

3

Toward a Cultural Phenomenology of Personal Identity

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How does our inherited world of meaning relate to our fundamental experience of ourselves as persons? Is there a core of self-consciousness that is sequestered from the constitutive reach of culture and language? Can we speak of an unmediated basis for personal identity? These are the questions I will explore in this chapter. My method will be analytic, not comparative or ethnographic. Psychological anthropology and cross-cultural psychology have produced rich literatures showcasing the diversity of conceptions of the person in terms of its physical, mental, and spiritual properties (Csordas, 1994; Fogelson, 1982; Heelas & Lock, 1981; Marsella, DeVos, & Hsu, 1985; Morris, 1994). I will not review these ample literatures here. Rather, my purpose is to provide a warrant and direction for considering self-consciousness as a thoroughly cultured form of experience. My argument will involve reviewing and questioning the commitment to a phenomenological universalism, exemplified by Kant's transcendental account of the *I*. From there, I will proceed to a sociocultural discussion of the temporality of subjectivity, as it manifests in both the synchronic and diachronic unity of personal identity. By taking subjective time as my focus, I will demonstrate how cultural forms are implicated in even the most immanent and fundamental aspects of self-consciousness.

Psychologists intent on uncovering the universal operations of the mind often give short shrift to arguments for the cultural contingency of these operations. Relativistic claims of any sort strike them as misguided at best and scientifically retrograde at worst. Oftentimes it is a short road from dismissal to annoyance. In discussing consciousness as a symbolically—and therefore culturally—mediated experience with antirelativist colleagues, I am at times reminded of the vivid line from Hanns Johst's play *Schlageter*, made infamous by the war criminal Hermann Göring: "Whenever I hear the word culture ... I release the safety-catch of my Browning." Granted, few if any psychologists are guilty of such fierce anti-intellectualism. Still, one has the sense that a focus on the cultural description of human

experience is inconvenient for and unwelcome in certain quarters of our discipline. The opposition is perhaps understandable. However positivist in its modern scientific spirit, it is Kantian in its universalism. To appreciate this commonality, we need to consider what Kant had to say about subjectivity.

KANT AND THE SELF OUT OF REACH

In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1990) Kant uses his “transcendental logic” to identify the elements that give form to consciousness. He holds up time and space as the two pure forms of “sensuous intuition,” the necessary *a priori* conditions of all human experience. Overlaying these forms are the 12 pure conceptions of understanding, or categories (unity, plurality, totality, reality, negation, etc.). The self-conscious subject is, for Kant, neither a category nor a pure intuition akin to space and time. Rather, the *I* is the “supreme” or “highest” principle of all cognition, providing as it does “the unity of consciousness in which all thinking consists.”

I am, therefore, conscious of my identical self, in relation to all the variety of representations given to me in an intuition, because I call all of them my representations. In other words, I am conscious myself of a necessary *a priori* synthesis of my representations, which is called the original synthetical unity of apperception, under which rank all the representations presented to me, but that only by means of a synthesis. (p. 78)

Kant goes on to dispatch the “paralogism” or misunderstanding of the self as substance, concluding that the *I* cannot know itself other than through the phenomena to which it is synthetically bound.

The subject cannot be cognized. The subject of the categories cannot, therefore, for the very reason that it cogitates these, frame any conception of itself as an object of the categories; for to cogitate these, it must lay at the foundation of its own pure self-consciousness—the very thing that it wishes to explain and describe. In like manner, the subject, in which the representation of time has its basis, cannot determine, for this very reason, its own existence in time. (p. 225)

This logical deflation of the Cartesian *cogito* renders the Kantian *I* a constitutive quality of thought that is presupposed in experience and therefore cannot itself be cognized as a determinate object of thought. It is as empty and elusive as it is indispensable.

