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FORUM: *THE IDEA OF THE SELF*

ANTHONY J. LA VOPA
Department of History, North Carolina State University

It is somehow fitting that Jerrold Seigel's *The Idea of the Self*, a triumph of rigorous and erudite intellectual labor, has me thinking about labor. And so I will come at the book through the meanings given to labor from the mid-seventeenth century to the early nineteenth. My skepticism is meant to serve a larger purpose: to begin mapping the research territories opened or resituated by Seigel's achievement.

We begin with a detour—not too circuitous, I hope—into issues of historical method. Seigel finds that since the seventeenth century the Western idea of the self has exhibited patterned variations, each in its way configuring the bodily, the relational, and the reflective dimensions of selfhood. His contextual explanation emphasizes that Britain, France, and the German states differed in what he calls their "predominant frames" for experiencing "the conditions of modernity" (pp. 36–9). Rest assured; after so much effort spent exorcizing essentialism, we are not being asked to swallow yet another essentialist notion of "national character." In each of Seigel's national contexts we move back and forth between the nation as framing structure and the nation as experienced and imagined. To Seigel the nation is a historically contingent matrix of elements, some objectively given, others subjective: the state and the law, the distribution and circulation of wealth and other social resources, norms and emblems of status, religious beliefs and institutions, circuits and forms of communication, the consumption of print. It is a measure of the caution he has taken with these matrices that his comparative argument is not easily summarized. To throw caution to the winds: In Britain, mixed government, religious pluralism, and a growing commercial economy made it possible to conceive the reflective self developing in salutary interactions with relational and bodily dimensions of selfhood, though these were not without tensions, rather than as constituting an ontological space of "pure independence." Among French thinkers we find a recurrent need for just such a psychic space; reflectivity was their refuge from the oppressive power imposed by a centralized monarchy, and from kinds of sociability emulating the obsession with social honor in the intricately hierarchical culture of the royal court. In the German states a particularly complex set of conditions—above all princely states

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respecting local and corporate privileges and sustaining a Protestant tradition of inner freedom—encouraged what Seigel calls "isomorphic" thinking (p. 38). Forms of self-referential agency were conceived as ontologically anterior to corresponding forms in society and nature. Hence reflective selfhood was endowed with a radically heightened sense of agency, constructing the external world to confirm an "inner" *telos* rather than passively registering impresses from without.

Please note the two axes of comparison: the way the state and society interlock in hierarchical structures, and the way hierarchy sets the terms (the conditions of exchange and the dynamics of power) in social relations.

There is a sense in which many, if not all, of Seigel's theorists of the self aspired to say something of universal purchase about being human, albeit within the parameters of the western experience of modernity. In Seigel's hands such aspirations are necessarily humbled as they are restored to dense layers of historical contingency, above all as refractions of the particularity of national experiences. Many philosophers will surely object that this is an inherently contradictory project, and one in which the historian, once again, denies philosophy its own voice. Though I do not mean to dismiss the objection, I want to pose an in-house question for historians. As Seigel is well aware, his comparative strategy multiplies the pitfalls historians have to dodge, even as it opens new avenues of inquiry. The very choice of the nation as our contextual and comparative unit may be problematic. The unit may be at once too large and too small. We confront this problem of scale when we round up some of the usual suspects and imagine giving them larger parts in the story of the self and of modernity. I have in mind religious cultures, class divisions, status norms, and gender norms. Surely these would pull us deeper into spaces in between—the spaces we have to traverse to connect the recorded traces of an individual mind, in this case a mind theorizing selfhood, to a frame as large as the nation. And yet, just as surely, they would pull us out to still larger spaces, encompassing all three nations in question and more.

