Sometimes I Think, Sometimes I Am: The Self as/in/through its Vicissitudes

by

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Sometimes I think.
Sometimes I am.
-Paul Valéry, French Poet, (1871-1945)

Sometimes I sits and thinks,
And sometimes I just sits.
-Satchel Paige, Baseball Player, (1906-1982)
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Introduction

Fuzzy Logics

On Friday August 20th, 1987, Mrs. Palin woke up with a headache, as she often does when awake early enough to go to the gym.\(^1\) Usually her aerobics class takes care of the headache. Not this time. It got worse and worse, and it eventually overcame her. Soon, Mrs. Palin was collapsed in the corner of the gym, with an ambulance on its way. This, she says, is the last thing she remembers for four months. At only forty-six years old, she had suffered from a brain aneurism. 50% of people die within minutes when the aneurism, which is a blood filled bulge in the brain, ruptures. Mrs. Palin, thankfully, survived: but not without a four-month coma and a seven-month stay in the hospital. Hannah, Mrs. Palin’s daughter, tells the story as ‘the day my mother’s head exploded’. But if you were to ask her what really happened, she would tell you that that was the day her mother died.

And if you were to ask Mrs. Palin what happened during those four months, she would give you a different answer: she was a ‘little old man’ in Vietnam, a vegetable farmer in fact. For those four months, Mrs. Palin had a virtual out of body experience, tending to rutabagas in Southeast Asia. Before the aneurysm Mrs. Palin was an incredibly proper, meticulous woman, always worried about her schedule and hyper aware of social expectations. She describes her (former) self as uptight, and a great worrier. Today she wears Groucho Marx sunglasses, is never concerned about the next day, and erupts into song any chance she gets (to Hannah’s chagrin). She

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\(^1\) The facts and quotes from this account are from the radio documentary by Hannah Palin, "The Day My Mother's Head Exploded," (January, 2003).
enjoys sex, an activity she previously had little interest in, and recently got a little tattoo of a red heart on a green stem above her left knee: the same symbol her ‘previous’ self signed her letters with. Today, Mrs. Palin is a magnanimously happy woman who loves Wendy’s cheeseburgers (she even has a song about them) and knows all the words to ‘Goodbye my Coney Island Baby’.

Hannah grieved as if her mother had in fact died that day more than twenty years ago. The mother of her childhood was gone, though she hadn’t perished in any material sense. Something much different happened: Hannah’s mother had a chance to start over again, and she took it. During her recovery, Mrs. Palin had to learn to walk again, talk again, and eat properly: the process was difficult for both mother and daughter. Hannah describes her attempt to connect with the new woman her mother had become during this difficult time as impossible: nevertheless, she ordered herself to have patience. But slowly and surely, a new woman emerged who, when asked why she is no longer a perfectionist, answers that she need not worry, since “everything is O.K.” “I don’t know what the difference is,” she recalls about her change in opinion of sex, “but I’m just more open to that kind of thing now.”

“Before my aneurysm, I never would have, never ever, would I have even stepped foot in a fast food restaurant. If a Wendy’s hamburger is in that part that you define as living, you better do it. And it is in that part that I define as living.”

Mrs. Palin did not have what she would describe as a near-death experience (though her doctors might disagree). There was no light at the end of the tunnel, unless being a Vietnamese vegetable farmer is what the other side is like. Whatever happened, she emerged from her incident as a completely different person, not only
with regard to her life, but also her relationships with people, including her daughter. The person that Mrs. Palin is today is not the same as who she was before. But what does this mean? Certainly, she is the same for the most part physically and biologically. She has the same color hair, eyes, same height as before; she lives in the same place, is married to the same person, and drives the same car. What changed is her relationship to herself, to the person that she is. But if this is so, then it is not only her relationship to herself that has changed, but also that very self.

This is fuzzy logic: what can it mean for a self to change? Does it mean one’s actions in the world change, or their evaluations, or both? What is the nature of an event that can cause such a monumental change in a person’s self? Is it a conscious change or something more fundamental and imbedded? These questions attempt to ascertain what it means for a self to change, but implicit in them is the question, “what characterizes the self?” There are as many answers to this question as there are selves in the first place, and not all of them are helpful in articulating what each question seeks to clarify. However, while it is not helpful to follow fuzzy logic, it is useful to point out how certain ways of thinking about the self, which may seem perfectly normal or innate, may in fact be a bit fuzzy once we look closely.

Notice one thing: Mrs. Palin can’t tell us why she now enjoys sex. “I’m just more open to that sort of thing now” expresses a sort of immediacy: ‘that’s the way it is.’ Is it that she is more open to sex? Could it be that sex seems different to her ‘new’ self? Is there a difference between someone being more open to things, and things appearing differently? Either way, sex is now something for Mrs. Palin that needs no justification: it’s just the way she is. And yet, in her next statement, we are
brought immediately to a formulæic justification for another indulgence of hers: “if a Wendy’s hamburger is in that part that you define as living, you better do it. And it is in that part that I define as living.” Strange: in this one peculiar woman we see two very different modes of the self as it relates to things. One, in this case as it relates to sex, operates with a sort of immediate and unexplainable truth: it just seems to be that way, no way to explain it any further. The other, which loves hamburgers, operates through a logical apparatus to attain its validity: if A is a subset of B, and B is good, then A is worth doing.

In this project I attempt to straighten out some of these fuzzy logics. Indeed, I have found a number of folds that need ironing out, not only in commonly held conceptions of what the self is, but also within the philosophical tradition that attempts to answer questions like the ones I have been asking. One of the biggest problems in many accounts of the self is already knowing what one is looking for before setting out to answer the question. This is a quite interesting problem, and one that is difficult to avoid. Often, in the thinkers I discuss and build on, the answer that obscures the questioning is a moral one. My focus here is not ethics or morality – I am looking for a concept of the self that does not take morality as a fundamental aspect of that self. It is true that one’s moral evaluations of the world are a significant aspect of what their self entails. I do not deny this, however, it is not my concern here. The work being done is not ethics, nor is it opposed to ethics in some vague way. Rather, I seek to articulate a conception of the self that does not start out with morality in order to distill a notion of the self that makes no recourse to moral evaluation in explaining the ontological structure of the self. I am not looking for an
a-moral or an anti-moral self. What I am looking to articulate is that self which makes moral decisions, the self that is even more fundamental than the evaluations of that self. My overarching goal here is to frame the self in such a way that its moral basis, its foundation in some principle of truth, is not an ontological fact but a decision that this self must uniquely make on its own.

Another problem that I investigate here is the common recourse to the concept of reflection. For many, the self is that thing that reflects, as well as the object of such reflection. My claim here is that there is a self that exists before this reflection, and that when reflected upon, the self takes on a quality that obscures important information about that self, both the content of the self (for lack of a better word) and the nature of the self. In short, I claim that in the process of reflection, the self becomes a static, rigid object of contemplation, when in actuality the self is much more dynamic and engaged in its own activity than the outcome of introspection would imply. Again, I am not claiming that reflection, in and of itself, is bad or unjustifiable. Rather, I’d like to point out some problems inherent to the concept of reflection and investigate alternative means to the ideas being elaborated. In this way I hope to shed some light on a problem that is oftentimes glossed over, and impart new methods and concepts for understanding one’s own self. I want to preserve the importance of both the reflective and the non-reflective self, and demarcate the scope and proper place for each of these ‘modes’ of the self.

The general structure of this project is a sort of an inverted pyramid shape - I mean to build on previous chapters to create richer and denser descriptions of the self throughout, allowing myself to construct an argument and utilize vocabulary for an
in-depth investigation. I use existing theories, critiquing and combining them in an original way to demonstrate points of my own. Chapter 1 is largely an elaboration of the work of an important philosopher, Charles Taylor. In this chapter I lay out a few of Taylor’s basic assumptions and approaches to the self, as well as an extended intellectual history that he finds to be important for understanding the self. I find this to be important too, particularly because it helps to articulate the problems that I will eventually be elaborating upon with regard to Taylor’s philosophy. I focus on one aspect of this intellectual history, the concept of inwardness, because I think it plays a crucial role in the elements of Taylor’s philosophy that I would like to focus on. Particularly, I focus on Descartes’ influential investigation into his own self: I will return to Descartes later, in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 2 I will continue my investigation into Taylor’s philosophy, but I will not be presenting him neutrally, or at least as neutrally as I do in the first chapter. First I elaborate further upon Taylor’s philosophy of the self, going into other parts of his philosophy and drawing out important themes that I need to take seriously in order to get a good sense of what he is talking about. The most important of these themes is the concept of ‘narrative unity,’ which refers to the coherency of a story that an individual can tell about themselves, their past, and their future. I take issue with the amount of import Taylor places on this concept, as well as assumptions he must make in order to discuss narrative unity, particularly an individual’s memory. After making clear why memory is so important for Taylor, whether or not he explicitly makes it so, I discuss the problems and advantages of memory using Nietzsche as an interlocutor. In the end, I hope to put pressure on what has become a frequent and
near-universal method of investigating the self and what characterizes and individual’s self.

Chapter 3 builds on the second chapter’s pressure on Taylor’s technique and introduces new vocabulary for talking about the self. This chapter does much of the work needed in order to make the claims made in Chapter 4, and represents an important break from the work of Taylor’s that I have been describing previously. I begin by outlining Taylor’s work on Heidegger’s critique of Descartes and the concept of the engaged self. Instead of following Taylor in his work on this concept, I attempt to demonstrate how, despite this work, Taylor’s philosophy actually departs significantly from Heidegger and is indebted to Descartes’ tradition. I do not fault Taylor for thinking differently from Heidegger, but I do want to preserve aspects of Heidegger’s thought that I find to be useful. This includes a robust conception of his idea of the engaged self, an entirely new way of understanding the term ‘understanding,’ and casting doubt on the ability for an individual’s power of reflection to reveal aspects of the self. I conclude that, to know the self, we must take serious account of the world, one’s environment, and the way an individual’s conscious and unconscious self is affected by the meaning of things in the world.

In Chapter 4 I make my definitive statements on the self, largely building on what I have already said about Heidegger, but also building from Taylor, Nietzsche, and two new thinkers, Lacan and Badiou. In this chapter I claim that both Taylor and Heidegger have problems with their concepts of the self in the way I have presented them, and I attempt to integrate useful concepts from their theories while avoiding the problems that I have found with them. An important part of my idea is repetition; in
this case, the repetition of meaning as an individual interacts with their world on a
daily basis. I claim that the ‘stuff of the self,’ the meaning contained in this
interaction, the outcome of this repetition. The meaning of things in the world, the
structure of which is like a chain of signifiers referring to each other, is reflected in
the meaning of the self. This way of approaching the self avoids the problem of
memory and narrative unity while preserving the historical aspect of the self that
accrues as we live our lives and build our own unique history.

In this chapter I also make an attempt to preserve a way in which new meaning
can interrupt the repetition of the self. I do so through the concept of events and
truth. Truth is a deeply personal concept that takes up its meaning in an individual’s
relationship to an important event. This event is only truth-creating if it changes the
chains of signification that compose the meaning of the self. One might think of Mrs.
Palin’s traumatic event catalyzing a profound commitment to a new truth that entered
her life after her aneurysm. Events are rare occasions that inspire a certain fidelity or
resoluteness in an individual. In the end, I admit that I preserve the possibility of
there being a self without a moral compass. Whether or not this is a desirable
conclusion, I believe it is the most accurate. In this discussion of events and truth I
do not adhere to a vocabulary that would create a system of ethics of a morality. This
is not my concern in this project. What I want to stress is the possibility for a
situation to create meaning that did not pre-exist that situation or can be deduced from
the elements of a situation.

Chapter 5 is, in effect, a case study of the self that uses the internet to elaborate
further upon ideas that have been used throughout. I do not mean to use my
observations here as proof of my ideas, but as a means to further articulate what I see to be important and interesting phenomenon. Part of the reason the internet is a good test is case is its relatively one dimensional means of interaction – I claim that the computer is a good example of the sort of mind-body dualism that Descartes championed and works its ways into Taylor’s theory. The internet also makes available massive amounts of information that has a unique character of ambiguity: it is not local or situated, personal or important, but abstract and plentiful. This, I claim, makes truth difficult to come by, not only because of a sort of compassion fatigue, but also because information no longer becomes pertinent in a way characterized by ‘event’ and ‘truth’.

I conclude with a description of what I think are important ideas to take away from this project, as well as some questions and directions for future work. The extensive scope of this project creates many possible directions for future study: political theory, sociology, psychoanalysis, existentialism, and others. I also hope, through my conclusion, to drive home the self’s choices in determining itself, but also the importance of this choice itself.
Chapter 1
Inwardness: The Birth of Reflexivity

I seek to articulate and explore various descriptions and approaches to the idea of a self. The idea of the self 

*seems* to be self-explanatory: one could simply answer that the self is precisely that which I am. But numerous questions arise, including the difference between ‘the self’ and ‘identity’, as well as the possibility of whatever the self is changing over time. Another problem: in order to find out what ‘the self’ is, I must already have some idea of what I am looking for to guide my search. This is complicated: if I already know what I am looking for, does my search constitute an authentic enquiry? Or am I just looking to confirm what is already my own definition? This makes possible a creeping dogmatism, a quiet discrediting of certain answers, as Heidegger’s concise example explains:

For example, anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth already has the answer to the question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” before it is even asked…¹

My task is a tricky one, and my response to this particular problem is to build on existing theories and accumulate concepts to deploy in my own account of the self. Part of the problem with the first philosopher I propose to include is this very issue of knowing the answer to one’s own question. I will show that, in his effort to articulate an ethical and ‘authentic’ self, Charles Taylor constructs his findings around the goals he seeks to fulfill in what he finds. I am claiming that there are aspects of the self that remain undisclosed to Taylor precisely because his enquiry is a moral one – that is, he knows what he is looking for (the moral self) before he sets out to find it. That

accusation will be fleshed out later; for now, there is much to learn from Charles Taylor’s excellent work on the concept of the self. Thus, I begin by outlining Taylor’s general approach, beginning with an intellectual history he has identified that provides a useful point of departure for my own ideas. I want to be clear: this chapter is about Charles Taylor – the ideas are his, and my own modifications and criticisms to those ideas are relatively minor and should be apparent throughout. It is important for my purposes that I not blindly go along with Taylor through his own work, but I would like to give him the chance to speak, as it were, not only to be fair, but to learn from him as well.

Taylor asks us to imagine a situation involving two Paleolithic hunters tracking a giant wooly mammoth. They are hot on its trail when, suddenly, the animal turns around and charges right at the hunters. When the beast is about to step on hunter A, something along the lines of “I’m in for it now” crosses his mind; but when the mammoth suddenly turns and crushes hunter B, a sense of relief replaces the thought of imminent doom. Inherent to hunter A’s thought process is a sense of self that seems familiar to us: “here is one person, and there is another, and which one survives/flourishes depends on which person/body is run over by the mammoth.”

Here self is being used as a term that unifies a body with a person. Person, it seems, is a word that contains a notion of identity. Identity is a conscious description of one’s particular sense of self, and identity can be bracketed to allow a discussion of the ‘self’ as a universal concept. As opposed to identity, the self can be something more like consciousness of one’s existence, or consciousness of one’s surroundings or

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2 Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989). p. 113
intentions. Oftentimes it means something like a personal history, or an account of one’s experience. We will see that for Taylor, it means something like a narrative of one’s life and future.

But this example is not without its problems. For example, Taylor seems to be confounding an idea of the self with the idea of the individual. In his effort to express the way all humans share “our sense of the unity of the person,” Taylor might be glossing over other ways of having a self, or experiencing that self. Furthermore, there is no evidence that these hunters would use a word like our personal pronoun “I” to formulate this sense of self. For now, I will grant the thrust of Taylor’s argument: that after the experience of seeing his comrade crushed by the giant mammoth, hunter A does experience something like a sense of individuality, of an individual self. But what if this traumatic event itself, the crushing of Hunter B, is an **individuating event** for Hunter A? That is, what if it is precisely this event that causes the idea of a self to pop into the hunter’s mind? Is it not possible that, prior to this moment, the hunters held some sort of group identity that was antecedent to their own sense of discrete individuality?

Taylor is careful to note that it is important to “distinguish the human universals from the historical constellations” that may have determined our contemporary, and historically specific, sense of self. For example, he mentions that there are formulations of the self that seem baffling, such as shamanistic cultures that believe the human person has three souls, one of which is mobile outside the body.

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3 Ibid. p. 112
He admits in a footnote⁵ that Theravada Buddhism, with its doctrine of ‘no-self’ (anatta), remains baffling for him, but he maintains that there is some universal sense of the self that is included even in this culture. This universal sense of self is characterized by a similar sense of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ across human beings of all times and place. That is why the example of a Paleolithic hunter is useful: Taylor is looking for elements of the self that endure through time, space, and culture.

Do these apologies resolve the dilemmas mentioned earlier? Is there compelling evidence that even the Theravada Buddhists have a conscious self that might be characterized in the way Taylor is describing? I do not believe so, but I will push on for now. What Taylor is claiming is that the self involves an understanding of one’s being as an individual, distinct from objects or other individuals, and possessing a single body that is bounded and discrete. This is a strong claim, and Taylor’s point is clear: no matter the culture, geographic location, or time period every human being has had some sense of his or her own self as an individual. We will give Taylor the benefit of the doubt (for now), and say that this specific notion of the self evolved exactly during the time of Paleolithic man. That is, in his ascent from creatures incapable of reflection upon the self, man gained the ability to individuate himself, and it is humankind after this evolutionary stage with which we are concerned. Thus, I am ruling out historical or evolutionary arguments about different forms of the self through time.

Taylor has thus created at least preliminary distinctions that should give us ground to stand upon for further enquiry. The self is not an identity: a self may have an identity, but for Taylor’s purposes the self is the prerequisite to this identity; the

⁵ Taylor, Sources of the Self. pp. 535-536
self is that which contains this identity and makes it possible. This description does not rule out the truthfulness or the adequacy of an identity, but rather places a notion of the self, which does not exclude any sort of identity, as an antecedent to identity itself. Thus, there is a difference between the self and identity: the former contains the latter, is the condition of possibility for it. And when identity is reflected upon, it is the self that does this reflecting, as well as any other kind of reflection. It is certainly possible (and, Taylor would argue, necessary) that identity factor into the reflective process itself, but for now this is not my concern.

After these preliminary distinctions, it is difficult to narrow the self down any further. I will soon turn to Taylor’s analysis of Descartes’ thoughts, which instigated a philosophical revolution. Descartes is a useful thinker to turn to, not only because his thought set the agenda for much of Western thought, but also because his thought has become an item of intense debate. My work here is part of this tradition that seeks to move away from Descartes’ influence on contemporary thought, whether this influence is explicit or an implicit set of assumptions or an approach. Interestingly, Descartes located the ‘center of the brain’ in the Pineal gland; a small endocrine gland that produces melatonin, while claiming the self is a non-physical category that has no spatio-temporal location. The Pineal gland, for Descartes, was the ‘seat of the soul’ and the point of connection between the intellect and the body. The potential dilemmas of locating a non-physical entity within a biological organ are not one of my concerns here. I am more interested in the interface between conscious and unconscious self, the self’s sense of itself, and the importance of environment on the self. Amusingly, Descartes believed that the position taken during deep thought, with
the head angled down, allowed the Pineal gland to excrete fluids necessary to the
process of reflection. While the transmission of fluids through the brain is also not
one of my concerns, the idea of reflecting is central, as is the mechanical approach to
the self demonstrated in this biological conundrum.

For Taylor, there are many sources of the self. In his book *Sources of the Self*,
there are three basic categories of ideas and values that shape our everyday
understanding of the self. While he claims that each of these categories are of equal
import and that discounting any one of these categories is to conceive of the self
inappropriately, it is part of my critique that he really sees one of these sources as
primary. This is so because his philosophy of the self is a heroic one that takes a
specific moral stance not only on the self, but also on modernity in general. Thus, I
will make brief explorations of two of these sources: everyday life and nature. Then I
will move onto the one that is more important for my purposes here - the category he
calls ‘inwardness’. I claim that inwardness is not actually a static category like the
rest, but a tension within man that has been developing for hundreds of years of
thought. For the moment, I will attempt to give a critical but neutral reading of these
sources, to give Taylor’s theory a fair reading. Indeed, as mentioned before, I agree
with much of what this brilliant thinker has to say, and I am not interested in polemics
or philosophical debate (for now).

The first of Taylor’s categories that I will speak of is that which contains
values that we as individuals take from our everyday life. He refers to these as

> those aspects of human life concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labour, the
> making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the
> family.⁶

⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 211
These activities are to be distinguished from what the classical philosophers referred to as the pursuit of the good life. Aristotle wrote that slaves and animals are engaged in the pursuit of life, and all other men pursue the good life. What Taylor is talking about is a prerequisite to the good life, but only in a formal sense: the simple and basic category of things that each of us needs in order to maintain our lives as we live them. Taylor notes how the extreme hierarchies of the Greeks, in this case, are not desirable: their location of ‘the good life’ in a special range of activities available only to the rich (those not born as slaves) is an especially distasteful element of ancient thought.

Taylor sees a transvaluation of values regarding the source of everyday life in modernity, with some benefits and one central problem. The dismissal of hierarchical understandings of what composes the source of value is one of the benefits. The relocation of value in the realms of work, family life, and art (to name a few aspects of everyday life) decenters a previously disciplined approach to meaning, where value came from a position in a system of honor. Taylor observes that modernity has eradicated at least the formal form of this honor system, and the purpose or central element of life is now something that everyone can have a part in and that everyone is a part of. This transvaluation also creates an engine of social change that allows a more democratic ethics to take hold of civil society, instead of the hierarchical ‘honor’ system of aristocratic and monarchic social systems. Thus, “a new model of civility emerges in the eighteenth century,” one that is democratized, civil, and enlightened.
The problem with the new emphasis placed on ordinary life, as Taylor views it, is the element of social leveling contained in this democratic ethic. Disregarding the love of fame and immortality, the hallmarks of the previous value system, gives rise to a smug satisfaction with where one finds oneself, without any motivation to improve in a social or spiritual way. Indeed, this is perhaps the most pervasive problem that Taylor sees with modernity: the dominance of mass culture and the abstract banality of ‘what one does,’ as Heidegger would call it. I will take issue with this claim in Chapter 5, not because I disagree entirely, but because I think Taylor is right for the wrong reasons. For now it is sufficient to note that there is certainly an element of leveling and mass culture at work in today’s world, and that this seems incompatible with earlier, honor based societies.

The second source of the self is what Taylor refers to as the Romantic conception of the self, specifically, seeing nature as a source of the self. Taylor writes

In the philosophy of nature as source, the inexhaustible domain is properly within. To the extent that digging at the roots of our being takes us beyond ourselves, it is to the larger nature from which we emerge. But this we only gain access to through its voice in us.⁷

From this point of view, the human life unfolds towards self-discovery in a way that creates a coherent and ‘whole’ human story. This source of identity is one that provides the ‘inner self’ with depth, a depth that is elaborated through the expressivist tradition. This is a counter-Enlightenment movement, one that has been articulated by thinkers such as Rousseau, who Taylor identifies as the exemplary thinker of nature-as-source.

⁷ Ibid. p. 390
In a few words, this tradition believes that, as Rousseau writes in *Emile*, “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.”

Again, Rousseau expresses the thrust of the idea:

> Let us lay it down as an incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right; there is no original sin in the human heart.

The romantic conception of the self locates that which is important in the movement of the heart – this is why Taylor also finds examples of what he has in mind in the expressivist tradition. For these thinkers, conscience is the voice of nature, and the demands of civil society, for example, represent distortions of a much simpler and natural orientation to the world. This is oftentimes misread as primitivism, but what Taylor has in mind is the critique of over consumption, unnecessary desires that act as fetters, and the weakness of civilized man.

Oftentimes, these romantic thinkers made recourse to a sort of deism, as well as a notion of the general will as something that should be evident and self-explanatory. Again, Rousseau writes in *The Social Contract*,

> When we see, among the happiest people in the world, groups of peasants directing affairs of state under an oak, and always acting wisely, can we help but despise the refinements of those nations which render themselves illustrious and miserable by so much art and mystery?

