



The Nature of the Human Self

TODAY THERE IS an explosion of interest on the subject of the self. It is said that this was impossible as long as B. F. Skinner, the Harvard behaviorist, was conditioning rats to run a maze and parrots to peck on a perch. Now that he is gone, we can proceed to study the phenomenon called the self.

Because you are a you and I am an I, we can ask the questions: “Who are you?” “Who am I?” The self is important because it involves our ultimate identity. It involves our concepts, perspectives and values. All these are imbedded in what we call the self. Yet the self is a great mystery. It is said that Thales, a Greek philosopher in the sixth century BCE, was asked the question, “What is difficult?” He answered, “To know oneself.” Then he was asked, “What is easy?” He replied, “To advise others.” This has not changed over the last two and a half millennia. What is difficult? To know oneself. It is an unfathomable mystery.

The Mystery of the Human Self

The self is a mystery because it not only is a *being* but a *becoming*. You are a being, and I am a being. But you also are a becoming, and I also am a becoming. We are not yet what we will be. Arizona University professor Louis Zurcher emphasizes this phenomenon in his book

The Mutable Self.¹ His point is that we are not today what we were yesterday, and tomorrow we will not be what we are today. The self changes. For example, Zurcher says that he was once a Catholic altar boy. He could say, “I am an altar boy.” Then he joined the Navy and could say, “I am a naval recruit, a naval trainee, a seaman.” When he was discharged from the Navy, he returned to college on the G.I. bill and became a sociologist. To the question, “Who am I?” he could answer, “I am a sociologist.” Thus, the self changes. The self is a mystery because it is a *not yet*; it is a *becoming*.

The self also is a mystery because it is not autonomous — as the Enlightenment mistakenly believed for hundreds of years. You cannot extract the self from yourself and say, “This is the essence of who I am.” There is no autonomous self. The self does not exist in itself. You have to go outside of yourself to find yourself. You have to be

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detached from yourself to see yourself. For example, even in your own self-consciousness you can say, “I’m going to go into the garage, and there I’m going to get my fishing tackle; and then I’m going to go out to the ocean.” You see yourself as yourself doing various activities. So the self is a mystery because it is not autonomous. A person can only define oneself outside of oneself.

Soon after he emerged from Auschwitz, where he escaped the gas chamber only because Allied troops liberated the surviving prisoners, Victor Frankl wrote his classic book *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology*.² While at Auschwitz, Frankl had plenty of time to reflect on the nature of the self. In summary, his conclusion was simply that the self ultimately is unanalyzable, unreflectable, irreducible and unknowable. Who am I? I don’t know. Who are you? Frankly, you don’t know. Thus, we are faced with the unanalyzable, unreflectable, irreducible, unknowable reality of the self; and yet, with it, the drive and necessity to make choices and decisions. With this paradox of an unknowable self and yet the necessity to seek and enjoy freedom *from* domination and freedom *to* live, love, work and play, on what basis can we exercise decisional responsibility? We thus are filled with fear, apprehension and terror at the prospect and freedom of living. Most people would rather face a knowable, certain death than an unknowable, uncertain life. The great psychotherapist Erich Fromm explored this phenomenon in his outstanding book *The Fear of Freedom*.³ Do you know what is going to happen tomorrow? I don’t. Ultimately, death is far more certain and thus far more acceptable to most people than living. A knowable, certain self with death is preferable to an unknowable self and life.

Self-Deceptive Selves

Faced with this dilemma — the uncertainty of an unknowable self and life or the certainty of a knowable self and death — we have embarked on an age-long process of self-deception. We have devised self-deceptive selves. All of us are born liars. We concoct bogus, fraudulent, false selves:

The Demonic Self. Apocalyptic Christianity — historic, orthodox Christianity — has demonized the self. For centuries Christians have echoed the theme, “Shall such a worthless worm as I . . . be found at Thy right hand?”⁴ Here is the worthless self, the fallen self. How many sermons have been preached on “original sin” — the fall of “Adam” and “Eve”? We have concocted a self-deceptive demonic self. Orthodox Christianity has thrived on this demonized self — the worthless, fallen self destined for hell.

The Divinized Self. Another example of a self-deceptive self is found in the first-century phenomenon of Gnosticism. Gnosticism is a name from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “to know.” The Gnostics wanted to know the self. Gnosticism flourished and then died out about the fourth century CE. The New Age movement represents a modern revival of Gnosticism. Who are you?

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According to Gnosticism and the New Age movement, you may not yet know, but actually you are God. You are the unconscious God. You merely have to become conscious of who you already are. Of course, Gnosticism and the New Age movement add that everyone and everything is God. All is God, and God is all. So the self has been divinized.

The “No Self.” Buddhism has nirvana — the “no self.” It is nothingness, annihilation. The “no self” of nirvana is Buddhism’s ultimate goal.

The Animalized Self. There also is the animalized self. According to the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, the self is the libido. B. F. Skinner and his school of behaviorism at Harvard claimed that the self is a series or aggregation of reflexes. The French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) said, “I think; therefore I am [a self].” To him the thought was the self. The passion or libido, the reflex, the thought — all are animalized selves.