I present Kant’s position for two reasons. First, I believe it makes explicit a viewpoint underlying the universalism of contemporary psychology’s approach to the reflexivity of consciousness. This significance is hardly obvious. At first glance, the 18th-century philosophy of a German idealist appears wholly dissonant with today’s empirical psychology. There is, nonetheless, an important connection. Kant’s reduction of the *I* to a “logical function” of consciousness, divested of all quality and aspect, is a distant precursor of modern functionalism’s turning away from *what it is like* to be self-conscious (Nagel, 1979) and toward a restrictive preoc-

cupation with *how it is* that we are, or can be, self-conscious. This epistemological turn invites an exclusive search for universal process and causal explanation, what Brentano (1874/1995) referred to as “genetic psychology.” After all, the only particularity that could attach to the internal *functions* of human cognition would be species-specific. Conveniently, questions of meaning—the symbolic content of experience—are pushed aside to reveal the decontextualized workings of the human mind: *Ecce homo in vacuo*. Thus, it is of little surprise that many psychologists who fancy themselves explorers of the self find little need for sociological, linguistic, or historical analysis in pursuit of their objectives. Their position is at least defensible. It is premised in part on the independence of mental process and mental content. That is, it assumes that what is important to know about self-consciousness as a mental property is not conditioned to any appreciable extent by the individual’s social and cultural lifeworld. What an individual learns to attend to in the intentional flow of reflexive experience, and how that experience is constituted through the symbolic forms and conceptual distinctions afforded by a particular language, is assumed to be irrelevant to the basic “operations” of consciousness. The strict functionalist stance results in an obviation of inner experience that is as complete as Kant’s transcendental definition of the pure ego, or *I*. In both cases, the felt *I*-ness of consciousness—the experience that my thoughts are mine—is forced well into the background. Also in both cases, there is the tacit belief that core *I*-ness must feel much the same for all individuals, however different they are one from another, and group from group, in other respects. It is this belief that I wish to call into question in advancing a cultural phenomenology of the self.

The second reason for beginning with Kant is to highlight his “deduction” of the innate forms and categories that allow for synthetic experience of the world. As mentioned, Kant saw the *I* as neither pure form nor category, but an all-pervasive intuition underlying and infusing both in the constitution of experience. This conceptual indeterminacy was further mystified (in rather different ways) by Fichte and Hegel. All three leave us with the nagging question: What is the exact status of the *I* in the structure and order of thought? Without this specification, it is difficult to address its relations to culture. The issue was revisited by Marcel Mauss (1938/1985) in his influential essay on the person. To this I now turn.

MAUSS AND THE SELF AS PERSON

As Durkheim’s nephew and a leading exponent of the French school of sociology during the first half of the 20th century, Mauss was naturally attuned to the social history of thought. Whereas Kant’s transcendental philosophy was largely ahistorical, Mauss approached the problematic of the self by examining its emergence across time and place. Early in his essay, he draws a distinction between the “sense of self” as an aspect of individual consciousness or “awareness” and the “concept of self” as evident in the collective representations and institutions of a society. He appears to have little to say about the sense of self, other than affirming it as a universal feature of mind: “Let me merely say that it is plain ... that there has never

existed a human being who has not been aware, not only of his body, but also at the same time of his individuality, both spiritual and physical" (1932/1985, p. 3).

Jaynes (1976) would later dispute this claim in his controversial and highly speculative account of the phylogeny of self-consciousness. The awareness of *I*, argued Jaynes, is a linguistically mediated innovation that radically transformed the simpler "bicameral mind" of our predecessors around 3,000 years ago. Be that as it may, Mauss, in disavowing the task of delving into "the psychology of this awareness," avoided the charge of relativizing the ghostly Kantian ego. He held himself to be examining "not the sense of self—but the notion or concept that men in different ages have formed of it," or "the succession of forms that this concept has taken on in the life of men of different societies" (p. 3). This latter subject he believed to be "independent" of psychological analysis. It must be said, however, that the details of Mauss's exposition betray him on this point. If he did indeed see the concept of self as a second-order, symbolic elaboration with little bearing on a more basic experience of self, why refer to the former as a "category of the human mind"? The phrase is a clear reference to Aristotle and Kant, whose categories were fundamental and formative of thought, not mere cultural expressions. I believe that Mauss made this choice because he did not in fact accept the epistemological status that Kant assigned his categories. Rather, he saw categories as *seemingly* innate ideas that, however formative of thought, are ever-evolving constructions afforded the individual by society. This interpretation allows us to understand his casting of the modern synonymy of selfhood with personhood as a sociopolitical achievement of the Enlightenment.

