

CHAPTER ONE

The Problematic of Self in Western Thought

SELF, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

All of the important notions characteristic of Western cultural self-consciousness are “vague” in the sense that they are open to rich and diverse interpretations.¹ This is the case with respect to the term “self” and allied terms such as “person,” “personality,” and “individual.” A perusal of the meanings for these terms in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) demonstrates this fact rather well. Indeed, beyond the strictly denotative senses found there lie the semantic complexities associated with the use of these terms in variant theoretical contexts.

Even if such genetic analyses were helpful, we would gain nothing by searching out the origins of the term “self,” for, as we are darkly told at the beginning of the OED entry, its etymology is “obscure.” We are dependent, therefore, upon the history of the semantics of the concept and its referents, whose philosophical transmutations over time have been further ramified by the accreted significances of “soul,” “mind,” “person,” “human being,” “agent,” and associated terms.

Normally, a dictionary is meant to include alternative meanings in order to facilitate the selection of the best definition relative to context. In our hyperconscious late modern period, however, this aim has been subverted in favor of the recognition that all of our interpretative categories are semantically vague complexes whose associations can neither be reduced to a coherent or internally consistent meaning, nor exhaustively isolated by appeal to their respective context-relative

meanings. In the absence of narrow and arbitrary stipulations, such categories are intransigently ambiguous.

Not only is there little consensus as to the correct meaning of any given term, most of us who have no specific theoretical motivations seem quite content to hold central cultural notions such as “freedom,” “power,” “nature,” “knowledge,” and “love” together in gloriously inconsistent clusters. With each use of such terms we are, willy-nilly, alluding to the entire cluster of associations, for the most part unaware of the logical tensions that might exist among the variant meanings.

What *meaning* can a cluster have if the semantic elements are mutually inconsistent and yet, in some complicated manner, can be shown to possess their meaning by virtue of the clustering process? We can answer this question only by reconsidering the meaning of “connotative sense.” For vague terms are shaped by their overlapping contexts.

The meaning of a semantically vague term results from aesthetic juxtapositions that highlight the tensions of contrasting senses that form an aesthetically complex, but often logically inconsistent, context. Our purported understanding of such terms might better approximate the experience of “appreciation” than the grasp of certain cognizable import. Such enjoyment or appreciation of the meaning of vague concepts challenges the coherence of the agent of understanding, who can truly accommodate the incoherence, incongruence, and inconsistencies embedded in vague notions only if she owns the same complexity as the notions themselves.

Thus the primary semantic associations, when they qualify the experience and practice of individuals, destabilize the self by shaping actions and appreciations in disparate, richly vague, manners. Such destabilization threatens the existence of any coherently defined ego or personality construct characterizing a core self. We are our (often conflicting) desires, our (often contradictory) beliefs, and the (often discordant) activities they enjoin. Aristotle’s doctrine remains intact: There is a real sense in which we become that which we know.

This situation places us in a better position to understand at least one aspect of the Chinese cultural sensibility. For what we have achieved involuntarily as a consequence of the failure of any single definition or interpretation to realize consensual status, the Chinese have traditionally affirmed as the ground of their intellectual and institutional harmony—namely, the recognition of the copresence of a plurality of significances with which any given term might easily resonate. The difference is that

the Chinese understanding of self is not threatened, but deepened by this fact.

In this work we wish to search out relevant meanings of “self” and its cognates in order to approach the Chinese senses of self as it is disclosed in terms such as “self” (*ji* 己), “person/s” (*ren* 人), “I/we/us” (*wo* 我), and, most importantly, *ren* 仁. We shall also be concerned with the distinctive sense of self-reflexivity in the Chinese tradition, as in “self-so-ing” (*xiran* 自然), “self-cultivation” (*xiushen* 修身), and so forth.

Before we do this, however, we must assay the principal meanings of self in the Western tradition. This requires that we attempt to escape the bounds of the dictionary and move among the uncollected, initially uncoordinated senses of things. Ironically, we can only evoke a viable sense of self by presenting a cluster of associated meanings that, even though they lack logical or semantic coherence, nonetheless name the vague reality we have become.

Within the Western philosophical tradition, subjective consciousness in the strictest sense is likely a modern invention.² Of course, the less stringent sense of self as agent or knower who acts or understands in the outer world of things and events is of much earlier origin. One may, with some plausibility, trace the *historical* origins of the concept of the self within Anglo-European culture. The historical vagueness³ of “self,” a consequence of the development of contrasting understandings of the notion by appeal to several distinct historical narratives, provides some evidence for the culture-bound character of the concept. We shall further highlight this boundedness below when we consider alternative Chinese understandings of “selfhood.”

