attempts to oppose it. Perhaps this is why events like the G8 summit – where the leaders of the capitalist countries come together to plan global economic activity – attract the most visible protests by the anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements. And identity is still a key element at the heart of such movements. While not everyone opposed to capitalism will regard himself or herself as working class, Alberto Melucci has claimed that the new social movements are based in people's experimentations with alternative lifestyles and identities.²⁷ Many will be Marxists, anarchists, trade unionists, squatters, or have religious or other values through which they create an aspect of their identity.

For Marx, then, humans produce their mode of life through collective activity, and it is within this mode of life that different self-identities become possible based on the individual's place and activity within the division of labour. The individual self only begins to feel that it does not belong to the collective under conditions of alienation, where the self becomes isolated from the whole. The resolution of this dialectic of belongingness and alienation can only be found in a higher form of communal life, where self-identity would not be class-based but come from the free association of individuals who would make themselves, not as Nietzsche suggested, by laws of their own individual making, but by laws of their own collective making.

One thing that Marx has in common with Emile Durkheim is the understanding that the division of labour is fundamental to the creation of different self-identities. Marx, for example, believed that the division of labour was responsible for the rift between mind and body, reason and feeling in modern selves, for it has created the split between manual and intellectual labour, with individuals specializing in practical or intellectual skills from an early age. For both thinkers, though, the division of labour creates the range of different identities possible in any society. In *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) Durkheim says that in simple forms of society individuals are bound together through 'mechanical solidarity', in which each individual is representative of the whole group, embodying the beliefs and values of the collective.²⁸ In contrast, modern Western capitalism creates and binds individuals in 'organic solidarity', in which individuals are dependent on one another because each one fulfils a different function in the division of labour. Here, individuals specialize in specific tasks and functions,

creating a range of differences between people, reflected in the creation of a variety of self-identities. Indeed, it was in such a society that Mauss (Durkheim's nephew) claimed that the self becomes a basic category of thought, in the sense that it becomes one of the organizing principles of our thinking and, more broadly, of society. It forms part of what Durkheim called the 'collective consciousness': the ideas, beliefs and values formed within society, which become the basis of all individual thinking and feeling.

Because of these views Durkheim is often described as a neo-Kantian in that he saw the categories of thought existing prior to the experience of any single individual. However, rather than the categories belonging to a transcendental self, Durkheim believed they were contained within society which educates each new generation in its ideas, beliefs and values. It is not, then, some imperative of the categories that forces them upon us, rather it is society and its institutions which instil the collective consciousness in each individual. Steven Collins has pointed out, though, that Durkheim was not directly influenced by Kant but by Charles Renouvier and, through him, took on board many of Hegel's ideas.²⁹ This is evident in Durkheim's social and historical perspective, especially his view of individual differences emerging from an original collective whole. It also means that if the categories of thought are not transcendental, but social and historical, then they cannot be universal; they must change historically and vary between cultures. Certainly, Durkheim saw the dangers of modern individualism and relativism of thought, as it can put the collective consciousness under strain. In the modern division of labour 'each mind finds itself directed towards a different point on the horizon, reflects a different aspect of the world and, as a result, the content of men's minds differ from one subject to another'.³⁰

If the modern division of labour goes too far, and people find themselves too individualized, a state of *anomie* ensues, which is a lack of moral regulation whereby individuals become isolated, without the social values to give meaning and form to their lives. These ideas led Durkheim to be ambivalent about the modern ideology of individualism, which places the highest value on the distinctiveness of each person and their freedom from the collective. Durkheim thought this had become almost like a modern religion, where the individual becomes exalted as the highest and most worthy entity. Individualism is good so far as it gives people rights and freedoms, but Durkheim argued against its utilitarian form, which states that each person pursuing their own self-interest inevitably results in the best outcome for society. To him nothing could be more destructive of social solidarity. People need to realize that it is society that guarantees individual rights in order to not always put self-interest before the interest of the group. If this can be achieved, then humanistic beliefs and the ideology of individualism can form a collective consciousness that holds modern society together.