We cannot exaggerate the importance of sectarian movements throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for the formation of political and philosophical thought. There it was that were posed the questions regarding individual liberty, regarding the individual conscience and the right to communicate directly with God, to be one's own priest, to have an inner God. The ideas of the Moravian Brothers, the Puritans, the Wesleyans, and the Pietists are those which form the basis on which is established the notion: the "person" equals the "self"; the "self" equals consciousness, and is its primordial category. (p. 21)

Kant himself, whom Mauss describes as a "feeble philosopher but well-informed psychologist and theologian" (p. 22), is reduced to a "precise" formalizer of this historical turn, not the discoverer of some immanent logic of human experience.

Seen in this light, Mauss's anthropological survey is an account of the *social* emergence of the self as a category of thought, one that is ever changing. Contrary to Kant's convictions, there is no deeper, "intuitive" scaffolding with which to grapple. Or, if there is, it lies outside the limits of language and, as Wittgenstein (1921/1974) aptly put it, "what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" for "what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense" (p. 4). The only *I* that we can experience and talk about with meaning is embodied and sociohistorically specific, not transcendentally universal. Accordingly, Mauss dethrones the notion of category by placing it in accusatory quotes toward

the end of his essay: "Who knows even whether this 'category,' which all of us here believe to be well founded, will always be recognized at such? It is formulated only for us, among us" (1938/1985, p. 22).

With Kant's epistemological conceits pushed aside, Mauss is free to describe the cultural evolution of the self. His account begins with the identity of individual and social role (*personnage*) in the preliterate societies of Australia and North America, moves on to the Etruscan wearer of a mask (*persona*), then the Roman personality (*personnalité*) behind the mask, and, finally, the legally recognized person (*personne*) and Christian moral being. However skeptical we may be of Mauss's evolutionary sequence and of his limited understanding of the societies he refers to in illustrating his arguments, his main thesis is hard to deny. This is that the notion of self held up as a natural and "primordial category" by any society is in fact tied to the cultural practices and social institutions that regulate the relations and activities of individuals in that society. I wish to adopt the strong interpretation of this thesis. This amounts to the position that the culturally shared notion of self-hood imbues the private experience of self-consciousness and cannot thereafter be separated from it. Once enculturated, we do not experience one *I* and reflect upon another. The *I* that we become aware of in our thoughts is shaped by the conception of it that we inherit. For all societies in existence today, the central feature of this conception is that of the *I* as person. Mauss's focus was on the genealogy of the modern Western notion of the person, with respect to its specific moral and psychological properties. However, we can just as well ask how the concept of the person itself differs in its particulars across living societies and how these differences color the self-consciousness of the individual. The key premise of this approach is the merger of self as reflexivity with personhood as the sense of being a particular subject and moral agent among others. According to this premise, one cannot experience oneself as a person without being self-conscious, and one cannot be self-conscious without the awareness of being a person. This reciprocity effaces Mauss's initial distinction between the "concept of self" and the "sense of self," which now become mutually determining. Outside of functionalist accounts, which inevitably bracket out the qualia of first-person experience, we cannot speak of a universally invariant "sense of self." The cultural construction of the person gives us the only *I* that we can know through symbolic constitution. Cassirer (1923/1953) captures this necessity in his discussion of language and the self:

Language cannot pass directly to ... the pure, "transcendental" *I* and its unity. For since in language the personal sphere only gradually grows out of the possessive, since the intuition of the person adheres to the intuition of objective possession, the diversity inherent in the relationship of mere possession must react upon the expression of the *I*. (p. 263)

Thus, the "diversity" of conceptions of personhood across societies in regard to its "possessive" properties—relations to the body, external objects, and spiritual entities, rights, obligations, social ties, and so forth—forms the *I* that is experienced through the mediation of language. Culture provides the symbolic tools by which individuals carve out the awareness of their subjectivity.

Man matures to the consciousness of this ego. ... He possesses his self only when instead of remaining within the identical flow of events he divides the stream and gives form to it. And only in this picture of a formed reality of experience does he find himself as subject, as a monadic center of multiform experience. (Cassirer, 1929/1957, p. 90)

If so, the notion of a pristine, decultured self-consciousness—let us call it Zen consciousness—is a mythic abstraction. Rather, we are stuck with a form of consciousness that reflects both the biological imperatives of our species-specific embodiment in a structured physical world and the culture-specific conception of what it means to be a person, a member of an organized moral community. These two aspects are not represented in experience as different levels of awareness, built upon each other as separate strata. Rather, self-consciousness is the emergent product of their fusion and mutual accommodation in the socialization of the individual into a person.

