

Introduction

This book is a theory-guided attempt to give an in-depth analysis of some of the pressing problems of our time as they emerge at the interface of self and society. I believe we are in need of rethinking the relationship between self, other, and the natural environment as a response to the limitations of the Western self-ideal. In order to realize this, I will present Dialogical Self Theory (DST) as a bridging theory at the interface of social sciences and philosophy. It is my purpose to present this theory as providing a broad picture view of some problem areas that place us in a field of tension between liberation and imprisonment.

Exploring Fundamentals

For several decades I've been "walking around" with the question: What is most fundamental in the conception of self and its history? Not only the answer but even the question may sound overly pretentious. I realized that, if I would give it a try, I would need to explore not only my own field, psychology with its relatively short history, but also philosophy with its much longer history of the self, traditionally addressed as the "soul." One of the most fascinating and insightful discoveries during this journey was Plato's "tripartite theory of the soul" that I see as a most audacious integration of three basic elements: the soul, the body, and society. This integrative view was most exciting to me given Dialogical Self Theory's striving to find linkages between the same three elements: self, body, and society. This theory conceptualizes the self as a dynamic multiplicity of embodied I-positions in the society of mind, with the possibility of realizing dialogical relations among positions. With Plato as an iconic example, I became aware, more than in previous books, that the self consists of not only individual I-positions but also collective we-positions. As extensions of I-positions, we-positions refer to the experience of being participants at different levels of inclusiveness: I as a participant of social

groups, as a participant of humanity, and as a participant of nature and the earth. In their historical and cultural expressions, we-positions have the power to organize and reorganize individual I-positions and their movement through time and space. Therefore, one of the main purposes of this book is to expand DST in the direction of we-positions that organize the I-positions of the dialogical self, contextualized as it is in history and culture.¹

However, becoming familiar with Plato's tripartite theory, I stumbled upon one basic problem. His theory is highly centralized with reason above emotion, the mind above the body, and his own society as superior to other societies. Given this organization of the soul, I could well understand Plato's ideal society in which the king-philosophers as ruling elite were placed above the "lower classes" of the military and the producing workers. His skeptical attitude to democracy, however, is in contradiction to DST's assumption of the self as a democratically organized and strongly decentralized society of I-positions.² I realized that DST, emerging from our highly complex, globalizing, and localizing society, deviates significantly from the small-scale polis of ancient Greece. Given this contrast between DST and the tripartite theory, I was faced with the puzzling question of what is the relationship between centralization and decentralization of the self.

Centralization and Decentralization of the Self

In order to explore an answer to that challenging question, I did more reading in the history of philosophy and discovered that there is sufficient ground for observing two lines that run across the centuries: one line highlighting the *centralizing* organization of the self or soul, represented by thinkers such as Plato, Saint Augustine, and Descartes, and another line of theorists who emphasized the *decentralizing* of the self, with Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Freud as prominent examples (Figure I.1).

I reasoned that the most viable conclusion is not only to take both movements, the centralizing and decentralizing ones, into account but also to see them, moreover, as mutually complementary. They simply need each other. Why? Inspired by American pragmatism,³ I realized that both movements, when unrestrained by its counterpart, go, gradually but

¹ For the place of Dialogical Self Theory in cultural psychology, see Valsiner (2019).

² Hermans (2018).

³ For a discussion of DST in the context of American pragmatism, see Duus (2020).

