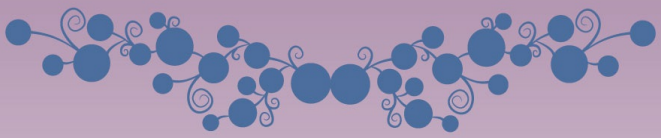
THE SELF AND THERAPY

The 17th Century

Rationalism and Empiricism Encounter the Self



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The 17th Century: Rationalism and Empiricism Encounter the Self

Rene Descartes (1596-1650), scientist, mathematician, and philosopher, was one of a handful of 17th-century innovators who shaped the modem world. His innovations changed the way humankind understood itself and its relation to the cosmos. The self that emerges from his philosophizing is indeed strange. Descartes's interests were dual: one being the quest for certainty that led him to engage in *radical doubt,* that is, doubting all that can be doubted to determine if there are any certainties, any indubitable knowables, upon which to erect an edifice of systematic science; the other being the securing of a place for scientific knowledge, which for Descartes is mechanistic and deterministic, apart from, and free from, dogmatic and theological considerations. In a time of persecution of free thought he sought to separate and isolate science so it could proceed without any conflict with the powers that were. He succeeded in doing so. Thus, the nature of the self that emerges from his philosophizing is tangential to his intellectual goals, to the main thrust of his thought. Nevertheless, the Cartesian self is an uncanny notion that has been widely influential. Indeed, his theory of the self resonates down the centuries to find a strong and unique response in, and attunement to, the thought of our time.

Descartes was a solitary. After years of wandering as a volunteer on the fringes of the Thirty Years' War, he found himself alone in a small Bavarian town. Although the story may be apocryphal, it is said that he sat in a large Dutch oven and tried to doubt everything that he could possibly doubt. He related this experience in his *Discourse on Method* (1637/1951a) and *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1642/1951b). In them, he tells how he decided to engage in radical doubt and to hold all received opinions up to scrutiny to see if any could withstand his test of indubitability. First he considered tradition, the opinions of his schoolmasters, and the texts he had read. None held up. The authorities contradicted each other; none of his received knowledge was beyond doubt. Continuing his radical doubting, he concluded that sense knowledge, the belief that there was an external world, and the reality of his corporality could also be doubted—doubted in the sense that their negation was not self-contradictory—or to put the same thought positively, that their nonexistence was logically possible although not logically necessary. Finally he tried doubting that he was doubting, cogitating, or thinking and found that he could not, for the very doubt that he was doubting implied a doubter. Doubt is a form of

thought, thinking implies a thinker. He had arrived at his famous *cogito, ergo sum*—"I think, therefore I am." Thinking is, here, mental activity of any sort—any cognition. Logically it should include affect, but Descartes is significantly silent about this. So modem thought starts with the disembodied, solitary thinker, lacking body, external world, and relationships—or at least not certain of their reality. All this self can know is that it is knowing—thinking. Descartes's self could be a character in a Beckett play. Bertrand Russell argued that Descartes had concluded more than he was entitled to from his data and his method. According to Russell, the only certainty is thinking now, and not that a thinker is doing the thinking. For Descartes, however, the self in this stripped, solipsistic sense does have existence and reality, and he knows that with certainty. Small pickings at best, but it does give us one certain proposition, the contrary of which is selfcontradictory. Once he has his one certainty, Descartes is able to prove to his satisfaction that there is a God who will guarantee the veracity of his "clear and distinct" (1637/195la, p. 2) ideas. Then he brings back the external world and goes on to build a dualistic ontology in which there are two substances: extended substance and thinking substance. Descartes never solved the problems raised by his radical dualism, such as how the two substances interact, but his metaphysical schema does give him a way to secure a place for a science, albeit a science that mathematizes nature and strips it of sensuous qualities. Cartesian science includes mechanistic psychology, which views the psyche as a piece of clockwork. Although Descartes states that he accepts the teaching of the Catholic church, there is really no place for soul in his system. Science can now be pursued without fear of persecution, but at what a cost. Descartes's self is devoid of affect, relationships, or development; it is a solitary knower, a pure subject. There is a bitter paradox here: Descartes's whole system stands on his indubitable knowledge of his existence, his *I am,* his selfhood, but he has traded certainty for vacuity. His *I am* is vastly different from the Burning Bush's *I am;* it is subject without object, computer program without data, existence without feeling. It is self as inferred, not as experienced. This is depersonalization with a vengeance, a view of self that can't help but be impoverishing and narcissistically wounding, yet that has had an incalculable influence on subsequent Western thought.

Descartes wasn't aware of the existential implications of his disembodied, unrelated, alone self. On the contrary, he felt exhilarated that he had started science on its way and had solved many of the questions of philosophy. He did, however, have a dream in 1619 that he interpreted as an augury of good fortune, but that is obviously suffused with anxiety. It was reported in Maxime Leroy's (1929, as

cited in Freud, 1927/1969) biography of Descartes. Leroy sent the dream to Freud for his comments. Freud thought that the dream thoughts were not far from Descartes's consciousness, although the more obscure parts of the dream represented the more deeply unconscious, probably sexual, latent meaning of the dream. Freud also thought that Descartes's difficulties in moving represented inner conflict. Here is the dream (or dreams) as told by Leroy. They were dreamt while Descartes was in a state of perplexity and about to embark on his adventure in radical doubt.

