

Selfing: A Bio-, Socio- Process In Humanistic Perspective

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WHEN I VOLUNTEERED this topic in 1988, my intention was to pick up some old threads (Tapp 1963), review a somewhat scanty subsequent literature, and make some suggestions for humanists in the contemporary context. To my pleasant surprise, the literature is less than scanty, especially on the social science side. Various forms of structuralism and neo-Marxism continue to divert academic humanists from questions of 'the self,' but this may simply reflect an absorbing insularity in such quarters. One of the most exciting, and intellectually necessary, developments is a crossdisciplinary crosscultural interest (Marsella and others 1985).

There is no longer any reason for jokes about psychology being 'without any psyche' or the parallel canards that have been directed at sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. My guess is that a partial explanation lies in the (unpredicted) success of older religious ideologies within developed societies (and particularly the U.S.). Academics, after all, only live in

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partial vacuums and must come to terms, if only among their students, with those various survivals that modernism and science were predicted to diminish. Once we begin to delineate (and in many circles welcome) a variety of 'postmodernisms,' our surprise becomes subverted. Many in our culture who are only 'premodern' can now be baptized as 'postmodern-without-knowing-it.' Beliefs are again in fashion, and who is to say that one irrationality is any worse than another!

Many critics of ideological humanism (I use this term to describe the kind of subcommunity served by NACH, to distinguish it from 'academic humanists' and to blur our own internal distinctions between 'secular' and 'religious' humanists) view us as naively assuming science would automatically turn all in its orbit into humanists. I think that this charge would (and should) be dispelled by any historical review of our multiform attempts to institutionalize and propagandize ideological humanism, and by our concern, even predating John Dewey, to reshape the necessary educational institutions to facilitate the spread of this ideology.

What I intend in this paper (which more and more becomes a prolegomena or even an outline) is to point to new knowledge about the self (more formally, I would prefer the more Deweyan 'selfing'), locate some of the new conditioning currents that we need to integrate, and then suggest some elements relevant to our specific ideological humanist tradition.

Some Buddhist Analogues

For initial clarification, I would turn your attention to ancient India. One of the key elements of Buddhism, perhaps from the time of Gautama himself, was the doctrine of anatta. This in turn was a denial of an emerging doctrine of atman. The historical record does not let us reconstruct other antecedents with any confidence. If the key term here refers to some kind of 'self' which was being affirmed by the articulate Indian theologians, then the Buddhist heresy was clearly a denial that such a self existed. Or, more precisely, that it had any 'lasting' existence. A typical exchange occurs in the *Milindapanha* (Questions of King Milinda) where Gautama points to the king's chariot wheel and successively asks the king if the rim, spokes, hub, etc. constitute the 'wheel?' In each case, the king says No, leading to the conclusion that there really is no 'thing' that can properly be called a wheel. A wheel is a composite, made up of some set of smaller indivisibles.

Early Buddhist psychologies listed more than a hundred such indivisibles (dhammas in Pali). These are only crudely comparable to the Greek

atoma since they are themselves subject to change and since many of them are, by Western criteria, non-material (eg. taste, sight, pride, courage). The history of India-based psychologies, particularly those rooted in Buddhist cosmology, reminds us that some of the dualisms that have plagued Western thought are not inevitable stages in human conceptualization. Thus the Buddhist 'person' is a shifting 'congeries' of lesser component parts (to use a favorite noun of the nineteenth-century translators). The Buddhist 'denial' of self therefore comes at the end of a long road. Along the way, many necessary concessions are made to popular usages. In the final analysis, however, wisdom and practice dissolve the glued-together structures of any self

The more mainstream Indian philosophical reflection, against which Buddhism was rebelling, can be found in an emerging Upanishadic tradition. The true self can be viewed as 'not this, not this.' The really real self transcends all these negations as a transcendent that is identical to the ultimate stuff of reality (atman equals Brahman, in the Vedantic formulation). We might term this the 'universal personal' in the sense that it loses all characteristics of any particular person. Paradoxes like this abound in India's speculations. They correlate perfectly with the withdrawal from experience of particulars that is characteristic of Indian spiritual practice. ('Withdraw the senses from their objects,' as the Yogasutras mandate the practice).

The Buddhist rebellion that we have been setting against these mainstream notions was nevertheless conditioned by them. No enduring self remained at the end of the spiritual journey, but the road there was strikingly the same. The attempts within later Mahayana Buddhist philosophies to qualify this world-renunciation by forms of instant enlightenment and praxes for laymen rather than just monastics simply underscore the all-too-Indian nature of the original Buddhisms.

