

A MOST PECULIAR SELF

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Draft only: please do not cite without permission.*Who is the Other?**Are all Muslims Terrorists?**Did Muslims kill US on 9-11?*

Who is “US”?

Social psychologist, Edward Sampson, delves into the Western celebration of the self in his book *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature*. He unmasks the technologies of power that construct the self as an atomistic bounded container, while instantiating domination through the attendant construction of “the other.” Our reified Western understanding of the atomistic self is accomplished in a kind of circular performativity where the category of the atomistic self is implicated in the production of systems of domination, as it is produced by dominating powers that draw fault lines between constructed binary positions. In this paper, I will investigate the production of self and other, as I critique the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize and mobilize. I will explore also the way that the production of self and other is mapped onto a human/nature binary resulting in the commodifying of nature. The way we depict the self is important—our perception conditions our capacity to well apprehend our situation, to honor the multiplicities of existence and to enact justice and peace.

On Sampson’s account, every construction has a dominant privileged group—the constructors—and its inferiorized others who are constructed.¹ Throughout Western history, privileged constructors mostly have been white, educated, heterosexual males of the dominating social class, while the inferiorized objects of construction have been what the dominant group is not: Women, non-Western people, people of color, people of subordinated social classes, people with diverse sexual orientations. The inferior position is cast as a lacking instrumental other, dispossessed of the qualities of the privileged position and produced to serve the needs and desires of the dominant constructors. Dependency on the other so constructed is denied, while the dominant constructors take on the mantle of possessive individualism—they are self-contained and bounded owners of their own capacities. This fictive construction of self/other has

¹ Sampson acknowledges that this useful suggestion “somewhat oversimplifies the complexities involved and makes it seem more conspiratorial than it usually is . . .” Edward E. Sampson, *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1993), 4.

led Sampson to describe the Western project as self-celebratory and monologic; it is a one way street that returns to its point of origin.²

The atomistic self and its normative recipe for domination rely on certain conceptual foundations prevalent in the West. We view the self as a coherent, integrated, singular entity whose clear cut boundaries (the body) define its limits and separate it from other similarly bounded containers. This self is a closed system, presuming no other formative utterances beyond itself. Its essential qualities are all housed within its perimeters; it owns its own capacities and abilities. What lies outside the self's boundaries is potentially threatening, and what lies within is worthy of protection. Relations between self and other are necessarily assumed as negative.³

Owing to this ubiquitous conceptual scheme, the dominant groups of the West claim a sense of themselves as independent agents with distinct boundaries which must be protected to ensure integrity and functionality. The self contained ideal is implicated, for example, in the history of the franchise in the United States. At first, only white male property owners whose livelihood was deemed as independent of the will of others had the right to vote. Later, when the franchise was awarded to African American men, and then to women, the debate focused on the cultural understanding of personhood—was the person seeking the franchise a possessive individual who owned her own capacities and self? In order to vote one needed to be free, that is, one needed to be independent of another's will and the owner of oneself.⁴

The consecration and naturalization of the atomistic self means the obliteration of the other. The other is not known on its own terms; but is rather, appropriated, captured and negated through hyper-separated binary positionings that create a sharp ontological break or radical discontinuity between a dominant position and another. Binaries are created by defining the privileged term as possessing particular attributes which the inferior opposite lacks. A female is not-male. Nature is not-human. The inferior opposite is a lack not defined in its own right. In the act of differentiating each term is solidified and consolidated. Yet, the production of the atomistic self is not simply accomplished through difference; it is accomplished by defining the dominant identity against or in opposition to a subordinated identity.⁵

The reductive accomplishment of the other through the self/other binary hinges on insensitivity to the other's needs, agency and prior claims. Any genuine standing in the world for the other is negated. The other becomes a political rather than a descriptive category, formed by multiple exclusions and denied dependency. Yet, the other is integral to the privileged identity. There is no master without a slave, no economic-political power without exploitation of others, no property without exclusion, no global war or terror without the Muslim other.⁶

As the construction of the atomistic self denies the other, so it also denies the in-group/out-group distinctions on which the Western individualistic view is based. The

² *Ibid.*, 3-6.

³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18, 31-32, 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5, 12-13.