APPROACHING A CULTURAL PHENOMENOLOGY: THE SELF IN TIME

Having taken pains to establish the cultural nature of subjectivity, we may now ask, What is it like to be a self/person and how might cultural diversity be explored in this regard? The psychological proximity required by any phenomenological approach points to ethnography as the natural method of choice. The ethnographic gaze is an inherently hermeneutic one. Ethnographers record what “natives” (be they Wall Street bankers or Xavante hunters) say and do in their everyday lives and in response to strategically posed questions. As they record, and even more so afterward, they interpret their observations in light of other aspects of the society’s culture and its history, utilizing both indigenous notions and the conceptual and theoretical tools their training and experience have provided them. Anthropological interpretation is always a blend of these two emphases, distinguished by Geertz (1973) as “inscription” and “diagnosis.” How far can ethnography take us? Admittedly, the goal of seeing the world through the eyes of the cultural other, or “going native” as is sometimes said, is as condescending as it is unrealistic. Ultimately, we cannot know what it is like to inhabit a different symbolic environment. The best we can do is to clarify the “sense” of the utterances and actions of those who operate in this environment. As Geertz (1984, p. 125) put it, “The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to.” This is essentially an effort to work out the rationality of behavior according to the beliefs and commitments that define a particular lifeworld—to understand not so much the causes, but the *reasons*, for behavior. In Habermas’s (1981/1984) language, this amounts to mapping out the “grounding” of the “validity claims” that are implicit in all purposive and communicative actions. Mapping is as much a configurational as an analytic project: every isolable element of a cultural system, be it a normative belief, behavioral style, concept, or social institution, grounds action through its interplay with all the other elements that support or conflict with it. Within this symbolic framework, what

can we say of the self? Which of its phenomenal aspects are likely to be implicated in the "rationality of action" across cultures? I will discuss only one here, the temporality of selfhood.

We cannot apprehend ourselves outside of time. As Heidegger emphasized, the experienced present is a dynamic interplay of the past and future. Temporality is inherent to being. To be is to have been and to anticipate. Every moment of self-consciousness suffused with the sense of "being-in-time." That much is universal. The phenomenology of time, however, is no better captured by reducing it to a common "pure form" than was true for the "category" of the *I*. This is not to reject the idea that there is something essential at play here that resists analysis. Conceived at the deepest level, the bare intuition of time can be understood as an inherent property of consciousness that is distinct from measured, formalized time, as Bergson argued in his theory of "duration." However, the textured "feel" of time, and of the realization of the self in time, is surely conditioned by how temporality is understood and represented within the symbolic web of language and culture. Take, for example, modernity's understanding of clock-and-calendar time as a succession of equal intervals receding into the origin of the past and forward into the horizon of the future. Measured time of this form, which has become so naturalized that it strikes us as innate, is implicitly spatial. One visualizes time as distance, a space-world *within* which events occur. Events are dated in memory, as might be cars positioned on an endless, straight railroad track. Walter Benjamin (1955/1970) referred to this conception as "homogeneous, empty time," contrasting it with the nonuniformity of a "Messianic" time that "blasts open the continuum of history." The former is the time of science, and of the modern secular bureaucracy. It has become our time.

Can time be taken up in any other way? Anderson (1991) offers the illuminating observation that for medieval Christians, history was compressed into a form of co-occurrence or simultaneity that appears entirely foreign to us today. First, the anticipation of the Second Coming provided a sense of being near the end of time. The future was less a distant horizon than an imminent fulfillment of prophecy. Second, there was the immediacy of the biblical past, wherein events prefigured and illuminated each other through divine revelation and providential continuities that created felt "simultaneities" across great separations in measured time. As an example of this, Benedict points to the sacred art of the period, which tends to portray biblical figures with local, contemporary clothing and features. For the religious community, these were not shadowy figures from a remote past, but personifications of God's will whose significance and purposes were coextensive with their own. The past, present, and future were folded into one another.