> *Then during the night, when all was fever, thunderstorms, panic, phantoms rose before the dreamer. He tried to get up in order to drive them away. But he fell back, ashamed of himself, feeling troubled by a great weakness in his right side. All at once, a window in the room opened. Terrified, he felt himself carried away by the gusts of a violent wind, which made him whirl round several times on his left foot.*
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> *Dragging himself staggering along, he reached the buildings of the college in which he had been educated. He tried desperately to enter the chapel, to make his devotions. At that moment some people passed by. He wanted to slop in order to speak to them; he noticed that one of them was carrying a melon. But a violent wind drove him back towards the chapel.*
>
> *He then woke up, with twinges of sharp pain in his left side. He did not know whether he wasdreaming or awake. Half-awake, he told himself that an evil genius was trying to seduce him, and he murmured a prayer to exorcise it.*
>
> *He went to sleep again. A clap of thunder woke him again and filled his room with flashes. Once more he asked himself whether he was asleep or awake, whether it was a dream or a daydream, opening and shutting his eyes so as to reach a certainty. Then, reassured, he dozed off, swept away by exhaustion.*
>
> *With his brain on fire, excited by these rumors and vague sufferings, Descartes opened a dictionary and then a collection of poems. The intrepid traveller dreamt of this line: "Quod vitae sectabor iter?" Another journey in the land of dreams? Then suddenly there appeared a man he did not know, intending to make him read a passage from Ausonius beginning with the words "Est et non"But the man disappeared and another took his place. The book vanished in its turn, then re-appeared decorated with portraits in copper-plate. Finally, the night grew quiet. (Freud, 1929/1961, pp. 200-202)*

Clearly, the embarkation on the journey into radical doubt aroused great anxiety in Descartes. There is a feeling of things being out of control in the dream. He is swept by forces of the storm, no doubt representing his inner storm, and Freud is on the money in pointing out the conflict, in the dream, between the forces of left and right, between thought and feeling, between instinct and reason. It is interesting that the "evil demon," who plays a role in Descartes's philosophical writings as intellectual deceiver, makes an appearance in the dreams as moral seducer. Descartes's dreams of 1619 reveal the human emotional cost, concealed behind a facade of cool urbanity, of the new scientific philosophy. Descartes's philosophical concerns with certainty and reality testing are direct derivatives of his

existential crisis and its representation in his dream.

Descartes's younger contemporary, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), who was also a triple-threat thinker—philosopher, scientist, and mathematician—was exquisitely aware of the existential implications of the Cartesian self. His reaction to the implications of the scientific revolution of the 17th century was horror, in spite of the fact that he was a participant in that revolution. Protesting against the self as pure intellectualization, he exclaims that "the heart has its reasons which Reason knows not." Reacting to humankind's displacement from its hitherto secure place in the great chain of being between the angels and the animals, Pascal sees that the new instrumentation provided by the telescope and the microscope has revealed man's insignificance in the scale of things, his aloneness in the vastness, indeed the infinitude, of space, and he cries out, "These infinite spaces terrify me" (1670/1966, p. 47); "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread" (1670/1966, p. 67); and "When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after ... the small space I occupy which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of space, spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then" (1670/1966, p. 48). Continuing, he cries out, "I want the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God of the philosophers" (1670/1966, p. 95). That is, Pascal wants a personally meaningful God not the God of Descartes who validates the truth of clear and distinct propositions in mathematics and science. Pascal was reacting to the radical contingency of the self, its arbitrariness, its "thrownness" (to borrow a term from Heidegger), and its estrangement—all strikingly contemporary motifs. Pascal goes on to say,

> *Man is only a reed, the weakest in nature, but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to take up arms to crush him: a vapor, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But even if the universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than his slayer because he knows that he is dying and the advantage that the universe has over him. The universe knows none of this. (Pascal, 1670/1966, p. 95)*

This heroic defiance is one way that Pascal deals with his cosmic anxiety. The second way he deals with that anxiety is through passionate belief in a mystical form of Christianity. The thinking reed is Pascal's way of regaining some selfesteem in the face of nothingness and insignificance. It is reminiscent of Job's "I will maintain my own ways before Thee" in response to God's omnipotence, although it has a different focus. Ironically, it is thinking in a broad sense of consciousness that is Pascal's way of responding to the emotional implications of Descartes's cogitating—and only cogitating—self lost in the

vastness of space with which he cannot even make contact.

The experience of cosmic anxiety, of dread of the infinite empty spaces of the universe, is far from unique to Pascal. I remember lying on my back on the flagstone balustrade of the Junior Balcony at the University of Pennsylvania dormitories, feeling myself being pulled into the infinite regression of endless space. As anxiety welled up, I looked at the stars and thought, "You are but hydrogen into helium fusing without possibility of knowing it, while I am mightier than you because I do know it." Long before I had heard of Pascal, I was reacting to cosmic anxiety much like he did in his concept of the thinking reed. More recently, one of my patients had to limit his hobby of gazing through his telescope because it engendered too much Pascalian cosmic anxiety.

In the history of philosophy, Descartes is usually classified as a rationalist, in fact as the founder of modern rationalism. He is so classified because of the primacy in his system of reason as the only reliable source of veridical, certain knowledge. In Descartes's epistemology, the proper use of reason leads us to clear and distinct ideas that are self-validating. His model is mathematics. Descartes is aware of the importance of experimentation and observation, but they are peripheral to his understanding of how science works. Furthermore, he is a believer in innate ideas; that is, he believes that the self comes into the world with knowledge already imprinted on it. This is an idea as old as Plato's doctrine that "knowledge is reminiscence," but assumes a characteristically modern form in Descartes. Reason, properly used, brings to consciousness innate ideas that are already imprinted, and their clearness and distinctness serve as guarantors of their truth.