Seigel traverses the spaces by putting three modalities of historical knowledge into play. The hermeneutic: recovering the intended meanings of texts. The contextual: relating those meanings to relevant orderings of social, economic, cultural, and political life, in this case the orderings that give national communities their distinct profiles. And the psychological: identifying motives, inferred from the author's responses (anxiety, fear, resentment, and so on) to contextual forces impinging on him and constraining, or perhaps opening out, his perceptions of choice. How to stitch these modalities into a durable fabric? That is the function of the many arresting biographical moments in Seigel's book. Theory and practice—conceptualization and craft—conjoin here, bringing into focus an author's individuality as he navigates his way through or past structural conditions. One thinks of Locke offering himself as a "utinsill" to his patron, Alexander Popham, even as he sought freedom from personal dependence in the

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republic of letters (p. 108); or Constant tugged between marriage to Charlotte von Hardenberg and a high-voltage life with Madame de Staël (pp. 278–88).

Readers may find it curious, even disconcerting, that the biographical and autobiographical material in *The Idea of the Self* usually comes in the middle or at the end of chapters, after Seigel has drawn us deep into a reading of texts as such. At work here is a methodological rule of thumb that can be stated as follows: if you want to posit motives, don't do so until you have recovered meanings. If intellectual and cultural historians ever adopt a mantra, I hope this will be it. We need only imagine that Seigel had limited his inquiry to textual meanings—that he had prudently avoided the more exposed route through contextual frames and the treacherous ravines of motive. Seigel's reading of the texts—those multilayered readings, sensitive to historically specific nuances of language and perceptions of choice—would still have made his book a persuasive corrective. He would still convince us that Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* pivots on a historically false dichotomy between communitarian and individualistic ethics, and likewise that postmodernist metanarratives positing a univocal "Western" conception of "logocentric" selfhood, usually assumed to originate with Descartes, are simply uninformed. *Pace* Richard Rorty, "rational reconstructions" that rid past philosophers' texts of "outdated foolishness" do not make for better conversations with the dead. They impoverish philosophy's engagement with its past.[1] Seigel's textual hermeneutic, by itself, is a powerful example of a more efficacious way of engaging that past.

But still, there is the distance between the nation as context and selfhood as individual thinkers have theorized it, and there is the challenge of bridging it. We have good reason to dwell on the challenge. It is a site for the larger challenge of bridging gaps between intellectual history, defined as the study of canonical thinkers and texts; the social history of ideas, also known as the historical sociology of knowledge; and some forms of the new cultural history. I persist, perhaps naively, in thinking we can maneuver within this triangle without loosing our footing. And that is one reason that I find myself cheering Seigel's three-dimensional approach to selfhood, and deeply engaged by the various configurations it yields. Its way of planting us firmly in intellectual history opens new prospects for the maneuvering I have mind.

To maneuver, however, we need to work our way across bridging, or mediating, rhetorics between the self theorized and the nation as context. My guess is that, curiously (or perhaps not so curiously), these will show little respect for national boundaries, even as they draw us deeper into national contexts. Of the many possible candidates, I will focus on what I call rhetorics of labor, partly to give the

1 On the contextual alternative to "rational reconstruction" see my "Doing Fichte: Reflections of a sobered (but unrepentant) contextual biographer," in Hans Erich Bödeker, ed., *Biographie schreiben* (Wallstein Verlag, 2003), 107–71.

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usual suspects a greater voice, and partly to expand the inquiry out still farther along the social and cultural valences of ideas. How did theorizing about the self shape, and how was it in turn shaped by, normative rhetorics of labor? In such rhetorics, I will suggest, selfhood theorized becomes virtually inseparable from the self represented in what was called "character." By laboring (or not laboring), in various meanings of that term, the self was seen to center itself, to develop itself, to make itself legible to others and enter exchanges with others, to practice performative acts of language, to gender itself. Such rhetorics may have shaped and configured the dimensions of selfhood in ways that Seigel's approach does not accommodate.

