PART I

Introductory

CHAPTER I

Dimensions and contexts of selfhood

Few ideas are both as weighty and as slippery as the notion of the self. By "self" we commonly mean the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be. From knowledge of what the self truly is people have hoped to gain greater happiness, deeper fulfillment, liberation from fetters or restraints, better relations with other people, or ways to achieve power over them. Selfhood thus matters to us both as individuals and as social creatures, shaping our personal existence and our relations with those whose lives we somehow share.

But what is this self whose understanding seems to promise so much? Many practically minded people hardly think the question worth posing, knowing well enough who they are for their purposes, thank you, while those who offer answers to it often do so for expedient or self-interested reasons: to support a political program, validate a religious belief or practice, foster or oppose some social policy, justify failings or pretensions, or establish a claim to therapeutic power. The nature and meaning of the self are subject to constant redefinition, as it is ever-again taken up on behalf of some partisan aim or project. And yet the question does not lose its force from being appropriated in these ways. Faced with outdated, self-interested, malign, or inadequate answers to it, people have over and over responded with a desire for better ones, if only to counter the effects of those that will not do.

Hence the nature and meaning of selfhood have been recurring questions, implicitly or explicitly, in practically every known human time and place. Nowhere has the debate been more full-blown or more intense than in the modern West, the locale in which individuality has been both most fervently celebrated and most ardently denounced. On the one hand, Europe and America have been the scene of "the emancipation of the individual," of the politics of rights and "careers open to talent," the celebration of self

and even of self-interest, of the search for originality and the artistic and scientific cult of the sovereign and sometimes lonely genius. Yet much of the history of modern thought and culture is a story of the ways people have found to call all these claims for individual independence into question, to transcend mere selves by fusing them with communities, nations, classes, or cultures, or to humble them by trumpeting their radical dependency on historical processes, cosmic forces, biological drives, fundamental ontologies, discursive regimes, or semiotic systems. More than any other world culture, the modern West has made the debate about individuality and selfhood a central question – perhaps the central question – of its collective attempts at self-definition. Hence those who belong to this culture, or who are moved to conceive themselves in relation to it – even if the relation be one of rejection – have much reason to care about the self.

One testimony to this is the preeminent place given to questions about selfhood by those late twentieth-century writers (to begin with in France) who fostered the notion that modernity had given or was giving place to a new condition, implicitly or explicitly styled as "post-modern." In these schemas the departure or escape from the modern condition, and sometimes from the whole Western heritage that lay behind it, went along with attempts to proclaim or effect the end of the individual, the "death of the author," or the demise of the human self or subject. I was first drawn to the question of selfhood by a sense of concern (mainly skeptical) about these notions, and I attempted to grapple with them in fragmentary ways through encounters with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Roland Barthes, and Michel Foucault, followed by a longer study of an exemplary avant-garde artist who anticipated some of their views and attitudes, Marcel Duchamp.[1] The book that has finally emerged takes a far broader perspective, but it bears the marks of this origin.

Many reasons might be adduced for calling the claims of individual selfhood into question. Justifiably or not, the modern Western focus on the self has been linked to ills that range from social fragmentation and inequality through imperialism to ecological destruction; to reject or displace it can be a way to stand against the hazards it may let loose. But demoting the self can serve quite different ends, and one of these, clearly exhibited by some of the people just mentioned, has been to intend a mode of self-existence far more powerful and unrestricted than the one it sets out to dismiss. Like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Duchamp (joined by other figures of the artistic and literary avant-garde), Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida all argued that the independence claimed for the self in the modern West is an illusion. But they did so on behalf of a vision of transcendent freedom that overwhelms the more

modest visions of personal integration and regulated autonomy projected by the ideas and practices they sought to supersede. Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, Heidegger's authentic *Dasein*, Duchamp's yearning for an ecstatic "fourth dimension," Foucault's project of "the permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy," Derrida's invocation of a condition beyond finitude where the promise of a wholly other existence is permanently maintained – all exemplify such aspirations. As these instances suggest, attempts to locate or promote such untrammeled modes of self-existence arise more often and more characteristically out of the negation of the common-sense understanding of individuals as centers of action and consciousness than out of their affirmation; the sense that human beings must be all in order to escape being nothing has belonged more to those who have called the claims of ordinary everyday selfhood into question than to those who have sought some kind of fulfillment by way of it. This paradox, if it be one, lies at the center of modern arguments about the self, making it an object of intense contestation in our culture. The sense that some important and revealing questions about selfhood and its history can be illuminated by focusing on what is at stake in such disputes has been a major impulse behind the present book. Achieving such illumination, I will argue, requires that we start out from a general overview of the attributes that have been taken to constitute the self, and the kinds of relations that exist or have been thought to exist among them.

