What is the self? In Chuck Close’s portrait, Maggie, the face is quite recognizable when viewed from a distance. Close up, it takes on an entirely different appearance. Your concept of the self may also shift as you read this chapter.
3.1 Know Thyself?

The cornerstone of Socrates’ philosophy was the Delphic Oracle’s command to “Know thyself.” But what exactly does that mean? Who exactly is your “self”? What are the qualities that define it? What differentiates your particular “self” from all others? What is the relation of the “self” you were as a child to the “self” you are now? What is the relation of your “self” to your “body”? How does your “self” relate to other “selves”? What happens to a “self” when the body dies? In what ways is it possible for you to “know” your “self”? In what ways might you never fully know your “self”? What do you mean when you say, “I don’t feel like myself today” or when you encourage someone else to “Just be yourself!”

As with many themes and issues in philosophy, the nature of the self is a subject that most people take for granted. Many people simply live, assuming the existence of their personal self-identity. And when they do think about their self, their concerns are typically practical rather than philosophical: How can I make myself happy? How can “I” (shorthand for my “self”) develop fulfilling relationships with other selves? How can I improve myself? And so on. Yet when we go searching for our self with a philosophical lens, we soon discover that what we thought was a straightforward and familiar presence is in fact elusive, enigmatic, and extraordinarily complex.

Developing insight into the nature of the human self in general and into your self in particular is a daunting task, underscored by the less than successful efforts of the best human thinkers for nearly three thousand years. Yet if we are to fulfill Socrates’ exhortation to live an examined life, a life of purpose and value, we must begin at the source of all knowledge and significance—our self.

Begin your exploration of your self by responding to the questions in the Thinking Philosophically box on the next page. The difficulties that you may encounter when completing those questions are an indication of the philosophical challenges posed by the concept of self. As your philosophical understanding becomes deeper and more sophisticated, your appreciation for the profound nature of these questions will grow as well. Those people who provide simple, ready-made answers to questions like these are likely revealing a lack of philosophical understanding. (“Of course I know myself . . . I’m me!”) So don’t be concerned if you find that you are beginning to get confused about subjects like the self that you thought you understood—such confusion is the sign of a lively, inquiring mind. As the newspaperman and writer H. L. Mencken noted: “To every complex question there’s a simple answer—and it is clever, neat, and wrong!”

Your responses also likely reflected the cultural and religious environment in which you were raised. Cultures that originated in Europe have tended to use a common religious and philosophical framework for understanding the self that was first introduced by Socrates and Plato in ancient Greece. For example, did your responses reflect the belief that your self

- is a unique personal identity that remains the same over time?
- is synonymous with your “soul”?
is a very different sort of thing from your “body”?
• can be understood by using your reasoning abilities?
• will continue to exist in some form after your body dies?
• is able to connect with other selves in some personal way?

If you found that your responses reflected some (or all) of these beliefs, don’t be surprised. These beliefs form the basic conceptual framework for understanding the self that has shaped much of Western religious and philosophical thought. So to fully appreciate the way our most fundamental views regarding ourselves have been formed, it makes sense for us to return to the birthplace of those views twenty-five hundred years ago and then to trace the development of these perspectives up to the current century. As we journey on this quest for the self, we will also encounter some non-Western perspectives as well, such as the Buddhist concept of anatta or “no-self,” which is covered in this chapter. Buddhist doctrine believes that the notion of a permanent self that exists as a unified identity through time is an illusion. For Buddhists, every aspect of life is impermanent, and all elements of the universe are in a continual process of change and transition, a process that includes each self as well. The self can best be thought of as a flame that is continually passed from candle to candle, retaining a certain continuity but no real personal identity—a concept very different from the self of Western consciousness.

3.2 The Soul Is Immortal: Socrates and Plato

Socrates was the first thinker in Western history to focus the full power of reason on the human self: who we are, who we should be, and who we will become. Socrates was convinced that, in addition to our physical bodies, each person possesses an immortal soul that survives beyond the death of the body. He explored this subject with his friends in the days following his trial and before his sentence of death was executed, a time in his life when the question of immortality no doubt had a special immediacy and significance. The following passage is from Plato’s dialogue, Phaedo.
This brief exchange provides a cogent summary of Socrates’ metaphysical framework. For Socrates, reality is dualistic, comprised of two dichotomous realms. One realm is changeable, transient, and imperfect, whereas the other realm is unchanging, eternal, immortal. The physical world in which we live—comprising all that we can see, hear, taste, smell, and feel—belongs to the former realm. All aspects of our physical world are continually changing, transforming, disappearing.

In contrast, the unchanging, eternal, perfect realm includes the intellectual essences of the universe, concepts such as truth, goodness, and beauty. We find examples of these ideal forms in the physical world—for example, we might describe someone as truthful, good, or beautiful. But these examples are always imperfect and limited: It is only the ideal forms themselves that are perfect, unchanging, and eternal.

Socrates’ metaphysical scheme may, at first glance, seem abstract and impractical, but it has a profound impact on the way the self is understood. For Socrates, our bodies belong to the physical realm: They change, they’re imperfect, they die. Our souls, however, belong to the ideal realm: They are unchanging and immortal, surviving the death of the body. And although a close relationship exists between our souls and our bodies, they are radically different entities. Our souls strive for wisdom and perfection, and reason is the soul’s tool to achieve this exalted state. But as long as the soul is tied to the body, this quest for wisdom is inhibited by the imperfection of the physical realm, as the soul is “dragged by the body into the region of the changeable,” where it “wanders and is confused” in a world that “spins round her, and she is like a drunkard.” But reason is a powerful tool, enabling the soul to free itself from the corrupting imperfection of the physical realm and achieve “communion with the unchanging.”

What is truly remarkable about these ideas is how closely they parallel modern Western consciousness. A finite body; an immortal soul; a perfect, eternal realm with which the soul seeks communion and eternal bliss: All of the basic elements of Western (and some Eastern) religions are present. Even on a secular level, the ideas

**Socrates** (469–399 B.C.E.). Ancient Greek philosopher often called “the father of Western philosophy.” Socrates created the conceptual framework and method of inquiry for much of Western thought. His teachings are known to us primarily through the writing of his student, Plato.

**Dualistic** Twofold. Related to dualism, the view that material substance (physical body) and immaterial substance (mind or soul) are two separate aspects of the self.
resonate with modern concepts of the self: the notion that the thinking, reasoning self and the physical body are radically distinct entities that have a complicated and problematic relationship with one another.

Having described his overall metaphysical vision, Socrates goes on to elaborate his ideas and argue for their plausibility.

Socrates: Yet once more consider the matter in another light: When the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve. Now which of these two functions is akin to the divine? And which to the mortal? Does not the divine appear to you to be that which naturally orders and rules, and the mortal to be that which is subject and servant?

Cebes: True.

Socrates: And which does the soul resemble?

Cebes: The soul resembles the divine, and the body the mortal—there can be no doubt of that, Socrates.

Socrates: Then reflect, Cebes: of all which has been said is not this the conclusion?—that the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intellectual, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and that the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintellectual, and multiform, and dissoluble, and changeable. Can this, my dear Cebes, be denied?

Cebes: It cannot.

Although Plato was for the most part committed to Socrates’ view of the essence of the self—the soul—as a unified, indissoluble, immortal entity that remains the same over time, he also recognizes the inherent difficulties with this view. In his dialogue The Symposium, Plato cites the views of the female philosopher Diotima, who presents a very different perspective on the nature of the self:

Although we speak of an individual as being the same so long as he continues to exist in the same form, and therefore assume that a man is the same person in his old age as in his infancy, yet although we call him the same, every bit of him is different, and every day he is becoming a new man, while the old man is ceasing to exist, as you can see from his hair, his flesh, his bones, his blood, and all the rest of his body. And not only his body, for the same thing happens to his soul. And neither his manners, nor his dispositions, nor his thoughts, nor his desires, nor his pleasures, nor his sufferings, nor his fears are the same throughout his life, for some of them grow, while others disappear. . . . Thus, unlike the gods, a mortal creature cannot remain the same throughout eternity; it can only leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left as it passes away. . . . And so it is no wonder that every creature prizes its own offspring, since everything is inspired by this love, this passion for immortality.

Plato’s description of Diotima’s position penetrates to the core of the problem of personal identity. How is it possible to say that a self remains the same when it is obvious that every self is defined by a process of continual change and evolution? This is visibly apparent in our physical bodies, and contemporary science has revealed that, even on the cellular level, old cells are dying and being replaced by new cells on an ongoing basis. In what sense can we say that an infant at the age of six months is the same person at the age of sixty years, when so much of his or her physical body has changed? And Diotima astutely points out that this same process of continual growth and evolution also defines your “soul.” It is analogous to completely renovating an old house, gradually replacing

Plato (427–347 B.C.E.), Ancient Greek philosopher of extraordinary significance in the history of ideas. Plato not only preserved Socrates’ teachings for future generations but contributed original ideas on a wide range of issues such as morality, politics, metaphysics, and epistemology.
Who Was Michael Jackson? All of us experience changes to our bodies as we age, but Michael Jackson’s transformations dramatize philosophical questions about identity. In what sense does the self change as the body changes? In what sense does the self remain the same?

every part of it over time: At what point does it lose its “original” identity and become a “new” house? For Diotima, this dynamic, changing quality of the soul leads her to a very different conclusion than Plato’s: Unlike the gods, the human soul is not immortal, though we fervently want it to be. And it is this doomed passion for immortality that inspires the “prizing” of our children. They will become our living legacy as we “leave behind new life to fill the vacancy that is left as it passes away.”

Who Are You? Consciousness, Identity, and the Self

< READING CRITICALLY >

Analyzing Socrates on the Self

- Compare Socrates’ concept of the “soul” with your concept of the self which you described in the “Thinking Philosophically” activity on page 89. Did you view your self as a unified identity that remains the same over time? An indissoluble entity that is immortal and will survive death? An entity that is very different in kind from your physical body? An entity that strives to achieve communion with some ultimate reality?

- In characterizing the relationship between the soul and the body, Socrates explains that the soul uses the body as “an instrument of perception,” and that the soul “rules” the body in the same way that the divine rules the mortals. Do you agree with this analysis? Why or why not? How would you characterize the relationship between your soul/self and your body?

- Socrates argues that because the soul is of a unified, indissoluble form we should not be concerned about death because the soul is incapable of being dispersed into nonexistence—it must be eternal. Does this argument address your fears about the potential death of your soul/self? Why or why not?

- For Socrates, our physical existence on Earth is merely an imperfect reflection of ultimate and eternal reality, and our purpose in life is to achieve communion with this ultimate reality. How do his views compare with your perspective on the purpose of life? Do you believe that our goal in life is to achieve spiritual transcendence and/or intellectual enlightenment? If not, what do you believe is the purpose of your life?
Plato elaborates his concept of the soul (the Greek word is *psyche*) in his later dialogues such as the monumental *Republic* and *Phaedrus*. In particular, he introduces the idea of a three-part soul/self constituted by

*Reason*—Our divine essence that enables us to think deeply, make wise choices, and achieve a true understanding of eternal truths.

*Physical Appetite*—Our basic biological needs such as hunger, thirst, and sexual desire.

*Spirit or Passion*—Our basic emotions such as love, anger, ambition, aggressiveness, empathy.

These three elements of our selves are in a dynamic relationship with one another, sometimes working in concert, sometimes in bitter conflict. For example, we may develop a romantic relationship with someone who is an intellectual companion (*Reason*), with whom we are passionately in love (*Spirit*), and whom we find sexually attractive, ignoring our lustful desires (*Appetite*). Or we may find ourselves in personal conflict, torn between three different relationships, each of which appeals to a different part of our self: *Reason*, *Spirit*, *Appetite*. When conflict occurs, Plato believes it is the responsibility of our *Reason* to sort things out and exert control, reestablishing a harmonious relationship among the three elements of our selves.

Plato illustrates his view of the soul/self in *Phaedrus* with a vivid metaphor: The soul is likened to a chariot drawn by two powerful winged horses—a noble horse, representing *Spirit*, and a wild horse, embodying *Appetite*. The charioteer is *Reason*, whose task is to guide the chariot to the eternal realm by controlling the two independent-minded horses. Those charioteers who are successful in setting a true course and ensuring that the two steeds work together in harmonious unity achieve true wisdom and banquet with the gods. However, those charioteers who are unable to control their horses and keep their chariot on track are destined to experience personal, intellectual, and spiritual failure. The fact that the horses are “winged” suggests the capacity of the
soul to soar to the elevated realm of wisdom and intellectual enlightenment. These are themes that we will explore more fully in Chapter 4 when we deal with the subjects of human nature and personal freedom and in Chapter 5 when we explore the nature of truth and reality.

**Plato, from *Phaedrus, The Chariot Analogy***

We will liken the soul to the composite nature of a pair of winged horses and a charioteer. Now the horses and charioteers of the gods are all good and of good descent, but those of other races are mixed; and first the charioteer of the human soul drives a pair, and secondly one of the horses is noble and of noble breed, but the other quite the opposite in breed and character. Therefore in our case the driving is necessarily difficult and troublesome. Now we must try to tell why a living being is called mortal or immortal. Soul, considered collectively, has the care of all that which is soulless, and it traverses the whole heaven, appearing sometimes in one form and sometimes in another; now when it is perfect and fully winged, it mounts upward and governs the whole world; but the soul which has lost its wings is borne along until it gets hold of something solid, when it settles down, taking upon itself an earthly body, which seems to be self-moving, because of the power of the soul within it; and the whole, compounded of soul and body, is called a living being, and is further designated as mortal. It is not immortal by any reasonable supposition, but we, though we have never seen or rightly conceived a god, imagine an immortal being which has both a soul and a body which are united for all time. Let that, however, and our words concerning it, be as is pleasing to God; we will now consider the reason why the soul loses its wings. It is something like this.