Western Reflections on the Self

The Universal personal. Classical Greek speculation proceeded in similar fashion to divert attention to a transcendental realm where true fulfillment could be found. Plato placed his Forms outside of time and space, even if they could be found in more shadowy casts within the empirical world. But the tradition built upon his conviction that in some mystical fashion denizens of these lower realms could see and participate in the virtues of that upper world. The Western ascetic tradition, building on this, sought the non-worldly counterpart of the Forms in a changeless soul which could intercourse with the transcending. This soul or self provides an instance of what we could call the 'universal personal' in that it is taken to

be the core of the individual while at the same time it is stripped of any of the idiosyncrasies that make for individuality. That is, it is seen as 'reason in me' rather than *my* reason.'

The Enlightenment Wellspring

By the eighteenth century, this reflection on the self reaches has branched in two quite separate directions. The Kantians affirm a transcendent self which itself cannot be an object of knowing, whereas the Humeians, finding no empirical referent for any self, discard the term. The more romantic side of the Enlightenment (cf. Rousseau) saw an originally 'free' self corrupted by the conditioning of society, with education as the way to undo this thralldom. impacts

Nineteenth-century Maturations

I believe that the major shift in thinking about the self results from nineteenth-century biologizing. For convenience, let us call this the Darwinian impact. By locating living organisms in historical contexts and explaining their changes in reference to those contexts, Darwin set the stage for all that has happened since. Recall those lines which concluded the first (1859) edition of *Origin of Species* "whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and wonderful have been, and are being evolved." By refusing to reduce living matter to the laws of physics, Darwin was here holding out for a new kind of calculus for the plastic possibilities that emerged on a planet governed by those laws of physics.

Of equal importance, he was concerned in all his writing to stress the continuities between living forms. When he turned to the human 'species' in *Descent of Man* (1871), we took great pains to show the continuity between earlier animals and humans. All the alleged human uniquenesses - intelligence, humor, play, altruism - existed before us. What this means, of course, is that these are properties of nature, and not non-natural or resident in some nonnatural space of a transcendent self. Where else, then, can these properties reside but in body? No thinker in that century saw this more clearly than Nietzsche. His Zarathustra: "Believe me, brothers: it was the body that despaired of the earth and heard the belly of being speak to it" (Kaufmann 1968 Pt 1, 'On the afterworldly' 143).

Marx. Placing the human squarely in history, that is in temporality and the materials conditions of life, is one of the lasting consequences of Marx' rejection of the 'German philosophy.' This too necessitated a revi-

sion of the individualist stress of Enlightenment liberalism. We are social products, and this means our selves must also in some sense be social. To socialize and temporalize consciousness, however, meant also to assert the ideological qualification that pervades human judgments. We are products not only of a common nature but also of a specific class, and this latter factor adheres to our worldviews.

Freud. If these social structures precede the emergence of individual consciousness, there are also precedent bodily structures. Freud's 'discovery' of the Id made clear that emotions such as aggression and attraction have a bodily matrix. For Freud, the role of society is inevitably repressive, pushing the scars of the conflicts between instinctual life and social realities down into some unconscious levels of 'mind' (which is treated by Freud as a hydraulic-material set of forces). These suppressed conflicts emerge as neuroses, the common condition of humanity. And, needless to say, as a condition that is seen to corrupt the moral judgments of humans.

The Demise of the Idealist Tradition

While it is convenient and conventional to see the Great War of 1914 as the endpoint of the Western liberal tradition, with its assumptions of disengaged and disinterested selves as observers and judges, in our accounting the undercutting was more at the intellectual level. In American thought, which followed its own rhythms, John Dewey was the pioneer of a newer naturalism based on biology which brought sophistication to an emerging discipline of psychology. As Dewey said in his classic 1909 lecture on "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy," no matter how we accept or reject various transcending entities such as gods, souls, and teleologies, "truth and error, health and disease, good and evil, hope and fear in the concrete, would remain just what and where they are now" (Appleman 1979;312). Dewey even then was calling for a new philosophy that would be a "method of moral diagnosis and prognosis"(313).

In many ways, Dewey's own emergence from his former Hegelianism was paradigmatic. As he put it, the focus shifted, and the old questions with their alternative answers lost urgency. "We do not solve them: we get over them" (1979;312[1909]).

