

## Introduction

If there is one value that seems beyond reproach, in our current confused ethical climate, it is that of the self and the terms that cluster around it – autonomy, identity, individuality, liberty, choice, fulfillment. It is in terms of our autonomous selves that we understand our passions and desires, shape our life-styles, choose our partners, marriage, even parenthood. It is in the name of the kinds of persons that we really are that we consume commodities, act out our tastes, fashion our bodies, display our distinctiveness. Our politics loudly proclaims its commitment to respect for the rights and powers of the citizen as an individual. Our ethical dilemmas are debated in similar terms, whether they concern the extension of legal protections to same-sex couples, disputes over abortion, or worries about the new reproductive technologies. In less parochial domains, notions of autonomy and identity act as ideals or criteria of judgment in conflicts over national identities, in struggles over the rights of minorities, and in a whole variety of national and international disputes. This ethic of the free, autonomous self seems to trace out something quite fundamental in the ways in which modern men and women have come to understand, experience, and evaluate themselves, their actions, and their lives.

In writing the essays that are collected in this volume, I wanted to make a contribution, both conceptual and empirical, to the genealogy of this current regime of the self. I hope that they will make a modest contribution to our understanding of the conditions under which our present ways of thinking about and acting upon human beings have taken shape; that they will help us chart their characteristic modes of operation; that they will assist us to draw up some kind of evaluation of the capacities they attribute to us and the demands they make of us. My aim, in other words, is to begin to question some of our contemporary certainties about the kinds of people we take

ourselves to be, to help develop ways in which we might begin to think ourselves otherwise.

These studies try to problematize our contemporary regime of the self by examining some of the processes through which this regulative ideal of the self has been invented. The invention in question is a historical rather than an individual phenomenon. Hence this work is underpinned by the belief that historical investigation can open up our contemporary regime of the self to critical thought, that is to say, to a kind of thought that can work on the limits of what is thinkable, extend those limits, and hence enhance the contestability of what we take to be natural and inevitable about our current ways of relating to ourselves. The psychosciences and disciplines – psychology, psychiatry, and their cognates – form the focus of these studies. Collectively I refer to the ways of thinking and acting brought into existence by these disciplines since the last half of the nineteenth century as ‘psy’, not because they form a monolithic or coherent bloc – quite the reverse – but because they have brought into existence a variety of new ways in which human beings have come to understand themselves and do things to themselves. I argue in these essays that psy has played a key role in constituting our current regime of the self as well as itself having been ‘disciplinized’ as part of the emergence of this regime. However, I do not claim to provide even the sketch for a history of psychology. Rather, I am concerned with the vocabularies, explanations, techniques of psy only to the extent that they bear upon this question of the invention of a certain way of understanding and relating to ourselves and others, to the making of human being intelligible and practicable under a certain description. I want to examine the ways in which the contemporary apparatus for ‘being human’ has been put together: the technologies and techniques that hold personhood – identity, selfhood, autonomy, and individuality – in place. I term this work ‘critical history’: its aim is to explore the conditions under which these horizons of our experience have taken shape, to diagnose our contemporary condition of the self, to destabilize and denaturalize that regime of the self which today seems inescapable, to elucidate the burdens imposed, the illusions entailed, the acts of domination and self-mastery that are the counterpart of the capacities and liberties that make up the contemporary individual.