Western cultural view is termed “egocentric,” meaning the social world is viewed as subservient to the individual. Society is designed to serve the interests of an idealized autonomous abstract individual living in, but free from, society. The “I” is independent, private and separate from others. “I” announces the privileging of self, as it neglects the necessarily embedded quality of living together. This Western view is marked by the exclusivity of the Western concept of self, and the role of power in sustaining the false notion that individuality is accorded to all.⁷

Extremely exclusive conceptions of the self mark the self as separate from in-group relationships. Pursuant to these conceptions, the essence of the self can be meaningfully abstracted from various relationships and in-group memberships.⁸ But, abstracting individuals from relationships overlooks two conditions that operate in highly individualistic cultures. First, atomistic individualism is reserved primarily for dominant groups. Individualism is implicitly founded on distinctions between dominant in-groups who are understood as self contained and out-groups who are not. Second, since the standards for determining the nature of personhood are established by the dominant group, their perspective becomes the normative standard, concealing its own particularity. The in-group/out-group distinction on which the concept of atomistic individuality is based is thus also concealed leading everyone to assume that individuality is a property of all persons rather than a property of the privileged dominant in-group/inferiorized out-group binary. The interests of the dominant group are served, their position sustained. This individualistic cultural view is not only self-celebratory, but actively represses difference and otherness not measured against the privileged term; the view is patently exploitive.⁹

Is global warming rhetoric leading to environmental terrorism?

Do US corporations have the right to pollute the entire planet?

Environmental philosopher Val Plumwood maps the drama of the master/constructor and his concocted others onto the binary of human-reason/nature while also mapping other aspects of life onto this dualistic form. She traces the deleterious effects of this mapping, showing how the human-reason nexus is particularly implicated in casting nature as an inferior other. The human-reason/nature dualism is a system of ideas that takes a radically separated reason to be the essential characteristic of humans and situates human life outside and above an inferiorized nature. Plumwood notes the polarizing aspects of this dualism, the way the binary position offers false choices and cuts sympathy and identification. The binary position leads to a misunderstanding of human relationships as well, as the self-made man is affirmed as a hyper-separated autonomous self whose illusion of self-containment is built on denying or backgrounding subordinated others. The joint product of coordinated work is often

⁷ *Ibid.*, 67-72.

⁸ In her book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological theory and women's development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), Carol Gilligan suggests that based upon extensive interviews of women seeking abortion information that women's voice of moral reasoning may emanate from a more socially embedded and interpersonally connected place than the separative male voice.

⁹ Edward E Sampson, *Celebrating the Other*, 72-74.

represented in terms of a hyperbolized independent agency which recognizes only one achiever. The binary framework naturalizes and justifies self-centered beliefs and the dispossession of others, as well as beliefs in the master's superiority.¹⁰

Plumwood characterizes the dominant Western culture as androcentric, Eurocentric, ethnocentric and anthropocentric. In historical terms it is reasoned centered where reason is treated as the characteristic which sums up and is common to the privileged side, and whose absence characterizes the other. The type of reason Plumwood finds troubling is a cultish form that elevates reason to an extreme supremacy contrasted from the sphere of nature and embodiment. The purely conceptual or mental is privileged over the corporeal. This centric and self-enclosed reasoning, which Plumwood calls "rationalism," denies its material base as an "externality" and fails to adapt to the larger ecological body. Rationalism promotes ideals of human culture and identity that are distant from and ruthless toward the sphere of nature. Non-human claims to the earth are minimized. Our real world interdependence is denied.¹¹

Reason is like this, Plumwood theorizes, because concepts of rationality have been corrupted by systems of power into hegemonic forms which naturalize and reinforce privilege. A hubristic sado-dispassionate form of reason is in charge; it is exclusionary in focus and acts for a narrow range of interests. The major decision roles in most polities go to those groups who profit most from the destructive processes that are threatening the biosphere. Rational hubris is part of a culture-wide blind spot associated with an anthropocentrism that fosters illusions of invincibility and hides our real danger.¹²

Pursuant to the hubristic form of reason, property is formed from the rational labors of white Europeans on the virgin earth. The heroic narrative of the modern economy is mapped onto the narrative of supreme reason. Now, the corporate warrior replaces the classical warrior. The market is portrayed as rational, and detached, an efficient mechanism free from irrational interference. All other aspects of life are subordinated to the corporate organization. The global market is a monological rationalist system whose extreme dominance over social life is the chief mark of neo-liberalism. Social and ecological embeddedness is stripped away. The business man considers costs and profits only from his standpoint. The rest of society and the earth are seen as unnecessary "externalities." Poor people and low consumption lifestyles are portrayed in negative terms. Rational competition is completely unrestrained by ethics which are conceived of as individual and private. Rationality is thus economic, egoistic and atomistic.¹³

How can we respond to the hegemonic and dominative stances of the atomistic self?