Seigel contributes powerfully to the demolition of hopelessly presentist views of Descartes and Locke as founders of secular individualism. For both thinkers stable moral selfhood was inconceivable without an Absolute. Now let us add to the contextual frame Christian traditions that make labor a vital connection between the self and the Absolute. We might want to bracket out such traditions on the grounds that they are not modern—that they are residues of the sacred in an increasingly secular world—but we cannot. They have formed complex chemical bondings with secular elements of modernity. Suppose we ask how labor has been figured in the ideal of calling in various forms of Protestantism—in English and Scottish Calvinism, in German Lutheranism and Pietism, in Methodism, and so on. Seigel's three-dimensional approach to selfhood would take us well beyond Charles Taylor's view of the calling as "the affirmation of ordinary life." But it stops short of confronting us with a paradox worth pondering. In Protestant cultures across the West what was it that empowered the "called," including women, to defy the social imperatives of hierarchy? Was it not their conviction of a kind of spiritual self-abnegation, their belief that they had in effect "dis-possessed" themselves by becoming instruments of the Absolute? Giving due weight to this logic of the sacred requires a particularly strenuous leap into historical and cultural otherness. We confront it, after all, from within a professional culture that celebrates the calling in its secular mutations, as a process of self-making, a kind of self-propulsion across a life trajectory. We would have to begin by acknowledging that labor in its sacred meanings has a way of defying our efforts to achieve a truly historicized understanding of volition. The challenge to the historical imagination is to avoid reading an enduring ethic of agency, grounded in the aspiration to spiritual "self-emptying," through the lens of secular notions of autonomy.[2] And, once that lens is removed, we might have

2 I am summarizing here the particularly cogent argument in Phyllis Mack, "Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism," in Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, eds., *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Palgrave, 2005), 434–59. Mack's point about eighteenth-century Quakerism, I am suggesting, also applies to other varieties of Protestantism.

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to reconsider how we differentiate between oppressive and sustaining webs of relational selfhood.

Then there is the issue of human value. What endows one human self with greater value than another? David Hume's essay "Of Essay Writing," published in 1742, opens by distinguishing the "learned" and "conversible" worlds from the great mass of people "immers'd in the animal life".[3] Hume is an author I take particular pleasure in reading, and so I find this phrasing all the more troubling. Here we have one of the Enlightenment's most audacious skeptics in the face of the truth claims of natural science, and one of its most acute theorists of three-dimensional selfhood, offhandedly accepting a class divide as a fact of nature. The laboring masses are consigned to one-dimensional selfhood—in this case, bodily selfhood—as an inescapable destiny, precluding the possibility of their realizing human potential through reflectivity or through higher forms of relational life. There is a sobering reminder here: in Britain, as Seigel emphasizes, it was the proliferation of social differences that seemed to make possible a distinctively modern kind of "character"; but this perception operated within a larger discourse that, in its brutally simple dichotomizing, put the achievement of character beyond the reach of most.

Less obvious, but more relevant to the worlds through which Seigel guides us, is a fault line Hume addresses within the elite worlds of learning and polite conversation. Georg Simmel has brilliantly evoked a kind of "sociability" whose claim to superiority rested on the exclusive practice of a social aesthetic, an art of social play.[4] One thinks of the code of "politeness" practiced by the *honnête homme* and *honnête femme* in seventeenth-century Parisian salons. True, this is a singularly rarified example of the social aesthetic. But in eighteenth-century cultures of politeness in other European countries, including England, we find variations on the logic of *honnêteté*, despite the fact that they prided themselves on avoiding "Frenchified" manners.

Even *honnêteté* could not dispense with a kind of labor, a relentless disciplining of affect and expression, but the labor was socially efficacious only to the extent that it hid itself, so that all comportment and speech seemed effortless and hence "natural" and "free." What I want to stress is the enduring friction between this art of play and another mode of selfhood, rooted in ancient philosophy—a friction that points us, via status, to gendered selfhood. The latter mode I shall call the labor of askesis, the strenuous, sustained spiritual and intellectual exercise

3 David Hume, "Of Essay-Writing," in *idem, Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Liberty Fund, 1985), 533.

4 Georg Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago, 1971), 127–40. Simmel's concept of sociability is skillfully applied in Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, *Exclusive Conversations: The Art of Interaction in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1988).