Perhaps it will already be objected that I have set out my question in a misleading fashion, in referring, so hastily, to an experience of oneself in terms such as ‘we’ and ‘our’. Who is this ‘we’, who comprises this ‘our’? Indeed, one of the premises of these essays is that the regime of the self that is prevalent in contemporary Western Europe and North America is unusual both historically and geographically – that its very existence needs to be treated as a problem to be explained. And further, a central argument of these essays is that this regime of the self is indeed more heterogeneous than is often allowed, localized in distinct practices with particular presuppositions about the subjects that inhabit them, varying in its specifications of per-

sonhood along a whole number of axes and in different problem spaces – operating differently, for example, in relation to the female murderer, the naughty schoolboy, the young black urban dweller, the depressed housewife of the wealthy classes, the disaffected worker, the redundant middle manager, the entrepreneurial business woman, and so forth. Nonetheless, what justifies me in speaking of a regime of the self, at least within a limited set of temporal and geographical coordinates, is less an assertion of uniformity than a hypothesis that there is a common normativity – a kind of family resemblance in the regulative ideals concerning persons that are at work in all these diverse practices that act upon human beings, young and old, rich and poor, men and women, black and white, prisoner, mad person, patient, boss and worker: ideals concerning our existence as individuals inhabited by an inner psychology that animates and explains our conduct and strives for self-realization, self-esteem, and self-fulfillment in everyday life. The essays that follow should establish the strengths and limits of this hypothesis, and also go some way to trace out the diverse and contingent places, practices, and problems out of which this norm of the quotidian yet sovereign self of choice, autonomy, and freedom has been invented.

To speak of the invention of the self is not to suggest that we are, in some way, the victims of a collective fiction or delusion. That which is invented is not an illusion; it constitutes our truth. To suggest that our relation to ourselves is historical and not ontological is not to suggest that an essential and transhistorical subjectivity lies hidden and disguised beneath the surface of our contemporary experience, as a potential waiting to be realized by means of critique. Nonetheless, these studies do arise out of an unease about the values accorded to the self and its identity in our contemporary form of life, a sense that while our culture of the self accords humans all sorts of capacities and endows all sorts of rights and privileges, it also divides, imposes burdens, and thrives upon the anxieties and disappointments generated by its own promises. I am all too aware that while these essays begin from such an unease, they fall far short of drawing up a balance sheet that would enable us to counterpose the ‘costs’ of our contemporary experience of our selves against its ‘benefits’. I nonetheless hope that, in rendering the historical contingency of our contemporary relations to ourselves more visible, they may help open these up for interrogation and transformation.

### *The challenged self*

The essays have been put together in a time and place in which a series of profound challenges have been directed toward an image of the self that appears, for so long, to have formed the horizon of ‘our’ thought. The self: coherent, bounded, individualized, intentional, the locus of thought, action, and belief, the origin of its own actions, the beneficiary of a unique biography. As such selves we possessed an identity, which constituted our deepest, most

profound reality, which was the repository of our familial heritage and our particular experience as individuals, which animated our thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and values. As selves, we were characterized by a profound inwardness: conduct, belief, value, and speech were to be interrogated and rendered explicable in terms of an understanding of an inner space that gave them form, within which they were, literally, embodied within us as corporeal beings. This internal universe of the self, this profound ‘psychology’, lay at the core of those ways of conducting ourselves that are considered normal and provided the norm for thinking and judging the abnormal – whether in the realm of gender, sexuality, vice, illegality, or insanity. And our lives were meaningful, to the extent that we could discover our self, be our self, express our self, love our self, and be loved for the self we really were.

In fact, as I have already hinted, these essays will question whether, or perhaps where, this regulative ideal of the self actually functioned in such a self-evident manner. They will suggest that the images of the person or the subject at work in various practices have historically been more disparate than is implied by such an argument – that diverse conceptions of personhood were deployed in Christian spiritual practices, in the doctor’s consulting room, in the hospital operating theater, in erotic relations, in market exchanges, in scholarly activities, in domestic life, in the military. This ideal of the unified, coherent, self-centered subject was, perhaps, most often found in projects that bemoaned the loss of self in modern life, that sought to recover a self, that urged people to respect the self, that urged us each to assert our self and take responsibility for our self – projects whose very existence suggests that selfhood is more an aim or a norm than a natural given. The universal self was reciprocally found in projects to articulate a knowledge of the person, a knowledge structured by the presupposition that an account of the human being had to be, in principle at least, without limits, at least insofar as the humans possessed certain universal characteristics, moral, physiological, psychological, or biological processes that were then worked upon in regular and predictable ways to produce particular and unique individuals. If our current regime of the self has a certain ‘systematicity’, it is, perhaps, a relatively recent phenomenon, a resultant of all these diverse projects that have sought to know and govern humans *as if they were* selves of certain sorts.