¹⁰ Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The ecological crisis of reason* (London: Routledge, 2002), 118.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹² *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17, 21-22.

Both Sampson and Plumwood propose a dialogic intervention in the economy of the atomistic self which is an economy of the same. Relying on four features of conversation—(1) conversation takes place between people, (2) conversations use a system of signs shared by the community, (3) conversations are addressed to a particular person(s) and (4) conversations encompass verbal, nonverbal, symbolic and written material—Sampson argues that people are joined in an intimate way, not easy to disentangle. Dialogism focused on the conversational quality of human nature leads to the illation that all that is central to human nature and human life is to be found in the processes that occur between people. Human freedom is not freedom from, but freedom for. Freedom is the right to collectively shape our common destiny, even as we recognize that we come to the table marked by power differentials. We are fundamentally relational beings, defined in and through social networks which constitute our identity and to which we are responsible.¹⁴

Similarly, Plumwood proposes a dialogical interspecies ethics and an ethics of materialist spirituality. Plumwood asks that we develop an environmental culture that values and fully acknowledges the non-human sphere and our dependency on it. Culture refers to and recognizes a multiplicity of standpoints and marks a contrast to top down strategies for ecological survival. Denaturalizing the otherness of the non-human, dealing with hyper-separation, avoiding unnecessary species ranking, developing a stance of openness rather than closure and making the human/other species distinction less central to ethics are integral to a dialogical interspecies ethics. Spirituality which honors the universe and that is sensitive to place, the spaces between places and nurturing relationships is also critical to honoring our interrelatedness.

ARE YOU NERVOUS WHEN YOU SEE PEOPLE IN MUSLIM DRESS?

CAN YOU IMAGINE A VENTURE REQUIRING TRUST OF ARABS THAT TURNS OUT WELL?

Neuroscience and Interpersonal Neurobiology¹⁵ support notions of a dynamic, dialogic and relational production of the human self as proposed by Sampson and Plumwood. This scientific work foregrounds the role of connections and connectors in productive processes. Neuroscience studies the way the brain¹⁶ functions through the energy consuming arousal and activation of neurons. The degree and localization of this arousal and activation within the brain—this flow of energy—directly creates our mental

¹⁴ Edward E. Sampson. *Celebrating the Other*, 4, 172, 97-98.

¹⁵ Dr. Daniel J. Siegel has pioneered the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology which he defines as a convergence of scientific perspectives that synthesize a wide range of scientific disciplines into an integrated developmental framework for understanding the mind, brain and human relationships. *See*, Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., and Mary Hartzel, M. Ed., *Parenting from the Inside Out: How A Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise children Who Thrive* (New York: Jeremy P. Thatcher/Penguin, 2004), 3.

¹⁶ The brain is composed of interconnected neurons distributed throughout the body. The connections are shaped by experience and genetics.

processes. But the mind involves more than the flow of energy alone, it also involves the flow of information. The mind can thus be defined as the relational and embodied process that regulates the flow of energy and information. The mind emerges at the interface of relational experience and the structure and function of the brain. Interactions with the environment directly shape the development of the brain's structure and function. Genes contain general organizational information, but experience determines which genes are expressed and how.¹⁷

At any given moment in time, the brain/mind creates cohesion within the various mental processes that define it through a "State of Mind." States of Mind have two functions: To coordinate activity in the moment, and to create a pattern of brain activity that can be replicated in the future. Replication of brain patterns is important because the stability of the brain/mind is achieved in movements toward maximizing complexity. But, complexity does not come from random activation. Rather, complexity is achieved by a balance between continuity and flexibility. Continuity refers to the strength of previously achieved States. It implies sameness, familiarity and predictability. Flexibility indicates the degree of sensitivity to environmental conditions, and involves the capacity for variability, novelty, and uncertainty. The ability of the brain/mind to produce new variation allows adaptation to the environment. Small inputs can cause large and unpredictable activations. Persons move between sameness and novelty; stability is achieved in flow.¹⁸

