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FORUM: *THE IDEA OF THE SELF*

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Jerrold Seigel's book on the self is a monument in three dimensions. A comprehensive review of this extraordinary achievement would require a volume all its own. Instead I will offer just a few remarks, first on the book's general argument, and second on some of its more specific claims regarding Heidegger and Derrida.

As to the general argument, Seigel admits to a preference for what he terms a "multi-dimensional" theory of the self, with a threefold structure—"corporeality, relationality, and reflectivity". The opening chapter provides a subtle brief for this threefold distinction, though in the conclusion Seigel is candid enough to admit the preference is "largely spontaneous" (p. 651). Now, one might ask if, with such terminology, the battle is not merely engaged but half-won. Who, after all, would wish to find themselves in the unhappy position of celebrating a theory characterized as one-dimensional? It is not only Herbert Marcuse who has inoculated us against images of one-dimensional man. Anyone who has read the geometrical fantasy 'Flatland' knows how difficult it is to manage one's affairs and recognize one's friends on a line or a plane. Experience alone furnishes the best instruction: our own, bulky and embodied selves compel us to recognize the seemingly unimpeachable truth—that three dimensions are better than one.

Yet on closer inspection Seigel's views are clearly more complex and perhaps more controversial. A prominent theme is that the self should exhibit a certain "stability"—a word that holds special importance in the book and recurs with unusual frequency toward its end (I will return to this theme below). A further requirement is that one of the three dimensions, *reflectivity*, must enjoy a distinctive, even primary, role in the composition of the self. This distinction is not always apparent throughout the book's many chapters, and it emerges more as a matter of definition than of argument. It seems to belong to the very meaning of reflectivity that it has the capacity to stand at some distance from the self's other two dimensions, although it is not, of course, able to tear itself entirely free from its social and embodied conditions. And this capacity seems to be an achievement which, if not unique to modernity, is nonetheless at least most characteristic of the theorists, such as John Locke, who enjoy a special place in Seigel's story as

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protagonists in the emergence of the modern and multidimensional self. It is this distance that prevents the self from collapsing into flatness. Reflectivity therefore plays a special role in the argument because almost by definition it holds open the multidimensionality Seigel wishes not only to document but also to celebrate, especially against those unflattering—and flattening—theorists of selfhood who regard reflectivity as something less than it really is.

All too often, Seigel suggests, the multidimensional self has come under attack by theorists who share a bipolar style of argument. They begin by imagining that reflectivity must afford a wholly unconditional freedom from both our bodily and our relational determinations. Yet this dream of radical detachment is so obviously false that they dispatch it without difficulty and then move rashly to the opposite extreme, rejecting reflectivity altogether and proposing in its stead a model of the self that is little more than a reflex of its social or material determinations. These are the philosophers of "fluidity" and "dissolution"—terms that betray Seigel's belief that they are going too far. But, Seigel notes, theorists who promote the dissolution of the self by compressing it into only one of its dimensions often succeed only to appeal covertly to a model of unbounded selfhood which is itself no less exalted than the model they set out to vanquish. They remain caught in a stark and unrealistic dualism between self-loss and self-emancipation—or, in Seigel's terms, between "no-self" and "all-self".

Seigel's book is rich with insight and manifold in its aims. But the argument I have just sketched above is directed chiefly against Heidegger and, perhaps even more so, against his twentieth-century inheritors in France. Indeed, one might say the book overall means to provide us with a sort of genealogy of postmodern errors. An instructive comparison would be Jürgen Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, which similarly argues that postmodernists like Foucault and Derrida lapse into performative contradiction when they exercise—yet simultaneously deny they are exercising—their own powers of reflection.

