2012-08-21

The Paradox of the Self and its Implications for Concepts of Personhood: Contrasting Contemporary Theological and Psychological Approaches to an Old Problem

Turner, Léon
Boston Theological Institute

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/4017

Boston University
The Paradox of the Self and Its Implications for Concepts of Personhood: Contrasting Contemporary Theological and Psychological Approaches to an Old Problem

Léon Turner
Queens' College
The University of Cambridge

It is a widely accepted principle in both theology and the human sciences that the self, though each person perceives him- or herself as a singularity, is also characterized by multiplicity. The author analyzes this apparent paradox as it appears in contemporary social cognitive psychology and in Christian theological models of the person that are grounded in the doctrine of imago Dei. He argues that, whereas there are evident differences in the psychological and theological conceptions of the nature of persons, both disciplines endorse concepts of personhood that are characterized by a dynamic process of self-unification. Thus, the conceptual divide alleged to exist between theological and secular scientific models of the person may not be as pronounced as many suppose.

Introduction

A paradox lies at the heart of this essay. Although persons perceive themselves to be whole, seemingly unified, continuous singularities, both contemporary psychology and Christian theology seem to accept that what has come to be referred to as the self is, at best, multifaceted and, at worst, fragmented. As with so many issues relating to the study of the human self, it is a paradox with an ancient pedigree. Allusions to the multiplicity of the person are readily identifiable in historical and contemporary philosophy and theology and are especially prominent in twentieth-century psychology.

It is commonly supposed that theological conceptions of the self are at odds with scientific conceptions. In mainstream secular psychological science, at least, contemporary metaphors for mind and self have largely replaced traditional concepts inspired by Christian theology. Evocative terms such as “soul,” “spirit,” and “essence” have given way to a mundanely anatomical language that frames the modern cognitive self against the background of “memory stores,” “modality-specific mental modules,” and “patterns of distributed neuronal activation.” Less pointed, even, than the “id” and “ego” of Freudian psychoanalysis, these have proved to be immensely important concepts that have yielded a great deal of insight into the functioning of the individual, but seem far removed from everyday experience. The conceptual specificity and value-neutrality that is, purportedly, inherent in modern psychology is a welcome development in the search for a fuller understanding of the real inner person; but there is still, arguably, a need for theories that capture the elusive not-readily-quantifiable aspects of the sense of self as it is actually experienced. It is just these facets of the person that have been elaborately described in the writings of countless philosophers and theologians; and, though these are often portrayed as outdated, overly value-laden or irrelevant to current psychological theorizing, psychologists should not dismiss this body of theories too quickly.

It is not just psychology and the secular philosophy of mind that has overlooked the importance of a dialogue with theology. Orthodox Christian theologian John Zizioulas notes:
The attempt to supplant Christianity in whatever concerns the dignity of man has succeeded in detaching the concept of the person from theology and uniting it with the idea of an autonomous morality or with an existential philosophy which is purely humanistic. Thus, although the person and "personal identity" are widely discussed nowadays as a supreme ideal, nobody seems to recognise that historically as well as existentially the concept of the person is indissolubly bound up with theology. The person both as a concept and as a living reality is purely the product of patristic thought. Without this, the deepest meaning or personhood can neither be grasped nor justified.

He is not alone in holding this opinion.

There are, certainly, differences between Christian theological and psychological approaches to the self, foremost of which is the theological attestation that true personal wholeness can be attained only through "salvation." The doctrine of imago Dei seems to have crucially important implications for this concept. Since humankind is created in the image of the triune God, in whom inheres a perfect unity of Persons, overcoming estrangement from God through salvation and thereby becoming a member of the kingdom of God would seem to entail the essential unity of the person. Secular psychology, at first glance, does not seem to hold the goal of self-unification in such high esteem. However, it is possible, I believe, to delineate certain similarities in their respective approaches to personhood and the assumed multiplicity of the self that underlies it. There may be, therefore, considerably more common ground than many are prepared to acknowledge.