The natural function of the wing is to soar upwards and carry that which is heavy up to the place where dwells the race of the gods. More than any other thing that pertains to the body it partakes of the nature of the divine. But the divine is beauty, wisdom, goodness, and all such qualities; by these then the wings of the soul are nourished and grow, but by the opposite qualities, such as vileness and evil, they are wasted away and destroyed. Now the great leader in heaven, Zeus, driving a winged chariot, goes first, arranging all things and caring for all things. He is followed by an army of gods and spirits, arrayed in eleven squadrons; Hestia alone remains in the house of the gods. Of the rest, those who are included among the twelve great gods and are accounted leaders, are assigned each to his place in the army. There are many blessed sights and many ways hither and thither within the heaven, along which the blessed gods go to and fro attending each to his own duties; and whoever wishes, and is able, follows, for jealousy is excluded from the celestial band. But when they go to a feast and a banquet, they proceed steeply upward to the top of the vault of heaven, where the chariots of the gods, whose well matched horses obey the rein, advance easily, but the others with difficulty; for the horse of evil nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth the charioteer whose horse is not well trained. There the utmost toil and struggle await the soul. For those that are called immortal, when they reach the top, pass outside and take their place on the outer surface of the heaven, and when they have taken their stand, the revolution carries them round and they behold the things outside of the heaven.

But the region above the heaven was never worthily sung by any earthly poet, nor will it ever be. It is, however, as I shall tell; for I must dare to speak the truth, especially as truth is my theme. For the colorless, formless, and intangible truly existing essence, with which all true knowledge is concerned, holds this region and is visible only to the mind, the pilot of the soul. Now the divine intelligence, since it is nurtured on mind and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving that which befits it, rejoices in seeing reality for a space of time and by gazing upon truth is nourished and made happy until the revolution brings it again to the same place. In the revolution it beholds absolute justice, temperance, and knowledge, not such knowledge as has a beginning and varies as it is associated with one or another of the things
we call realities, but that which abides in the real eternal absolute; and in the same way it beholds and feeds upon the other eternal verities, after which, passing down again within the heaven, it goes home, and there the charioteer puts up the horses at the manger and feeds them with ambrosia and then gives them nectar to drink.

Such is the life of the gods; but of the other souls, that which best follows after God and is most like him, raises the head of the charioteer up into the outer region and is carried round in the revolution, troubled by the horses and hardly beholding the realities; and another sometimes rises and sometimes sinks, and, because its horses are unruly, it sees some things and fails to see others. The other souls follow after, all yearning for the upper region but unable to reach it, and are carried round beneath, trampling upon and colliding with one another, each striving to pass its neighbor. So there is the greatest confusion and sweat of rivalry, wherein many are lamed, and many wings are broken through the incompetence of the drivers; and after much toil they all go away without gaining a view of reality, and when they have gone away they feed upon opinion. But the reason of the great eagerness to see where the plain of truth is, lies in the fact that the fitting pasturage for the best part of the soul is in the meadow there, and the wing on which the soul is raised up is nourished by this. And this is a law of Destiny, that the soul which follows after God and obtains a view of any of the truths is free from harm until the next period, and if it can always attain this, is always unharmed; but when, through inability to follow, it fails to see, and through some mishance is filled with forgetfulness and evil and grows heavy, and when it has grown heavy, loses its wings and falls to the earth.

Plato believed that genuine happiness can only be achieved by people who consistently make sure that their Reason is in control of their Spirits and Appetites. This harmonious integration under the control of Reason is the essence of Plato’s concept of justice, both at the individual level and, as we shall see in Chapter 10, at the social and political level as well.

< READING CRITICALLY >

Analyzing the Chariot Analogy

- Describe an experience in your life in which you experienced a vigorous conflict between the three dimensions of your self identified by Plato: Reason, Appetite, and Spirit. What was the nature of the conflict? How was it resolved?
- Describe an experience in your life in which Reason prevailed over Passion and Appetite. How was Reason able to prevail? Did you gain increased wisdom from the experience?
- Describe an experience in your life in which the three elements of your self identified by Plato worked together in a productive and harmonious fashion, enabling you to achieve a great success.

A Feminist Critique of Plato’s View of the Self

Some contemporary feminist philosophers have criticized Plato for overemphasizing the power and authority of reason, and underemphasizing the importance of the body and emotions. They believe that this view is particularly insidious because Plato—and other traditional philosophers—have tended to identify men with the superior capacity of reason, while relegating women to the “inferior” areas of physical responses and
emotions. This perspective is expressed in an excerpt from the essay “Woman as Body” by the philosopher Elizabeth V. Spelman.

Plato’s dialogues are filled with lessons about knowledge, reality, and goodness, and most of the lessons carry with them strong praise for the soul and strong indictments against the body. According to Plato, the body, with its deceptive senses, keeps us from real knowledge; it rivets us in a world of material things which is far removed from the world of reality; and it tempts us away from the virtuous life. It is in and through the soul, if at all, that we shall have knowledge, be in touch with reality, and lead a life of virtue. Only the soul can truly know, for only the soul can ascend to the real world, the world of the Forms or Ideas.

Plato also tells us about the nature of beauty. Beauty has nothing essentially to do with the body or with the world of material things. Real beauty cannot “take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh.” Yes, there are beautiful things, but they only are entitled to be described that way because they “partake in” the form of Beauty, which itself is not found in the material world. Real beauty has characteristics which merely beautiful things cannot have; real beauty

Is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other.

Because it is only the soul that can know the Forms, those eternal and unchanging denizens of Reality, only the soul can know real Beauty; our changing, decaying bodies only can put us in touch with changing, decaying pieces of the material world. . . .

Plato, and anyone else who conceives of the soul as something unobservable, cannot of course speak as if we could point to the soul, or hold it up for direct observation. At one point, Plato says no mere mortal can really understand the nature of the soul, but one perhaps could tell what it resembles. So it is not surprising to find Plato using many metaphors and analogies to describe what the soul is like, in order to describe relations between parts of the soul. For example, thinking, a function of the soul, is described by analogy to talking. The parts of the soul are likened to a team of harnessed, winged horses and their charioteer. The body’s relation to the soul is such that we are to think of the body vis-à-vis the soul as a tomb, a grave or prison, or as barnacles or rocks holding down the soul. Plato compares the lowest or body-like part of the soul to a brood of beasts.

But Plato’s task is not only to tell us what the soul is like, not only to provide us with ways of getting a fix on the differences between soul and bodies, or differences between parts of the soul. As we’ve seen, he also wants to convince us that the soul is much more important than the body; and that it is to our peril that we let ourselves be beckoned by the rumblings of the body at the expense of harkening to the call of the soul. And he means to convince us of this by holding up for our inspection the silly and sordid lives of those who pay too much attention to their bodies and do not care enough for their soul; he wants to remind us of how unruly, how without direction, are the lives of those in whom the lower part of the soul holds sway over the higher part. Because he can’t point to an adulterated soul, he points instead to those embodied beings whose lives are in such bad shape that we can be sure that their souls are adulterated. And whose lives exemplify the proper soul/body relationship gone haywire? The lives of women (or sometimes the lives of children, slaves and brutes).

For example, how are we to know when the body has the upper hand over the soul, or when the lower part of the soul has managed to smother the higher part? We presumably can’t see such conflict, so what do such conflicts translate into, in terms of
actual human lives? Well, says Plato, look at the lives of women. It is women who get hysterical at the thought of death; obviously, their emotions have overpowered their reason, and they can’t control themselves. The worst possible model for young men could be “a woman, young or old or wrangling with her husband, defying heaven, loudly boasting, fortunate in her own conceit, or involved in misfortune or possessed by grief and lamentation—still less a woman that is sick, in love, or in labor.” . . .

To anyone at all familiar with Plato’s official and oft-reported views about women, the above recitation of misogynistic remarks may be quite surprising. Accounts of Plato’s views about women usually are based on what he says in book 5 of the Republic. In that dialogue, Plato startled his contemporaries, when as part of his proposal for the constitution of an ideal state, he suggested that

There is no pursuit of the administrators of a state that belongs to woman because she is a woman or to a man because he is a man. But the natural capacities are distributed alike among both creatures, and women naturally share in all pursuits and men in all. . . .

Well now, what are we to make of this apparent double message in Plato about women? What are we to do with the fact that on the one hand, when Plato explicitly confronts the question of women’s nature, in the Republic, he seems to affirm the equality of men and women; while on the other hand, the dialogues are riddled with misogynistic remarks? . . .

3.3 Descartes’ Modern Perspective on the Self

Although Socrates is often described as the “father of Western philosophy,” the French philosopher René Descartes is widely considered the “founder of modern philosophy.” As profoundly insightful as such thinkers as Socrates and Plato were regarding the nature of the self, their understanding was also influenced and constrained by the consciousness of their time periods. Descartes brought an entirely new—and thoroughly modern—perspective to philosophy in general and the self in particular. Earlier philosophers had focused on exploring the fundamental questions of human existence, such as:

- What is the nature of reality?
- What is the “good life” and how ought we to behave?
- Does God exist? If so, what is God’s nature and relation to humankind?
- What is the nature of the soul?
- What is the ideal society?

René Descartes (1596–1650). French philosopher considered the founder of modern philosophy. A mathematician and scientist as well, Descartes was a leader in the seventeenth century scientific revolution. In his major work, Meditations on First Philosophy (1641), he rigorously analyzed the established knowledge of the time.
Although Descartes recognized these as significant questions, he was more concerned with understanding the thinking process we use to answer questions such as these. He agreed with the great thinkers before him that the human ability to reason constitutes the extraordinary instrument we have to achieve truth and knowledge. But instead of simply using reason to try to answer questions, Descartes wanted to penetrate the nature of our reasoning process and understand its relation to the human self. He was convinced that to develop the most informed and well-grounded beliefs about human existence, we need to be clear about the thinking instrument we are employing. For if our thinking instrument is flawed, then it is likely that our conclusions will be flawed as well.

As an accomplished mathematician (he invented analytic geometry) and an aspiring scientist, Descartes was an integral part of the scientific revolution that was just beginning. (His major philosophical work, Meditations on First Philosophy, was published in 1641, the year before Galileo died and Isaac Newton was born.) The foundation of this scientific revolution was the belief that genuine knowledge needed to be based on independent rational inquiry and real-world experimentation. It was no longer appropriate to accept without question the “knowledge” handed down by authorities—as was prevalent during the religion-dominated Middle Ages. Instead, Descartes and others were convinced that we need to use our own thinking abilities to investigate, analyze, experiment, and develop our own well-reasoned conclusions, supported with compelling proof. In a passage from his Discourse on Method, Descartes contrasts the process of learning to construct knowledge by thinking independently with simply absorbing information from authorities:

For we shall not, e.g., turn out to be mathematicians though we know by heart all the proofs others have elaborated, unless we have an intellectual talent that fits us to resolve difficulties of any kind. Neither, though we may have mastered all the arguments of Plato and Aristotle, if yet we have not the capacity for passing solid judgment on these matters, shall we become Philosophers; we should have acquired the knowledge not of a science, but of history.

But reasoning effectively does not mean simply thinking in our own personal, idiosyncratic ways: That type of commonsense thinking is likely to be seriously flawed. Instead, effective use of “the natural light of reason” entails applying scientific discipline and analytic rigor to our explorations to ensure that the conclusions that we reach have genuine merit:

So blind is the curiosity by which mortals are possessed, that they often conduct their minds along unexplored routes, having no reason to hope for success . . . it were far better never to think of investigating truth at all, than to do so without a method. For it is very certain that unregulated inquiries and confused reflections of this kind only confound the natural light and blind our mental powers. . . . In (method) alone lies the sum of all human endeavor, and he who would approach the investigation of truth must hold to this rule. For to be possessed of good mental powers is not sufficient; the principal matter is to apply them well. The greatest minds are capable of the greatest vices as well as of the greatest virtues, and those who proceed very slowly may, provided they always follow the straight road, really advance much faster than those who, though they run, forsake it.
One of the reasons Descartes is such an influential and enduring figure in philosophy is his willingness to test his reasoning powers to their limit and to record with absolute candor the results of his explorations. To this end, Descartes typically writes in the first person, inviting us to participate in his reasoning process and compare it with our own. He’s saying, in effect: “This is what makes sense to me—do you agree?”

In his best known work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes shares with us his own philosophical journal, analogous to the philosopher’s journal that you have been encouraged to keep as an integral part of this course. In an opening passage that virtually every young adult can appreciate, Descartes confesses that he has come to the conclusion that virtually everything he has been taught from authorities and other adults is questionable and likely false. His radical solution? To establish a fresh start on gaining true, well-supported beliefs by simply erasing his endorsement of anything he has previously been taught. What a bold and extraordinary project!

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**René Descartes, from Meditations on First Philosophy**

1. Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences. But as this enterprise appeared to me to be one of great magnitude, I waited until I had attained an age so mature as to leave me no hope that at any stage of life more advanced I should be better able to execute my design. On this account, I have delayed so long that I should henceforth consider I was doing wrong were I still to consume in deliberation any of the time that now remains for action. Today, then, since I have opportunely freed my mind from all cares [and am happily disturbed by no passions], and since I am in the secure possession of leisure in a peaceable retirement, I will at length apply myself earnestly and freely to the general overthrow of all my former opinions.

2. But, to this end, it will not be necessary for me to show that the whole of these are false—a point, perhaps, which I shall never reach; but as even now my reason convinces me that I ought not the less carefully to withhold belief from what is not entirely certain and indubitable, than from what is manifestly false, it will be sufficient to justify the rejection of the whole if I shall find in each some ground for doubt. Nor for this purpose will it be necessary even to deal with each belief individually, which would be truly an endless labor; but, as the removal from below of the foundation necessarily involves the downfall of the whole edifice, I will at once approach the criticism of the principles on which all my former beliefs rested.