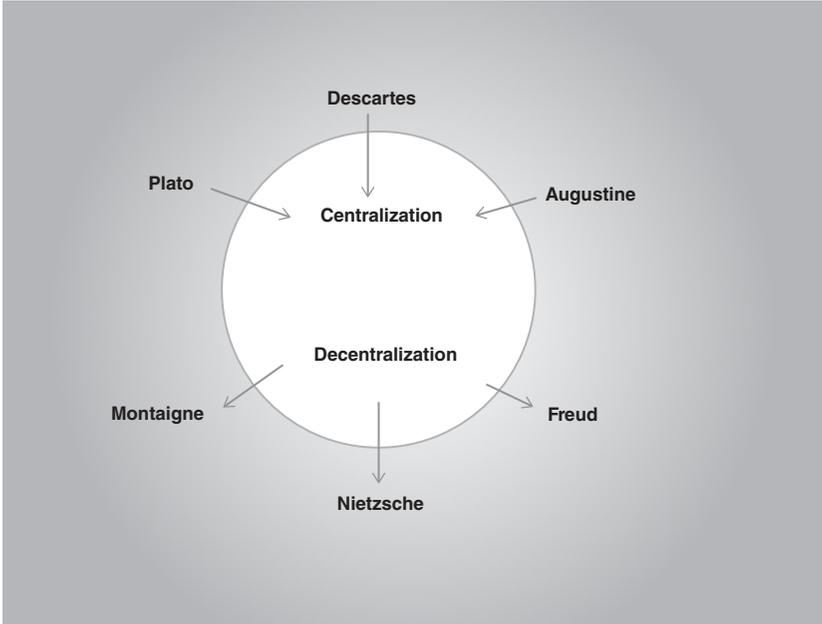


Figure I.1 Theorists representing centralization and decentralization of the self
 Source: The author

unmistakably, into overdrive with enormous practical implications for self and society. Overcentralization of the self results in the formation of a “container self,”⁴ typical of individualism and narcissism, often considered endemic in modern Western societies. Over-decentralization of the self, on the other hand, leads to anarchy and a confusing cacophony of voices unable to understand each other. On the societal level, we witness parallel phenomena: overcentralization can be observed in ultranationalism, tribalism, and divisive forms of identity politics; over-decentralization is typical of a globalizing society at risk of identity confusion, the breakdown of communities, and alienation from one’s culture of origin.

These wanderings brought me to choose the term “liberation” in the title of the present book. Why this concept? Before writing and even more during the writing itself, I felt irresistibly drawn to the formulation of this thesis, which I see as the crux of the book: *centralization without decentralization and also decentralization without centralization lead, in their*

⁴ Sampson (1988) and Callero (2003).

*final consequences, to imprisonment of self and society; in contrast, centralization **with** decentralization as mutually complementary movements offer the perspective of self-liberation and a truly liberal society.* Both processes, centralization and decentralization, will be elaborated on and further explored throughout the book as an unfolding of the nuclear definition of the dialogical self. As a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions and we-positions in the society of mind, the self is subjected to decentralizing movements. In its capacity of creating dialogical relationships among these positions, the dialogical self puts its centralizing forces into operation.

Main Themes of the Book

There are several themes that are “cycling” through the book as whole. They appear in several chapters and together form the basic structure of the book: the other-in-the-self, living in I-prisons, the experience of uncertainty, the re-enchantment of the world, and the pursuit of happiness and well-being.

Other-in-the-Self

The relationship between self and other is a topic that is relevant to the widespread phenomena of self-contained individualism and narcissism considered as the result of overcentralizing movements in the self. The book proposes that a prolific view on the relationship between self and other can be achieved when other individuals and groups (family members, circle of friends, opponents) and also nature are not simply located outside the self but form intrinsic *participants* of its dynamic constellation and contribute to its organization and reorganization. Elaborating on Sartre’s play *No Exit*, I show that the other in the self sometimes functions as “hell,” but at other times as “heaven.” Building on these considerations, I will discuss the nature of dialogical relationships.

Living in I-Prisons and We-Prisons

It is a well-known fact that in our society, at least in many countries, people are plagued by stress and depression and are becoming locked up in the closed centers of themselves. Such phenomena can be studied with the concept of “I-prison,” which refers to an I-position in which the person feels imprisoned for a shorter or longer time, or even permanently.

