

## Introduction

Everyone is a whole world of representations, Which are buried in the night  
 of the “I.”

G. W. F. Hegel<sup>1</sup>

Like so many of Hegel’s pithy observations, this one is suitably enigmatic. I am drawn to it because it can be read to capture, *avant la lettre*, and with admirable brevity, the implications of recent work on identity in psychology, analytical philosophy and political theory. This research indicates just how elusive the concept of the self is, conceptually and empirically. As many philosophers contend, the self may be an illusion, but one that is central to the well-being of modern people. As Hegel suggests, we appear in multiple guises by virtue of our numerous self-identifications, but invariably think of ourselves in the singular.<sup>2</sup> Given the contradictions between our self-understandings and those of science, we have a strong incentive to keep the former under wraps. My goal in this book is to shed light on conceptions of identity and their associated practices. Following in the footsteps of Hegel, my end goal is to think about the relationship between identity, and politics and ethics.

Most analytical philosophers and neuroscientists question the existence of the self.<sup>3</sup> Some deny its existence altogether, and describe consciousness as a never-ending stream of fleeting sensations and reflections on them. For others, there is a “minimal” or phenomenological self, an illusion to be sure, but a powerful one that provides meaning to our lives and guidance in our interactions with others.<sup>4</sup> If selfhood is questionable, identity, which rests upon the

<sup>1</sup> Hegel, “Preliminary Conceptions.”

<sup>2</sup> This insight can also be attributed to William James and George Herbert Mead. See James, *Principles of Psychology*; Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*; Markus, “Self-Schemata and Processing of Information about the Self.”

<sup>3</sup> Among philosophers there are, roughly speaking, two schools of thought. The “reductionist” view, made prominent by David Hume, and more recently associated with Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, denies the notion of a persistent core self. The “non-reductionist” position, whose modern statement derives from John Locke, maintains that there is a core self that persists through various stages of life.

<sup>4</sup> Phenomenological is used here in its traditional continental sense to describe lived experience and its subjective dimensions.

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Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

foundation of the self, is an even more dubious concept. Westerners – and many other people – would be as shocked by the thought that they do not possess a self as they would be by the suggestion that they are without a gender. More remarkable still, most Westerners believe in the face of all the evidence to the contrary that their identities are consistent and unique.

Highly respected scholars in diverse fields (e.g. Clifford Geertz, Erik Erikson, Paul Ricoeur and Anthony Giddens) encourage this illusion, as do prominent philosophers (e.g. Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor) who want to ground ethical systems in such identities. They write in an era when our discourses reveal the near-metastasis of the word self, which is now attached via a hyphen to an almost endless list of words. These include self-image, self-seeking, self-esteem, self-knowledge, self-consciousness, self-reference, self-preservation, all of which have a positive valence. In part, my project is aimed at pulling the empirical rug out from underneath such claims, but more importantly, in understanding why they are made. What accounts for our fixation on the self in the modern era, and more so still in the last half-century? What kinds of identity projects has modernity spawned? What accounts for this variation, and to whom do different constructions of identity appeal? Could we recognize ourselves as fragmented and question the status of the alleged selfhood on which our identities are based? If so, what would be the ethical consequences?

Identity discourses emerged in early modern Europe and became more pronounced in the eighteenth century. The diversity they reveal indicates that there is nothing inevitable about contemporary understandings of identity or their relative appeal. Identity projects are a response to modernity, but they are mediated by cultural understandings and practices. Modernity is now a global phenomenon, and many people contend that there are important differences between non-Western and Western identity discourses, especially in their relative emphasis of social versus individual selves.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*; Triandis, *Individualism and Collectivism*; Markus and Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation"; Halloran and Kashima, "Culture, Social Identity and the Individual" find significant differences with respect to individualism and collectivism, especially between Asian and North American cultures. Tafarodi, Marshall and Katsura, "Standing Out in Canada and Japan," finds an emphasis on distinctiveness in Asian cultures as well, but that its expression is more constrained by cultural norms. Criticism of earlier studies comes from Halloran and Kashima, "Culture, Social Identity and the Individual"; Jetten and Postmes, "I Did It My Way"; Vignoles, Chrysoschoou and Breakwell, "Distinctiveness Principle"; Takano and Osaka, "Unsupported Common View"; Hornsey, "Ingroup Critics and their Influence on Groups"; Moghaddam, "Interobjectivity," who find these earlier studies, if not biased, overly mechanical in their methods. Trafimow, Triandis and Goto, "Some Tests of the Distinction Between the Private Self and the Collective Self"; Hong, Chiu and Kung, "Bringing Culture Out in Front"; Matsumoto, Wessman, Reston, Brown and Kupperbusch, "Context-Specific Measurement of Individualism–Collectivism on the