At various stops in the journey Seigel anticipates this argumentative denouement. About Benjamin Constant we read, "A self in which fluidity was the price and the vehicle of independence looks . . . forward to more recent French figures who have equated such plasticity with freedom, and stability or constancy with subjection, such as Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida" (p. 290). Elsewhere Seigel explores the German sources of this bipolar tendency. Schelling, for example, "simultaneously exalted and dissolved the self" (p. 389). Seigel momentarily entertains a comparison between Schelling and Freud, which, however, he then dismisses. Freud, Seigel writes, "affirms the existence of a partial autonomy while regarding the extremes of confinement and boundlessness as illusory or irrational". Schelling, however, does "just the opposite," oscillating "between integral self-assertion and self-abnegation as the deeper truth behind the everyday

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experiences of finite independence and dependency". These "polar conditions of being all-self or no-self," Seigel concludes, "would later be theorized in different ways by Nietzsche and Heidegger". (p. 390)

The lines quoted above typify Seigel's penchant for theoretical moderation and his mistrust of extremes—an attitude that animates his book throughout. The figure of Freud, though not examined in depth, makes a reappearance at the book's final pages as an exemplar of the more moderate option Seigel wants to defend. Yet it seems to me that when we arrive at the closing chapters on Heidegger and his postmodern disciples, the polemical aspect of Seigel's framework somewhat outstrips its exegetical utility. The tone in these sections is noticeably less patient, and Seigel's admirable commitment to defending a given author against crudely one-dimensional misreadings (evident, e.g., in the nuanced survey of John Locke) gives way to a tone of vigorous criticism.

As regards Heidegger's philosophy, I must beg Seigel's indulgence for now revisiting various points about which he knows we disagree. First, some background.

Being and Time, Heidegger's early and incomplete magnum opus, sets out to examine the so-called *Seinsverständnis*, or understanding of Being, that first makes it possible for human beings to come into meaningful relation with what there is. As such, Heidegger followed after Kant and the tradition of so-called "transcendental" analysis, i.e. a philosophical investigation into the prerequisite and formal conditions for experience. Yet Heidegger dissented from that tradition in claiming that such conditions were neither Platonic forms nor pure a-priori furnishings of the human mind, but belonged instead to the very structure of lived existence, our being-in-the-world, or *Dasein*. Heidegger's "analytic of *Dasein*" purports to show that there was no "essence" of human existence apart from its worldly and practical involvements over time. *Dasein*'s very identity, Heidegger claimed, is incorrigibly dependent upon such involvements and the inherited norms of social existence that give them their meaning.

The analysis of human existence was therefore an analysis of its "inauthenticity," its condition of never being truly its own. In *Being and Time* Heidegger portrayed *Dasein* as immersed in an anonymous field of public meaning which he called *das Man*, or 'the One', after the neuter, third person singular. *Dasein*'s basic entanglement in history—the human condition of finding oneself always beholden to meanings one did not create for oneself—Heidegger called *Geworfenheit* or "thrownness". It was a cardinal rule for Heidegger as a hermeneutic philosopher that one cannot get to some position "outside" the worldly environment that makes these meanings possible. *Dasein* could only be what it is on the basis of its world. It followed, then, that *Dasein* is never *not* thrown.

In Seigel's view this theory of social and historical determination makes Heidegger a relational extremist; the "self" in his philosophy has all but surrendered its

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capacities for reflection and threatens to vanish into the anonymity of *das Man*. This doctrine, Seigel reminds us, bears a strong resemblance to other German conservative laments for the loss of the self in modern, mass society. But the similarity convinces partly because Seigel follows the 1962 mistranslation of *das Man* into English as "the They," as if it were a collective separable from individual identity. Yet this would be to neglect Heidegger's basic conviction that *Dasein* always and invariably grounds its identity in social norms. *Das Man* is not a factual predicament we can change or a collective we can reject. It is instead an "existential," a piece of our own life-constitution and a necessary resource for understanding ourselves and our world. In sum, Heidegger does not want us to think that everyday existence is "self-loss" since he believes it is our thrownness into the social world that first permits us to be selves at all. In Seigel's view, however, inauthenticity is something from which we can feasibly break free. *Dasein*, he writes, begins in thrownness and social determination, but "is capable of transcending this mode of being, and of achieving *instead* what Heidegger calls 'authentic selfhood'" (p. 576; added emphasis)