Here at the beginning, I wish to clarify the typology that I will employ throughout this essay, since the terms "person," "self," and "identity," have become somewhat confused in recent times. "Person" is the most overarching of these terms and denotes the sum total of the component parts of any human individual, including the physical body, the mind, the sense of self and identity. "Self," to adopt Rom Harré's definition, will "...do duty for the many aspects of personal being that appear in personal and private regard." "Identity" will here be taken to refer to those public and private aspects of the way an individual person conceives him- or herself and is conceived, in relation to other persons and the physical world.

Below, I shall contrast social cognitive psychological theories of human individuality with those contemporary theological approaches that are grounded in the doctrine of imago Dei. I will first establish that both disciplines conceive persons to be physically embodied individuals-in-relation, in which multiple senses of self inhere. I will then argue that both disciplines identify personhood with a dynamic process of self-unification, and, thus, they exhibit a degree of similarity in their respective solutions to the paradox of the self.

The Disunity of the Self in Psychology and Theology

It is a fundamental tenet of much of contemporary psychology that a multiplicity of self underlies the individual person. In modern psychology this idea first arises in the work of William James, who divided the concept of the whole self into "1-component" (the "pure ego") and "me-component" (the "empirical self"). James further subdivided the "empirical self" into three constituent parts, which he claimed were organised hierarchically—the spiritual self at the top, the (plural) social self in the middle, and the material or bodily self at the bottom. James also believed that the "I" of the self represented the "active agent," able to shape its own destiny, and is, therefore, better conceived as a process, or verb, than as an entity. This contrasts with the empirical self, portrayed as the subjective interpretations of the individual's experiences.

For James, multiplicity and perceived social self-evaluation go hand in hand, hence his famous observation that a person could be considered to have "...as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind." This idea was elaborated upon in the theories of the symbolic interactionists, Charles Cooley.
and George Herbert Mead, and continues to form the basis of the vast majority of contemporary social psychological models of the self. According to these theorists, the self is better described as a multiplicity, developed through the subjective interpretation of the reactions of others in a social context, and continually reconstructed on the basis of new social experience.

There are, certainly, differences between Christian theological and psychological approaches to the self, foremost of which is the theological attestation that true personal wholeness can be attained only through "salvation." An "I/me" distinction remains prevalent in contemporary writings, though James's concepts of the pure ego and empirical self have not weathered as well. The "I" of modern psychology, which refers to the "self-as-knower," or the "experiencing subject," is contrasted with the "me," meaning self-as-known, or the object of experience: and the two are usually portrayed as co-existent and co-determining. As George Herbert Mead observed, "If the "I" speaks, the "me" hears. If the "I" strikes, the "me" feels the blow." In the last fifty years, cognitive psychology, which has its theoretical foundations in, and draws its conceptual inspiration from, a computer metaphor for mind, has initiated a new era in research on self. Social psychologist H. R. Markus has argued that the self is more accurately described as a collection of interrelated "self-schemata," each of which organizes and encodes specific information regarding perceived personal knowledge or interpersonal relationships. Schemata are, roughly speaking, structured clusters of concepts relating to one's knowledge of stereotypical situations; they are well-established entities in cognitive psychology. According to this model, multiple conceptions of self exist, not all of which are available at any one time. Markus prefers to emphasize "working," "on-line," or "accessible" self-concepts, whereby the self is a dynamic and pluralistic structure that remains continually active and in perpetual flux.

Each of these theories of self is compatible with the conceptual typology outlined above. So, how well do these secular psychological approaches to the human subject correspond to those of contemporary Christian theology? Certainly, there is an ancient Christian theological tradition of conceiving the person as a multifaceted entity. Augustine's theology of the soul, for example, presents several different ways in which this might be expressed. Each person, he alleges, is constituted by matter and spirit, characterized by both "outer" and "inner" aspects: and each soul is constituted by many different levels of being, each "struggling" for dominance over the others. In each case, the multiplicity of the person is appealed to in order to explain the continuity of humankind with the rest of creation, but also to distinguish it and to explain its unique standing in relation to God. Such prominent philosophers and theologians as Søren Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, and Paul Tillich have each, at some point, discussed the finite fragmented existence of the person in relation to the infinite unity of God. Disunity, it seems, is everywhere.