In addition to cohesion in the moment, the brain/mind creates a coherence, or continuity over time. Continuity in the flow of States across time is established in part by neural constraints imposed by the neural connections that have been already established by biology and experience. These neural constraints arise from the emergent and recursive properties of the brain/mind. States of Mind continually organize across time. Elements of a given State return to influence elements of newly emergent States, and repeated patterns may become ingrained. What fires together wires together; repeated States become traits. The brain/mind is dependent upon the induction of alteration or disequilibrium as it moves toward organization. This self organization is a dyadic interaction between people and places as the self is perpetually being created. The brain is thus a social organ. Mirror properties within the nervous system even allow the social brain to perceive the intentional actions of others while linking this perception to the priming of motor systems to engage in the same action.¹⁹

As relationship and other experiences are repeated, they cohere in self-States that internally organize as associations of attitudes, expectations, meanings and feelings. There is neither one fixed State of Mind nor one fixed self. The self is formed and reformed in the leaky and permeable iterations of neural substrates. The thoughts, feelings and images of the evolving self exist as patterns of information represented by patterns of neural structures and processes. These structures and processes are spread throughout the brain and the nervous system. Here, a "reflective self" (I am solving this

¹⁷ Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind: How Relationships And The Brain Interact To Shape Who We Are* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1999), 13-18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 210-212.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 220-228; Daniel J. Siegel, *The Mindful Brain: Reflection and Attunement in the Cultivation of Well-Being* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007), 347.

problem) likely arises in neural connections among the anterior cingulate cortex, the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. There, an “emotional self” (I am happy) emerges from the amygdale, hypothalamus, striatum and upper brain stem. Here, an “autobiographical self” incorporates some of the reflective self and some of the emotional self and provides the sense of an “I” with a unique past and future. There is also a nonverbal, underlying feeling of “I” as the “core self” which relies on subcortical and brainstem structures.²⁰

The feeling of the self as a subject arises in distinctions made between this body and that world. Thus, subjectivity is generated both in the brain and in ongoing interactions with world. The brain indexes across innumerable experiences to find common ground—the experiencing of experience in one particular body. The brain also indexes across moments of subjectivity to create an apparent subject. But there is no subject inherent in subjectivity. The apparently solid “I” is created from subsystems and sub-subsystems over the course of development with no fixed center. The idea that there is a subject of experience evolves from disparate moments of subjectivity. The self continues to change in relation to different conditions. As parts of the self arise and then give way to other parts, so do the momentary neural assemblies that enable them.²¹

What do notions of a dynamic and relational self portend?

Zygmunt Bauman describes these times as “liquid times.” We are witnessing interconnected departures marking the passage from solidity to liquidity: The divorce of power from politics, the withdrawal of communal and state sponsored networks of support, the disappearance of long-term thinking and planning and disproportionate responsibility shifted to individuals, the separation of capital from production.²² These shifting and volatile quandaries augur an unprecedented and uncertain time. The questions I have asked in this paper are drawn from the public arena, from the comments of Bill O’Reilly, Juan Williams, Brian Kilmeade, Marty Peretz. The questions arise in the context of domination and hyper-separated binaries, fear and uncertainty.

To reflect on the meaning of the human self is to accept the challenge of becoming creators of ourselves and of this world. Such reflections make us capable of overcoming the growing isolation imposed by neo-liberal economic structures and global war. These reflections may lead us, as well, to greater compassion as we consider our contingent production within the diverse and overlapping webs of life. Here, the human is a “becoming” rather than a self-contained “being.” Our becoming does not lead to a solidified identity or an isolated voice. We are multiplicities breaking in on the singular, an intricacy of points of view. The gift of the other is our selfhood—our constitutive development. Partial views and halting voices make new, thoughtful openings. Perhaps we will find difference that is not maintained as a system of binary

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 229; Rick Hanson, PhD, Rick Mendius, MD, *Buddha’s Brain: the practical neuroscience of happiness, love & Wisdom* (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), 205-210.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

²² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 5.

oppositions of race, class, gender, ethnicity—or as a phenomenon requiring domestication. Difference then may be used transgressively or subversely or deconstructively, even to denaturalize the aching “uninformativity” of Empire. The creative unfolding of relations, patterns and processes, not entities, portends interplay—shared responsibilities and strategic solidarities. Responsibility is not a matter of will, but the recognition that life is precarious. Our own vulnerability and relatedness is the entry point.

The Buddha offers guidance for this continuing journey of dynamic interdependence:

“Like a caring mother
Holding and guarding the life
Of her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Hold yourself and all beings.”