The victory over dualism was more easily announced than accomplished, however. One might well decry 'the ghost in the machine' (Ryle 1949) but the nature of the 'machine' was far from clear in the early part of this century when the most sophisticated metaphor was a telephone exchange. In most cases, investigators were content to shelve the 'what' ques-

tions in favor of 'how' questions. The behaviorists were not alone in their rejection of 'mentalism' and most kinds of psychology were comfortable in ignoring questions of a 'self.' A variety of 'culture and personality' studies tended to operate on Freudian assumptions which pushed many selfing issues to one side.

Gordon Allport's 'proprium' (Allport 1950) was an early attempt to call attention to the missing domain. One of the most persistent psychologists to insist upon consideration of the fuller ranges of selfing has been M. Brewster Smith. His own historical review of some of the fruits of this is instructive (Smith 1985). A broader view of Western psychiatric reflection on the self by Frank Johnson may be found in that same volume (Johnson 1985). Further examples, focusing more on the experimental literature, can be found in *Psychological Perspectives on the Self* (Suls 1982). In fact, a number of recent collections document this renewed interest in the self (Marsella & White 1982; Marsella et al 1985; Mischel 1977; Sarbin & Scheibe 1983; Staub 1980; Wegner & Vallacher 1980; Wylie 1974; Wylie 1979; Wylie 1987). Anthropological interest is represented in several collections (cf. Heelas & Lock 1981). Two collections can introduce the sociological literature (Carrithers 1985; Klausner 1965). Philosophical sampling can be found in (Castell 1965; Shoemaker & Swinburne 1984; Strawson 1974; Williams 1973).

Perspectives and Polarities in Current Scholarship

At one extreme are situated those whom Raymond Aron calls the "Parisian Nietzscheans," particularly Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. As the latter puts it "Rather than the death of God or rather, in the wake of that death and in a profound correlation with it-what Nietzsche's thought heralds is the end of his murderer" (Foucault 1970, 385). They see this as a logical correlate of Marx's proposition that the 'human essence' is an 'ensemble of social relations.' This broad thesis has proved more fruitful in theory than in research, and Althusser himself has modified matters sharply by giving a greater autonomy to that 'superstructure' which subsumes non-economic culture (Smith 1984).

The reductionist tradition was modified in another direction by Ralph Turner in a major paper calling attention to the role of 'impulse' as against the role of 'institution' in shaping selfing. This moves attention to the idiosyncratic and biological dimension (Turner 1976). Turner is trying to capture the social impacts of the emerging post-workethic culture in America. Less approvingly, Rieff has described the emergence of a 'therapeutic' culture in which the payoffs for individual selves in terms of

feelings and satisfactions become paramount (Rieff, 1966).

In the flowering of a more permissive culture in the 1960's, many turned from behavioristic or Freudian models in directions variously labelled 'humanistic,' 'transactional,' 'existential.' It would not be too inaccurate to subsume these trends as the 'human potential movement,' a movement characterized by the insistence that persons could become whatever they chose to become, and that the 'human stuff' was basically good. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow provided much of the theoretical underpinning (Rogers 1970; Maslow 1962).

What seems of most congruence with a humanist form of selfing during this period, however, was the critical theorizing along pragmatic lines. Milton Singer both summarized and contributed to the rehabilitation of C. S. Peirce, and the tracing of the lineage from that fertile thinker to James, Dewey and Mead (Singer 1980). The symbolic interactionist tradition stemming from the latter has provided a sophisticated platform to account for social forces as they translate into symbols. As these symbols are treated linguistically, they become the markers for the development of a 'self.' The Cartesian entity-self simply fades out as a result of contemporary theorizing. Various researchers found a process view more fruitful in dealing with the real questions. Wright, for instance, in operationalizing friendship, found it necessary to focus on motivational variables dealing with well-being and worth of the 'entity identified as self' (Wright 1977, 427). The relation to this tradition of Harry Stack Sullivan has also been explored (Uncourt & Olczak 1974).

From a psychiatric viewpoint, Kohut's work on narcissism has provided impetus for fresh moves away from need-based reductionisms. Gehrie, for instance, explores the importance of reference groups in research with *nisei* and *sansei*, showing that inner dynamics alone were insufficient explicators of the selfing process (Gehrie 1979).

Revisions in political science theory regarding the romantic Rousseau self have also taken place. Modernity may well depend upon a centered subjectivity, but this self has been seen, particularly by Ortega, as 'self-maker and creator' (Zetterbaum 1982, 8U.). Others have focused on the role of 'consent' in marking the distinctively human animal. McDonagh does this very effectively in the context of traumatic experiences of rape and other forms of interpersonal violence (McDonagh 1982).