However, perhaps the most fruitful strand of contemporary theological thought to acknowledge the various multiple facets of the self can be identified in discussions of the imago Dei, and it is primarily this body of theories that I shall contrast with contemporary psychological thinking about the person. Clearly, the interrelationships of the three Persons of the Trinity and the implications of this for the imago Dei have frequently been addressed in attempts to understand human
persons. Sometimes, it has been assumed that humanity as a whole bears the image of the "social" Trinity (for example, in the work of Jürgen Moltmann), but many have attempted to understand the *imago Dei* in as much as it relates to the single, autonomous, multifaceted individual. I wish to focus on here on this latter perspective. Protestant theologian Alasdair McFadyen's book, *Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships*, is exemplary of such an approach, though many have contributed to this general enterprise.17

Beginning with the presupposition that, "Individuality, Personhood and selfhood do not...refer to some internal and independent source of identity, but to the way one is and has been in relation." McFadyen argues:

[H]uman being is determined by the relational form proper to it, which may be materially defined as being-in-gratitude. This in turn implies that the relational structure of human being is one of openness to and for God's Word.18

McFadyen's purpose here is to establish the dialogical nature of the divine-human relationship and the response of the person to God as a "free-dialogue partner" in the context of this relationship.

[The divine image, and the freedom associated with it, are not qualities or attributes which we can possess in ourselves; rather, they designate a way of being in relation.19

Conceiving the nature of God as Trinity, McFadyen proposes an analogous theory of individual being. He argues that the model of the Trinity as a unique community of Persons does not entail the autonomous individuality of each Person, nor an understanding of each Person as a specific mode of relation to the other Persons of the Trinity. Instead, he proposes that the Trinity subsists as "Persons in relation and Persons only through relation. Persons exist only as they exist for others, not merely as they exist in and for themselves."20 This perspective is reflected in his understanding of *human* persons as acquiring identity through their relations with others. Persons are individuals constructed through their interpersonal relations with each other and with God. He supposes that at any given moment a person can be located at a spatio-temporal point in a grid or network comprising the relationships that are central to his or her social world. At any particular time, then, the location of the person is determinative of the identity of that person at that time. Changing location entails changing identity:

To enter a particular communication at a particular point in a given exchange is to make an implicit claim concerning the social validity of such a contribution.... The social space and time it is appropriate for "me" to occupy in each case is different.21

Although some elements of this theory are similar to some of those secular psychological theories discussed above, the grounding of McFadyen's theory in the *imago Dei* leads to a distinctive difference—the core themes of relationality and multifaceted identity, which McFadyen believes define the person, are grounded in the image of God as it inheres in the human. Where psychology sees a two-way, mutually determining relationship between an individual and the others of society, McFadyen's theological anthropology sees a trine relationship between individuals, society, and God.

Even from this brief overview, then, emerges a general consensus between some contemporary secular psychologists and Christian theologians that physically embodied persons have multiple senses of self, which are formed largely through their experience of interpersonal interaction. However, I now wish to show that neither secular psychology nor Christian theology necessarily dismisses the idea of a substantive, enduring component to the individual. Far from it. Rather, the multiplicity of selves can be ascribed specific content in as much as it can be represented as real knowledge about the person, even if this knowledge is derived and distilled from social encounters—in which case, personhood itself is best conceived, perhaps, as something substantive beings do, rather than as a fixed unchanging state of being. From this perspec-
tive, the substantive individual cannot be separated from his or her being-in-relation. This is, as will be seen, a widely endorsed principle.27

**Personhood as the Unification of Self: Identity in Psychology**

Returning for a moment to Harré's concept of self. he writes:

The self as an expression of the singularity of the point of view of the embodied person in perception, the unity and structured pattern of the contents of consciousness, is always singular for every human being, in all cultures. If there are exceptions they are in the realm of myth and mysticism.28

By this, he means that every person uses the personal pronoun "I" in such a way that individual people can somehow claim their experiences for themselves and index them as events in their own personal history. How, exactly, should this assertion be squared with the tacit acknowledgement that the self is ultimately a plurality? I shall argue here, that this depends on precisely how self-unity is conceived.