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undertaken to achieve self-knowledge and self-mastery. Throughout the early modern West, askesis was hyper-reflective labor. It promised to free an essential self from the constraints of bodily and relational selfhood—though it also had an ironically cruel legibility in the psycho-physiological signs of melancholy.

Askesis looms large in the lives and the thought of modern philosophers as diverse as Descartes, Kant, Fichte, and Victor Cousin—not only in their theorizing about the self but in their own self-constructions and indeed in their life choices.[5] And the troubled relationship between askesis and the social aesthetic of play has significance well beyond seventeenth-century French salons. It forms, I would suggest, a point of departure for putting Seigel's history of selfhood and the historical study of gender in a mutually beneficial dialogue. For the *honnête femme* and her successors in polite society throughout Europe, the corporeal and reflective dimensions of selfhood—the woman's bodily comportment, her speech, her judgments on matters of taste, the very workings of her intelligence—served a hyper-relational presentation of self that had to appear effortless, free of labor. This is to say that the much-celebrated superiority of her social intelligence had an ironic price. Her status as well as her gender required her to studiously avoid the channeled diligence not only of professional work, but also of philosophical inquiry, including thinking about selfhood.

I want to end with another, more distinctly modern rhetoric of selfhood, character, and labor. It too is aesthetic, in that it envisions a person's character as a unique refraction of "universally human" qualities, a harmonious blending of sensual and cognitive powers. It is modern in a quite specific sense: its contextual referent is the intricate meshings of the modern division of labor and the modern state, or at least the early modern state. As Seigel explains with his usual lucidity, Adam Smith gave a positive spin to two aspects of the modern division of labor—the specialization it required, and the more or less impersonal relationships it structured. In Smith's moral theory, these combined to extend and multiply subjective distances among people in commercial and "polite" societies, thus making possible three-dimensional concepts of selfhood that Seigel considers distinctively British. Seigel's underlying contrast here is between a fluid British society and a French society relentlessly ordered by a centralizing state. Perched oddly beside them—less fluid than Britain, but not statist in the French mold—is the German case.

But what happens when elusive German characters like Wilhelm von Humboldt enter the story? I will suggest that they strain Seigel's comparative framework beyond its capacity. To fit Humboldt into his framework, Seigel has

5 On Cousin see Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

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to make two moves that I, as a Germanist, find puzzling—and his biographical stitching becomes uncharacteristically tangled. He has to posit an affinity "at some level" between Humboldt's aesthetic ideal of personal wholeness and what he calls "locally based" and "still small-scale" forms of German social life (p. 346). How this squares with Humboldt's aristocratic "cosmopolitanism" is not clear. Still more puzzling is that Seigel locates one source of the German ideal of personal wholeness in a new world of officialdom—a world emancipated from "inherited forms of social organization" and creating "new social relations" (p. 303).

My objection to this reading is that it muffles a late eighteenth-century theme that was pronounced in German-speaking Europe, though not unique to it. The world is seen as an oppressively mechanistic field of power, and the most menacing embodiment of that power is the modern bureaucratic state and its idol "utility" (*Nützlichkeit*). Ineluctably rationalizing the division of labor, the state becomes the prime mover in fracturing the human into the stunted and the tunnel-visioned. It was above all Friedrich Schiller, Humboldt's close friend, who articulated this vision, but we also find it in the thought of three of Seigel's figures: Humboldt himself, Herder, and Kant. That it plays little role in Seigel's reading of them points to a problem: his comparative framework requires him to slight the dark side of the modern bureaucratic state—the side that menaced the men who composed it. To do that side justice we would have to be more attentive to a quasi-utopian rhetoric of labor, distinguishing work that is meaningful in itself (in that it enables the development of character as multifaceted individuality) from inherently dehumanizing work. This rhetoric, of course, will echo through modern thinking about selfhood, personal wholeness, and alienation to the present.