The romantics were not without their concept of ‘return,’ that is, going back to life as it was before it became complicated with all of the entanglements of modernity. This was a time when moral thought was simpler and evident, when one’s concerns were limited to the immediate items of utmost importance, and the existence of a universal good, which organized the body politic, was understood and appreciated.

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9 Ibid. p. 81
Now, I will give emphasis to the source of the self that Taylor refers to as ‘inwardness’. This source is presented in the form of an intellectual history of the idea, and it begins with Plato as a way to explore classical thought, generally, pre-Christian formulations of the self. In the *Republic*, Plato describes a set of moral doctrines that refer to both the individual and the society of which he is a part. Taylor notes that these moral doctrines specify a sort of ‘moral state’ that is accessible through the realm of thought, or the practice of philosophy. This moral state is transcendental in the same way that Plato’s forms are transcendental: it exists as a paradigm of behavior that is reached through thought and reason, not discovery or evidence. For Plato, philosophy is the practice that delivers us to this high moral state; we gain self-mastery through philosophizing. The good man is ‘master of himself’ (or ‘stronger than himself’);\(^{11}\) reason rules over the desires, which form the higher and lower parts of the soul, respectively. The good soul enjoys order (kosmos), concord (xumphonia), and harmony (harmonia), and the bad soul is characterized by conflict, civil war, and contradiction.

Thus reason, for Plato, resembles what we would today call order, or perhaps organization. The self (in its ideal state) is “a condition of self-collected awareness and designates a state of maximum unity with oneself”.\(^ {12}\) This explains Plato’s use of the health analogy throughout the republic: bodily health is a condition of the proper biological order of the body, ruled and being ruled. So “virtue… would be a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul, and vice would be disease, ugliness,


\(^{12}\) Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 113
and weakness.”\(^{13}\) Reason is the capacity to understand, or to see the way things are: to be ruled by reason is to have a correct understanding of the situation at hand and the proper order of the self. One aspect of this natural order of reason is that reason should rule, creating a sort of natural hegemony for reason itself. Therefore, those who are morally good will have aligned themselves with the good, with the rational order of both society and of their souls.

This idea of the good is central to Plato’s moral universe: the good of the whole (city, or person) is what creates the Idea of the Good, which embodies all others. Indeed, the Good is what confers the status of desirability on all other goods, so that one is only aligned with the Good insofar as their soul is ordered in a way that corresponds to a larger and coherent whole. Plato captures the eternal nature of the Good, in contrast to petty and worldly goods for which men squabble, in his argument with Adeimantus:

> For surely, Adeimantus, the man whose mind is truly fixed on eternal realities has no leisure to turn his eyes downward upon the petty affairs of men, and so engaging in strife with them to be filled with envy and hate, but fixes his gaze upon the things of the eternal and unchanging order, and seeing that they are neither wrong nor are wronged by one another, but all abide in harmony as reason bid, he will endeavor to imitate them and, as far as may be, to fashion himself in their likeness and assimilate himself to them.\(^{14}\)

This vision of a transcendental moral code has significant implications for the ancient concept of the self, although these connections are not immediately recognizable. They become clear when one recognizes the strict importance of the sense of assimilation and the ‘rule of reason’. Indeed, the strong sense of hierarchy that pervades Plato’s thought translates into a claim about what the soul loves, what it values and actively attends to. To be ruled by reason means to have one’s self, one’s

\(^{13}\) Plato, *The Republic*. 444D-E. Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*

\(^{14}\) Ibid. 500B-C. Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*
entire life, shaped by this ‘eternal and unchanging order’ in such a way that whatever sense of individuality may seem to inhabit this self is extinguished, not by an overpowering hierarchy, but by a pre-existing rational order which one understands and loves. There is an airtight connection between one’s own life and the larger order of the cosmos, which in turn bestows meaning and fulfillment upon those who seek it.

Between Plato and the modern Western philosophical tradition lies much important thought. Taylor claims that the most important contribution between Plato and Descartes is in the thought of Augustine, especially his idea of *in interiore homine*, or, ‘inner man’. Augustine made a fundamental leap in thought by seeing God and the soul as immaterial, and spent much of his intellectual career articulating a previously jumbled account of the opposition between spirit and flesh. And he was greatly influenced by Plato – for example, Taylor argues that Augustine’s doctrine of creation ex nihilo is a Christian take on the secular forms: created things take their form through God’s will, and their participation with His Ideas. In both thinkers there is an explicit reference to a transcendental truth that guides and shapes earthly manifestations.

Everything having been created in the mind of God, for Augustine, everything has being only because and insofar as it participates with God. Thus, Augustine believed that our values must be crafted with reference to this common standard that lies outside of ourselves, similar to the way Plato did: however, Augustine also began to emphasize a subjective element of this process. This element, the personal and subjective inner man, he christened ‘the inner guiding light’, and Taylor describes his departure from Plato: “I can only understand myself in the light of a perfection that
goes far beyond my powers.”

Thus, we can only understand ourselves if we see ourselves in relation to the perfection of God, which is beyond us.

Augustine is an exemplary ‘step’ in the movement of thought from Plato to Descartes, for while he uses an idea similar to the forms, he also posits what Taylor calls a ‘proto-cogito’. He uses a proof to show the skeptics that they indeed do know at least something, claiming, “if you did not exist it would be impossible for you to be deceived.”

What he does here is establish the self, in a meaningful way, through and in the first person perspective, and grounds my certainty in my own existence with this perspective. “It is a certainty of self-presence,” writes Taylor.

Thus, for Plato, the locus of our sources for inner strength, peace, and well-being resides outside of us, and to have access to this source is to be in tune with a larger, transcendent cosmic order, which is shaped by the Good. For Augustine, this moral source is still very much outside of us, although our comportment and orientation towards this good is very much a process of inward reflection. But this does not come from a power that is uniquely ours: we turn inward only to move along the path to the beyond, to the transcendental, to God. Augustine does posit an ‘inwardness’ (that will be emphasized with Descartes), and this is his departure from Plato for our purposes: however, his moral source is still ‘on the outside’. For Descartes’ radical departure from this tradition, one must no longer think of him or herself as related to moral sources outside of them. Instead, these sources are all within, as Descartes is “certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me.

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15 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*: p. 144
17 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*: p. 133
except by means of the ideas I have within me.”

With this declaration, the Platonic notion of knowledge in terms of a self-revealing entity, like the Good or Ideas, was abandoned by Descartes and much of Western philosophy.

For Descartes, Plato’s sense of eternal things was an example of the sort of mind/body confusion that he sought to eradicate. The first and most important step of this eradication is to disengage ourselves from the normal and readily available way of experiencing the world through our own embodiment in it. One needs the perspective of a neutral, external observer in order to attain knowledge and in Descartes’ case, to trace the relationship between the state of the world and its effect on my mind, or the ideas therein. This includes an objectification of the body and world: an understanding of both as mechanical, material, and devoid of a spiritual or transcendental meaning, but rich in rational sense. The Cartesian soul is liberated by almost climbing out of the body, by looking upon one’s own body as if one were an objective observer outside of it. This Cartesian dualism departs from Plato’s dualism substantially: whereas Plato’s soul is affirmed in its absorption into the supersensible, the Cartesian affirms his immaterial self by departing from the material body through detached reason. Knowledge, for Descartes, is a correct representation of the outside world, one that is confirmed through evidence and is employed usefully when one has certainty in his own representations. This disenchanted, scientific outlook is typified by Descartes’ method for organizing his own thoughts, building from the simpler to the more complex, “assuming an order, even if a fictitious one, among those which do

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not follow a natural sequence relative to another."\textsuperscript{19} This sort of objective logic encourages us to abandon our normal, perhaps more natural way of approaching the world, that is, from a perspective swayed by custom, association, and faulty sense perceptions that may deceive us. This attitude of Descartes is a view that Taylor laments: there is a problem with the overly scientific approach to the world. This will be expounded upon later, for now, it is important to notice the objective and detached sense of self Descartes has in mind, and its departure from what might seem like a more natural way of approaching the self. Prior to Descartes, the thinkers Taylor discusses defined the self with reference to a good. Descartes, on the other hand, defines the self primarily in terms of its power of observation on itself, and its capacity as a rational agent to make evaluations of its world.

The crucial difference here is the role of reason, which is no longer defined as a dominant, cosmic vision, but in terms of a directing agency, which subordinates this reason to a functional domain: “the hegemony of reason for Descartes is a matter of instrumental control.”\textsuperscript{20} In this way, Descartes sees reason as a mediator of the passions, holding them to their instrumental function. One might think of the fear of a dangerous animal as an example of passion having an instrumental function, in this case, the protection of the body. With the new import placed on thinking activity, the supremacy of reason is understood now as rational control, the power to objectify, and ‘the good’ comes from an agent’s sense of dignity as a rational being able to engage in this activity. That is, since reason is held as primary, the respect for an


\textsuperscript{20} Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 150
agent’s reasoning capacity, and the dignity that this entails, becomes of utmost
importance. Free will, in this case, is paramount:

Now Free Will is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain
manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subject; and so its rightful use is the
greatest of all the goods we possess, and further there is nothing that is more our own or that
matters more to us. From all this it follows that nothing but free will can produce our greatest
contentments.21

The respect for this free will produces dignity, which powers the ideal of
reason as a purposeful giving-order to the world, and is expressed through the virtue
of generosity. Generosity is the virtue of this dignity, because the source of the good
is no longer outside of the agent, but is actually bestowed by the agent on the world.

True generosity, writes Descartes,

causes a man to esteem himself as highly as he legitimately can, consists alone partly in the
fact that he knows that there is nothing that truly pertains to him but this free disposition of
his will, and that there is no reason why he should be praised or blamed unless it is because he
uses it well or ill; and partly in the fact that he is sensible in himself of a firm and constant
resolution to us it well, that is to say, never to fail of his own will to undertake and execute
all the things which he judges to be the best – which is to follow perfectly after virtue.22

Generosity accompanies a sense of human dignity: it incorporates an understanding
of what this dignity means, as well as my own living up to this dignity and
commitment to virtue.

Thus, for Descartes, the moral source is clearly and fully within the agent,
corresponding to that agent’s rational capacity and dignity. Both Descartes’ ethics
and epistemology call for a radically objective disengagement from one’s embodied
experience, and an instrumental stance towards the world and the realm of emotion
and passion. The values of inwardness, self-sufficiency, and autonomy are articulated
within his work with the most clarity yet in the history of Western philosophy. Many

21 Rene Descartes, “Letter to Christina of Sweden, 20 November 1647,” in Descartes: Philosophical
22 Rene Descartes, “Tractatus De Passibus Animae,” in The Philosophical Works of Descartes

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of these values, especially those of dignity and autonomy, will be picked up by later theorists, especially Kant, Hegel, and Taylor. Clearly, Descartes’ influence on the tradition is not to be underestimated, and his philosophy is an important stepping-stone on the road to modern conceptions of the self.

So far we have compared three different evaluations of the inward self as it relates to a moral source. For Plato, there is no such ‘split’ between inner and outer: the good is comportment to a larger system of meaning, a cosmic order, which is in some sense transcendental. For Augustine, the mediator of these two perspectives, there is indeed some sense of inwardness that characterizes a personal search for truth. However, like Plato, Augustine locates this truth in a greater being (God), which prescribes a moral code that must be ‘discovered’ instead of created. Descartes breaks with both thinkers by locating the source of good within the agent, specifically in its capacity to think reasonably and produce its own logical structures and explanations. The dignity of this agent is a crucial element of its own thinking capacity, and autonomy is a logical extension of this dignity.

We have seen that Descartes’ philosophical revolution mandates a split between the mind and the body in order to treat the body as a discrete physical object in space open to manipulation and contemplation by an agent. This procedure, along with his mechanistic method of approaching the world and knowledge, produces a new sort of scientific stance on one’s self and environment. Instead of comprehending the world as an embodied subject, we are called to disengage ourselves from our own experience and treat even our own passions objectively. This produces a disenchanted approach to the world, one that focuses on mechanistic
relationships and movement of objects, leaving no room for Plato’s all encompassing, teleological understanding of the self or the world.

I have been outlining a trend, one that can be characterized by two steps: internalization, which perhaps occurred between Plato and Augustine, and disengagement, which occurred between Augustine and Descartes. The implications of this trend are incredibly important and pervasive. The definitions created by this way of thinking are inescapable because, as Taylor writes, “it penetrates and rationalizes so many of the ways and practices of modern life.”

We come to see ourselves as ‘having’ selves, as we have our head: that human agency is defined through the idea of ‘having a self’ is a reflection of this modern understanding. But this is only one tradition, one that emphasized the departure from Plato by Descartes, and to a certain extent by Augustine. Descartes took a specific movement of thought and accentuated it, but Augustine moves in a different direction from both Descartes and Plato: besides disengagement, the modern self and identity are characterized by a sort of radical reflexivity that is not found in the world of Descartes or Plato. Taylor characterizes this new, secular process as one of ‘self exploration’, and as one that resists precisely the sort of self-objectification that seems prevalent in Descartes.

Instead, Taylor turns to Montaigne as the paradigm example of this trend. There are similarities between Montaigne’s project and ancient thought, but our purpose is to find the ways in which he influenced precisely modern thought, and the idea of the self.

Montaigne is one of the first writers who, when discussing the self and its related complexities, abandons almost entirely the concept of stability and singularity.

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23 Taylor, Sources of the Self; p. 177
While he does not believe that there is *no* unifying theme to or in the self whatsoever, his writing is definitely geared towards a description of the self as fundamentally dynamic:

“There is no constant existence, neither of being, nor of the objects. And we, and our judgments, and all mortal things do incessantly roll, turn, and pass away… every human nature is ever in the middle between being born and dying, giving nothing of itself but an obscure appearance and shadow, and an uncertain and weak opinion.”

Perpetual change, finitude, inconstancy: these are the characteristics that set up Montaigne’s vision not only of the self, but of the world in general (partially because we see the world from a self). “The world runs all on wheels”\(^{25}\), and any fantasy of permanence should be discredited. But besides all of this, besides the impermanence, the shiftiness, the dynamic and always changing world, Montaigne still sets out to describe himself. From this outset, it follows that he does not aim at setting up a universal description of ‘self’, but rather an individual and finite self, that belongs to him uniquely.

Self-knowledge will be the key to Montaigne’s project: knowing ourselves and, more importantly, knowing our *limits*. With these limits we can draw the contours of ourselves from within. Montaigne looks to nature, and human nature, to find these limits: “We cannot error in following nature: and that the sovereign document is, for a man to conform himself to her.”\(^{26}\) Montaigne calls upon us to live our lives in a way that conforms to this human nature, to live within our limits, shorn ourselves of superhuman aspirations. He also calls upon us to find our own limits, in


\(^{25}\) Ibid. p. 725. Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*

\(^{26}\) Ibid. p. 958. Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*
a unique way. But not in a way that is vain, or superfluous. We must discover a human balance:

To what purpose are these heaven-looking and nice points of Philosophy, on which no human being can establish and ground itself? And to what end serve these rules, that exceed our use and excel our strength?27

In essence, what Montaigne is asking us to do is accept who we are in a fundamental way, by recognizing our limits and our finite possibilities.

We seek self-knowledge, but this knowledge will not be the sort of impersonal stories and moral systems that Plato described. Nor is it the abstract and disengaged approach to the self exemplified by Descartes. We must discover our own form, each and every one of us. There is no reference to universal nature, and when one seeks themselves they are not looking for any sort of universal nature. Montaigne’s new method is one of explanation: it is descriptive, and intimately first person. The difference between this method and Descartes’ is vast: while Descartes was looking for a science to find the individual in its general essence, Montaigne is looking for precisely that which differentiates us from all other human beings.

From this history two radically different interpretations of the self emerge. On one hand there is the tradition from Plato to Descartes, characterized by the disengagement of reason from the beholder of the world. On the other hand we have the tradition from Augustine to Montaigne, characterized be a search inward for the elements that constitute the self in its particularity. Plato is the primary thinker of the ‘great chain of being’ of which each of us is a part;28 Descartes is the founder of modern individualism. Augustine is the founder of the interior man; Montaigne is the

27 Ibid. p. 896. Quoted in Taylor, Sources of the Self
original searcher for the personal self. Taylor means to claim that the self cannot be determined by any one of these methods – his project is descriptive. The question then arises: what constitutes the self? What is the content of the self, apart from the philosophy that we use to theorize about it?

These questions will be answered further on: Taylor has written done much work on our questions – the purpose of this chapter has been to introduce the trajectory of thought that Taylor is working from, and point out important ideas without which my study would not be complete. One of these ideas is the idea of sources itself: in positing multiple locations of content that influence the self, Taylor is explicitly claiming that the self is characterized by multiplicity. Another important idea to take from this chapter is the thought of Descartes, his introduction of the “I” as the primary access point to the self. Taylor, despite criticizing this claim of Descartes’, will adhere to this formula of the self as a fundamentally reflective entity, one that peers inward to discover or evaluate itself. This is the point of inwardness as a source of self: what the thinkers in this chapter have in common (besides Plato, to whom Augustine, Descartes, and Montaigne are responding) is the claim that we can look inside of ourselves to find information about the self. This idea has shaped the debate, as we will see in the next chapter. The two ideas of the self as multiple, and emanating from a singular reflective point, provide important topics of enquiry for an investigation into the self. Next, I will be exploring these ideas, elaborating on what Taylor means to say, where he might contradict himself, and how we might conceptualize the self differently.
Chapter 2
Diachronic Unity, Synchronic Multiplicity, and Memory

In the preceding chapter, I explored the approach that Charles Taylor used in his discussion of that broad term, ‘the self.’ Through the concept of sources, Taylor elaborates upon a number of different intellectual traditions that have made meaningful contributions to the way we think about ourselves when we reflect on questions like “who am I.” It is interesting to note that we often think of ourselves as ‘having’ a self, as if it is something that we carry with us. This would seem to correspond with Taylor’s history of the self: to have a self means that one’s self is somehow created, whether by nature or our own reflection on that self. In this way, it makes sense to ‘have’ a self: I can fashion it to a certain extent, and to a certain extent it is fashioned by where I live, how I was brought up, and what I do on a day to day basis. But it is with me, in a sense outside of me, external to me – not within me: it is not synonymous with myself, but something that is included in me.

In this chapter I will bring new elements of Taylor’s philosophy into the picture, and begin a sustain criticism of his theory as a whole. What I am introducing is the concept of a personal narrative. This term is intimately bound up with the idea of a personal history, or a story that one can tell about themselves. One of my points with regard to Taylor is that his idea of the self as a combination of multiple and sometimes conflicting sources is in tension with his strong emphasis on the concept of narrative unity. This is a popular concept in theories of the self; nearly every thinker in Taylor’s tradition has a concept of narrative unity and a certain way of justifying their reading of the concept.
An important distinction is often talked about in the literature on this topic, and that is the distinction between ‘diachronic unity’ and ‘synchronic multiplicity’ with regard to a personal narrative. Diachronic unity refers to the claim that all of the elements of a history (in this case, a personal history) have a sort of coherence at any given point in that history. Thus, at any moment, Taylor would expect an individual to be able to tell a unified story of themselves and their past. Synchronic multiplicity, in contrast, refers to the fact that along the entirety of a history, a multiplicity of elements is represented, some of which may seem to be at odds with others. What Taylor, along with his peers, claim is that these two ideas of unity and multiplicity are in a tension with each other that must be resolved in a way that favors one of the two. The way this happens will be made clear in my explication of the terms.

My argument in this chapter is twofold: first, that this binary of diachronic unity and synchronic multiplicity is the wrong way of approaching the self. It creates an artificial distinction that bogs down philosophies of the self and discourages alternative approaches. Charles Taylor, for example, resolves the tension between the terms by locating his theory of the self much closer to the ideal of diachronic unity, but at the expense of a richer conception of the variegated nature of the self. The second part of the argument is that these concepts of unity and multiplicity imply a strong sense of memory on the part of the self which is never explicitly explained by Taylor. I explore the concept of memory with regard to its benefits for the self, and conclude that its usefulness for a healthy self is suspect. At best, one can conclude that memory is only useful to a certain extent, and that its usefulness often manifests itself when that history is used in the creation of something new.
To make practical example of Taylor’s theoretical idea of sources of the self, I propose that each element of my experience (my daily activity, my environment, my thoughts on myself) are all sources of the self: they all contribute to and constitute my self. It seems that Taylor’s vision of the self is a sort of multiplicity of selves which, when combined, form a whole. This piecemeal way of imagining the self, as the outcome of many sources, is a popular metaphor in today’s culture for approaching many of the questions being explored here. For example, when planning my day, I often try to appease different desires of my own, as if each corresponds to different self, or source of myself. I’ll make sure to do some work to appease the student, get some exercise to appease the athlete, and engage in a social activity to appease the socialite in me. It is a practical and useful way of picturing what I am composed of, what is important to me, and what I can do to be happy. This sort of schema moves away from a concept of the self that pictures a static, discrete, and enclosed set of characteristics that define who one is. Taylor criticizes this latter idea, claiming that it delimits the range of real possibilities or identities that are taken up by an individual to be meaningful and constitutive of self. He affirms, instead, a ‘decentered’ idea of the self that is multilayered, like an onion. Each layer is meaningful, but no more than the next.

I would claim, however, that the idea of sources of the self, with the theme of a multiplicity of meanings and sources, is actually a relatively unified way of approaching the idea of the self. That is, instead of making room for multiple and possibly conflicting ‘selves,’ Taylor’s approach, in privileging one of these selves, conceals the others. This privileged source of the self would be interiority, the source
that was elaborated upon most fully in the preceding chapter. Recall that I described this source of the self as, in effect, a tension between two conflicting descriptions: Descartes’ rational reflector, and Montaigne’s erratic existence. The fact that this source of the self is actually the marriage of two conflicting sources is important to understanding my criticism of Taylor. This particular source is special in this way: each of the other sources he names is relatively static, while interiority seems to be dynamic, a struggle: a place in which a decision must be made.

The decision that must be made in this space, in this interiority, is a decision about sources of the self in general. That is, a privileging of certain sources over others, taking some sources of the self as primary, and others as less fundamental in shaping what the self is. In this decision, these sources come together to form a single person. For Taylor, this formative process takes place through what he calls a ‘horizon of meaning’. By this he means that one builds a narrative of their life through their life: there is a unity of human life, a unified self, through its whole extent. This horizon of meaning provides a background upon which decisions, such as which sources to take as fundamental, make sense. The horizon of meaning is what gives significance to different sources of the self. These fundamental ideas of the self guide my decision making process on a day-to-day level: they not only determine which decisions are meaningful (as opposed to, say, what I have for dinner), but how these decisions should be made. A horizon of meaning is what defines the ‘inner’ part of interiority, and sets us apart as individuals.
This is a process that takes place over time, because the choices we make that articulate an identity take place over the course of our life, as this quotation from Taylor helps to elaborate:

The issue of our condition can never be exhausted for us by what we are, because we are always also changing and becoming… So the issue for us has to be not only where we are but where we’re going… Since we cannot do without an orientation to the good, and since… our place relative to this good… is something that must always change and become, the issue of the direction of our lives must arise for us.¹

The point here is that no decision we make can make sense when abstracted from the horizon of meaning within which it is situated. Each decision contributes to a flow of choices that builds and is building our sense of self. Taylor is emphatic about this latter sense of self, the self that is comprehensive, whole, and coherent. He writes, “There is something like an a priori unity of a human life through its whole extent.”² And he is serious when he says ‘to its whole extent:’

We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, or to grow towards some fullness… But this means our whole lives. If necessary, we want the future to ‘redeem’ the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity.³

Note the language here: redemption, purpose, meaningful unity – the moral good that Taylor is seeking to preserve is making itself clear in this passage, and it relates to an individual’s strong sense of unity over time.

Why would Taylor put so much emphasis on narrative unity, and what does it have to do with his morality? Taylor claims that unity comes from “the good that I orient myself by and… the way I am placed in relation to it.”⁴ This good is the unifying thread in the story we tell of ourselves, and “I don’t have a sense where/what

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¹ Taylor, Sources of the Self. p. 46-47
² Ibid. p. 51
³ Ibid. p. 50-51
⁴ Ibid. p. 50
I am… without some understanding of how I have got there or become so."5 This seems to be right: there is definitely an element of my past in the way that I think about myself, and this past figures into that process of becoming that has led to the point at which I find myself now. However, I would like to claim that there are other ways of incorporating a past into the present configuration of myself. Taylor’s method is one of reflection and memory: the past is an explicit object of contemplation for me, and it figures into myself and my story because I think about it, what it means, how it has affected me, and what I can do to change it.

