

The Myth of the “Authentic Self”

A critical look at the seductive myth that identity is fixed, discoverable, and pure.

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1. Executive Summary.

The “Authentic Self” is a framework as popular as it is misguided. It's a self-help mantra, a social media buzzword and a book title, but it's also a deeply flawed idea. It overlooks the complexity of human identity formation, the interplay between individual agency and social structures, and the psychological intricacies of how we come to perceive ourselves.

This article will delve into this “Authentic Self” model, offering a critical examination and a brief overview of contemporary philosophical, psychological, and neuroscience perspectives. By doing so, it aims to highlight the complexity of the concept of “Self” and the nuanced discussions required for a comprehensive understanding.

2. Introduction.

2.1 Definitions.

Within Western intellectual traditions, the concept of self has been defined in a multitude of ways. This diversity of definitions underscores the multifaceted and complex nature of the self, evident across both philosophical and psychological inquiries. Broadly, it can be characterized as the *“totality of the individual, consisting of all characteristic attributes, conscious and unconscious, mental and physical”*.¹ It's the subjective experience of being an individual, encompassing elements such as personal identity, a sense of continuity, and an internal perspective on the world.²

In many Eastern religions and traditions, and particularly in the Indian subcontinent, there is a clear distinguish between this “psychological” self and the “existential” self, a pure awareness, an experience of inner stillness and presence beyond mind and intellect (and usually accessible only through a form of meditation).³ Along the same lines, when discussing the self, some yogic lineages often use the term “intuition” to describe an experiential wisdom that arises when the mind becomes still.⁴ According to the Vedic traditions, for example, this state, characterized by a merging of the individual with universal consciousness, allows for the realization of one's inherent boundless nature.⁵ This is not the same concept of “intuition” that is used in everyday language.

¹ American Psychological Association, *“Dictionary of Psychology”*, 2025

² I will refrain in this article to discuss the variety of definitions of the Self, and what that entails, as this would be a stand-alone topic. For the purpose of discussing the “Authentic Self” I will use the summary, wide ranging, definition provided in this introduction.

³ To provide the reader with a minimum of context, it is important to understand that all of the modern Indian spiritual, philosophical, and ritual traditions ultimately derive from the Vedic scriptures. There are four most authoritative main texts (Veda) – written in Sanskrit starting from 1500 BC - that are considered śruti (revealed knowledge, i.e. divinely revealed to ancient sages through deep meditation). Each Veda is divided in 4 sections, Samhitas (Hymns), Brahmanas (Rituals), Aranyakas (Forest Texts) and Upanishads (Spiritual Knowledge). The latter particularly explore the nature of reality, consciousness, and self-inquiry. The Vedic teachings from these 4 original texts have been interpreted over the centuries by 6 classical schools of Indian philosophy, which provide different approaches to understanding of the reality and the self. The 6th school is the “Vedanta”, which based on Upanishads, but also on other Indian classical texts as the Bhagavad Gita, and is focused on spiritual knowledge. The Vedanta is considered highest philosophical system in the Vedic universe. Vedanta asserts that Brahman, the universal consciousness, is the only absolute reality. Everything else, including the material world, is impermanent (maya). In this context, while Vedanta provides a metaphysical framework for understanding the nature of reality, Yoga - *which has nothing to do with glorified stretching in lululemon leggings!* the word derives from the Sanskrit word “Yuj,” meaning “union”, referring to the union of individual consciousness with Brahman - offers practical disciplines to achieve that realization.

⁴ Sadhguru, *“Inner engineering : a Yogi's guide to joy”*, Random House, 2016; Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, *“Shiva Sutras”*, Art of Living, 2010

⁵ In the Vedic tradition this is usually referred to as “Vijnanamaya Kosha” the 4th layer of existence. Beyond this level there is only the Anandamaya Kosha, representing pure consciousness and self-realization. Different Eastern traditions, for example Buddhism, have vaguely similar concepts but certainly not identical and with different internal structures and intellectual representations.

Numerous contemporary self-help frameworks, extending beyond the New Age movement,⁶ exhibit a tendency to conflate such distinct concepts. This often involves an arbitrary selection and amalgamation of elements from diverse sources, resulting in conceptual hybrids that lack internal coherence and intellectual consistency. For the avoidance of doubt, in this article we will be discussing only the “psychological”, western self.