Descartes is convinced that committing yourself to a wholesale and systematic doubting of all things you have been taught to simply accept without question is the only way to achieve clear and well-reasoned conclusions. More important, it is the only way for you to develop beliefs that are truly yours and not someone else’s. He explains, “If you would be a real seeker after truth, it is necessary that at least once in your life you doubt, as far as possible, all things.” This sort of thoroughgoing doubting of all that you have been taught requires great personal courage, for calling into question things like our religious beliefs, cultural values, and even beliefs about your self can be, in the short term, a very disruptive enterprise. It may mean shaking up your world, ques-
tioning the beliefs of important people in your life, perhaps challenging your image of yourself. Yet there is a compelling logic to Descartes’ proclamation: For, if you are not willing to question all that you have been asked to accept “on faith,” then you will never have the opportunity to construct a rock-solid foundation for your beliefs about the world and your personal philosophy of life. What’s more, you will never have the experience to develop the intellectual abilities and personal courage required to achieve your full potential in the future.

This, then, is the beginning of Descartes’ quest for true knowledge that leads to his famous first principle: *Cogito, ergo sum*—“I think, therefore I am.” We will be exploring his epistemological odyssey in some detail in the sections on Knowledge and Truth (Chapters 5 and 6). For now, we’re going to focus on Descartes’ analysis of the self, the theme of this chapter.

*Cogito, ergo sum* is the first principle of Descartes’ theory of knowledge because he is confident that no rational person will doubt his or her own existence as a conscious, thinking entity—while we are aware of thinking about our self. Even if we are dreaming or hallucinating, even if our consciousness is being manipulated by some external entity, it is still my *self-aware self* that is dreaming, hallucinating, or being manipulated. Thus, in addition to being the first principle of his epistemology, *cogito ergo, sum* is also the keystone of Descartes’ concept of self. The essence of existing as a human identity is the possibility of *being aware of our selves*: Being self-conscious in this way is integral to having a personal identity. Conversely, it would be impossible to be self-conscious if we didn’t have a personal identity of which to be conscious. In other words, having a *self-identity* and being *self-conscious* are mutually dependent on one another. Here’s how Descartes explains this phenomenon in his *Meditation II*.

**René Descartes, from Meditations on First Philosophy**

Thinking is another attribute of the soul; and here I discover what properly belongs to myself. This alone is inseparable from me. I am—I exist: this is certain; but how often? As often as I think; for perhaps it would even happen, if I should wholly cease to think, that I should at the same time altogether cease to be. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true. I am therefore, precisely speaking, only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, understanding, or reason, terms whose signification was before unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing, and really existent; but what thing? The answer was, a thinking thing. . . .

But what, then, am I? A thinking thing, it has been said. But what is a thinking thing? It is a thing that doubts, understands [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses; that imagines also, and perceives.
For Descartes, then, this is the essence of your self—you are a “thinking thing,” a dynamic identity that engages in all of those mental operations we associate with being a human self. For example,

- You understand situations in which you find yourself.
- You doubt the accuracy of ideas presented to you.
- You affirm the truth of a statement made about you.
- You deny an accusation that someone has made.
- You will yourself to complete a task you have begun.
- You refuse to follow a command that you consider to be unethical.
- You imagine a fulfilling career for yourself.
- You feel passionate emotions toward another person.

But in addition to engaging in all of these mental operations—and many other besides—your self-identity is dependent on the fact that you are capable of being aware you are engaging in these mental operations while you are engaged in them. If you were consistently not conscious of your mental operations, consistently unaware of your thinking, reasoning, and perceiving processes, then it would not be possible for you to have a self-identity, a unique essence, a you.

But what about your body? After all, a great deal of our self-concept and self-identity is tied up with our physical existence: our physical qualities, appearance, gender, race, age, height, weight, hair style, and so on. Despite this, Descartes believes that your physical body is secondary to your personal identity. One reason for this is that he believes you can conceive of yourself existing independently of your body.

The question now arises, am I anything else besides? I will stimulate my imagination with a view to discover whether I am not still something more than a thinking being. Now it is plain I am not the assemblage of members called the human body; I am not a thin and penetrating air diffused through all these members, or wind, or flame, or vapor, or breath, or any of all the things I can imagine; for I supposed that all these were not, and, without changing the supposition, I find that I still feel assured of my existence. But it is true, perhaps, that those very things which I suppose to be non-existent, because they are unknown to me, are not in truth different from myself whom I know. This is a point I cannot determine, and do not now enter into any dispute regarding it. I can only judge of things that are known to me: I am conscious that I exist, and I who know that I exist inquire into what I am. It is, however, perfectly certain that the knowledge of my existence, thus precisely taken, is not dependent on things, the existence of which is as yet unknown to me: and consequently it is not dependent on any of the things I can feign in imagination.
Nevertheless, even though your body is not as central to your self as is your capacity to think and reflect, it clearly plays a role in your self-identity. In fact, Descartes contends, if you reflect thoughtfully, you can see that you have clear ideas of both your *self as a thinking entity* and your *self as a physical body*. And these two dimensions of your self are quite distinct.

And, firstly, because I know that all which I clearly and distinctly conceive can be produced by God exactly as I conceive it, it is sufficient that I am able clearly and distinctly to conceive one thing apart from another, in order to be certain that the one is different from the other, seeing they may at least be made to exist separately, by the omnipotence of God; and it matters not by what power this separation is made, in order to be compelled to judge them different; and, therefore, merely because I know with certitude that I exist, and because, in the meantime, I do not observe that anything else necessarily belongs to my nature or essence beyond my being a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists only in my being a thinking thing [or a substance whose whole essence or nature is merely thinking]. And although I may, or rather, as I will shortly say, although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I, [that is, my mind, by which I am what I am], is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.

It is at this point that we can see the pervasive influence of the metaphysical framework created by Socrates and Plato and perpetuated through the centuries by such thinkers as Plotinus and Saint Augustine. Following directly in their footsteps, Descartes declares that the *essential self*—the *self as thinking entity*—is radically different than the *self as physical body*. The *thinking self*—or soul—is a nonmaterial, immortal, conscious being, independent of the physical laws of the universe. The *physical body* is a material, mortal, nonthinking entity, fully governed by the physical laws of nature. What’s more, your soul and your body are independent of one another, and each can exist and function without the other. How is that possible? For example, in the case of physical death, Descartes believes (as did Plato) that your soul continues to exist, seeking union with the spiritual realm and God’s infinite and eternal mind. On the other hand, in cases in which people are sleeping or comatose, their bodies continue to function even though their minds are not thinking, much like the mechanisms of a clock.
Thus Descartes ends up with Plato’s metaphysic, a dualistic view of reality, bifurcated into
• a spiritual, nonmaterial, immortal realm that includes conscious, thinking beings, and
• a physical, material, finite realm that includes human bodies and the rest of the physical universe.

In the case of the human self, the soul (or mind) and the physical body could not be more different. For example, you can easily imagine the body being divided into various parts, whereas it is impossible to imagine your soul as anything other than an indivisible unity (precisely the point that Socrates makes when he’s arguing for the immortality of the soul):

To commence this examination accordingly, I here remark, in the first place, that there is a vast difference between mind and body, in respect that body, from its nature, is always divisible, and that mind is entirely indivisible. For in truth, when I consider the mind, that is, when I consider myself in so far only as I am a thinking thing, I can distinguish in myself no parts, but I very clearly discern that I am somewhat absolutely one and entire; and although the whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, yet, when a foot, an arm, or any other part is cut off, I am conscious that nothing has been taken from my mind; nor can the faculties of willing, perceiving, conceiving, etc., properly be called its parts, for it is the same mind that is exercised [all entire] in willing, in perceiving, and in conceiving, etc. But quite the opposite holds in corporeal or extended things; for I cannot imagine any one of them [how small soever it may be], which I cannot easily sunder in thought, and which, therefore, I do not know to be divisible. This would be sufficient to teach me that the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body, if I had not already been apprised of it on other grounds.

This dualistic view of the self is particularly useful for Descartes, who was faced with a serious conflict in his personal and professional life. As previously noted, Descartes was first and foremost a scientist in his professional life, committed to establishing true knowledge through rigorous reasoning, experimentation, and analysis. Many scientists of the time—physicists, astronomers, biologists—were inclined to view the human self in terms of the physical body, governed by the same laws of physics that defined the operation of the rest of the physical universe. However, if the self is seen exclusively in terms of the physical body, the self is terminated when the body dies.

As a devout Catholic who believed in God, immortal souls, and eternal life, this view of the world was completely unacceptable to Descartes. However, by advocating a dualistic metaphysic, Descartes was able to maintain both his scientific integrity and his religious convictions. The physical self is a part of nature, governed by the physical laws of the universe, and available to scientific analysis and experimentation. At the same time, the conscious self (mind, soul) is a part of the spiritual realm, independent of the physical laws of the universe, governed only by the laws of reason and God’s will.

Although a bifurcated view of the universe solves some immediate problems for Descartes, it creates other philosophical difficulties, most notably the vexing question, “What is the relationship between the mind and the body?” In our everyday
experience, our minds and bodies appear to be very closely related to one another. Our thinking and emotions have a profound effect on many aspects of our physical bodies, and physical events with our bodies have a significant impact on our mental lives. For the most part, we experience our minds and bodies as a unified entity, very different from the two different and completely independent substances that Descartes proposes. As the writer and humorist Mark Twain noted, “How come the mind gets drunk when the body does the drinking?” Even Descartes recognized the need to acknowledge the close, intimate relationship between mind and body, as the following passage reveals:

René Descartes, from *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Nature likewise teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely a thinking thing, but should perceive the wound by the understanding alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged; and when my body has need of food or drink, I should have a clear knowledge of this, and not be made aware of it by the confused sensations of hunger and thirst: for, in truth, all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc., are nothing more than certain confused modes of thinking, arising from the union and apparent fusion of mind and body.

Descartes believed that the “intermingling” point of contact was through the pineal gland, a small gland located at the base of the skull. It was here that he believed that the thinking self connected to the physical brain. Why the pineal gland? Descartes found its physical location appropriate, and it had no known biological function at Descartes’ time. Ever the scientist, Descartes dissected a variety of animals to learn more about this mysterious gland.

Recognizing the problem of the mind/body relationship in a dualistic system and solving the problem in a satisfactory way are two very different things. Most philosophers agree that Descartes’ efforts to provide an integrated model of his concepts of the mind and body were not successful, and it’s a problem that has challenged thinkers in every discipline ever since. We will continue our exploration of the mind/body “problem” later in this chapter.

How did Descartes’ views regarding the self relate to his personal life? In a fascinating way: Descartes was plagued by frail health, a condition that caused him throughout his life to sleep late into the morning. A financial inheritance from his parents meant he didn’t have to work. Instead, he devoted his life to study and experimentation, spending much of his time alone, and moving from place to place on a regular basis (he lived in twenty different houses in one twenty-year period). Descartes preferred the company of himself because it provided him the opportunity to fully devote himself to his scientific, mathematical, and philosophical activities, without the distraction of social relationships (although he did find time to father an illegitimate child with a servant). Ironically, it was an error in judgment that hastened the death of his body. Against his better judgment, he accepted the invitation of Queen Christina of Sweden to come to Stockholm and tutor her. Unfortunately, the queen turned out to be an early riser, depriving Descartes of his beloved sleep. That, combined with the
cold and damp climate of Stockholm, led to pneumonia and his premature death at the age of fifty-three, providing him with a first-hand opportunity to test his theory of an immortal soul.

**< READING CRITICALLY >**

**Analyzing Descartes on the Mind/Body Problem**

- Describe some of the ways your mind significantly affects your body: for example, when you are anxious, elated, depressed, in love (or lust), and so on.
- Describe some of the ways your body significantly affects your mind: for example, when you are feeling sick, deprived of sleep, taking medications, or finding yourself in a physically dangerous/threatening situation.
- Create your own metaphysical framework for the “self” by describing
  - your self as thinking subject.
  - your self as physical body.
  - your analysis of how these two aspects of your self relate to one another.
- Reconsider your views on human souls—what do you believe happens to the self after the death of the body? Why do you believe it? What would Descartes think of your views and your justification for them?

### 3.4 The Self Is Consciousness: Locke

The English philosopher—and physician—John Locke continued exploring the themes Descartes had initiated, both in terms of the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and the nature of the self. He shared with Descartes a scientist’s perspective, seeking to develop knowledge based on clear thinking, rigorous analysis, and real-world observation and experimentation. However, Locke brought a very different approach to this epistemological enterprise. Descartes believed that we could use the power of reason to achieve absolutely certain knowledge of the world and then use this rationally based knowledge to understand our world of experience. His extensive work in mathematics served as a model, convincing him that there were absolute truths and knowledge waiting to be discovered by reasoned, disciplined reflection.

Locke’s work as a physician, rather than a mathematician, provided him with a very different perspective. The physician’s challenge is to gather information regarding the symptoms a patient is experiencing, and then relate these symptoms to his (the physician’s) accumulated knowledge of disease. Although a successful doctor uses sophisticated reasoning abilities in identifying patterns and making inferences, his conclusions are grounded in experience. Knowledge, in other words, is based on the careful observation of sense experience and/or memories of previous experiences. Reason plays a subsequent role in helping to figure out the significance of our sense experience and to reach intelligent conclusions.

To sum up: For Descartes, our reasoning ability provides the origin of knowledge and final court of judgment in evaluating the accuracy and value of the ideas produced. For Locke, all knowledge originates in our direct sense experience, which acts as the final court of judgment in evaluating the accuracy and value of ideas. As a result, Descartes is considered an archetypal proponent of the rationalist view of knowledge,
whereas Locke is considered an archetypal advocate of the **empiricist** view of knowledge.