There is no singular universally agreed upon conception of self-unity.29 One of the best-established approaches to this problem, however, and arguably the most successful, is to adopt a phenomenological approach to self-unity, as psychologist and philosopher Dan McAdams does, and seek to understand it through the description of how one derives one's sense of self.30 Several types of theory have been proposed in this mold. Some, notably the cognitive psychologist Seymour Epstein, propose that the self is analogous to an hypothetico-deductive theory of how one relates to the world, and that the unification of the self is promoted by one's natural drive toward internal consistency.31 Others suppose that a person's various selves are structurally interconnected so as to form a loosely integrated whole, giving the illusion of unity, but continuing to exist as a multiplicity, each retaining the capacity for a degree of autonomous functioning. This, in Marvin Minsky's terms, is the "society of mind." 27 It is similar to the preferred approaches of psychologists Seymour Rosenberg and Francisco Varela. 26

There is, however, a common denominator to almost all accounts of self-unity: unity is not a static property of the self; rather there is a dynamic process of self-organization at work.32 Considering self-unity in dynamic terms, rather than as an attribute of a superordinate entity, also offers an extremely congenial theory of personal individuality and uniqueness, which avoids the problems of absolute relativism. Individuality, from this perspective, subsists in the unique organizational pattern of a person's multiple selves. McAdams's approach is possibly the best developed, most systematic theory of this kind.30

Sometimes, it has been assumed that humanity as a whole bears the image of the "social" Trinity, but many have attempted to understand the imago Dei in as much as it relates to the single, autonomous, multifaceted individual.

McAdams discusses the "I-self," in process terms as "selfing." Remaining faithful to the Jamesian concept of the 'I' as the "process of being a self," McAdams defines the verb "to self":

To self—or to maintain the "stance" of an "I" in the world—is to apprehend and appropriate experience as a subject, to grasp phenomenal experience as one's own, as belonging "to me." 31
Central to this concept of the "I-self" is that the process of experiencing one's material and social world changes the "me" in some way, which, in turn, exerts a significant influence on how one's material and social world is experienced. In James's terms, "the 'I' reflexively creates a modern 'me' for which the 'I' assumes authorship and responsibility."^32 McAdams explains

[The "me" is a motley collection of self-attributions.... For many adults in contemporary modern societies, unity in the "me" is rather a cultural expectation that arises when one seeks to move from a self-list [such as myself as a father, myself as a friend, etc.]...to a more patterned and purposeful integration of the "me."^]  

This purposeful integration, he argues, takes the form of the construction of a narrative to one's life story. Unity in the 'me', then, is also the construction of identity.

Such a narrative synthesizes the synchronic and diachronic elements of the "me" into a coherent unified whole, so that one's experience of "me" in the past leads to the "me" of the present, which in turn sets the stage for the "me" of the future. A great many theorists are in complete agreement with McAdams, that this is indeed how one's life is given unity and purpose. Importantly, it is a continuous process, which never culminates in the "birth" of a person. Rather, personhood is a perpetually evolving process of becoming. Theologian Emmanuel Levinas remarks:

The "I" is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existence consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification.  

It seems that even if a person's multiple selves are not necessarily unified in any sense other than the purely phenomenological, this is in itself enough to endow a sense of unique individuality and continuity. The process of self-unification is the process of becoming a person. It is the process of organizing experience into a unique pattern—an autobiography, or the narrative of an individual life story. It is essentially the construction of identity.  