2.2 The aims of the article.

The two main aims of this article are to:

- 1) Offer a brief critique of the "Authentic Self" myth as propagated by a large section of the self-help industry, highlighting the limitations of this narrative;
- 2) Suggest a systematic introduction to the complexity of the concept of self, taking into account different established perspectives (philosophical, psychological, neuroscience). In particular, this article will focus on three distinct propositions:
 - a. The self is not real, but it is rather a construct of our mind;
 - b. This constructed self is dynamic, and it's neither static nor “Authentic”;
 - c. This constructed self is also “Ecological”,⁷ i.e. it is to be understood in the context of the environment in which it operates.

2.3 Expectation & Context.

Managing expectation and creating some context, I am not trying here to summarize in a few pages the history of thought on the subject from Aristotle to Sartre, which would of course be a rather arduous endeavor.⁸ My goal is to provide a 30,000ft overview, not to engage in either detailed analysis or comprehensive reviews, which is why the topics of innumerable books and scientific articles have been hastily summarized in a few sentences, and the bibliography is limited to the essential.

Moreover, my critique of the various "Authentic Self" frameworks should be understood solely within the context of this particular theoretical construct. It

⁶ The New Age movement, a diverse and eclectic spiritual paradigm that emerged in the late 20th century, synthesizes elements of mysticism, psychology, Eastern and Western philosophies, and esoteric traditions to facilitate personal transformation. While offering a framework for spiritual growth, New Age approaches often lack empirical validation, relying heavily on anecdotal evidence, confirmation bias, and pseudoscientific interpretations. This can lead to “spiritual bypassing,” where individuals avoid confronting real-world challenges by focusing solely on positive thinking. Furthermore, the commercialization of New Age practices, often presented as quick-fix solutions without rigorous verification, raises concerns about their efficacy and ethical implications.

⁷ This term – in its widest, more comprehensive form – was borrowed from the outstanding work of Gregory Bateson (for more details see 6.4)

⁸ More erudite and better educated philosophers have indeed attempted this bold enterprise. If you have to read a single book on the topic, there's probably nothing more comprehensive than Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, 1989. PS Not an easy read.

is not necessarily intended as a blanket dismissal of the overall validity of the work of the individuals who propose these frameworks.

Finally, as I am neither a philosopher nor a scientist, and trying to communicate to the widest possible audience, I have used a journalistic language. This, at times, will inevitably lack the precision and the nuances otherwise used in more academic settings. The errors are all mine.

Federico Malatesta
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3. The “Authentic Self” In Personal Development Literature.

The concept of the 'Authentic Self', widely explored within the new-age spiritual and self-help movements, with numerous variations,⁹ goes something like this:

The “Authentic Self” (good) is the inner essence of who we are. This essence, original and untainted, differs from the “Social Self” (bad), the identity that individuals construct based on societal expectations, cultural conditioning and past trauma. The latter self is concerned with fitting in, meeting norms, and conforming to rules, whilst the former represents the core of our being, our unique desires and passions. Only by rediscovering our “Authentic Self” we will be free to live our purpose and attain happiness.

Variation on the theme can be found in popular authors as Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson, Gary Zukav, Richard Rohr, Joe Dispenza, Stephen Joseph, Dr. Thema Bryant, Susan Reynolds, Don Miguel Ruiz, Joe Vitale and many, many others.

The definitions of “Authentic Self” created under the auspices of these frameworks have been extensively criticized. We summarize here the most relevant critiques. For the purpose of this article, in particular, we will focus on the challenges summarized in 3.5 below. However, it is worth noting that the list below is certainly not exhaustive.

3.1 Weak and Vague Theoretical Frameworks.

Instead of critically examining diverse viewpoints or providing evidence for their claims, the proponents of the “Authentic Self” models simply assert statements without providing any evidence whatsoever and disregard some 2500 years of philosophical, theological, medical, anthropological and psychological advancements.

In addition, they often repurpose established terms with altered meanings. This approach inevitably leads to confusion and misunderstanding, which is why these new-age frameworks have been largely ignored by social sciences and academia, as this article will show.

⁹ The New Age movement, a diverse and eclectic spiritual paradigm that emerged in the late 20th century, synthesizes elements of mysticism, psychology, Eastern and Western philosophies, and esoteric traditions to facilitate personal transformation. While offering a framework for spiritual growth, New Age approaches often lack empirical validation, relying heavily on anecdotal evidence, confirmation bias, and pseudoscientific interpretations. This can lead to “spiritual bypassing,” where individuals avoid confronting real-world challenges by focusing solely on positive thinking. Furthermore, the commercialization of New Age practices, often presented as quick-fix solutions without rigorous verification, raises concerns about their efficacy and ethical implications.