For Durkheim, then, in answer to the question 'who are we?' he would say that modern individuals are selves characterized by their place in the division of labour: by their skills, interests, specialisms, talents, functions, knowledge, jobs, professions and social status. It is these things that create a sense of self-identity,

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and it is the reason why we look to change jobs or social functions when we want to change our selves and our lives. However, if we place our own individual value too highly above others, we can become isolated and disconnected from society, in a state of *anomie*, without other values or interests above ourselves to give meaning to life. In the extreme, Durkheim believed this state could lead people to commit suicide.³¹ His ideas also create a view of the self that Anthony Giddens calls *homo duplex*, 'in the sense there is an opposition in every individual between egoistic impulses and those which have a "moral" connotation'.³² That is to say, we are all double selves, one half selfishly wanting to pursue our own interests, and the other half finding joy in transcending self-centredness to reach better, higher goals that benefit others. This is why Durkheim believed that universally humans have created some form of religion through which they can transcend their own narrow self-concern and reach for higher spiritual goals within a social group. The only problem with religion, according to Durkheim, was that humans mistook the Gods they created for the real source of their self-transcendence: society.

Durkheim's theory of the social creation of modern individualism and self is inspiring and thought-provoking, but it leaves us with one central problem common to all structural or functional theories. If society forces the categories on individuals through which they think and act, and outside of which they couldn't perform these functions, how do social groups develop such categories – a collective consciousness – to begin with? As Collins points out, this *a priori* theory of classification runs into trouble, because while it claims that classification must be forced upon individuals by society, it presupposes the ability of humans to classify.³³

While Durkheim was able to draw some positive aspect from modern forms of individualism and selfhood, this view was not echoed in Max Weber's more pessimistic ideas about modernity. Like Marx, Weber thought the modern individual self was alienated from the world as a result of the transformation of relations of personal dependence into relations of impersonality and rational calculation.³⁴ However, he didn't believe this to be the direct result of capitalist social relations: indeed, for Weber, the modern form of individual selfhood is derived from Christianity, especially Protestantism, and it was this that gave direct impetus to the formation of the Western style of capitalism.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) Weber argued that from the 16th century onward, beginning in Geneva and Scotland, but spreading their influence outwards, the Protestant sects such as Calvinism created an ascetic ethic by which individuals ordered themselves and their behaviour; activities that were to be influential in the formation of capitalism.³⁵ What was important in the Protestant ethic was its denial of any magical means of salvation by the church, such as the Catholic confession in which sins could be forgiven and the soul cleansed and saved. For example, Calvinism preached a harsh doctrine of predestination, which claimed that God had already predestined the few for salvation and there was nothing that an individual could do in their life to change that. For Weber, this had two effects on individuals. First, the lack of any means of

salvation meant that individuals were alienated from both God and church, as they were now abandoned in the world and left to an uncertain fate. Second, because individuals could no longer be forgiven sins, every sin counted against them and was perhaps a sign they weren't one of those chosen for salvation. Protestants now had to guard against sin and wrongdoing by ordering their lives into a progression of good works according to a rational plan. The ascetic life-plan of good deeds, hard work, frugal living and the accumulation of wealth, saved for the glory of God rather than sinfully spent and squandered, was perhaps a worldly sign that the individual was one of the chosen. As Louis Dumont has said, there is a paradox in the doctrine of predestination: although it would seem to take away the individual's control of their fate, on the contrary, it makes them more concerned with their fate, as this becomes a possible sign of election.³⁶

The desire to bind all of one's life into a rational plan of work spread into all areas of life, and gradually this Protestant spirit became secularized as a general ethic. It spread into capitalist enterprises where rational methods of bookkeeping account for money spent and profits made, as well as into labour disciplines such as strict time keeping and regular working hours. More importantly, for Weber, it led to rationalization becoming the basic mode of social organization and government, with bureaucratic styles of administration that had developed earlier in countries like China, and in European institutions such as the monasteries and the military, being adopted as a general principle. To Weber, the abstractions that rule people's lives and leave them feeling alienated are not purely economic, centring on private ownership of property and accumulation of capital, but are also to do with impersonal bureaucratic systems of population management, which are rule-bound rather than person-centred. Here, individuals can come to feel like the cogs in the rational bureaucratic machine, their lives totally ordered by such systems. Weber has likened this to living in an 'iron cage', a reference made specifically about the effects of modern consumerism.