In a sense, Descartes's thinking subject, his I, is an innate idea. Descartes is characteristically suspicious of the reliability of the senses as a source of knowledge or as a basis of doing science, and that places him squarely in the rationalist camp. Descartes doesn't question the sufficiency of sensory knowledge for everyday living, but he does give it an inferior role in scientific methodology. In stripping matter of *secondary qualities*—taste, smell, color, and so forth—and reducing it to extension—matter in motion—he mathematizes nature. He does the same thing to the self—here seen as thinking substance rather than as extended substance—it is depersonalized, deindividualized, and dequalified; that is, it is stripped of qualities, leaving thought as the self's only attribute. As I said above, Descartes is not emotionally threatened by his conceptualization of thought and being (unless his dream indicates

otherwise), while Pascal is very much so. Part of their different reactions to the same state of affairs has to do with their temperaments. Descartes, the solipsistic contemplator in the Dutch oven, was, after all, a soldier, courier, and man of the world who had a series of liaisons and, indeed, a natural child whom he lost. Although he didn't marry, he enjoyed vigorous good health and won adherents, thereby gaining much narcissistic gratification. He was an ambitious man who enjoyed seeing his ambitions fulfilled, while Pascal was unworldly, sickly, tormented in both mind and body, and sexually repressed, or at least unexpressed. His reaction is anxiety, not exhilaration, at the new position of the self in relation to the universe that was corollary to the rise of science. Pascal's mother died when he was 3, and one wonders how much of his terror before the eternal silence of those infinite spaces had its origin in the toddler's devastation at his mother's eternal silence and in the emptiness of the "vast" spaces in which that toddler must have searched for and yearned for her without ever finding her.

Descartes was the child of a family of successful middle-class professionals; although we don't know much about his early life, it seems to have been unproblematic. He was educated in the best school in France, La Fleche, which was run by the Jesuits, and went on to receive a degree in law. He looked about the world, such as it was: in his youth was an aide de camp to various participants in the Thirty Years' War, and he eventually returned to Paris before settling in Holland, where he published circumspectly so as not to get in trouble with the church authorities. He succeeded, and went on to enjoy considerable renown and respect. Given his basic sense of security he was able to engage in radical doubt; indeed, he wrote that he felt compelled to doubt—to doubt everything that can be doubted, including the reliability of the senses, the trustworthiness of reason, and the existence of the external world. He doubted in order to be certain. Better to know nothing than to have false belief. He worried that he might be fooled by an evil demon who was trying to deceive him into believing, for example, that he was awake while he was in fact dreaming, a state of affairs prefigured in his dreams of 1619. If such were the case, there would be no possibility of knowing anything to be true; that is, it would be impossible to both know the truth and know that you know it as long as the demon remains in the realm of possibility. Descartes's doubt is a meditative technique, a form of thought therapy to cure the mind of excessive reliance on the senses or on received ideas. So, in this sense, Descartes is a "dark enlightener," as Yovel (1989) calls those thinkers who destroy false belief systems. He is one of those thinkers who sweeps away the cobwebs of custom and belief and, in so doing, takes away some of our security. In

Descartes's case, he undermines old belief systems, including beliefs about the nature of self, which had provided ontological security, a sense of relatedness to the cosmos, for the educated classes of Western Europe.

In his state of radical doubt, Descartes does finally find something to rely on, the principle of natural light, and herein comes to the fore his rationalism. It was the clearness and distinctness of the cogito that validated the existence of the self, from which Descartes generalizes that, if he can know something as clear and distinct in the light of nature, then he can be sure of it. Descartes's natural light is strangely parallel to the Quakers' belief that the light of nature validates moral insight. It is its rationalistic equivalent, and it is a thoroughly Protestant notion, Descartes's Catholicism notwithstanding. The idea that each man can arrive at truth through meditation, rather than by following authority, would not have been conceivable before the Reformation.

Descartes's task is to try and set a foundation upon which the science of the 17th century could build. What he does, once he finds something that is self-evident, the self, is to see what kind of ontology he can build. He winds up with a dualistic view of the world. There are two substances: extended substance and thinking substance. Each substance is self-sufficient. Particular things and particular minds are real by virtue of their partaking of extension and of thought, respectively. From another point of view substances are substrates in which qualities adhere. What we perceive of the external world are its primary and secondary qualities. The primary qualities are really matter in motion. Material things are defined by their positions in space and their extension. For Descartes these primary qualities are "real," that is, actually resident in matter, while the secondary qualities are unreal in the sense that they do not appear in nature but are our contribution to perception. Descartes believed that there are innate ideas whose truth, as long as they are clear and distinct and seen in the light of natural reason, is self-evident, and guaranteed by an omnipotent God. This is a strange belief for a radical skeptic. The way Descartes arrives at his belief in the certainty of clear and distinct ideas is by "proving" the existence of a God who will not deceive him. This God guarantees the certain truth of certain kinds of thought and becomes a God who validates mathematics and physics, but who has none of the qualities of the comforting God whom Pascal was looking for in his cosmic terror. Descartes tells us that, for all his radical doubt, he is going to follow the customs and adhere to the beliefs of his environment. His doubt is theoretical and philosophical, but does not extend to practical matters. Accordingly, he remains a

practicing Catholic. That, however, does not seem to influence his philosophical system. Descartes's true religious convictions are unknown; perhaps he was simply protecting himself from persecution, or perhaps he was a sincere believer, as his more recent biographers believe.

Let's return to Descartes's *cogito, ergo sum*—I am thinking, I exist; I think, therefore I am—and try to analyze what kind of proposition it is. Descartes maintains both that it is a self-evident mental intuition and that it is a proven inference. Historically, it has been regarded as both, although most philosophers have considered it a proof. We have seen Russell's criticism of that proof, in which he maintains that all Descartes can legitimately say is that thinking is occurring now and that the I is gratuitous. Can there be thought without a thinker? Or, to turn that around, does thought necessitate a thinker? Logical necessity does not compel us to conclude that there is a thinker, and there is nothing self-contradictory in the proposition "thinking does not imply a thinker." Russell is right. However, Descartes does not only rely on *cogito, ergo sum* as a valid and self-evident inference in positing the certainty of the existence of the self. On the contrary, he affirms that everyone can intuit that he exists as a thinker, thinking, here, including all of cognition—willing, judging, doubting, and affirming. It is this direct intuition, not mediated by logic but rather validated and, so to speak, certified true by its clearness and distinctness that is, in the last analysis, the ground of the one certain belief that is to be the foundation of all knowledge. One could question this. After all, clearness and distinctness are remarkably subjective criteria of truth. When clearness and distinctness of a thought don't mean that its contrary is selfcontradictory but rather that it is intuitively self-evident, one man's clearness and distinctness need not be another's. But Descartes does not see this. For him the clearness and distinctness of a thought make it self-validating for all, and the propositions so validated have universal conviction and certainty.

