

Pathways to the self

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Our sense of self unfolds throughout our lives. Wordsworth's infant at the dawn of conscious life is the prelude to all those different epochs and experiences that we bind together both consciously and unconsciously into a sense of personal identity. Identity itself is two sided, for it is both a personal achievement, a major task in adolescence, but at the same time it is a recognition given to us by others, a recognition given to us by society: from early nurturance, through family roles, education and the eventual emergence beyond family and education into adult life.

I have chosen the title "Pathways to Self" in order to give scope to some of the different ways that I consider essential in approaching this complex and fascinating subject, one to which psychoanalysis has comparatively recently begun to give proper attention. But questions to do with the self have occupied minds of scholars throughout the ages, part of the struggle to grasp the nature of human existence. Researchers posed such questions as:

- (1) What is a self?
- (2) Can we measure self?
- (3) What does a self do?

But, you may ask, are these the right questions? Is "self" measurable or in trying to do so are we denying the self its proper nature? I shall return to this later.

Eventually I will come to a psychoanalytic consideration of the self, but as psychoanalytic concern with the psychology of self is so recent, I shall begin with that fateful moment in western thought when a 17th century soldier on active service sits by his fireside, dreams a series of disturbing dreams from

which he awakens in alarm and confusion and struggles to establish his sense of who he is. Of course, I refer to Descartes who ushered in a mode of scientific thought that established the individual mind as the only secure datum of experience; all else may be illusion, dream, but “cogito ergo sum”. The process of thinking by the disembodied mind ushers in the age of enlightenment, of modern philosophy and psychology including psychoanalysis. Freud’s self-analysis is a supreme example. The Cartesian enterprise locates mentality “in” the mind, draws a primary distinction between within and without the mind, reinforces our common sense belief that we alone have privileged access to our minds and dis-unites us from our bodies which are of material substance whereas the mind is not. Science is then faced with the question of how we can gain access to the minds of others who similarly are encased in their separate mentalities: experimental science seeks to open the black boxes, called other minds; the gap between individual minds is leapt over by inference; other minds must be recognisably similar to my own and therefore follow lawful pathways that can be investigated experimentally. This path Freud took with his self analysis; he needed others in this momentous task, repeatedly he claimed Fliess; attention at their “congresses” where they shared ideas, but Freud, an intensely private person, could not fully appreciate the meaning of his imperative needs for others; nowadays we might call them his self-objects. Freud’s psychology became a psychology of impersonal drives that transform into personal meanings, but which can always be decoded back into the impersonal id origins. Though Freud originally used the term ego to address both self, a person, and ego, a part of the mental apparatus in his earlier writings, later he addressed himself to the concept of psychic structure rather than to the elusive concept of self. Incidentally James Strachey abetted this in his “scientific” translation of Freud.

But do we still have to accept Freud's id as impersonal, as a seething cauldron of primitive drives that have to be tamed and civilised in the course of development? Most current thinking in psychoanalysis takes a different viewpoint.

If identity is the gift of society, then this mould is cast not only from the moment of what Freud called "The great caesura of birth", but from conception. The fantasies, fears and aspirations of parents, notably the mother, but we must not foreclose the father, begin to shape the destiny of the unborn infant. From the start the social permeates the personal for that child is destined for a place in a particular society, a culture represented by, transmitters of the parents' culture.

In my opinion Three analysts have notably contributed to our understanding of early identity formation. They are Eric Erickson, Heinz Lichtenstein and Hans Loewald. Erickson thought deeply about the concept of identity and extended psychoanalytic understanding beyond childhood and the oedipal phase to the whole life cycle. You will recall his epigenetic series, the unfolding of successive phases of development each of which presents tasks to be faced, mastered and integrated with a developing sense of self; failure in these successive tasks leads to different forms of pathology that centre around the sense of identity.