One of the most recent discussions of 'self' occurred in a special issue of *Social Research*. Walkup notes the new turn in the discussion as re-

lating to the "collective life we find worth living" (Walkup 1982,9). Bruner turns to literary and psychological analyses of life-narrative for clues. He suggests that we, as observers, are privileged to imagine alternative ways of acting, and that this very process enriches selfing (Bruner 1982). In this same symposium, Walzer contrasts psychoanalytic and philosophical ways of dealing with hierarchies within the self - "analysts want to modify ... philosophers to vindicate" (Walzer 1982, 37). But for him the crucial point is the possibility of self-criticism and the fact that this firmly grounds the self. Polonoff takes the opposite tack, grounding the self in the datum of self-deception, and then introducing the category of "livability" (Polonoff 1982). Rorty provides a detailed analysis of the various functions we have placed upon the person-concept, concluding that there is a certain emptiness to the debate since none of the alternatives solve philosophical or political problems (Rorty 1982).

Constraints on any Future Selfing

Inquiry of this variety and quality can be expected to stimulate disciplinary interest and, in this case, crosscultural interest. What makes this new situation promising is the set of constraints within which contemporary scholarship operates. I say constraints because most of the assumptions of liberal scientific scholarship are sharply challenged, especially those assumptions dealing with value-free detached observation. These new constraints may be explored under several headings.

Feminism. If sexism is acting as though gender mattered, and as-signing negative qualities to one gender, we need a category of institutional sexism which believes that gender doesn't matter when in fact it is determinative. Mary Midgley's observation is pertinent here that the:

whole idea of a free, independent, enquiring, choosing individual, an idea central to European thought, has always been the idea of a male [who assumes] the love and service of non-autonomous females (and indeed often of the less enlightened males as well) (Midgley 1984)

Even in our discussions of the 'human,' we have failed to note that 'men' and 'women' are asymmetrically situated from this supposedly neutral term (Riley 1988). Gender has traditionally been mapped onto polarities such as active/passive (although ancient India and China differed on which went with which). David Bakan tried to move beyond this by using the polar terms 'agency/communion' (Bakan 1966). More recently, Carol Gilligan has reminded us of the ways that our morality discussions have been marked by

hidden masculine assumptions (Gilligan 1982). Any serious discussions of self-development will have to proceed in full recognition of these obscured or suppressed potentialities (Cancian 1987).

The Body. Beginning with Nietzsche's attack on mentalism and idealism, the body as locus of willing and feeling has returned to Western thought. ('Returned' seems appropriate in view of Plato's emphasis that philosophy should start with body training in athletics and music). The role of the body in cognition has now moved to center stage, and this is reshaping our views of the autonomy of reasoning as a mental process and particularly (Lakoff 1987) of categorization.

Racism. While the concept 'race' has no useful scientific meaning, it remains loaded with popular and social connotations. Traditionalliberal social science treated race as a thing to be ignored in discussions of self-formation. Yet this politically-loaded variable feeds into consciousness at almost all levels. Consider, for example, the history of other-applied and self-applied descriptors for Americans of African descent (Negro, black, colored, Afro-, etc.). One is reminded of both the Nuremberg Laws and John Searle's 'bald man paradox' in discussions regarding which persons are 'black' and which 'white' in the U.S. today.

The important point is that such color-mapping has universal impact. If 'black is bad' for certain 'whites,' in all probability 'white is good' for these same persons. And selfhood must be viewed as shaped accordingly, in both cases.

Sexual preference. Quantitatively if not qualitatively, as many Americans find selfing altered by this constraint than by the racial constraint, if we assume a 10 percent distribution of same-sex preferencers in a highly-homophobic population. Contemporary discussions of human sexuality have moved away from simple polarities, and considerations of selfing must do the same.

Class. While each of our putative constraints deals with relationships of differential power, this is clearest in the case of class. However complexly stratification is determined within a social group, it exists. And those within each subgroup group know this, and have learned the prices to be paid for deviance. We begin by being taught 'our place,' and unlearn this slowly if at all.

Nation. This constraint becomes obvious when persons travel far enough from their homelands, but is also powerfully present in times of per-

ceived crisis. When Libyan hit-teams are after the U.S. president, most Americans quite automatically say 'How can they think of doing this?' When American planes bombed the Libyan president, most Americans applauded, saying something like 'He deserved this.' One of these situations turned out to be fictitious, but not u.s. citizens either did not discover this or did not alter their estimates in view of it.