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978-1-107-02765-7 - The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

I will show that the variation in this regard within Western culture is at least as great as any putative differences between it and its Asian and African counterparts.

Modernity is the starting point of my analysis and a principal focus of my book, so it is useful to start with a short discussion of the meaning of this term. Bernard Yack identifies four distinct conceptions of modernity: philosophic, sociological, political and aesthetic.<sup>6</sup> Philosophic modernity represents a self-conscious break with authority, initiated by Bacon, Descartes and later Enlightenment philosophers. The roots of these discourses can be traced back to Petrarch and the Renaissance and the rejection of divine logos as the foundation of political or individual order and identity.<sup>7</sup> The sociological conception of modernity describes changing social relationships and conditions, and is generally thought to have been ushered in by the development of capitalism in the late eighteenth century and the break it initiated with traditional forms of authority. The political conception of modernity emphasizes the emergence of egalitarian and democratic forms of politics and legitimacy, and the corresponding decline of the aristocratic order. The watershed in this transformation is the French Revolution. The aesthetic conception of modernity is associated with styles of art and literature that understand beauty and meaning as ephemeral, and are opposed to the orthodoxy of the moment regardless of its content. Modernism, as this aspect of modernity is usually called, did not appear until the late nineteenth century.

The French poet Baudelaire, who is generally credited with coining the term modernity, used it to describe Parisian urban life where he routinely rubbed shoulders with different kinds of people. He reasoned that modern art, like the modern city, required new plots and forms and openness to chance encounters with unpredictable outcomes.<sup>8</sup> Robert Pippin contends that modernity should also be defined by its sense of itself. It encourages the belief that the contemporary world is distinct from, and possibly better than, its ancient and medieval counterparts.<sup>9</sup> This belief in progress is found in the poetry of Petrarch in the fourteenth century. It is more pronounced in the writings of Francis Bacon in the sixteenth century. This is also when the word “modern”

Individual Level”; Gardner, Gabriel and Lee, “‘I’ Value Freedom but ‘We’ Value Relationships,” argue that many of the differences found between Asians and North Americans are due to experimental priming. Recent evidence finds strong desires for distinctiveness in Asian cultures as well.

<sup>6</sup> Yack, *Fetishism of Modernities*, pp. 32–5.

<sup>7</sup> Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, pp. 44–68, on Petrarch. Masters, *Fortune is a River*, dates modernity to an encounter between Leonardo and Machiavelli at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> Baudelaire, “Painter of Modern Life.” <sup>9</sup> Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*.

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Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

entered the vocabulary.<sup>10</sup> I will return to this understanding of modernity in the concluding chapter, where I argue that it rests on utopian visions of the past which individuals lived without inner tensions in their societies. Future utopias – a major goal of modernity – attempt to recapture this harmony, and it is no accident that Bacon was the father of this genre.