3.2 Magical Thinking.

Most of the frameworks also use extensive personal anecdotes to justify listening to a “inner voice” as a general solution to life’s problems. There are no attempts to employ the scientific method, at any stage. It is not surprising, as this is a common practice in what is defined as “Magical Thinking”, a concept deeply embedded in human cognition: the belief that one’s thoughts, words, or actions can influence events in ways that defy natural laws. This cognitive distortion is characterized by the conflation of correlation with causation, often manifesting in superstitions, rituals, or illogical connections between actions and outcomes. You can read more about Magical Thinking in a separate article coming out soon.

3.3 Intuition.

All of the Authentic Self models relay on a vaguely described “intuition” in a variety of ways.¹⁰ However, while intuition is a valuable tool in certain limited circumstances, it has many limitations. Whilst this is not a topic that I will discuss here at length, it is worth noticing that our intuitions are neither necessarily positive nor do they always add value. Some intuitions can indeed be shaped by unconscious biases, past trauma, or unexamined assumptions. Studies have shown that intuition is shaped by cognitive heuristics rather than direct access to an “inner truth”. This means that blindly trusting one’s inner voice can sometimes – if not often - lead to misguided choices.¹¹

3.4 A Linear Life:

Many self-help authors stress the role of a journey of confusion and despair that individuals must navigate as they work to reclaim their “Authentic Self”. This journey through darkness is portrayed as a necessary phase of personal growth, where old identities and attachments fall away to make space for the emergence (or re-discovery) of a more authentic self. But life is much more complicated than that.

The idea that individuals must endure a period of suffering before emerging into the light risks oversimplifying the complexity of personal growth, which varies considerably case by case and is almost always cyclical and ongoing. Life rarely follows a clean, linear path from confusion to clarity, and the pressure to reach an ultimate state of self-realization often create unrealistic expectations, as we will discuss in Chapter 9.

3.5 Implicit Essentialist Underpinning

Most “Authentic Self” frameworks are also implicitly created with an “essentialist” pivot, i.e. they imply that the “Authentic Self” is real, innate, that it is a pre-existing essence (we are born with it) and that it is both “pure” and “good”. All of these assumptions are today considered flawed. This article aims to show how there is an exceedingly large body of work that challenge the ideas that:

1. the self is real (chapter 5)
2. the self is both static and internally focused (chapter 6)
3. the self operates solely at a conscious level (chapter 7)
4. the self is inherently “good” (chapter 8)
5. framing the self as “Authentic” is always helpful (chapter 9);

¹⁰ It is worth reminding here that we are talking about a “western” definition of intuition, as introduced in 2.3

¹¹ Kahneman, D. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

3.6 Prominent authors with hybrid models

In the self-help & therapeutic world, there are also a number of established authors that, without fully subscribing to this extreme interpretation of the “Authentic Self”, use some of its essential elements. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will put the spotlight here on three well-known practitioners in these fields as illustrative examples:

- 3.6.1 Martha Beck is a prominent life coach and author. She argues that individuals are born with an “Essential-Self” that gets obscured over time by social conditioning, cultural expectations and the desire to please others.¹² Beck advises her readers to reconnect with this essential self by peeling back the layers of false personas created through societal influence and emotional trauma through the process of introspection and self-awareness. Beck’s teachings, like many in the self-help realm, emphasize that living authentically will lead to greater happiness, fulfillment, and success. She underscores the importance of listening to one’s inner voice, trusting intuition, and pursuing a life that aligns with one’s personal truth. So, on one side Beck talks about an evolving awareness of the self and describes herself *“firmly in the camp of narrative therapists”*,¹³ but on the other side she structures a very simplistic and dualistic model with a “social self” (bad) and the “essential self” (good), where the latter is described as:

*“formed before you were born, and it will remain until you’ve shuffled off your mortal coil. It’s the personality you got from your genes: your characteristic desires, preferences, emotional reactions, and involuntary physiological responses, bound together by an overall sense of identity.”*¹⁴

Her model takes some individual elements from the broader humanistic psychology tradition popularized by figures like Carl Rogers (see 4.9 and 6.2.7), who argued for the importance of congruence between one’s “true self” and outward behavior. However, she uses an extreme reductionist approach and leaves behind most of the nuances present in the humanistic school, in particular around the inherent drive toward “self-actualization” through new experiences.¹⁵ What is left - self-discovery as a process of “returning” rather of “developing” - with a sprinkle of magical thinking and excessive focus on individual intuition for good measure, is not too dissimilar from the “Authentic Self” framework and new age literature.