There is much controversy over just what Heidegger meant by inauthentic and authentic *Dasein*. Notwithstanding the express warnings in *Being and Time* that we should not mistake existential description for evaluation, Heidegger muddled his portrait of social being with depreciatory language, e.g. "falling," "ambiguity," and "idle-talk". Seigel is absolutely right, I think, to discern in Heidegger's philosophy judgments symptomatic of some of the most conservative or even antimodernist cultural attitudes of his era, attitudes that eventually primed Heidegger to imagine—in the notorious phrase from 1935—an "inner truth and greatness" in National Socialism. Still, it seems wrong to charge Heidegger with a dualistic choice between thrownness and authenticity. However authentic *Dasein* might be, it can never do more than modify our social being; it cannot reject it.

This perspective on language and social being aligns Heidegger with Wittgenstein, whose argument against private language similarly promotes a kind of philosophical externalism, i.e. the doctrine that our innermost thoughts rely upon the public words we use to express them. For Heidegger this meant that *Dasein*'s individual world is also and always a social world. To emphasize this point, Heidegger explained that "'the One' *belongs to Dasein's positive constitution*". And he added, "*Authentic Being-one's-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the "One"; *it is rather an existential modification of the "One"—of the "One" as an essential existentiale*".[1]

1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 168; translation amended. Heidegger's emphasis.

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Granted, it is still unclear just what authenticity and "modification" really amount to. Heidegger seemed to be saying we should cease our efforts at evasion and should instead come to recognize our thrownness as the deeper truth about what we are. I confess I have my own troubles with the notion that we can arrive at this kind of metaphysical insight into the human condition. Ironically, this is just the kind of expectation Heidegger himself warned us against, and his self-contradiction on this point lies at the source of many perplexities and dangers in his philosophy. Still, whatever Heidegger meant by authenticity, it seems clear he was not conceiving it as an escape from thrownness, since Heidegger just did not think of thrownness as something we can ever get beyond.

For Seigel, however, *Dasein*'s thrownness and dependency on *das Man* are merely occasions for rebellion; *Dasein* needs them "in order to experience its power to cast off its dependency on them, *creating a new mode of selfhood in which their manner of being themselves has no place*" (p. 579; added emphasis). In authenticity, Seigel writes, *Dasein*'s actions "express the understanding that, even inside given conditions, the true ground of its being is *no longer thrownness but its own self*" (p. 578; added emphasis). By the end of Heidegger's narrative, Seigel concludes, the self has "emerged *out of its original thrownness* into the authentic form of existence where its being is wholly its own" (p. 579; added emphasis).

To summarize, Heidegger sees thrownness as a necessary condition; Seigel sees it as a "necessary moment" (p. 593). Heidegger defines *Dasein*'s resoluteness as "taking over the thrownness of the self" (*Übernahme der Geworfenheit des Selbst*); Seigel claims that *Dasein*'s thrownness can be "cast off". The difference is dramatic. Seigel wants Heidegger to stand as a major representative for the immoderate school of philosophy that demands a starkly unrealistic choice between all-self or no-self. But this is to criticize Heidegger for a view he expressly denied.

This controversy reappears in the final chapter's assessment of Heidegger's successor, Jacques Derrida. Granted, Derrida went through many phases and his works are notoriously resistant to synopsis. Yet certain themes strike me as paradigmatic. Amongst them is a principled antipathy to binary oppositions—such as "inside" or "outside", "authentic" or "inauthentic," and "male" or "female"—which, Derrida believed, gain their authority by appealing to a special kind of containment or immediacy in meaning that language cannot achieve. For this kind of immediacy to obtain would require a metaphysical conception of thought as wholly "present"—available without distortion or omission—to the mind. But this is a requirement which Derrida—following Heidegger—saw as impossible to fulfill. Heidegger's assault on the metaphysics of presence therefore found a new and unexpected application in Derrida's assault on the metaphysics of language. But there was a crucial difference: Derrida wished to argue that philosophical dualisms never achieve metaphysical purity since they are always "contaminated" by the terms they oppose. We can therefore understand why