In any event, it is certainly the case that, today, this image of the self has come under question both practically and conceptually. A whole variety of practices bearing upon the mundane difficulties of living a life have placed in question the unity, naturalness, and coherence of the self. The new genetic technology disturbs the naturalness of the self and its boundaries in relation to what is termed, tellingly, its ‘reproduction’ – donating sperms, transplanting eggs, freezing and implanting embryos, and much more (cf. Strathern, 1992). Abortion and life support machines, together with the contentious debates around them, destabilize the points at which the human enters

existence and fades from it. Organ transplants, kidney dialysis, fetal tissue brain implants, heart pacemakers, artificial hearts all problematize the uniqueness of the embodiment of the self, not only establishing ‘unnatural’ links between different selves via the movement of tissues, but also making all too clear the fact that humans are intrinsically technologically fabricated and ‘machinated’ – bound into machines in what we term normality as much as in pathology. No wonder that one image of human being has so rapidly disseminated itself: the cyborg (Haraway, 1991).

This image of the human as a cybernetic organism, a nonunified hybrid assembled of body parts and mechanical artifacts, myths, dreams, and fragments of knowledge, is just one dimension of a range of conceptual challenges to the primacy, unity, and givenness of the self. At the very least, within social theory, the idea of the self is historicized and culturally relativized. More radically, it is fractured by gender, race, class, fragmented, deconstructed, revealed not as our inner truth but as our last illusion, not as our ultimate comfort but as an element in circuits of power that make some of us selves while denying full selfhood to others and thus performing an act of domination on both sides.

These contemporary conceptual challenges to the self are, of course, themselves historical and cultural phenomena. As is well known, nineteenth-century social theorists argued in various ways that the process of modernization, the rise of the West, the uniqueness of its values and its economic, legal, cultural, and moral relations could be understood, in part, in terms of ‘individualization’. In developing this theme over the course of the twentieth century, and increasingly in its final decades, historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have developed this argument in a different voice, using the historical and cultural specificity of the idea of the self in order to relativize the values of individualism.

The shock value has now faded from assertions such as that by Clifford Geertz that “[t]he Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action, organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world’s cultures” (Geertz, 1979, p. 229, quoted in Sampson, 1989, p. 1; cf. Mauss, 1979b). In response, the impassioned anthropologist now seeks to retrieve the self from the welter of its social and cultural determinations, and from the relativism that this implies (e.g., Cohen, 1994). But despite such endeavors, it has proved impossible convincingly to reuniversalize and renaturalize this image of the person as a stable, self-conscious, self-identical center of agency.

The peculiarities of our regime of the self have also been diagnosed by philosophers. Historians of philosophy, most notably Charles Taylor, have argued that our modern notion of what it is to be a human agent, a

person, or a self, and the issues of morality with which this notion is inextricably intertwined, is “a function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West and which may indeed spread thence to other parts of the globe, but which has a beginning in time and space and may have an end” (Taylor, 1989, p. 111). Taylor traces this history through an interpretation of philosophical and literary texts from Plato to the present, seeking to address the “interpretive” question of why people at different historical moments found different versions of the self and identity convincing, inspiring, or moving: the “*idées-forces*” that is contained within different ideas of the self (p. 203). And Taylor has suggested that our current ‘disenchanted’ sense of self, in particular the value that we attach to the self that has the capacity to lead, autonomously, an ordinary life, has multiple “sources” arising out of a “theistic” notion that allocates humans souls a special place in the universe, a “romantic” notion stressing the capacity of selves to create and recreate themselves, and a “naturalistic” notion that regards the self as amenable to scientific reason, explicable in terms of biology, heredity, psychology, socialization, and the like. ‘The self’, whatever virtues of humanity and universality it may entail, thus appears a much more contingent, heterogeneous, culturally relative notion than it purports to be, dependent on a whole complex of other cultural beliefs, values, and forms of life.