All these understandings of modernity capture key real or mythical features of our world. They are intimately connected with two developments: the quest for individual autonomy and the proliferation of roles. The goal of the autonomous self is inseparable from the development of richer mental lives that focus people's attention on their feelings, needs and goals. Introspection of this kind is at least partially dependent on discourses that legitimate it and make the self, rather than the cosmos, the principal source of reference and development. Role proliferation also encouraged introspection by making it economically and socially rewarding for people to present diverse faces to others, some of which were at odds with how they conceived of themselves. Interiority and reflexivity – the constituents of internal autonomy – are intellectual developments that were well underway before the economic changes we associate with modernity. Role proliferation is largely a function of the division of labor and the diverse hierarchies and economies of scale to which it gives rise. Autonomy and role proliferation are mutually supporting in that autonomy presupposes life choices and role proliferation provides them.<sup>11</sup> By examining their interaction we can develop a better understanding of how modernity emerged and assumed its multiple meanings.

The autonomous self and role proliferation provide reinforcing sources of alienation. Once we step back from our social selves to reflect upon our empirical or social selves, we become to some degree detached psychologically from our surroundings. Detachment prompts alienation if we conclude that the roles we perform compel us to communicate different, perhaps contradictory, even "false" selves to diverse audiences. Kant and Hegel rightly identify the division between reflective and social selves as the defining psychological feature of modernity. I contend that the alienation and internal discomfort generated by reflexive and social selves made identity a primary concern in the modern era. This in turn gave rise to four generic strategies to overcome alienation.

The first two strategies are anti-modern in their outlook. One seeks to recreate a world dominated by a religious-based cosmic order in which, its proponents imagine, there was little tension between individuals and their society. It aims to reduce interiority and reflexivity, and of equal importance, to make their residues consistent with the values and goals of the

<sup>10</sup> Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages'"; Bacon, *New Organon*, pp. 7–8; Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>11</sup> Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society*.

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978-1-107-02765-7 - The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

5

society. Millennial movements like Dispensationalism – the subject of chapter 6 – embrace this strategy, as do to varying degrees the Amish, Satmar, Rajneeshees and some varieties of Mormons.<sup>12</sup> A second strategy attempts to do away with interiority and reflexivity as far as possible, as its proponents consider them sources of alienation and social and political unrest. They want to create a largely secular society that removes all distinctions of wealth and honor and deprives people of privacy, free time and all forms of individual differentiation. Thomas More's *Utopia* is the quintessential expression of this approach. The two strategies are conceptually distinct, but they share much in common, and utopian projects have often drawn on both, as traditional Marxism does.

Two modern strategies embrace interiority and reflexivity. Strategy three is associated with British empiricism. It understands interiority and reflexivity as compatible with the social order. Its advocates consider society a source of diverse role models that people can emulate, even mix and match and transform in the process of working out identities of their own. Strategy four was pioneered by Romanticism and propagated by its successors. It condemns society as oppressive, and encourages people to turn inwards, or to nature, to discover and develop authentic, autonomous identities. The two modern strategies encourage self-fashioning, and to varying degrees, the belief that we can construct unitary, consistent identities. Strategy four is arguably the dominant intellectual conception of identity in the contemporary West. There are reasons for believing that strategy three is more common in practice.

These four strategies provide the intellectual and psychological foundations for four kinds of political projects.<sup>13</sup> With its effort to constrain individualism, strategy one undergirds conservatism and its emphasis on the organic nature of societies and their enduring wisdoms. Although the concept of totalitarianism is no longer in vogue because of its Cold War associations, strategy two is closely associated with political systems, real or imagined, that attempt to suppress individual autonomy and expression, and socialize and coerce people into committing themselves to communal values and goals. Strategy three envisages a world in which individual and society can coexist, not without tensions, but nevertheless, in a mutually beneficial way in part because of those tensions. It finds political expression in liberalism. Strategy four embraces the long-term goal of reconciliation of the individual and society, but only as the result of a far-reaching transformation of society and individuals alike. In the interim, it regards them as adversaries, and in contrast to strategies one and two, unambiguously sides with the individual. It provides the justification for anarchy. All four political movements are distinctly modern, and their emergence can be traced to the same conditions responsible for the identity

<sup>12</sup> Swaine, *Liberal Conscience*. <sup>13</sup> I would like to thank Dorothy Noyes for this insight.