Since the time of Descartes and Locke (and less explicitly before, as we shall see), the basis of selfhood in Western culture has been sought primarily along or within three dimensions, ones that are familiar and should be easily recognizable to anyone. We will call them the bodily or material, the relational, and the reflective dimensions of the self. The first involves the physical, corporeal existence of individuals, the things about our nature that make us palpable creatures driven by needs, urges, and inclinations, and that give us particular constitutions or temperaments, making us for instance more or less energetic, lethargic, passionate, or apathetic. Our selves on this level, including whatever consciousness we have of them, are housed in our bodies, and are shaped by the body's needs. The second, relational, dimension arises from social and cultural interaction, the common connections and involvements that give us collective identities and shared orientations and values, making us people able to use a specific language or idiom and marking us with its particular styles of description, categorization, and expression. In this perspective our selves are what our relations with society and with others shape or allow us to be. The third dimension, that of reflectivity (some reasons for using this term, rather

than some others, will be given below), derives from the human capacity to make both the world and our own existence objects of our active regard, to turn a kind of mirror not only on phenomena in the world, including our own bodies and our social relations, but on our consciousness too, putting ourselves at a distance from our own being so as to examine, judge, and sometimes regulate or revise it. On this level the self is an active agent of its own realization, establishing order among its attitudes and beliefs, and giving direction to its actions. It appears to be – how far or how justifiably is not in question now – in some way self-constituting or self-made: we are what our attention to ourselves makes us be.

To be sure, such a schema is very rough, leaving many questions unaddressed. All three of the categories are broad enough that different and even opposed ways of thinking can find, and have found, footing within them. For example, bodily selfhood means one thing if one views the body in terms of organs and needs, as Freud did, and another when it is seen as the vehicle of genes and their imperatives, as some evolutionary biologists do in our day. The body regarded as a kind of machine, in the way certain early modern materialists proposed, implies a mode of selfhood very different from the one that appears when the body is taken as a restless source of ever-changing desire and will, as Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (preceded by the Marquis de Sade) had it. Similarly, relational selfhood means one thing when it is conceived in Marx's terms of class division and social conflict, and a different one when it is posited in the classical anthropological way, as operating through a culture that somehow infuses all the members of a population. It also makes an important difference whether the relations through which personal formation takes place are conceived as interpersonal, involving interaction between and among individuals, or rather as putting selves-in-formation directly up against society or culture as an independent entity, what Emile Durkheim called "a being *sui generis*," that stands above all its members and imposes obligations on them. As for reflective selves, they can appear in disembodied guise, as in René Descartes's claim that the being that thinks its own existence must be incorporeal and immortal, or they can be depicted as constantly struggling to achieve authenticity inside an engulfing material world, as in Jean-Paul Sartre's scenario of the "for-itself" forever bound up with an "in-itself." Reflectivity can distance the self so fully from all the everyday features of individual existence that it approaches the negation of material life altogether, as in what Paul Valéry called the *moi pure*, or it can be regarded as the principle of all life and the vehicle for reconciliation with it, as with Hegel's *Geist*. Hegel reminds us that reflectivity can also be given a developmental

form, exhibited in a different way by some recent accounts of the self as "narrative," weaving a pattern of continuity out of the moments or stages of its own evolving being.[2]

Despite these variations, each of the three dimensions fosters common features among the self-conceptions that arise along or within it. Bodily selfhood usually gives an image of the self that is independent of time and place, while relational selfhood, although it may claim to be applicable everywhere, marks individuals with patterns from some particular social or cultural matrix. Reflective selves, to the degree they are envisioned as such, and not as formed by experience or driven by bodily need or instinct, either innately possess or can acquire independence from physical and social existence. The dimension or dimensions chosen and the ways they are understood are central in determining the character and implications of any given conception of the self. On such bases there arise selves generated from within their own being or ones fabricated from outside, selves whose main features are universal or specific to some time and place, selves that are stable or fluid, and selves that are more or less autonomous or dependent, self-governing or in thrall to some power or powers of whose existence they may or may not be aware.