These are themes that we will be exploring in depth in Chapters 5 and 6. For now, we will focus on the way in which these contrasting approaches to the world influence their views on the nature of the self.

True to his philosophical commitment to grounding his ideas in sense experience, Locke, in his essay entitled “On Personal Identity” (from his most famous work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) engages in a reflective analysis of how we experience our self in our everyday lives.

In this initial passage, Locke makes the following points, implicitly asking the question of his readers, “Aren’t these conclusions confirmed by examining your own experiences?”

1. To discover the nature of **personal identity**, we’re going to have to find out what it means to be a **person**.
2. A **person** is a thinking, intelligent being who has the abilities to reason and to reflect.
3. A **person** is also someone who considers itself to be the **same** thing in different times and different places.
4. **Consciousness**—being aware that we are thinking—always accompanies thinking and is an essential part of the thinking process.
5. **Consciousness** is what makes possible our belief that we are the same identity in different times and different places.

Reflect carefully on Locke’s points—do you find that his conclusions match your own personal experience? Certainly his first three points seem plausible. What about points 4 and 5? Does **consciousness** always accompany the thinking process? Locke explains: “When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is to himself that which he calls self.” Consider what you are doing at this moment: You are thinking about the words on the page, the ideas that are being expressed—are you also aware of yourself as you are reading and thinking? Certainly
once the question is posed to you, you’re aware of your self. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that when you think, you are either conscious of your self—or potentially conscious of your self. In other words, are there times in which you are fully immersed in an activity—such as dancing, driving a car, or playing a sport—and not consciously aware that you are doing so? Analogously, are there times in which you are fully engaged in deep thought—wrestling with a difficult idea, for example—and not aware that you are doing so? But even if there are times in which you are unreflectively submerged in an activity or thought process, you always have the potential to become aware of your self engaged in the activity or thought process.

What about Locke’s fifth point, that consciousness is necessary for us to have a unified self-identity in different times and places? This seems like a point well taken. You consider your self to be the same self who was studying last night, attending a party at a friend’s house two weeks ago, and taking a vacation last summer. How can you be sure it’s the same self in all of these situations? Because of your consciousness of being the same self in all of these different contexts.

These points become clearer when we contrast human thinking with animal thinking. It’s reasonable to believe that mammals such as chipmunks, dogs, and dolphins are able to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel, just like humans. But are they conscious of the fact that they are performing these activities as they are performing them? Most people would say “no.” And because they are not conscious that they are performing these activities, it’s difficult to see how they would have a concept of self-identity that remains the same over time and place. So consciousness—or more specifically, self-consciousness—does seem to be a necessary part of having a coherent self-identity. (Some people believe that higher-order mammals such as chimpanzees and gorillas present more complicated cases.)

Descartes would agree with Locke’s view that a person—or self—is a thinking, intelligent being that has the abilities to reason and to reflect. And he likely would be sympathetic to Locke’s contention that consciousness accompanies thinking and makes possible the concept we have of a self that remains the same at different times and in different places. But in the following passage, Locke expresses a belief that many people—including Descartes—would likely disagree with. Let’s examine his unusual belief regarding the self.

**Consciousness Makes Personal Identity**

But it is further inquired, whether it [personal identity] be the same identical substance. This few [Locke refers here to Descartes] would think they had reason to doubt of, if these perceptions, with their consciousness, always remained present in the mind, whereby the same thinking thing would be always consciously present, and, as would be thought, evidently the same to itself. But that which seems to make the difficulty is
As this passage makes clear, Locke is proposing a radically different version of the self than the philosophical tradition before him. Plato and Descartes had agreed that the self existed in the form of an immortal, nonmaterial soul that continues to exist following the death of the body. In a fascinating twist, Locke denies that the individual self necessarily exists in a single soul or substance. For Locke, the essence of the self is its conscious awareness of itself as a thinking, reasoning, reflecting identity. But this in no way means that this self is necessarily embedded in a single substance or soul—it might very well take up residence in any number of substances or souls.

In Locke’s mind, conscious awareness and memory of previous experiences are the keys to understanding the self. In other words, you have a coherent concept of your self as a personal identity because you are aware of your self when you are thinking, feeling, and willing. And, you have memories of times when you were aware of your self in the past, in other situations—for example, at the party two weeks ago, or your high school graduation several years ago. But, as we noted earlier, there are many moments when we are not consciously aware of our self when we are thinking, feeling, and willing—we are simply, unreflectively, existing. What’s more, there are many past experiences that we have forgotten or have faulty recollections of. All of which means that during those lapses, when we were not aware of our self, or don’t remember being aware of our self, we can’t be sure if we were the same person, the same substance, the same soul! Our personal identity is not in doubt or jeopardy because we are aware of our self (or remember being aware of it). But we have no way of know-
ing if our personal identity has been existing in one substance (soul) or a number of substances (souls). For Locke, personal identity and the soul or substance in which the personal identity is situated are two very different things. Although the idea seems rather strange at first glance, Locke provides a very concrete example to further illustrate what he means.

**Personal Identity in Change of Substance**

That this is so, we have some kind of evidence in our very bodies, all whose particles, whilst vitally united to this same thinking conscious self, so that we feel when they are touched, and are affected by, and conscious of good or harm that happens to them, are a part of ourselves; i.e. of our thinking conscious self. Thus, the limbs of his body are to every one a part of himself; he sympathizes and is concerned for them. Cut off a hand, and thereby separate it from that consciousness he had of its heat, cold, and other affections, and it is then no longer a part of that which is himself, any more than the remotest part of matter. Thus, we see the substance whereof personal self consisted at one time may be varied at another, without the change of personal identity; there being no question about the same person, though the limbs which but now were a part of it, be cut off.

It’s a rather gruesome example Locke provides, but it makes his point. Every aspect of your physical body (substance) is integrated with your personal identity—hit your finger with a hammer, and it’s you that is experiencing the painful sensation. But if your hand is cut off in an industrial accident, your personal identity remains intact, although the substance associated with it has changed (you now only have one hand). Or to take another example: The cells of our body are continually being replaced, added to, subtracted from. So it’s accurate to say that in many ways you are not the same physical person you were five years ago, ten years ago, fifteen years ago,
and so on. Nevertheless, you are likely convinced that your *personal identity* has remained the same despite these changes in physical substance to your body. This leads Locke to conclude that our *personal identity* is distinct from whatever substance it finds itself associated with.

**< READING CRITICALLY >**

**Analyzing Locke on the Conscious Self**

- Evaluate Locke’s claim that your *conscious self* is not permanently attached to any particular body or substance. Does this view make sense? Why or why not?
- Locke believes that it is our memory that serves to link our *self* at this moment with our *self* in previous circumstances. But people’s memories are often faulty. How can we distinguish between accurate memories of our *self* and inaccurate memories? To do so, don’t we have to assume that we have a continuous *self* that is performing the evaluation? But because memory is supposed to explain the existence of our *self*, doesn’t this mean that Locke’s reasoning is circular? Explain your analysis of this dilemma.

### 3.5 There Is No Self: Hume

David Hume continued in the empiricist tradition of John Locke, believing that the source of all genuine knowledge is our direct sense experience. As we have seen, this empiricist approach had led Locke to a number of surprising conclusions regarding the self, including the belief that the self’s existence is dependent on our consciousness of it. In Locke’s view, your self is not tied to any particular body or substance, and it only exists in other times and places because of our *memory* of those experiences. Using the same empiricist principles as Locke, Hume ends up with an even more startling conclusion—if we carefully examine our sense experience through the process of introspection, we discover that *there is no self*! How is this possible? From Hume’s perspective, this astonishing belief is the only possible conclusion consistent with an honest and objective examination of our experience. The following passages are from Hume’s essay “On Personal Identity.”

**David Hume, from On Personal Identity**

There are some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF [Hume is referring to Descartes and Locke, among others], that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. The strongest sensation, the most violent passion, say they, instead of distracting us from this view, only fix it the more intensely, and make us consider their influence on self either by their pain or pleasure. To attempt a farther proof of this were to weaken its evidence; since no proof can be derived from any fact, of which we are so intimately conscious; nor is there any thing of which we can be certain, if we doubt of this.

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of self, after the manner it is here explained.
According to Hume, if we carefully examine the contents of our experience, we find that there are only two distinct entities, “impressions” and “ideas”:

**Impressions**—Impressions are the basic sensations of our experience, the elemental data of our minds: pain, pleasure, heat, cold, happiness, grief, fear, exhilaration, and so on. These impressions are “lively” and “vivid.”

**Ideas**—Ideas are copies of impressions, and as a result they are less “lively” and “vivid.” Ideas include thoughts and images that are built up from our primary impressions through a variety of relationships, but because they are derivative copies of impressions they are once removed from reality.

If we examine these basic data of our experience, we see that they form a fleeting stream of sensations in our mind and that nowhere among them is the sensation of a “constant and invariable” self that exists as a unified identity over the course of our lives. And because the self is not to be found among these continually changing sensations, we can only conclude that there is no good reason for believing that the self exists. Hume goes on to explain:

But farther, what must become of all our particular perceptions upon this hypothesis? All these are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other and may be separately considered, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing to support their existence. After what manner, therefore, do they belong to self and how are they connected with it? For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect nonentity. If any one upon serious and unprejudiced reflection, thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.
“I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.” Even when we actively look for the self, Hume contends, we simply can’t find it! All of our experiences are perceptions, and none of these perceptions resemble a unified and permanent self-identity that exists over time. Furthermore, when we are not experiencing our perceptions—as when we sleep—there is no reason to suppose that our self exists in any form. Similarly, when our body dies and all empirical sensations cease, it makes no sense to believe that our self continues to exist in some form. Death is final. And what of people who claim that they do experience a self in their stream of perceptions? Hume announces that “I must confess I can reason no longer with him. . . . He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.” In other words, as an empiricist, Hume cannot do more than provide an honest description and analysis of his own experience, within which there is no self to be found. But if Hume is right, then why does virtually everybody but Hume believe with certainty that they do have a self-identity that persists through time and serves to unify their life and give it meaning? After all, it’s not enough to say to the rest of the world: You’re wrong, and I’m right, and I’m not going to discuss the issue if you insist on disagreeing with me. Let’s examine Hume’s explanation of the self that most people would claim they experience.

David Hume, from On Personal Identity

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance . . .
What is the self we experience according to Hume? A “bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” Humans so desperately want to believe that they have a unified and continuous self or soul that they use their imaginations to construct a fictional self. But this fictional self is not real; what we call the self is an imaginary creature, derived from a succession of impermanent states and events. What is our mind? According to Hume, it’s “a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”

**< READING CRITICALLY >**

Analyzing Hume on the Absence of Self

- Perform your own empiricist investigation by examining the contents of your consciousness. What do you find there? Fleeting and temporary sensations, perceptions, and ideas, as Hume describes? Is your self anywhere to be found?
- Hume uses the terms *I* and *myself* throughout his writings, words that seem to suggest a continually existing self-identity that he is denying. Does Hume contradict himself? Why or why not?
- Descartes’ key point was that even if we are dreaming, fantasizing, or being deceived, the act of doubting proves that I have a self that is engaged in the activity of doubting. Is the same true for Hume? By denying the existence of a self, is he at the same time proving that his self exists, the self that is engaged in the act of denying? Why or why not?
- If you believe that you have a unifying and conscious self that exists through time but you can’t “catch yourself” when you examine your immediate experience, then where does your self exist? What is the nature of your self if you can’t perceive it? (This is precisely the challenge taken up by our next philosopher, Immanuel Kant.)

### 3.6 We Construct the Self: Kant

Brilliant and idiosyncratic, the German philosopher **Immanuel Kant** helped create the conceptual scaffolding of modern consciousness in the areas of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Kant was alarmed by David Hume’s notion that the mind is simply a container for fleeting sensations and disconnected ideas, and our reasoning ability is merely “a slave to the passions.” If Hume’s views proved true, then humans would never be able to achieve genuine knowledge in any area of experience: scientific, ethical, religious, or metaphysical, including questions such as the nature of our selves. For Kant, Hume’s devastating conclusions served as a Socratic “gadfly” to his spirit of inquiry, awakening him from his intellectual sleep and galvanizing him to action:

> I admit it was David Hume’s remark that first, many years ago, interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my inquiries in the field of speculative philosophy.

Kant was convinced that philosophers and scientists of the time did not fully appreciate the potential destructiveness of Hume’s views, and that it was up to him (Kant) to meet and dismantle this threat to human knowledge.

Immanuel Kant

(1724–1804). German philosopher considered by many to be the greatest thinker of the eighteenth century. Kant attempted to synthesize the two competing schools of the modern period, rationalism and empiricism, by showing the important role both experience and reason play in constructing our knowledge of the world. His works include the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 1787) and *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783).
How did Hume's empirical investigations lead him to the unsatisfying conclusion that genuine knowledge—and the self—do not exist? Kant begins his analysis at Hume’s starting point—examining immediate sense experience—and he acknowledges Hume’s point that all knowledge of the world begins with sensations: sounds, shapes, colors, tastes, feels, smells. For Hume, these sensations are the basic data of experience, and they flow through our consciousness in a torrential rushing stream:

(The sensations in our senses) succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement. . . . The mind is a kind of theatre where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.