We have argued elsewhere that in the Western tradition, our cultural self-understanding has been importantly influenced by analogy with the cosmogonic motivation of construing order from out of chaos.⁴ This motivation has operated to shape our myths, religions, laws, and institutions. Equally it is evident in the development of the Western philosophical dialectic that effectively began with the systematization of thinking by appeal to logical definition as a means of bringing order into our perceptions and imaginations.⁵ One way of recounting the narrative of our developing intellectual culture is by indicating the specific manner in which we have established the meanings of important notions such as “God,” “Nature,” “Power,” “Law,” “Freedom,”—and, of course, “Self.”

Broadly speaking, there have been four primary semantic contexts that have shaped alternative meanings of terms such as “individual,”

“human being,” “personality,” and “self.” In our previous work, these contexts were termed the materialist, formalist, organicist, and volitional models.⁶

The neurophysiologists’ construal of human behavior in terms of neuronal firings, or the sociobiologists’ characterization in terms of genetic determinants, or Sigmund Freud’s reduction of human experience and expression to libido, and of human culture to sublimated products of libidinal sexuality, along with the behaviorists’ reckoning of human individuality by appeal to contingencies of reinforcement in local environments, establish a materialistic-mechanistic axis of interpretation in Western culture. This axis goes back through the latter to Thomas Hobbes, who conceived of individuals as bodies swirling in social space, and to ancient materialists such as Democritus who believed that human beings were mere collocations of atoms who “emerged from the ground like worms, without a maker and for no particular reason.”⁷

At the opposite extreme lies the characterization of personality by appeal to mind, consciousness, or reason. Plato’s explanation of *psyche* in terms of the guidance of the rational element, Hegel’s claim that “the real is the rational,” and Husserl’s delineation of the Transcendental Ego as a formal and noncontingent structure defining the apriori character of both mind and self, are points on a line constituting the rational axis of interpretation. Obviously, idealist and phenomenological understandings are not commensurable with materialist interpretations.

In addition to these explanations that emphasize the physical or mental individuality of the self, there are two models that stress the self as a function of social and or political contextualization. Aristotle’s organic naturalism conceived the human being as a language-bearing creature whose experience is constituted by interactions with other persons. The person as biological and social organism is ensconced in a sociopolitical context itself construed in organic terms. The chief defining characteristic of this organism is its principal aim, which Aristotle conceived to be “happiness.” This view has since received elaboration and nuance in the pragmatic vision of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey. For these thinkers, persons emerge in the mutually constitutive relationships which ultimately define both self and social ambiance. This social view is found in a variety of forms in sociology, social psychology, and political science.

The Sophistic tradition persists in the twentieth century as a vision that characterizes knowledge as a function of rhetorical persuasion, and

personality as a function of self-creativity and persuasive power. This perspective has both “political” and “literary” versions. It is political to the extent that it promotes the ruler-ruled relationship as the context within which meaningful human existence is to be found. Powerful persons are authentic by virtue of the fact that they establish the context of meaning; the ruled are those who operate within this context. This perspective originated in early Greek thinkers such as Protagoras and Thrasymachus and has been perpetuated in modern times by certain strands of existentialism. Michel Foucault’s critique of the conspiracy of knowledge and power in social institutions is an instance of this approach. Derrida’s virtuosic deconstruction of the coherence of the canonical texts instances this volitional turn in contemporary philosophy in its literary guise. Here person and text are mutually defining, providing the dynamics of self-creativity involved in authoring both self and text.

The four principal models just rehearsed may be capsulized as follows: The self is either a physiological mechanism swirling in social space, or a mind or consciousness detachable from its bodily housing, or an organic, socially interactive, goal-achieving organism, or a willing, deciding, potentially self-creating agent whose meaning is determined by persuasive agency.

The ages-long transmogrifications of the Western notions of self from Homer to the present has been told as a psychic journey from the Many to the One, from the disparate and unfocused actions, dispositions, and understandings that variously expressed the human mode of being in its world to the unity of the human being individuated by mind, will, purposive functioning, or physical substrate. This press toward unity has finally created a new plurality, a plurality of ways of characterizing the unity of the person. These alternative models of unity may be seen to rehearse the four primary semantic contexts described above.⁸

Lately, this cultural adventure seems to have turned about, and has begun to retrace its path, moving now from unity to plurality. The late modern self well might be the original disparate self—but with a remarkable difference. What is left over from the failed project of the Enlightenment that sought in the unity of rational self-consciousness the highest expression of human sensibility is not, of course, the unity of the self but its *self-consciousness*. Ironically, the content of this consciousness is of the self as a candidate for a variety of distinctive interpretations. Thus the desire for wholeness and unity, already definitive of the Western adventure by the close of the Hellenic period, cannot be said to have

realized its goal in modernity. The modern self collapsed as soon as it was formed, its very apotheosis signaling its demise.