Heinz Lichtenstein is probably the least known to you: his collected papers, "Problems of Identity" are well worth reading. Philosophically and biologically sophisticated he asked what is the significance of non-procreative sexuality in the human, why is sexuality so fundamentally important to us throughout life and is not restricted to orgasmic genital gratification and reproduction. His answer is that the very concept of identity, what he called the "identity theme" is the template that provided continuity and coherence throughout life and that it is cast from the earliest sexual and sensual exchanges between infant and

mother. How is this so? From very early on in her way of handling, relating and containing her infant's bodily actions and affects she begins to "cast", that is to mould the infant into one who meets her needs, her concept of the infant in the mother infant unit. Reciprocally the infant moulds, coerces, seduces the mother into being the mother it wants and needs. When the process proceeds well they provide each other with gratification and pleasure; when badly, with frustration and pain. This identity theme cast in infancy draws for its maintenance all the forces of genital sexuality and interpersonal needs.

Hans Loewald, a quiet revolutionary in American psychoanalysis, moved Freud's concept of instinct from the impersonal to the personal. He asserts that from the very beginning of life the mother is not only the object upon whom these drives are directed, she together with the infant is the active organiser of the nature and form of these biological givens. Loewald's is a field theory; infant and mother both occupy positions in a psychic field, a contextual approach. Together mother and infant organise the infant's genetic givens, its constitutional forces, so that instinct is now seen as a process, not as entity. "Instinct" understood as psychic motivational forces, become organised as such through interaction with a psychic field, consisting originally of the mother-child psychic unit". Thus Freud's constitutional instincts become processes formed in interaction with the environment. Infant and mother represent relatively unorganised and relatively organised polarities within the psychic field and the tension gradient between is what makes for the interchanges as the child is organised by the mother and she too is organised by her child through her adaptive repression, Winnicott's primary maternal preoccupation.

Arnold Modell, an important writer on self and identity points out that Erickson's identity template, Loewald's psychic field are all ways of approaching the fundamental issue of how we obtain and maintain self and identity. When we

ask this question we are introducing concepts of continuity and coherency to the level of major vital forces. In the psychology of the self maintaining coherency is a fundamental homeostatic principle: coherency must be maintained and threats to coherency strike terror into us. The film maker Luis Bunuel in his autobiography wrote, “my memory is my coherency”. We make desperate efforts to maintain a sense of cohesion and coherency and many sorts of character defences have this aim. A wide range of psychopathology, drug abuse, sexual addictions, pathological forms of relationships, all these are ways in which we make efforts to maintain the vital sense of self-coherency.

This is one of the major questions to ask; how is coherency and continuity maintained in the process of growth and change through the life cycle; in what way do we recognised ourselves or are recognisable to others as still being the same person over a lifespan of 70 or more years?

Such considerations move us away from being concerned principally with the interplay of the structures of the mental apparatus, the hypothetical forces of drives, controls, neutralisations, inhibitions, prohibitions, releases, to the realm of the personal and of the self, what Kohut called experience near issues rather than experience distant. How do we secure and maintain a sense of continuity and coherency in the psychic field in which we live inseparably intertwined as social beings with each other?

It was the great pioneer American psychologist and philosopher William James who laid the scaffolding for the exploration of the concept of self. He struggled with the problems of how a sense of continuity can exist when consciousness is ever changing. This is the same issue that constantly confronted Virginia Woolf and which she dramatised in her novels where individual minds and consciousnesses seemed to part in waves. The boundaries of the individuals

are diffuse and thought processes and feelings seem to pass through her characters, the Mrs Dalloways and the Septimus who kill themselves in order to try to preserve what sense of self they have. She writes vividly and poignantly about the struggles to remain sane in the face of impending madness, the sense of the self changing its form and nature.