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Derrida could endorse neither Heidegger's revolutionary hopes for a closure to the era of metaphysics nor Heidegger's nostalgia for a deeper kind of truth wholly untroubled by the difficulties of the modern condition. In fact, the guiding insight of deconstruction is that no such closure is possible. Meaning is enabled only in language, yet language forbids meaning from achieving perfection.

The critique of closure is an important theme in Derrida's philosophy and (even if we share Seigel's reservations about the overall merits of deconstruction) one we must take care to acknowledge, especially if we are trying as intellectual historians to appreciate Derrida's place in the larger context of postwar French thought. First, it helps us to understand why Derrida always stood apart from the more admiring representatives of "French Heideggerianism," since he remained openly critical of Heidegger's invidious recourse to the myth of an uncorrupted—or "primordial"—sense of "Being". It may also lead us to wonder if Seigel can be right when he reproaches Derrida for appealing—however covertly—to a dualistic model of the self, when the drive to dispute any such dualism was arguably the central preoccupation of Derrida's philosophy. Most decisively, it may help us to understand what distinguished Derrida from the broader, contemporary school of so-called "post-structuralists" and why he typically dissented from their more dramatic reports about the end of the self.

Recall, for example, Derrida's public defense of "Différance," a paper widely seen as the *locus classicus* of deconstructive method.[2] Here Derrida introduced his term of art—"différance"—with the explanation that it would mark "the tomb of the proper".[3] In other words it would signal the death of metaphysical presence and, more narrowly, of Heideggerian authenticity (in French, *propriété*, or *le soi propre*, i.e. "the proper self"). "Différance", Derrida explained, was a "strategy without finality". It ran through all structures of meaning without ever appealing to "a transcendent truth" that might secure their metaphysical authority. Following these remarks, Derrida was asked about the apparent resemblance between his own efforts in phenomenology to overcome its latent metaphysical humanism and Michel Foucault's announcement in *Les Mots et les choses* in 1966 that history was nearing "the disappearance of man".[4] Lucien Goldmann, the Marxist sociologist of literature, faulted Derrida for helping to disseminate "the contemporary philosophy of the negation of the subject".[5] Derrida's response displays a characteristic hesitation: "I have never said that

2 Derrida, "La Différance". Séance du samedi 27 janvier 1968," *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 543 (1968), 73–120; hereafter *D*.

3 *D*, 4.

4 *D*, 105.

5 *D*, 110.

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différance would *express* our époque". He hastened to add, "I have never said 'there is not a subject' [*il n'y a pas de sujet*]".[6]

Derrida was indeed a critic of metaphysical humanism. But he never fell into the extremist variety of metaphysical anti-subjectivism that might prove vulnerable to Seigel's charge of inconsistency. Seigel also revisits Derrida's well-known remark in *Of Grammatology* (1967)—that textuality is deeper than the split between self and world such that "there is no outside-the-text". Seigel warns us that this pan-textualism risks "undoing" the reality of an author (p. 638). But this may be an overstatement. The notion that we cannot meaningfully refer to what is "outside" textual conditions is neither an imperialistic fantasy that all is literature nor a self-effacing retreat to the written book; it is a more or less logical correlative of the phenemenologists' theory of meaning, which demands that all description refer to what Merleau-Ponty called "the text of experience" (*ce texte d'expérience*). As Husserl once observed, phenomenology conceives of intentional activity as always within descriptive reach and so condemns any reference to an "outside" as strictly "nonsense".[7]