**Personhood as Becoming a Being in Relation: Theological Concepts of Individuality**

I now turn to examine the potential similarities between secular psychological notions of self-unification and a specific concept of personhood that has developed within Christian theology. I argue that personhood can also be portrayed, from a theological perspective, as a process that involves both unifying the multifaceted senses of self and maintaining a degree of consistency. However, these senses of self are ultimately grounded in a faith relationship with God.  

Continuity and stability, as McFadyen and Vernon White use the terms, have their equivalent in the concept of wholeness, or singularity, which Harré and others identify as a definitive characteristic of the human person. Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg argues:

The wholeness of the self, which infinitely transcends the limitations of life at any given moment, finds its present manifestation as personality. "Person" signifies the human being in its wholeness, which transcends the fragmentariness of its reality-at-hand.  

Persons, he presumes, are more than just collections of fragments; they are characterized by a unified and continuous experience. In fact, theological expressions of the importance of personal wholeness are not difficult to find.  

Theologically, the unity or continuity of the self has exceedingly important implications (in contrast to secular psychological theories), both with respect to personal ontology and to personal responsibility. Given the essential unity of the persons of the Trinity, to be created in the image of God means to be created as a whole, unified person, not as a multiplicity of distinct selves. Without an essential continuity of identity, moreover, how could an individual be strictly said to be in relation to God at all, since within the one
body, many independent relationships would be established. As Anglican theologian Vernon White simply observes, "The originality and uniqueness of each individual is a presupposition of Christian belief of our createdness, and of prophetic ministry."

The projects of White, Colin Gunton, and John Zizioulas to ground the individuality of human persons in a systematic theological ontology is also, in many ways, an attempt to defend the unity of the person, and thereby establish the continuity of identity. They wish to establish the existence of a substantive component to human persons—a consistency that underpins the many identities brought into being through the continuous flux of relationality that is implied by understanding persons as beings-in-relation. Without this continuity, they argue, "the self is always likely to be...unstable, transient, diminished."42

White criticizes philosophical theologian John Millbank for the kind of extreme relativism that he and McFadyen strive to avoid. Millbank argues:

Just as God...is not a "substance," because he is nothing fundamental underlying anything else, so also there are no substances in creation, no underlying matter, and no discrete and inviolable "things".... There are no things, no substances, only shifting relations.44

What is attractive in this account is its description of the dynamism of personhood. According to Millbank, personhood is the constant flux of relationality, not just a fixed state of being. For White, Millbank takes a step too far, as this concept of personhood removes any possibility of conceiving persons as "enduring particulars" or of establishing a continuity in personal identity. For both White and McFadyen, persons "are a manifestation of their relations, formed through though not simply reducible to them."45

McFadyen, also wary of the Millbankian extremes of relativism, offers a defense of this idea of "relational but particular personhood." He argues:

The "I" which responds in the flux of unfolding situations and relationships includes a "sedimentation" of previous such moments of response which together form a unique and stable cluster within the structure of the developing personal identity.46

Personal identities are somehow "sedimented" from personal experiences of social relations and are, therefore, bound to the identities of others and one's relations with them. Part of being in relation, then, is the construction of identity—a product of the "I" acting to unify the "me."

Where psychology sees a two-way, mutually determining relationship between an individual and the others of society, McFadyen's theological anthropology sees a triune relationship between individuals, society, and God.

McFadyen posits the existence of what he refers to as a "deep-self," which is not subject to the same degree of changeability that a person's other multiple identities are susceptible to. The deep-self is seen as a core aspect of identity, which is derived from the sedimentation of the experience of a particularly close relationship, and which is always present in the background of one's relations with less significant others. Unlike other identities, it is not situation specific. Effectively, it acts as a mediating presence in less stable relations, offering continuity when the sense of self is in danger of being fragmented.