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Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

strategies that support them. They in turn aspire to create the social conditions in which each of these identity strategies can reach fruition.

Three of the four strategies were pioneered by utopias, a genre that developed to explore solutions to psychological and social tensions created by interiority and reflexivity. Utopias are “subjunctive worlds,” to use Dorothy Noyes’ term, that are critical for their assessment of the worlds in which we live.<sup>14</sup> Critics of utopias allege that they inspire political projects that promote more intense conflicts between individuals and their societies or seek to overcome them by depriving people of key features of agency commonly considered essential to humanity. The genre of dystopia arose in part to elaborate and publicize this critique. I will argue, in contrast to the conventional wisdom, that most utopias are backward looking and describe societies that all but do away with external and internal autonomy. As this overview suggests, modernity, identity strategies, novel political forms and utopian and dystopic discourses are closely related, even co-constitutive.

All efforts to resolve tensions between individual and social selves have failed, as they inevitably must. It is impossible to turn the clock back on modernity, or overcome its alienating features by means of individual choice or social engineering. Somehow we must come to terms with the psychological truth that our selfhood is largely imaginary, even though we feel it intensely. Our so-called identities, moreover, are more socially than individually determined. We are multiple conflicted and discontinuous selves and to the extent that we attempt to assert and develop ourselves we must to some degree alienate ourselves from our social environment. This reality shares much with Heidegger’s nightmare of aporia: a world in which identities are *zerstreut* (fragmented, dispersed and disconnected).<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, Heidegger and their French acolytes make valiant and innovative efforts to overcome this situation and theorize higher forms of selfhood based on the very absence of ontological stability that ordinary people crave.

I agree with these philosophers that a world in which people could move beyond the illusion of consistent, unitary identities, even selfhood, has enormous psychological and ethical potential. Indeed, this may be essential to bridge effectively other categories maintained by logically and empirically indefensible markers and boundaries. Such a move would not be incapacitating if we could retain the ability to order the multiple components of our selfhood and conduct a Bakhtinian-like dialogue across them. Multiple selves are not necessarily incoherent selves. Such a world would nevertheless be more difficult to achieve than even these philosophers imagine, for reasons I will explore. One of the most serious impediments is our dependence on linear narratives, in which all approaches to identity are currently anchored.

<sup>14</sup> Noyes, “Subjunctive Worlds.”

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 129 (German pagination in margins).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02765-7 - The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

7

In 1785, Thomas Reid described identity as “the foundation of all rights and obligations, and of all accountableness.”<sup>16</sup> Many moral philosophers agree. Identity undeniably has important implications for ethics, but this relationship is poorly understood and I make two radical claims about it. I challenge the conventional wisdom that identity is somehow dependent on negative “others.” This belief complicates, if not altogether impedes, that task of squaring ethics with identity. It is also responsible for the major cleavage between cosmopolitans and communitarians. I marshal evidence from psychology to show that identities generally form before images of others and that negative images are a special case; they are most likely to develop when groups compete directly for scarce resources. I turn to Homer and Virgil to show that identity construction may require actors to draw closer to those from whom they are differentiating themselves. It is best conceived as a dialectical process, and current approaches examine only the separation side of the equation. I offer a more comprehensive and, I believe, more balanced account, and explore some of its normative implications for individuals, states and our species.

More fundamentally, I question the move to root ethics in identity. Given our illusory and multiple selves, turning to identity for ethical guidance is like looking for stability in a vortex. It invites great confusion and frustration, or alternatively, a cramped focus on one form of self-identification with a correspondingly restricted ethical horizon. Much might be gained from liberating ethics from identity. Recognition of the fragmented nature of identities could provide intellectual and emotional grounds for transcending many of the “us” and “other” distinctions that stand in the way of implementing any ethical commitments on a more universal basis.