Descartes does raise a problem about the nature of the thinker, about the thinking self, when he writes "you do not know whether it is you yourself who thinks or whether the world soul in you thinks as the Platonists believe." However, Descartes is really not much worried about this question and does not take it seriously, nor is he concerned with the world soul. Rather, his interest lies in the certainty of his existence as a thinker because that knowledge is clear and distinct and serves as a model for, and criterion of, all knowledge. "I think, therefore I am" is a paradigm of scientific truth.

Descartes has remarkably little to say about the nature of the self. Given the way he arrives at the

certainty of the self, this is hardly surprising. One of the few things he does say is, "I recognized that I was a substance whose essence or nature is to think and whose being requires no place and depends on no material thing" (1642/1951b, p. 26). Here we see very clearly the insubstantiality of the Cartesian self, its disembodied nature as a thinking self, as pure mind.

Material things are also substances for Descartes, but they are extended substances. For the scholastics (i.e., the medieval philosophers), substances were concrete entities (i.e., particular things), but not so for Descartes. He writes, "By substance we can understand nothing else but a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist" (1642/1951b, p. 75). Strictly speaking, given Descartes's definition of substance, there can be only one substance, God, who has two attributes, thought and extension. Spinoza (1677/1951), Descartes's successor in some ways and very much his own man in others, defined substance as "that which is the cause of itself' (of which there can only be one) and developed a metaphysical system in which God or Nature, the one substance, has infinite attributes of which we can know only two, thought and extension. For Descartes there are two substances, thinking substance and extended substance. As Descartes puts it, there are two created substances that need the concurrence of God to exist. That is, if God wasn't continually creating us as a thinking substance and the world as extended substance, both world and self would cease to exist.

The radical subjectivism that is so central to Descartes's thought has become so characteristic of modern thought that we don't recognize how much of who we are, and of how we conceptualize who we are (with all of the problems, limitations, and illuminations of that conceptualization), we owe to him. When he wrote, "I resolved to seek no other knowledge than that which I find within myself, or perhaps in a great book of nature," and continued, "I reached the decision to study myself" (1637/1951a, p. 6), he was adumbrating the inwardness of modernity—anticipating the self-conscious self-absorption of our own time.

Descartes's thought has another, more objective aspect: his elucidation of a method of scientific problem solving, which sounds almost like a computer flow chart. The method includes a number of steps, the first of which is to never accept as true anything but that which is self-evident (i.e., clear and distinct); the second, to divide the problem up into manageable bits; third, to think about them in an orderly fashion, breaking down the complex into a series of simple steps; and finally, to enumerate and

review the results to see that no error occurred. So to speak, he builds in a feedback loop in his review step. This methodology is related to, but not identical with, the geometric method, which is purely deductive. Descartes was indeed influenced by the example of mathematics, which alone seemed to give certain knowledge, and was himself a great mathematician, the founder of a branch of mathematics, analytic geometry, in which algebra and geometry are seen to be capable of representing the same truths, to be isomorphic in modern language. This method of geometry, somewhat modified, becomes the method of philosophy for him. It was the certainty, clarity, and distinctness of mathematical proofs that served as the model for conscious truth seeking and led to the *cogito*—a strange path to the self.

Once Descartes established his one certainty, himself as solitary thinker, he needed to bring God back into the universe as the guarantor of the truth of clear and distinct ideas. The way he does this is an old one going back to St. Augustine. Descartes gives a modern twist to Augustine's "ontological proof' of the existence of God. Once he has established his certain existence as thinker, he realizes that among his thoughts is the thought of an absolute perfect being. However, he himself is not perfect, is not omniscient or omnipotent, so he cannot be the cause of this thought of perfection since every effect needs a sufficient cause. At least that was the belief of the scholastics, the medieval philosophers, whom he had studied at La Fleche and whose thought he had unconsciously carried over into his not as radical as he believed radical doubt. He argues that since it is more perfect to exist than not to exist, and since God is a perfect being, existence must be one of God's attributes. Furthermore, God must have put the thought of a perfect being in his mind, since as an imperfect being he could not be a sufficient cause of the idea of perfection. Bertrand Russell wrote that the ontological proof was one of the great scandals of philosophy because it seems in many ways to be *prima facie* absurd, yet that logically he could not quite see what was wrong with that proof. It is not logically fallacious, nor is it technically invalid. Descartes is, however, satisfied with his proof, and once he has established the existence of a good God simply uses Him as a guarantor of the truth of mathematical physics and of his style of philosophizing. Descartes is now free to go ahead and pursue science in his rationalistic way, without fearing the opposition of the church, which he goes out of his way not to offend. Using a traditional proof of God's existence didn't hurt his case, nor did his cautious affirmation that in ordinary matters of belief and custom it is wise to follow the ways of the society one lives in, which is precisely what he did.

Once God is back in His Heaven, if that is where He is, Descartes uses Him to establish the truth of

clear and distinct ideas, including the idea that the external world exists. The result is an odd system indeed, in which the solitary self becomes the foundation for a kind of disembodied mathematical view of the universe in which the truth of that mathematical system is ultimately guaranteed by a God who is proved by an argument about logical necessity. Neither the thinker nor the Deity seems to have any sort of affective life. This is not a God one would or could love, fear, or worship, and this is not a self that seems to have feelings, although feeling states are certainly part of thinking as Descartes uses the term.