This fragmentation can be further detailed by recourse to a second set of variables. For in addition to the broad distinctions between the characterizations of self associated with the four principal philosophical traditions, there is the distinct manner in which each tradition comes to interpret the tripartite structure of the *psyche* elaborated in the philosophic syntheses of Plato and Aristotle. The elements of reason, appetite, and will (thought, action, and passion) grew to be so much a part of the problematic of selfhood that some characterization of them appears in almost any full-scale treatment of personality, ancient and modern. We find more than echoes of this psychic structure in Augustine's treatment of the *imago dei*, in Kant's critiques of the aesthetic, moral, and scientific spheres of value, and in Hegel's dialectical analysis of consciousness as In-Itself, For-Itself, and In-and-For-Itself, as well as in Freud's psychoanalytic categories of ego, superego, id.⁹

It is a truism of the interpretation of ancient Greek culture that the analogy established between *kosmos* and *polis* had its origins in the sense of *kosmos* initially referenced to social and political structures. The verb, *kosmeo*, "to set in order," was used in a number of quite ordinary contexts from the household to the military before it came, as a noun, to be used, initially perhaps by Pythagoras, as a characterization of the natural world. *Kosmos* came into being modeled upon social organization. The cosmos is the *polis* writ large, just as the *polis* is the soul writ large. This structure is adumbrated already in the senses of person or individual suggested by the Homeric texts. The terms Homer used to refer to the essential, living aspect of the individual human being were variously *psyche*, *noos*, and *thymos*. There is in the beginning no reason to posit a self-conscious being aware of its various functionally specialized potentialities.

The analogical relationships among *psyche*, *polis*, and *kosmos* were exploited in the mature phases of Greek philosophy to develop the general structures of aesthetic, political, ethical, and metaphysical understandings. The same process is to be seen with respect to the cosmological employment of the concept of *dikaiosyne*, "justice," which was a term of art in the courts before Anaximander applied the notion to the interaction of opposites within the Boundless.

In the discussion of putatively naturalistic concepts, therefore, one does well to seek a social and cultural ground for the tools permitting their

articulation. This principle must be applied, above all, to any consideration of the meaning of self within the Western tradition. *Psyche* developed in Plato as a tripartite structure owning the functions of spirit (*thymoides*), appetite (*epithymia*), and reason (*nous*). These notions were manifest in conventional contexts associated with disparate and uncoordinated human activities and expressions, and only later came to possess an essentialistic reference to psychic structure. Aristotle used these same notions in his organization of the disciplines into theoretical, practical, and productive.

One of the most telling developments in the creation of a coherent conception of self comes about with the transition from the Greek to the Judaeo-Christian cultural context. As has been argued by a number of different scholars, until the Stoics' and Augustine's ruminations upon the soul's relationship to God, the notion of will (*voluntas*) was not a part of the conception of personality.¹⁰ The notion of "will," after all, requires a sense of over-against-ness that derives from a central power—God as Divine Caesar—who represents absolute authority. Another way of saying this is that to own *intention*, one must be *in tension* in some significant manner.

We have said enough to demonstrate the plausibility of the thesis that, from the sense of a chaotic matrix of shifting uncoordinated and unintegrated vital functions, to the expression of the tripartite structure in Plato and Aristotle, to the final articulations of the three modes of functioning as reason, passion, and will, Greek, Roman, and Judaic elements of Anglo-European cultural traditions contributed the contingent factors that eventuated in the modern conception of the self.

Whatever permutations of the self one might wish to highlight, the three general notions expressed by terms such as knowing, acting, and feeling will be involved at some level. No coherent analysis of these terms is possible, of course, for there have simply been too many theoretical proposals offered with respect to these modalities of psychic activity to make any final analysis either possible or even desirable. Nonetheless, a general analysis will serve to provide a background against which we might highlight the fragmentation of the modern self and the late modern celebration of that fragmentation as a means, finally, of preparing ourselves to understand the Chinese senses of self.