William James noted three areas of self that we need to address which are the empiric, that is the bodily self; the social self, all that which is invested with “me” feelings, my image, my reputation, my loved ones, my possessions; profoundly important is the spiritual self that seeks out religion and other ways to satisfy deep needs that cannot be met bodily or socially. Modell regards James’ spiritual self as corresponding to his private self and to Winnicott’s true self, issues that I shall turn to later. James exemplifies the complex interplay of the personal and the social. We strive for personhood and autonomy, to be self-sustaining and independent; but intertwined and woven into our sense of self are our needs for recognition, support and affirmation from others who exist as autonomous entities, but who yet form part of ourselves through identification and internalisation. We inhabit the world with others and are inhabited by them. Their attitudes to use, both veridical and fantasied, profoundly effect both who and how we are.

I will now present to you a case study of the social structure of self which comes from a deeply absorbing autobiography by a man in his early 30s. He suffered a major depressive crisis and crisis of identity from which he recovered through anti-depressants. But as he recovered from this illness, his mother entered into a depression that led to her self-murder through hanging. The author wrote this book to re-establish his sense of who he is, to understand his origins and development, but at the same time to try to understand both his mother’s life and her tragic death.

TIM LOTT

The smell of dried roses. Viking (1996)

The author's mother committed suicide. She hung herself during a depressive illness soon after the author himself had recovered from a severe depression. After her death he needed to get to know her, to examine the traces of her life, at the same time to find out about himself. To understand Jean's death he needed to understand his own death wish. "Depression is about anger, it is about anxiety, it is about character and heredity. But it is also something that is in its way quite unique, it is an illness of identity, it is the illness of those who do not know where they fit, who lose faith in the myth they have so painstakingly created for themselves".

"In finding a solution to identity, you begin to find a solution to depression. Depression is not grief, it is an attempted defence against the terror of losing your invented sense of self, fear of annihilation, of doubt, of insignificance".

He writes that the story of his mother's life no longer stood up, but she was not prepared to let it collapse. She was more frightened of that than of the noose. Looking back, he could see that she was making her farewells for she made the house neat and tidy, wrote her farewell note: "I cannot keep up the pretence.... I hate Southall. I can only see decay, I feel alone. Please forgive me. I love you forever."

She had lived in Southall for most of her married life and felt the disintegration of the area now given over to immigrants and losing that character of safe, solid, working class culture that formed so large a part of her identity. As Southall rotted, another scrap of identity went, which was the idea, so large for her generation, of pride in being English.

Her son does not spare himself writing that “I killed Jean, not just once but twice”. The first time was when he realised that by telling his parents that he had tried to kill himself, that this would destroy her and knew that it did not matter to him. The second time was the night before the death, when she told him that she had been put on to anti-depressants because she was feeling “a bit low”. He tried to assure her that she was ill, that she would recover if she was patient and took the tablets. She replied “I don’t know if I can last that long”.

Retrospectively, he saw that his mother, though possessing determination, lacked, like many women of her generation, a strong sense of self. What she needed was that life remain the same as it always had been. The fact that the world had been changing around her, the world of her family, of her environment, his understanding of these changes might be the first unavoidable clues, “the first threads of the hanging rope”. His parents belonged to a generation born in the 1920s who had prospered, who were rooted in their sense of class, community and nationality, whereas the author belonged to a generation who, he sees, had lost their way in the 1950s. Looking back on his own life and that of his mother, he goes back to her second pregnancy when carrying him, when she began to develop severe alopecia that finally led to the complete loss of her hair. “The moment I was born, it was obvious that some kind of mistake had been made.... there was a bloody gap where the centre of my upper mouth should have been... I vomited up my mother’s food, my mother’s milk, so they x-rayed me and found something black where there should have been only shadow... I was wired up in a pink plastic incubator (he was awaiting an operation to open his blocked gut. My first real experience of life, beyond the instincts of breath and tears, was not my mother’s touch, but the cut of a surgeon’s knife opening me from chest to groin”. He was three months in hospital, his mother staying with him and his father coming after work.