Borrowing Tillich's terminology, McFadyen argues that persons, through the meaningful social expression of themselves, come to "center" themselves. His concept of "centering" is very closely analogous to the organizational processes that many secular psychological theories have described and
leads to the person experiencing him- or herself as directing communication from a continuous point of identity. Hence, persons, through the recognition and understanding of the fact that they are unique socially interactive individuals, are able to form an experientially transcendent sense of self, which "enables one's experience and activity in diverse places and times to be unified in a central organisational structure which transcends the embodiment in any and all particular contexts." It is in this way, according to McFadyen, that the individual achieves unity and continuity.

So, it appears that a number of theologians are happy to posit the existence of a stable sense of self, which is the product of prior experience, and exists over and above the relational aspects from which the individual person is formed. Thus, it is possible to discern a notion of personhood that is, in many ways, similar to the process of narratization that secular psychologists have described. A theological approach to the self is not incompatible with the idea that a person's identity exists primarily in a dialogical relation with the other of any individual relation and is, thus, specific to that relation: but for many theologians, as for many psychologists, the experience of self has a transcendent quality. Personhood involves the continuous "updating" of the person in the light of new experience; and, thus, the self must be conceived in dynamic terms. In other words, personhood is a process of becoming, a process of unification through which continuity is established, which both emerges from and is inseparable from the organized substantive center of personal experience.

In summary, I quote McFadyen once more:

The "self" should not be conceived of as an organ, but in terms of the organization which believing in it enables. For it is not something one has but something one is and does, a way of being in public and private. It is not a substance but a means of organizing one's experience, thought, knowledge, beliefs, action, etc., as though centered on a substantial inner core. 47

Conclusions

My primary aim throughout has been to establish certain points of contact between theological and psychological approaches to the problem of how the self comes to be unified in the human person. I have argued that secular psychological and some Christian theological theories are in broad agreement regarding the essential multiplicity of selves that underlie the person. Personhood, it is clear, is not conceived by either discipline to be a static state, and the disciplines are united in their supposition that the perceived singularity of the human person is an ongoing dynamic process of becoming.

Some differences have also been identified here, the most striking of which concerns the idea of personal relationality. Christian theologians, in contrast to secular psychologists, though they too recognize the importance of other human relationships, are specifically concerned to ground the process of becoming and the construction of identity in the notion of being-in-relation to God—as answering God's call. A further difference lies in the value ascribed to the continuity and unity of the person. No a priori reason exists for why the multiple selves of the person should be unified. The theories of Varela, Minsky and Rosenberg are examples of theories that are perfectly at ease with the idea that a person's selves ultimately remain disunited in anything but the most perfunctory of ways—that is, through their being parts of a single individual person. Christian theology, by contrast, emphasises the importance of the unity of the person as an essential aspect of being created in the image of, and standing in relation to, God.

Although the two disciplines have not been shown to be in complete agreement, this was neither an objective nor an aspiration. I have merely tried to show that in as much as they both address the multiplicity and unity of the self as deep and enduring problems, they can ask similar questions and make similar theoretical distinctions. Too frequently, theology and the human sciences are supposed to offer competing, rather than complemen-
tary, explanations of the self: blindly placing them in such opposition precludes the mutual elucidation that might arise from a close analysis of their subtle differences, as well as their similarities.

Pannenberg notes:

The idea of wholeness cannot be claimed as the special preserve of theology, although theology may insist that human beings can attain their wholeness only in the form of "salvation" that is promised and given by God, and not through any effort at self-realization.\(^{49}\)

The concept of attaining wholeness through salvation is indeed central to Christian theology, but it would be a mistake to presume that the idea of multiplicity is the special preserve of psychology.

Works cited:


Augustine of Hippo. De Trinitate.