¹² Beck, M. *“Finding Your Own North Star: Claiming the Life You Were Meant to Live”*, Three Rivers Press, 2001.

¹³ Beck, *ibid*, p.87

¹⁴ Beck, *ibid*, p.13. Similar passages are found in the same book, for example *“The Essential Self is the part of you that is untouched by socialization, fear, or trauma. It knows the truth of who you are”*, (p.43) and *“Babies show up knowing the truth”* (p 71).

¹⁵ See 4.9 and 6.2.6

3.6.2 Eckhart Tolle, another influential figure in the self-help world, takes a slightly different but even more problematic approach to the “Authentic Self”. In his best-selling books, Tolle advocates for individuals to transcend the “egoic mind” and connect with their “true essence”.¹⁶ According to him, this authentic self is found by transcending the ego and living in the present moment. He believes that the ego – described by him as the part of the mind that is attached to past and future, identity, and material desires - creates a “false” self. He advises individuals to disengage from “egoic” thinking to discover their true self, which he associates with a state of deep spiritual presence.

However, Tolle’s explanation of ego lacks the systematic depth found in the Eastern traditions he refers to. He seems perennially confused by the two separate concepts of the self - discussed above - and he continuously mix random discrete elements of different traditions with each passage.

Just to highlight one example, he talks about the dissolution of the ego (self) lifting some Buddhist elements, but without discussing the meditative frameworks (Vipassana, Zen, Madhyamaka philosophy) that deeply explore this idea. Then he contraposes this ego to a “presence” as a final goal. But this is something that could be vaguely connected to the Vedanta tradition rather than to Buddhism, which instead teaches the realization of impermanence, dependent origination, and wisdom (Prajna), none of which play a central role in Tolle’s framework. In summary, Tolle borrows from Eastern traditions with a dash of Christianity and psychoanalysis here and there and then conflates everything into a vague, universalist self-help model that lacks the discipline, rigor, and structure.¹⁷

3.6.3 The idea a unifying, positive and authentic self has also been partly borrowed by the ever more popular Internal Family System (IFS) Therapy,¹⁸ a theory of mind organization developed in the 1990s by Richard Schwartz.¹⁹ This theory divides the mind in clearly defined parts, each with distinctly delineated actors.²⁰ Central to this model is the concept of the “Self,” not as an identity but as a positive core essence of an individual, embodying “the eight Cs of Self-leadership—calmness,

¹⁶ Tolle, *“The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment”*, New World Library, 1997.

¹⁷ Tolle is especially notorious for borrowing terms like “ego” and “awareness” and to change and dilute their meaning making them unrecognizable to any social scientist. For example, at times, he suggests that the ego is simply a collection of thoughts and attachments. At other times, he implies that the ego is a false identity that must be transcended, without ever clarifying what remains after the ego dissolves, nor does he define the nature of the self beyond psychological relief.

¹⁸ It’s important to underline here how the comments on Self model for the IFS therapy has no bearing on the ultimate efficacy of such therapy, which is beyond the scope of this article. The jury is still out on that, both in absolute terms and in relation to other therapies: Brownstone, L.A., Hunsicker M.J., Greene A.K., *“Internal Family Systems: Exploring Its Problematic Popularity”*, Society for the Advancement of Psychotherapy, 2024. It is however fair to say that IFS is a recognized therapy which has some scientific underpinnings and should not be which be compared with new-age woo-woo practices.

¹⁹ Schwartz, R.C., Sweezy, M., *“Internal Family Systems Therapy”*, 2nd edition, The Guilford Press, 2019

²⁰ According to IFS, there are 3 separate submodalities or “parts” of the mind, represented by 3 separate actors: the Exiles, symbolic of our traumatic experiences, the Firefighters, who jump into action when the Exiles start demanding our attention and result in inappropriate/damaging behaviors, and the Managers, who want to control everything, trying to prevent the Exiles from flooding our conscious awareness with their traumatic experiences.

clarity, curiosity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness”.²¹ According to Schwartz *“this self is in everybody, can’t be damaged and knows how to heal”*.²² As with Beck, the “Authentic Self” model is not that far away.