A major presumption of our tradition has been that legitimate knowledge must have resort to concepts or principles involving class

concepts that have the effect of denying the idiosyncratic character of particulars. Whether knowing is said to precede or to be consequent upon praxis, it has, nonetheless, a shaping character since the practical forms of construing the world are reflections of the theoretical forms of shaping antecedent chaos in terms of the structures of mythopoetically described cosmos. The first philosophic question, the question to which *physis* was the answer, is: "What kinds of things are there?" Understanding the world in terms of a *kind* or *kinds* of things is the paradigmatic expression of knowledge in our tradition. It is this that introduces the notion of natural kinds characterized in terms of essential properties. This development has led us to ask after the meaning of an essential human nature, which grounds the core meaning of the self. Platonism finds this core self in a formal rationality, while Aristotelian naturalism finds it in the knowledge of ends or aims defining the nature of the human organism.

"Action" has its origins in the heroic model characterized by appeal to the *agon* or contest, which involves the assertion of an agent of such quality or magnitude as to certify either the agent's strength or courage in the face of the strength of an "other." This model derives from the Homeric tradition and continues to serve as one of the crucial interpretations of action in our tradition. An alternative model, paradigmatically expressed by St. Augustine in the fifth century, involves obedience to the all-powerful Will of God. The elements of *greatness* and *humility*, or excellence and deference, define the modalities of human action. In either case, there is the notion of assertion, be it that of the hero or the Divine agent.

The Greek concept of *agon* or contest that defined the context for the heroic notion of the individual did not provide a stable, continuous focus of authority in tension with which the notion of will could be established. That notion did not originate in our tradition until action was interpreted in relation to an authoritative Divine will. Modernity, then, charts the detachment of that notion from its theological context and the association of action with the volition of autonomous human beings. It is this that insures that *self-assertion* will constitute one of the principal defining characteristics of the modern age.¹¹

The element of "feeling" is more diffuse in its signification than the other two modes of psychic expression. Perhaps it is best focused by the notion of "desire." The difficulty in understanding the mode of desiring lies in a failure to grasp its psychological underpinnings. Desiring is a

wanting and, as the ambiguous word, "want" suggests, it is predicated upon a lack. When Plato defined *eros* as the "stepchild of abundance and need," he captured the essentials of passion. Absence of the desired object leads to desire. The presence or possession of the object (ostensibly the goal of desiring) mitigates or cancels the desire. We want what we do not, perhaps *cannot*, have.

One of the serious problems associated with the element of desiring concerns the contradiction between the need to possess a desired object and the even more primordial need to create an *object* out of that which is desired. The poignancy of the Platonic reading of desire is that, in objectifying and then possessing the goal of our desiring, we cancel the desire. This self-contradictory character of desiring is, of course, a major theme in most Buddhist and some Western psychologies.

Desire, as a category serving to shape our understandings of the self, has also received an important materialistic interpretation in terms of the notions of *pleasure* and *pain*. Materialist or mechanistic philosophies interpret desire as the motivation to promote pleasure and avoid pain. From the early hedonistic philosophies to the latter day Freudians and behaviorists, the self is seen as contingent upon its more or less successful attempts to maximize pleasure and minimize pain.

This broad survey of the contextualization of the self from out of the classical cultural resources highlights the elements which the Age of Enlightenment will take up in its effort to build the subjective autonomy and rational self-consciousness of the modern self. For we do not have a real concept of the self until we arrive at subjective, self-conscious experience as the principal medium of self-articulation. This is, as we have said, a peculiarly modern occurrence in the West.

THE MODERN SELF

In tracing the complexities of the modern development of the self, one normally begins with Descartes' diremption of mind and body, which permitted a means of maintaining the material character of body as a part of physical nature while making room for strictly mentalist explanations. The development of materialist science from Galileo, Boyle, and Newton provided the grounds for physical reductionisms of positivism and behaviorism in which the self or personality is construed in terms of

matter and motion. After Kant, mentalist explanations employed the explanatory matrix of the value spheres that, as we have seen, were analogous to the psychic modalities of reason, volition, and feeling.

One way of telling the story of the strictly modern self is by rehearsing the reading Hegel provided of Immanuel Kant's philosophic program.¹² According to Hegel, Kant's three critiques were in fact conscious attempts to ground the autonomy of the value spheres of art, science, and morality. Taking the analogy from Plato, Kant recognized that reason, passion, and (in the post-Augustinian age) will, as modalities of human experience, were focused by the cultural interests of science, art, and morality. The three critiques provided an account of the nature and limits of rational inquiry vis-à-vis the investigation of intellectual and practical culture.