At this point it is clear why I believe Taylor privileges one of the sources of the self, the inwardness of the self. Implicit (and sometimes, explicit) in Taylor’s formulation of a horizon of meaning is an “I.” This “I” is that which is making decisions, has meaningful sources, and articulates a consistent sense of self. In the end, it is this “I” that builds a coherent narrative accounting for its entire life, from birth to death, to its whole extent. And this “I” must do so with a powerful sense of reflection and recollection of the past, particularly if Taylor expects an individual to tell the same story each time they account for themselves (and indeed, he does expect this). To fail to make an account of one’s childhood, for example,

Is to fail to meet the full challenge involved in making sense of my life. This is the sense in which it is not up for arbitrary determination what the temporal limits of my personhood are.6

Taylor has thus gone too far in one direction: his quest for a unified, coherent, and meaningful life narrative sacrifices many of the benefits of his model of the self as a combination of sources. Does it not seem likely that, in the process of creating an all-encompassing narrative of the self, one will rule out other sources of the self that

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5 Ibid. p. 50
6 Ibid. p. 51
they may encounter in the future? Does this description leave room for the becoming of the self that Taylor seemed to laud, that is, a self with multiple and sometimes conflicting sources? Most importantly, isn’t it possible that an individual will encounter a situation that fundamentally reorients their position in the world, and their understanding of what is good, what is bad, and what life is worth pursuing?

These questions are precisely why the source that we have referred to as interiority and inwardness actually turns out to be primary. Taylor’s self, formally a heterogeneous multiplicity of sources, derives from a fundamental self, a primary and original self, which evaluates and chooses how to respond to these sources. To pick up an earlier example, when one peels away the onion layers of Taylor’s self, one finds a core: the layers are derivative of this center because it is responsible for the makeup of those layers. The only way in which oneself can construct a ‘coherent narrative of their life as a whole’ is through interiority, that is, by reflecting on themselves, examining oneself. For Descartes, this examination would be objective, adhering to the rules of logic in order to come to the most rational, universal decision. For Montaigne, this process would be deeply personal, an attempt to discover the unique and meaningful aspects of one’s existence. For Taylor, it is an investigation into one’s past with regard to a constitutive good with which they align their life. For all of them, the reflective self, the self of interiority, is the fundamental self because it provides access to all of the other sources of the self.

It is understandable, then, why Taylor has such a problem with the tensions between synchronic multiplicity and diachronic unity. On one hand, he wants to preserve a certain openness of the self to multiple sources, on the other, he seeks to
attain a good that can only be attained through telling a story of one’s life as a quest for this good. In the end, the narrative he seeks does violence to synchronic multiplicity by sacrificing a diversity of goods for their ultimate coherence. His method and vocabulary forces him to make a choice, and he chooses his position somewhere closer to diachronic unity than synchronic multiplicity. This choice of where to stand with regard to multiplicity and unity is the pivotal point for theorists of the self in Taylor’s tradition, and in many ways, their philosophies can be distinguished from Taylor’s mainly on the point at which they place the self on this scale. Peter Digeser, for example, moves closer to synchronic multiplicity, by claiming that:

…a minimal level of narrativity… could be satisfied by telling very specific sorts within a very narrow time horizon. A narrative could begin in the recent or distant past and extend into the distant or near future. A minimal narrative could be as simple as saying that ‘I get up every morning at this time,’ or it could be as entailed and complex as an epic poem…. The assumption that we are narrative creatures does not mean that we will tell very interesting, very encompassing, very consistent, or very accurate stories.7

Alasdair MacIntyre, on the other hand, sides closer to diachronic unity than even Taylor, claiming that such unity is essential for virtue:

What is crucial to human beings as characters in enacted narratives is that, possessing only the resources of psychological continuity, we have to be able to respond to the imputations of strict identity. I am forever whatever I have been at any time for others – and I may at any time be called upon to answer for it – no matter how changed I may be now… The self inhabits a character who unity is given as the unity of character.8

In the end, philosophers negotiate a balancing act on this tightrope of narrative unity and multiplicity, each striking their own territory between the two poles. One pole would be a totally nomadic self, one that has no sense of unity over time: one might think of Deleuze and Guttari’s radical postmodern existentialism in Capitalism and

Schizophrenia. The other pole would be a totally static and reified self who is the same today as it was years ago and will be when it expires. We could even draw out the scale; it would look like this:

I include this chart as a pithy and hyperbolic demonstration of the problem that all of these thinkers have in common: each of these poles is understandably unsatisfying, causing philosophers and political theorists to find reasons to prefer one area between them to another.

My view, then, is that the problem with these interpretations is not their place relative to other philosophies: each position is defensible to a certain extent, and each takes a certain stance on the self. One favors a unified self, the other a more dynamic self. In the end, what one values in a description of the self is what determines their position on the scale. In this sense, each position is unfalsifiable in relation to others, as it defends certain aspects of the self that others admit is legitimate. And each position is arbitrary, in the sense that the debate between them can never be resolved, and each position is equally true. Each one is true according to the moral story that the philosopher wants to tell, either an emphasis on change and multiplicity, or an emphasis on a consistent and constitutive good. Instead of locating a point on this scale, I propose investigating the limitations of the division between synchronic multiplicity and diachronic unity. This sliding scale, though never made explicit, has
for too long been the center of philosophical debates on the self. Instead of grappling for positions within the tradition, it is the task of philosophers to set the scope of applicability for each of these positions, and attempt to move beyond the debates that bog down the theory. I suspect that the fruitlessness of these debates is a symptom of a fundamental impotence of the terms being used and the ideas from which they derive.

It seems to me, then, that the first step in this task is to isolate that which each has in common with respect to the project at hand. And in each example, there is a crucial moment of reflection on the part of the subject whose self is in question. In each instance of the self, in a moment of confronting that self, enters into itself and reflects on who it is, what it has been, and what it is becoming. There is also an important aspect of memory involved, the memory of one’s past that becomes accessible through reflection, and is integrated into a narrative (whether this past be years ago, or seconds). For Taylor and MacIntyre, this memory extends as far as possible, for Digeser, it may extend only to what one had for breakfast this morning. Along with memory there is an element of prognostication. Thus, each element of diachronic unity not only recollects past experiences, but also projects an individual into the future. This sort of unity is not confined merely to experiences in the world, but includes an element of experience not-yet-endured.

I would like to explore the themes of diachronic unity and memory in order to flesh out some of the problems with the tradition of unity versus multiplicity. Reduced to its essence, a personal narrative is little more than memory. Memory of my past experience, judgments, and aspirations is what endures from day to day and
that which I will retain to my deathbed. The metaphor of memory is useful for approaching these theories in general in providing ground for a criticism of the tradition. Let us clear up a few of the marginal cases before approaching what I consider to be the fundamental point to unity-as-memory. First, there is the case of a person without memory, an individual with Alzheimer’s, for example. According to the theory I am working with, to the extent that he lacks a recollection of their past experiences, judgments, and aspirations, he lacks a sense of unity of self. An individual with no memory would constantly reinvent himself at each successive moment of life. Each iteration of one’s ‘self’ could be radically different from the previous, and this previous iteration could be radically different from the one that preceded it. Only in each of these instances, in each iteration, would there exist a unified self, but as soon as the memory of this self evaporates, so does this self. My point is that the impossibility of their being a self without memory proves the implicit reliance of Taylor’s idea of a self on a strong concept of memory in order to ground and orient that self with reference to its past and a constitutive good.

There is also the case of schizophrenia, or even more pertinent, multiple personality disorders. In these cases, an individual seems to have multiple selves, each of which is unaware of the other but able to give a coherent narrative of itself. This narrative is oftentimes fictitious: for the kind of coherence needed to legitimate itself, a personality fills in many of the gaps that may testify to the multiplicity of selves that inhabit a single body. Indeed, this is a process that occurs to a large extent for all selves, not just schizophrenics. Individuals often re-describe a situation, or fill in information, in a way that does not correspond to what might be called ‘the truth,’
or what actually happened. In another sense, the truth is an individual’s description, since this is actually the only information available to them. Thus, schizophrenics will oftentimes become violently attached to their mistaken identities, because this is, for them, truth! And the same goes not only for schizophrenics, but also for everybody. The only story we have access to, the only account of our past, is the one that we remember, not one that might correspond to what were, at one time, facts.

According to Taylor’s theory as I have been re-describing it, my sense of unified self only exists to the extent that I can (re)collect my past experiences. But there are a number of issues that prevent my unmediated access to these memories, from subconscious repression to simple forgetfulness, from Alzheimer’s to schizophrenia. Thus, my own unity, and indeed my own self is not an entity to which I have unrestricted, perfect access too. This point provides the first inconsistency in the theories I am criticizing. Indeed, it is one of Taylor’s largest faults that his conception of the self is more transparent to its self than seems theoretically legitimate. It would also follow that this self only exists when it is reflecting on its self explicitly – at all other times, there is no memory, narrative, or unity to speak of. What I am claiming is that this sort of neutral recollection of the past is impossible, and that the self is not primarily rooted in the inward reflection on itself. In the next chapter I will elucidate the latter of these claims, that the self is not derivative of its reflection on itself. For the rest of this chapter I will continue to explore the problems involved in Taylor’s emphasis on memory and unity.

Now, my unity is a finite (re)collection of my past, which cannot be a perfect life-long story but only that which I am able, which I choose, or which I happen to

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remember. While the entirety of myself is not perfectly available to me, that which I confront when I recollect is perfectly available to me. That is, when I recollect, I do not have trouble ‘seeing’ or thinking that which I remember. What I remember, what I ruminate upon, is consciously available to me in a perfect sense, but the content of this rumination may not be perfect. By this I simply mean that I am able to deceive myself: my memories are clear, to the extent that I remember them, but they may not be accurate. Indeed, I may remember a much rosier picture of my mother’s birthday party when in fact the entire affair was a disaster. Or perhaps, when I recall my activity last Tuesday, I simply remember nothing, when I was actually undergoing a painful surgery without anesthetic. The point here is that the content of my memory, whether it corresponds to its object or not, is the content upon which my own unity condenses. Its ‘accuracy’ is a non-issue in this case, because there is no metamemory to which I have recourse to correct my own account. Thus, that which provides my unity as an individual may in fact be entirely illusory in some sense, but still very real in another.

The mutability of memory begs another crucial question: to what extent is this memory a good thing? To what extent is it healthy? These questions, proposed in a way that also begs itself, are: to what extent is a self a good, healthy thing? This question is hyperbolic, and to some extent negates much of what I have just said: in an important and meaningful way, the self as a diachronic unity is unavoidable, for to be without memory at all, as I mentioned before, is to be stuck in a trap of recreation. But to continue my departure from Taylor, I believe that too much memory, too much of a self, can be equally bad for the same reason, by annihilating the power of agency.
Indeed, Taylor’s concept of authenticity, a crucial part of which is the acceptance of multiple sources of the self, is made impossible by too rigid a self. If one’s future is determined to a great extent, then the input from many other sources is disqualified before the fact. Not only is this a problem in its own right, but it also is in tension with Taylor’s self as a multiplicity of selves, or sources of self, which attain coherency in a narrative.

The Will to Forget

To resolve this dilemma, I turn to perhaps the greatest writer on memory and the self: Nietzsche. I identify two reasons why forgetfulness, in the sense of ‘forgetting oneself,’ is healthy. The first is the possibility of action in the broad sense. One who always remembers, who is perfectly aware of their own past, can only see the becoming which they themselves are. As Cratylus is cited as saying in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, since no true statement can be made about a thing that is always changing, one ought to say nothing at all. Nietzsche poetically expresses this conundrum:

> Take as an extreme example a man who possesses no trace of the power to forget, who is condemned everywhere to see becoming: such a one no longer believes in his own existence, no longer believes in himself; he sees everything flow apart in mobile points and loses himself in the stream of becoming.\(^{10}\)

To live with such hypernesia is to forever ruminate on the past, on what one has been, on what one is. One with perfect memory, and a perfect sense of self, does not realize (or perhaps forgets!) “what his existence basically is – a never to be completed

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imperfect tense.”¹¹ This is the point where Taylor undoes his own project: the process of becoming to which he indebts his own thought is ossified in the attempt to know one’s self, to remember what one has become, as opposed to recognizing its becoming. Instead, one is locked into a never ending rumination, reflection, and historicizing on the self.

The extent to which an individual destroys itself through such insomnia is the extent to which this individual lacks plastic power, “the power distinctively to grow out of [oneself], transforming and assimilating everything past and alien, to heal wounds, replace what is lost and reshape broken forms out of itself.”¹² Taylor’s predictive diachronic unity robs the subject of its plastic power, condemning it to an insignificant moment between past and future. The forgetfulness of the self, or even more so, the ability for one to rework their own past, to assimilate and appropriate it in their own way, has no place in Taylor’s philosophy, precisely because Taylor’s task is a moral one. To forget the past in this healthy, Nietzschean way is to make impossible the sort of ethic Taylor has in mind. This ethic is his concept of authenticity, a conscious allegiance to one’s past, which exists in indisputable tension with his insistence on the non-existence of a static sense of personal identity.

These observations lead me to my second critique of memory, which exhibits the tension between memory and creativity. Memory, and in this case, a unified self, has an overwhelming and unique potential to become a route (or rut?) into which our actions fall. This is a familiar situation: everyone has known an individual to whom the world is lost in the sand trap of regularity. We become disciplined, we become

¹¹ Ibid. p. 9
¹² Ibid. p. 10
regular, we become, most of all, boring! Nietzsche has a number of metaphors to describe this problem; indeed, it may be the central concern of his existentialism. One of the most poignant is that of a tree which, content with its roots and the happiness of being wholly knowable and consistent, “dies unnaturally, beginning at the top and slowly dying towards the roots – and in the end the root itself generally decays.” And again, “the less men are bound by tradition, the greater is the fermentation of motivations, within them [and]… the polyphony of their endeavors.”

In this instance, it becomes clear that Nietzsche’s critique of memory is bound up with his criticism of morality in general, especially that of Christianity as it evolved in the Western discourse. For Nietzsche, memory is the prerequisite for the possibility of promises:

Man himself must first of all have become calculable, regular, necessary, even in his own image of himself, if he is to be able to stand security for his own future, which is what one who promises does!

This is the first step in the origin of responsibility, which traverses through a dark history of pain and remembrance. Nietzsche famously claims “man could never do without blood, torture, and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself,” and more poetically yet:

…there was nothing more fearful and uncanny in the whole prehistory of man than his mnemotechnics: “If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stay in the memory…”

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13 Ibid. p. 21
16 Ibid. II. 3
For Nietzsche, morality is not an element of memory, or merely the aspect of memory that blocks creativity: they are, in fact, one in the same things. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche writes

> as soon as we see a new image, we immediately construct it with the air of all our previous experiences... *All experiences are moral experiences*, even in the realm of sense perception.\(^\text{17}\) (my emphasis)

This is crucial, of course, because with our use of the concept of memory, any unity of the self is a source of morality, which weakens the spirit and foments *ressentiment*. Again, in *The Will to Power*: “the extent of moral evaluations: they play a part in almost every sense impression. Our world is colored by them.”\(^\text{18}\) Our memories, and the morality that comes with these memories, are an irreducible part of our everyday experience, in a practical sense. This is what Nietzsche means by using the word ‘colored:’ the world would be without an essential element if we did not see it with the weight of our past experience.

I think that at this point in our exploration of Nietzsche’s sense of memory, the idea of the self makes itself apparent. If one lacks a self, then the world lacks color: both are necessary, neither is possible to do without. And yet both are a weight on our shoulders, restricting in a rather direct way our potentialities. This is paradoxical, to say the least, or perhaps more accurately, it is the human condition! But the previous quotes and thinking mask a crucial element of Nietzsche’s thought: it is a genealogy after all. The pain of memory is not one that we need to understand as a sort of original sin of existence – this would be contrary to Nietzsche’s project.

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Instead, Nietzsche sees the creation of memory as a prerequisite for the possibility of
the supramoral, free, strong individual he comes to laud at the end of the *Genealogy*:

> If we place ourselves at the end of this tremendous process, where the tree at last
> brings forth fruit... the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself,
> liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral (for
> “autonomous” and “moral” are mutually exclusive), in short, the man who has is own
> independent, protracted will and the *right to make promises* – and in him a proud
> consciousness, quivering in every muscle, of *what* has at length been achieved and
> become flesh in him, a consciousness of his own power and freedom.\(^{19}\)

Memory, then, is not only an oppressive force of morality and responsibility; it is also
a prerequisite for the strong independent individual, with his own will and autonomy.

Nietzsche’s praise for memory is sparse throughout his books, but,
interestingly, each time he mentions its benefits he is consistent in his reasons for
lauding it. Nietzsche believes that memory provides the material for the creative
impulse, and only when memory serves this purpose is it useful and healthy. The
prototypical example of this balance between memory and creativity is Homer, whose
epic poetry was “three-quarters convention,” and yet profoundly original and
beautiful.\(^{20}\) The creative process does not give birth to original ideas out of nothing:
even the idea of abiogenesis, the theory of spontaneous generation, requires non-
living material to give rise to life. Take, for example, Nietzsche’s discussion of law
and punishment in the *Genealogy*:

> ...All events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all
> subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, and adaptation
> through which any previous “meaning” and “purpose” are necessarily obscured or
> even obliterated.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) Nietzsche, "Genealogy of Morals." II. 2

\(^{20}\) Quoted in Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Dancing in Chains: Narrative and Memory in Political Theory*

\(^{21}\) Nietzsche, "Genealogy of Morals." II. 12
Creation (and creativity), that which is possible for an event, is intimately bound with a process of interpretation and obliteration, each of which requires the existence of material to be interpreted, to be obliterated. Thus abiogenesis is actually a quite fitting metaphor: only from stationary, fixed, non-moving matter can life be produced. Only from material that is, in a sense, dead, can the new come into being.

Memory is thus the location of creativity, but the creative process is a destruction of this grounding. Memory and creativity stand in a tension, a healthy and productive tension, with one another. ‘Dancing in chains’ is Nietzsche’s formula for this relationship, one which Homer mastered:

Already in Homer we can perceive an abundance of inherited formula and epic narrative rules within which he had to dance: and he himself created additional new conventions for those who came after him.\(^2\)

It is thus better to be partly chained than it is to be wholly chained (a static sense of identity) or wholly free (an identity wholly unbound by memory). This seems practical and true to experience to me: there are those who are perhaps too chained down by memory, like the ‘A type’ personality described earlier with a whole life plan, unable to open themselves up to new experiences. But there are also those who seem totally unbound by any sense of themselves: these people lack material for creativity, so any newness they create seems trite, empty, unreflective and shallow. Any change is meaningless because there is nothing to be changed, and there is nothing changing.

Taylor would agree with Nietzsche at this point, a surprising fact. At times, Nietzsche even agrees with Taylor (an even more surprising fact), such as when he

\(^2\) Dienstag, p. 205
discusses the possibility of redeeming the past through the future. But this similarity can be misleading, because the two diverge at one very crucial point, and that is the power of the past as such. For Taylor, the past is the part of one’s personal narrative that is determined and must be dealt with in order to meet the challenge of moral good. But in order for one to have this sort of coherent narrative, one would have to always be in the same place with relation to their past. This is what I mean by saying that Taylor’s subject is, in effect, disengaged: for Taylor, an individual has the same idea of its past no matter its situation. For Nietzsche, the past is much closer to a canvas on which one is able to freely create themselves, not bound by the ideals of consistency or an all-encompassing good. Taylor’s idea of the past as an element of a coherent narrative is the stuff of memory that is obliterated and interpreted in the play of creativity to form something new.

I have been discussing two different approaches to the idea of memory, one taken directly from Nietzsche, and the other one I have deduced from Taylor’s moral theory of the self. My point is that Taylor has a few problems with his idea of the self that are rooted in his understanding of our ability to see our past for what it really is, and his emphasis on our conscious evaluation of it. At this point I think it is also clear that Taylor has no real choice but to see narrative unity and memory in this way, as any other way would sacrifice the constitutive good he seeks to ground the self in. If he were to take seriously the mutability and inconsistency of memory, and the possibility of self-deception that goes along with it, it seems that a constitutive good

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23 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Random House, 1966): “to redeem those who lived in the past… that lone should I call redemption” (II. 20). And Zarathustra claims to have taught men “to work on the future and to redeem with their creation all that has been” (III. 12).
would be the wrong way to ground the self. *This is how Taylor has already answered his question before he asked it:* having in mind the good as the point de caption for the self, Taylor backs himself into a corner with regard to what he is able to define the self as.

**Did Paleolithic Mammoth Hunters Think of Themselves as Selves?**

Nietzsche’s contribution to this debate is useful, as it crystallizes the tension between memory and forgetfulness, and contributes a positive definition of forgetfulness. However, we are still within the tradition I am attempting to move away from, that is, the scale of unity and multiplicity. Indeed, Nietzsche would reject this scale as I do, but what is needed is a new vocabulary that allows a conceptualization of the self apart from the idea of memory and narrative. While we cannot ignore narrative, we also cannot subject our analysis entirely to it. I have shown that memory is an important element of the self which, in its tension with forgetfulness, provides the possibility of creativity, self-making, and a will to power over the self. But I am interested in moving even further away from Taylor’s tradition which builds from the Cartesian concept of the “I” and reflective interiority. I will use the rest of this chapter as an introduction to the ideas that will finalize this departure from memory and narrative as constitutive of self. I would like to state, however, that while I focus on other aspects of the self, I do not deny that memory factors into the idea of the self. Rather, I want to say that there is a more primordial and essential element of self, from which memory and narrative unity (and multiplicity, for that matter) are derivative.
To make steps towards this final critique of Taylor’s problem of the subject, which will conclude in the next chapter, I would like to return to Taylor’s concept of the self in a general form. This was first articulated much earlier, in Taylor’s example involving two mammoth hunting humans. One is trampled by the mammoth being pursued, an experience which causes the second hunter to reflect on ‘himself.’ Indeed, this is an inviting example, not only because of its vagueness, but also because it reflects Taylor’s general attitude and approach to theories of the self. This has been described as a “relaxed approach” by friends and critics alike,\(^{24}\) emphasizing his tendency to collapse concepts such as ‘person,’ ‘identity,’ and ‘self.’ I do not see this relaxed approach as a problem in itself: it is for the most part practical and allows Taylor to move on to more important concepts that he wishes to discuss, as well as to create a coherent theory of all the different words we could describe with the word self. However, I think this relaxed approach also allows him to gloss over several important problems.

Let us, then, return to the example at hand. I said in the first chapter that I agree (though hesitantly) with Taylor’s description of the self involving the mammoth hunters. Indeed, few could object to this account. When hunter A reflects on the demise of hunter B, hunter A includes a notion of the self. This self can be characterized as, first, alive, but also whole, independent, and capable of thought. But can this self also be described as existential? It seems that the motivating concerns that prompted hunter A to reflect on his ‘self’ were primarily physical, that is, the will to live and the understanding that death is possible. I argue that this self,

the one being investigated or celebrated by hunter A after the encounter with the mammoth, is not the same self that Taylor is investigating in his book, *Sources of the Self*. Hunter A is not reflecting on the self that has a history, which reflects desires and fears and concerns. The self that the hunter is glad to have after hunter B’s demise is his life in general, not his personal history or narrative. More importantly, however, hunter A’s notion of the self is *conditioned by the event that inspired this reflection*. This is the crucial element of my argument in this chapter, as well as what I see to be the biggest problem with Taylor’s theory of the self.

Of importance here is my use of the word ‘conditioned,’ and I would like to make a foray into this idea before developing it in the next chapter. Hunter A has just seen an example of death, and a relatively arbitrary death that could have happened to him instead of hunter B. This causes hunter A to draw a distinction between himself and the one who has just died: the death of the latter brings the life of the former to light. “He is dead, I can see that he is dead, I am alive: that which is alive is myself.”