We can now see quite clearly what Pascal was reacting against. He, too, was a great mathematician, the founder of the scientific study of probability, an experimentalist, and no mean physicist in his own right; he was a multifaceted genius, who, almost in passing, started the public transportation system in Paris. He was temperamentally very different from Descartes. He suffered a lot of loss in his life. There was the early death of his mother and the later death of a beloved sister. He himself was always sickly, his existence always threatened, and although he had what is called his "worldly phase," he was essentially an unworldly man. Pascal became attracted to Jansenism, a form of mystical Catholicism to which his sister had converted. In a way it was she who converted him; however, his reaction to the new world view of the 17th century (including its view of the self), which was abject terror, predisposed him to that conversion. The Pascalian self is the thinking reed looking with fear and trembling at the immensity of the universe and taking the gamble of religious belief. Probability rather than certainty, feeling rather than thought, as primary categories distinguish Pascal's thought and understanding of self from that of Descartes.

It is no accident that Descartes's major contribution to mathematics was analytic geometry, which relates and shows the structural identity (isomorphism) of the clear and distinct sciences of algebra and geometry, while Pascal's major contribution to mathematics was the theory of probability, which deals with the random and chance. It is almost as if Descartes were groping for a model for the interaction of the realm of extension and the realm of thought by demonstrating the underlying unity of two apparently disparate branches of mathematics, while Pascal was attempting to work through his terror and anxiety by demonstrating that the apparently random and merely probable was also lawful and capable of rational understanding.

Descartes died on a visit to Christina, Queen of Sweden, where he had been appointed advisor to

court. He was not able to take the Nordic winter, but, as far as we know, he was in a cheerful and confident frame of mind until his final illness. Descartes's body was shipped back to France. With almost perfect symbolism for the man who bifurcated nature into thought and extension, the head arrived severed from the body, and is buried apart from it. It is almost as if the problems raised by his dualistic metaphysics pursued him into his grave.

Pascal didn't have it so easy. Probably suffering from tuberculosis, he died young after many years of progressive weakness and illness. In the end his interest was in his Christian faith and his wager that a God existed and in his passionate commitment to that faith. His self is a self of fear and trembling; a self acutely aware of cosmic insignificance; a self, like that of St. Augustine, that is desperately trying to reconnect to some sort of loving, caring outwardness, to something in that vastness that so diminishes and terrifies him that will validate the thinking reed that he knows the universe can snuff out at any time.

So, having seen something of the self as understood by the great rationalist, Descartes, and the emotional reaction of Pascal to that understanding, we are going to go on to look at some different views, those of the empiricists. Before we do so, we might summarize the journey we have taken so far. We started with the idea of the self as that which is the same, that which endures, and went on to the Eastern idea of the self as the God within and to the Hebraic notion of self as the personality of God. In Plato, and the Greeks in general, we see the self as psyche, as mind or as spirit, and as something enduring that is the rational part of the mind, and as such is identified, or potentially can be identified, with the eternal. In this conception, the relationship between the self (or parts of the self) and the most permanent object of consciousness, which is for Plato the "Form of the Good," allows us to reach a stable relationship with that which is not mutable. We are enduring insofar as we relate to the eternal. The Platonic notion of self also highlights its inner division and conflict. We went on to see the personalization of the self in Hebrew scriptures when God describes himself as "I am who I am," where once again the self is essentially relational. It is a person relating to a person, or relating to God. That is also true for the ancient Hindus, with their distinction between the immanent indwelling self and the transcendent self. That immanent indwelling self is to be distinguished from the psychophysical self. It is a kind of transcendental self, and again there is an identification here between self as indwelling and self as transcendent that is reminiscent of Platonism. Connecting with the reality behind the changing world of appearances and sensations was the goal of the early philosophical theorizing of both East and West. They both sought,

and both inferred, the existence of a soul-like enduring self as subject commensurate with an eternal object in an attempt to link the permanent with the permanent. A relational concept of self indeed.

This way of thinking was taken over by early Christianity, and we saw how St. Augustine developed it in his autobiography. However, his *Confessions* are more deeply subjective and more deeply personalized than previous writing about the self. In St. Augustine we have a new emphasis on the importance of the self and of the individual as the child of God, so the self becomes something of supreme importance.

In the Middle Ages, the importance of the individual diminishes, and there is relatively little interest in the self as such. What there is tends to be expressed in medieval political theory, in which the state is seen as organic and the self is defined in terms of its contractual relationships. Here the self is situated not only, or even primarily, in terms of its position in a worldly hierarchy, but more saliently as part of the great chain of being in which it occupies a secure and defined place. That security was lost as the Ptolemaic geocentric world view broke down and the Copernican heliocentric world view replaced it. At the same time, the universality of Catholicism was challenged by the rise of Protestantism. The economic, religious, philosophical, metaphysical, and political vision of the High Middle Ages was coming to an end, and the corresponding institutions that expressed and embodied that vision were no longer stable or beyond question. The Renaissance and the Reformation changed the world forever. The former redirected attention to the individual and the self, and the latter made each man the judge of truth. The emphasis was now on inwardness, on the internalization of conscience, as exemplified and taught by Martin Luther. Simultaneously, there was a dramatic increase in privacy, in the potential for aloneness, in all but the lowest classes.

The old synthesis broke down in the 17th century, to be replaced by the rise of individualism. That individualism was exciting. It led to new opportunities for many people, but it was also threatening because it was achieved at the cost of relatedness. It is no accident that the existence of the self becomes problematic at precisely the time when self becomes self-conscious and intensely aware of separateness. Nor is it an accident that Descartes seeks certainty at precisely a time when the cosmological, social, political, and religious certainties of the medieval world view ceased to be tenable. In premodern conceptualizations, the self had been seen as safely coherent and enduring, deriving its stability from its

relationship to God, but now something else was required as a cement. The old verities were no longer certain, and the unity of the self, itself, was now problematical. The 17th century was the time of the rise of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism. That entailed a fragmentation of the old social fabric, a breakdown of the great chain of being, events that paralleled the rise of Protestantism and the concomitant end of the Church Universal. The fragmentation of society and the fragmentation of the self are contemporaneous. The rise of materialistic philosophy—for example, in Thomas Hobbes's writings, which maintain that the only reality is matter in motion—is another manifestation of this new world view. Although it hearkens back to Lucretius and the Greek Atomists, materialism is given a new impetus and is very much in the air in the 17th century. Materialism, Protestantism, and individualism were the raw materials that Descartes used to fashion his world view and to arrive at the solipsistic thinking self. That self as pure thinker now needed a way to connect with the other reality, matter in motion.