But in reflecting on his experience, Kant observes an obvious fact that Hume seems to have overlooked, namely, our primary experience of the world is not in terms of a disconnected stream of sensations. Instead, we perceive and experience an organized world of objects, relationships, and ideas, all existing within a fairly stable framework of space and time. True, at times discreet and randomly related sensations dominate our experience: for example, when we are startled out of a deep sleep and “don’t know where we are,” or when a high fever creates bizarre hallucinations, or the instant when an unexpected thunderous noise or blinding light suddenly dominates our awareness. But in general, we live in a fairly stable and orderly world in which sensations are woven together into a fabric that is familiar to us. And integrated throughout this fabric is our conscious self who is the knowing subject at the center of our universe. Hume’s problem wasn’t his starting point—empirical experience—it was the fact that he remained fixated on the starting point, refusing to move to the next, intelligible level of experience. Here’s how Kant explains the situation:

Since the origin of metaphysics so far as we know its history, nothing has ever happened which could have been more decisive to its fate than the attack made upon it by David Hume. He threw no light on this species of knowledge, but he certainly struck a spark by which light might have been kindled had it caught some inflammable substance and had its smouldering fire been carefully nursed and developed. . . . However hasty and mistaken Hume’s inference may appear, it was at least founded upon investigation, and this investigation deserved the concentration of the brighter spirits of his day as well as determined efforts on their part to discover, if possible, a happier solution of the problem in the sense proposed by him. . . .

But Hume suffered the usual misfortune of metaphysicists, of not being understood. It is positively painful to see how utterly his opponents . . . missed the point of the problem; for while they were ever taking for granted that which he doubted, and demonstrating with zeal and often with impudence that which he never thought of doubting, they so misconstrued his valuable suggestion that everything remained in its old condition, as if nothing happened.

There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience. For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action did not objects affecting our sense partly of themselves produce representations, partly arouse the activity of our understanding to compare these representations, and, by combining or separating them, work up the raw material for the sensible impressions into that knowledge of objects which is
Where does the order and organization of our world come from? According to Kant, it comes in large measure from us. Our minds actively sort, organize, relate, and synthesize the fragmented, fluctuating collection of sense data that our sense organs take in. For example, imagine that someone dumped a pile of puzzle pieces on the table in front of you. They would initially appear to be a random collection of items, unrelated to one another and containing no meaning for you, much like the basic sensations of immediate unreflective experience. However, as you began to assemble the pieces, these fragmentary items would gradually begin to form a coherent image that would have significance for you. According to Kant this meaning-constructing activity is precisely what our minds are doing all of the time: taking the raw data of experience and actively synthesizing it into the familiar, orderly, meaningful world in which we live. As you might imagine, this mental process is astonishing in its power and complexity, and it is going on all of the time.

How do our minds know the best way to construct an intelligible world out of a never-ending avalanche of sensations? We each have fundamental organizing rules or principles built into the architecture of our minds. These dynamic principles naturally order, categorize, organize, and synthesize sense data into the familiar fabric of our lives, bounded by space and time. These organizing rules are a priori in the sense that they precede the sensations of experience and they exist independently of these sensations. We didn’t have to “learn” these a priori ways of organizing and relating the world—they came as software already installed in our intellectual operating systems.

Kant referred to his approach to perception and knowledge as representing a “Copernican Revolution” in metaphysics and epistemology, derived from the breakthrough of the Polish astronomer Copernicus (1473–1543), who was one of the first and most definitive voices asserting that instead of the sun orbiting around Earth, it’s actually the reverse—Earth orbits the sun.

In a similar fashion, empiricists like Hume had assumed that the mind was a passive receptacle of sensations, a “theatre” in which the raw data of experience moved across without our influence. According to Hume, our minds conform to the world of which we are merely passive observers. Kant, playing the role of Copernicus, asserted that this is a wrongheaded perspective. The sensations of experience are necessary for knowledge, but they are in reality the “grist” for our mental “mills.” Our minds actively synthesize and relate these sensations in the process of creating an intelligible
world. As a result, the sensations of immediate experience conform to our minds, rather than the reverse. We construct our world through these conceptual operations; and, as a result, this is a world of which we can gain insight and knowledge.

Immanuel Kant, *from Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them by means of concepts have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must, therefore, make trial whether we may not have more success if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge.

This is a brief overview of Kant’s epistemological framework, which we will examine in more depth in Chapters 5 and 6. For now we are interested in how this framework influences Kant’s conception of the self. Actually, from Kant’s standpoint, it’s our self that makes experiencing an intelligible world possible because it’s the self that is responsible for synthesizing the discreet data of sense experience into a meaningful whole. Metaphorically, our self is the weaver who, using the loom of the mind, weaves together the fabric of experience into a unified whole so that it becomes my experience, my world, my universe. Without our self to perform this synthesizing function, our experience would be unknowable, a chaotic collection of sensations without coherence or significance.

Immanuel Kant, *from Critique of Pure Reason*

Sensations would be nothing to us, and would not concern us in the least, if they were not received into our (orderly) consciousness. Knowledge is impossible in any other way... For perceptions could not be perceptions of anything for me unless they could at least be connected together into (my) one consciousness. This principle stands firm *a priori*, and may be called the “transcendental principle of unity” for all the multiplicity of our perceptions and sensations.

The unity of consciousness is a phrase invented by Kant to describe the fact that the thoughts and perceptions of any given mind are bound together in a unity by being all contained in one consciousness—my consciousness. That’s precisely what makes your world intelligible to you: It’s your self that is actively organizing all of your sensations and thoughts into a picture that makes sense to you. This picture is uniquely your picture. You are at the center of your world, and you view everything in the world from your perspective.

For example, think about a time in which you shared an experience with someone but you each had radically different experiences: attending a party, viewing a movie, having a communication misunderstanding. Reflect on the way each person instinctively describes the entire

thinking philosophically

SENSE, PERCEPTION, AND YOUR SELF

- Reflect on your mind and identify the contents that you are experiencing as Hume would describe them: isolated and fleeting sounds, images, tastes, smells, and so on. Did this require a special effort on your part? Why or why not?
- Now reflect on the contents of your mind and identify the contents that you are experiencing as Kant would describe them: an integrated world of objects, relationships, space, and time. How did this mental “experiment” compare with the previous one?
- Describe a time in your life in which your experience was very much as Hume describes it and then how it changed into an experience that was more Kantian.
situation from his or her perspective. That’s the unity of consciousness that Kant is describing.

Your self is able to perform this synthesizing, unifying function because it transcends sense experience. Your self isn’t an object located in your consciousness with other objects—your self is a subject, an organizing principle that makes a unified and intelligible experience possible. It is, metaphorically, “above” or “behind” sense experience, and it uses the categories of your mind to filter, order, relate, organize, and synthesize sensations into a unified whole. That’s why Kant accords the self “transcendental” status: It exists independently of experience. The self is the product of reason, a regulative principle because the self “regulates” experience by making unified experience possible. Other such “transcendental regulative ideas” include the ideas of cosmos and God.

Everything that has its basis in the nature of our powers must be appropriate to, and consistent with, their right employment—if we can only guard against a certain misunderstanding and so discover the proper direction of these powers. We are entitled, therefore, to suppose that transcendental ideas . . . have an excellent, and indeed indispensably necessary, regulative employment, namely, that of directing the understanding towards a certain goal upon which the routes marked out by all its rules converge.

The first (regulative) idea is the “I” itself, viewed simply as thinking nature or soul . . . : in a word, the idea of a simple self-sustaining intelligence. [Reason operates] to represent all determinations as existing in a single subject, all powers, so far as possible, as derived from a single fundamental power, all change as belonging to the states of one and the same permanent being.

So where did Hume go wrong, from Kant’s standpoint? How could Hume examine his mind’s contents and not find his self, particularly because, in Kant’s view, the self is required to have intelligible experience? Hume’s problem (according to Kant) was that he looked for his self in the wrong place! Contrary to what Hume assumed, the self is not an object of consciousness, one of the contents of the mind. Instead, the self is the transcendental activity that synthesizes the contents of consciousness into an intelligible whole. Because the self is not a “content” of consciousness but rather the invisible “thread” that ties the contents of consciousness together, it’s no wonder that Hume couldn’t find it. It would be analogous to you going to a sporting event and looking in vain to see the “team,” when all you see are a collection of players. The “team” is the network of relationships between the individuals that is not visible to simple perception. The “team” is the synthesizing activity that creates a unity among the individuals, much like the self creates a unity in experience by synthesizing its contents into an intelligible whole. And because experience is continually changing, this intelligible picture of the world is being updated on an instantaneous basis.

We can also see Kant’s refinement of Descartes’ concept of the self, which he interprets as a simple, self-evident fact: “I think, therefore I am.” Kant was interested in developing a more complex, analytical, and sophisticated understanding of the self as a thinking identity. To begin with, Descartes was focusing on one dimension of the thinking process: our ability to reflect, to become aware of our self, to be
self-conscious. But from Kant’s standpoint, the thinking self—consciousness—has a more complex structure than simple self-reflection. The self is a dynamic entity/activity, continually synthesizing sensations and ideas into an integrated, meaningful whole. The self, in the form of consciousness, utilizes conceptual categories (or “transcendental rules”) such as substance, cause and effect, unity, plurality, possibility, necessity, and reality to construct an orderly and “objective” world that is stable and can be investigated scientifically. It is in this sense that the self constructs its own reality, actively creating a world that is familiar, predictable, and, most significantly, mine.

Kant’s idea of the self as a “transcendental unifying principle of consciousness” is certainly not “conscious” in the traditional sense. But neither is it hidden from reflective awareness, if we know where to look for it. This transcendental self (or ego) is not to be found as an entity in consciousness—it is the dynamic organizing principle that makes consciousness possible. One problem with this view of the self is that there is nothing personal about it.

As an abstract organizing principle, it appears to be difficult to distinguish one transcendental self from another. As a result, Kant identifies another self the empirical self (or ego), which includes all of those particular aspects of our selves that make us uniquely different people: bodies, memories, personalities, ways of thinking, emotional patterns, and so on. The obvious problem is that this model of consciousness leaves us with two selves, leading to some disquieting questions: How do these two selves relate to one another? Is one self more primary or fundamental than the other? Which self is our “true” self, our identity, our soul? Are we condemned to be metaphysical schizophrenics? Kant tries mightily to answer these troubling and enigmatic questions, but it’s a very difficult challenge.

Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” accompanied by his comprehensive and penetrating analysis of the central themes of philosophy helped usher in a modern consciousness. In fact, many of his foundational premises have been supported by research in the sciences and social sciences. For example, the renowned developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) conducted painstaking empirical research on the way the human mind develops, an interactive process involving both sensory experience and innate cognitive structures. His seminal book Construction of Reality in the Child (1950) (published almost 150 years after Kant’s death) could very easily have been written by Kant had he been a modern developmental psychologist. Similarly, work in language development by linguists such as Noam Chomsky (1928–) have also supported the Kantian idea that human experience—such as language abilities—are the product of both exposure to a specific language and innate, a priori intellectual rules or categories that are “hardwired” into each human being.

Kant’s dominant influence on Western philosophy and the intellectual framework of modern consciousness was in sharp contrast to his quiet, limited life. Never traveling more than sixty miles from his birthplace in Germany, Kant never married and lived a life of such precise habits that it was said the citizens of his hometown could set their watches based on his daily walks. He was a popular university professor, and his passion for understanding both the universe and human nature is reflected in the inscription he wrote for his tombstone: “The starry heavens above me; the moral law within me.”
In a radical break from traditional theories of the mind, the German thinker Edmund Husserl introduced a very different approach that came to be known as phenomenology. Phenomenology refers to the conviction that all knowledge of our selves and our world is based on the “phenomena” of experience. From Husserl’s standpoint, the division between the “mind” and the “body” is a product of confused thinking. The simple fact is, we experience our self as a unity in which the mental and physical are seamlessly woven together. This idea of the self as a unity thus fully rejects the dualist ideas of Plato and Descartes.

A generation after Husserl, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty articulated the phenomenologist position in a simple declaration: “I live in my body.” By the “lived body,” Merleau-Ponty means an entity that can never be objectified or known in a completely objective sort of way, as opposed to the “body as object” of the dualists. For example, when you first wake up in the morning and experience your gradually expanding awareness of where you are and how you feel, what are your first thoughts of the day? Perhaps something along the lines of “Oh no, it’s time to get up, but I’m still sleepy, but I have an important appointment that I can’t be late for” and so on. Note that at no point do you doubt that the “I” you refer to is a single integrated entity, a blending of mental, physical, and emotional structured around a core identity: your self. It’s only later, when you’re reading Descartes or discussing the possibility of reincarnation with a friend that you begin creating ideas such as independent “minds,” “bodies,” “souls,” or, in the case of Freud, an “unconscious.”

According to Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, if we honestly and accurately examine our direct and immediate experience of our selves, these mind/body “problems” fall away. As Merleau-Ponty explains, “There is not a duality of substances but only the dialectic of living being in its biological milieu.” In other words, our “living body” is a natural synthesis of mind and biology, and any attempts to divide them into separate entities are artificial and nonsensical.

The underlying question is “What aspect of our experience is the most ‘real’?” From Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s vantage point, it’s the moments of immediate, prereflective experience that are the most real. It is the Lebenswelt or “lived world,” which is the fundamental ground of our being and consciousness. To take another example,
Breathing Head (2002), by Fred Tomaselli. This painting evokes the idea of the self as a perceiving being. This image teems with life and energy. Might this view of the self suggest how you could feel more fully alive? (FRED TOMASELLI, Breathing Head. 2002. Leaves, photocollage, acrylic, gouache, resin on wood panel. 60 × 60 inches. Image courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York.)

consider your experience when you are in the midst of activities such as dancing, playing a sport, or performing musically—what is your experience of your self? Most likely, you’re completely absorbed in the moment, your mind and body functioning as one integrated entity. For Merleau-Ponty, this unified experience of your self is the paradigm or model you should use to understand your nature.