The juxtaposition of life with death, as well as the intensity of the entire affair itself, pushes hunter A into a realization of his self, but a specific realization. This realization includes the fact that he is alive and breathing, and that hunter B is not. But past these simple realizations, what else can be said about hunter A? When he realizes that he is alive, does he also reflect on his past experience? Does hunter A, when celebrating the self that has survived, also celebrate his desires, expectations and fears? Does he celebrate his identity, or the mere fact of life?

I would like to argue that Taylor’s example only leaves room for the reflection on ‘mere life,’ and nothing else: he injects the self into this picture. And this is where
the model beings to break down. I can construct a modern day example that puts pressure on Taylor’s. Imagine a woman waiting for the subway, when suddenly she slips and falls onto the tracks. The train is approaching, and realizing her death is immanent, her last thoughts turn to her husband and daughter. Then, almost out of nowhere, a heroic police officer dives onto the track, shielding both from the train and saving her life. Stunned and speechless, the woman thanks the police officer not in the name of her own life, but for saving the mother of her children. Running home to avoid taking the subway, the woman is not thinking about herself, but about her family. In fact, she can think of nothing else for the next few days, cherishing the time they have together that was almost lost.

Several questions are now necessary to ask. Did the woman in the example, in her moment of peril, lose any sense of herself because of her intense devotion to her family? Or could it be that, for this split second, this woman’s self was her family? I think that the latter of these two descriptions deserves serious thought, despite its strangeness. Even Descartes, that great author of the disengaged, could see the light in this example in his explication of love in *The Passions of the Soul*. In this tract, Descartes describes love as a feeling where one joins oneself with the object of love, and hatred as the attempt to distance oneself from the object of hatred. These feelings guide individuals in their judgment of what action to take, about what self should be considered in seeking self-interest. A mother, then, acts in the best interest of her children, or in Descartes’ example, a father: “He regards them, rather, as parts of himself.”\(^\text{25}\) And again, in writing to his friend on the loss of the friend’s brother,

\(^{25}\) Descartes, "Traites Des Passions De L’ame." § 82 Quoted in Taylor, *Sources of the Self*
Descartes writes, “the loss of a brother, it seems to me, is not unlike the loss of a hand.”

While love and family is a specific example, it brings to light a problem in Taylor’s reflections on the self. And this problem extends well beyond familial relationships – one important realm that is affected is group identity, especially in non-Western societies. Taylor acknowledges alternative forms of identity, but not in a satisfying way. With regard to Buriats of northern Siberia, who believe in the existence of three souls,

Does it mean that these people don’t share our sense of the unity of the person or the link/identity of a person with his or her body, that they don’t count persons in the same way we do? But we don’t have to suppose anything so bizarre. We can probably be confident that on one level human beings of all times and places have shared a very similar sense of ‘me’ and ‘mine.’

It should be obvious that there are a few problems with this quick dismissal of the Buriats of northern Siberia. However, I do not see much use in an eclectic example such as this for philosophical explication (I also know very little about the Buriats of northern Siberia). Instead, I’d like to use the example as a point of departure for an alternative line of thinking about the self, especially with regard to the immediacy of decisions involved in situations like the one involving our friends, the mammoth hunters.

Let us say, continuing with the problematic elaborated above, that the mammoth hunters were traveling in a pack of hunters, that is, there were more than just the two hunters involved. For Taylor, each and every one of the hunters who witnessed hunter B’s demise would think something like, “hunter B is dead, I am

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26 Quoted in Yrjonsuuri, "Reconsidering the Need for Selves." P. 86
27 Taylor, Sources of the Self. P. 112
alive. I have not perished, and he has perished, I am thankful that I am not the hunter who has died.” But couldn’t there exist something like a strong tie of group consciousness in the hunting party? They could have experienced the situation in a way that actually did not refer at all to the individuality of the hunters, but rather to their success as a whole. This thought could have been something like, “our hunting party has been reduced in size! We are less likely to succeed in our task!” Here, there is no sense of the self as Taylor has in mind within the reflections of the hunter. Alternatively, to return to Descartes’ poignant observations regarding his friend’s brother, the thought could have been something like losing a part of themselves. This latter thought indeed includes some sort of notion of the self as distinct, but also the inclusion of rather distinct individuals in this notion of the self.

To a certain extent, Taylor leaves room for this notion of group identity with his idea of ‘webs of interlocution.’ But these webs always situate discrete persons at each node of intersection between relations of interlocution, instead of seeing each point of interaction as a product of these interactions. Most tellingly, Taylor describes our relations with people who mean a lot to us, whose opinions and voice enter into our concept of ourselves, always as ‘others.’ These ‘others’ exist as discrete wholes, whose existence factors into our own existence as a discrete whole. But at no point do any of these wholes merge, converge, split, or even move for that matter. What is unsatisfying here is not necessarily Taylor’s account of group identity, but the way he describes the self as something that does not change with regard to its environment: the mammoth hunter only realizes its self, this self never changes with regard to his friend’s death, for example.

28 Ibid. p. 35-40
These thoughts bring to light a whole new set of questions: to what extent does Taylor take the idea of an engaged subject seriously? The line of thought I have been exploring aims to show that Taylor fails to radicalize his own conception of the self as an engaged agent. This is largely because Taylor’s notion of authentic pursuit of a constitutive good prevents him from truly dedicating himself to the task of elaborating an engaged subject: an authentic person, for Taylor, maintains a certain fidelity to their sources of goods and their self. This, it seems likely, prevents an individual from bringing other sources of goods into their concept of themselves. More importantly, it prevents using a truly and radically engaged subject, because such a subject may not hold the same goods to be dear in every particular arrangement he finds himself in.
Chapter 3

Being-in-the-World, or,
Taylor as a Reader of Descartes

In the preceding chapter I discussed ways in which the concept of narrative
unity begins to unravel when questions regarding memory and reflection are asked in
simple ways. One important element of my challenge includes the concepts of
memory and forgetfulness. Narrative unity must include some sort of memory
function – otherwise, there is no story for an individual to tell about themselves. And
without a story to tell, an individual would fail to have a self in the way that Taylor
defines it. A self without a history would constantly be up for redefinition,
perpetually malleable and without content. Without elements of the self that one can
‘take with them,’ from the past or otherwise, and use to project themselves into the
future, they lack the stuff of the self that makes life meaningful by ascribing worth or
significance to objects, people, and places. At the same, we could easily imagine
someone whose narrative is too thick or substantial. This person would have trouble
incorporating new truths and meanings into their life: they would be sedentary, static,
and also lack the means for creating meaning, as their world is all but cast in stone.

This dilemma, I believe, is the inevitable antinomy of descriptions of the self
that abide by concepts such as narrative unity and reflection. The first reason, as
elaborated earlier, is that this method forces a choice between two poles, which I have
referred to as diachronic unity and synchronic multiplicity. Authors have taken
positions on this scale, but every position seems arbitrary and easily defended against
others: each simply marks a moral stance on what it means to be a person, but makes
no contribution to an ontological investigation, or an investigation whose purpose is not morally charged. By ontologizing his moral crusade against postmodernity, Taylor winds up with a concept of the self that not only takes a stance on what ‘the good life’ is, but makes this good life a fundamental part of what it means to be a person. This, I believe, is unacceptable, and does not provide an adequate basis for an existentialism of the self or a moral foundation for action.

Part of the key to this puzzle is the general form of Taylor’s thought. Recall the concept of inwardness: this occupied most of Chapter 1. Inwardness, as elaborated by Descartes, presupposes an ‘inner’ and an ‘outer,’ the outer being the ‘mere objects’ of existence such as the body and one’s surroundings. The inner characterizes the place from which reflection emanates, or the perspective from which one looks at and thinks about the outer. For Descartes, the thinking that takes place through inwardness is an objective logic that produces knowledge. For Taylor, the thinking that takes place through inwardness is of a personal nature, building a narrative composed of past experience and plans for the future. Both thinkers make this realm of inwardness the primary point of access to the self. Any other source of the self, from family to epiphanic art, is filtered through this inwardness in order to be integrated into the narrative of self. In Taylor’s model, there is no escaping reflection: it is the necessary condition for the formation of the self, the point through which experience, emotion, and judgment must pass before taking on significance.

These are contentious claims to make, as Taylor is oftentimes regarded as a chief critic of the beliefs I am ascribing to him. His essay, Engaged Agency and Background in Heidegger, makes a strong case against the ‘grip of rationalism’ left
by Descartes’ legacy. However, I find that Taylor’s philosophy outside of this essay does not do justice to the critique of the abstract subject: it does not go far enough, it is insufficient. Here I will endeavor to prove that this insufficiency is tied to Taylor’s most fundamental philosophical concepts (strong evaluation, reflection, and the self) and that his failure is not incidental, but produced by cornerstone concepts in Taylor’s philosophy. I claim that Taylor does not adequately utilize Heidegger’s concepts of understanding, world, and being-in, despite his work on them. To accomplish this task, I will begin with Taylor’s reading of Heidegger in the above-mentioned essay, followed by comparative analysis of each thinker’s elucidation of world and being-in. I conclude that Taylor’s insufficiency spawns from an inadequate rendering of Dasein’s understanding. Dasein, from here on out, refers to that being for whom being is an issue, namely humans, the human self (for my purposes).

It should be mentioned that in this essay of Taylor’s, he masterfully articulates a watershed movement in the history of Western thought. This movement is characterized by the abandonment of the dominant role of reason in the thinking subject: the hegemony of the ‘proper procedures’ of rational thought, as ontological fact, are problematized. Instead, the subject is regarded as engaged, imbedded in a particular culture, embodied as opposed to detached from its circumstances. Descartes’ subject is objective: it has the perspective of a ‘view from nowhere’, enabling it to process information and produce a neutral picture of the world which is acted upon using a wholly rational calculus of means and ends. In contrast to this

2 Ibid. p. 318-320
approach, which casts knowledge as the outcome of rational calculation, Taylor (and Heidegger) posit the existence of an understanding, a pre-understanding, which is implicitly available to the subject by its very being-in-the-world. Dasein, in having a world, also always-already has a system of meaning created by this world and Dasein’s being-in this world. For Taylor, we are not aware or unaware of our understanding of the world, “we don’t know that we know,” but are nevertheless able to articulate it. Understanding is a paramount component of the imbedded subject: understanding is impossible without being-in-the-world, and the abstract subject is incapable of this sort of know-how.

This concept of understanding must not be underestimated, and I will elucidate further. In contrast to knowledge of the Cartesian kind, understanding is much closer to ‘know-how.’ For example, if handed a hammer, one would know how to use it, that it is a tool used to push nails into wood. This wood is used to build structures, structures that are constructed to make life easier for Dasein, perhaps to live in. Being a student, I also understand how to go to class, write a paper, and drink beer. I do these things without reflecting on them directly: I understand how to do them while doing them, or through doing them. I do not plan these things, but they unfold naturally from me because I am competently able to engage the world in which I live. And this world is constituted by background information that I also do not explicitly reflect on. This background information, which can range from what kind of beer is popular to how students tend to eat, oftentimes exists before me, or is given to me. Background permits certain activities, or provides certain activities, for me to do and assigns meaning to these activities. Thus, the craftsmen hammers, the

3 Ibid. p. 326
student drinks beer, and the professor teaches, all doing so against a background which we implicitly understand and cope with.

This is all well and good: Taylor acknowledges and gives voice to the all-important concept of world, which, for Heidegger, is the referential totality of meaning into which each of us is thrown into. As a fundamentally embedded subject, Dasein is transcribed into this totality of involvements, which forms an architectonic understanding of being, both ontic and ontological. To abstract, or subtract, a ‘subject’ from this structure would be inappropriate: there is no subject which exists independent of its world – Descartes’ subject is a metaphysical abstraction from Dasein’s being-in the world, and there is no world independent of Dasein. This claim is to be taken seriously, not as a metaphor for Dasein’s involvement in the world or a formal indication of throwness, but as a claim that the place in which we encounter ourselves, as Dasein, is in the world of entities, where Dasein ‘is.’ Henceforth, any retreat to an interiority of Dasein is to be regarded as metaphysically suspect: the ‘self,’ in its various formulations, is not to be given or deduced from a pure subject. Instead, the ‘self’ must be drawn out from existence (in the world) itself.

For Taylor, the self is essentially composed by a variety of valuations made by this self: the self is characterized by what factors into its ‘strong evaluations.’ Narrative unity, in the sense discussed in Chapter 2, is a prerequisite to the possibility of strong evaluations, which only make sense if they are incorporated into a coherent life story. Strong evaluations are not means-ends determinations, but those which concern motivations in the first place: thus, weak evaluations concern desire for goods, while strong evaluations are those judgments that determine the comparative
worth of desires themselves. 4 Strong evaluations are moral evaluations, established contrastively, that weigh qualitative differences between ‘higher and lower,’ ‘noble and base,’ ‘bad and good’ desires themselves. For Taylor, they are those evaluations from which we approach the world, which bestow meaning on entities in the world and determine the moral and, it seems, the ontological makeup of the self. Thus, I have indicated that Taylor’s self needs narrative unity in order to make strong evaluations, and that strong evaluations are moral evaluations of the world. For Taylor, there is no self without these evaluations, and accordingly, without the narrative of which these evaluations are a part.

Here the path that Taylor takes clearly breaks from the one Heidegger has indicated he intends to tread. His departure is most clear in the overdetermined concept of ‘reflection,’ which Taylor straightforwardly defines:

The role of reflection is not to make these [evaluations] articulate, but rather to step back from the immediate situation, to calculate consequences, to compensate for the immediate force of one desire which might not be the most advantageous to follow… to get over hesitation by concentrating on the inarticulate ‘feel’ of alternatives.5 (emphasis added)

In reflecting on strong evaluations, Taylor’s reflective self “goes deeper” and “also examines the different possible modes of being of the agent.”6 Here, the agent establishes commensurability between its conflicting desires, motivations, and moral disposition. This establishes a kind of depth in a human agent, one that not only characterizes that agent’s mode of being, but is essential to Taylor’s notion of humanity and what it means to be a human agent. A human agent is, essentially, its depth, and the nature of this agent’s self is the nature of this depth.

5 Ibid. p. 24
6 Ibid. p. 25
Taylor contrasts his notion of strong evaluation and agency with Sartre’s concept of radical choice. Recall the story of a young student who approaches Sartre and shares a dilemma he finds himself in: stay with his lonely mother, or leave for England to join the Free French Forces. Taylor claims that a prerequisite to this dilemma is a set of strong evaluations: these evaluations make the dilemma possible – without these evaluations, there would be no incommensurability. “In order for us to speak of choice, we cannot just find ourselves in one of the alternatives. We have in some sense to experience the pull of each and give our assent to each one.”

Elsewhere: “a radical choice between strong evaluations is quite conceivable, but not a radical choice of such evaluations.” We can see how the student in this example has already made a number of strong evaluations, and is now working to establish commensurability between these evaluations. The student comes to the dilemma already with a notion of the good, and this is why the decision is so difficult for him.

Thus, while an agent may feel one way sometimes and another way other times, his duty is to establish a commensurability, which then characterizes his self. The choice is no longer radical, but a continuation of the path he has set for himself as the self he has decidedly taken up as his identity. This path is created by one’s narrative. Accordingly, for Taylor, Sartre’s agent of radical choice is “utterly without identity.” I claim that, opposed to this reading of the situation, the agent’s identity does not precede his choice: to conceive of the self as something which precedes radical choice is to treat Dasein as something which is present-at-hand, or a static

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8 Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?", p. 31
9 Ibid. p. 29
10 Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?" p. 35
object of contemplation. And this articulation of the self is one that has failed to adequately overcome the legacy of Descartes. True, Taylor abandons the sinking ship of Cartesian objectivity; the model of the subject as a rational calculator removed from its environment, but he has replaced it with another abstract subject whose calculus is moral, not rational. This new subject is equally dogmatic, objective, and transparent to itself. To what does strong evaluation owe its possibility, if not the subject’s lucidity, intelligibility, and knowledge of itself? And what is this self, of which the agent has knowledge, if not an abstracted, objectified, rigidified entity whose mode of being is present-at-hand? (This example, however, should not imply that I agree with Sartre’s concept of radical choice. I will return to this example in Chapter 4 to clarify where I stand on this particular issue.)

Indeed, Taylor’s subject begins to unravel to reveal a beautifully intricate, but knotted, Cartesian heritage. Heidegger seems to anticipate Taylor’s subject:

Even if one rejects the “soul substance” and the Thinghood of consciousness, or denies that a person is an object, ontologically one is still positing something whose Being retains the meaning of present-at-hand, whether it does so explicitly or not.\(^{11}\)

It is clear that one need not explicitly posit an abstract subject to fall into the Cartesian trap: the task now is to further characterize the way Taylor fails to overcome Descartes and provide the framework for an adequate conception of the self. My claim is that Taylor’s reflective self is an inappropriate and derivative representation of the Being of Dasein for two reasons: first, it is inappropriate because incorporating a moral calculus into the ontological determination of being is unjustifiable, second, it is derivative because the process of reflection presupposes a more primordial ‘self’ which precedes the reflective self. Both of these problems, I

believe, are implications of Taylor’s merely formal acknowledgment of an embodied subject, which will be elaborated upon in the explication of the concepts of understanding, world, and being-in. In short, I hope to demonstrate both of these critiques *en route* to a demonstration of Heidegger’s existential philosophy.

Taylor’s claim that “in order for us to speak of choice, we cannot just find ourselves in one of the alternatives”\(^\text{12}\) speaks to the moral charge of his philosophy. It is not the average, everyday comportments (or decisions) of Dasein that Taylor seeks to formalize: it is only the heroic decisions, strong evaluations, which determine the depth of the self. This is well and good, but how can Taylor claim to speak of Dasein as imbedded in the world when his reflective self is always reflecting, always carrying himself out of its world? Dasein is “that kind of Being which we know as concernful absorption in the world we encounter as closest to us,” not the deep thinker of strong evaluation!\(^\text{13}\) Proximally and for the most part, Dasein is already familiar with the referential context of significance, and is imbedded in its world. *To characterize the proximal position of Dasein as one of reflection is to say that Dasein’s access to its world is primarily theoretical as opposed to practical and absorbed.* Dasein exists, it does not rest; it vacillates between moments of strong evaluation and practical Being-in the world.

Taylor is, then, *dead wrong* to characterize Dasein as not already in one of its alternatives: Dasein can only find itself in the ‘there’ into which it is thrown:

> An entity of the character of Dasein is its “there” in such a way that, whether explicitly or not, it finds itself in its throwness. In a state-of-mind Dasein is always brought before itself, and has always found itself, not in the sense of coming across itself by perceiving itself, but in the sense of finding itself in the mood that it has.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," p. 31
\(^{13}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time.* ¶ 27, p. 167
\(^{14}\) Ibid. ¶ 29, p. 174
This is the first step in recognizing the derivative character of Taylor’s reflective subject. Reflection, the positing of one’s self as an object for contemplation, is forgetful of being: the question should be asked almost in reverse order. Dasein comes closest to itself when it is not engaged with itself in a moment of inward reflexivity:

Is it then obvious a priori that access to Dasein must be gained only by mere reflective awareness of the “I” of actions? What if this kind of ‘giving-itself’ on the part of Dasein should lead our existential analytic astray…? Dasein is in each case mine, and this is its constitution; but what if this should be the very reason why, proximally and for the most part, Dasein is not itself?15

Dasein is, proximally and for the most part, not itself because it is, proximally and for the most part, engaged in the world. Only when engaged in reflection does the “I” posit itself as itself – for the most part, Dasein is not itself, is lost in things. The self cannot be reduced to its reflective modality: it encompasses both modes of being, one of which is proximal. The self can only come to itself when it is not itself, from the position of not being itself, that is, being itself and not reflecting on itself.

Before moving on, let me recount my argument thus far about how Taylor does not do justice to the engaged subject. In ignoring the way that Dasein is primarily absorbed in the world, Taylor has formulated a self that is primarily inward: a reflective subject that perceives the world almost as if behind a glass wall (mirror?) of reflection. This subject is not engaged but tentative, apprehensive, contemplative: in short, theoretical. If this subject were engaged, in fact, there would be no subject to discuss – we would only see it vanishing into the world of practical engagement. Only in its reflective mode does the subject make itself exist, so to speak. I believe this critique of Taylor’s reflective subject holds on its own, that it is sufficient to

15 Ibid. ¶ 25, p. 151
show that Taylor only formally adheres to a post-Cartesian subject. Taylor’s subject is not bound by the steadfast rules of rationality, as Descartes’ is, but it is still abstract in that it is removed from its world and concerns. If we were to imagine a Heideggerian approach to strong evaluation, we would have to conclude that one can only make a strong evaluation from a particular stance or orientation to the world – our state-of-mind, or mood:

Existentially, a state-of-mind implies a disclosive submission to the world, out of which we can encounter something that matters to us. Indeed, from the ontological point of view we must as a general principle leave the primary discovery of the world to ‘bare mood.’ Pure beholding, even if it were to penetrate to the innermost core of the Being of something present-at-hand, could never discover anything like that…”

Taylor’s subject reflects, but from where does it reflect? Where is it standing when it reflects, and from where does it approach reflection? In an earlier quote, Taylor describes reflection as a process by which an individual removes himself from his mood and approaches the world directly. This brings to light another element of Descartes’ subject in Taylor: his thinking subject is reflective, but reflects (or is able to reflect) objectively, without disposition, to form strong evaluations. This is an example of the “pure beholding” that Heidegger dismisses in the preceding quote.

For Heidegger, the self must include its world: this is (again) why Taylor’s reflective self is derivative: the self exists before the reflection that posits this self takes place. How is this so? Because knowledge of the self comes about through not through reflection, but through understanding, and

…seizing upon the full disclosedness of Being-in-the-world throughout all the constitutive items which are essential to it, and doing so with understanding. In existing, entities sight ‘themselves’ only in so far as they have become transparent to themselves with equal primordiality in those items which are constitutive for their existence: their Being-alongside the world and their Being-with Others.

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16 Ibid. ¶ 29, p. 177
17 Ibid. ¶ 31, p. 187
The self is never without a world: the task is to see itself *there*. Dasein’s world is so excessively proximate, so intimately bound up with what Dasein *is*, that to distinguish or demarcate it is to obscure Dasein itself. This is why understanding is so important for Heidegger: Dasein understands what it is capable of *without reflection*, with an ontological understanding that is always already available to it. It also understands its ontic world and its practical engagement in it. And it is this understanding that allows Dasein to exist in the world of entities whose mode of being is readiness-to-hand. In reflecting on entities, Dasein’s relationship to their mode of being becomes present-at-hand: the same is so when Dasein reflects on itself. Dasein without understanding is the thinking subject of pure intuition, the theoretical inquisitor of Descartes, the reflective self of Taylor.

As mentioned much earlier, understanding is a crucial component of the imbedded subject for both Taylor and Heidegger: so what does Taylor (and his reflective subject) fail to understand about understanding? It is this: Dasein comes to know itself by understanding where it stands within the architecture of meaning in which it exists. Dasein knows where it stands with respect to itself when it enters into the world, into the totality of involvements of the for-which of equipment. *A familiarity with the world is a familiarity with oneself.* In each involvement, in each hammering of the hammer, Dasein’s being ‘makes sense:’ “The for-the-sake-of-which’ signifies an ‘in-order-to’.”¹⁸ These relationships are all bound up with each other in a totality, within which, and only from the perspective of being-in, can Dasein come to know itself, to give itself to itself:

¹⁸ Ibid. ¶ 18, p. 120
In its familiarity with these relationships, Dasein ‘signifies’ to itself: in a primordial manner it gives itself both its Being and its potentiality-for-Being as something which it is to understand with regard to its being-in-the-world.\(^{19}\)

The ‘in-order-to,’ ‘with-which,’ and ‘toward-which’ are all disclosed beforehand with a certain intelligibility to Dasein. In each of its tasks and involvements, Dasein is its own determination, and Dasein comes to know itself on the basis of these involvements, with which it is concerned. Dasein is where its concerns are, and these concerns, in turn, constitute the “I” of Dasein: “

Man’s ‘\textit{substance}’ is not spirit as a synthesis of soul and body; it is rather \textit{existence}.\(^{20}\)

One would not go too far in comparing the soul of Descartes’ subject to the reflective self of Taylor, and the body to this self’s practical engagements that spawn the synthesis (or the commensurability) of reflection.