Discord followed the breakdown of the geocentric picture of universe and the rise of the heliocentric one. Galileo was condemned by the Inquisition for supporting the heliocentric theory. Freud wrote that mankind experienced three narcissistic wounds—deep injuries to self-esteem: Copernicus's demotion of man from the center of the universe to a resident of one of nine planets of a minor star; Darwin's demotion of man from the product of God's special creation to but another animal; and Freud's own demonstration that instead of being master in his own house, man was the plaything of unconscious forces. The response to narcissistic injury is rage and anxiety. The 17th century, which felt the full impact of the first narcissistic injury, demonstrates plenty of both.

Contemporaneously with the abandonment of the geocentric world, alienation and estrangement become dominant themes in writers as diverse as Pascal, writing from a religious point of view, and Montaigne, writing from a humanistic point of view. Now man is no longer at home in a comprehensible universe but is, on the contrary, alienated and estranged in a better understood (at least from a scientific point of view) but less humanly inhabitable universe. The phenomenal self, Pascal's thinking reed, becomes central in thinking about self precisely as the non-phenomenal self, the indwelling self tied metaphysically to something eternal, loses its credibility and is no longer tenable.

The world is no longer viewed as a vale of tears, a preparation for eternity, but as something valuable for its own sake. There is, however, a price to pay for this new humanism and this worldliness,

namely cosmic loneliness.

Paul Tillich (1952) maintains that the predominant anxiety of the Middle Ages was fear of condemnation, while the predominant anxiety of modern times is fear of meaninglessness. This is congruent with the new emphasis in the 17th century on the self and its problematical status.

We now turn to another point of view that emphasizes experience rather than reason. The view that knowledge comes through the senses rather than through abstract thinking is called empiricism. The empiricists replaced the primacy of reason with the primacy of the senses. Empiricism stands in opposition to rationalism. Roughly speaking, rationalism is a Continental European phenomenon, while empiricism is an English, and later an American, phenomenon. The more radical empiricists maintain that the senses are the only sources of knowledge; less radical empiricists allow reason a subsidiary role in their epistemologies.

When the English physician, political theorist, man of affairs, and philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) wrote "nothing is in the mind that wasn't first in the senses" (1690/1959, p. 123), he became the founder of modern empiricism. Locke, like Descartes, was the son of a lawyer. His father was caught up in the English civil war, in which he backed Cromwell. Locke, like Descartes, grew up in a world in which the traditional order was under assault but, unlike him, looked not for certainty as a basis for both knowledge and personal security, but to probable knowledge and mutual tolerance of differing opinions. Descartes reacted to the twin threats of dogmatism and meaninglessness by looking for certitudes that could be agreed on by all men; Locke's goals were more modest, but perhaps more livable. Though he studied Greek and moral philosophy at Oxford, looking toward taking holy orders, Locke graduated in medicine. As a physician, he was both exposed to the new science and socialized into a pragmatic, observational, applied science. Locke, however, practiced little, being quickly drawn into the world of diplomacy and public affairs. Toward the end of the century, he retired from public life and turned toward philosophy. He published his masterpiece, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* in 1690 (Locke, 1690/1946). It was preceded by his great political tracts, including *Letters Concerning Toleration* (Locke, 1667/1959), which argued for freedom of thought in an age when men killed each other for their beliefs and opinions. The political Locke importantly influenced Jefferson, and many of his ideas are embedded in the American Constitution and Bill of Rights. This, however, is not the Locke who

interests us here; rather, we are interested in Locke the technical philosopher.

Book 1 of the *Essay* is concerned with refuting the notion of innate ideas. Descartes for all of his skepticism had reintroduced innate ideas into his system. In a sense, all clear and distinct ideas are innate, or at the very least the test of certitude, clarity, and distinctness is itself innate, a built-in given. Locke feared that any epistemology that allowed a role for innate ideas as a source of knowledge would open the doors to speculative metaphysics and dogmatic theology, precisely what he wanted to deny credibility. (When my wife and I acquired a Newfoundland puppy, who we called Freud, we were told that all Newfoundlands have an innate desire to please. When he proved to be sweet but recalcitrant and quite willful, I told my wife that unfortunately he was a Lockeian, not a Cartesian, Newfoundland. She looked puzzled.)

Locke tells us that the idea for the essay started with a friendly discussion in his rooms at Oxford about various metaphysical questions. He tells us that the group of friends decided that, before such ultimate concerns could be meaningfully addressed, it was first necessary to determine the limits of knowledge: what it was possible to know and how it might be known. To do so, it was necessary to examine the nature of, and limits of, our instrument of knowing, the human Understanding. To fail to do so could lead to unwarranted claims, dogmatically held, and to bloody conflict and repression. This, after all, had been the history of the 17th century. The task of examining the Understanding critically was given to Locke, and 20 years later he published the result. Hence, the thrust of the essay is critical—throwing away the debris of fanatical belief and dogmatic certitude. It is of some interest to note that the origin of the essay is social; its impetus came out of dialogue and out of interpersonal interaction, in contradistinction to both the impetus and the execution of Descartes's *Principles* and *Meditations,* which emerged from solitary contemplation. Their respective origins both exemplify and determine their ambience and not a little of their conclusions, or at least there is a reciprocal (dialectical) relationship between their social-solitary genesis and their views of self, world, and the possibility of knowing either or both.