Taylor nonetheless retains a certain affection for the regime of the self as it has taken shape historically, and for the moral values to which it has been attached. In this, he is somewhat unusual. The moral valuations underpinning this affection have been most powerfully disputed by feminist philosophers. In different ways, feminists have argued that the cultural representation of the subject *as* a self is based on a continually repeated, motivated, and gendered act of symbolic violence. Beneath the apparent universality of the self as constructed in political thought and philosophy since the seventeenth century lies, in fact, an image of a male subject whose ‘universality’ is based on its suppressed other. Thus Moira Gatens argues that while the male subject is “constructed as self-contained and as an owner of his person and his capacities, one who relates to other men as free competitors with whom he shares certain politico-economic rights . . . [t]he female subject is constructed as prone to disorder and passion, as economically and politically dependent on men . . . justified by reference to women’s nature. She ‘makes no sense by herself’ and her subjectivity assumes a lack which males complete” (Gatens, 1991, p. 5; cf. Lloyd, 1984). Since its invention, the apparently sex-neutral subject-with-agency was a model applied to one sex and denied to the other; indeed it was dependent on this opposition for its philosophical foundation and political function.

For many who write as feminists, this politicophilosophical and patriarchal illusion of universal ‘disembodied’ person is to be redressed by an insistence upon the *embodiment* of the subject. The universalizing of the subject, they



suggest, went hand in hand with a denial of its bodily existence in favor of a spurious image of reason as abstract, universal, rational, and associated with the masculine principle. A renewed emphasis on embodiment seems to reveal that, at the very least, the subject is two: male and female bodies give rise to radically different forms of subject; the notion of the corporeality of the human is to be developed “by emphasizing the embodied and therefore sexually differentiated structure of the speaking subject” (Braidotti, 1994a, p. 3). Such a reinsertion of ‘the body’ into our thinking in subjectivity is often argued to have consequences beyond simply questioning the identity of mind and maleness, body and femaleness. For Elizabeth Grosz, if bodies are diverse “male or female, black, brown, white, large or small . . . not as entities in themselves or simply on a linear continuum with its polar extremes occupied by male and female bodies . . . but as a field, a two-dimensional continuum in which race (and possibly even class, caste or religion) form body specifications . . . a defiant affirmation of a multiplicity, a field of differences, of other kinds of bodies and subjectivities . . . if bodies themselves are always sexually (and racially) distinct, incapable of being incorporated into a singular, universal model, then the very forms that subjectivity takes are not generalizable” (Grosz, 1994, p. 19). If subjectivity is understood as corporeal – embodied in bodies that are diversified, regulated according to social protocols, and divided by lines of inequality – then the universalized, naturalized, and rationalized subject of moral philosophy appears in a new light: as the erroneous and troublesome outcome of a denegation of all that is bodily in Western thought.

Feminist theorists have also been at the forefront of a further assault on the image of the unified, individualized psychological self, this time effected through examining the links between subjectification, sexuality, and psychoanalysis. It was Jacques Lacan who began this psychoanalytic assault on the image of the subject that, he suggested, not only infused most contemporary psychology but also the forms of psychoanalysis that had gained sway in the United States and whose regulatory ideal was the mature ego. For Lacan, far from psychoanalysis operating according to the image of harmony and reintegration usually inferred from Freud’s dictum that “where id is, there ego shall be,” Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, and of the rules of its operation, revealed the self’s radical ex-centricity to itself. A radical heteronomy gapes within human beings – this is not the property of a few cases of split personality, or a feature of psychological disturbance, but is the very condition of our being able to relate to ourselves as if we were subjects. At the very heart of our assent to our own identity, Lacan asserted, we are wagged, agitated, activated by an Other: an order that goes beyond us and is the condition of any consciousness whatever (Lacan, 1977). Psychoanalysis, in the invention of the notion of the unconscious, is thus taken to have dealt a fundamental blow to the vision of the subject propounded by classical philosophy and taken for granted in everyday existence, by establishing the ‘excess’