The Autonomous Self. Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the *Declaration of Independence*, believed in the autonomous self — the self-contained self. So he wrote those historic words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident [autonomous].” If you are an autonomous self, you already possess everything that is essential. It already is in your “archive,” your “bookshelf,” and you just need to take it out and read it. It was on that premise that the United States was founded. We are the product of that illusion. We held to this until the French Revolution, which occurred on the supposition of the autonomous self — the Age of Reason. Then the Reign of Terror broke out, and people found that the autonomous self did not work. It was filled with terrorism. Our founding fathers then retreated from the concept of the autonomous self, and America reverted to “one nation, under God.” The so-called Age of Enlightenment with its autonomous self was abandoned. Today we still quote those words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” and they sound beautiful. But they embody a history that we need to reconsider.

The Institutionalized Self. A final example of a self-deceptive self is the institutionalized self. In this deception you are defined by that to which you belong. You become an institutional person — whether religious, political, social or economic. You become an institutionalized self.

Thus, in the face of the genuine self with its uncertainty — its unanalyzable, unreflectable, irreducible and unknowable nature — we have engaged in age-long self-deception. We have invented bogus selves — the demonic self, the divinized self, the “no self,” the animalized self, the autonomous self, and the institutionalized self.

Understanding the Human Self

If we are to understand the true human self, there are some principles that we need to consider:

1. A Human Perceptual Standard. We need a perceptual standard. As an illustration, all physical perceptions require a standard. We have an inbuilt thermometer with which we compare the temperature around us to determine whether

it is cool, warm or just right. Likewise, our hearing is with respect to acoustic standards produced by the brain.

A standard is required not only for physical but for psychological perception. In a scientific report a gentleman who was born blind was given his sight through an operation at the age of 50. He could see just as well as anyone can see. Yet when he looked at a person, he could not tell whether that person was smiling and happy or frowning and sad. Because he had been raised without sight, he had developed no perceptual standard to determine what he was seeing. In an experiment this man was shown a school bus and asked to draw it. But although he had ridden a school bus during his years of education, he could not draw that bus. Because he had touched the steps of a bus, he could draw them. For the same reason, he also could draw the handle of the bus door and part of the door as well as part of a window. But he could not draw the front of the bus or its wheels or roof or back. He was looking at a bus without a perceptual standard, without an image of a bus in his brain. This phenomenon is called partial consciousness.

Today research is multiplying in this field of investigation on the nature of human perception, whether physical, psychological or scientific. For example, in science we always establish a perceptual standard. Investigation begins with a hypothesis. Then we conduct experiments and make observations to test that

hypothesis, critiquing and revising our standard as we proceed. Using this scientific method, we arrive at a theory in our particular discipline or field of investigation. Thus, all human perception and understanding demand a standard.

Therefore, if we are to abandon all self-deceptive selves and be a human self, we must have a perceptual standard for the self. There must be a human self as a perceptual standard if we are to become human and be human. So Victor Frankl, in a historic statement after he emerged from the gates of Auschwitz, declared, "What we need is not only the belief in the one God but also the awareness of the one mankind . . . *monanthropism*."⁵ That is, we need one humanity — a common humanity. In order to have one humanity, we must have one common, universal perceptual standard for what it means to be a human self.

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2. Human Reflection and Observation. Once we have this human standard for the self, we need human reflection and observation. In this regard it should be made clear that all theology is a human undertaking. In theology God is not talking to us; we are talking to each other. Theology is a human enterprise that requires human understanding. Furthermore, as Hans Küng observes in his book *Theology for the Third Millennium*,⁶ all revelation is human revelation. This is because all revelation must be to human understanding.

3. Historical Action as Story or Narrative. We have noted that, in order to understand the human self, there must be a human standard and human reflection. There also must be a story, a narrative. There must be action. There must be history. This is because the self only is disclosed in story, in action, in history. As one author stated, "Narrative alone is capable of fundamentally describing the embodied

contradictions that are persons.”⁷ If you ask the question, “Who am I?” I will tell you a story — the story of myself.

This brings us to our major point: *The universal human perceptual standard — in narrative, in action, in history — is found in the incarnate Christ.* As one author stated, the incarnation “characterize[s] every moment of the history of the universe.”⁸ It is the human

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Jesus who characterizes every moment of the universe. That is the universal perceptual standard for what it means to be a human self. That is the story, the narrative, the action, the history to which we look to determine whether we are human selves and who we are as human selves. Jesus Christ, dwelling with and for mankind (male and female), is the ultimate definitional Human Self — plus nothing.

The Nature of the Human Self

Jesus is the “author and finisher” (Hebrews 12:2) of the self. Because of him we now can say what the human self is — not *has* but *is*:

1. Relational. The self is relational. You are not a self nor am I a self apart from relationship. Writing in *U.S. News & World Report*, psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen says, “A person is simply a unit in

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a relationship.”⁹ There is no self without the “other.” Stephen Erickson develops this concept in his book *Human Presence: At the Boundaries of Meaning*.¹⁰ Human presence, human being, human becoming requires the “other.” If I were all alone in a universe or a non-universe, I would not be a self.