Endnotes:

2. See Schwöbel.
4. Whatever one's opinion regarding the compatibility of theological and psychological approaches to the person, it is certain that the general incoherence of the topic is a problem for both disciplines. As Rom Harré notes, "The study of no aspect of humanity is so marked by muddled thinking and confusion of thought as this one" (p. 2). In sympathy with this perspective, Pfuetze proclaimed, "The problem of the self is perhaps the most elusive, abstruse, and subtle problem in philosophy. We know, or think we know, so much about man, about human nature — and yet we know so little. The terms we employ are names to cover our ignorance; they are abstracted descriptions which never give us the concrete wholeness of human lives nor explain the rich complexity of human experience" (p. 23).

5. Harré uses "person" to refer to "a human being as a social and psychological being, as a human organism having a sense of its place among others of its kind, a sense of its own history and beliefs about at least some of its attributes" (p. 73).

6. Harré, p. 73. Harré actually distinguishes between three specific interrelated descriptions of self, none of which, he argues, is individually adequate: all inhere in the person. Self, he supposes, can be described as a singular point of view, as the totality of personal attributes, or as how the individual appears to others.

7. One important caveat, though, must be firmly made at this point: the definitions offered above must be seen as specific to the Christian West, in the latter half of the twentieth century. Concepts of person have changed much over time; and those features of the person that are taken for granted in the modern western world, such as the extent to which they are attributed individuality or perceived to be personally autonomous, are not always so self-evident in pre-modern thought or in non-Western cultures. Although I am primarily concerned here with certain contrasts between contemporary Christian theological and psychological anthropologies, I am aware that those concepts are not necessarily representative of the whole gamut of person research.

8. I should emphasise that, as Lamiell notes, the concept of personal individuality is not necessarily derived from the philosophical doctrine of individualism. Indeed, many of the aspects of personhood that will be discussed here are essentially relationally derived. They are acquired and developed though participation in interpersonal relationships, and through the interactions with the physical world, which are a crucial part of human existence. A sense of individuality — roughly correlated with a person's impression of his- or herself as perceiving the world from a unique and singular point of view — is arguably a common denominator of all human persons in all cultures.

9. James is usually credited with introducing the self and identity as a subject of scientific analysis, as he was the first to suppose that it could be subject to the systematic rigorous empirical research procedures that, until then, were the preserve of the more traditional natural sciences. He developed the idea of a multiplicity of selves, though the apparent disunity of the self, soul, or person is not an original contemporary psychological discovery. Rather, it is an idea that is firmly grounded in many centuries of philosophical and theological tradition.

10. This hierarchy reflects his view that the material body is the foundation for all other selves and that the spiritual self is the apex of a person's individuality, comprising his or her "thoughts, dispositions, moral judgements, and so on, which he considered to be the more enduring aspects of the self" (Harter, p. 2).


12. Furthermore, advances in empirical methodology, including more precise data-
gathering procedures and more sophisticated data-analytic methods, have reinvigorated the scientific study of the self, and research in this area has mushroomed in recent years. See, for example, Higgins; Hermans and Kempen; Bracken; Rosenberg.

13. The theory of the social construction of the self finds its most straightforward expression in Cooley’s famous concept of the “looking-glass self”—the idea that one comes to know oneself only by assimilating the reactions of others toward oneself into a self-image.

14. Behaviorists and others have attempted to deny the efficacy of the “me.” and many have quibbled over the precise mode of functioning of the “I.”


16. According to Augustine of Hippo, the soul of the irrational outer man comprised the vegetative soul—the basic life giving principle common to man, animals and plants alike—and the animal soul, which includes those aspects of being common to man and animals such as sense perception. Augustine further divided the rational soul of inner man into the intellect and the will, which together comprised five further grades of being rising from discursive reason all the way to the intellectual contemplation of God. See de Trinitate XII.21-25. XIV.1-5.

17. See, for example, Zizioulas, Being as Communion, and “On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood.” See also Gunton and Schwöbel; and White.


19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 27.