Regional blocs. Most obvious here is the East/West division. Selfing emerges with vague delineations of an enemy, who is at the same time other. Human history is replete with such polarities in all their instabilities. But on a deeper level they represent the demonologies of selfing.

Colonialism. In a popular sense, this is the 'North/South' polarity, reflecting an earlier power thrust of European and American power. But Turkey, India, China and Japan each have their polarities rooted in the past. These differential memories of greatness and submission also insinuate themselves into the selfing process.

Creedism. In some ways this is essentially the same as nationalism, but to avoid any unnecessary omissions we are singling out the role of beliefs where they reflect differential destinies of people. When Kipling wrote of 'lesser breeds without the Law' or the 'white man's burden,' was he writing English or Christian (or both)?

Scientific canons. At first glance, this seems less a constraint than a facilitator. But in framing theories of the self and selfing process, we need to become sensitized to the biasing roles that certain assumptions necessary to us may bring to the theorizing situation when we describe selfing in others. Gergen notes two remaining assumptions of positivist science that persist: the assumption that we are trying for knowledge of an objective world, and that verification/falsification is the way to obtain such knowledge (Gergen 1982). These assumptions will typically lead us away from pluralistic conceptions of selfing, which in turn may skew our approach to the actual data.

Selfing as a Bio-Social Process

Despite the more extravagant claims of sociobiologists (Wilson 1975), most of the components of the human self seem (a) supplied by culture and (b) sufficiently varied as to preclude the possibilities of some determinate 'personality gene(s).' Culture is a shorthand term for both those multiple relationships upon which the human organism depends and those non-necessary relationships that remain as possibilities. As Fred Hoyle

once put it, we are born 'partially wired' and culture completes the job.

Three immediate issues seem relevant. Is the 'self' a single entity (Is there a single locus for selfing?). Before we say Yes too quickly, we need to consider data on multiple selves. Not simply at the extremes of deviance, but in more everyday senses. There are significant ways in which we are different persons in the relationships of, say, a Humanist Colloquium and in our workplaces and in our homes. We may even answer to variant names in each of those settings. But we would in all likelihood contend that there is some functional continuity or identity that ties these together. Is the plurality the more basic reality, and the unity the after-the-fact generalization? We also need to consider the severe 'loss of self' that occurs with such afflictions as Alzheimer's. Does the patient remain the same self, become another self, or simply become a 'reduced self'? If this last option, can an entity be increased or reduced?

If we give a partial Yes to the self-as-entity position, what analogues may prove instructive in understanding this selfing process which is a reflection and reciprocation with significant others - in separate times and places? We may be back to the artificial intelligence questions that we raised in our first Colloquium. Minsky's metaphor of a 'society of mind' (Minsky 1985) is fruitful here.

Finally, can theory so based deal with issues of self-decision, self-responsibility, and freedom that have figured so centrally in ideological humanist discourse? Michael Arbib has been making a persuasive case that they can, in trying to describe a "decisionist, nontranscendental view of the person" (Arbib 1985).

The Humanist Community

The process of human selfing clearly lasts a lifetime-and may well remain quite incomplete even then (Horowitz 1988). For humanists, the locus of such selfing is all important. We need to focus on those ideas, values, beliefs, and persons that have developed the humanist tradition thus far. This tradition, into which few of us were initially nurtured, needs embodiments (both contemporaneous and historical) if it is to function in 'significant otherness' for new humanists. In part, I have in mind a reconsideration of what orthodox Christians have called 'the company of the holy.' We go against a number of cultural streams in using labels like 'hero,' but the history of free inquiry cannot be understood without a considerable stress upon individual achievements

But I also have in mind certain specifically unique humanist values regarding openness and the critical nature of inquiry. Humanists are committed to build by critical remodelling rather than by simple preservation. And this means an ongoing critique of what has been received in terms of how well it can still serve this open future? Putting it another way, how do human animals whose personhood reflects biological and social conditioning move to that stage where that same selfing takes critical responsibility for both the process and the social structures and relationships that have induced the selfing?

Whatever term we use for the selfing process (self, ego, person, identity), we need somehow account for this process which emerges in infancy and subsides with death (or sometimes before) and at the same time possesses 'human rights.' That task will demand both *theoria* and *praxis*.

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