Phenomenologists do not assume that there are more “fundamental” levels of reality beyond that of conscious human experience. Consistent with this ontological (having to do with the nature of being or existence) commitment is the belief that explanations for human behavior and experience are not to be sought by appeal to phenomena that are somehow behind, beneath, or beyond the phenomena of lived human experience but instead are to be sought within the field of human experience itself, using terminology and concepts appropriate to this field. And when we examine our selves at this fundamental level of direct human experience, we discover that our mind and body are unified, not separate. It is this primal consciousness, Merleau-Ponty notes in his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, that is the foundation for our perception of the world and our knowledge about it:

Consciousness must be reckoned as a self-contained system of Being, as a system of Absolute being, into which nothing can penetrate and from which nothing can escape. On the other side, the whole spatio-temporal world, to which man and the human ego claim to belong as subordinate singular realities, is according to its own meaning mere intentional Being, a Being, therefore, which has the merely secondary, relative sense of a Being for a consciousness.

For Merleau-Ponty, everything that we are aware of—and can possibly know—is contained within our own consciousness. It’s impossible for us to get “outside” of our consciousness because it defines the boundaries of our personal universe. The so-called real world of objects existing in space and time initially exists only as objects of my consciousness. Yet in a cognitive sleight-of-hand, we act as if the
space/time world is primary and our immediate consciousness is secondary. This is an inversion of the way things actually are: It is our consciousness that is primary and the space/time world that is secondary, existing fundamentally as the object of our consciousness.

Nor is science exempt from condemnation, according to the phenomenologists, for scientists are guilty of the same flawed thinking as expressed in abstract philosophical and religious theories. Too often scientists treat their abstract theories as if they take precedence over the rich and intuitive reality of immediate lived experience. In cases when the two worlds conflict, scientists automatically assume that the scientific perspective is correct, and the direct experience of the individual wrong. This is the difficulty we pointed out with the concept of the unconscious: It was considered by Freud and many of his followers to be of such supreme authority that no individual’s contrasting point of view can measure up to the ultimate truth of the unconscious interpretation. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty makes the crucial point that these theories couldn’t even exist without the primal reality of lived experience to serve as their foundation. And then these theories have the arrogance to dismiss this fundamental reality as somehow secondary or derivative:

Scientific points of view are always both naïve and at the same time dishonest, because they take for granted without explicitly mentioning it, that other point of view, namely that of the consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me.

As a philosophical theory of knowledge, phenomenology is distinctive in the sense that its goal is not to explain experience but rather to clarify our understanding of it. A phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty sees his aim of describing what he sees and then assuming that his description will strike a familiar chord with us, stimulating us to say, “I understand what you’re saying—that makes sense to me!” From this perspective, the responsibility of philosophy is not to provide explanations but to seek the root and genesis of meaning, “to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason,” to help us think and see things more clearly. For example, to develop a clear understanding of your “being in love,” you need to delay using elaborate psychological theories and instead begin by describing the phenomena of the experience in a clear, vivid fashion, trying to uncover the meaning of what you are experiencing. Then you can begin developing concepts and theories to help you make sense of the phenomena of “being in love.” The danger of using theories prematurely is that you may very well distort your actual experience, forcing it to conform to someone else’s idea of what “being in love” means instead of clearly understanding your unique experience. Concepts and theories are essential for understanding our selves and our world. It’s simply a question of which comes first—the concepts/theories or the phenomena of experience that the concepts/theories are designed to explain. For phenomenologists, it’s essential that we always begin (and return regularly to) the phenomena of our lived experience. Otherwise, we run the risk of viewing our experience through conceptual or theoretical “lenses” that distort rather than clarify. For instance, in providing a phenomenological analysis of “being in love,” you might begin by describing precisely what your immediate responses are: physically, emotionally, cognitively. I’m currently in love and,

- I feel . . .
- I think . . .
My physical response . . .
I spontaneously . . .

By recording the direct phenomena of our experience, we have the basic data needed to reveal the complex meaning of this experience and begin to develop a clearer understanding of what “being in love” is all about, by using concepts and theories appropriate to the reality of our lived experience.

What exactly is “consciousness”? For Merleau-Ponty it is a dynamic form responsible for actively structuring our conscious ideas and physical behavior. In this sense, it is fundamentally different from Hume’s and Locke’s concept of the mind as a repository for sensations or the behaviorists’ notion of the mind as the sum total of the reactions to the physical stimuli that an organism receives. Consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, is a dimension of our lived body, which is not an object in the world, distinct from the knowing subject (as in Descartes), but is the subjects’ own point of view on the world: The body is itself the original knowing subject from which all other forms of knowledge derive.

Accomplished writers often have a special talent for representing human experience in a rich, vibrant, and textured way. The French novelist Marcel Proust is renowned for articulating the phenomena of consciousness in a very phenomenological way. Consider the following descriptions of experiences and analyze their effectiveness from a phenomenological perspective on the self.

Marcel Proust, from In Search of Time Lost

Waking from Sleep

When a man is asleep, he has in a circle round him the chain of the hours, the sequence of the years, the order of the heavenly host. Instinctively, when he awakes, he looks to these, and in an instant reads off his own position on the earth’s surface the time that has elapsed during his slumbers; but this ordered procession is apt to grow confused, and to break its ranks . . . suppose that he dozes off in an armchair, for instance, after dinner: then the world will go hurtling out of orbit, the magic chair will carry him at full speed through time and space, and when he opens his eyes again he will imagine that he went to sleep months earlier in another place . . . for me it was enough if, in my own bed, my sleep was so heavy as completely to relax my consciousness; for then I lost all sense of the place in which I had gone to sleep, and when I awoke in the middle of the night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal’s consciousness: I was more destitute than a cave dweller; but then the memory—not yet of the place in which I was, but of the various other places where I had lived and might now possibly be—would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of non-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself: but in a flash I would traverse centuries of civilization, and out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, then of shirts with turned-down collars, would gradually piece together the original components of my ego. (20)
3.8 The Self Is the Brain: Materialism

Materialism is the philosophical view that all aspects of the universe are composed of matter and energy and can be explained by physical laws. Many philosophers and psychologists view the self from a materialistic point of view, contending that in the final analysis mental states are identical with, reducible to, or explainable in terms of physical brain states.

Humans have known since recorded history of the close, intimate relationship between the mind and the body. The health of our bodies, the things we ingest, the experiences we endure—all of these dimensions of our physical self have a profound effect on our mental and emotional functioning. Similarly, our emotional states, the way we think about things, our levels of stress, the optimism (or pessimism) we feel—all of these dimensions of our mental self have a dramatic impact on our physical condition. As an example, just consider how the single word heart is used to display this intimate connection between the emotional and the physical: heartfelt, heartache, heartsick, heartened, large-hearted, heartless, lighthearted, hard-hearted, heartbroken.

Modern science is now able to use advanced equipment and sophisticated techniques to unravel and articulate the complex web of connections that binds consciousness and body together into an integrated self. In fact, one of the most dynamic areas of scientific research currently is that devoted to exploring the mind/brain relationship, and the information being developed is fascinating. Scientists are increasingly able to correlate specific areas in the brain with areas of mental functioning, both cognitively and emotionally. Psychotropic drugs are being developed that can influence emotional states such as depression or extreme social anxiety. Brain scans can reveal physical abnormalities that are related to personality disorders. And discoveries are being made in the reverse direction as well, detailing the physical affects of emotional states such as anxiety, depression, anger, pessimism, and optimism on the health and well-being of the body. The assumption of this approach is that to fully understand the nature of the mind we have to fully understand the nature of the brain.

The impressive success of such scientific mind/brain research has encouraged many to conclude that it is only a matter of time before the mental life of consciousness is fully explainable in terms of the neurophysiology of the brain. The ultimate goal of such explorations is to link the self—including all of our thoughts, passions, personality traits—to the physical wiring and physiological functioning of the brain.
of the brain. Although such thinkers recognize that achieving such a goal will take

time, they are confident that we will progressively develop ways of describing the

mind, consciousness, and human experience that are physiologically based. The

contemporary philosopher Paul Churchland articulates such a vision in the fol-

lowing essay. He begins by acknowledging that a simple identity formula—mental

states = brain states—is a flawed way in which to conceptualize the relationship

between the mind and the brain. Instead, we need to develop a new, neuroscience-

based vocabulary that will enable us to think and communicate clearly about the

mind, consciousness, and human experience. He refers to this view as eliminative

materialism.

Paul Churchland (b. 1942)
Contemporary American
philosopher and professor
at the University of Califor-
nia, San Diego. Church-
land's interests are the
philosophy of science, the
philosophy of mind, artificial
intelligence and cognitive
neurobiology, epistemology,
and perception. His writing
includes The Engine of Rea-
son, The Seat of the Soul: A
Philosophical Journey into
the Brain (1995).

Churchland, from On Eliminative Materialism
The identity theory was called into doubt not because the prospects for a materialist
account of our mental capacities were thought to be poor, but because it seemed unlikely
that the arrival of an adequate materialist theory would bring with it the nice one-to-one
match-ups, between the concepts of folk psychology and the concepts of theoretical neu-
roscience, that intertheoretic reduction requires. The reason for that doubt was the great
variety of quite different physical systems that could instantiate the required functional
organization. Eliminative materialism also doubts that the correct neuroscientific account
of human capacities will produce a neat reduction of our common-sense framework, but
here the doubts arise from a quite different source.

As the eliminative materialists see it, the one-to-one match-ups will not be found,
and our common-sense psychological framework will not enjoy an intertheoretic
reduction, because our common-sense psychological framework is a false and rad-
cially misleading conception of the causes of human behavior and the nature of cog-
nitive activity. On this view, folk psychology is not just an incomplete representation
of our inner natures; it is an outright mis-representation of our internal states and
activities. Consequently, we cannot expect a truly adequate neuroscientific account
of our inner lives to provide theoretical categories that match up nicely with the cat-
egories of our common-sense framework. Accordingly, we must expect that the older
framework will simply be eliminated, rather than be reduced, by a matured neuro-
sience . . .

It used to be thought that when a piece of wood burns, or a piece of metal rusts,
a spiritlike substance called “phlogiston” was being released: briskly, in the former
case, slowly in the latter. Once gone, that “noble” substance left only a base pile of
ash or rust. It later came to be appreciated that both processes involve, not the loss
of something, but the gaining of a substance taken from the atmosphere: oxygen.
Phlogiston emerged, not as an incomplete description of what was going on, but as
a radical misdescription. Phlogiston was therefore not suitable for reduction to or
identification with some notion from within the new oxygen chemistry, and it was sim-
ply eliminated from science. . .

The concepts of folk psychology—belief, desire, fear, sensation, pain, joy, and so
on—await a similar fate, according to the view at issue. And when neuroscience has
matured to the point where the poverty of our current conceptions is apparent to every-
one, the superiority of the new framework is established, we shall then be able to set
about reconceiving our internal states and activities, within a truly adequate conceptual
framework at last. Our explanations of one another’s behavior will appeal to such things
as our neuropharmacological states, the neural activity in specialized anatomical areas,
and whatever other states are deemed relevant by the new theory. Our private intro-
spection will also be transformed, and may be profoundly enhanced by reason of the more
accurate and penetrating framework it will have to work with—just as the astronomer’s perception of the night sky is much enhanced by the detailed knowledge of modern astronomical theory that he or she possesses.

The magnitude of the conceptual revolution here suggested should not be minimized: it would be enormous. And the benefits to humanity might be equally great. If each of us possessed an accurate neuroscientific understanding of (what we now conceive dimly as) the varieties and causes of mental illness, the factors involved in learning, the neural basis of emotions, intelligence, and socialization, then the sum total of human misery might be much reduced. The simple increase in mutual understanding that the new framework made possible could contribute substantially toward a more peaceful and humane society. Of course, there would be dangers as well: increased knowledge means increased power, and power can always be misused.

Churchland’s central argument is that the concepts and theoretical vocabulary we use to think about ourselves—using such terms as belief, desire, fear, sensation, pain, joy—actually misrepresent the reality of minds and selves. All of these concepts are part of a commonsense “folk psychology” that obscures rather than clarifies the nature of human experience. Eliminative materialists believe that we need to develop a new vocabulary and conceptual framework that is grounded in neuroscience and that will be a more accurate reflection of the human mind and self. Churchland proceeds to state the arguments that he believes support his position.

The arguments for eliminative materialism are diffuse and less than decisive, but they are stronger than is widely supposed. The distinguishing feature of this position is its denial that a smooth intertheoretic reduction is to be expected—even a species-specific reduction—of the framework of folk psychology to the framework of a matured neuroscience. The reason for this denial is the eliminative materialist’s conviction that folk psychology is a hopelessly primitive and deeply confused conception of our internal activities. But why this low opinion of our commonsense conceptions?

There are at least three reasons. First, the eliminative materialist will point to the widespread explanatory, predictive, and manipulative failures of folk psychology. So much of what is central and familiar to us remains a complete mystery from within folk psychology. We do not know what sleep is, or why we have to have it, despite spending a full third of our lives in that condition. (The answer, “For rest,” is mistaken. Even if people are allowed to rest continuously, their need for sleep is undiminished. Apparently, sleep serves some deeper functions, but we do not yet know what they are.) We do not understand how learning transforms each of us from a gaping infant to a cunning adult, or how differences in intelligence are grounded. We have not the slightest idea how memory works, or how we manage to retrieve relevant bits of information instantly from the awesome mass we have stored. We do not know what mental illness is, nor how to cure it.

In sum, the most central things about us remain almost entirely mysterious from within folk psychology. . . .