Underlying the many specific ways of picturing the self, there stands one broad alternative whose presence and importance only comes to light once the separability of the three dimensions is recognized. This is the difference between what we will call multi-dimensional and one-dimensional accounts of the self. It may not always be immediately apparent under which of these two descriptions a particular image or theory falls; we shall see that one mode or delineation can mask the other, and certain thinkers have shifted between them. But the persistence of the two options is a significant and little-recognized feature of the history of thinking about the self, and it has a strong bearing on the phenomenon mentioned a moment ago, the perhaps paradoxical conjunction between radically narrowing the self's independence or autonomy and inflating it beyond limits. Neither possibility receives much encouragement when selfhood is conceived as multi-dimensional. If the self takes shape at the intersection of multiple coordinates, each with a different vector, then it is bound to be subject to competing pressures and tensions. The demands of the body strain against the limits culture imposes on need or desire, while reflectivity may set itself against both relational and material modes of self-existence. To acknowledge these strains and stresses is not the same as to deny that individuals can attain to a measure of stable unity and integrity, however: one can give close attention to them while still regarding some significant degree of

consistency and self-directedness as a goal worth pursuing. Freud provides perhaps the most notable example in the realm of theory (and Freud's self was three-dimensional, bodily in its deep origins, reflective through the "secondary process" or "reality principle" that regulated conscious thought and action, and relational through the super-ego's internalization of models and ideals), and John Stuart Mill's account of his own life fits the description too, as do many novelistic portrayals, prominent among them Proust's autobiographical narrator and, despite the label, Robert Musil's "man without qualities." There are good reasons for thinking such unity possible even in the face of tensions that undermine it, as Hume among others insisted: if we had no stable way of being the persons we are then we could neither plan for the future nor engage in social relations, since we would have little or no reason to expect that the notions about ourselves or others we relied on yesterday or an hour ago can provide guidance now or tomorrow. But often personal integration remains problematic or incomplete (as many of the figures we will encounter below were painfully aware); it can be a lifetime project for some, and even those who attain it may do so along a path strewn with crises and failures, testimony to the troubles and vicissitudes that balancing the diverse constituents of self-existence entails.

None of these barriers to actually achieving pure, homogeneous selfhood stands in the way of conceiving or imagining it, however. An image of such a seamless existence arises as soon as one posits the self along a single one of the three dimensions, whether that of bodily, relational, or reflective being. Some thinkers have postulated self-existence in a single dimension, as Descartes did at the moment when he said "I think, therefore I am," making the self's essential being arise out of its ability to reflect on its own existence, or as Diderot did in *D'Alembert's Dream* when he had one speaker attribute both moral personality and social identity to bodily constitution. Some have attributed to one dimension the power of imposing itself on the others, as Marx did when he pictured social relations as determining both consciousness and perceived bodily needs. Others have proceeded by way of more complex strategies, such as the different but related ones that Nietzsche and Heidegger worked out in order to conceive selfhood in lower and higher forms, the first (Nietzsche's "the weak" or Heidegger's "*das Man*") wholly formed from outside, and the second (Nietzsche's "the strong" or Heidegger's "authentic *Dasein*") able to determine the conditions of its being through its own self-referential agency. Such selves are the only ones that can achieve unbroken homogeneity, and they therefore may appeal especially to those who for some reason need or wish to conceive individuals as essentially uniform beings, whether to prove their purely

spiritual or purely material nature, to show that they are fully autonomous or wholly determined by external powers or circumstances, or to make them available for enlistment in causes that require an undifferentiated identity or a no-questions-asked commitment and devotion.

What is perhaps surprising about one-dimensional models of the self is the capacity they often display to transfigure life, by envisioning a rapid passage between – or sometimes a coexistence of – images that confine human agency within rigid limits and ones that give the widest possible scope to it. It is just such metamorphoses that generate the pattern remarked above, in which denials of the self's independence lodge together with its radical exaltation. The same thinkers who imagine a self so deeply infused with the conditions of its material nature or surroundings that it possesses little or no capacity for going beyond them turn out to be those who imagine one capable of constituting itself wholly by some kind of profoundly liberating self-directedness. The Cartesian ego suddenly enters into the truth of its own self-referential subjectivity just at the point when its subjection to worldly confusion and uncertainty seems most complete. Fichte in his early works envisaged the ego as at once tightly hemmed in by the limitations of objective existence and ceaselessly rediscovering the inner foundation of its pure autonomy, and he later found a way to depict the person formed wholly from outside, in a hermetic and rigidly controlled educational system, as the bearer of unalloyed freedom. Marx's first scenario for working-class revolution represented the proletariat as capable of receiving the explosive truth of human freedom from the heights of philosophical reflection and acting to realize it precisely by virtue of its unconditional subjection to material chains, and in *The German Ideology* he saw those same workers as passing from the state of complete loss of self-activity (*Selbsttätigkeit*) to one of full, even limitless self-possession in the moment of revolution. (Some of his later writings made less radical claims, but these early images exhibit the original configuration of his thinking.) The Nietzschean and Heideggerian alternatives mentioned in the previous paragraph fit this pattern too, picturing the narrow and expanded forms of the self as existing either simultaneously or in a pattern of succession that promised the emergence of the second out of an inner transformation of the first.[3]