One may therefore ask whether it is fair to range Derrida's critique of metaphysical humanism alongside the more intrepid predictions concerning the "death of the author" (Barthes) or the "erasure of man" (Foucault). Derrida eschewed this utopian image of a world without subjects for the same reason he resisted the confidence of humanism itself: the subtle workings of *différance* complicate any simple appeals to an "outside" and any metaphysical closure to history. Seigel writes that Derrida's infrastructures of language "doom every attempt to establish stable subjectivity and selfhood" (p. 637). But while Derrida's critique of metaphysical foundationalism in language may inhibit a certain notion of selfhood as an ultimate or irrefragable source of meaning, we would be wrong to infer with Seigel that "the constitution of subjectivity through linguistic relations means that both stable selfhood and any coherent relationship between consciousness and objects in the world are illusions" (p. 631). The self was for Derrida a concept established internal to structures of language. But for that very reason it could not be dismissed.

Much depends, then, on just how much stability we believe the self requires and whether we see all challenges to that stability as dooming the self as an

6 *D*, 105; 113.

7 Quotations from M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 388, as quoted in Vincent Descombes, *Le Même et l'autre. Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002), 79; and Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 84; added emphasis.

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illusion. It seems right to say that Derrida conceived the self as one of those fixtures of our thinking that betray a metaphysical heritage. This is exactly why the self—in Derrida's characteristic formula—must remain always "in question". But it is not clear why an interest in questioning the stability of the self would necessarily commit Derrida to the view that the self enjoys no reality whatsoever. Derrida typically resisted such logic. He aimed to expand the scope of our reflectivity—to examine, not to extinguish, just those concepts that remain most consequential in our language. The fear that the self must be "stable" so as not to dissolve into pure "fluidity" seems largely an artifact of Seigel's own philosophical commitments.

This leads me to conclude that Seigel's way of carving up the self into three dimensions might not be so uncontroversial after all, since it prevents us from properly construing an idea which has enjoyed widespread appeal in recent Continental and Anglo-American thought. This is the idea of social ontology, i.e. the idea that private selfhood is conditional upon public language, such that relationality itself gives us what we need to be individuals. Speaking broadly, Habermas is a social ontologist. But so, too, were Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, and Foucault. (My colleague Professor Surkis makes a strong case in this forum for including Durkheim.) What unites this diverse group is their longing to move beyond the shopworn belief that reflectivity cannot be explained in social-discursive terms. The social ontologists were therefore a) proponents of a kind of philosophical externalism and, accordingly, b) skeptics regarding the claim that reflectivity should possess its very own dimension. But externalism neither dissolves one's selfhood nor impairs one's capacity for thinking. On the contrary; *pace* Seigel's warning that social ontologies promote self-dissolution, one could argue instead that anchoring the self in society makes the self more stable, not less so. (Freud, incidentally, was a social ontologist in just this sense, especially on the topic of psychic instability. For does psychoanalysis not teach us that proper socialization—the formation and dissolution of the Oedipal complex—is the absolute prerequisite to stable and successful individuality?) Moreover, an externalist can be an ardent believer in reflectivity. Social ontologists such as Habermas have accordingly taken the "post-metaphysical" turn, i.e. towards the view that to exercise one's very own powers of reflection is just to exploit a critical potential inherent in the common fabric of our language.

I am not saying the post-metaphysicians are beyond reproach. I am simply asking whether the noticeably *ahistorical* anatomy of the self which guides Seigel's narrative permits us to understand this most recent wave of intellectual history in a properly historical fashion. If not, perhaps this is because no one can ever remain purely an intellectual historian, since no one can describe ideas without lending them some sort of interpretative shape. The frameworks we use are never

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innocent. They are, ineluctably, vehicles for our convictions. Seigel too, is not merely documenting various ideas of the self; he is commending one of them to us as the one we should accept as true. If I have quarreled with aspects of his interpretation, this does nothing to subtract from my admiration for his achievements in a book that points in so very many directions and will continue both to instruct and to inspire not only me but, I am sure, all of us in intellectual history, for many years to come.

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