Hegel claimed, however, that Kant was not sufficiently aware of the threat to the cultural autonomy of the value spheres. He decided that it was his mission to provide a philosophic rationale for the protection of these individual and cultural interests. Hegel's speculative system rehearsed in the most complete form the means of coming to cultural self-consciousness. With the advent of this exercise in cultural self-articulation, which involved the mediation through cultural forms of the various modalities of self-expression, the modern self, at least in principle, realized its apotheosis.

It was certainly the case that the modern world had already manifested other agents of self-interpretation. Descartes is often singled out as the first truly *modern* philosopher by virtue of his discovery of rational subjectivity; Francis Bacon may be said to provide a supplement to Descartes' project through the elaboration of the self as assertive agent and as a shepherd of technological progress. David Hume found in the passions of pride and envy, love and hate, the source of self-awareness and the meaning of individuality. Baudelaire, ringing the aesthetic variation of Hume's economic interpretation, stressed the creative, novelty-seeking artist as the paradigm of selfhood.

These thinkers could easily be understood as having stressed the importance to self-understanding of the elements of reason, volition, and passion respectively. But there is a sense in which, the obvious limitations of Hegelian philosophy to the contrary notwithstanding, the full conscious recognition of the complexity of the self is a post-Hegelian phenomenon that depends in some skewed manner upon the grandiosity of the Hegelian project.

The assault upon the Hegelian project came from numerous quarters, of course, but none was so devastating in its consequences as the critique offered by Søren Kierkegaard. It is one thing, said Kierkegaard, to realize in some abstract and speculative manner a vision of the harmony of the value spheres and of the modalities of self-expression that resonate with them, and quite another thing to come to grips with the concreteness of temporal experience. At the level of lived experience there seems no way of overcoming the concrete conflicts between the knowledge-bearing institutions, the propertied interests, and those technological activities that order the instrumentalities of society. Life is one thing; philosophy another.

Hegel's resolution of the diremption of the value spheres was a resolution in theory. It was comprehensive in itself, but remained essentially unrealized in the sphere of praxis. Other proposed resolutions, such as those offered by the Marxists or existentialists, constitute attempts to promote resolutions in practice. Even here, however, we are often offered mere *theories* of practice. Further, these practical approaches are both reductive and partial. That is, they require that personal and institutional choices be made that exclude real alternatives without providing an adequate rationale for this exclusion.

For example, though Marx's indignation at the alienated condition of the newly emergent proletariat was a justifiable decrying of the reduction of the self to the interests of property acquisition and ownership, the Marxian alternative errs in the opposite direction by collapsing the distinction between the theoretical and practical spheres in a manner that effectively cancels the life of disinterested intellectual activity. Relevance is gained at the cost of comprehensiveness.

There appears to be no means of establishing a preference of one view over another. If we are to be reasonable, however, we cannot simply be content with settling upon whichever theory or mode of praxis best suits us. The dominant views of the self, derived from the specialized, reductive, construals of selfhood in accordance with the rational, volitional, and affective paradigms are, of course, mutually incompatible. Further, that incompatibility has practical consequences by creating active tensions within each self-conscious self.

Faced with the alternatives of either narrowness or incoherence, the only rational choice seems to be that of attempting to avoid inconsistencies by tentatively accepting one of the various modalities of self-expression as the focus of one's sense of self. Even if this were possible,

however, it would only result in externalizing the otherwise internal conflicts that come from attempting to modulate the tripartite self. The more individuals refuse to recognize the need to supplement within themselves the full range of the modalities of self-expression, the greater will be the conflict of ideologies and institutions within a society. Thus the so-called rational response to a pluralism of understandings and practices turns out, finally, to be rather *unreasonable*.

Perhaps the most reasonable approach to the plurality of beliefs and practices, though this may hardly seem satisfying, is simply to accede to the relativist *in theory*, while attempting to go one's own way in practice. Practical commitments do not gain any clarity or cogency by being supported by dogmatic claims to the truthfulness of a theory said to support or entail them. This is especially so if these claims are made in the face of a number of alternative theories. And any attempt to separate theory from practice in any final way assumes, illegitimately, that the vagueness of our understandings will not affect our actions. This is, of course, altogether naive.

MIXING METAPHORS: THE VAGUENESS OF THE SELF

In late modern culture, to be a self is to be incoherent or narrow; moreover, to *have* a self in these times is to recognize that our incompleteness, or our incoherent forms of self-articulation and expression, leads to a sense of fragmentation, manyness, and internal contradiction. Whether this condition is experienced as alienation, or as a complex aesthetic satisfaction, is the question that currently divides we late moderns.