In addition, in his books, Schwartz introduces the IFS’s model in a manner that resembles the approaches used by new age practitioners, writing that he had this intuition after exploring *“the writings of some of these esoteric schools, including the Mahayana school (Buddhism) and Sufism (Islam)”*. No further details provided.

As he humbly narrates:

*“(I) had accidentally come upon a simple way to help people access the state of consciousness that those traditions sought through meditation and other techniques. I had stumbled onto the secret of the gods.”*²³

While the author may dismiss millennia of intellectual progress,²⁴ his work explicitly draws heavily upon existing psychological frameworks, especially from Family Systems Therapy, but also from Psychodynamic Therapy, and Gestalt Therapy and all the way to Jung’s and Freud’s theories of the unconscious. Borrowing from previous frameworks and research is not only acceptable, but also essential within any field of study. However, simply integrating concepts like “intuition” and “mindfulness” into established therapeutic practices, hardly qualify as *“secrets of the gods”*.²⁵ Instead, it mirrors Tolle’s approach, cherry-picking elements from Eastern traditions while disregarding their integral context.²⁶

²¹ Schwartz, R.C., *Introduction to Internal Family Systems*, 2nd edition, p.30 Sounds True Adult, 2023

²² Being Well with Forrest Hanson, June 21st 2021;

²³ Schwartz, R.C., *ibid*, p.25

²⁴ Schwartz manages to obliterate Western traditions in one page. After disposing of both St. Augustine - with whom he has actually much more in common than he realizes, see 4.3-4.5 below - and Darwin in a couple of paragraphs, he asks himself: *“Is it possible that we are born with such qualities and don’t need to obtain them from our environments? How could it be that prominent Western psychologies, philosophies, and religions have so thoroughly underestimated human nature?”*. Schwartz, R.C., *ibid*, p.26

²⁵ We repeat here the point made above, introducing individual, ad-hoc elements of Eastern religions and traditions into western constructs does not make the latter more comprehensive and exoteric, but rather simply incongruent.

²⁶ Schwartz might have “explored” the esoteric eastern religions, but his interpretation seems to have missed their depth and complexity. Talking about the positive, innate, authentic self, he makes a potpourri of different traditions in one paragraph: *“The Quakers call it the Inner Light. Buddhists call it rigpa, or Buddha Nature. Hindus call it atman, or the Self. The fourteenth-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart called it the God seed. For Sufis, it’s the Beloved—the God within”*. From Schwartz, R.C., *ibid*, p.26. However, these concepts that have a very specific meanings in their own particular context, and that cannot be extrapolated and equalized. As an example, the concept of “Rigpa” does not translate with what we usually refer to as “awareness” in everyday language and it has to be interpreted in the context of Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism - not just any “Buddhism” - where it applies universally and not only to the human mind. Moreover, it is very different from the idea of “Atman” in Hinduism, which is not only inseparable from transcending the transient nature of the material world, but has also very different interpretations across various schools of Hindu philosophy. Finally, the concept of the “Beloved” in the Sufi tradition resembles neither of the previous ones, as it hinges on a journey of reunion with an individual Creator.

4 The Origins Of The “Authentic Self” Idea.

Prior to further analysis, a historical examination is necessary to understand the emergence and subsequent development of the “Authentic Self” concept, culminating in its current manifestation within new age paradigms.

4.1 The ancient social aspect of the Self.

Historically, human identity has always been tied to social relationships rather than to the self. In prehistoric times, survival depended on the ability of individuals to integrate into groups. The tribe provided security, social structure, and a shared identity. Anthropological studies of hunter-gatherer societies show that people were deeply embedded in kinship networks, and identity was defined in terms of familial roles, tribal affiliation, and social obligations.²⁷ Individual identity was inseparable from the group, and personal worth was determined by one's contributions to the collective.