Main Themes of the Book

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Two kinds of prison will be distinguished and clarified with examples in psychology and sociology: (1) individual I-prisons as experienced in loneliness and rumination where individuals feel locked up in their own body or psychological state of mind, not able to find an exit; (2) societal we-prisons referring to situations in which we as a collective are imprisoned, in particular by social isolation, increasing commercialization and an overpositioning economy.

The Experience of Uncertainty

One of the most pressing challenges of our time, with its rapidly changing situations and complexity of problems, is the feeling of uncertainty that exerts forces in the direction of decentralizing movements in the self. This particular experience has two very different manifestations. When uncertainty is intruding upon many I-positions of one's self, and when, moreover, its intensity exceeds a particular level, then the self as a whole feels threatened or unsafe and responds with defense and self-protecting behavior. However, uncertainty also has a positive and liberating side: it broadens the scope of one's view and makes a larger variety of I-positions accessible so that a broader outlook is possible and alternative routes become visible and viable. The present book focuses on uncertainty both as a danger and as an opportunity to deal with unpredictable situations and complex problems in the field of tension between imprisonment and liberation.

The Re-enchantment of the World

Since the writings of sociologist Max Weber,⁵ the process of “disenchantment of the world” has attracted the interest of many theorists who assume that under the influence of science and technology, the physical and material environment has gradually lost its subjective character and has given way to a perception of the human being as surrounded by an environment of lifeless objects. In opposition to this view, recent theoretical work has emphasized that, as a reaction to the assumed disenchantment of the world, counterreactions are emerging, already in modernity, that embody a re-enchantment of the world. This view implies that disenchantment and re-enchantment are not to be conceived of as successive phases, but simultaneous movements in self and world. This simultaneity creates space for the extended self to

⁵ Weber (1992).

perceive objects, instead of lifeless *it*-positions, as shining *I*-positions (e.g., in ecstasy, transcendence, myths, self-surrender). Such experiences, discussed under the heading of decentralization, will be sketched as ways to liberate oneself from the cage of living in a lifeless and objectified environment.

Expanded View on Well-Being

The question will be posed whether psychology's conceptualization of well-being is sufficient to understand the needs of our time. I will address the distinction, proposed by mainstream psychology, between hedonic happiness, oriented toward one's own individual pleasure, and eudaimonic happiness that is focused on human growth and well-being. Instigated by the wake-up calls of climate change and the rapid spread of pandemics, I propose that we need a *more extensive view on well-being*, one that incorporates not only the happiness associated with individual emotions and group favoritisms but also the well-being of humanity as a whole and even of nature and the earth. This broader conception is particularly relevant in an era of meritocracy and "economic over-positioning," which entails the risk of "hunting for happiness" in the form of short-term consumption pleasure and instant gratifications. Looking for cultural differences, I was lucky to find out that some colleagues applied DST in their own culture: Africa, Japan, China, and indigenous America. Learning from their insights and comparing these cultures with our modern Western culture, I critically discuss the sharp self versus nonself boundaries of the overly autonomous Western self-ideal that has resulted in a highly centralized container self, isolated as it is from the social and natural environment. This leads to the conclusion that it is time to share our well-being with the earth and all its inhabitants.

Rotation Method

Throughout the book, I use a rotation method that allows discussing DST in relation to a series of other views, theories, and research findings, guided by the question of what DST can learn from them with the eye on its further articulation and development. This method allows enlightening different aspects of the theory, sometimes leading to responses DST can give to classic theories and at other times criticizing or complementing them. For example, I systematically compare DST with authors representing the centralizing line – Plato, Augustine, and Descartes – and explore how DST can incorporate some of the centralizing features of their

philosophies. Likewise, a comparison with the theorists representing the decentralizing line – Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Freud – invites the exploration and articulation of the decentralizing aspects of DST. The same method is applied to research resources. For example, there is quite some empirical evidence on loneliness, rumination, and happiness. I give summaries of such findings and rephrase them in terms of DST. Sometimes I introduce new elements derived from DST, when I notice that research findings are based on limited assumptions and need revision or complementation. Throughout the book, I look for “meeting places” in research areas where I see the possibility of productive connections between DST and other theoretical or empirical endeavors.