Late modern theories offer an alternative to both narrowness and the negative construal of incoherence through a transfer of the criteria of relatedness away from the logical or rational to the aesthetic. On these terms, what was once unacceptable because expressive of divisiveness, inconsistency, and incoherence, is desirable because of its expression of aesthetic contrast and intensity. This reversion to what we have called "first-problematic thinking" issues in a correlative interpretation of the self.¹³

In this sort of interpretation, the paradigm of self-understanding has shifted from an ego-based, substance view, to that of the person as process. And the processive understanding of the self permits the serial realization

of conflicting modalities of self-expression. The self as process is concerned with its potentially multifaceted "career" rather than its self-identity at any moment. This career is one in which various dimensions of expression are possible.

The denial of authorial presence, the absence of the omniscient narrator, and the general suppression of linear narrativity in fiction, along with the celebration of multiple personality constructs, the announcement of the "death of man" in the human and social sciences, all challenge the modern concept of the self as free, subjective, autonomous consciousness.

Each of these phenomena is an expression of the general disillusionment with the so-called "philosophy of presence" that according to Heidegger, Derrida, and the poststructuralists, has dominated philosophic discourse from the beginnings of Greek philosophy. The desire to make Being present through the beings of the world, to advertise the *logos*, essence, or logical form of that which is conceptually entertained, has created a profound bias toward the recognition of the sameness of the otherwise different, the pattern in the flux of passing circumstance.

With the failure of the philosophy of presence, however, comes the new project of thinking based upon the claims of difference. With respect to the self, one thinks difference by attempting to think the becoming of the self. By attempting to think *self-difference* rather than *self-sameness*, one denies the need for a *logos*, pattern, or structure that makes the self present to itself. In place of such a *logos* one celebrates the ever-not-quite, the always-only-passing, character of experience.

Though the project of thinking about change is no more easily realizable today than when Parmenides and Zeno advertised its rational impossibility, something has been gained by virtue of the critiques of Kierkegaard and others. At least this much is different: Whereas after the Parmenidean gambit, the principals of our cultural articulation chose reason and *logos* over the intuition of process and becoming, contemporaries faced with that same choice today are apt more readily to forego strict rationality if it precludes access to the temporal, processive, character of concrete experience.

This turn toward processive understandings of selfhood may be illustrated in many ways. Indeed, the appeal to notions of self as process is characteristic of both the metaphysical and nominalist strains of contemporary philosophy. The most elaborate analysis of self-as-process

is to be found in those philosophies influenced by Henri Bergson, A. N. Whitehead, and Charles Hartshorne. According to the philosophy of process expressed by Whitehead, the self is a temporal route of occasions of experiencing. One could think of a string of beads strung out in time—but with the string removed. The transitory drops of experience constituting the actual occasions comprising the career that is, in fact, the self, are loosely tied together through the inheritance by the present occasion of relevant data from its predecessor. But without any notion of a substrate or core defining the permanent features of the self, the conviction that there must be a strict continuity of the self through time is called into question.

On this view, the self is constituted by its becoming, both in the sense that individual selves come into being and pass away, and in the sense that the career of such occasions that comprises the self through time is itself a process of becoming. Though understandings of the self such as are presented by so-called process philosophers are perhaps overly burdened by recourse to abstract metaphysical constructions, they do serve to indicate the turning away from substance views of selfhood that characterizes a large number of contemporary Western philosophies.

The turn toward processive understandings of selfhood may be found in distinctly nonmetaphysical thinkers as well. Richard Rorty, for example, has recently elaborated what he takes to be an argument of Donald Davidson¹⁴ by contrasting the Freudian understanding of the relations of reason to the passions with traditional understandings from Plato to Hume. Far from claiming with Plato that reason is at war with the passions, or, with Hume, that “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office but to serve and obey them,”¹⁵ Freud affirmed a continuity between “conscious” and “unconscious” that placed these two aspects of the personality on a par. Thus, the unconscious is as likely, or unlikely, to be rational as is the conscious mind.

On this view, the unconscious is no seething cauldron of chaotic passions, but is as coherent as is the conscious mind. The belief in such coherence is a consequence of the fact that the effects of the unconscious upon the conscious presumed by the Freudian vision requires that the former, as fully as the latter, be “a coherent and plausible set of beliefs and desires.”¹⁶ This coherence allows it to serve as a context within which matrices of desires and beliefs alternative to those abiding at the conscious level are to be found. These alternative networks form candidates for alternative selves that can, and often do, compete with the conscious self.