21. Ibid., p. 83.

22. See Bracken; Ashmore and Jussim; and Fletcher and Fitness.


24. Intuitively, from a folk-psychological perspective, self-unity is supposed to be conferred by a superordinate structure of the self—a substantive ‘I’ that organizes “me”—or through the continuity of consciousness in the manner proposed by John Locke and subsequently William James. These are now deeply unpopular approaches to the idea of unity, which raises as many questions as they answer, given how poorly consciousness is actually understood.

25. See McAdams.

26. See Epstein.

27. Although the mind remains effectively a society, Minsky argues, the concept of a self retains its utility, “provided that we think of it not as a centralized and all-powerful entity, but as a society of ideas that include both our images of what the mind is and our ideals about what it ought to be” (p. 23).

28. Rosenberg; Varela; and Minsky. This is not exactly a theory of unity, but more of a theory of how multiple selves might act as a sort of conglomerate entity, each retaining a degree of autonomy while recognizing the important roles that the other selves have to play in “wholeness” at a personal level. In fact, there is no compelling psychological reason for why the self should be unified at all. This, it will be argued below, represents another fundamental point of departure from theological conceptions of the person.

29. McAdams continues to trace this concept of a unifying process through much of psychoanalytic and cognitive psychology from Goldstein and Maslow to Jung and Piaget. See McAdams, p. 57.


31. McAdams. p. 56.

32. Ibid., p. 61.

33. Ibid., p. 60.

34. That one’s prior experience has a significant influence on one’s present experience—the “I”—needs no justification; it is the premise upon which the whole of psychology is predicated.

35. Including Polkinghome; MacIntyre; and Hermans and Kempen.

36. Levinas. p. 36.

37. In fact, some, such as Varela, see no compelling psychological reason for why the self should be unified at all.
38. As Proudfoot suggests with characteristic clarity, "The issue can be stated quite simply. I am a son, husband lover, friend, competitor, citizen, colleague. and teacher. Each of these identities, which operate on different levels. contributes to my sense of myself. Sometimes they supplement one another and at other times they conflict. In every moment I forge an identity that integrates or pulls together all of these different roles into a sense of myself as a person. I think, I act, other persons respond to me, and I respond to their responses" (p. 21).


40. McAdams makes the interesting point that "fragmentation" is a word that is not popular among psychologists. Whereas Mead and others were keen to celebrate the multiplicity of the self, "fragmentation" carries overtones of postmodern angst and uncertainty (McAdams, p. 53). When theologians use the word fragmentation to refer either to the psychology of the person or the place of the individual in community (for example, in the manner of White or Pannenberg), a similarly negative state of affairs is usually being implied. In these contexts, it is a word most often associated with "brokenness," "immorality," "conflicting," or "failure." This is, in turn, testament to the intrinsic value that theologians tend to place upon self-unity.

41. As Tillich argues, "selfhood or self-centeredness must be attributed in some measure to all living beings.... Man is a fully developed and completely centered self. He 'possesses' himself in the form of self-consciousness. He has an ego-self" (vol. 1, pp. 169-70).

42. White. p. 87.

43. Ibid., p. 95.

44. Millbank. pp. 424, 426; White, p. 98.

45. McFadyen continues, "The persons of the Trinity, for example. are identified by terms which indicate their most significant relations. Yet they appear in many more relations in a formally identical but materially different way. Hence the Father is identified principally in terms of the relation with the Son but has other relations less significant for, but consistent with, His relational identity and being" (p.40). John Zizioulas and Colin Gunton are of the same opinion and have similarly tried to argue that the concepts of substantial particularity and relationality can co-exist in a concept of persons.


47. McFadyen. p. 100.

48. Ibid., p. 98


Leon Turner has a B.Sc. Degree in psychology and an M.Sc. In the philosophy and history of science, both from the University of London. He earned an M.Phil. in theology from the University of Cambridge, where he is currently a third-year Ph.D. student. His dissertation concerns theological approaches to the fragmentation of the self. He is also a research assistant in the Cambridge office of the newly-formed International Society for Science and Religion.

<ipt21@cam.ac.uk>

The Boston Theological Institute

209