Unlike Marx, Weber saw no solution to problems of modern capitalism in a revolution of the alienated and oppressed, because he thought that socialism – in trying to distribute wealth to meet individual needs – would turn into another form of bureaucratic system. Instead, following Nietzsche, he thought that individuals, who are crushed and depleted by modern civilization, can only become true selves when they take back the power and responsibility to freely choose their own values and actions. Selfhood is therefore an ideal to be attained, rather than a fact of modern life in Western bureaucratic capitalism.

However, there are problems in Weber's understanding of the modern rationalized nature of capitalism and selfhood. Anthony Giddens has pointed to the common critique that not all countries in Europe which became capitalist in the 18th and 19th centuries were predominantly Protestant countries, and that the influence of the Protestant sects was uneven. It is hard, then, to trace any direct link between the Protestant sects and the emergence of capitalism.³⁷ Others have suggested that Weber overestimated the effects of asceticism on the modern self. Colin Campbell has pointed to the Pietistic tradition in Protestantism, which stressed the individual's emotional commitment to God, suggesting that the

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emphasis on emotion rather than rationality had an influence on the popularity of Romantic art and literature in the 19th century.³⁸ According to Campbell, books by Romantic writers were amongst the first items demanded and produced for mass consumption. If the Protestant ethic only encouraged the formation of ascetic selves – who denied pleasure in order to save the fruits of hard-earned labour – then modern consumerism could not be explained. Indeed, one of the characteristics of selves in contemporary capitalist societies is that they have a seemingly insatiable desire to spend money on the consumption of goods. This has led the contemporary sociologist Zygmunt Bauman to claim that modern selves are ‘happy shoppers’, seduced by a culture of desire rather than denial.³⁹ It is then a problem, in Weberian terms, to see how lone individuals can escape this system without some collective associations – such as social movements – to help build alternative ways of life and new forms of social relationships.

Indeed, it could be said about all the sociologists I have considered above, that the lines of influence they draw between contemporary forms of individualism and capitalism are uncertain. As Abercrombie, Hill and Turner have noted, individualism and capitalism both have long and separate lines of development, ones that came together in European countries to form an individualistic type of capitalism. But it need not have been that way: in Japan, for example, traditionally there has been a more collective form of capitalism.⁴⁰ Capitalism and individualism have been of mutual influence on the modern Western notion of the self, but, as Mauss showed, we can see this beginning to form in ancient Greco-Roman societies and, from that time onwards, there are multiple influences on the Western conception and experience of selfhood. There are also many possible causes of the sense of alienation – the separation from the social world and individual isolation – that some feel in Western society. I have dwelt on only a few possibilities, but from these strands we can conclude that notions of the self, in the West alone, have a complex and conflicting history of social and cultural influence.

Psychology of the self

The discipline of psychology has also been influenced by many of the ideas I have considered above. One could regard modern cognitive psychology as a direct descendant of Kant’s philosophy. Cognitive psychology claims that human thought cannot be directly derived from sense experience and that there must be prior structures of thinking for humans to be able to order their thoughts and experience of the world. However, cognitive psychology does not believe in a transcendental self: rather, the structures of thought are understood to be either hard-wired into the brain at birth, or at least partly programmed in through learning. Cognitive psychology has therefore abandoned metaphysics and adopted a materialist scientific approach to the mind, based on biological science and computing. Yet there is controversy over how much mental ability is hard-wired into our brains through genetic inheritance, and how much is programmed or learned

from society. Moreover, cognitive psychology cannot explain how social knowledge develops and changes, focusing instead on individual minds. Social representations theory, a branch of 'social cognition', attempts to address this problem by developing the Durkheimian notion of the collective consciousness.⁴¹