If we describe a self as a coherent set of beliefs and desires, and we allow for alternative sets of such beliefs abiding within a single person, then we have a new model for accounting for so-called "irrational behavior." Such behavior indicates that more than one set of beliefs and desires may serve as the reference for explaining a given act or set of behaviors. The interpretation of the unconscious then, is that it "can be viewed as an alternative set, inconsistent with the familiar set that we identify with consciousness, yet sufficiently coherent internally to count as a person."¹⁷

On this reading of the self, there is no war of reason against the passions, but a complex set of interactions between competing sets of beliefs and desires. This quasi-Freudian description of the human being is a primary illustration of the decentering of the self common to late modern thinkers. Such decentering well illustrates the vagueness of selfhood presupposed in our discussions to this point. Among the hyperconscious intellectuals of late modern culture, self-awareness becomes the awareness of a number of potential ways of being. Further this notion of the decentering of the self is a variant of the process view sketched earlier, since the designation of *the* self requires resort to a shifting set of references. By contrast to the Whiteheadian view in which the self is a route of occasions strung out in time, this revised version of Freud suggests that the self is an aggregate of sets of beliefs and desires existing contemporaneously.

Another sign of the fact that "difference" reigns with respect to our understandings of the self is the manner in which characterizations of the self have become fragmented and compartmentalized in the name of specialization. For example, the conception of the person most emphasized in John Rawls' writings is deemed "moral," or "political," as opposed to religious, scientific, legal, or philosophical. Rawls' conception of the person is a normartive conception,

one that begins from our everyday conception of persons as the basic units of thought, deliberation, and responsibility, and adapted to a political conception of justice, and not to a comprehensive doctrine. It is in effect a political conception of the person, and given the aims of justice as fairness, a conception suitable for the basis of democratic citizenship. As a normative conception it may be distinguished from an account of human nature given by natural science and social theory.¹⁸

More and more we find such stipulations among theoreticians. There is the increased recognition that theories are stipulative contexts that deal with partial perspectives on subjects that may be thought to receive “comprehensive” treatment elsewhere. Of course, there are increasingly few resorts to such comprehensive theories, and the few that are offered are met with the suspicion currently directed at metaphysics and speculative philosophy in general. As a consequence, the self is fragmented both within and without. This is but to say that the self is conceptualized as processive and/or internally dirempted, or is parcelled out among any number of specialized theories in a manner that prevents any sense of the whole, if such a whole there be.

The embarrassment of modernity lies in the obvious failure of the creators and purveyors of intellectual culture to demonstrate the efficacy of reason in establishing a consensual basis for our scientific, social, and political institutions. One of the casualties of this project has been the notion of “rational self-consciousness” upon which the free, autonomous activity of the modern self was to have been predicated.

Late modernism celebrates aesthetic criteria of evaluation, such as intensity and contrast. Both the self created by recourse to these criteria and the self engaged in employing these criteria are functions of the creative juxtapositioning of intensely contrasting features developed from traditional modalities of self-articulation. Instead, however, of seeking a rational accommodation, the elements of the self are held together by the claims of aesthetic enjoyment.

The late modern self returns to its origins in aesthetic plurality, but it arrives with the gift of reflexive consciousness. In the beginning, human beings *were* selves but they didn't *have* their selves. At present, a plural, aesthetic self has an awareness both of its plurality and of the insistent particularity of the elements which variously focus that plurality. As we shall soon see, this aesthetic consciousness rehearses something like the Daoist vision of no-soul, or no-self (*wuwo* 無我 or *wuji* 無己) that rejects the unitary self, and affirms the self as a locus of sometimes consistent, and sometimes less than consistent, experiences.

The above rehearsal of the relevance of the four primary semantic contexts and the tripartite structure of the soul for understanding discussions of the meaning of the self may be fruitfully supplemented by a consideration of the issues of sex and gender.

In the West there is a strong tendency to construe important contrasts as disjunctive by virtue of the pervasiveness in our culture of

dualistic contrasts rooted in the being/not-being problematic. This problematic has its strongest illustration in the logical contrast of “p” and “not-p.” This linguistic pattern is an important signal and/or determinant of the manner contrasting pairs are construed.