of the subject over its representations of itself. In so doing, it appears, it has made it necessary for us to theorize those psychocultural mechanisms through which the subject comes to take itself as a self.

Again, it is contemporary feminist thought that has pursued these investigations most intensively. With notable exceptions, feminists have insisted that sexual difference is constitutive of subjectivity itself: the identifications that form us *as if* we were subjects are, first of all, articulated in relation to gender (cf. Irigaray, 1985). Thus Judith Butler argues that “the subject, the speaking ‘I’” does not precede its construction as gendered, but “is formed by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex” and that this is a process constitutively bound to exclusion of certain “abject beings” who are not permitted to enjoy the status of a subject in virtue of not according to the forms in which such a sex is prescribed: the existence of such abjected persons, “under the sign of the ‘unliveable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Subjectivity, for Butler, is not the origin of action, but the consequence of particular, and inevitably gendered, routines of performativity and modes of citation. The subject and ‘its’ attributes now appear as an effect of a range of processes that give rise to the human being assuming or taking up a certain position of subject – a position that is not universal but always particular. Subjectification occurs, then, but not in the form in which it thinks itself: subjectivity is no longer unitary, or conceived on the model of the male, but fractured through sexual and racial identifications and regulated by social norms. Yet paradoxically, to account for these practices of subjectification, and to disrupt the ways in which they have traditionally been understood, such arguments themselves seem inescapably drawn to a particular ‘theory of the subject’ – psychoanalysis – to account for the ‘inscription’ of the effects of subjectivity in the human animal.

If arguments in anthropology, history, philosophy, feminism, and psychoanalysis have thrown the self into question, they have linked up with arguments developing in the very heartland of the self: the discipline of psychology. For here, too, the self is challenged. For some, the self is to be unsettled by revealing it to be ‘socially constructed’, ‘its attributes’ from gender to childhood reconceptualized as multiple and mobile effects of attributions made within historically situated interchanges among people. Thus we are invited “to consider the social origins of the taken-for-granted mind assumptions such as the bifurcation between reason and emotion, the existence of memories, and the symbol system believed to underlie language. [Our attention is directed] to the social, moral, political and economic institutions that sustain and are sustained by current assumptions about human activity” (Gergen, 1985c, p. 5). In these constructivist arguments within psychology, attributions of selfhood and its predicates are most frequently understood in Wittgensteinian terms, as features of language games arising within and making possible certain forms of life: it is in and through language, and only in



---

*Introduction*

9

and through language, that we ascribe to ourselves bodily feelings, intentions, emotions, and all the other psychological attributes that have, for so long, appeared to fill out a natural and given interior volume of the self. “Considered from this point of view, to be a self is not to be a certain kind of being but to be in possession of a certain kind of theory” (Harré, 1985, p. 262; cf. Harré, 1983, 1989).

Either for epistemological reasons (we can never know the inner domain of the person – all we have is language) or for ontological reasons (the entities constructed by psychology do not correspond to the real being of the human), an analysis of a psychological interior is to be replaced by an analysis of the exterior realm of language that *attributes* mental states – beliefs, attitudes, personalities, and the like – to individuals (see the essays collected in Gergen and Davis, 1985, and Shotter and Gergen, 1989). When what was once attributed to a unified psychological domain is now dispersed among culturally diverse linguistic practices, beliefs, and conventions: the unified self is revealed as a construction. Once again the self is challenged and fragmented: heterogeneity is not a temporary condition but the inescapable outcome of the discursive processes through which ‘the self’ is ‘socially constructed’. And, from the perspective of so many of these critical psychological investigations, psychology itself becomes not only a major contributor to contemporary understandings of the person, through the vocabularies and narratives it supplies, but also a discipline whose very existence is to be regarded with suspicion. Why, if human beings are as heterogeneous and situationally produced as they now appear to be, did a discipline arise that promulgated such unified, fixed, interiorized, and individualized conceptions of selves, males and females, races, ages. Whose interests did such an intellectual project serve?