4.1.1 The Self in Classical Greece.

As human societies evolved into more complex agricultural and then urban civilizations, the development of formalized social roles and class systems further shaped identity. In ancient Greece, for example, citizenship, occupation, and familial ties were the primary determinants of one's social identity. The Greeks placed great emphasis on the polis (city-state) identity, where a person's sense of self was intertwined with their civic duties and relationships within the community. In Athens, participation in the Ecclesia (the political assembly) was both a right and a duty for citizens, and those who refrained from public affairs were often viewed with disdain. Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, also discussed identity in relational terms, suggesting that humans are naturally social creatures and that a person's virtue is realized through relationships within society:

*“a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless is either low in the scale of humanity or above it (like the clanless, lawless, hearthless” man reviled by Homer, for one by nature unsocial is also ‘a lover of war’ inasmuch as he is solitary)”*²⁸

Aristotle reinforces this point when he notes that even gods are not entirely happy in isolation. He writes:

*“For he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god.”*²⁹

²⁷ Lee, R.B., DeVore, I. *“Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers: Studies of the !Kung San and Their Neighbors”*, Harvard University Press, 1976.

²⁸ Aristotle, *“Politics”*, Book I, 1253a.

²⁹ Ibid. Book I, 1253a, 27–9

This idea of the individual part of a larger entity has to be understood in the wider context of the Greek *Weltanschauung*,³⁰ centered on the premises of an immutable and cyclical nature and on the mortality of men.³¹ The Greeks conceive nature as that immutable background that no man or God made. Nature is the immutable, it is the eternal, it has always been, it will always be.³² We must look at nature to capture its constants, its rule. We must build a city following its logic. We must live life according to its principles. Nature is this immobile dimension where all living beings - whether plants, animals or men - are born, grow, generate, die.³³ There is no privilege for man, who is not at the pinnacle of creation. Indeed, the common words used by the Greeks to indicate men are translated with "mortal".³⁴

4.1.2 "Know thyself".

Socrates' "*Know thyself!*" encouraged introspection, suggesting that true wisdom came from within and that living authentically involved aligning one's life with inner virtue. Plato expanded on this, advocating for the existence of a true self separated from the external world, comprised of ideal forms that exist beyond material reality. However, the self of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle was not the "Authentic Self" we are discussing here. Instead, it was about understanding one's role in relation to both "virtue" and "reason". Aristotle's idea of the "eudaimonic" life, or living according to one's true nature, was less focused on transcendent ideals and more on fulfilling one's potential through virtue, reason, and social participation. For Aristotle, living authentically meant achieving balance and excellence, not retreating from society but, as we have seen, engaging with it in a virtuous manner. And even for the Stoics, living in accordance with nature and reason would lead to a harmonious life. This did not translate into uncovering a hidden self - but in living in accordance with universal principles.

³⁰ It can be summarily translated as "comprehensive worldview" or "philosophy of life"

³¹ We are using here a terminology that tries to match the original, so "men" here has to be interpreted as "mankind".

³² The idea of life & time as cyclical and deeply connected to nature's rhythms- such as the changing of the seasons, the migration of animals, and the life cycles of plants - is also presents in many indigenous cultures, from the North American First Nations to the Masai in East Africa and the Ainu in Japan. These recurring patterns are seen as part of a greater cosmic order that humans must align themselves with to live in harmony with the world around them. It is worth noticing that there are often significant differences on the interpretation of the afterlife at death in the different native cultures and traditions, which in the Greek world was the end of the journey.

³³ Galimberti U., "*La casa di Psiche. Dalla psicoanalisi alla pratica filosofica*", Giangiaco Feltrinelli Editore Milano, 2005

³⁴ βροτός (brotos), θνητός (thnētos)

4.2 The Advent of Christianity.

Christianity's rise in the 1st century AC brought with it a radically different way of understanding both nature and the self, which is relevant to understand the idea of "Authentic Self".

Christianity placed the individual in direct relationship with God - individuals were "*imago Dei*" (in the image of God) - and carrying an eternal soul capable of salvation or damnation. Individuals were encouraged to see themselves as unique souls, each with an intrinsic worth and a destiny shaped by their moral choices and by their faith. No longer merely a cog within a broader social order, the self in Christian theology is reimagined as an inward entity—defined by its alignment with the divine rather than its role in the collective. This special relationship allows humans to claim a role in creation, which mirrors God's sovereignty.³⁵ The primary biblical text regarding dominion is Genesis 1:26-28:

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'"

This passage, often referred to as the "dominion mandate," frames humanity's relationship to the natural world as one of authority.³⁶

4.3 St. Augustin.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 AC) played a crucial role in synthesizing Christian theology. He emphasized human uniqueness and the authority of humans over nature and interpreted dominion as part of the natural order, wherein humans, as rational beings, are superior to animals and plants, tying this to the biblical mandate in Genesis (see above 4.2).

Augustine framed this dominion over nature both as part of God's design for the natural order and to the role of reason, claiming that humans' rational faculties distinguish them from animals, thus granting them a unique position to rule over nature.

