



## An Overview of the Psychology of Complex Selfhood and Its Concurrent Identities

The concept of pluralistic status represented in the notions of concurrent being and becoming is readily apparent in psychological and philosophical investigations of selfhood. Just what ‘a self’ is, how it is composed, and how it functions, are perennial questions for the intellectual traditions of Western European thought. Responses to such questions have included singular, rather mechanistic concepts of selfhood. But by and large, modernity has presented a diverse range of theories that constitute a psychology of complex selfhood. In various ways, these perspectives conceive of the personal mind or psyche as diversified into multiple, often radically interactive components. These include contrasting and competing interests, desires, feelings, thoughts, intentions (some overtly conscious and some not) along with diversified cognitive functions and regions of the brain that appear dedicated to generating different aspects of consciousness.

The history of notions about multiple aspects and nexes of intention in the human psyche is long. Versions of complex selfhood range from archaic mythical conceptions of spirits and gods that ‘get into humans,’ to Plato’s triumvirate of the personality as charioteer seeking to control the horses of Passion and Reason, to Kant’s notions of different mental faculties, the conscious and subconscious layers of mind in psychoanalysis, the archetypal components of personal and collective psyches in analytical psychology, and the vast amount of cognitive activity transpiring beyond one’s conscious awareness that has been tracked in the empirical brain research of contemporary cognitive science.

### The “I” that is not All of The Self that is Other to Itself

Granting some general validity to these various versions of self-complexity, it appears evident that when a person says “I,” he or she is declaring a self-consciousness that is not consciously aware of some aspects of the cognition, intention, desire, etc., that compose the very selfhood which that pronoun is intended to represent. Whatever the

“I” is, then, it is evidently not ‘all of the self.’ Nonetheless, each person tends to express some consistency of behavior by which they are identified. Society attaches to each person a rather singular identity defined by name, social roles, history, and associations. And yet there is always more to selfhood than those social distinctions can define. Thus neither personal sense of self (of who or what “I” am) nor social identity appear adequate for fully representing the diverse aspects of selfhood. Thereby, attempts to define the self as exclusively ‘this way or that’ are inevitably likely to leave some aspects of it unrepresented.

Notions of such fundamental self-complexity present a status of many-ness in/as oneness, or multiplicity in personal singularity that is not neatly ordered in a mechanical or hierarchic manner. Such a self, composed by competing and divergent aspects and intentions, exists in/as a concurrently disparate field of consciousness. Selfhood is not ‘one with itself’ and is thus ‘other to itself.’ There is an inherent alterity to the experience of being a self that is not self-consistent. In addition to this concept of a ‘self divided within and against itself,’ there is the overall quality of reflective detachment in human awareness. The capacity to ‘stand aside from’ one’s self and thereby to reflectively examine one’s selfhood as if observing it ‘over there’—or analyze humanity as a species that produces types of consciousness, thought, culture, and society—constitutes a radical abstraction of self from self and society. Such status appears as an activity of self-alienation. Self-consciousness that can reflect so radically upon its own origins, contexts, and composition in thought and society is in a sense ‘alien to itself.’ Such ‘thinking about thinking’ is suggested in the species name *homo sapiens sapiens* or the hominid that is ‘twice wise,’ ‘sensible about sensing,’ or ‘knowing about knowing.’

The radically abstract awareness this ‘double thinking’ consciousness can generate about self and world seems to actually derive from a detachment or alienation of consciousness *from itself*. In so far as such a trait is characteristic of human consciousness, it would appear that the “I” that is not its self, that is ‘other to its self,’ is the appropriate “I” of human identity.

## **A More-Than-Ordinary Self: The Conundrum of Knowing the Plurality of One's Singularity**

Given this notion of a radically complex plurality to selfhood that somehow defies singular definition, a sense of more than one self arises. There is the self that individuals habitually identify with the pronoun “I.” There are the identities assigned to individuals by social order and other people. In addition there appears yet more self that is composed of self-aspects that are not consciously recognized or acknowledged--aspects not represented by the conscious “I” or social distinctions. That selfhood is often figured

as the 'sub' or 'un-conscious' self. Though psychological observation and cognitive science confirm the complex activities of such unacknowledged self-aspects in consciousness and behavior, few people appear to devote much overt attention to this intrinsic otherness of selfhood. It can be said then that there is a relatively ordinary sense of self (that of the "I" and social context) and also some 'more-than-ordinary' or 'extra-ordinary' self that tends to go unrepresented by ordinary self-awareness and social identity. And yet, both the acknowledged and unacknowledged aspects of selfhood appear to 'exist within' or by way of a single person or psyche. One person can express radically different attitudes, preferences, behavior, and capacities—some of which the "I" is not even aware. These 'internal aliens' or 'sub-selves,' sometimes referred to as "alter egos," can not only lack a social role but also be overtly opposed and repressed by social standards. The intellectual selfhood of women is an example.