Geertz (1973) provides a more explicit account of the muting of measured, progressive time in the ethnography of his time in Bali. He describes how the Balinese defined their days according to both a lunar-solar calendar and the "permutational" conjunctions of multiple day-name cycles. In both cases, he argues, days are seen more as modalities of reality with social and spiritual implications than as uniform increments in the extension of time. Especially in regard to the permutational calendar, each day holds a qualitative significance that regulates ritual observance, personal conduct, decision making, and industry. The emphasis

is on the day as a self-standing “type” of time, not a point in history understood as a succession of constant intervals.

The nature of time-reckoning this sort of calendar facilitates is clearly not durational but punctual. That is, it is not used (and could only with much awkwardness and the addition of some ancillary devices be used) to measure the rate at which time passes, the amount that has passed since the occurrence of some event, or the amount that remains within which to complete some project: it is adapted to and used for distinguishing and classifying discrete, self-subsistent particles of time—“days.” The cycles and supercycles are endless, unanchored, uncountable, and, as their internal order has no significance, without climax. They do not accumulate, they do not build, and they are not consumed. They don’t tell you what time it is; they tell you what kind of time it is. ... The Balinese sense of time is not much more cyclical than it is durative: it is particulate. ... To present the Balinese calendar, even partially, in terms of Western flow-of-time ideas is, in my opinion, inevitably to misrender it phenomenologically. (pp. 393–394)

A third example comes from the linguistic anthropology of Whorf (1956). In his discussion of Hopi grammar, Whorf notes the lack of any “objectification” of time into a noun. Time is not represented as a “formless item” that can be metaphorically spatialized and quantified into amounts. Rather, temporal periods are represented exclusively as a sort of adverb (e.g., “when-it-was-morning” in place of the English “morning”). Consistent with this, Whorf claims that Hopi verbs have no tenses as in European languages, but take on the qualities of “earlier” or “later” through subjective validity forms and relational modes, and “tensors” that convey the qualitative aspects of “becoming later and later.” Thus, time is intimately tied both to *subjective* duration and the particular way a substance manifests itself through time. In a sense, then, there are as many kinds of time as there are kinds of persistence and change. “Homogeneous, empty time” is not represented.

Our own time differs markedly from Hopi duration. Is it conceived as like a space of strictly limited dimensions, or sometimes as like a motion upon such a space, and employed as an intellectual tool accordingly. Hopi “duration” seems to be inconceivable in terms of space or motion, being the mode in which life differs from form, and consciousness *in toto* from the spatial elements of consciousness. Certain ideas born of our own time-concept, such as that of absolute simultaneity, would be either very difficult to express or impossible and devoid of meaning under the Hopi conception, and would be replaced by operational concepts. (p. 158)

Many of Whorf’s starker claims have been disputed more recently by Malotki (1983) in his comprehensive analysis of Hopi temporal expressions. Even he, however, concedes that the Hopi “sense of time ... does not correspond to ours” (p. 632).

The above examples invite the question: What does cultural variation in the symbolic realization of time mean for self-consciousness? The answer lies in the texture of subjective time. To begin with, one cannot consider the experienced unity and continuity of the self other than in and through time. In this regard,

Galen Strawson (1997) draws a useful distinction between the “synchronic” and “diachronic” singularity of the *I*. The former refers to the sense of oneness that defines the experience of self within “an unbroken or hiatus-free period of thought or experience,” which typically lasts a few seconds or so. This corresponds roughly to William James’s “specious present.” Singularity or unity at this level resides in that we do not experience ourselves as two or more mental beings, but one. This does not preclude the experience of radical change in the form or character of subjectivity. Even if one were to feel instantaneously transformed into a different sort of mental being, the recognition of such a “moment” of change would only be possible from a single and continuous experiential “standpoint.” Because synchronic unity is experienced as momentary, the cultural conditioning of its phenomenal texture is likely to be subtle and, therefore, difficult to consider. However, a few things can be said about this. First, the normal experience of the *I* as familiar and known appears to depend on the “position” of self-consciousness in relation to past experience and sustained intentions and objectives. On this view, there is little difference between the questions “*who* are you right now” and “*where* are you right now,” the term “*where*” being taken for its full metaphorical force. Any awareness of oneself thinking and experiencing emerges against a dense background of paths and trajectories that have led to the present moment. Equally woven into this awareness are the vectors of desire, intention, anticipation, and progressive action that point forward in time and are ever in play. In other words, the past and future are represented, however vaguely, in any momentary synchronic unity of the self. Strawson’s positing of “a bare locus of consciousness … void of personality,” an *I* “stripped of particularity of character, a mere (cognitive) point of view,” is, I believe, a philosopher’s fiction. Even the pathological depersonalization he offers as an illustration of this “pure” state entails the relative sense of *being* depersonalized. That is, those who suffer from depersonalization disorder endure the disorienting fragmentation of the *I* from a *familiar* subjective standpoint. It is as if one were standing on an (*familiar*) iceberg from which chunks of ice were coming loose and falling away; hence, the terrible sense of loss and existential diminution that characterizes the ordeal. Importantly, though, the ice directly under one’s feet remains, otherwise it would be impossible to recount the experience afterward. This “place to stand” is hardly “stripped of particularity.” The past is present in the interpretation and categorization of the depersonalizing experience *as it happens*. Thus, even here there is temporal continuity.