4.4 The original "Authentic Self".

A direct consequence of Augustine's belief that true human identity is found in the soul's pursuit of God intentions, is his articulation of the dualism of

³⁵ The word in the Hebrew Bible, was *radah*, which carries the connotation of rulership or authority over something, and it is translated as "dominion" in the King James Version;

³⁶ It has been argued that this text has to be interpreted in the context of divine kingship. God's rule, as depicted in other parts of the Bible, which is often characterized by care, justice, and stewardship, rather than exploitation or abuse (Psalms 72, 145). The Bible, especially in later texts, for example Psalm 8, indeed emphasizes the need for care and wisdom in exercising dominion. The issue with this interpretation is that the concepts of "stewardship" and "responsibility" are not universal. What is stewardship for one might not be for another. This leaves the entities in charge – in this specific case, humans - a very large scope to define the criteria to apply.

body and soul.³⁷ Augustine viewed the soul as the higher, immaterial part of human existence that seeks God, while the body is associated with the material world and is prone to sin and temptation.³⁸

Augustine's reflections on the soul and the self reveal a preoccupation with the notion of an inner, authentic self that is intimately connected to one's relationship with God.³⁹ For Augustine, authenticity is not about individual autonomy in the modern sense, but rather about aligning oneself with God's will and recognizing one's true nature as a creation of God. In Augustine's view, this self is rooted in divine truth, and only through God can one come to know oneself fully. This deeply introspective perspective on human existence, which focuses on the inner self as the seat of both sin and redemption, laid the foundation of philosophical inquiries into the nature of the Self for centuries to come.

4.5 The Self and the impact of Christian theology in the Western World.

Augustine's Christian theology transformed Western understanding of time from cyclical to linear, introducing the three-stage model of past-present-future. The past is negative (sin), the present is about redemption and the future is positive (salvation). At the end of life, we don't have the end of things, as in Greek philosophy, but a rebirth. This framework has had the most profound influence on Western culture, extending beyond religion, and it remained unchallenged until Nietzsche's declaration of "*God is dead*", when philosophy began to re-examine this dogma.⁴⁰

As a result, Science is profoundly Christian, because the past is ignorance, the present is research, the future is progress. Marx is profoundly Christian because the past is social injustice, the present explodes the contradictions of capitalism, the future is justice on earth. Even Freud's theory of neurosis and trauma reflects this Christian framework, placing the past as a source of negative experiences, the present as a time for analysis, and the future as a path to healing. Notwithstanding Schwartz's assertions discussed in 3.1, even the IFS Therapy framework falls well within this Augustinian construct. Regarding the myth of the Authentic Self discussed in this article, this Christian framework persists: the past is seen as the corrupted social self, the present as a time for shedding external influences, and the future as a return to the "Authentic Self."

³⁷ This dualism is partly based on Platonic and neo platonic concepts.

³⁸ Augustine of Hippo, "*Confessions*", (397 AD), Penguin Classics, 1961.

³⁹ Augustine of Hippo, "*On the Trinity*", Catholic University of America Press, 1963

⁴⁰ With "God is dead" (*The Gay Science*, 1882 and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 1883), Nietzsche was not opinionating on the existence of God. He was rather pointing out that at the end of the XIX century God was no longer a critical element necessary and sufficient to explain the contemporary world. It was a profound commentary on the cultural, moral, and existential consequences of modernity and secularization. The "death of God" symbolized the collapse of traditional religious values and the realization that these values no longer held sway over modern humanity. The moral and philosophical frameworks derived from religion were no longer credible, creating what Nietzsche called a "nihilistic" situation, where life appears meaningless, and there is no inherent purpose or moral compass. As discussed in 6.2.2, Nietzsche viewed it as an opportunity for humanity to transcend reliance on religious or external authorities for meaning. He believed that individuals must create their own values and purpose.

4.6 Descartes and the Rational Self.

Although René Descartes did not explicitly cite Augustine as a major influence, the thematic parallels between their views on the mind-body distinction are unmistakable.⁴¹ With “*Cogito, ergo sum*” (“*I think, therefore I am*”), the 17th-century French philosopher introduced a new way of understanding the self that centered on the role of rationality. For Descartes, the mind was the true essence of the self, as opposed to the body, which was subject to physical laws and ultimately unreliable as a source of truth.⁴² Descartes believed that individuals could discover truths about the self and the world through reason and introspection, without necessarily relying on external authorities.