Of course, these contemporary challenges to the coherence of the self, which I have described in barest outline, occupy one dimension of that composite cultural and intellectual movement sometimes termed postmodernism. This has made fashionable the argument that the self, like society and culture, has been transformed in current conditions: subjectivity is now fragmented, multiple, contradictory, and the human condition entails each of us trying to make a life for ourselves under the constant gaze of our own suspicious reflexivity, tormented by uncertainty and doubt. I think we would be well to treat these breathless pronouncements of the uniqueness of our age and our special position in history – we are at the end of something, at the start of something – with a certain reserve. In the essays that follow, drawing upon many of the ideas that I have mentioned, I suggest some pathways for a more sober critical assessment of the birth and functioning of our contemporary regime of the self. The multiplicity of regimes of subjectification is not, I suggest, a novel feature of our own age. The repetition of the parameters of difference – gender, race, class, age sexuality, and the like – may perform a useful polemical function, but at most such parameters gesture to the starting

points for an analysis of modes of subjectification, not to its conclusions: these categories, too, have a history and a location within particular practices of the person. ‘The body’ provides no sure basis for an analytic of subjectification, precisely because corporealities are diverse, nonunified, and operate in relation to particular regimes of knowledge: the configurations of the human body inscribed in the anatomical atlas did not always define a way of delimiting the order of vital processes, or of visualizing and acting upon human being. The binary division of gender imposes a fallacious unification on a diversity of ways in which we are ‘sexed’ – as men, women, boys, girls, manly, feminine, blokes, perverts, homosexuals, gay, lesbian, seducers, mistresses, lovers, ladies, matrons, spinsters. No theory of the psyche can provide the basis for a genealogy of subjectification, precisely because the emergence of such theories has been central to the very regime of the self whose birth must be the object of our inquiries. The notion of interests as explaining the positions espoused in intellectual and practical disputes is inadequate, because what is involved is the *creation* of ‘interests’, the forging of novel relations between knowledge and politics, and the association and mobilization of forces around them. And, while there is much of value in the attention directed by critical psychology to the conditions of the birth and functioning of the discipline, the focus on language and narrative, on the subjectification as a matter of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, is, at best, partial, at worst misguided. Subjectification is not to be understood by locating it in a universe of meaning or an interactional context of narratives, but in a complex of apparatuses, practices, machinations, and assemblages within which human being has been fabricated, and which presuppose and enjoin particular relations with ourselves. Such, at least, will be the argument developed, in different ways, in this book.

### *Subjectification: Government and psy*

These studies arise at the intersection of two concerns that appear to me to be intrinsically related. The first of these is a concern with the history of psychology, or rather, of all those disciplines which, since about the middle of the nineteenth century, have designated themselves with the prefix *psy* – psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis. This may seem perverse and limiting, for the *psy* disciplines are, after all, only a small element in contemporary culture, little understood by most people. Indeed, in popular culture, where *psy* is not parodied, it is often represented – or ‘misrepresented’ – in a way that makes professional and academic practitioners of the psychological specialisms throw up their hands in exasperation. However, I want to suggest that psychology, in the sense in which I will use the term here, has played a rather fundamental part in ‘making up’ the kinds of persons that we take ourselves to be. Psychology, in this sense, is not a body of abstracted theories and explanations, but an ‘intellectual technology’, a way of making