This argument from explanatory poverty has a further aspect. So long as one sticks to normal brains, the poverty of folk psychology is perhaps not strikingly evident. But as soon as one examines the many perplexing behavioral and cognitive deficits suffered by people with damaged brains, one’s descriptive and explanatory resources start to claw the air. . . . As with other humble theories asked to operate successfully in unexplored extensions of their old domain (for example, Newtonian mechanics in the domain of velocities close to the velocity of light, and the classical gas law in the domain of high pressures or temperatures), the descriptive and explanatory inadequacies of folk psychology become starkly evident.
Churchland’s point is that the most compelling argument for developing a new conceptual framework and vocabulary founded on neuroscience is the simple fact that the current “folk psychology” has done a poor job in accomplishing the main reason for its existence—explaining and predicting the commonplace phenomena of the human mind and experience. And in the same way that science replaces outmoded, ineffective, and limited conceptual frameworks with ones that can explain and predict more effectively, so the same thing needs to be done in psychology and philosophy of mind. This new conceptual framework will be based on and will integrate all that we are learning about how the brain works on a neurological level.

Although he believes strongly in the logic of his position, Churchland recognizes that many people will resist the argument he is making for a variety of reasons.

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The initial plausibility of this rather radical view is low for almost everyone, since it denies deeply entrenched assumptions. That is at best a question-begging complaint, of course, since those assumptions are precisely what is at issue. But the following line of thought does attempt to mount a real argument.

Eliminative materialism is false, runs the argument, because one’s introspection reveals directly the existence of pains, beliefs, desires, fears, and so forth. Their existence is as obvious as anything could be.

The eliminative materialist will reply that this argument makes the same mistake that an ancient or medieval person would be making if he insisted that he could just see with his own eyes that the heavens form a turning sphere, or that witches exist. The fact is, all observation occurs within some system of concepts, and our observation judgments are only as good as the conceptual framework in which they are expressed. In all three cases—the starry sphere, witches, and the familiar mental states—precisely what is challenged is the integrity of the background conceptual frameworks in which the observation judgments are expressed. To insist on the validity of one’s experiences, traditionally interpreted, is therefore to beg the very question at issue. For in all three cases, the question is whether we should reconceive the nature of some familiar observational domain.

Churchland, from On Eliminative Materialism

The second argument tries to draw an inductive lesson from our conceptual history. Our early folk theories of motion were profoundly confused, and were eventually displaced entirely by more sophisticated theories. Our early folk theories of the structure and activity of the heavens were wildly off the mark, and survive only as historical lessons in how wrong we can be. Our folk theories of the nature of fire, and the nature of life, were similarly cock-eyed. And one could go on, since the vast majority of our past folk conceptions have been similarly exploded. All except folk psychology, which survives to this day and has only recently begun to feel pressure. But the phenomenon of conscious intelligence is surely a more complex and difficult phenomenon than any of those just listed. So far as accurate understanding is concerned, it would be a miracle if we had got that one right the very first time, when we fell down so badly on all the others. Folk psychology has survived for so very long, presumably, not because it is basically correct in its representations, but because the phenomena addressed are so surprisingly difficult that any useful handle on them, no matter how feeble, is unlikely to be displaced in a hurry...
A final criticism draws a much weaker conclusion but makes a rather stronger case. Eliminative materialism, it has been said, is making mountains out of molehills. It exaggerates the defects in folk psychology, and underplays its real successes. Perhaps the arrival of a matured neuroscience will require the elimination of the occasional folk-psychological concept, continues the criticism, and a minor adjustment in certain folk-psychological principles may have to be endured. But the large-scale elimination forecast by the eliminative materialist is just an alarmist worry or a romantic enthusiasm.

Perhaps this complaint is correct. And perhaps it is merely complacent. Whichever, it does bring out the important point that we do not confront two simple and mutually exclusive possibilities here: pure reduction versus pure elimination. Rather, these are the end points of a smooth spectrum of possible outcomes, between which there are mixed cases of partial elimination and partial reduction. Only empirical research... can tell us where on that spectrum our own case will fall. Perhaps we should speak here, more liberally, of “revisionary materialism” instead of concentrating on the more radical possibility of an across-the-board elimination.

Churchland’s ultimate concession that the psychology-based conceptual framework currently used by most academic disciplines and popular culture may not end up being completely eradicated and replaced by a neuroscience framework appears to recognize the fundamental differences between the life of the mind and neuroscientific descriptions of the brain’s operation. Many people believe that, no matter how exhaustively scientists are able to describe the physical conditions for consciousness, this does not mean that the mental dimensions of the self will ever be reducible to these physical states. Why? Because in the final analysis, the physical and mental dimensions of the self are qualitatively different realms, each with its own distinctive vocabulary, logic, and organizing principles. According to this view, even if scientists were able to map out your complete brain activity at the moment you were having an original idea or experiencing an emotional epiphany, that neurobiological description of your brain would provide no clue as to the nature of your personal experience at that moment. Articulating and communicating the rich texture of those experiences would take a very different language and logic.

Fascinatingly, it was Socrates who first articulated a coherent critique of the materialist position in Plato’s dialogue *Phaedo*, during the period following his trial and conviction. Socrates ridicules the materialist position, which he attributes to the philosopher Anaxagoras, which, he says, would explain his decision to remain in Athens by reference to his “bones and sinews,” rather than the result of the conscious choice of his mind. With surprisingly good humor he explains that if it was up to his body he would not have remained in Athens to be executed, but rather “I fancy that these sinews and bones would have been in the neighborhood of Megara or Boeotia long ago—impelled by a conviction of what is best!—if I did not think that it was more right and honorable to submit to whatever my country orders rather than to take to my heels and run away.” In other words, Socrates is arguing that it is his conscious, rational mind that has determined his fate, and attempting to use a materialistic framework to explain his actions makes no sense. “If it were said that without such bones and sinews and all the rest of them I should not be able to do what I think is right, it would be true. But to say that it is because of them that I do what I am doing, and not through choice of what is best—although my actions are controlled by mind—would be a very lax and inaccurate form of expression.” For Socrates, even if we had a complete description of how the body (and by extension the brain) worked, we would still be unable to dispense with folk psychological terms like *choice* and *belief*. 
Western culture’s concept of the self, initiated by Plato and continued through the centuries by thinkers like Saint Augustine and Descartes, is so woven into the philosophical frameworks of many of us that it’s difficult to conceive of radically different concepts of the self if we haven’t been exposed to them. Yet the fact is that these different concepts of the self do in fact exist, and they are assumed to be true by people immersed in different cultures and religions.

One of the most influential of these alternate views is the Buddhist conception of the self, and comparisons are often made between Hume’s concept of the self as a unified bundle of thoughts, feelings, and sensations and Buddhism’s concept of anatta or “no-self.” Although there are surface similarities between the two views of the self, a deeper analysis reveals significant differences. For Hume, a close examination of our stream of consciousness reveals no self, soul, or “I” that exists continually through time. We each create a “fictional self” to unify these transient mental events and introduce order into our lives, but this self has no real existence.

Buddhist doctrine agrees with Hume that the notion of a permanent self that exists as a unified identity through time is an illusion. For Buddhists, every aspect of life is impermanent and all elements of the universe are in a continual process of change and transition, a process that includes each self as well. The self can best be thought of as a flame that is continually passed from candle to candle, retaining a certain continuity but no real personal identity. But if the self or “I” doesn’t refer to a continuous identity, then what does it signify? According to Buddhist philosophy, the self is composed of five aggregates: physical form, sensation, conceptualization, dispositions to act, and consciousness. Each self is comprised of the continual interplay of these five elements, but there is no substance or identity beyond the dynamic interaction of these five elements.

What would reincarnation mean for the self? Buddhist philosophy allows for the idea of reincarnation, as the self passes from body to body. The Buddha uses the mudra (a sacred gesture) to represent the Karmic wheel of birth, death, and rebirth. Do you believe that your actions in this life affect your self in a next life or afterlife?

< READING CRITICALLY >

Analyzing Churchland’s Materialism

- Explain the reasons why materialists believe that to fully understand the nature of the mind we have to fully understand the nature of the brain.
- Based on your own experience, describe some examples of the close, interactive relationship between the physical dimensions of your self and the psychological aspects of your mind and experience.
- Explain why Paul Churchland believes that a close examination of the history of science suggests that we are at the beginning of a conceptual revolution in understanding the nature of the mind.
- Explain the arguments against eliminative materialism. Which arguments do you find most persuasive? Why?
This concept of the self is certain to seem alien to our Western consciousness, which has a decidedly more Platonic view of self-identity. And, in fact, there was a famous debate regarding these two points of view that occurred in the second century B.C.E., between King Menander, a Greek who ruled northwestern India, and a Buddhist monk Nagasena. Witnessed by five hundred Greeks and thousands of monks, the argument hinged on a chariot simile, though in a much different fashion than that employed by Plato!

**Milindapanha, The Simile of the Chariot**

Then King Menander went up to the Venerable Nagasena, greeted him respectfully, and sat down. Nagasena replied to the greeting, and the King was pleased at heart. Then King Menander asked: "How is your reverence known, and what is your name?"

"I'm known as Nagasena, your Majesty, that's what my fellow monks call me. But though my parents may have given me such a name . . . it's only a generally understood term, a practical designation. There is no question of a permanent individual implied in the use of the word."

"Listen, you five hundred Greeks and eighty thousand monks!" said King Menander. "This Nagasena has just declared that there's no permanent individuality implied in his name!" Then, turning to Nagasena, "If, Reverend Nagasena, there is no permanent individuality, who gives you monks your robes and food, lodging and medicines? And who makes use of them? Who lives a life of righteousness, meditates, and reaches Nirvana? Who destroys living beings, steals, fornicates, tells lies, or drinks spirits? . . . If what you say is true there's neither merit nor demerit, and no fruit or result of good or evil deeds. If someone were to kill you there would be no question of murder. And there would be no masters or teachers in the (Buddhist) Order and no ordinations. If your fellow monks call you Nagasena, what then is Nagasena? Would you say that your hair is Nagasena?"

"No, your Majesty."

"Or your nails, teeth, skin, or other parts of your body, or the outward form, or sensation, or perception, or the psychic constructions, or consciousness? Are any of these Nagasena?" "No, your Majesty."

"Then are all these taken together Nagasena?" "No, your Majesty."

"Or anything other than they?" "No, your Majesty."

"Then for all my asking I find no Nagasena. Nagasena is a mere sound! Surely what your Reverence has said is false!"

Then the Venerable Nagasena addressed the King.

"Your Majesty, how did you come here—on foot, or in a vehicle?"

"In a chariot."

"Then tell me what is the chariot? Is the pole the chariot?" "No, your Reverence."

"Or the axle, wheels, frame, reins, yoke, spokes, or goad?" "None of these things is the chariot."

"Then all these separate parts taken together are the chariot?" "No, your Reverence."

"Then is the chariot something other than the separate parts?" "No, your Reverence."

"Then for all my asking, your Majesty, I can find no chariot. The chariot is a mere sound. What then is the chariot? Surely what your Majesty has said is false! There is no chariot! . . .

When he had spoken the five hundred Greeks cried "Well done!" and said to the King, "Now, your Majesty, get out of that dilemma if you can!" "What I said was not false," replied the King. "It's on account of all these various components, the pole, axle, wheels, and so on, that the vehicle is called a chariot. It's just a generally understood term, a practical designation."

"Well said, your Majesty! You know what the word 'chariot' means! And it's just the same with me. It's on account of the various components of my being that I'm known by the generally understood term, the practical designation Nagasena."
3.10 Making Connections: In Search of the Self

What is the self? We have seen in this chapter that this seemingly innocent question is anything but simple. It’s certainly curious that this entity that is so personal and always present to us turns out to be so elusive and enigmatic. It should be some comfort to realize that the greatest minds in history have wrestled with this question without reaching conclusive answers. Is the self an immortal soul, distinct from the physical body? Is the self simply a receptacle for the stream of sensations moving through our consciousness? Is the self defined by its ability to think and reflect? Is the self an organizing principle that integrates all of the elements of experience into a personal unity? Is the self defined by its observable behavior? What is the relationship of consciousness and the physical body? Is the mind/body “problem” the result of confused thinking? Is the self identical with the brain or some part of the brain?

You may be asking yourself at this point, Do I really need to have a philosophy of the self? What difference does having such a philosophy make in my life? Paul Churchland mentions that a better understanding of our selves will contribute toward a more

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Does the soul transcend death? Funeral ceremonies embody beliefs about the connection between the self and body. In this picture of a Buddhist funeral, the body of the deceased is to be cremated so that the soul can be released to the next incarnation. What beliefs are embodied in the funeral practices of your culture?
peaceful and humane society. How so? Do you agree? Your personal reflections as you have thought your way through the issues in this chapter have likely suggested some responses to these questions. Why is it important to have a philosophy of the self? In part, because we cannot influence or control what we do not understand. Achieving your goals in life, both in terms of personal growth and real-world success, is directly related to your insight into the nature of your self. The key to determining your authentic life goals, overcoming obstacles that may be inhibiting your success, and taking the most productive path to achieving your aspirations, is grounded in self-understanding. As we will see in the next chapter, “Are You Free? Freedom and Determinism,” your philosophy of your self relates directly to your belief in whether free choices are possible, and if they are, how you can maximize your personal freedom.

But you do not exist in isolation: Your self is bound up in a network of relationships with other selves. The person that you are is in large measure shaped by your social experiences in life: your family, your culture, your religion, your community, your friends, and so on. In fact, many thinkers believe that it is a mistake to try to understand the self in isolation from others. Instead, they reason, we can only be understood in the context of the complex web of social relations that constitute and define us. This was the view of Aristotle, who observed:

If there were a being who could not live in society or who did not need to live in society because he was self-sufficient, then he would have to either be animal or a god. He could not be a real part of the state. A social instinct is implanted in all people by their nature.