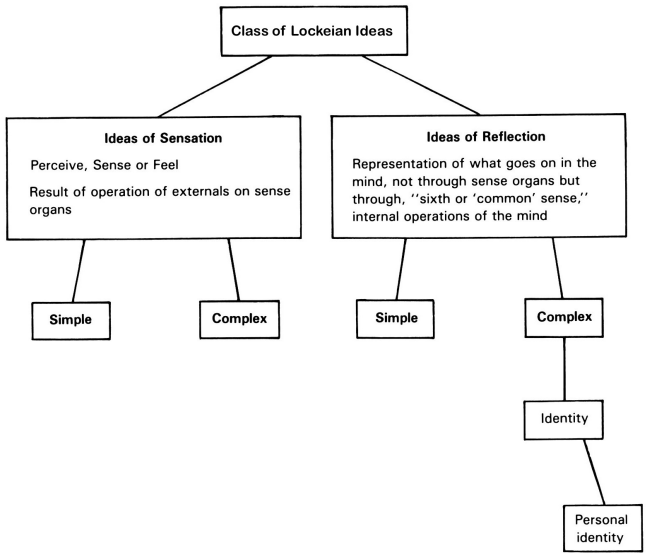
After demonstrating, by a variety of arguments, that innate ideas, including the idea of the self (as innate), do not exist, Locke postulates that the Understanding (the mind) starts as a blank slate (*tabula rasa)* or, in an alternate metaphor, as an empty cabinet needing to be furnished. Nothing (including the

idea of the self) is in the mind that was not first in the senses.

> Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, devoid of all characters, without any ideas: how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it that vast store which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it as an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer in one word, from EXPERIENCE. In that all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observations employed either, about external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our mind perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understanding with all of the materials of thinking. These two are the foundations of knowledge from whence all of the ideas we had, or do naturally have, do spring. (Locke, 1690/1959, Vol. 1, pp. 121-122)

Having cleared the decks—refuted the existence of innate ideas—Locke goes on to examine what ideas furnish the cabinet, are written on the blackboard, on the (initially blank) slate. He finds that they are of two kinds: ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection. The two are distinguished by their degree of clarity, immediacy, and force. Either can be simple or complex, unitary or composite. Ideas of sense (sensation) come from the external world through the senses. The cabinet is furnished, the blank slate is written upon, by, and only by, sense experience. I have the idea of *red,* I have it by seeing red. That is a simple idea of sensation. If I see something is red and round, that is a complex idea of sense. It is in my mind because it came from the external world by means of vision, a sensory mode. Ideas of sense can be highly complex, but this doesn't change their origin. Clearly, Locke's use of the word *idea* differs from Plato's. For Plato, ideas are archetypes—universals known only through ideation; through thought, not through the senses. The ontological status of Platonic ideas is problematic, but they are certainly real, in fact the only really real reality, for Plato. Perhaps Plato's *forms,* another word he uses for *archetypes,* are, in fact, ideas in the mind of God. At least his Christian interpreters have so viewed the Platonic ideas. Not so for Locke; when he says ideas, he means just that, ideas: sensations, perceptions, and so forth in the minds of men, in the Understanding. Ideas can also arise from reflection on the operations of the mind—by introspection. These Locke calls *ideas of reflection,* which arise from the *internal sense,* an organ of perception just as much as the eye or the ear. Ideas of reflection too can be simple or complex. Both ideas of sense and ideas of reflection are thoughts. Ideas of reflection are insights into the operation of the mind. *Essay* itself is a complex idea of reflection. As Locke's successor David Hume put it, all knowledge concerns either matters of fact (ideas of sensation) or relations of ideas (ideas of reflection). These are the only sources of our knowledge. Having completed the critical task of the *Essay*, Locke goes on to examine the status of abstract ideas, of concepts, and concludes that they are generalizations from particulars. In this respect he is a modem nominalist. (In medieval philosophy, those who held that concepts, like Plato's

forms or ideas, existed apart from the particulars that embodied them, were called *realists*, and those who held that general terms were but names for collections of particulars [*cat* was but a name for *Tabby*, *Felix*, etc.] and for their commonalities were called *nominalists*.)



This brings us to Locke's discussion of identity. *Identity* is an abstract term, a concept. Locke feels certain that he has accounted for conceptual knowledge as abstraction from ideas of sense and ideas of reflection. Identity is a complex idea of reflection. He goes on to give an account of this particular idea of reflection and, in so doing, arrives at the concept of personal identity, which is his version of the self. In doing so, he is one of the first to explicitly recognize and acknowledge the problematical nature of personal identity, of the self. I realize that personal identity and self are not necessarily identical, but there is certainly a close relationship between the two. To have a self is to have an identity, although selfhood may entail more than identity. In any case, Locke's discussion is primarily of personal identity.

The concept of personal identity entails two distinct notions: one's identity as something particular —as a man or woman, as an artist or scientist, or as a child or an adult—and one's identity as being the

same person, as having continuity, ongoingness, and relatedness to past states of being. Locke is interested in the second notion of identity and doesn't deal with the particulars of personal identity or with the relationship between these particulars and one's more global sense of sameness, of identity. You may ask. Does the Cartesian self have identity? The Cartesian self is consciousness, and Descartes doesn't raise the question of the sameness of that consciousness across time. It is Locke who first raises that question.

Locke recognizes four kinds or types of identity. The first is logical identity. A is A. This he takes from Aristotle's logic. A thing is identical with itself and with no other, and so is a thought. The second kind of identity is the identity of an object continuing through time, for example, a stone seen today and seen tomorrow is the same stone. It endures, and this is its identity. The third kind of identity is the identity of organization, exemplified by plants and animals. Their identity is organic, consisting of the organization and the relationship of their parts, which remains the same, although the constituents of those parts are in constant flux. Their atoms change, but the relationships of the succeeding atoms to each other do not change. The fourth kind of identity is personal identity. As I noted above, the very word *self* comes from the Anglo-Saxon word used for *same.* Since *self* means "same," the concept of personal identity is implicit in the concept of self. To have a self is to be the same. Of course, our experience of ourselves is as both continuous and discontinuous, as both unitary and composite, as both consistent and inconsistent, and as both cohesive and fragmented. Any theory of the self, if it is to be convincing, must account for both sides of these antinomies of the self. Locke is aware of this and struggles, not particularly successfully, to do so. This is hardly surprising since he was the first to clearly see and delineate these difficulties.