The use of the rotation method is well in agreement with DST as a “bridging theory” in search of connections with other theories as a way to gain new insights and research ideas. As we have explained elsewhere,⁶ DST is devised neither as a grand theory that pretends to arrive at a comprehensive or “final” integrative view of existing self-conceptions nor as a mini-theory that is focused on a fairly narrow segment of human functioning. It is rather a bridging theory that aims to “meet” a diversity of theories, research traditions, and practices in order to create new and unexpected linkages. However, the book does more than just looking for “linkages.” DST is a theory itself with an own identity and specific conceptual framework. However, this framework is constructed as an “octopus theory” open enough to “spread its arms” to different, even contradictory, conceptual frameworks in order to find platforms for “unexpected meetings,” to learn from each other, and to generate ideas for future research.

Difference with Previous Books

What is specific about this book in comparison with previous books on DST? I limit myself to four books that are most relevant in the present context. In *Dialogical Self Theory: Positioning and Counter-Positioning in a Globalizing Society*,⁷ the conceptual framework of DST was presented with an exposition of the differences between the traditional, modern, and postmodern selves. The same book presented the basic concepts of the theory (e.g., meta-position, promoter position, coalition). The present book makes use of these concepts but applies them to some of the most challenging problem areas that humanity is facing in the present era, for

⁶ Hermans and Gieser (2012).

⁷ Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010).

example, self and uncertainty, self in relation to economy and ecology, the limitations and potentials of the pursuit of happiness, the challenge of climate change, and the spread of pandemics.

The *Handbook of Dialogical Self Theory*⁸ focused on theory, methods, and applications and brought researchers and practitioners together who applied DST in their specific research areas. However, none of the chapters of the Handbook dealt with the function of the body and the problems of uncertainty and well-being and it did not create links with philosophy. The present book is an attempt to fill these gaps.

In *Society in the Self: A Theory of Identity in Democracy*,⁹ DST was applied to the connection between identity and democracy. The book was an attempt to explain what it means when the self-system is organized in a democratic versus an autocratic way. One of the purposes of the book was an in-depth discussion of the difference between dialogue in the Bakhtinian sense¹⁰ and dialogue as proposed by David Bohm¹¹ and how DST offers a framework for combining elements from both conceptual traditions. The present book shortly summarizes this combination, but its emphasis is on the further potentials and practical implications of the concept of “generative dialogue,” as this concept is particularly relevant to articulate the innovative and community-creating potentials of dialogical relationships. Moreover, the present book provides an extensive application of DST on well-being with special attention to the well-being of humanity and the earth, problem areas that were not discussed in any of the previous books.

The purpose of *Citizenship Education and the Personalization of Democracy*¹² was to provide future teachers at the college level with an educational text, including theory, research, and exercises, to foster a democratic attitude in the pupils and their (future) classrooms. Inspired by DST, that book contains exercises and practical examples that can be used for explaining the distinction between different identity levels: I as an individual, we as a group, we as participants of humanity, and we as participants of the earth. The same levels of inclusiveness also play a significant role in the present book where they appear at different levels of well-being.¹³

⁸ Hermans and Gieser (2012). ⁹ Hermans (2018). ¹⁰ Bakhtin (1984).

¹¹ Bohm (1996). ¹² Hermans and Bartels (2021).

¹³ For more general practical applications of DST to the field of education, see Meijers and Hermans (2018) and to the field of psychotherapy, see Konopka, Hermans, and Goncalves (2019). For the creation of learning environments as trajectories to dialogue and democracy, see Kennedy (2020).

Chapter Contents

The chapters of this book deal with the field of tension between centralization and decentralization and their relationship with the imprisonment or liberation of the self. At the end of each chapter, I sketch a number of practical implications.