I have shown that Taylor, despite efforts to make a provision for the engaged subject, fails to go far enough with the idea. His reflective subject is not engaged in a world to produce an understanding, but makes strong evaluations through reflection. This, I have claimed, makes a proper treatment of understanding impossible, as Taylor leaves no meaningful room for the kind of knowledge or information attained through a skillful comportment to the world that is pre-reflective. I would like to characterize the nature of this disposition to the world a bit further with the concept of mood, and the mood of anxiety.

\textbf{Mood and Anxiety}

Here I will discuss mood and affectedness, as well as the mood of anxiety.

Before mood, however, I must explicate \textit{Befindlichkeit}, which is difficult to translate.

\(^{19}\) Ibid. ¶ 18, p. 120
\(^{20}\) Ibid. ¶ 25, p. 153
Options include ‘affectedness,’ ‘findedness,’ ‘where-you’re-at-ness,’ and, my favorite, ‘already-having-found-itself-thereness.’ For simplicity’s sake I will use affectedness, to follow Hubert Dreyfus’ example. What the word refers to is the quality of being found in a situation where things and options already matter and have significance to you. This should make sense given the earlier discussion of world and being-in-the-world: recall that Dasein always-already exists in a situation where elements have meanings that are, in some sense, pre-established. Heidegger writes,

To be affected by the unserviceable, resistant, or threatening character of that which is available, becomes ontologically possible only in so far as being-in as such has been determined existentially beforehand in such manner that what it encounters within-the-world can “matter” to it in this way. The fact that this sort of thing can “matter” to it is grounded in one’s affectedness, and as affectedness it has already disclosed the world…

Affectedness, then, indicates Stimmung, or mood. Mood is an everyday sort of thing: it is our affect, and names any of a number of ways Dasein can be affected, such as fear, loathing, anxiety, and boredom.

What is important in mood and affectedness is the meaning disclosed by them. By this I mean that through mood, world takes on significance. Mood builds off of understanding in its articulation of the world’s significance to Dasein: underneath mood there is understanding, but there is no understanding without mood. A mood is a primordial way in which Dasein becomes aware of is being-in-the-world, and is prior to intellectualization, contemplation, or reflection. If one is afraid, the world is a scary place; if one is elated, the world is a happy place. And Dasein always has a mood: they deteriorate or change over time, but Dasein is never without mood. Even “the pallid, evenly balanced lack of mood, which is often persistent and which is not

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21 Ibid., ¶ 29, p. 176
to be mistaken for a bad mood,” is a mood that Dasein can have. Mood discloses Dasein in ‘how one is,’ or ‘how one is faring,’ and thus discloses the ‘there’ of Dasein. In and through mood, Dasein is brought before itself in a way that goes farther than cognition, reflection, or language can articulate.

Mood, in articulating Dasein’s there, also discloses Dasein’s throwness into the world. Recall the architectonic structure of meaning which takes on significance for Dasein. In mood, Dasein is disclosed as that entity to which it has been delivered over, to the being that it ‘has to be.’ This is an interesting phenomenon – the ‘that it is and has to be’ which is disclosed through mood reveals Dasein’s throwness into the world, whether explicitly or not. This should make sense: how often is one’s mood entirely determinant of meaning for them? The ‘that it is and has to be’ is something to which Dasein has been handed over, not something Dasein shapes for itself. Dasein has to be in the mood in which it finds itself at any given time. Affectedness refers to the way we encounter things in the world with regard to our mood. Affectedness is made concrete in a world-defining mood, which in turn makes an intentional and directed attitude towards entities in the world possible.

The ‘that it is and has to be’ of throwness has important implications for the earlier mentioned concept of narrative unity. Heidegger is explicit here, and again seems to have Taylor’s position in mind when he writes that “the pure ‘that it is’ shows itself, but the ‘whence’ and the ‘whither’ remain in darkness.” By this he means that, while Dasein’s mood may become apparent, the reason for this mood remains concealed. What one thinks about oneself, their plans, aspirations, in short,

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22 Ibid. ¶ 29, p. 173
23 Ibid. ¶ 29, p. 173
their narrative, has nothing to do with mood and is, in fact, derivative of mood.

Heidegger articulates this idea:

Phenomenally, we would wholly fail to recognize both what mood discloses and how it discloses, if that which is disclosed were to be compared with that Dasein is acquainted with, knows, and believes ‘at the same time’ when it has such a mood. Even if Dasein is ‘assured’ in its belief about its ‘whither’, or if, in rational enlightenment, it supposes itself to know about its ‘whence’, all this counts for nothing as against the phenomenal facts of the case: for the mood brings Dasein before the ‘that it is’ of its ‘there’, which, as such, stares it in the face with the inexorability of an enigma.24

Mood is the way in which one confronts one’s self as imbedded, absorbed, and thrown. A narrative could certainly be constructed, but it would have to be built around mood, and this narrative may be different, depending on the mood one is in. And because Dasein can never be without mood, there is no neutral or baseline narrative that exists outside of mood. Moods are so far from being an object of contemplation or reflection that they assail us in our concerned absorption in the world. It does not come from inside or outside, but it comes from being-in-the-world as a way of such being. A mood is not an ‘inner state’ but a kind of comportment to the world.

It should be clear how mood and affectedness determine what in the world has meaning for us and how it has meaning. Having already submitted itself for being-in-the-world, Dasein’s care for things is already outlined in advance by its mood. Out of this disclosure of the world, through mood, do things emerge as something that matters to us. Reflection, and the contemplative stance on the world, could never deliver up the kind of significance that comes with mood. By looking at the world theoretically, we dim it down to a neutral uniformity in which nothing can really matter, but is rather evaluated, calculated, acted upon. The ‘mattering’ of things in

24 Ibid., ¶ 29, p. 175
reflection is the detached meaning ascribed to them from an unimbedded perspective, that is, without mood. Only with mood does Dasein actually direct itself towards things, and only with mood can anything matter to Dasein.

I have been articulating two things: the concept of engaged agency as opposed to a reflective agent, and the concept of mood as opposed to a reflective agent. Through these articulations I am hoping to craft a different model of the self from Taylor’s, one that is not wholly reflective but engaged, one who is not neutral but moody, so to speak. Now, of course, there are many moods that an individual can find herself in, and many situations into which individuals are thrown. Fear is a mood that Heidegger spends much time articulating, for example, and one may also think of happiness, loneliness, or perhaps irritatedness. These examples of mood do no work, however, when it comes to articulating a theory of the self. Heidegger does, however, mention moods that explicitly reveal Dasein to itself in a way that is useful for this discussion. He mentions in his 1931 lectures that the fundamental mood at the Greek beginning of philosophy was wonder, and that the mood for the modern cultural experience is alarm. I am interested in the mood of anxiety, not only because Heidegger focuses on anxiety as a mood that reveals Dasein to itself, but also because it might be confused with what I have been referring to as reflection.

First, then, I will clarify how anxiety and mood differ. For Taylor, reflection occurs in its most fundamental and essential form when one is weighing alternatives: the outcome of this reflection is a strong evaluation that gives direction to future reflective judgments. This is not the case for Heidegger and anxiety. Anxiety is not
felt in the face of anything in the world - in fact, the world shrinks away from

Dasein’s concerns in anxiety:

Here the totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-to-hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance… [telling] us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the bases of this insignificance of that is within-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself.25

And again, later on the same page:

That in the face of which one has anxiety is characterized by the fact that what threatens is nowhere. Anxiety ‘does not know’ what that in the face of which it is anxious is… That which threatens cannot brings itself close from a definite direction within what is close by; it is already ‘there’, and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere.26

In comparing Taylor’s ‘reflection’ with Heidegger’s ‘anxiety,’ we have uncovered another important distinction that merits further study. I claim that Taylor’s notion of reflection is precisely what Heidegger dismisses as “perceptually tracking down and inspecting a point called the ‘Self.’”27 Taylor’s error is in associating the self with an objective and knowable entity that that self is: in short, a modified Cartesian subject. The immanent, punctual “I” that Taylor has in mind is too narrow, it does not include its world: it is disengaged.

Anxiety does not place Dasein in a position to make evaluations that will determine the meaning of things for it. Instead of ‘stepping back’ and ‘weigh alternatives,’ as Taylor would have it, anxious Dasein cannot grasp the significance of anything at all. One cannot weigh alternatives when everything is meaningless. Instead of highlighting what is meaningful, or what corresponds to one’s narrative, anxiety reveals Dasein as dependent on a public system of meaning that is not

25 Ibid. ¶ 40, p. 231
26 Ibid. ¶ 40, p. 231
27 Ibid. ¶ 31, p. 187
produced by Dasein.\textsuperscript{28} It becomes clear, when anxious, that the meaning of things is largely bestowed on us by outside forces, such as our parents, our social situation, perhaps the television and the media. This is crucial: through anxiety, Dasein comes to see that it is fundamentally empty, composed entirely of meanings that do not originate from its own evaluations, but from its being thrown into the world:

Anxiety is anxious about naked Dasein as something that has been thrown into unsettledness. It brings one back to the pure ‘that-it-is’ of one’s ownmost individualized throwness.\textsuperscript{29}

Notice this interesting phrasing on Heidegger’s part: it is not Dasein that is anxious here; rather, “anxiety is anxious.” In anxiety, there is no Dasein at all(!), since Dasein is its concerns and activity in the world.

Another reason why Heidegger might say that ‘anxiety is anxious’ is because, bereft of the meaning bestowed on Dasein from its world, there is no Dasein to speak of. Thus, when anxious, and the world with its meaning loses its significance for Dasein, so too does Dasein lose its significance and its content: without the meaning of things in the world there is no meaning for Dasein. I mean to put a strong emphasis on the meaning of things as constituting the meaning of Dasein here. This would imply not only that mood and affectedness have a robust role in the constitution of the self, but also understanding. In the process of introspection, when the world is left out of concern, the object of contemplation is the self, but without the world, the self loses its meaning.

These thoughts are appropriate for moving into the next chapter, in which I attempt to tie these strings together and propose an original (though indebted) concept

\textsuperscript{29} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}. ¶ 60, p. 343
of the self. As I mentioned before, I think Heidegger is closer to what I have in mind than Taylor is, but that does not mean Taylor is wrong about everything. In fact, one amendment I would like to make to the way I have depicted the self in this chapter is a stronger sense of personal history. However, if the self is essentially composed of the meaning of things in the world, how can we have a meaningful account of personal history? This conundrum will be cleared up soon: in short, I argue that one’s history is intimately tied up in the meaning of things themselves. For now it is sufficient to understand exactly why reflection is an inadequate means for basing an investigation into the self, and that the self is most closely tied to the things it is concerned with, not its personal history or reflective orientation to itself.
Chapter 4

Repetition, Meaning, and Event:
An Existential Grammar of the Self

In this chapter I endeavor to make a contribution to the debate that I, in a sense, have been facilitating. As mentioned earlier, I am building on concepts introduced by Heidegger, Taylor, and Nietzsche, and this chapter represents the conclusive peak of this development. It will also be the densest, as I am now in a position to make fine distinctions between what seem like very similar ideas. I believe that much of Heidegger’s work that I have been developing thus far is very close to what I have in mind, and I will articulate what I think he is lacking and how to fill in the gaps. To do this I will introduce new concepts (repetition, event) and two new thinkers (Badiou and Lacan), but what I propose is neither of their philosophies but a culmination of the thought throughout this project including my own.

So far I have criticized Taylor’s concept of the self for two related reasons. First, Taylor’s subject is a reflective one: in its dealings with the world it is always referring to its personal narrative to inform decisions. Taylor’s self is the subject of its own narrative – it carries its narrative with it consciously and deploys the meaning of its past through and in strong evaluations of the world which serve to further articulate this self. I compared this to the Cartesian ‘I think,’ as each evaluation, for Taylor, includes an “I” with a specific history that approaches decisions and the world. Second, Taylor’s subject objectifies its history through reflection. In these moments of reflection the history of an individual is deceptively clear, the meaning of
the self is evident to the individual, and the individual is able to articulate itself through evaluations of the world. In this way, self and personal history/narrative form a feedback loop, co-determining each other throughout. Nothing seems to lie concealed, and the self acts as if that self is more apparent than it actually is. For Taylor, the self for each individual is largely determined by its own narrative unity, unless individuals choose to break from themselves, from their past, by pursuing an entirely new line of self. Even so, this decision would still only make sense against the backdrop of personal narrative, that is, with regard to this narrative.

I contrast Taylor’s subject with my own reading of Heidegger’s subject, concluding that Taylor does not take adequate account of the concepts of imbeddedness and understanding. Individuals do not ‘carry’ their selves with them consciously; rather, one’s self is largely articulated by the world of things that an individual finds themselves in. Meaning is not historical, but created at all times through a subjective disposition towards one’s environment, mood, and understanding. The meaning of an individual self is not articulated by that individual, but by that individual’s relationship to and involvement in their environment. The meaning of this environment is articulated as well in this process, and the two sources of meaning create another sort of feedback loop: there is no abstracting one from the other, and both are needed in order to speak of anything like meaning or self. I have, in a sense, replaced Taylor’s hermeneutic circle of self and narrative with a new circle that moves from self to environment and back to self.
While these diagrams are hyperbolic, they are also pithy and concise, and they provide a nice visual metaphor for these two lines of thought and the problems I have with each. Here, Taylor’s circle cites the self as the point de capiton of a personal narrative that lends that self its unity. The self is its past, and the past imputes meaning into the self by grounding it and directing it. But the self also determines its past by interpreting it, evaluating it, and redeeming it through strong evaluations. The self also determines its past by choosing its future, though the extent to which Taylor’s self can freely make its future is determined by its past. For my reading of Heidegger, the self is informed and filled by its world and its imbeddedness in a particular environment. The self is its understanding of things in the world. But the self also understands its world according to its mood – things in the world can only take on a significance with mood. Thus, the self (with its mood) co-determines the world, which in turn informs that self.

However, there are problems also with this version of Heidegger’s self. Not the least of these problems is the fact that we can only derive a very thin concept of personal history if we take the claims about imbeddedness seriously. This seems like a problem – it would be dishonest to deny the importance of an individual’s personal history in the meaning of the self, whether this history is conscious or not. This is
less of a problem for the consistency of Heidegger’s project because the second half of *Being and Time* works in the concepts of time and resoluteness to account for historicity, but this resoluteness is conscious and introspective. But there is a second, more pervasive problem with my reading of Heidegger here, and that is the problem of truth. While Taylor’s philosophy includes some sort of mechanism for determining truth for an individual, Heidegger’s philosophy only includes ‘what there is’ in the world, none of which corresponds to the category of truth. Indeed, Heidegger is making a critique of the correspondence theory of truth, and posits principles of authenticity instead. But something is lost in this movement, in the loss of truth for the concept of authenticity. Basically, I am not satisfied with either of the two circles I have described. Taylor’s circle is too historical, consistent, and inward; Heidegger’s circle is too instantaneous, contradictory, and worldly. I propose to use both Taylor and Heidegger’s work, along with my own observations, to come to a theory that maintains the advantages of each and avoids the various problems that I have just outlined.

In this chapter I describe a way of understanding the self, and relate a corresponding theory of truth. In its most basic formulation, my theory is that the self is the repeated deployment of the world’s meaning. The repetition of this meaning is what gives the self its endurance through time. The meaning of the world manifests itself through the meaning of things in the world, but the meaning of things is not something static nor is it entirely social and predetermined. Rather, the meaning of things is codetermined by social circumstances and our own valuation of them. However, this valuation of things in the world is historically conditioned, so that
one’s personal history and experience of the world is expressed through the meaning of things. Thus, the meaning of the self is the meaning of the world as it is determined by the history that this self has traversed.

In the last chapter, I concluded that the self receives its meaning from understanding, which is an amalgamation of the meaning of things in the world. For Heidegger, this meaning is pre-established: the meaning of things is, for the most part, social and predetermined. This means that the hammer receives its meaning from its function, that is hammering. A hammer is a tool used to build things, and the meaning of the hammer is constructed from various other meanings that hang together to form a larger, architectonic meaning of things-in-the-world. This pen in my hand, for example, is a tool for writing. As a student, it is a tool that I use everyday to take notes, etc., just as a hammer is used to hammer nails. But there seems to be something different in what the hammer means to me, a student, and what the hammer means to a carpenter. The same is so for what the pen means to me, a student, and what a pen means to a carpenter.

This difference in meaning is not a theoretical or reflective difference. That is, when studying and reflecting on the pen, both I myself and the carpenter will come to the same conclusions: it is a writing instrument, used to take notes, and I may use it more than the carpenter. So, too, for the hammer. But when I am absorbed in my use of the pen, when I am taking notes, it is not just a pen but an element of my activity. It confirms my status as student. So too with the hammer: the carpenter’s use of the hammer confirms his status as carpenter. I am not claiming here that without the pen or the hammer I cease to be a student and the carpenter ceases to be a carpenter;
rather, each tool is incorporated into my activity in a different way then someone else. And there are many things-in-the-world that can be incorporated similarly or differently. I would go as far as to say that there are an infinite number of things in the world, providing an infinite number of combinations of use and incorporation.

The meaning of things, then, is a twofold relation of an object’s social meaning in an abstract, theoretical sense (a hammer is a tool for hammering), and the way that meaning is taken up in the activity of an individual (a pen is something I use to write my thesis). This activity is not necessarily a profession, and the things that have meaning are not necessarily tools. We can also speak of the meaning of different events, information, and even other individuals. Each of these categories of things have similarly twofold meanings, both socialized and individualized. Individualized meaning differs from social meaning, and could be described as an individual’s unique ‘outlook’, or perspective, on the world. Individualized meaning is not total, but it is architectonic. By this I mean that a set of individualized meanings does not include the totality of things-in-the-world, but those that it does contain all make reference to each other, and hang together to form a whole.

But where does this individualized meaning come from, and what is its nature? This is where Taylor’s philosophy of narrative unity can be of use. Individualized meaning comes from an individual’s history and his or her activity in the world. Note here that I use the word history, not narrative. The word narrative implies a reflective element of story telling: to say that something means something because of a personal narrative means that one can tell a story to account for why something means a certain thing for them. I am after something different here, a
meaning that is pre-reflective and instead wrapped up in my activity. When I stop to
tell a story, I am talking about something else, a derivative sort of meaning that
abstracts the self from the network of activity and meaning that it is enmeshed with.
The sort of individual meaning I seek is one that is contained in objects, not my
reflection on them, in a way that is uniquely my own. This meaning is not an element
of a conscious story, but is imbedded in the context of everyday life.

I am thus abandoning Taylor’s theory of narrative for a different means of
incorporating personal history into the self. No narrative is needed to lend the self its
unity; in fact, unity is the wrong term to characterize the fullness of the self. Instead
of unified, the self is whole, and this wholeness stems from the hermeneutic nature of
the self, which is not divisible, integrated, or heterogeneous, but circular: it moves.
The idea of separate ‘selves’ makes sense when we use the concept of multiple selves
as a metaphor for the singular self; but when one forgets that this is only a metaphor,
the injunction to ‘unify’ these selves appears. The self is whole, nor is it unified, for
it is not divisible to begin with: just because it may contradict itself does not mean it
is not one! This helpful idea of ‘multiple selves’ has become too prominent in the
way we understand the self: we must caution against letting our metaphors for
understanding the self factor inappropriately into that understanding. The idea of
multiple selves only makes sense when one assumes a Cartesian detachment from
world: now I approach the world from this perspective, now from another...
Imbedded within this approach is the assumption that there is always an “I”
accompanying my being-in-the-world. As articulated before, the self need not reflect
on itself; instead of reflecting a meaning of the individual, the self is a reflection of
the meaning of things in the world. The self is the meaning of things in the world to this self – that is, it is constituted by the way things take on significance for it. But things in the world do not have meaning without the self. This generates a new hermeneutic circle, one in which there is no element ‘self’ self, but the wholeness of which characterizes the self in its dynamic circularity, its movement.

This is appropriate because the self, as I explained in the last chapter, only becomes an object when it is contemplated through reflection; thus, it must be represented dynamically. The self I am investigating is an everyday self, not the self of inward reflection: only when disembedded from its environment through reflection does the self become the sort of static object I am contrasting to my own theory of self. However, we cannot say that the self is entirely lost in things, because it certainly has some sort of trajectory, and a definitive past of its own. This past enters into the constitution of that self, but not in a way such that it is reflected on, for this would objectify the self by crystallizing its historicity. Instead, an individual’s history factors into the self the same way that things do: pre-reflectively, without contemplation. Like the self, as well as the things that give it meaning, the past can be reflected upon, and this sort of contemplation ossifies it into the sort of narrative that Taylor writes about. But again, this is not what I am interested in. I am not
claiming that reflection never takes place, but that reflection is not as straightforward as Taylor would have it.

A number of questions are unresolved here, the most important of which is how exactly the hermeneutics of history and world interact. How is history incorporated into world? And how is world reflected in history? Other questions regarding how inward reflection fits into this picture beg themselves as well. These are the folds that are created when combining the two approaches I have described, and I plan to iron them out by elaborating upon the concept of the self I have in mind. I have said that the self is what results from the feedback loop between a personal history and a personal world, or environment. In order to prove this, I need to articulate how exactly an individual’s history influences their world, and how an individual’s world influences their history. I then need to clarify how this feedback loop results in the self, and why the self cannot be abstracted from the movement of its elements. With all the work that has been done prior to this task, I will be able to draw upon now familiar concepts to explain what I mean. Now, I would be mistaken to justify my claim by demonstrating how world creates history and then demonstrating how history creates world, as this would create an artificial distinction between the two. One cannot simply ‘start’ with world and derive history, or vice versa: world both precedes and follows history, and vice versa. This is the nature of the feedback loop, and elaborating upon this sort of structure is a difficult and delicate task. Instead of picking apart the process, I must attempt to describe it in its entirety and wholeness so as to avoid the distinctions problem and obscuring the picture as a whole. To do this, I will call upon the philosophically rich concept of repetition.
Repetition a philosophical idea that has been elaborated upon by a number of thinkers (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and Lacan, to name a few) without ever being formalized or completed satisfactorily. Kierkegaard covered the idea extensively in his aptly titled book, *Repetition*, written under the pseudonym Constantin Consantius. This name already articulates part of Kierkegaard’s point: that conscious repetition provides the foundation for a morally fulfilling existentialism. This idea is elaborated upon by Heidegger, whose claim in the second half of *Being and Time* validates Kierkegaard’s, with a new vocabulary including resoluteness and death. While this tradition dovetails with the analysis I have given so far, I do not wish simply to report on Heidegger’s philosophy, but to move in a direction that does not hinge upon morality or authenticity as a foundation for my existential concept of the self. Instead, I turn to a more marginalized and less rigorous tradition, that of Nietzsche’s eternal return.

Eternal return is a concept made relevant by the possibility of unconscious thought and activity, in contrast to the conscious willing of repetition espoused by Heidegger and Kierkegaard. The emphasis lies not upon my choice in what I do, but upon my actions in themselves. This recalls Nietzsche’s famous claim that there is no doer behind the deed, that lightning flashes and there is no separating the lightning from the flash: “there is no “being” behind doing, effecting, becoming; “the doer” is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.”¹ This claim is in line with my own, making an explicit break from ego-psychology and the reflective, inward self. Instead, the doer, the self, is its actions, environment, and imbeddedness in its world. Separating the flash from the lightning is to use a logic which “sees a

¹ Nietzsche, "Genealogy of Morals." I, Section 13, p. 481
doer and doing; it believes in will as the cause; it believes in the ego, in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and it projects this faith in the ego-substance upon all things.”

Now, the ‘doer’, the self, can speak the ego into existence by reflecting on itself to produce an object for contemplation. The self can tell itself – it becomes an ego through its story (or, in this case, narrative). It is not an imaginary tale, but a myth: for Freud, a myth has the power to create structures, which can be meaningful. Thus, it would be incorrect to say that the ego, or the conscious, reflective self, is an illusion: indeed, this ‘illusion’ makes decisions, takes action, and for the most part, thinks. The problem with the ego is that it is derivative of a more fundamental self. What Nietzsche (and I) has a problem with is the assumption that this ego is the primary element that constitutes the self. What I will be claiming constitutes the self, as opposed to the conscious ego, is the non-conscious repetition of the meaning of things in the world (I used non-conscious because I wish to avoid the meaning ascribed to subconscious and unconscious).