He grew up in Southall enclosed in family life, he was not very successful at school, but nor were his parents ambitious for him. By the late 50s and 60s England was no longer held together socially by geography or class in the way that it had been for his parents' and grandparents' generation. "The great lumps of English life were flying apart. However, life in Southall was safe, dull, secure, reassuring in slow forward motion. We lived enclosed in the dream of our own community". But he belonged to a generation that would not like their parents wish for security and stability as they entered into a world of ambition, freedom, and possibility, the new Elizabethans.

In trying to understand his own depressive illness, his life crisis, he writes that "I wish I could tell a story, a single narrative, like my father has, instead of this make fit of narratives that compete, and ellipse each other, then slide mutely back into darkness. For my father, like all the fathers and mothers before the great flood that began round 1956, seemed to have a common story, with a beginning and a middle and an end in the right places. The story was a lie, of course, all the stories we tell ourselves are lies, but it was a good lie, a sustaining lie, and, above all, a single and comprehensible lie.

My life, on the other hand, has been just a thin patchwork of disconnected impressions that seem to disable me since I am not sure which are true. If they are not true, some of them are actually quite bad lies, that is – unsustaining, cool, self-defeating. But worst of all, none of them ever really comes into focus or takes on permanent shape. I wish for my father's ballast. I wish for his quiet certainty, his sense of shape of his own life".

To his great surprise, Tim Lott became a successful entrepreneur, a journalist; his success within a bewilderingly short time changes the world for him utterly. He flies all over the world, drinks bottles of wine that cost more than his father's

weekly wages, wine which he cannot appreciate, orders food from menus that he cannot understand. He develops a defensive arrogance which makes even people who like him dislike him simultaneously. He is not ignored even if he is not always liked. Women are attracted to his arrogance, mistaking it for self-confidence. "I am trying to make myself up, I am searching for ballast, the ballast that was my parents' birthright". He belongs to a generation that has become unhinged from commonsense and thinks that if they have more money, they will automatically have more liberty, but he finds that the more money he has, the less it seems to be of value. A love affair seems to be the only thing that moors him to the earth, aware of his inadequacy to cope with the world in which he is now living, he applies to university to take a degree, but finds himself lost in the world where he is required to have opinions, commitments, but in which he can only find increasingly layers of doubt.

His breakdown begins after his girlfriend leaves him. He starts another relationship with a woman who has declared her love for him, but feels that there is a stone in his chest that does not shift or soften, that though he can feel his love, he cannot reach it, it exists as if behind a protective glass screen that cannot be breached. At university the only thing that makes sense to him is Richard Hogart's "Uses of Literacy" which tells him precisely who he is, one of those who has lost hold of one kind of life, but failed to reach the one to which they aspire, that behind apparent cynicism and self-pity is a deep sense of being lost without purpose, will sapped, so divided in many ways, wanting to be accepted into the middle classes and yet who despise themselves for that very wish. He becomes suicidal, then manic, his final defence against breakdown, the underlying fear being loss of continuity of self. After a job failure, he takes to his bed convinced that he is evil, his soul lost to the devil, that he must die. His need to commit suicide is the greatest certainty he has ever known. The

deepest part of his self has always demanded a system of belief that will make sense and suicide gives him that sense. It becomes a self protection, though he must die for his beliefs to survive; “to launch myself into the air is the right and appropriate thing to do, something obscurely I can be proud of”. But after 20 minutes on a roof unable to jump off, he realises the true depth of failure, that he is too weak even to kill himself successfully. He refuses medication, breaks off an attempted psychotherapy, but eventually his parents persuade him to take his anti-depressants in which he has absolutely no faith. He spends a lot of time with his parents and later realises that his mother is beginning to behave strangely. Eventually his depression remits and all his thoughts of suicide, being evil, of religion, disappear. Now he realises that conscience is different from guilt, that life is a process in which the future arrives, never wholly predictable. The stone in his chest dissolves, now there is warmth again. But his mother Jean begins to complain of not being good at anything, develops insomnia, drives badly. Looking back, it could be seen that she was making her farewells. On her last day she made the house neat and tidy, wrote her farewell note “I cannot keep up the pretence.... I hate Southall. I see only decay, I feel alone. Please forgive me. I love you forever”. She went upstairs and hanged herself.