Developing productive and healthy relationships with others is clearly related to developing an enlightened philosophy of the self: Otherwise we’re flying blind as we try to negotiate our way in the world and build relationships with others. And on a social level, developing an informed understanding of the self is certainly connected to the larger social challenges that face us. One cannot help but be concerned with all of the destructive events occurring in the world today, fueled in large measure by ignorance of the self in both its individual and social incarnations. There is a strong case that can be made for Churchland’s point that creating a more peaceful and humane society—and world—is contingent on understanding ourselves. It is only through self-examination and insight that we will be able to diminish the destructive impulses that humans seem to be prone to and promote the constructive, empathetic, and creative dimensions of our selves that will help construct the sort of world in which we all yearn for.

These are some of the themes that we have explored in this chapter and that we will continue to examine throughout this text. But in a larger sense, these are questions that you will continue to explore throughout your life. Your self is a wonder, a miracle, an extraordinary creation. When Socrates urged each of us to “Know thyself” and warned that “The unexamined life is not worth living,” he was issuing a challenge that requires a lifetime commitment and our mind’s best work. But it is in the process of striving to understand our self that we may also discover the purpose of our existence and the path to living a productive and fulfilling life.
**writing about philosophy: DEFINING THE SELF**

**The Assignment**

This chapter has explored the deceptively complex question, “Who Am I?” One of the great ironies of life is that though we have spent our entire waking lives with ourselves, the precise nature of our self remains elusive and enigmatic. The philosophers and psychologists we have studied in this chapter have endeavored to unravel the mysteries of consciousness, personal identity, and the soul. It is likely you have found that in studying them you have gained both insight and confusion as your understanding of these issues has deepened and your questions have become more intellectually sophisticated.

This essay assignment is an opportunity to express your own views on the nature of the self in a form that is thoughtful and coherent. Begin by reflecting on the various perspectives regarding the self that you read about and discussed in this chapter. Make notes about which theories you strongly agreed and disagreed with, and do some prewriting by drafting a paragraph on each of these theories, bringing in your own experiences to support your positions. Then use these drafts to compose a paper that reflects your own synthesis of the theories. You may find that your ideas on this complex subject become clearer as you think them through in writing. By the end of the essay, the reader should have an understanding of your concept of the self and its connection to the philosophical ideas we have been examining.
Years ago my parents met in an elevator in Manhattan, and in an instant my existence was made possible. Had my father missed that elevator, had his dentist been running late, he might never have stepped on and seen my mother in her rainbow-striped socks and miniskirt, struggling with a stack of boxes. If she had not smiled, or he had not held the lobby door or gotten up the guts to suggest coffee sometime, or if my mother had not said, “How about right now?”—if not for everything falling into place: no love, no marriage, no me. When I was two years old at a garden party, I made my way precariously across the lawn towards the sparkling rectangle of swimming pool and toppled in. All backs were turned, and only one woman saw me. She leapt in with all of her clothing on to pull me free: again, no woman, no rescue, no me. These are the stories of how I was created that circle my consciousness and that have shaped who I am today, my “self.” But where do I find this “me”? Where is the self contained? And where does it come from? From my experience, it comes partially from our history. From the stories that we have been told that shape what we believe and how we see the world. A chance meeting, a near drowning. There are so many reasons that none of us should be here, but here we all are, all of these free-floating entities miraculously arrived at this place, what the author Kurt Vonnegut calls “beams of light.” Our inner self, our core: invisible and fluctuating and strong. But where do we find this self? Where is it contained? And where does it come from?

David Hume contends that the self is merely a convenient term we use to designate the fleeting perceptions that pass through our minds and that in the end all we are is just a collection of these perceptions: nothing more and nothing less than what we see, smell, taste, touch, and hear. There are moments when this seems valid. In Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Time Lost*, the protagonist tastes a madeleine cookie dipped in tea and suddenly is transported, through the taste and texture, to his childhood and everything contained within it. As B. F. Skinner claims, to a certain extent our perspectives on the world are at the mercy of our conditioned responses to our experiences. I walked in a garden one day under trees that came together over the path like a small wooden racing boat overturned on a shelf. I had taken up rowing months before, and images from my new pastime had begun to shape my perceptions. What would that arch of trees have been before I learned what rowing meant? Perhaps at the age of four or five, I would have looked up on that garden walk and seen an empty tunnel awaiting the subway train in New York City. But once I knew the weight of the wooden edge of a boat overturned on my shoulder as I carried it dripping back inside and slid it carefully into its slot, once I had seen the wooden boat shells all stacked, all in rows, those trees became the enormous ghosts of those overturned boats. My perception, the world as only I see it, myself.
As much as stories, memories of my past, and my sensory perceptions of the world have shaped who I am, I believe that ourselves must be more than only our memories and our perceptions, the stories that we have heard and things we have seen. Who we are is also defined by our ability to take these things in, to observe them and to understand where these beliefs and perceptions came from. We are not helpless victims of conditioning because we have the ability to reason and to challenge our life experience. Only then can we arrive at our true self, a self that is, to use Kant's term, “created” through contemplation and analysis. For example, many people might see coincidences in life as nothing more than coincidence and near accidents as nothing more than chance. I have thought about my parents' meeting, about the things in my own life that have fallen into place, and come to the conclusion that there is some order to things. This belief is not solely rational and not solely empirical but rather a combination of Descartes' rationalism and Locke's empiricism. As humans, we experience life, we think through what we have experienced because we can, and we arrive at a conclusion, a belief. It is this belief that is our own and that defines us. Are we always conscious of ourselves? Are we always aware of where our beliefs come from? No, of course not. Often we are caught up entirely in doing or we see an arch of trees and the pattern becomes something that we cannot define or put a finger on. However, the potential for examination, consciousness and understanding is always there. The potential to bring to light the forces that have shaped our lives and to examine them critically is what makes us conscious beings.

Making the unconscious conscious, however, is not where self-understanding and growth ends. Once we are able to recognize where our impressions have come from, once we step outside of our selves and become aware of how we are seeing the world and why we are seeing it as we do, we then have the opportunity to act on this analysis and to make choices that shape and form the selves that we most want to become. Jean-Paul Sartre's view of the self is as an entity that is being always projected towards the future, creating and recreating itself as it goes through reflection and choices. When we have acknowledged what has been conditioned, it is this self-consciousness that gives us the freedom to reshape our lives, to envision our ideal future self and to make the choices that will launch us in that direction. Sartre's theory of the human experience is self-perpetuating: The more insight you have into your self the more freedom you have to create who you want to become, and the more freedom you have, the deeper your insights into what it means to create and live a meaningful and fulfilling life.

For me, the issue of how our selves continue to exist after death is best understood by a belief of the ancient Romans. On a trip to the Vatican Museum in Rome, a guide explained why the Romans created so many tombs, monuments, and carvings dedicated to a single life. The ancients, he said, did not believe in a conventional afterlife, so all that remained after death was non-existence. But if you could capture even a single part of an individual—in art, in writing, in stone—so that years later, centuries later, one person would see that little bit of lost soul, then in that moment of
recognition, the person who had died would continue to exist like a flash of light in the settled dust of the universe; a nonentity that flickers on like a light in the dark void of nothingness. Similarly, the Greek Olympians competed not only for a crown, for money, and for fame in their lifetime, but for something far more pressing—immortality: for a way in which to be remembered and so “conquer” death.

John Locke goes further than many philosophers in the soul/body issue to make the claim that the self is not even tied to a single being, a single soul, but is rather a consciousness that passes from person to person—from a prince to a cobbler, from one being to another over the centuries. This makes sense in that it is the evolution of humankind, the consciousness and understanding of self that has grown and changed and evolved over thousands of years through interactions, experiences, and the questioning of life’s purpose. It is a growth of self-awareness that is the product of philosophic study as ideas pass from one mind to the next.

How do our selves fit into a social context? Are we defined by our social selves? What is a more accurate measure of self—who we think we are, or whom others see us as? I believe that our self is not only defined by those around us, but the people in our lives certainly impact who we are becoming and how we see ourselves. These are the people who recognize us not simply for what we believe we are, but also for what we value about ourselves—they see us for what we can become. Like holding up a mirror, these people who take the time and have the insight and empathy to understand enough of the many facets that make up our personalities to allow us to see ourselves more clearly. I can recall vividly an evening in which a friend said to me, “You know, it’s funny: You’re so much different than what I first thought. You were so quiet. I thought you were just this nice quiet person, but you turned out to be not that at all. All of a sudden you just popped out. You’re so crazy!” In that instant, I had the bizarre sensation of myself “popping out,” springing forth. It is odd to think of it that way, but she was right—that is exactly how it felt. People have images of self: who they want to be; who they want people to think they are; what they think they truly are underneath—hidden away, trapped and unrecognized. But once that “hidden person” emerges, “pops out,” it is often not what you might have thought it was. Not as serious, not as profound, but you.

Somehow this friend saw me, recognized me, and held up the mirror. And for the first time, perhaps, I had an almost physical sensation of myself—as though I could see it and feel it, a glowing beam of light before me. Not perfect, not profound, not all that I aspired to be and was moving towards, but me nonetheless. And at the same time, I had a sense of all the other selves around me and thus the smallness and inconsequence of my existence. It was a glimmer of me emerging as something different than what I’d once imagined: a wavering dot on the map, a flash of light somewhere in time, and one of the millions of beams of light being projected toward the future that really shouldn’t be here but are here simply because an elevator arrives just when it should or a pair of hands pulls us from the suffocating waters of nonexistence.
Know Thyself?
- The concept and nature of the “self” has been an ongoing, and evolving, subject of inquiry among philosophers since the time of Socrates. To grapple with the concept of self is to begin to explore what it is to know, to believe, to think, to be conscious.

Descartes’ Modern Perspective on the Self
- Early modern European philosophers, including René Descartes, expanded the concept of the self to include the thinking, reasoning mind. For Descartes, the act of thinking about the self—of being self-conscious—is in itself proof that there is a self. Descartes still demonstrates the powerful influence of Platonic thought in his distinction between the physical body (which he believes is material, mortal, and nonthinking) and an immaterial, nonmaterial thinking self, governed by God’s will and the laws of reason.

The Soul Is Immortal: Socrates and Plato
- For Socrates and Plato, the self was synonymous with the soul. Every human being, they believed, possessed an immortal soul that survived the physical body.
- Plato further defines the soul or self as having three components: Reason, Physical Appetite, and Spirit (or passion). These three components may work in concert, or in opposition.

The Self Is Consciousness: Locke
- John Locke argued that consciousness—or, more specifically, self-consciousness—of our constantly perceiving self is necessary to “personal identity,” or knowledge of the self as a person.
- Instead of positing that the self is immortal and separate from the body, Locke argues that our personal identity and the immortal soul in which that identity is located are very different entities.

Philosophy Texts in MyPhilosophyLab
- Phaedo, Plato
- Phaedrus, Plato
- Discourse on Method, René Descartes
- Meditations on First Philosophy, René Descartes
- An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, John Locke
- Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, Immanuel Kant
- Critique of Pure Reason, Immanuel Kant
- Doctrine of Not-Self, Milindapanha

Films
- 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) What distinguishes human beings from other animals? Humans from machines? In this science fiction film, a crew on a mission to uncover a mystery in space runs into complications when the machine they are using begins to make decisions for them.
- Blade Runner (1982) What does it mean to be human? In the future as depicted in this classic science fiction film, humans have developed the technology to create replicants, clones with fixed life spans that serve people in the colonies outside Earth. When the technology backfires and the clones rebel, a blade runner, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) is hired to search out and terminate replicants in Los Angeles.
- The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (2007) Who does one become when one is no longer physically oneself? Based on the memoir of the same name, this film recounts the life of Jean-Dominique Bauby, a French journalist and author who was almost entirely paralyzed after suffering a stroke at age 42. The author was only able only to blink his left eyelid, and used this to communicate and write his memoir.
- Memento (2000) How is memory connected to identity? In this neo-noir psychological thriller, a man who has lost the ability to create new memories and cannot recall his most recent memories attempts to reconstruct his identity and solve the murder of his wife. The film is divided into two narratives—one follows his
attempts to uncover the murderer, while the second moves backwards in time through a series of flashbacks.

**Literature**

- **The Catcher in the Rye**, J. D. Salinger. After being expelled from prep school, Holden Caulfield finds himself wandering the streets of New York City. This coming-of-age story traces the attempts of this alienated adolescent to find meaning in a world that seems empty and superficial, and to come to terms with tragedy, injustice, abuse of power, and hypocrisy.

- **Invisible Man**, Ralph Ellison. A talented young African American from a small southern town leaves home to attend college and finds himself becoming increasingly socially invisible. As he encounters racism both at school and in New York City, he addresses vital questions about his own identity as well as the identity of African Americans in the early twentieth century.

- **Life on the Color Line**, Gregory Williams. Gregory Williams was raised as white until the age of 8 when his father told him that he was of African American heritage as they were on their way to live in a predominantly black community in Muncie, Indiana. There, he found himself to be the victim of racism and prejudice. This powerful memoir raises profound questions about one’s identity in the face of social constructs as the young Williams navigates his existence on the “color line” and attempts to, and ultimately succeeds in, developing a strong sense of self and thriving without dismissing either heritage.

- **Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood**, Marjane Satrapi. In this graphic memoir, Satrapi recounts her childhood in Iran during the Islamic Revolution when the fundamentalists took power. The family experiences violence and oppression, and the young Satrapi questions her own developing identity and ideals as the cultural, legal, and moral code of her country changes.

- **A Remembrance of Things Past**, Marcel Proust. In his monumental work, Proust attempted to capture a complete life. The novel addresses many themes related to consciousness and identity, including how we develop self-understanding and knowledge of other people; the role of memory and sensory perception in identity creation; phenomenological issues regarding the nature of reality; whether there is a single “self” that is consistent both in the present and across time; and how to articulate experience of living in art.