Chapter 1 deepens the understanding of the dialogical self by considering it through the lens of Plato's tripartite theory of the soul that brings together three elements in an imaginative construction: body, mind, and society. DST incorporates the same elements but in a different manner. Whereas Plato's theory integrates them in a highly centralizing way, DST gives room to their decentralizing tendencies.

In Chapter 2, the centralizing line, started with Plato, is continued by exploring the work of Augustine and Descartes, the latter one generally considered as the much-criticized father of modern philosophy. This centralizing line is contrasted by discussing the work of three thinkers who emphasize the decentralizing movements of the self: Montaigne, Nietzsche, and Freud. The chapter leads to the conclusion that a proper understanding of DST requires both the centralizing and decentralizing trends as two opposite, at the same time mutually complementary, movements in the highly dynamic household of the self.

Chapter 3 is based on the idea that the potentials and the limits of dialogue can be clarified only if we take its positional basis into account. In order to clarify this thesis, I start this chapter by contrasting two situations: one portrayed in the play *No Exit*, written by the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and the other one referring to a mass meeting of a civil rights movement, in collective protest against racial suppression. With these two situations as starting points, I clarify the nature of dialogue in the broad sense of sign-mediated interchange among positions and the so-called "generative dialogue" that aims at innovation and commonality of positioned interlocutors. In order to explain the specific quality of generative dialogue, I detail the difference between debate and dialogue.

Chapter 4 starts with introducing sociologist Max Weber's thesis of the "disenchantment of the world" that critically discusses the science-based objectification and rationalization of the environment. However, the ideal of the self as highly centralized in itself and its associated pursuit of full mastery of the environment have received a powerful response from a decentralizing countermovement that can be summarized under the broad label "spirituality." This countermovement represents a widespread attempt to bring the "spirit" back into the environment and, at the same

time, into the self as a participant of this living environment. With this idea in mind, I present literature on the experience of awe and the possibility of an “encounter” with the environment in the areas of spirituality and creativity. In these areas, I investigate how “objects” can be transformed into “subjects” and how the world can be experienced as filled with I-positions. As a practical implication, specific guidelines are presented in order to open the self to the experience of awe as a first step to the “depositioning” of the self.

Chapter 5 is focused on the self as imprisoned. I discuss two phenomena that inhibit a fully-fledged dialogical self. One is rumination as closely associated with a depressive state of mind; the other is loneliness as an unpleasant emotional response to perceived social isolation. There is empirical evidence demonstrating that the interchanges with ourselves are, to some degree, determined by genetic factors. However, the dialogical self has, at the same time, the possibility to trigger forms of counter-positioning that, if they are strong enough, open the path to self-liberation. However, self-imprisonment is not a purely personal phenomenon that centers around I-positions, as there are also collective factors that as we-positions play their part. I focus on two collective trends: the problem of social isolation and the problem of an over-positioning economy. In this context, I discuss how the self can find alternative routes in the direction of prosperity, conceived of as broader and more multifaceted than just economic prosperity.

In Chapter 6, I discuss that the experience of uncertainty is one of the most pervasive problems of our society, faced as it is by climate change, pandemics, artificial intelligence, immigration, and the increasing power of algorithms. These challenges are not only shaking the foundations of our society, but they also work as strongly decentralizing movements in the self, making it more uncertain and unstable than ever. Central to this chapter is the distinction between the disorganizing impact of uncertainty and its constructive potential to provide a multiplicity of alternative positions. At the end, I present a model for an expanded identity definition with different levels of inclusiveness: I as individual, we as group members, we as humans, and we as participants of the earth.

In Chapter 7, I mention that happiness is one of the most basic values of human existence and, at the same time, one of the most widespread obsessions of our time. This obsession finds its roots in the ideal of the modern self that, under the influence of the Enlightenment, became overly centralized, with sharp boundaries between self and nonself, the other as located outside the self, and having the environment under control.