I will contrast this self-narrative which led to painful self-knowledge, which restored the writer to his generative context with another very different text written also in a place of pain and turmoil. Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* was written in 1925, when he was imprisoned in Landsberg Prison after the failure of the Munich Putsch. Confronted with defeat, humiliation, the loss of a grandiose idealisation and mirroring that he had been achieving in the Nazi party, Hitler was threatened with the fragmentation of his self, therefore his autobiography and political statement can be seen as the restoration of himself and also the

writing of an epic in which he authorises himself as the hero leader, a man of destiny.

In Kohut's Self Psychology the self is constituted and maintained throughout life by self-object functions, relationships of self with objects that thereby preserve or actively evoke and maintain the experience of selfhood; these functions have been termed mirroring, idealisation, alter ego twinship, and adversarial self-objects. Kohut also wrote of cultural self objects, aspects of society that perform similar functions and fulfil similar needs on a social cultural level, that our needs for support, security, direction, ideals and goals, purposes; the cultural self objects are the civil structure, the government and monarchy, the social structure, cultural heroes, styles of art and so on.

Hitler as an impoverished ex-World War I soldier in Vienna, a failed artist and architect, absorbed aspects of Austrian culture and politics. Anti-semitism and his contempt for parliamentary government served as adversarial self objects, defining who I am not. Karl Lueger, the anti-semitic Mayor of Vienna he admired as a politician/statesman and who had magically transformed the capital city, one in which Hitler would stand and stare for hours in front of the Opera, the buildings on the Ringstrasse which, he wrote, affected him as if a fairytale from the Arabian Nights. He lived in poverty with the underclass to whom he felt superior, an innately higher type of human being despite his poverty. His meteoric rise to political leadership has however led to humiliation, defeat and imprisonment which proved an enforced time to which he gave form in writing, creating a direct line of continuity from early childhood to his present and future self. His fictionalised self became an idealisable self object which maintained his integrity and coherency. He invented himself as an epic hero, one with a heroic past and a projected glorious future. In reinventing himself as hero, as Fuehrer, he could transcend the real dirty world of political compromise which to him

signalled weakness of character and lack of conviction. He transformed himself, transcending his past, now becoming a visionary with an agenda infused by other-worldly powers, with knowledge from the Aryan Gods. As leader, he embodied a collective truth, a vision of a better society.

Developmental psychology points in similar directions. Infants actively engage and disengage with caregivers from very early days. Imitation begins a few hours after birth with imitation of tongue protrusion and mouth movements. Infants and caregivers intermesh and if these events are interrupted, infant and caregiver distress follow. There is a synchrony, a dance of interplay, as mother and child match each other's temporal and affective patterns. By this they create inner psycho-physiological states similar to those in each one of the partners. This is the way in which each person, each self system, establishes a form of continuity and absence, Lichtenstein's template. These are processes through which the self in development, a future person beings to recognise affective experiences as being parts of the self.

Good caregiving response to the infant's joy in discovering its own capabilities, vocal and muscular: together the partners share interest in the same object, pointing to and at objects of mutual interest: remember here that Freud used the German word "Deutung" which means a pointing, for what has been translated as "interpretation" which is a very different concept. Interpretation is an observation, not a shared interest.

These are new challenges for psychoanalysis, creating and sharing a psychic field, working out what are appropriate forms of responsiveness, re-evaluating the technical tools of abstinence, interpretation, making greater place for empathic immersion – to use Kohut's phrase – for generative use of the counter transference, and for going beyond counter transference. These are the issues

that revitalise psychoanalysis that is always in danger of slowing down its creative flow. Psychoanalysis must retain a lively interest in and exchanges with its relevant neighbours, psychology, philosophy, neuro-physiology and now evolutionary genetics. Now all these sciences contribute to and converge on our sense of what it is to be human, that is to be a self in a community with others.