In order for this to make sense, things in the world must be endowed, somehow, with meaning that is more than just their ‘public,’ or inherited meaning. Objects, ideas, things, etc. are carriers of meaning, or value, and this value has a two-part composition. One part of this value is social, and we are born into this picture of values and socialized according to it even before we gain the ability to speak. This is a simple process, starting with the expectations parents have of a child that change the way it is brought up, its name, its socio-economic status and location in space and

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time. The other source of the value of objects is the individual’s ability to create value for him or herself. These two sources of value correspond to the earlier notions of individualized meaning and social meaning. Both of these types of meaning have the same basic content, but different sources. Social meaning is a sort of structural, inherited meaning, while individualized meaning is the result of an act of will. This is what Nietzsche has in mind when he calls man the creature that esteems:

To esteem is to create: hear this, you creators! Esteeming itself is of all esteemed things the most estimable treasure. Through esteeming alone is there value: and without esteeming, the nuts of existence would be hollow.  

I am arguing that all value is a product of esteem, and the two sources of value are merely two different originators of this esteem, one social and one personal.

Objects have a meaning and significance larger than they are themselves, as they participate in a network of signification that extends beyond those objects or the immediate purposes they serve. And this value is articulated every time its value obtrudes into our activity. This is the first moment of repetition: the fact that we find ourselves, every time, in the same world. “Everything acquires its meaning, and hence its reality, be being a renewed manifestation or enactment of timeless and unchanging, that is, archetypal, things...”  

Our movement in the world is a ceaseless reproduction of values and meanings that have existed before our enactment of them, and are contained in our own evaluations of the world, whether they are conscious or not. Our valuations of the world are only a confirmation of what we already value, or what has always been valued, or happens to be valued at the time (by society, my

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family, the church, school, etc.) It is through this repetition that the meaning of things in the world endures through time.

Part of the meaning of things in the world is an individualized meaning, one that corresponds to the history of the self that is interacting with the things. This is a straightforward idea: what something means to one person is not necessarily what it means to another, and this difference can be accounted for through their history with that object, or other objects that reference it. As a self endures through time, the elements of repetition that compose the self endure with it and change their meaning. Meaning thus accumulates in things as they take on a history: our history. Simple examples abound: a generic police officer may give one person security and another discomfort because of the various interactions, stories, and meanings associated with police or the law. All this while the ‘public,’ social meaning of police remains the same. The meanings of things in the world are both an accumulation of history and a social meaning: they cannot be one or the other but always both. And these meanings of things in the world form knowledge: knowledge is an encyclopedia of these meanings, it is this encyclopedia that is repeated, and out of this repetition spins the self. This is why it is important that I study the meaning of memory: recall that memory is the ‘stuff’ of creativity (from Chapter 2). This makes sense: whether it be implicit or explicit, existing in reflection or in the meaning of things, the history of an individual and of the things in the world is the material the comprises the self, and the self can combine, recall, and reconstitute this ‘stuff’ in a way that allows it to creatively articulate itself.
It is clear, then, why both Taylor and Sartre are wrong about radical choice: the past doesn’t fix the future, nor is every second a radically free moment of infinity. Rather, history accumulates via repetition: to say that we are fixed by the past is silly, but to say we can totally abandon the past in one fell swoop is equally ridiculous. A person can make a decision to abandon the trajectory he or she has traversed, but this decision does not magically rewrite or erase the meaning that has accrued in his or her world. Those who fancies themselves ‘radically free’ would be full of existential guilt: the meaning of things in their world would be haunting reminders of obligations ignored, possibilities lost, and meaningful engagements that never reached their potential. This sort of guilt might well be conscious or non-conscious, reflective or imbedded. Taylor, then, is on the right track when he speaks of establishing commensurability; I will use this idea when I discuss truth and the possibility of moral decision. For now, radical freedom is a hyperbole, and ignores the way in which history, meaning, and self amasses in ways that cannot be avoided, ignored, or modified entirely at will.

Consider this quote from Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*:

As Zarathustra was climbing the mountains he thought often since his youth he had wandered alone and how many mountains and ridges and peaks he has already climbed. I am a wanderer and a mountain climber, he said to his heart; I do not like the plains, and it seems I cannot sit still for long. And whatever may yet come to me as destiny and experience will include some wandering and mountain climbing: in the end, one experiences only oneself. The time is gone when mere accident could still happen to me; and what could still come to me that was not mine already? What returns, what finally comes home to me, is my own self and what of myself has long been in strange lands and scattered among all things and accidents.\(^6\)

Note the language: “he said to his heart,” clearly a reflective moment, “I do not like the plains, and it seems I cannot sit still for long.” Even in his moment of reflection,

\(^6\) Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Section 3, “The Wanderer”
Zarathustra is discovering himself through his actions and environment, in the sense that Zarathustra learns more about himself at every moment he lives. And again: “…in the end, one experiences only oneself.” This is a claim that the experience of oneself does not come through reflection but through the experience of things themselves. The self is the things in the world that it values and how it values them. And what returns to the self is that same self, which has been “scattered among all things” in the world. The return of the same is the moment in time when the self returns to itself as itself, informed by the world that comprises its history.

This brings to mind Lacan’s concept of the self and repetition, namely, the idea that the self is constituted by the repetition of a symbolic order:

Since this repetition is symbolic repetition, it turns out that the symbol’s order can no longer be conceived of there as constituted by man but must rather be conceived as constituting him.  

We can see repetition as the internalization of social structures that link objects (or the values of objects, or the symbolic meaning of objects) together in a chain of signification that produces meaning, which is constitutive of self. It is clear at this point that I am developing a theoretical anti-humanism, taking seriously the claims of writers like Foucault that ‘man’ is a socially constructed concept that takes on different meanings according to its historical situation, and on my account, spatio-temporal and cultural situation. So too with whatever the self is: to divorce the self from the symbolic order that constitutes it subtracts its content and disregards the structural process that inaugurates and sustains that self’s existence. This process is one of the repetition of signs.

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The self is not a gap in the order of things as they exist, a gap that allows for agency and freedom, but the grounding of the order of things itself, the “vanishing mediator” whose gesture lends the final element of coherence to what is really a pre-ontological multitude. Thus, the self does not ‘belong to’ the order of things or the chains of meaning that constitute the world, but is the quilting point at which these various meanings come together to form an idea or perspective. The self is this viewpoint: it is unique, individual, historical, situated, and social. Without a self, the world could not possibly make any sense, and vice versa. Each iteration of things in the world is an iteration of a self, in that it constitutes a unique constellation of values. In each iteration, each self, different things take on different importance: one’s concerns lie where the meaning of things are at issue for him, in his world. The repetition of this constellation is what allows the self to endure through time, despite the eventual movement of concerns, meaning, and value.

This sort of repetition is distinct from Kierkegaard’s or Heidegger’s because what is being repeated is not some belief of the self, a particular lifestyle, or any bearer of authenticity. What is being repeated is knowledge: what there is, the meaning of things in the world as they relate to each other. This repetition constitutes and discloses the self – it is not the self that is repeating, but the self that is being repeated. This entire chain of signification is articulated in each iteration of a link, as the entire chain is represented in each part. Recall from the previous discussion of understanding that the architectonic meaning of the world is contained in each instantiation of it, since the ultimate ends of various pieces of equipment in the world

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can be tied back to an end (Dasein). So too with signifiers, except that there is no ultimate end, or in this case, meaning. Instead, signifiers refer to other signifiers endlessly, as this is the method of signification (signifier/signified) without the final signified, without the final positive content.

This seems terribly abstract, but the idea itself is simple. Take, for example, the example from Lacan of the bathroom doors. We have before us two doors, the same in every respect, leading to two identical toilets. The difference between the doors and the rooms is nothing but the signifier stamped on the front of the door (a picture of a woman, or of a man). This picture refers to… nothing, it simply demarcates, it manifests the presence of a difference without signifying any sort of positive content – the content comes after the sign, it is inaugurated by the sign. The sign creates meaning by working with the viewer’s knowledge of the difference between the two toilets, but this difference does not precede the sign itself. There is a conundrum here that is obscured by the way that all of these signs hang together and make sense with reference to each other. Meaning is the result of references to other signs, not a relationship between a sign and its positive content, or signified. The sign ‘Men’s Room’ references others signs (Women’s Room), which act as signifiers for social standards, meanings, and practices. Look as hard as you can, you’ll never find the signified behind the sign, ‘Men’s Room’: you’ll only find an androgynous toilet. This is an important observation because it indicates that there is no baseline signified in the chain of signification that is constitutive of self. That is why ‘self’ is not in the center of the circular diagram I used to illustrate my point, but the outcome, or residue, of that movement.
The reflections of Zarathustra quoted above come at a time when he realizes that all that is ever experienced is the self, via things in the world. The self comes back to him, is repeated to him, in the same way signification is repeated. The eternal return of the same, for Nietzsche, does not refer to the endless, yawning stretch or circle of time, but to those moments in which this circularity appears and becomes tangible to us. This circularity confesses itself to us when the chain of signification is exposed to us, made conscious. This begs the questions of how these moments of clarity impose themselves into our otherwise repetitive and unreflective lives as well as the possibility of a third source of value for things, one that is related to reflection. Certainly, this is in part related to Heidegger’s concept of anxiety, but what is being reflected on is not the self, but things in the world which have value. It seems that, when made conscious and available to us, we would be able to modify, replace, or even reject this structural element of the self. This is a bold claim and I do not endorse it; rather, I believe that in certain rare moments the chains of signification that compose meaning and self can be altered in a way that changes the meaning of the whole.

Before answering these questions and elaborating upon this claim, I will sum up what has been said so far. In an effort to move away from models of the self previously mentioned while still incorporating their useful elements, I have described the self as an interaction between history (a personal history) and world (a personal environment). Repetition plays a crucial role here, not as a conscious repetition of moral beliefs, but as the repetition of value that occurs with our activity in the world.

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Value is a word used to describe objects in the world, and this value is repeated in our interactions with these objects. This value is a result of history, but it also factors into that history. This value is attributed to things, but things also figure into the creation of the meaning of this value. In the end, all that we experience is ourselves, in that the self is the meaning of things in the world as this meaning emerges from history. As this history unfolds, so does the self, despite the self’s being always-already present in things.

Now, to the question of event and, ultimately, truth. As opposed to the self, I will use the term subject to describe that unique mode of the self in which that self is able to make conscious evaluations of its world. Here it should be understood that subjectivity is intimately bound up with reflection, since evaluations are made during times of inwardness. For now, an event is a happening in the world that spurs the self to become a subject: an event subjectivizes. As such, there is no event without a subject – that is, if a tree falls in the forest and no subject is there to see it, it never fell. Or, to be more specific, the tree’s fall does not constitute an event. An event is an event because it is experienced as such by a subject. And an event is, therefore, subjective: it does not have the same meaning for all, nor does it necessarily have any meaning at all for everyone. The example of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection is exemplary here: for the Romans, Christ’s death was nothing but the procedural execution of a radical Jew, one of many. For others, however, Christ’s death and resurrection constitutes an event that acts as the condition for the possibility of a number of strong evaluations, to put it simply. The reason that the meaning of the world manifested itself and became an issue is because Christ’s resurrection exploded
the repetition of meaning in the world by introducing something new, something not included in ‘knowledge’.

If, proximally and for the most part, the self is caught in a cycle of repetition, not yet a subject, then an event is a *supplement* to the order of things, to knowledge. This means that it is something extra, something not included in what ‘exists’ in the chain of signification. A subject needs something to have happened, something which does not neatly fit into the order of things, in order to speak of an event. An event is an event because it is in tension with, reorients, decenters, and rewrites value. An event, in itself, has no crystallized meaning so to speak: its meaning is (again) subjective, and must be worked out by the subject that the event induces. This working out of the meaning of an event, the relationship between a subject and an event, is a truth. I can now claim that the real thrust of an event and truth is the introduction of something new and radically destabilizing into knowledge.

Knowledge is encyclopedic: it is an account of the way things are that is relatively stable, coherent, self referential and discrete. Truth, in contrast, is completely new, unaccountable, and unexplainable for the very reason that it is not contained in knowledge. Truth obtrudes into knowledge and throws it off kilter. At this point, it should be clear how an event changes the meaning of things in the world, and thus factors into what I am calling the self for both the unreflective self, to whom things are simple, and the reflective self, to whom the meaning of things must be worked out and justified.

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I would to point out that the concept of truth is something never satisfactorily accounted for in Nietzsche and Heidegger’s philosophies. Some have concluded that both reduced truth to poetry\(^{11}\), while there is at least something of a consensus that for both, truth is related to language. The concept of truth I am elaborating is not linguistic but situational; it is not poetic but subjective. I maintain the concept of imbeddedness and world by making the event situational and subjective; I also honor the determinacy of language and the chain of signifiers by positing these as precisely that which the event breaks free from. Thus, I can say that the event erupts from ‘what there is’ (language, public opinion) and introduces something new, but still within a particular situation with regard to a particular subject. As the Lacanian aphorism goes, ‘truth punches a hole in knowledge;’ it emerges from language and things-in-the-world in a way that cannot be predicted or derived from them or any sort of situation. Knowledge, or the concept of understanding elaborated earlier, do not contain the truth that follows from an event.

The structure of an event is a retroactive transvaluation of values. It implies that the relationship between the subject and the event is not “X-event-subject,” but “subject-event-subject:” “‘subject’ names the something inaugurated by the event, as well as the something that makes a place (and time) for the event.”\(^{12}\) The event reaches back in time in such a way that the subject to an event was always a subject to truth – it could not be any other way! Truth is what results from the radical destabilization of knowledge – truth is not a positive piece of information or a correspondence between fact and theory, but the affirmation of an event and the

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\(^{12}\) Zupancic, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*. p. 19
practical working-out and incorporation of that event into the world. But most importantly, it is not the subject that creates truth, but truth which constitutes its subject. By reconstituting the meaning of things around itself, and the event gives birth to a subject.

Now, the concept of truth will be the way in which I incorporate the possibility of meaningful change and decision into my description of the self. I distance my concept of truth from Taylor’s conception of strong evaluation in two ways. First, the vocabulary of event, subject, and truth means that the structural process is entirely different from Taylor’s moral theory. Truth is not something to be reflected on, but the result of an event that erupts into the individual’s world. The individual indeed has the power to decide how to deal with this eruption, but he is motivated and affected deeply by an event. As such, a truth has the power to alter the meaning of things not only in a situation, but retroactively, without conscious reflection. Once subjected to an event, the bearer of truth sees the world in a way that corresponds to their fidelity to that truth. Truth is not an evaluation but a relationship to an event: as such, it is malleable, constantly being articulated by the subject. Truth is not a correspondence – the only thing that holds a truth, that speaks a truth, is the subject that bears this truth. Truth has no real positive content, so to speak; rather, the subject’s relationship to the event is such that he is always trying to give content to that truth to which he is bound. Truth cannot give meaning to the self in the way that it does for Taylor. For Taylor, the ethical noesis (intuitional object) requires a noema (ideal content) that preexists it: ethical demands correspond to one’s ethical
imagination, so to speak. Instead, I claim that truth cannot exist in the ethical imagination before its inauguration, but is characterized primarily by its absence, which corresponds to its impossibility according to knowledge, which by its nature, cannot account for truth. Secondly, as pointed out before and, indeed, one of my fundamental claims, truth is not an ontological fact for the self, but is constitutive of that particular self I have referred to as subject (a subject to truth). This means I am making possible a situation in which, for a particular individual, there is no truth, and there will not ever be a truth. I investigate this possibility, and the trends of modernity that encourage it, in the next chapter.

The concepts of event and truth also differ from Heidegger’s concept of conscience, and the call of the conscience. For Heidegger, the self is spurred into an ethical decision by the call of the conscience which is actually Dasein calling itself. This call is answered by Dasein thickening and deepening its existential autonomy and pushing itself resolutely into the possibilities that it has chosen to take up authentically and responsibly. In opposition to this, I am proposing that the ethical demand comes from a situation itself, one in which an event transpires. One can say that a situation is an evental site from which a demand for action emanates. A truth creates an imprint on the self that can never be understood, nor is it a possible object for contemplation. Truth does not ‘call’ Dasein in the way that conscience does, but manifests itself through a transvaluation of things in the world.

I feel I must clarify certain further details involved in truth, event, and reflection. It seems that a subject to truth, one who has been witness to an event,

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would indeed be able to reflect consciously on said event. Truth, in this case, would be the commensurability that this subject establishes between the event and the knowledge that the event is, in a sense, in competition with. Note that Taylor’s theory of strong evaluation can be of use here, but not without modification. For Taylor, the commensurability being established is one between strong evaluations: one creates a harmony between their various ethical decisions. In the case I am making, reflection’s use is to establish a commensurability between event and knowledge, not between ethical evaluations of the world. An event forces, compels, propels, and puts pressure on: it does not wait to be evaluated, and it is not patient with the elements of encyclopedic knowledge that contradict its truth.

However, I think it is more important to focus on the non-conscious aspect of event and truth with regard to subject. An event is, in many ways, just like any other thing that might carry value: the crucial difference lies in the nature of that value, the meaning it carries with it. Since an event conveys information that is outside of knowledge, it erupts into the chain of signification that constitutes the world and the self. This (e)ruption insists on itself for the subject, and has the capacity to alter the meaning of things to which it relates. To what does an event relate? That question is up to the subject: the subject’s fidelity to an event is the foundation for the articulation of truth. As just mentioned, much of this articulation occurs in the realm of conscious reflection, a working out or establishing of commensurability. Much of it also occurs through a non-conscious alignment of meanings to those inaugurated by the event. The nature of meaning, in the way I have described it, is largely autonomous: since signification is forever linked together as an architecture of world
and self, the replacement (or in this case, radical destabilization) of one element can
shake the very foundations of being. The foundation of a building structures the
whole: so too with meaning. Just as one’s history is incorporated into things non-
consciously, truth can restructure knowledge to create commensurability without the
self’s consent (or deliberate effort).

A truth, then, would be foundational. This concept of a structuring element of
meaning is remarkably similar to Lacan’s notion of the Master-Signifier, a
complicated concept that will always be at the forefront of psychoanalytic study.

Lacan writes:

…A signifier is that which represents the subject for another signifier. This signifier will
therefore be the signifier for which all the other signifiers represent the subject: that is to say,
in the absence of this signifier, all the other signifiers do not represent anything, since
something is represented only for something else.¹⁴

This Master-Signifier is the nodal point of the signifying chain, and consequently, the
point around which other links in that chain form. The possibility of a Master-
Signifier as a truth event makes very real the otherwise illusory notion of a final
signified. This final signified is local, embodied, and subjective: it is, in its most
proximal form, not an object for contemplation (though fidelity demands that, at
times, it becomes one). A truth is one of those things that one ‘just knows;’ it is self-
evident.

At this point I am able to clarify how the account given in this chapter avoids
several problems articulated in earlier ones. First, the problem of memory and
narrative unity. I have claimed that the self and its history are in things, and are
repeatedly articulated by them; thus, there is no concept of memory included in what

¹⁴ Quoted in Slavoj Zizek, For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor
(London: Verso, 2002). p. 21
is important to the self. Things and history are bound up together in the chain of meaning that constitutes them. One might say that things remember my past for me, in that the way they appear to me articulates this past. Events are a-historical, and retroactively change the meaning of things for a subject in such a way that memory is not spoken of. Things simply are. Secondly, I maintain the concept of imbeddedness in world – in fact, everything that I have spoken of is always with regard to a particular situation. In moments where the subject abstracts itself from a situation, in moments of reflection, it is not the self that is at issue but the way this self approaches the truth to which it has aligned itself.

So too for the meaning of other people. For Taylor (as well as many other thinkers), ‘the problem of other people,’ or ‘other minds,’ leads him to place the concept of recognition on a pedestal, since the opinions of others factor into the meaning and value of the self. In my reading, only when reflected upon does the self become the type of being to which value can be ascribed, that is, an object. But let us take this seriously: the opinions of others can negatively influence the self when it is reflected upon (objectified). That is, when the self takes on the property of things with value it can be devalued - when objectified via reflective distance. Proper recognition of an individual’s uniqueness, it would then seem, is a good way to prevent this sort of negative evaluation of the self when reflected on. Taylor and other theorists are correct to put an emphasis on recognition as a social lubricant that allows individuals to have a healthy existential relationship with themselves in a social world.
However, proximally and for the most part, individuals are not lost in reflection but are engaged in the world. Other people take on the status of other things, and one’s own self is not a value function, does not carry value, but is the arbiter of value. Thus, the opinions and misrecognition of others do not denigrate the self, as it has no value to that self. Other people can, however, change the social or individual meaning of things in the world, or be carriers of meaning, which then go on to influence the self as its content. This means that other people can direct the activity of the self, where its concerns lie, etc. Other people are objects in the world capable of transvaluation. In this mode of being, the self is like one of many selves walking on a busy street in New York. Others pass without notice, sometimes the activity of another might direct my gaze to whatever they are doing, perhaps I catch a glimpse of someone’s eyes directed behind me and I stop to see what they are looking at. If I bump into someone, he or she may or may not apologize: either way, he or she has left my concern almost as soon as entering.

This example of a busy street can be juxtaposed to the position of a person who directs my activity in a more meaningful way. An individual’s lover may be able to direct activity without causing them to reflect on it; perhaps one is more motivated to come home early from work to be with his or her lover without actually thinking about it. Alternatively, another can influence my own valuation of myself when I reflect on it: I might have a lower opinion of myself after being rejected by a group of friends or an intimate partner. What I mean to do here is note that the theory of recognition assumes a reflective self that holds value for that self. While I do not deny that this is so, I believe that the self is usually lost in its activity and concern,
and that only in a specific and derivative mode of existence (reflection) does the self take up a value to itself as an object and become susceptible to its own transvaluation by other people.

The theory I have given here manages to incorporate history without narrative, it maintains a robust conception of imbeddedness, and provides for the possibility of truth that can motivate meaningful decision. Nevertheless, it is not without its own liabilities and problems. Unlike Taylor’s rather ordinary theory of strong evaluation, truth-events are romantic and rare. Unlike Taylor’s moral self, my theory of the self is not necessarily bound to any moral compass – indeed, it seems likely that most individuals will never experience an event in the way I have described it. While I could manipulate definitions to allow events to be rather commonplace, I do not believe they would retain their vitality. In order to speak of an event, one must be forever locked into its truth: this is both a strength and a weakness of the theory. However, I believe that I can at least cast some of the blame for this problem on something else. This blameworthy ‘something else’ is none other than the whipping horse of modernity. It is ironic that, in a theory that criticizes Charles Taylor as a point of departure for a new conception of the self, I ultimately lament the very condition of which Taylor has been one of the twenty first century’s chief critics. Nevertheless, in my final chapter I turn to that formless multitude of historical development, in particular, the communications revolution, informational media, and the internet.
Chapter 5

Reflections on the Condition(s) of Postmodernity

In this final chapter I’d like to apply the tools I have been developing to some interesting and important developments in the world. With the focus on meaning that I have been working with an analysis of our ‘information society’ begs itself, and I oblige happily because of the exciting (and frightening) new trends that deserve, rather, need to be taken seriously. One of these trends is often called ‘the death of distance,’ and refers to the idea that the geographic space separating places is becoming, or has become, unimportant due to advances in communications, trade, and global governance. An application of the concept of the imbedded self, to my knowledge, has not been made with regard to this particular movement in our globalizing world.

This chapter is more concerned with conscious identity than any other part of the project, but I still wish to focus on the embodied, pre-reflective sense of self that comes with understanding and the meaning of things. However, part of my point in these pages is that a proliferation of identities causes individuals to become more actively conscious of their own identity, so an at least partial shift in focus is warranted, if not demanded, in order to address these concerns. The interface between imbedded self and reflective identity is undergoing a social modification at a very fast pace – the very pace at which the exchange of goods, the communication of ideas, and the withering away of cultural mores is occurring (and this pace may very well still be accelerating).
Part of the reason it is important to study these changes in contemporary society is their own historical, cultural, and sociological import. These imports have been articulated by a number of theorists, most notably Paul Kennedy, Anthony Giddens, and Zygmunt Bauman, to name a few. Another reason it is important, and indeed this is the reason I hope to discuss, is that these developments have the potential to change the basic makeup of the existential self. Where one’s concerns lie, the trends and fashions of identity, cultural constellations of norms: these are all closely related to the movement and pace of society, as well as what we might call existentialism. In the following pages, I map some of these changes, with particular regard to the internet and other related communications devices spawning from the globalization revolution. I conclude with some reflections on how these changes might affect the notion of truth as I defined it in the last chapter.