One way of stating such complexity is to posit a status of "I am I" that, when confronted with contradictory aspects of self, must consider that it coexists with a status of "I am Not I." This latter formulation acknowledges that the ordinarily or consciously conceived "I" does not represent all of the self. There is thus a self or aspects of selfhood that are "Not I." Yet at the same time the diversified, inconsistent, and acknowledged and unacknowledged 'selves' of this schism are related. Both observation of such 'internal disparity' in others and experience of one's own self-complexity suggest such a 'negation' of the singular status of being simply "I." And yet, that negation is itself negated by being 'a single person'—"I am I" and "Not I" as 'a' person. The inclusive status of this contrast can be phrased as "I am Not Not-I." In this third composition the sense of "I" is positioned as both 'not all of the self' and yet also that which seems to be other-than "me" even while still being part of the self. 'The alien is me.' Such is the dynamic character of complex self psychology.

Collective social groups, from families to nations, express these pluralistic contrasts that compose 'a unity' more obviously than individual persons. Such social groups tend to profess unitary, consistent identities despite the diversity and even conflict among the persons and sub-groups that collectively compose them. The 'we' of family and nation tend to be intrinsically constituted by contrasts with other groups that amount to an 'us' versus 'them' quality—such as 'my family versus your' or political divisions of 'liberals' and 'conservatives' within the supposed unity of 'the nation.'

How then are we to know our selves if those selves are so various? How is the sense of "I" to become more consciously inclusive of the diversity and concurrent pluralities of the selfhood it purports to represent? In one sense the 'gap' between the ordinarily singular sense of self (the "I") and the parts it inevitably fails to include or represent (the "Not I") is not bridgeable because the latter is, by definition, at least partly unknown to conscious awareness. Taken together this poses a selfhood that is irreducible in that it

cannot be definitively, self-consistently defined—either by itself or others. The alterity of selfhood, like the diversity of social groups, constitutes an intrinsic and evidently necessary part of human life. Thus alienations of self-consciousness from a whole or inclusive selfhood, like that of individuals from the supposed unitary identity of family or nation, appears not so much as a ‘problem to solve’ but a ‘reality to be lived.’ Given that challenge, a task of learning to ‘live in relation with’ alienated, repressed, unacknowledged, or more-than-ordinary self-aspects emerges. Such a task of self-knowing requires the sense of “I” to seek means for establishing relations with the ‘Not-I’ so that the “I” can experience being the ‘Not Not-I.’

Those means are approached in both religious and scientific modes of linking a more ordinary sense identity with more extra-ordinary aspects of self and reality. In a general sense, the knowing of the radical complexity of selfhood, like that of concurrent being and becoming, demands modes of ‘more-than-ordinary knowing’ and for interpreting or understanding such extra-ordinary status as valid. It is worth noting that this conundrum of how to know the diversified plurality of one’s singularity also changes over time. The concurrencies of complex selfhood are not only radically complex but also transient due to the character of concurrent becoming. Thus there can logically be no end to this endeavor to related habituated or ordinary self-consciousness to ‘the rest of the self’ that remains intrinsically extra-ordinary or alien.

This rather internal psychological struggle is mirrored in that of social collectives that must contend with the inherent diversity of the individuals that compose them. Just as the “I” in a person is confronted with ‘making a whole’ out of radically complex concurrences of personal psychic aspects, so a social group is continually imposing its supposed unity upon irreducibly different persons. The tension between posing a singular identity that is *imposed upon* such complexity involves considerable anxieties about how to manage contrasting concurrencies of emotion, thought, relations, and desire while conforming adequately to social standards. The need of persons to conform to social standards and conventions of behavior pushes them toward restrictive self-identity and often induces fascistically reductive expectations of how other people should be—or at least ‘appear.’ Thus a genuinely conscious sense of pluralistic identity in both individuals and social groups, one that respects diversified individuality, is not easy to generate. Some special, more-than-ordinary modes of knowing and understanding self and world are required to articulate such an ‘identity of concurrent identities.’

\*\*\*Additional elaboration of these concepts in Chapters One and Six of **Manifesting the Many in the One** and Chapter One of **Learning to Be—Variously** \*\*\*

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