However, I do not propose to develop these ideas in this book. Nor do I want to dwell on 'the psychology of personality', because in this branch of psychology 'personality' has come to mean something different from the notion of self. As developed by psychologists such as Gordon Allport, Hans Eysenck, and Raymond Cattell, personality is understood as a collection of traits or types that are mainly biologically inherited, which characterize each one of us as a unique individual.⁴² In this approach, different traits or types can be identified and measured to establish the nature of personality as, for example, extrovert or introvert. Again, this is not an approach I will be dealing with here, for while I do not dismiss the possibility that characteristics or temperament can be biologically inherited and socially developed, it is self-understanding I am concerned with. That is, I want to investigate how we come to identify ourselves among others as having specific characteristics, how we come to see some aspects of our personality as more important than others, and how this changes over time, both socially and individually. It could be, for example, that two different people, who know me in different contexts, develop two very different views of my personality. Which one is correct? Given that personal characteristics can vary in different situations, maybe they are both correct. But this is what the psychology of personality ignores, that we are social beings: instead, it sees the dynamic organization of each individual lying inside its biological structure, rather than being constantly recreated between people in social relationships. As Allport once said, the dynamic organization of each personality lies 'within the skin', which becomes the boundary that separates each individual.⁴³ Throughout this book I will provide a series of arguments against this view of personality.

For now, I want to say something about the work of Sigmund Freud, which is of greater import to other ideas I will consider in this book. Freud has also had a huge impact on self-analysis in the Western world, and beyond, through the development of psychoanalysis. As both theory and method of self-examination, this discipline has had some influence on just about every form of psychotherapy and counselling practiced today. For Freud, following Nietzsche, when we ask the question 'who am I?' we reply with a partially false answer, either because we do not know who we are, or because we respond with some illusion: an ego-ideal we take to be our self, but of which it is only a small part. In Freudian theory, the vast part of the self is unknown to us, or unconscious: the conscious 'I' is like the tip of an iceberg with only the small peak visible above the water and the major part of it concealed beneath the surface.

Again, like Nietzsche, Freud believes that what we conceal are animal instincts that are largely unacceptable to our civilizations, especially in certain forms of their expression, such as sexual and aggressive instincts. These have to be either repressed in the unconscious (how many of us will admit to being an aggressive person?) or channelled into socially acceptable forms of expression. In today's

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civilization, to fight someone in a boxing ring, according to strict rules and under supervision, is allowed, but to attack someone in the street is not: to express oneself sexually in a loving, long-term relationship is more acceptable than to be promiscuous. For Freud civilizations develop morality and law to manage and control the human instincts, but these are so powerful that they constantly strain at the leash, building up pressure in the human self to be released. Working in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Vienna, Freud saw many patients suffering from neuroses – obsessive, compulsive or maladapted behaviours – that he attributed to repressed sexual desires, especially among women of the time who couldn't openly express their sexuality. Freud theorized that it was the repressed aspects of the self – not only the instincts, but the ways these are culturally and historically transformed into sexual or aggressive wishes, desires, dreams and fantasies – that were causing the trouble, fighting for expression against the conscious mind and its moral conscience.

From this, Freud developed a tripartite theory of the self, divided between the ego, super-ego and id: consciousness, conscience and the unconscious. However, as Bruno Bettelheim has pointed out, it was the English translator of Freud's works who chose to use the Latin terms 'ego' and 'id' for the psychic agencies, whereas in the original German texts Freud had rendered these in everyday terms: I, above-I and it.⁴⁴ The 'I' is self-consciousness, the part of ourselves with which we identify, or the 'ideal I', whereas we regard everything we repress or deny about ourselves as not-I, or as 'it'. The 'above-I' is conscience, the moral values instilled in the self from its infant years, which watches over thoughts and feelings, looking to prevent the stirrings of a thought, wish or desire that is unacceptable. Thus, for Freud, the self is like a field of conflict on which warring factions often engage: the 'it' is like a force that compels us towards the expression of its repressed content of guilty secrets or forbidden dreams and desires; the 'above-I' watching to make sure that certain desires do not emerge, and, if they do, only in acceptable form; and finally, in the middle of these two powerful forces is the 'I', the conscious self, torn between these competing demands. Like Nietzsche, Freud believed the 'I' to be the weakest and most fragile part of the self, suspended between two threatening forces: the internal 'it' powering up from the depths for satisfaction, and the external power of cultural sanctions in the form of the 'above-I', resisting 'it' with the authority of society.