Understanding these instances requires close attention to each case, but one thing that makes possible such passages between a self that is narrowly confined and one that is radically free is their common absence of ambiguity. To feel or believe that human beings do or should belong to one of two unqualified and mutually exclusive states is a familiar and recurring feature

of the relations we create or imagine for ourselves and others, for instance as masters and slaves, civilized and barbarians, saved and damned, oppressed and free. Putting one's trust in such polarities constitutes one particular way of viewing the world. Psychologically the continuity between states in which the self is all and in which it is nothing appears in the rapid passage from one to the other often exhibited by children, and by the mentally troubled, both of whom may go quickly from feeling their environment as an unalloyed extension of themselves to experiencing things around them as unbearable or deeply threatening. Another way to say this is that the two alternatives of no-self and all-self both posit dependence and independence as incompatible with each other. What images of self-existence as fully under the sway of powers outside it have in common with pictures of an ego that is unconditioned or absolute is denial that the mix of autonomy and dependency commonly found in ordinary life represents the genuine or authentic condition of personal existence. To treat partial limitations as total is the other face of an attitude for which freedom must be absolute in order to exist at all.

In creating these alternatives as conditions of the self, the three dimensions do not all play the same role. Where the self's freedom or autonomy is at issue, the reflective dimension is the one that is most likely to be exalted or diminished. The reason lies in the special kind of self-determination it promises. Reflectivity is not the only power that can work against the limits of individual and social existence; culturally founded practices can oppose and contest biological necessities (as in monasticism or other ascetic ways of life), and physical or material needs may impel people to overthrow social constraints. But taken in themselves such ways of gaining latitude for the self institute limitations of their own, reenforcing other dependencies. By contrast, reflectivity can promise an unconditional kind of liberty and self-determination, because it seems able to take its distance successively from each and every determinate form of existence, and so be limited by none. Only reflectivity can claim to found the radical freedom of the self, and only its eradication can issue in a self that is totally absorbed into some set of external determinations.

For this reason, what most often underlies any thinker's or writer's espousal of a one-dimensional or a multi-dimensional view of the self is that person's way of setting reflectivity in relation to the other attributes. Where reflectivity's relationship to the other dimensions is thought or felt in terms that allow for positive coexistence or mutual support, so that it neither consumes them nor is consumed by them, the self will possess a limited but substantial independence from the material and relational conditions

that partly determine it. Where the self is envisioned either in a way that conceives its most basic or genuine form as generated by reflection alone, or that pictures reflectivity as essentially subjected to one or both of the other dimensions, the self faces the polar possibilities of total autonomy or thoroughgoing constraint. Selves do not need to be strictly one-dimensional in order to exhibit these diametrical alternatives; it is enough that reflectivity's domination of or by them (sometimes one of them, if it is conceived as decisive) is presented as basic to the self's essential being. Few thinkers ignore any dimension of the self altogether; what matters is the kind of relationship that is posited among them.

One condition of thinking about the self especially prepares the passage from extreme narrowing or confinement to its opposite: those who theorize the radical circumscription of the self must speak from outside the position in which the theory seems to put them. No theory can claim general validity if it knows itself to be predetermined by conditions over which reason has no control. Marx could not (although he tried) confine his own thinking within the theory that made ideas merely the reflex of social conditions and class relations. Nietzsche's diagnosis of his time as pervaded by a nihilism and decadence that sickened and weakened the people around him was made from a position that was intellectually beyond (even though he himself was not existentially beyond) those conditions. Heidegger described ordinary human beings as robbed of any control over their own ideas and actions by the anonymous and insidious power of *das Man* from the opposite perspective of "authentic" existence. Because human beings are reflective creatures, they can theorize the disappearance of their own reflectivity only by directing it with special intensity on themselves and others. In doing so they display the persisting human power to stand back from our own being in the very attention to the self and the world through which its extinction is supposed to be demonstrated, emphatically exhibiting the capacity to know and affect the conditions of their own constitution that their theorizing denies. Since in doing so they set that capacity wholly apart from the conditions said to shape the self from outside, there already glimmers in it the prospect of a self constituted wholly by its own self-referential agency, a prospect realized in the images of higher selfhood mentioned above, and which we will examine in more detail below.

Behind the multitude of alternative selves engendered by the many ways in which the dimensions of selfhood have been conceived and put in relation to each other, there lie questions about human biology, psychology, and social relations whose content and complexity far exceed our ability to deal with them here. We do need to say something about them all the same.