*The Politics and Ethics of Identity* interrogates identity from macro and micro perspectives. At the macro level, I attempt to account for four generic identity strategies, the problems they confront, the reasons why people continue to embrace them and the prospects for moving beyond them. At the micro level, I analyze how discourses create and propagate identities, the dynamics of identity construction and how identities are related to different understandings of modernity and expectations about progress. Different identity strategies can also be explained in part with reference to the relative strength of state and society in different Western countries. Agency is also important. People invent and propagate the discourses that instantiate identities. Within limits, contemporary people make choices about who they want to be. I am interested in both kinds of agency, their relationship and respective dynamics.

I begin this chapter with a discussion of psychological autonomy, which is so central to my larger argument. I then offer a critique of the concept of identity embedded in a genealogy that begins in the ancient world and ends with contemporary analytical philosophy. I subsequently attempt to reformulate

<sup>16</sup> Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, p. 112.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-02765-7 - The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

our understanding of identity to take into account what analytical philosophers have to say about personhood and identity and the ways in which people form self-identifications that are the sources of what they think of as their identities. I conclude with an overview of the remaining chapters of the book.

To recapitulate, I start from the assumption that selfhood and unitary, consistent identities are illusions. I am nevertheless interested in why so many modern people and scholars believe such identities to be feasible.<sup>17</sup> I situate my answer in a broader examination of modern identity discourses, which I describe as a response to the uncomfortable, and for some, unacceptable tensions that opened up between our reflective and social selves. I identify and evaluate four distinct identity strategies and conclude that the best we can do is accept the existence of our multiple selves and reach some kind of partial accommodation between our reflexive and social selves. I disagree with philosophers who maintain that ethics must be anchored in identities. I believe we might live happier and more ethical lives and societies by recognizing and exploiting the tensions generated by our multiple, conflicted and fragmented selves.

My arguments draw on psychology, philosophy, history and political science, as they all have different but important things to say about identity. They offer different takes on identity, some of them at odds, within and between disciplines. I give priority to history and psychology because the former describes the different social orders and conditions in which people must live, while the latter provides insight into universal human needs. I am particularly interested in the ways these needs find expression in different cultures and circumstances. Philosophy enters the picture in three important ways. It develops concepts of identity, brings rigor to those we use to describe our world and ourselves and exposes their logical fallacies and incompleteness. It also provides a record of how good minds across the ages have grappled with concepts, but also with the problems they attempt to instantiate and engage.

In many ways, Nietzsche is the jumping-off point of my empirical and normative arguments. In *Genealogy of Morals*, he argues against Kant's dualistic deduction of morality and attempts to develop an alternate justification for what he considers the stifling Christian-based morality of his Europe.<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche insists that "virtue must be *our own* invention." Everyone must "find *his own* virtue, *his own* categorical imperative."<sup>19</sup> The most profound expression of Nietzsche's anti-dualism concerns the subject himself. In a dualistic worldview, eternal forms exist beyond the shadow world, and one of them is posited to be an eternal soul. With Nietzsche's refusal to accept any

<sup>17</sup> These claims are made by the social identity theory and self-categorization theory research programs.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Sections 10, 13, and *Antichrist*, Section 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.



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978-1-107-02765-7 - The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

9

distinction between essences and appearances comes a rejection of a reified soul. Just as there is no essence behind the appearance, there is no otherworldly soul behind the worldly actor – no doer behind the deed. “The doer is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.” The “subject” – in an abstract, metaphysical sense – is an invention of the weak, who turn to it as part of their retreat from the worldly struggles for domination. Only the slave “needs to make this distinction in order to create the illusion of freedom in impotence.” This illusion encourages the organization of the world and its actors into stable objects and identities.<sup>20</sup>

Nietzsche would have us believe that strong people, or “free spirits,” do not need to find refuge in the illusion of stable truths and identities. Invoking Schopenhauer’s idea of a will to power, he imagines that free spirits are endowed with a sense of self that is too powerful to be constrained.<sup>21</sup> They find freedom and fulfillment in the very absence of stability of any kind. Such people have no recourse to the fictions of a soul or transcendental unity. Absent an underlying subject, the achievement of self is reserved for those whose words or deeds reflect a consistency of style.<sup>22</sup>