There is a biographical moment here as well. Humboldt's brief stint as a junior functionary in the Prussian judiciary in 1790 and 1791 produced a bitter lament in the third chapter of his *The Limits of State Action*. He saw ever-expanding swarms of functionaries themselves "relaps(ing) into machines" as they were "diverted from real work" into "partly empty, partly narrow employment," where "men are neglected for things, and creative powers for results".[6] I choose this example in part because, acute reader that he is, Seigel notes a resulting divergence between Humboldt and Smith. Smith located intimate friendship at the weak end of a spectrum of character-developing relationships, many of them, perhaps most, characterized by the relative impersonality of social exchange in the modern division of labor. To Humboldt, friendship offered a refuge from that same

6 Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, ed. J. W. Burrow (Cambridge, 1969), 34–5.

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division—a way to realize one's human potential despite it (p. 346). That signals a larger divergence; in German thought on the cusp of the modern era we find a deep-seated sense of threat in the face of the modern division of labor not to be found in the thought of Hume or Smith. Positioning Germany as he does vis-à-vis France and Britain, Seigel does not follow this curve in the comparative road.

Am I simply saying that we have to fill in all the blanks Seigel unavoidably left unfilled? Not an earthshaking conclusion. But I am also raising the possibility that, if we want to sustain comparisons on a national scale, we need to adjust our lens. To me a signal contribution of Seigel's book—one it would be unreasonable to expect from a philosophical hermeneutics—lies in its broadly political focus on power in historically specific forms. We need to continue asking, as he has asked, how theorists of modern selfhood experienced, or at least witnessed, the power of the modern state, particularly as it asserted and insinuated its presence in hierarchical divisions of labor. To advance the inquiry, however, we need to query whether Seigel's national frames were the "predominant" frames. This is not because Seigel's emphases lack textual confirmation; they abound in it. The danger is that these comparative emphases will blur other, no less salient, polarities or juxtapositions within each national frame—and these may direct us to other ways of understanding how configurations of selfhood registered the workings of power.

First, Britain. If we follow Seigel's emphasis on the distinctive modernity of eighteenth-century Britain, what is the state? It is an institution that presides over, is deeply engaged in, and to some degree mirrors a commercializing society. This is Adam Smith's world of spectatorial sympathy, where the dictates of personal dependence accede to an unprecedented degree to the self-discipline achieved in sympathetic interactions. As Seigel acknowledges, however, for many eighteenth-century Britons personal dependence was still a fact of life. I would add that here too the state, itself still a thick mesh of patronage and clientage, had a large presence. This reframing, or adjusted framing, helps us understand something significant: that morally validating properties were so insistently attributed to the focused, sustained, even obsessive practice of labor itself, the ultimate exercise of self-directed and self-disciplined agency. Figured in that way, labor opened a space for character in the climb up a chain of personal dependencies.

One adjustment leads to another. Perhaps above all in France, the state was a floodlit aristocratic stage diffusing its hierarchical norms to ever-widening audiences. Surely there was, as Seigel argues, a marked need for psychic refuge from this world of intensely competitive and imitative sociability, where, in Diderot's image, "continual rubbing" turned people into "coins" with the stamp "worn off" (p. 197). And yet at the beginning of the nineteenth century France was also home to certain rhetorics of labor—the rhetoric of "careers open

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to talent" comes to mind—that grounded self-validation in an emphatically statist kind of bourgeois conformity. The state, we might say, institutionalized a culture of emulation, in careers driven by an ethos of academic and professional achievement.

And that returns us to the German adjustment. As late as the 1780s the German Enlightenment had a marked tendency to imagine the state as a benign, emancipatory power, the engine of a more rational order coming into being. Hence when Humboldt's generation refigures the machine-state as an artificial, denaturing force, harnessing its servants as well as its subjects to its grinding power, we should take notice.

My point is not that Seigel should have written a different book. This is precisely the book we needed. The history of the idea of the self has a powerful new sense of direction. Whether his contextual map is ratified or revised, the contextual history of thought will profit immeasurably.

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