2. Historical. The self is historical. There is no history apart from the self. There is no self apart from history. As one author has said, “The world does not *have* a history, but *is* history.” The self is *being* and *becoming*. It *is*, and it is *yet to be*.

3. Creative. The self is creative. Because the self is creative, it is transcendent — that is, it is the precondition for all other reality.

4. Life. The self is life. Ultimately, there is no self apart from life, and there is no life apart from the self. As quantum physicists now are contemplating, the universe with its life exists because it is observed. Someone is observing it; therefore it lives. There is a self, and therefore there is life. There is life, and therefore there is a self.

5. A Whole. The self is a whole. You do not *have* a body, a mind, a spirit. You *are* a body, a mind, a spirit. You are a whole. As here noted, the self embraces physical, mental and spiritual. The spiritual includes faith, hope and love.

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These are imbedded in the self and are an inextricable part of the self in order for there to be a whole self.

6. Non-Commandable. The self is not commandable. You cannot command faith, hope or love. I cannot effectively even tell you to cry. And if I tell you to laugh, you will effectively stop laughing. It is said that when taking a candid photograph, one should never tell the subject to say “cheese.” This will not reveal the self but only a caricature.

7. Decisional. The self is decisional. It has the responsibility and privilege of choosing and deciding. You alone can choose. You alone can decide. That is what it means to be a self.

8. Free. The self ultimately is free. If the self cannot be commanded, it is free. By “free” we mean free *from* domination and submission and free *to* live, love, work and play — to *be* and to *become*. In his book on *The Fear of Freedom*, Erich Fromm movingly develops what it means to be free *from* and free *to*.¹¹

Because of Jesus Christ, the self is all of these, for he was and is all of these. He is the universal Human Self.

The Future of the Human Self

There thus is no further need to perpetuate self-deceptive selves. Why should we continue to perpetuate the demonic self, the divinized self, the “no self,” the animalized self, the autonomous self, and the institutionalized self when the true human self has been disclosed to the universe and to all humanity? There is no future in self-deception or in self-deceptive enterprises. Self-deceptive selves have no history, no relationship, no being, no becoming, no creativity, no life. No self-deceptive entity can be a self. The future lies, not in self-deception, but in the human self irrevocably assured in the history of Jesus Christ.

God and man (as an animal) have been moving on a historic, converging journey toward becoming relational human selves.¹² This journey is marked by a series of axial points or crises of opportunity. One of those crises of opportunity faces us today. Now is the opportunity of decisional freedom to choose the full, complete, universal, irrevocable and eternal disclosure of the human self revealed in Jesus Christ and in all of his relational “others.” He is our “Other,” and we are his “other.” Without us he cannot be a self, and without him none of us can be a self.

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In the science of chaos or disorder, there is what is called the “butterfly effect.”¹³ The meteorologist Edward Lorenz was endeavoring to develop long-range weather forecasting. To do this he was feeding into a computer the initial conditions that would influence the weather — such as temperature, wind direction, and pressure. To his amazement he found that, if he changed these factors by even one part in a thousand, this totally changed the weather forecast. To use his metaphor, a butterfly moving its

wings in South America today could cause a hurricane off the coast of Florida next week. Another example of the profound consequences of an apparently trivial change is the swelling El Niño current off the western coast of Peru. Depending on where it happens to upwell, this current can markedly determine the weather elsewhere.

In the science of chaos, a little “butterfly” can make an enormous change. So today, we live in a time when the consequence of decisional freedom, even as small “as a grain of mustard seed,” is inseparable from the boundless destiny of the human self.¹⁴ For the relational self requires the mutual participation of both the universal “Other” and his fellow “others.” Indeed, this is the future of the human self.

Endnotes

1. Louis A. Zurcher, Jr., *The Mutable Self: A Self-Concept for Social Change* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1977).
2. Victor Frankl, *The Unconscious God: Psychotherapy and Theology* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1948, 1975).
3. Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1942).
4. Isaac Watts (words: 1707); Hugh Wilson (music: 1824), “Alas! and Did My Saviour Bleed?”
5. Frankl, *The Unconscious God*, p. 140.
6. Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).
7. Rodney Gapp, “Tom T. Hall and the Necessity of Narrative,” *Perspectives* 6, no. 4 (April 1991): 17-19.
8. Richard A. Rhem, “Sleeping through a Revolution,” *Perspectives* 6, no. 4 (April 1991): 8-14.
9. Kenneth J. Gergen, “Identity through the Ages,” *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 July 1991, p. 59.
10. See Steven E. Erickson, *Human Presence: At the Boundaries of Meaning* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).
11. See Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*.
12. See “God’s Eternal Purpose,” *Outlook* (Prolepsis 1991.4).
13. See James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987).
14. See Matthew 13:31, 32; 17:20.

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