The third pathway itself that I shall take you on is not adequately described as “social”, though it belongs in that realm. It is to present a view that I believe to be a profound view of human nature that must be addressed by any psychology including psychoanalysis; it is the intersubjective and the dialogical. I began with Cartesian mind, knowing only itself, having to reconstruct the mind of the other only through inference. The intersubjective and dialogical is a different approach to what it is to be human, what it is to be a person, an embodied self attaining personhood through encounters with other persons. This approach does not have to deal with issues of inner and outer realities, self-other distinctions which inevitably arise from the Cartesian approach. It is an ontology and psychology of subject-object relationships and of the intersubjective. It is a psychology of “alterity”, which means that I am given to myself by the other to whom I also bestow a sense of selfhood. In psychology, this is the teaching of Vigotsky, Luria, an important aspect of Russian developmental psychology. In philosophy, it is the realm of Bakhtin, Buber, Levinas, exemplars of “the between”. In psychoanalysis it is Winnicott, Loewald, Modell, Kohut and self psychology; it is the subject of developmental psychology, of infant research, of what can broadly be termed relational psychology. It is a psychology and philosophy of communion, community, that takes as the given of humanness processes of giving and receiving; mutuality, reciprocity, responsiveness, responsibility, turn-taking, mutual regulation. It is an approach that predicates vision, sound, kinesthesia, as the embodiments of our humanness and capacity to

communicate. In these approaches there is an emphasis on language in the sense that we address each other and are interlocutors who are inseparable through our dialogical meshes. Kohut calls these self-objects, the inseparable ones who empathically affirm and confirm us; if they fail to do so, it is the greatest threat to our mental and emotional stability.

For Bakhtin the fundamental unit of speech is the utterance, words that seek the response of the other. It is not a word, but a sentence that is the vehicle of language. We can extrapolate backwards to the first human utterance, the baby's cry that produces caregiving responses. Bakhtin's is a psychology of "alterity", that we are given ourselves through others. In this psychology within and without are artificial distinctions that we create in order to simplify the complexity of life. Reality is more like the Mobius strip where inner and outer are simply aspects of the same continuity.

For Buber and Levinas being human is the primary and ethical issue. Face to face with the other, we have the possibility of being more or less fully human, to be responsive, responsible, to respect, to have interest and to accept these attitudes from the other. We are separate, but we always have the possibility of dialogue, of creating and sharing a mental and emotional "in-between" akin to Winnicott's transitional space.

Cultural self objects

Traumatized societies develop when severe inter-ethnic and international conflicts cause drastic shared losses, humiliation by the enemy, guilt over not being able to protect one's family, and helplessness that prevents positive adaptations to the situation. Members of these societies exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder: sense of helplessness or paralysis of initiative, shame, guilt, self-blame, utter aloneness, projected depression, a search for

perpetrators and a desire for revenge so as to purge oneself from a contaminated sense of identity. It was from this disturbed sense of identity and all these psychological dangers that Hitler had to protect himself which he did by self-authorship and creating himself an epic figure, the leader of his defeated people who would revenge themselves upon the world. He found his perpetrators and indeed did wreak an unbounded revenge and cast them into humiliation and did his utmost to create for Jews, Gypsies and other ethnic groups and also political groups, a contaminated, shameful sense of identity.

A society's trauma can destroy the foundations of democratic society as democracy is a passionate debate and conflict in rules of safety, but for traumatised people there is no conflict without terror, harm or death. Democracy opens up a society and makes it possible to talk about trauma which can pave the way to healing. When debate is rendered silent, there can be no recovery from trauma, only revenge.

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