It is crucial that, when developing a theory of such foundational notions like the self, to apply concepts in alternative vocabularies in order to develop, test, and apply them. Here I pick up much of the sociological tone that has been used to approach the issues I’m discussing, but my focus remains philosophical.

**Globalization and Modernity**

Academic literature abounds with various versions of the claim that we are witnessing a massive departure from ‘pre-modern’ and even modern forms of experience for a new postmodern sensibility, and the nauseating quantitative excess of such claims (to which this chapter contributes) does not diminish their acuity. Today, individuals are able to choose their identities to a large extent – people
‘manage’ their identities by consciously manipulating their lifestyle based on an immense array of options set before them by multiple sources of meaning and value. Today’s (post)modern self is not a passive canvas upon which identity and tradition is imposed – identification is more autonomous in today’s globalized world than any other stage in history. While in the past one’s access to traditions and cultures was limited by his or her physical location, family, ethnicity and profession, today one finds a quantitative explosion of identifications on the market and in one’s everyday life. This creates an increased consciousness of one’s self, which becomes a role, an activity performed knowingly and deliberately.\(^1\) Herbert Gans describes this largely symbolic practice of identity performance as “a voluntary role that people assume alongside other roles,” such as one’s career.\(^2\) Food, dance and language are all elements of identification, each of which is often practiced in contradistinction to traditional or historical activities.

This conscious and deliberate formation of identities creates a qualitatively new function of ‘lifestyle.’ It is difficult, but helpful, to imagine our modern notion of lifestyle as a recent phenomenon, something that has not always been an element of the everyday world. Anthony Giddens defines lifestyle as “a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity.”\(^3\) Lifestyle is conscious, deliberate ego activity - it is adopted instead of ‘handed down:’ identity is intensely mobile and fluid. Oftentimes,

it is intimately tied to consumption: the proliferation of cultural commodities on the market, for example, provides ample material for individuals to synthesize into a unique lifestyle that they craft themselves. But lifestyle is not solely consumptive – it is also performative, through dance or religious ceremonies, for example. This new lifestyle, with an emphasis on ‘style,’ is made possible in an age of globalization, with the communications revolution, the increased reach of the market, and the rapid spread of culture worldwide. Part of this consciousness resulting from the communications revolution creates increased awareness of the creative aspect of the self, and gives individuals the ability to ‘pick and choose’ their identities, oftentimes opposed to their cultural roots.\footnote{Jusdanis, p. 54} Formerly, identity was more prescriptive, and “primary attachment was stipulated by one’s clan, religion, or race.”\footnote{Bell, D. \textit{Ethnicity and Social Change}. \textit{Ethnicity: Theory and Experience}. Ed. by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 153} It was local, imbedded, engaged, and below the level of consciousness: this is becoming less and less true of self and identity.

Thus, globalization creates a rapid and massive change to the notion of self-identity in the late modern world, and it does so in specific ways. First, the end of the Cold War and the correlative ‘end of ideology’ has eliminated the idea of a universal task for the globe (although recent democratization campaigns may threaten this claim). Either way, the rise of industrial nations other than the United States brings multiple perspectives on precisely what modernity should be into the limelight.\footnote{Kennedy, P. \textit{Introduction: Globalization and the Crisis of National Identities}. \textit{Globalization and National Identities: Crisis or Opportunity?} ed. Paul Kennedy and Catherine Danks (New York: Palgrave, 2001) p. 4} This fragments any unidirectional progression for the globe. The ‘dehegemonisation’ of
the West allows multiple nations to contribute not only to an international dialogue, but to cultural dialogues occurring at sub-national levels. The result is a profound pluralism of ideas, movements, and particular identities, with cultural and sub-cultural implications. A flowering of lifestyles occurs as a consequence.

Secondly, and as a result of the previous point, a postmodern sensibility arises and becomes prevalent worldwide. Not necessarily a ‘radical postmodernism,’ this new sensibility critiques the very notion of a stable identity and of linear or teleological progress entirely. This erodes expectations of and between individuals, even those within the same territory, and shatters norms within localities. A veritable profusion and excess of philosophical, political, and moral certainties and uncertainties come about from this new ethic, creating substantial changes in the everyday life of individuals. Instead of being rooted in a personal history, things and identities now tend to anticipate the future, becoming planned and purposeful, creative and artistic, but not historical or traditional. This fact changes the debate that was focused on in the earlier chapters: reflection on the self, in the Tayloresque sense, is often less of an attempt to whittle down to the ‘true me’, and more of a stylistic response to the particular mores, trends, and movements that an individual is surrounded by. Here, interiority is less of a space for evaluation than it is a driving force for self-expression and creation.

Finally, economic globalization changes the very location at which decisions, incidents, and events take place. Instead of being located within specifically defined territories, happenings that affect everyday lives occur outside of and between territorially bounded localities. Transnational corporations can change the grids of

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7 Giddens, p. 75
communication between individuals with or without the consent of those individuals or their governments.\textsuperscript{8} Activities by individuals and corporations alike are no longer constrained by national borders or even physical space. Late capitalism not only distributes capital but makes it essentially fluid and able to operate through and between corporations, greatly enhancing the economic interconnectedness of the world.\textsuperscript{9} Individuals experience these changes primarily through their immediate access to goods from around the world, which carry with them cultural values and encourage pluralism. Blogs in Cuba are a popular method for spreading the word about the conditions there, and the same can be said for China and sub-cultural localities in the United States. These economic, political, cultural, and social spheres of everyday life have become much more autonomous and powerful than they were before; yet, interestingly enough, each seems to assume and remain connected to the others, although through connections that are not always material or accessible to individuals or nation-states.\textsuperscript{10}

\textbf{Homelessness}

Culture, then, flows worldwide; social exchanges occur through transnational institutions and nonmaterial lines of communication, political loyalties transcend state or territorial boundaries, and economic influences occur at supranational levels and are not necessarily physical. These spheres increasingly form their own rules and values, distinct from those of the state, and can communicate and interact with each

\textsuperscript{8} Kennedy, p. 7
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid. p. 8
\textsuperscript{10} Magatti, M. \textit{Globalization as Double Disconnection and Its Consequences}. Eds. P. Kennedy and N. Hai, \textit{Globalization and Identities} (Manchester: Manchester University, 1999) p. 10
other without the state. While this does not necessarily entail a decline in state power, it does create a fragmented social body, and eliminates the idea (or the myth) of a unitary and coherent national culture or nation. And there is a secondary importance of this trend: its ability to produce and reproduce itself, and the state’s relative inability to intervene. By this I mean the cultural and economic movements toward globalization, and the snowball effect of telecommunications technology and transnational commerce.

The exposure of individuals to this overwhelming amount of influence and experience eliminates shared cultural experiences and expectations: there is no longer a common ‘life-world’ through which people of the same nation communicate and relate to each other.\textsuperscript{11} Modern society is differentiated, specialized, and impersonal: there is an increasing divide between public life (bureaucracy, the state, the economy) and the private lives of individuals.\textsuperscript{12} This produces a schism between public and individual meanings of things in the world, and public meaning withers away as individual meaning becomes more robust and determinant. The state and nationalism take on an increasingly insignificant part of people’s lives: pop culture and identity occupies the time of individuals, not the public sphere. Additionally, each of these fields is taking on an increasing complexity that makes re-integration more and more unlikely. Proliferating knowledge, information, communication, and range of choice further bifurcates these realms and fragments the knowledges contained in each. Identities thus become increasingly subjective – not based on material or shared conditions, but on the conditions one chooses to relate to through the market, the

\textsuperscript{12} Kennedy, p. 11
internet, etc. Thus Knowledge itself becomes increasingly subjective, as the positions from which each individual approaches the world become more and more dissimilar. Reality itself, in responding to further shifts and pluralities, is always itself changing, incorporating other lifestyles and adjusting to new conditions created by dialogue between individuals, nations, and organizations. As Kennedy writes, “Thus, along with money, goods, people and information, cultural experiences of all kinds – abstract knowledge, aesthetic preferences in everything from cuisine and music to designer goods and TV soaps, marriage customs, religious beliefs and so on – exhibit a growing capacity to break loose from their original moorings in particular societies.”

This creates what Berger et al. call ‘homelessness’: individuals are always in a state of flux, of migration. Without a territorial or ideological ‘homeland’, individuals lead increasingly nomadic lifestyles. This causes anomie, with fewer connections between individuals and other individuals, or between individuals and the world that they find themselves occupying. With too many ‘life-worlds,’ individuals experience an increasingly disjointed life, which can make many uncomfortable or provoke anxiety. The global media, to a certain extent, performs the task of unifying many of these life-worlds by bringing them into constant juxtaposition with each other. This can be with or without bodily movement by the individual, through either communication or travel and tourism. Political, cultural and social links are created on a global scale in this way, largely through media

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13 Ibid. p. 11
14 Berger, p. 77
15 Kennedy, p. 12
devices, from Fox News to Facebook, from the Colbert Show to chatrooms dedicated to current events.

These trends create a ‘global consciousness’: people increasingly think about the world as ‘one big place’ instead of identifying primarily with their territorial location or local commitments. We are witnessing the emergence of a ‘global society’ where individuals are not only aware of, but are also involved in events occurring on the other side of the globe. Transnational collaboration is a result, with non-governmental organizations facilitating much of the collaboration.\textsuperscript{16} Human rights, women’s rights, worker’s rights, and environmental protection are some of the most common banners under which these efforts operate, although there are certainly many more. One need only recall the WTO strikes in the United States, or Jubilee 2000, to understand the power and the uniting potential of these movements and their disregard for state power.

There are profound implications of these trends for the idea of the self that I have been discussing. One of the most important is the lack of imbeddedness in these online, global, and media-mediated relationships. There is a new form of being-in-the-world which has emerged with the 21\textsuperscript{st} century: one of tele-presence. Gone are the days where an individual was enmeshed in the affairs of their proximate environment. Instead, we are bombarded by images of ‘the globe’ itself, from a war in Iraq to starvation in Africa, from assassinations across the Atlantic to riots in South America. While the media creates connections and outlets to myriad events, places, and movements around the world, the overwhelming nature of the spectacle itself actually serves to isolate the individual who is ‘participating’ in these events (by

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. pp. 13-14
watching them on T.V., or reading about them in the newspaper). And the trend is towards an intensification of these tele-present relationships, as the internet and telecommunications networks become increasingly dense. *Wired Magazine* tells us that

Today’s metaphor is the network – a vast expanse of nodes strung together with dark, gaping holes in between. But as the thread inevitably become more tightly drawn, the mesh will fill out into a fabric, and then – with no voids whatsoever – into an all pervasive presence, both powerful and unremarkable… In the words of Eric Brewer, a specialist on computer security and parallel computing, it will be ‘a giant, largely invisible infrastructure that makes your life better.’

What was earlier referred to as ‘homelessness’, I am now tempted to call ‘worldlessness.’ Indeed, the expansion of the individual’s world has, in many important ways, eliminated the meaning of that world. If world refers to the architectonic totality of meaning for an individual, this set of meanings must be bounded – otherwise, its elements can no longer make reference to each other meaningfully, and the world becomes infinitely inarticulate. In other words, *the world has lost its capacity to form a world*, has eliminated presence in a meaningful way by expanding beyond an understandable size. By creating new interdependencies, weakening dependencies, and disenfranchising older, more rooted orders of representation, belonging, and identity, globalization threatens the very structure of meaning and significance of the self. The world has become too expansive and malleable to hold up anything meaningful to individuals on an everyday level, giving rise to the new postmodern sensibilities that favor fluidity over duration, and stylistic representations as opposed to ‘authentic’, or local identity.

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Part of the reason that world has expanded beyond its capacity to form a meaningful world is the ready access to information that the internet provides. Today the internet provides music, news, communication, social networks, advice, opinion, and anything else one might want. In Jacques-Alain Miller’s short piece, called *Google*, he discusses how online search engines contribute to the immediacy of information:

Google is the spider of the Web. It assures in it a metafunction: that of knowing where knowledge is. God doesn't reply; Google, always, and immediately.\(^{19}\)

There is no question that needs to go unanswered, and no question not worth asking. Not only does the internet create a new structural relationship to knowledge by making it always-already available, it changes the means by which meaning is incorporated into our lives and, ultimately, ourselves. I now turn my attention to precisely this phenomenon.

**Identity, Cybersex, and Postmodernism**

The sheer quantity of the books, essays, and opinions circulating the cultural mass today that make claims regarding the nature of the ‘postmodern self’ and the internet is truly astounding. One of the most common theses is that, in a world where most individuals spend a considerable amount of their time online, identities become mobile, fluid, and take on a character that need not correspond to ‘reality,’ that is, life outside of the internet. New identities are created on the internet: in fact, multiple and conflicting identities can be created on the internet, and ‘users,’ or the original creators of these identities, need not suffer real world consequences for anything that

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these avatars do. The online world encourages people to live out their wildest fantasies by creating online selves that are radically dissimilar to the lives individuals have been living for, well, their whole lives. It’s a brave new world, it seems, with virtual people in it.

One of the leading theorists studying this movement is Sherry Turkle, whose book *Life on the Screen* has set the standard for the study of online identities. Much of her work focuses on MUDs, or Multiple User Domains, which allow users to craft new online personas and explore virtual worlds, alone or with other virtual people. These MUDs have exploded in popularity in the last few years, particularly with online gaming worlds such as World of Warcraft, and social network sites, like Second Life. For many users, their online world is more important, and even prior to, their ‘real’ life offline. This makes sense: while an increasing number of people spend much of their time in front of a computer screen, they are still human beings, still social animals. Even when online, individuals seek to interact with others, express themselves, even engage in sexual relations (cybersex).

Another popular format through which individuals interact online is the IRC, or Internet Relay Chat. These forum like conversations allow users to pick up ‘handles,’ which are essentially screenames, to discuss anything from politics to erotic stories. There are thousands of channels that users can subscribe to, and users are able to pick up multiple handles, each of which can have their own unique persona. One thirty-year-old teacher describes her experience on IRCs:

> It is a complete escape… On IRC, I’m very popular. I have three handles I use a lot… So one [handle] is serious about the war in Yugoslavia, [another] is a bit of a nut about *Melrose*
Clearly, the woman being interviewed not only ascribes a good deal of meaning to her multiple online identities, but also feels that she is able to express a certain part of herself online that she in unable to in real life. The fact that she has multiple online identities, each of which has its own personality, lends credence to the popular metaphor of a fractured and multiplied sense of self, and contributes to an understanding of one’s self as discontinuous and without history.

Online identities allow one to ‘be who they want to be,’ express and explore fantasies of the user, and experiment with alternate identities. One of the most popular ways of exploring the online social world is picking up an avatar, or a handle, with a different biological gender from the one the user has naturally. Thus, a man can pick up an avatar that looks, acts, and speaks just like a woman, and even engage other men in sexual banter, under the auspices of being a woman. In this way, online identities seem to allow the kind of escape from one’s past that Nietzsche had in mind; one’s online avatar or handle need not have lived the life of the user. The user is confronted with an overpowering freedom from itself, and is no longer bound by its past. One of the most popular, and eccentric, forms of this new online freedom comes in the form of cybersex. Users type explicit descriptions of theoretical activity into text boxes, or even purchase actions their online characters can perform in an MUD. A user who has mastered the kind of programming used for these applications can even ‘rape’ another user by seizing control of their character’s actions. Virtual

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21 Ibid. p. 193
intimacy is a big business: the possibility of cybersex brings millions of users to their computer screens, and millions upon millions more come for the possibility of intimacy, with or without the sex. The online environment is ideal for users to portray themselves as more flirtatious, outgoing, promiscuous, or domineering than they fancy their actual selves to be. This and more: the possibility for gender swapping online carries through to cybersex, so that a male, playing a female character, can have cybersex with another male who thinks he is ‘with’ a female.

The possibilities are endless. One user, Garrett, who has engaged in precisely this kind of gender swapping online intimacy, says:

I wanted to know more about women’s experiences, and not just from reading about them… I wanted to see what the difference felt like. I wanted to experiment with the other side… I wanted to be collaborative and helpful, and I thought it would be easier as a female… As a man I was brought up to be territorial and competitive. I wanted to try something new… In some way I really felt that the canonically female way of communicating was more productive…

Garrett felt a newfound freedom to act in a certain way, to explore previously undeveloped elements of his self, online. And his story is not unique: for thousands of people, the chance to gender-swap, or experience intimacy online is the primary point of attraction to online communities, especially for children. Online chat and gossip lends itself much more easily to flirtation for adolescents, since there is less repercussion for saying something awkward or unnaturally forward. One thirteen year old comments on her experience with online romance:

"Usually, the boys are gross. Because you can’t see them, they think they can say whatever they want. But other times, we just talk, or it’s just [virtual] kissing and asking if they can touch your breast or put their tongue in your mouth.

In fact, online experimentation goes farther than gender-swapped cybersex.

One can go about virtual worlds as a rabbit or frog, one can fly, fight, and destroy the

22 Ibid. p. 216
23 Ibid. p. 227
White House. And one should not simply dismiss these activities as mere video games: for many, the online world comprises the majority of their time, and a significant amount of the meaning in their lives. Relationships online can take on a certain seriousness that translates into actual, physical intimacy or commitment, and it is not uncommon for close friends to have met online. One need only recall the suicide of thirteen-year-old Megan Meier, whose friend’s mother invented a fake online identity, named Josh Evans, to woo Megan over the course of several months. One day, Josh’s opinion of Megan took a sudden turn for the worst, having apparently decided that he hated Megan and that the world would be a better place without her. Having stumbled upon this news via a message from Josh, Megan hung herself in her closet while her parents were downstairs, all because of an individual who Megan had never met, and who did not actually exist.24

And just two weeks ago, eight teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17 were arrested and later charged with battery and kidnapping for detaining and beating a classmate after luring her over to one of their houses.25 The attack lasted a total of thirty minutes, and left 16-year-old Victoria Lindsay, who was a cheerleader, with a concussion and two black eyes, among other injuries (she still cannot hear out of her left ear). And yet, it gets worse: the attackers videotaped the entire affair and put it on Youtube.com, a popular website for sharing videos online. After being put in their cells, the assailants joked about being unable to make cheerleading practice that day, and “seemed to have absolutely no remorse at all,” according to the sheriff, Grady

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If ever there was an example of a profound lack, or in this case, misunderstanding, of consequences from online activity, this is it. And the motivation for these attacks, online fame, shows just how important this online activity can be.

The Hype about Hyperlinks

Megan and Victoria’s cases are particularly stern: the point, rather, is the various fantasies, curiosities, and parallel selves that can be explored, experienced, and developed online without regard for repercussion. Things in these online worlds have meaning, are ascribed value, and can contribute to the constitution of self just as things in the non-virtual world do. An interesting phenomenon, which exists as a symptom of this sort of spontaneous freedom, is the tendency for users to occupy themselves, almost fanatically, with the task of guessing the ‘true’ identity of other users in their virtual world. Sherry Turkle admits that, in her experimentation with MUDs, she often found that she oriented herself most often by checking to see what the gender of other players was. But since these stated online genders do not necessarily correspond to the user’s gender, a certain amount of guessing, prodding, and investigating goes on. In fact, a sort of science has developed spontaneously for determining a user’s true identity.

Pavel Curtis, the founder of a popular MUD called LambdaMOO, observes that when an avatar has a username such as “FabulousHotBabe,” the user is most likely to actually be a male. Another MUD user claims, “if a female-presenting

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27 Turkle, p. 211
character’s description of her beauty goes on for more than two paragraphs, ‘she’ is sure to be an ugly woman.”\textsuperscript{28} Or perhaps not a woman at all. Avatars can also elect to skip the choice of gender, and take on a neuter gender. Ironically, this only piques the interests of other users to determine the player’s biological gender, as one user points out:

I also think the neuter characters are good. When I play one, I realize how hard it is not to be either a man or a woman. I always find myself trying to be one or the other even when I’m trying to be neither. And all the time I’m talking to a neuter character… I’m thinking, “so who’s behind it?”\textsuperscript{29}

Virtual cross dressing thus turns out to be incredibly complicated, not only because the user must adjust to online social expectations for the behavior of their character, but also because, psychologically speaking, the transition can be hairy, especially when online relationships become involved. One trend is for men to play as women online in order to engage in virtual sex with other women. Referred to as ‘fake-lesbian syndrome,’ this trend exemplifies not only the tendency and motivations for individuals to explore alternate identities online, but also the psychological complexities and significance of these activities.

All of these examples point to the power of online identities to open up a realm of freedom that seems, at times, dizzying. But this dizziness is always felt with reference to a user’s real identity: one never actually loses themselves in cyberspace, but always feels tethered to their real self. One user describes this feeling:

…I feel very different online. I am a lot more outgoing, less inhibited. I would say I feel more like myself. But that’s a contradiction. I feel more like who I wish I was. I’m just hoping that face-to-face I can find a way to spend more time being the online me.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. p. 211
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. p. 212
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid. p. 179
It becomes increasingly clear that these online identities are always existing with reference to the user’s real identity: online identities are usually a fantasy being acted out, but the fantasy belongs to someone else, namely, myself. It seems that this online identity swapping is possible only to the extent that one is able to detach themselves from their real selves, and really allow themselves to be thrown into the online world.

There are two reasons why online identities are not able to provide the rich meaning of embodiment meaning that would allow users to ‘really experience’ the gender swapping, multiple identities, or fantasy lands they crave. The first is that many social norms from the ‘real’ world are transplanted into the virtual world. While it seems like people would be inclined to explore marginalized or exotic identities online, the truth is that people usually rely on preexisting stereotypes from the non-virtual world when constructing new and multiple online identities. Online conversations are constantly probed for indications of status, and assumptions regarding gender, race, and class migrate onto the internet just as easily as they pass through various forms of media in the non-virtual world. Internet personas thus “exist as artifacts of the being who types them in; therefore, they cannot have equality since the typing being can easily continue without these ‘selves.’”

Thus, online identities seem to be a derivative form of the more primordial self that types them into existence. The fantasies being lived out on the web are just that: fantasies being lived out, not parallel selves exploring alternative universes. In the end, the user is still sitting at the computer, typing realities into existence. My

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32 Ibid. p. 268
point here is not a technological one – indeed, this year, a new kind of neuro-headset that reads the activities of brain neurons and controls online activities will be made available by the U.S./Australian firm Emotiv.\textsuperscript{33} The headset, with sprawling sensors around the head, looks like something out of a science fiction movie, but will cost less than $300 dollars and enable users to control movement and action by simply thinking of the action. It also reads emotions, and communicates these to other users through body language and text. But again, my point is not a technological one: even as the interface connecting users to their online environments become increasingly subtle, there is still a user who is using hardware to enact actions elsewhere, in a non-territorial location online. The online experience is discontinuous and shallow, and this is not a symptom of a technological lag in hardware interfaces.\textsuperscript{34} Only chosen information is communicated, instead of an entire visual field, along with other sense fields. And the user’s fantasies will always fill in the gaps between reality and the virtual, lending legitimacy, but not reality, to the experience. Being online is always a task, one that uses cultural skills to read, interpret, and reply – the experience is never immediate or immersive, but conscious and premeditated. Most importantly, online identities are elements of another identity: they are sub-identities, not nearly as rich or rooted as the user’s primary self.

The derivative nature of online identities becomes clear once the hype over hyperlinks has dissipated. In reality, the majority of online identities are relatively solid, static, and representative of the user. The flipside of the postmodern argument

for the internet as the playground for the unbounded is that this playground acts as a virtual panopticon where everyone is constantly under the threat of undetected surveillance and judgment (recall Megan Meier’s suicide). The effect of this surveillance is, in part, the extension of social norms to the internet, as well as a correspondence between online and real life personas. By far, the most popular form of online identity is that of a homepage: these pages include pertinent details about the individual, pictures, interests, and even a list of friends. These types of homepages, on websites like The Facebook and Myspace, form a solid test case for durable statements of identity that are stable and replicable. These homepages are almost always situated within an online social context, formed by online friends and the social expectations generated or passed onto the online world. Even when online, the individual is still itself, in many important ways.