Nietzsche grasps the link between the soul and the modern concept of identity, a relationship I explore later in this chapter. He further recognizes that identity projects have roots in the past and take shape within the framework of Greek and Christian thought and practice. I follow Nietzsche in believing that true agency requires us to distance ourselves from at least some identifications that have been imposed on us and, most importantly, to renounce the fiction of consistent and stable identities. I am, however, skeptical of his proposed solution to Kantian dualism, and even more, of his identity project. The perpetual energy of self-becoming, based on the tapping of some inner power, in accord with the nature of the world, strikes me as metaphysical nonsense.<sup>23</sup> The variants offered by Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida are no more convincing, for reasons I will make clear.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Section 13. Also see *Beyond Good and Evil*, ss. 17–20, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and *Will to Power*, s. 585a. Nietzsche nevertheless offers an ambivalent account of what he calls slave morality. He clearly dislikes slave morality because it is characterized by cleverness and ingenuity. It can nevertheless be quite powerful and shape the world in which persons live, and accordingly have a more positive dimension. This can be seen in Nietzsche’s fascination with St. Paul. While disapproving of his project, he was deeply impressed by Paul’s ability to create a new religion, a new grand myth that shaped and changed the world.

<sup>21</sup> On Schopenhauer see Magee, *Philosophy of Schopenhauer*; Saffranski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*. On Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Seigel, “Problematizing the Self.”

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, Section 13. Also *Beyond Good and Evil*, ss. 17–20, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and *Will to Power*, s. 585a.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, ss. 689, 1067 and *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, pp. 227, 312.

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978-1-107-02765-7 - The Politics and Ethics of Identity: In Search of Ourselves

Richard Ned Lebow

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The best we can do in practice is to gain some control over the process of self-identification and self-construction. We will always be fragmented selves as long as we are to some degree socially embedded. There is no escape from the dualism and tension of reflexive and social selves. This situation is better than the alternative: people who free themselves from all social bonds and their identifications. They risk becoming a danger to themselves and everyone around them, as the Greeks believed and Mozart and Da Ponte try to show in the character of Don Giovanni. We can nevertheless profit enormously – ethically and creatively – from recognizing, exploring and exploiting the tensions arising from our multiple self-identifications and our efforts to chart our own courses while performing important social roles and following through on the commitments associated with them.

My project differs from Nietzsche's in another respect. He envisages identity construction as an elite project. I contend that ordinary people are just as capable of self-fashioning and ethical choice as intellectuals. Many non-intellectuals are as reflective and creative as their intellectual counterparts and do not suffer from any need to ground or explain their behavior with reference to foundational principles. Such people may be better prepared psychologically to accept the uncertainties and tensions associated with the recognition of our multiple identities. They may also feel more comfortable making ethical choices that strike them as right but ultimately indefensible.

A caveat is in order. At the opposite end of the spectrum from imaginary unified, consistent selves are people who suffer from multiple personality syndrome and other psychiatric disorders.<sup>24</sup> I am building my approach to identity and directing it to the vast majority of us who live closer to the middle of this continuum. The question of identity is not a purely philosophical or psychological one. Letting go the illusion of unified, consistent selves, and even more, that of selfhood, compels us to recognize the fictional, or at least conventional nature of all social, legal, economic and political anchors. It does not necessarily follow that we must cut ourselves loose from these moorings. The notion of the corporation as a person is universally recognized as a fiction and this does not prevent it from functioning as intended.

### Autonomy

Autonomy is a term with a very wide lexical field.<sup>25</sup> It has external and internal references. External autonomy describes our degree of independence from constraints imposed by society or other actors. Internal autonomy describes our ability to construct an internal life of our own. Drawing on Adorno, Seyla Benhabib characterizes internal autonomy as "the capacity of the subject to let itself go, to deliver itself over to that which is not itself, to remain 'by itself in

<sup>24</sup> Radden, "Multiple Selves." <sup>25</sup> Schneewind, "Use of Autonomy in Ethical Theory."