However, unlike Nietzsche, Freud places himself on the side of 'I', bringing the forces of psychoanalysis to its aid. Far from wanting to see the destruction of 'I', Freud wanted self-analysis to strengthen the 'I' by enlarging its scope to encompass the 'it' and reach greater harmony with the 'above-I'. He once said that the aim of psychoanalysis was a reformation of the self, in which where 'it' was there 'I' shall be. The more we know the 'it' and its potentially destructive drives, the more we can deal with them or defuse them without becoming too repressed or fearful of parts of the self – repression and fear also being potentially dangerous. In *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), written after the First World War and in the build-up to the Second, Freud expressed the view that the instincts, especially aggression, might be too powerful for any civilization to

contain, leading to its eventual destruction. Again, though, Freud supported the achievements of human civilization, such as science, rationality and art, regarding them as precious but precarious in the face of human destructiveness. Freud hoped that psychoanalysis could reinforce civilization in its battle against such forces, helping the self to feel less alienated from its own drives and from society and its rules. Certainly, Freud did not believe that a communist revolution would overcome alienation and result in a better, more equal society, for revolution relies on the very destructive forces that threaten self-identity and rational thought (the 'I'), as well as all the civilized achievements Marx thought everyone should share.

Despite this, Freud's aims and hopes for psychoanalysis were frustrated. Throughout his life he worked on *The Project for a Scientific Psychology*, hoping to locate the different aspects of the human mind in neurological functions and the workings of the nervous system, but neurological science was not advanced enough at that time for Freud to ever complete the project. Instead psychoanalysis remained largely philosophical and humanistic, with Freud attempting to understand the workings of the mind and self through metaphors and allusions to ancient literature (such as his adaptation of Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* into the notion of the 'Oedipus complex', describing the development of the child's self and sexuality within the complexity of family relationships). And while it has had a huge impact on all forms of psychotherapy, psychoanalysis has not become the answer to all of the problems of modern civilization. If Freud set out to be the therapist to the Enlightenment, strengthening the forces of rationality against the irrational, his success has been only partial.

Furthermore, while Freud was centrally concerned with the self, often his understanding of the relationship between self and society was only a secondary consideration. Whilst he had a detailed understanding of the repression demanded in civilizations and in the family, he never fully considered the effects that others have on the formation of the self in everyday relations and interactions. Nor did Freud consider the effect of factors like social class or gender on identity (strange, given that most of his patients were middle-class women). I will consider these factors in greater detail throughout this book.

The idea of social individuality

What I will be exploring throughout the rest of this book is the idea of social individuality, which means that one cannot separate the styles of self found in different cultures from the very historical and social relationships in which they are formed. We have seen in this chapter how Western notions of the self have been formed from many diverse and contradictory cultural strands, from Roman legal theory and Greco-Roman Stoic philosophy, to the Christian theology of the metaphysical soul as a kind of self-substance, and how, in various ways, this had an effect on the type of industrial capitalism that formed in Britain and other countries of Western Europe (and later in the USA). As thinkers as diverse as Hegel,

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Marx, Durkheim and Weber have pointed out, individuals also become alienated from social life when power consolidates around church and state, or certain social classes, leaving the majority divorced from the social wealth (cultural and economic) they have helped to create. But capitalism has also created the division between the public world of work and politics, on the one hand, and of private life with family and friends, on the other. The modern self feels this division to its very core, having been created within it, and is often torn by the competing demands of the two.