However, as with this entire project, my focus is not on this scale that locates a point between the two poles of unity and multiplicity. Much of the study of this new wave of online activity falls prey to this same binary that theorists of self have made so popular. Instead, I will approach the internet with the same concerns I have approached the self with: the concepts of imbeddedness and being-in-the-world, and the idea of a truth-event. This is an interesting way to apply the observations made in the body of this work, particularly given the popularity and peculiarity of online activity. The fact that we use only one sense, vision, to access the online world begs a number of questions about the nature of online worlds, and the potential it has to change not only the meaning and activity of the social world, but the structures by which individuals come to create meaning for themselves.

This latter point brings up a previously mentioned problem: users cannot actually, and honestly, detach themselves from their non-virtual personas. Instead, their physical, mental, and emotional self always acts as the point of access to their online selves, and thus, is always ‘there’ in a very real and important way. This difference between real and virtual, Turkle claims, is on the verge of collapse:

As the boundaries erode between real and virtual, the animate and inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self, the question becomes: Are we living life on the screen or in the screen?”

But I argue that Turkle goes too far in equating the reality of these two realities, virtual and non-virtual, to the user. I cannot disagree with the fact that, for many, online personas constitute the vast majority of their social interaction, friend base, and meaning in their lives. While one’s non-virtual self may be a physicist with few friends and a nice computer, their online self is much richer in a quantitative sense, as it includes more points of access to information, people, and relationships. But there is something missing in the movement from the former to the latter. And this constitutes the second reason why online identities are, for the most part, postmodern hype.

Dualism.com

This element missing from the online experience of self is precisely that sense of being-in that I elaborated upon, in contrast to Charles Taylor, with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Being-in-the-world, that quality of being embodied in one’s particular environment, is absent when online. Indeed, when we go into cyberspace, it is our mind, not our body, that does so. This fact provides an interesting point of

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36 Turkle, p. 39
exploration for the kind of differences we are looking for, namely, those that
distinguish that quality of being-there and being-one’s-self from the sort of reflective,
internal sense of self proposed by Taylor, and traced to Descartes. For Descartes,
since all experience is mediated by our senses before being ‘experienced,’ online
experience would be just as real as non-virtual experience: both are mediated by some
sort of hardware (read: sensory apparatus) and eventually interpreted as experience by
the mind. The only thing we have direct access to is our thoughts, so the differences
between throwing a baseball and using a joystick to throw a baseball would not be as
great as they may seem.

In contrast to this chain of thought, the model I am working with introduces
this funny notion of presence: that feeling that something is there, with me, here, and
my understanding of this fact is pre-reflective, immediate, and difficult to describe. I
used the word understanding to characterize a certain familiarity with the world one
finds oneself in (and has been living in…), a certain skillful coping with things-in-the-world that is, to a certain extent, innate and pre-reflective. One might claim that
this skillful coping with is missing from, say, a racing videogame, whereas it is very
much present in actual driving. Sure, this sort of understanding might develop as one
improves with regard to the game, and even a certain skill may accrue. But it lacks
that element of corporeality that comes with driving an actual car – there are no
consequences in the video game for crashing, for example. It is easy to say how this
sense of presence is missing from internet and computer activity. What is much more
difficult, and ultimately much more important, is to discover just how important this
presence really is for experience, especially experience of the self.
The fact mentioned earlier that only chosen information is articulated online extends not only to intellectual or linguistic information, but also to spatial, tactile, and corporeal information. Real presence presents a ‘bottomless pit’ of information: one could continue learning, interpreting, and reading forever, as the information contained within presence can be ever further articulated. Information and identities broached online are less abundantly expressed – they are underarticulated, they lack the necessary properties to be a thing of the type they refer to. One might think of a two-dimensional prop of a building, or a picture of the Grand Canyon: each contains many elements of the thing that it represents or embodies, but neither contains the suppleness, depth, or repleteness of that which it caricatures. Also important is the fact that neither of these things draws meaning from its environment. The Grand Canyon takes on and expresses meaning through the desert of which it is a part. A building, subtracted from its snowy forest landscape, expresses much less information than one bunkered in amongst trees and woodland fauna. There is something missing, but that which is missing is not limited to the characteristics of the thing itself – sometimes, what is missing is precisely the environment in which the thing resides.

The same can be said for the relationship of the thing to the subject who wishes to access it. Via the internet, or any other telecommunications device, the distance between the subject and the thing vanishes. This distance is an important element in the constitution of the meaning of the thing for the subject – the simple reading is that that which is closer to me, I know more intimately, and that which is farther is a more abstract object of knowledge. While globalization, and especially
the internet, may have killed distance, they have certainly not made everything near. 

*Nearness is not the same as a lack of distance.* Instead, with the internet, everything is equally far or near, neither far nor near. The things of knowledge are all “lumped together into uniform distanceless,” as Heidegger says.\(^{37}\) Nearness is not something we can approach directly, by watching video clips of something online or chatting with someone on the phone. We reach what is near by attending to it in its nearness. Someone whose distance from me is tragically far can be intimately near to me; someone who is sitting next to me can be as far as any other stranger on the train. Just as Bergson expressed time’s subjectivity so eloquently, we can begin to articulate the subjectivity of space and the internet’s effect on it.

Online relationships are a fitting example of how, when only the mind goes online to meet other minds, nearness, emotion, and information goes missing. Peter, a twenty-eight year old lecturer in Comparative Literature, thought he was in love with a woman hundreds of miles away named Beatrice. The two had been making virtual love for quite some time when he decided to fly to Oregon to meet her. Upon meeting her face-to-face, Peter was crushed: “[Online], I saw in her what I wanted to see. Real life gave me too much information.”\(^{38}\) The internet, in this case, did not create a sort of nearness that conveyed information, but merely eliminated the distance that prevented communication. It is easy to see how actual presence conveys information that is qualitatively denser and more meaningful than, for example, waiting one’s turn to speak into a text box. The information available online is information for the mind – the body is missing in the equation, it is not present. But

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\(^{38}\) Turkle, p. 207
the lack of presence, and information that appeals to and is conveyed by presence, does not necessarily mean there is a lack of information of other kinds.

In fact, the wealth of information available on the web is overpowering. If there is a lack of sensual, bodily, or tactile information online, there is an abundance of intellectual, linguistic, and visual information. This is why ‘surfing the web’ is actually an activity that can take up large amounts of time. Researchers attribute the drop in driver’s licenses obtained by sixteen year olds partly to the popularity of staying indoors and going online.\footnote{Mary M. Chapman and Micheline Maynard, "To Some Relief, Fewer Youths Jump Behind the Wheel at 16," \textit{New York Times}, 2/25/2007 2007. p. A1} RSS feeds, which are online pages that amalgamate updates and headlines from multiple websites of the user’s choosing, integrate information and sources of information so that users need not even navigate away from their homepage to catch up on news. And of course, Google puts all of that information at the fingertips of users all over the world, creating a virtual library updated every minute, with immediately accessible texts, videos, songs, pictures, and documents. On one hand, we can accurately describe the telecommunications age as lacking in information; on the other, we can say that it most certainly gives us too much.

\textbf{Speeding on the Information Superhighway}

During hunter-gatherer societies, there was no such thing as too much information. Hunters had enough information to live a full life, but there was never any such thing as an excess of information; it never accumulated. Nor did hunter-
gatherers ever lose track of the source of their information. The calories that came from sugars and fat were rare, and the desire for these goods was tremendous. When technological innovation made these sugars and fats more readily available, primitive peoples retained their immense desires for these calories, but lost the circumstances that tempered their access to them. This dual phenomenon of abundance and desire led to over-saturation: easy access to fats and sugars made possible a gluttony that is still a problem. There is an evolutionary basis for the consumption of goods beyond the point at which their returns begin to diminish: obesity in the age of agriculture is a prime example of this trait. So too with information – over-saturation is an item of serious concern.

Several studies indicate that being online does not contribute to happiness or energy, but rather leaves users surly and depressed. Despite this fact, the individual’s craving for information remains, even though it is readily available, no longer sparse, and not satisfying or pleasing. Its former scarcity gave information an illuminating and entertaining quality, and while our curiosity and hunger for this information remains, the competence, skill, and attentiveness needed to retrieve it has vanished as information’s abundance becomes more and more overwhelming. This is not an entirely new phenomenon; one need only recall the ‘reading madness’ that swept Europe after the wave of literacy during the eighteenth century. The difference is that today we are totally oversaturated with the stuff. And unlike the various fats and sugars that were so precious to primitive man, all of our saturation is of the same

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40 Borgmann, "Information, Nearness, and Farness," p. 96
41 Ibid. p. 103
type – the banal distanceless that characterizes online information reduces and levels it down to a one-dimensional exercise in monotony. I want to further characterize the nature of information today, specifically the information accessed through modern telecommunications devices.

Today, information obtrudes itself into our everyday lives in the forms of headlines, blogs, advertisements, and opinion. And it does so with terrific speed: with its ability to make available, and thus to dignify, any perspective on any issue, the internet contributes to an already bustling marketplace of ideas. These myriad ideas are never encouraged to enter into dialogue with each other, and communities and sub-communities form without taking sufficient account of anything else. The individual, able to float freely from community to community, becomes the place of dialogue for all of these opinions, the only point of convergence. Unable and unwilling to subscribe wholly to any of them, the individual is thrust into a consideration of all of them. The ability to surf the net, which is nothing other than a monorail tour of public opinion today, creates a sort of paralysis characterized not by immobilization, but by incapacity and debilitation. Increasingly dependent on headlines, blogs, and ‘news analysis’, most people become unable to sort through issues themselves, not only because the media stream of consciousness is enfeebling, but also because the totality of information is simply too immense to take account of in a responsible and thoughtful way.

And so public opinion, which is the totality of these squabbling voices, comes to dominate not only the public sphere, but the contents of one’s mind. This term, public opinion, is of utmost importance, and has a history of similar implication.
Jurgen Habermas locates the emergence of the public sphere in the eighteenth century, with the increased popularity of coffeehouses and independent sources of information that were not explicitly tied to the brokers of power at the time.\textsuperscript{43} The Enlightenment spirit regarded the public sphere as a rational and democratic place to discuss the movement of society, being protected from partisan politics and ideal for disinterested reflection.\textsuperscript{44} Such a space for public opinion and discussion, rightly or not, became the hallmark of freedom and democracy, such that Edmund Burke was led to remark that “in a free country, every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters.”\textsuperscript{45} The extent to which a man like Burke was able to make claims like these with equal amounts of seriousness and contempt speaks directly to the double-edged nature of the public sphere.

The public itself, formerly white landowners, was gradually expanded over the course of the next century by the growth and democratization of the press.\textsuperscript{46} Democratization here means an expansion of reach, but also a loss in general coherency, which was a luxury afforded by the former social exclusiveness and high levels of education contained therein. This movement, still developing today, coincided with the dignifying universalization of political participation that simultaneously brought myriad private disputes into the public sphere, and “the reign of the many and the mediocre.”\textsuperscript{47} This movement of freedom in the nineteenth century, one whose influence still reverberates in the American consciousness, is the

\textsuperscript{43} Jurgen Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society} (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). p. 130
\textsuperscript{44} Drefyus, \textit{On the Internet}. p. 75
\textsuperscript{45} Quoted in Habermas, \textit{The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society}. p. 94
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. p. 131-132
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid. p. 133
origin of the press which Kierkegaard identified as the primary leveling agent of the present age. And today’s internet generation is the codification, consolidation, and extension of this same movement, which reproduces itself insofar as it is self-justifying and the very means by which information is exchanged everyday (indeed, every second of every day).

The individual, then, being mobile and curious, has the same of point of access to all of this information, and all of this information becomes basically the same, ‘lumped into one distanceless sum’ – the meaning derived from its presence, nearness, and imbedded significance is lost in its tele-transmission. In fact, it might be correct to call it nothing but information: the passion of attachment and embodied meaning withers in proportion to the quantitative increase in the amount of information available. This is what Kierkegaard had in mind when he coined the term ‘leveling’ to describe the lack of differentiation in the information presented to the public by the press. Nothing matters in that everything is equal, in that all of this information has the same (rather indifferent) pull on the individual consuming it. For Kierkegaard, banal conversation, or talkativeness, is the logical conclusion of such an abundance of meaningless information. 48 Bereft of a spirited engagement with the world, social groups are reduced to the trite chitchat that was once the pleasure of only the petit bourgeoisie. This talkativeness, portrayed so well by Dostoevsky in his novels and decried so well in his existentialism, becomes the medium through which merely cultural affairs multiply and take on their empty significance. The latest cultural episode, such as a play or perhaps some sort of scandal, occupies the minds

of the now-numb masses until some other news worthy incident takes its place.

Today we might refer to this talkativeness as water cooler chat, or simply as gossip.

But with a less cynical attitude, it is called culture, or simply what’s going on.

More so today than any other time, we have a profound excess of desituated information: knowledge with a view from nowhere, ‘objective’ news analysis shows, faceless blogs, public opinion. Accessing this information from a computer or television, the viewer is wholly disembedded from the context of the news, as well as their own particular environment. And this desituated information, delivered and accessed in desituated mediums, creates a desituated public. The individual’s subjectivity and agency dissipates as banal distanceless and homogenous information pervades the content of the self. Individuals become unmoored from their place, their environment, causing their concreteness to crack and their foundations to falter. The ‘mobile, fluid, multiple’ self of postmodernity is indeed radically free in its movement, but it is also radically anonymous and without depth – it loses in intensity what it gains in extensity. Always able to find a new perspective and unable to come to a conclusion, the age of the internet is replete with critical deliberation, education, and democratic discussion. It is completely without action. Action occurs with a keyboard: petitions are signed online by millions of indifferent citizens; web groups engage in activism without activity; support is pledged with the click of a button, for hundreds of causes, each hundreds of miles away. The internet is the ideal breeding ground (because it does not exist anywhere) for an age in which context, location, place, and situation evaporate, and along with them, meaning, embodiment, and truth.

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49 Drefyus, *On the Internet*. p. 76
Truth

If the reader has followed the logic that I am trying to express, my thoughts on the condition of truth in this online world should make itself clear. If truth always follows from an event that is imbedded in a situation, then desituated information is at odds with truth. If truth always breaks with encyclopedic knowledge, and a superabundance of knowledge destroys the boundaries and background that makes information meaningful, then the global media is averse to truth. If truth is characterized by a passionate and faithful attachment to a meaningful event in one’s life, then an age in which consequence is antiquated, proximity is outmoded, and passion is passé is opposed to truth.

I do not want to say that truth is impossible, or truth is dead – rather, I think it has become much more difficult to create the kind of passion and intimate proximity that characterizes truth the way I have described it. Today, the meaning of things is more subjective than ever before, but this does not mean that individuals are ‘closer’ or more attached to their world at all. Nor does it mean that the meaning of things and one’s world is ‘created’ by them. What it really means is that people get to choose the source of their information, not its content, context, or contribution to their lives. And when the sources of information begin to pile up such that this information can begin to accumulate, we have a serious problem on our hands: figuring out a way to prioritize this information so that, from the piles of knowledge that have amassed in our collective inbox, we can dutifully submit ourselves to truth.

But so much focus on the world! We must go back to the self! With the odds stacked up against the self, is there any chance for truth? Or is it that it is easier to
point out reasons why, structurally speaking, it isn’t really anyone’s fault that we seem to be fresh out the stuff?

The problem, then, is not only the frail and overwhelming information the individual has, but also his or her willingness to go further, to seek something more meaningful. The problem is a feedback loop of unenthused irresponsibility. Is this not the postmodern dilemma, the problem that even Taylor sets out to solve? Hannah Palin, the daughter of the woman who suffered an aneurysm in the introduction, offered these reflections in her account:

You know, you spend most of your life developing a persona that makes you feel all warm and fuzzy. The right clothes, attitude, outlook. And while it can be comfortable and secure, it can also become a prison... In those months, I became acutely aware of what was real, important. My mother’s illness was one of those moments when time stops, when normal disappears, when you marvel that everyone else in the world can still laugh and go to the movies and complain about the weather... [Those moments have] clarity and meaning in the midst of all of [life’s] horror and pain. But then those moments pass, and you’re consumed by the trivia of daily life again.  

The event has a profound ability to shake the foundations of the prison of daily life. Ironically, it’s the most comfortable prison that one could ask for. After all, even Hannah knows how easy it is to return to ‘life as normal’, although her mother remained faithful to her new self. We cannot put all the blame on the conditions of postmodernity – the postmodern self it also responsible for, and able to fix, the problem. If given the opportunity, would the average individual choose to become subject to an event, to take up a meaning that will be burdensome, demand sacrifice, and could alter life, along with all that as he or she knows, forever? Would you?

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50 Hannah Palin, "The Day My Mother's Head Exploded"
Conclusion

From Self to World… and Back Again

In the foregoing pages I have offered an interpretation of the self that departs radically from what has become a stagnant debate in many philosophical circles. Many of the ideas I have turned to in order to express these ideas are well known, but there is a lack of a substantive debate that connects the two schools of thought that I have sought to put in dialogue with each other here. The tradition represented by Taylor is, in many ways, at odds with the one represented by Nietzsche and Heidegger, and this division persists as ‘continental’ philosophy and ‘analytic’ philosophy continue to isolate themselves from a meaningful conversation. Indeed, it is an important task for philosophers today to find ways to create this conversation, as there is a large potential for useful and important concepts to be drawn out from this exchange.

The interface between a reflective, inward self and its imbedded mode is a nodal point for this lasting divide. One tradition prefers to work with theories of an evaluative self, and while granting the legitimacy of its alternative mode, it often fails to incorporate that mode in a meaningful way into its thought. The same goes for the tradition that focuses on the mode of self that is engaged in its world: it is agreed that the reflective self is a legitimate and useful philosophical concept, but it is often discussed in a superficial manner. Taking each tradition seriously and finding a way to combine the advantages of each is a difficult process that requires an immense amount of restraint and cautious thought. However, the findings that can come from
such work are robust, as the problem of the self is a foundational moment in any philosophy.

It would be arrogant and dishonest of me to claim that I have solved this problem, but I do believe I have made some progress, and part of this progress is indicated by the fact that I have addressed concerns similar to Taylor’s with an entirely new vocabulary, including Nietzsche, the thinker who, for many critiques, represents a serious problem for Taylor. By pointing out that both descriptions of the self are legitimate for different reasons, I can treat each mode in its proper respect. On one hand, the self is an evaluator that can consciously turn to its past in order to inform decisions and activity through the intimate processes of reflection and introspection. On the other hand, this same self can become lost in its world in a way that is not characterized by reflection, but by understanding and a more immediate and immersive experience. By giving the latter mode of the self its content through the meaning of things, which carry with them a history of that self, I have begun to articulate a grammar with which we can make distinctions between what is meaningful to each mode of the self, how it approaches itself, and how to characterize the way that self moves in its world. By rejecting that model which treats the self as a unifying space for ‘multiple and conflicting selves,’ I have sutured a gap that often prevents meaningful progress or conversation.

New ways of approaching old questions begin to emerge when we take these two modes seriously. Take, for example, the situation described in the introduction of this work, Mrs. Palin’s aneurysm. We could say that her aneurysm constitutes an event for her, one that reworks the meaning of things in her world. Whereas sex
might have meant ‘frivolous and base,’ before, it now appears as something worth trying. But, as her language clearly demonstrates, this is not a new meaning that she came to consciously: rather, she’s “just more open to that kind of things now.”

However, when she reflects on her experience, she provides a very well thought out and existential reason for her new way of life, her new self so to speak. And indeed, this self is a new self, given the radical change in the meaning of things in her world, and the way her self is constituted by these meanings. We can see how there is only one self to speak of here, but that self has different modes and moods that partially determine the way that it expresses itself. I think this is a helpful way to express the self, and one that can be of serious use in other fields and philosophical questions.

For one, the politics of recognition faces questions about the nature of the self that is deserving of recognition. While I claim that, proximally and for the most part, the self is not an object with the mode of being to which value can be ascribed, I do admit that it can be offended and devalued in that mode by which the self evaluates itself. If this is so, then it could also be possible that interactions with others, or a particular environment, can affect an individual in such a way that they become reflective, thus exposing themselves to misrecognition and devaluation. This would then be a situation that makes somebody self-conscious, and would be a situation to be avoided. This is what Frantz Fanon described in his book, *Black Skin White Masks*, through his experience walking the streets of France and feeling rejected, stereotyped, and ostracized.¹ Not only does this give us a clue as to how feelings of misrecognition come about, it also provides a way of thinking about how a positive and healthy sense of self can be maintained before recognition takes place, by

¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1982).
creating a positive world, in the pre-reflective sense: creating conditions in which one is not likely to become self conscious in an unhealthy way. This could guide an intersubjective ethics that takes the idea of the imbedded self seriously, while preserving the theoretically legitimate concept of recognition.

This line of thought can be pursued further: recognition is reminiscent of dignity, one of those concepts that were so important to Descartes, the outcome of a respect for each individual’s capacity to reason. An important question arises: can we distill and ethics of recognition and dignity if take seriously the critique of Descartes given here? Can we still derive concepts like human dignity rights with this new existential grammar? How might these ideas change conceptions of common concepts such as universal human rights, or the universality of the democratic decision making process? The concept of truth proposed, which is certainly not worked out here, could be further articulated by specifying the situation in which ethical decisions regarding other persons might be made, and why universal definitions of what constitutes a rights violation might be suspect.

I also believe that general distinction between two modes of the self lends itself to other disciplines, such as political science and game theory. For example, the collective action problem no longer seems like a problem once the possibility of imbedded decision-making is taken seriously. Thinkers like John Roemer have postulated the possibility of “collective rationality” in order to explain away the problems that accrue when one attempts to account for non-rational decisions made by actors in games where a good can only be acquired by making significant
A game theoretic analysis of the collective action problem that maintains a rational actor model yields a contradiction that can only be solved with vague ideas such as ideology and social exclusion, and even these do not provide satisfying answers. I imagine that robust findings would result from a theoretical use of the imbedded perspective, as this would provide a solid and rigorous explanation for why social actors do not always make perfectly rational, reflective decisions. Recourse need not be made to either ideology or ‘collective rationality:’ instead, decision-making can be explained with reference to situated meanings that may not be easily formalized in a game theoretic format. Revolution, it seems, might be one situation where situated understanding becomes an important element of a player’s move.

Finally, after serious examination, I am left with a question: how does this notion of truth, articulated best by Alain Badiou, relate to Heidegger’s notion of death? Both constitute a sort of limit (in the mathematical sense) that, once reached, produces an effect so profound it is difficult to put into words. And for both, this effect relates the meaning of things in the world, directs the activity of individuals, and uniquely belongs to that individual. In the end, the theory of the self I have elaborated either situates the self as a determined element in the equation world + history = self, or places the onus of self-creation squarely on its own shoulders. The difference between these two readings is not one that is up to the reader’s interpretation, or the author’s intent: the power of an individual is entirely up to them, and whether they choose to be a variable or a constant.

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All in all, much work has been done articulating how the world shapes the self – one could claim that the idea has dominated the discipline of social theory for years now. It is time, then, for a return to the self, to go back to the self, in order to derive concepts that put more pressure on individuals to make decisions for themselves.

This is why the relatively under-developed notion of truth (as I have described it) is both exciting and a philosophical idea in need of serious work: the further articulation of truth includes concepts such as responsibility, fidelity, and resoluteness. These concepts are all critically necessary in an age characterized by a profound lack of consequences and a severe subjectivism. This thin little possibility of truth – all that is left after a thorough reworking of the concept in accord with even radical readings of postmodernity – is the powerful seed of a radical new direction for existentialism and social theory today. If the focus in the recent past has been on the world’s effect on the self, then we must return to Marx’s dictum and investigate how that self might in turn change its world. If a lever and a place to stand are all that is needed to move the globe, truth at least provides sturdy ground to dig our feet into.
Bibliography


———. *Purity of Heart is to Will one Thing*. Trans. by Douglas V. Steere. New York: Harper, 1948