This is easy enough to see with respect to the semantic variations played upon the gender distinction. Materialists, from Lucretius to Freud, are hard put to characterize anything like a significant relationship between male and female and must either deal with them as two separate beings (the Lucretian option) or, as with Freud, in terms of the female as an incomplete male. From the Lucretian perspective,

... frame unto frame they wildly lock,
 Mingling the moisture of their mouths, and e'en
 Draw in each other's breath, as teeth on lips
 They madly press; yet all in vain, since naught
 Can they remove therefrom, nor penetrate
 Body in body, and thus merge in one.¹⁹

If the nature of things is defined by atoms and empty space (being and not-being), then any two beings separated by not-being can never overcome the separation, can never “penetrate body in body, and thus merge in one.” In a materialist world, all relationships are finally extrinsic.

Aristophanes' familiar myth of the round men makes the problematic of sexual separation quite clear: after Zeus divides the round men, each sundered part seeks its complement. The consequence in the beginning is disaster, since once the pairs struggle to reunite, they smother one another or prevent their complements from getting nourishment. Zeus seeks to solve the problem through the invention of the orgasm. Now pairs unite for but a little while, and then are able to go about the business of the day. The implication of this colorful myth is that love drives us to seek unity, while physical sex permits us to maintain autonomy.²⁰ Plato's response to the myth of Aristophanes is to find unity by abstracting from difference. Gender is a bodily affair; the rational *psyche* is asexual. In Plato's heaven, as in that of St. Paul, “there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage.”

Volitional understandings of the sexes are defined by the power relationship. The interactions between male and female are construed as struggle for dominance. Love is seen as seduction in which one party gains victory over the other. It is not always the female who surrenders. As

much romantic poetry suggests, the power of female beauty is often the occasion of male surrender.

The materialist finds no unity possible; the formalist finds unity without ultimate difference. The volitional thinker maintains the relationship of dependence of the ruled upon the ruler. (Though as Hegel's famous discussion of the master/slave relationship suggests, the ruler/ruled relationship is often one of mutual dependence.) On the organicist model, there is a recognition of functional difference in which a degree of complementarity is achieved through procreation, the nurturing of children, and the functional specialization of household and public institutions. In the Western tradition, this model has traditionally been thought most promising for defending parity and the complementarity of the sexes.

There are attempts among some contemporary Western thinkers to appeal to models which promote complementarity. The mystical *coincidentia oppositorum* associated with Nicholas Cusanus, and the androgynous models associated with the ancient Gnostic myths, and the modern Jungian *anima/animus* characterization of personality, stress such complementarity. But, for the most part, these models have received inadequate philosophical elaboration.

Western thinkers may easily forget the importance of the male/female distinction since our thinking is arguably shaped by a reduction of one of these genders (almost always the female) to the other, and a subsequent resort to a putatively neutral, but certainly gender-biased, language of theory.

Summarizing our argument thus far: The fundamental senses of self in the Western tradition appeal to at least three sets of distinctions: The first utilizes the four primary semantic contexts defined by the metaphors of matter, mind, organism, and will. The second involves three psychic modalities of thinking, acting, and feeling that constitute the tripartite functioning of *psyche*. The third involves the gender distinction.

We have not sought to provide detailed examples of the various theories that specify the senses of self in our tradition. Our concern has been to celebrate the fundamental categories that ground more specific theories. For it is at this, quite general, level that one can best understand the theoretical distance that exists, for the most part, between Chinese and Western philosophical understandings. And if it is found to exist here, one must expect equally profound differences when these general categories are employed to build more specific theories. In what follows

we shall attempt to develop the Chinese understanding of selfhood against the background of the three sets of distinctions assayed above. In so doing we shall be able to demonstrate the pragmatic value of our, thus far, quite general approach.

Our argument is that, in our efforts to understand the Chinese, we must be cautious in applying home-grown concepts and categories such as we have just considered. It is easy enough to show that comparative philosophy aimed at understanding the Chinese sensibility has not, to this point, been able to accomplish this adequately. By writing large Western philosophical speculations concerning the meaning of self, we are attempting to remain alert to the major sorts of roadblocks that stand in the way of an appropriate appreciation of Chinese sensibilities.

Our task, therefore, is to indicate the irrelevance of the philosophic inventory rehearsed above to Chinese understandings of self. First, the four primary semantic contexts will be shown to provide misleading categories that we shall have to qualify as carefully as possible in our attempts to understand Chinese notions of self. Secondly, with regard to the tripartite structure of the psyche, we shall find, particularly within Daoism, something like a reversal of the sense of these modalities that will require a significant transvaluation of the categories of thinking, acting, and feeling. Finally, in the last chapter of this part, we shall examine the distinctive manners in which the gender question has been treated in China and the West, and attempt to show some of the consequences of these different treatments for understanding the contrasting senses of self in China and the West.