Insofar as continuity is integral to synchronic unity, the felt qualities of the latter are bound to reflect cultural aspects of temporal orientation. If Geertz’s account of Balinese “particulate” time is taken seriously, continuity would be less keenly felt in the phenomenal texture of the synchronic *I*. Similarly, the seamless fusion of past, present, and future into a momentary sense of becoming would be more complete within a Hopi subjectivity than is possible within our modern technobureaucracy, with its adherence to clock-and-calendar time and the punctual dating of experience. More generally, we can expect that the individual’s momentary sense of being-in-time will be colored by society’s articulation of time as a basis for intersubjective co-ordination and the organization of action. Whatever is

innate to the experience of time would be melded with its cultural expression in the formation of self-consciousness.

Recognition of the temporality of the synchronically unified *I* points to the second level of integration and continuity. This is diachronic unity, the sense of oneself as persisting through time as a single self/person. Hallowell (1955) points to both the universality and the cultural shaping of this second subjective orientation:

If we wish to postulate a sense of self-continuity as a generic human trait, a culturally constituted temporal orientation must be assumed as a necessary condition. ... Self-identification would have no functional value in the human social order if, at the same time, it was not given a temporal dimension. ... For in order to play my designated roles I do not only have to be aware of who I am today, but be able to relate my past actions to both past and future behavior. If I am unable to do this there is no way I can assume moral responsibility for my conduct. (pp. 94–95)

Given the profound alteration of the body that takes place across the life span, the equally profound change in attitudes, beliefs, and other dispositions, and the lacunae of memory, it is remarkable that we are able to maintain a categorical sense of personal identity at all. How is this feat accomplished? According to Parfit (1984), our view of ourselves as individuals persisting in time depends on the continuities of our mental life and nothing more. Because continuity is never absolute, but expressed on a spectrum of degree, our natural belief in a determinate, either/or conception of personal identity is, Parfit claims, false. He uses a variety of creative thought experiments involving replicas, transplants, divided minds, and descendants to highlight the fact that, as pertains to psychological continuity, persons endure to various extents, and in various respects. In ambiguous or borderline cases, personal identity becomes indeterminate, allowing for alternative descriptions of the same facts. Here, the question, “Is this the same person?” becomes empty, revealing that personal identity is not “what matters” in the consideration of our futures. Central to Parfit’s argument are the notions of *quasi-memory* and *quasi-intention*, elements of psychological continuity that are contrived so as not to presuppose personal identity, but, rather, to serve as its basis. It is here, in Parfit’s use of isolable intentional states, that his argument fails to capture the hermeneutic background of personal continuity. The disembedded consciousness of Parfit’s arguments, replete with self-contained and “impersonally” described memories, intentions, and other thoughts, is a gross distortion of subjectivity. Not only is “the concept of a person ... logically prior to that of individual consciousness” (Strawson, 1959, p. 103), but the particularity of embodied personhood is necessary for the intelligibility of our thoughts and actions for ourselves. MacIntyre (1981) makes this clear in arguing for the inherently narrative form of personal identity, and the “mutual presupposition” of identity, narrative, intelligibility, and accountability. Our memories, plans, actions, sentiments, and so forth are meaningful to us insofar as they are understood within a narrative framework within which we are constituted as persons/characters. To speak of these intentional states as existing outside of and prior to this framework renders them incoherent. Furthermore, the

upholding of personal identity within a unifying web of a narrativized life depends as much on its consistency and connection with the stories told by others as on how one is characterized in those stories. Personal identity is not the heroic achievement of separate minds; it emerges from the coordinated actions of interacting members of a role-structured cultural community. Each society facilitates the continuity of the individual subjectivities that comprise it. As Strauss (1969) describes it:

A quiet progression of institutionalized statuses from cradle to grave hardly insures an unchanging identity; but it does prevent those radical crises during which options multiply and group rationales become inadequate for handling personal dilemmas. Likewise, various conventional explanations for sloughing off aspects of past behavior—such as “interests” which notoriously change during a lifetime—prevent a person questioning the change, and thereby prevent further questioning of himself. (p. 142)

On this view, personal identity is realized within a configuration of social identities that provides it with meaning and form. Even the most private and seemingly role-independent “intentional content” (Searle, 1983) of self-consciousness necessarily arises from the tensions and conflicts between assumed social positions, real and imagined, formal and informal. We “find” ourselves as persons by tracing our contours within and against a nexus of social relations. Accordingly, major biological and role changes are often supported through public ritual.

Arnold van Gennep’s (1909/1960) classic study of “rites of passage” highlights the ceremonial scaffolding of personal transformation. He distinguishes three phases of rites—separation, transition, and incorporation. These rites are most vividly instantiated in “magico-religious” tribal societies, where passage from one role, status, or state to another is a stringently regulated and sacred affair. The importance of van Gennep’s account for our topic lies in his emphasis on the need for social detachment and cessation as prerequisite to major life transitions. One does not take on a radically different primary identity (mother, chief, hunter, adult, group member) without first cutting the moorings of one’s former identity. Temporal unity in this context is understood as an institutionalized progression of movements toward and away from society, each movement bringing one into a new juxtaposition.

For groups, as well as for individuals, life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always different thresholds to cross: the thresholds of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity, and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife—for those who believe in it. (pp. 189–190)

The segmentation of the life course returns us to a consideration of diachronic unity in the narrative structure of personal identity. Ricoeur’s (1991) critique of Parfit’s reductionist account, with its exclusive emphasis on the continuity of intentional states, turns on the idea of the “refiguration” of time and the past in narrative construction. Key to this notion is the understanding of

narrative of an interweaving of history and fiction. History is given form and meaning through its interpretation and articulation in the structures of fictional representation. Hence, narrative is always a fictionalized realization of the past. Narrative unity is achieved through the composition and configuration of disparate actions, events, and synchronic fragments. The emplotment of these various pieces allows for "a synthesis of heterogeneity" and a "discordant concordance" (Ricoeur, 1992). Like MacIntyre, Ricoeur argues that Parfit's treatment of the self fails to recognize the narrative integrity of personal identity, and thereby fails to confront the fundamental hermeneutic of diachronic unity. We understand ourselves as enduring single persons in large part because of the manner in which we are structured within our life stories, or personal narratives. The structuring of identity does not reduce to the simple continuities described by Parfit, but involves the entire plot, of which it is a part and on which it depends. Identity does not precede narrative structure; it is expressed in and through it. Seen in this light, the experience of continuity through time rests upon the symbolic forms and conventions of composition that each culture affords its members. The analogy to literary form should not blind us to the fact that the refined oral traditions of nonliterate peoples are equally rich sources of narrative knowledge. We do not so much "find" ourselves persisting in time as construct ourselves through the learned artifice of narrative time. In this sense we are the plagiaristic authors of our own identities.

SUMMARY

In this chapter I have briefly outlined the basis for a cultural phenomenology of the self. I argued against the artificial separation of innate aspects of *self-experience* from those that are culturally contingent. I suggested that inherited symbolic forms penetrate to the core of mature self-consciousness. To illustrate the deeply encultured nature of reflexive experience, I examined the temporality of the *I* and its relation to personal identity. My broader aim was to highlight the gap between functionalist and phenomenological descriptions of that aspect of mind, which is perhaps most resistant to, and most distorted by, theoretical objectification. It should be noted, however, that a thoroughgoing cultural phenomenology in no way requires a postmodernist surrender of the commitment to universal explanation. The systematic description of how cultural forms are taken up in human experience carries its own functionalist requirements and offers ample opportunity to interpret and harmonize local differences within a unifying explanatory framework. The trick, it seems, is not to lose or obscure the phenomenon within a purely processual description of cause and effect.

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