According to Locke, personal identity, the self, is the *I* that accompanies all consciousness. Intuition of our existence accompanies every thought. I accompany every thought. We have identity (i.e., are self-identical) in several senses. One is as an organism, as creatures whose material constituents change, but whose relations of parts—organization—does not change. Of course, logically we are we, A is A, at any given moment. When we see, hear, smell, or reflect, we know that we do so; our knowing it is data, just as much as the sensation itself, and is inseparable from it. Self-consciousness necessarily accompanies consciousness. Perceptions perish as they occur; indeed, Locke defines time as "perpetual perishing" (1690/1959, p. 265). Yet I am also aware of continuity in time. Identity, a sense of self, depends on consciousness and memory and on the self-consciousness that is concomitant with each idea, and with

the memory of consciousness in the past. Our identity is not disturbed by breaks in consciousness. I also exist as a body, as a person, and as an immaterial substance that underlies the vicissitudes of time, but these do not constitute my identity. Rather, Locke says that memory bridges gaps in consciousness, and it is my memory of being the same person that is the basis of my personal identity. So it is either immediate self-consciousness or memory of a similar self-consciousness in the past that leads me to believe that I endure, that I have continuity in time, and that I am the same self now as I was in an earlier stage of my life. Breaks in consciousness don't disturb the sense of enduring personal identity because memory bridges them.

For our purpose, Locke has done several important things in his discussion of personal identity and of the self. First, he has connected the consciousness of self with the body and its sensations. Personal identity consists of the enduring organization of one's organism as well as in self-consciousness. So we are no longer in Descartes's world in which the *cogito*—the self—is pure thought without material existence, since the realm of extension in which matter exists and the realm of thought in which I exist are dichotomous. For Locke the "withness of the body" is intrinsic; my sensations and my feelings are now part of myself, and are not ethereal, detached, floating, and unanchored, as they are in the Cartesian self.

Next Locke asserts that we are always aware, or at least potentially aware, of our selfhood. He asserts this as a matter of fact, not as a conclusion of thought. For him self-consciousness is a datum, originating in what he calls the common sense, or the sixth sense, which gives us information about what happens in us just as the five senses give us information about what is happening outside of us. Third, he recognizes that our continuity as persons, as selves, is problematical, and not a given. Since we are not always conscious, and self for Locke is always conscious, there are discontinuities in our experience as self. These are bridged by memory. In a sense, our knowledge of the sameness of the self is no different from our knowledge of the sameness of the stone. Both depend on memory and on comparison to establish the identity of yesterday's stone with today's and of yesterday's self with today's. Locke is aware of the possibilities of unconscious ideation, but he doesn't want to allow it for two reasons: first, it might be a back door for reintroduction of innate ideas, and second, it isn't empirical, because for him an unconscious idea is neither an idea of sense nor an idea of reflection, the only sources of knowledge. Locke's criticism of the unconscious as a notion without epistemological foundation is a recurrent one in the history of thought. Memory, of course, consists of stored ideas that are not necessarily in awareness.

The unconscious, in this sense, Locke does admit into his system. The data stored in Locke's memory is what Freud called preconscious rather than dynamically unconscious; that is, the contents of memory can be made conscious and used in mental operations such as comparison by an effort of will or attention; they are not repressed, nor are they unavailable in principle.

Consciousness is a tricky, complex concept. Its meanings include simple awareness, awareness of the display of sensa, awareness that it is I who am aware, and awareness of some of the specificity of the I who am aware. When Locke is talking about consciousness, he is usually talking about the awareness that it is I who am aware, which he calls self-consciousness. But he doesn't make the distinctions in the meaning of consciousness that I do, and his meaning is not always clear.

Locke is aware of the difficulties posed by such phenomena as multiple personalities and loss of consciousness in amnesia, and he worries them but fails to solve the dilemmas they cause for any theory of the self. Locke solves some of the problems of sameness within discontinuity through the concept of substance, of an underlying substrate to which, or in which, ideas occur. But his account of personal identity is independent of any notion of substance. Whether we are one or more than one substance is an empirically unanswerable question for Locke so he drops it and turns to consciousness and memory, not enduring underlying substance, to account for our idea of personal identity. Characteristically, Locke's discussion is highly practical. He is concerned with such questions as legal responsibility, and accountability in the afterlife, when he talks about our many selves and the continuity of personal identity. Should a man be held responsible, in this life and the next, for acts committed when he wasn't himself? asks Locke. He decides not. In Locke's account of the role of memory in establishing the continuity of personal identity through comparison and the judgment of identity, his inert *tabula rasa,* his passive cabinet of the mind, becomes highly active. Here the operations of the mind approximate what the psychoanalysts would call the "synthetic functions of the ego."

C. Fred Alford (1991), writing from the point of view of a political theorist, sees the Lockeian self very differently. Alford is interested in the relation of the Lockeian self to property, a concept central to Locke's political philosophy, seeing property as a self-object, as an extension and constituent of self. This is a psychoanalytic notion to which we will return.

To sum up, Locke understands the self in at least two ways: as the enduring organization and structure that remains through development and change in the material constituents of the body and as the self-consciousness that accompanies every idea and that memory allows us to establish as the same self-consciousness that accompanied our previous ideas. It is a self that is active, in part given, and in part created through thought, the operations of the mind. It is pattern and perception, relation of parts and ideas of reflection. It also has aspects that Locke knows he cannot account for.

For Locke, self in the sense of self-consciousness is a given, an idea of sensation or reflection, as the case may be. It is a matter of fact, in the same sense that "the pencil that I am now writing with is hard" is also a matter of fact. Not so for our next theorist of self, Locke's successor David Hume. Hume's main contribution to the theory of self is the intuition that there isn't any. He takes Locke's claim, that awareness of self is a given, seriously, and looks for it. He says that he can't find it; therefore, if that is what the self is, then self is an illusion.