However, a subtle shift happened in the understanding of the self from Hegel onward, in that for him, and for other social scientists who followed, the self is no longer at the centre of the world-picture, as it was for Descartes. Understanding the self is no longer the direct concern because this has to be approached by framing the self in the wider context of social formations and their changes. This is often referred to in the contemporary literature as the de-centring of the self. Nietzsche and Freud also participated in this movement by shifting the focus of their analyses away from the self-conscious 'I' onto the unconscious 'it' from which our thoughts and feelings spring unwillingly. It is this challenge I take up here in trying to understand the nature of social selves, or of social individuality, and to do it in a new way of my own theoretical synthesis.

Those who have attempted to de-centre the self have also had another aim in their sights, to challenge the founding Christian notion of the self as an inner soul or substance, one that is metaphysical because it is unseen, but nevertheless substance-like because it provides the core elements of self prior to learning or experience. Instead, for the challengers, the self is understood as created in society and is a contingent or accidental amalgamation of the different aspects of the influences that have informed us, literally making us who we are. I will take up this line of argument by claiming that the idea we have of ourselves as possessing an 'inner' self waiting to be revealed somewhere inside the body or mind, *feels* correct, but only as a metaphor. The metaphorical sense of having an inner self arises through a silent dialogue we constantly hold with ourselves (not necessarily going on 'in the head'), which is only possible through social relations and dialogue with others. Like Adam Smith, many believe this sense of self only arises in the communicative interactions we have with others, through which we gain knowledge of ourselves and become who we are.

However, it is my view that sometimes the movement to de-centre the self goes wrong, finding itself in a purely academic debate, because it confuses three things I have begun to draw out in this chapter.

First, the critique of individualism as a political ideology or methodology: this is the critique of individualism along the lines of Macpherson's notion of 'possessive individualism', or of the ideas of methodological individualists who believed that unique individual differences occur prior to social relations, being the building-blocks out of which society is constructed. Methodological individualism in the social sciences and in psychology is what many are against who want to understand society as existing prior to individuals, theorizing the self as a social construction. But this can also spill over into a critique of alienating

forms of individualism in capitalism, such as Marx's critique, or Macpherson's more democratic adaptation of Marx's ideas.

Second, the philosophical critique of the self as substance: this is the critique of Augustinian and Cartesian ideas of the self as soul or metaphysical substance, or of contemporary theories such as the psychology of personality, which understands self to be an 'inner' organization of the organism. This is an epistemological critique of the way the individual is theorized and understood within philosophy.

Third, the investigation of the nature of self and what it is to be a self among others in the social world. It is this aspect of self I will pursue in this book, arguing that we must not confuse the critique of individualism or the epistemological critique of self as substance, with an understanding of self as it emerges in social relations and dialogues. The first and second critiques do not lead automatically to a critique of the third: that we exist as embodied beings in social relations, and, in this milieu, we become selves. I will also argue that while some ideological and metaphysical abstractions, which need to be critiqued, have acted upon individuals in everyday life, shaping self-identities, there is a reciprocal relation between political and philosophical abstraction on the one hand, and everyday life and selfhood on the other. The two inform each other, with ideas about what it is to be a self that emerge from everyday social relations seeping into concepts of the self in the social sciences, psychology and the humanities, while these concepts can then filter back into everyday understandings of who we are. I will discuss this relation of 'official' (established political or scientific) ideas of self and 'unofficial' ones (ideas and feelings that are created in everyday interactions and dialogues) throughout the book.

In anticipation of the development of my views, let me say that I understand self as a necessary part of modern Western life. Taylor has argued that to know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, to know where you stand in terms of the value commitments and identifications through which actions are determined.⁴⁵ I, however, argue that to have a sense of self and an understanding of self-identity is a means of orientation in the entire social space of Western modernity. In this space we orient our actions with one another by trying to gauge other selves: who they are and what they are thinking and feeling. Especially in the more secular and cosmopolitan places of Western modernity, where single overarching moral frameworks are starting to lose their hold, notions of the self help to orient people in their relations and activities in a society of individuals.

Notes

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