4.7 The Dynamic Self in the Enlightenment.

Descartes' emphasis on reason and introspection established the self as a site of certainty, grounding knowledge in the first-person perspective of the thinking subject, which is evident today both in the idea of an “Authentic Self” and in the framework - if one can call it that way - of Magical Thinking.⁴³ His idea of the self as fundamentally rational and distinct from the body influenced subsequent philosophical developments, particularly with John Locke and Immanuel Kant. However, both Locke and Kant viewed the self as neither static nor “Authentic”, but Dynamic.⁴⁴

4.8 Rousseau and the Corruption of the Self by Society

The notion that society acts as a corrupting force upon the (authentic) self, in a form recognizable within contemporary debates, found its most influential early expression in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He argued that humans are born inherently good and that it is civilization, with its artificial constraints and inequality, unnatural hierarchies and norms (laws and customs), that leads to the moral degradation of individuals.⁴⁵

Rousseau's notion of the “noble savage” encapsulates the idea that human beings, in their natural state, are free from vice. This romanticization of the individual's natural state has deeply influenced modern self-help movements, many of which encourage individuals to look inward to rediscover their true, authentic selves, which have been buried under societal pressures. Indeed, the idea that one's true self is good, unspoiled, and genuine persists strongly in modern self-help literature, often detached from its complex philosophical origins.

⁴¹ In particular, Augustine's *Confessions* contains passages that anticipate Descartes' cogito argument. Augustine reflects on the certainty of his own existence as a thinking, doubting being, even in the face of uncertainty about the external world.

⁴² Descartes, R., “*Meditations on First Philosophy*” (1641). Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁴³ Today many new-age practitioners unknowingly use a simplified Cartesian model when they introduce “thought-only” processes and magical thinking models.

⁴⁴ See 6.2.1

⁴⁵ More on this in 8.5

4.9 Carl Rogers

In the XX century, the psychological theory which is closest to the current new-age interpretation was probably Carl Rogers'. According to Rogers, individuals possess two key dimensions of the self: the "real" self - which represents a person's true nature, their inner feelings, desires, and experiences - and the "ideal" self, which consists of a person's aspirations and the traits they wish to embody, often shaped by societal expectations and conditions of worth imposed by others.⁴⁶

Rogers viewed the "real" self as fundamentally positive, emphasizing that individuals possess a biological drive toward growth, fulfillment, and the realization of their true potential (actualizing tendency). However, psychological distress arises when there is a large gap ("incongruence") between this real self and the ideal self. The more incongruent these two selves become, the greater the likelihood of internal conflict, leading to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety.

⁴⁶ Rogers, C. *"On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy"*. Houghton Mifflin, 1961

5. The Illusion Of The Self.

The most fundamental critique to the “Authentic Self” concept concerns the actual existence of what we consider a unitary, permanent self. In other words, is the self real? Or is it an illusion created in our mind?

5.1 The Buddhist View: The Self as Illusory.

One of the earliest philosophical traditions to question the reality of the self is Buddhism. In Buddhist philosophy, the doctrine of “Anatta” (“non-self” in Pali),⁴⁷ rejects the notion of a permanent, unchanging self. According to this view, what we typically think of as “the Self” is merely a collection of ever-changing mental and physical components known as the “five aggregates” (*form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness*). These aggregates are in a constant state of flux, and there is no enduring entity that persists over time.

According to the earliest Buddhist scriptures, including the “Dhammapada”,⁴⁸ the belief in a fixed, independent self is a form of ignorance that leads to suffering:

*“All conditioned things are impermanent—when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering”.*⁴⁹

By clinging to the false belief in a permanent self, individuals subject themselves to the suffering that arises from attachment to an illusion. Buddhist teachings encourage the realization that the self is a mental construct, and that recognizing the impermanence of all things, including the self, can lead to spiritual liberation.

5.2 David Hume: The Self as a Bundle of Perceptions.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume offered a strikingly similar critique of the self in the 18th century,⁵⁰ arguing that there is no empirical basis for the idea of a permanent self. He wrote:

*“when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.”*⁵¹

⁴⁷ Pali is an ancient liturgical language related to Sanskrit. It is closely associated with the early scriptures of Theravāda Buddhism and is most famous for being the language of the Tipitaka (also known as the Pāli Canon), the earliest collection of Buddhist teachings.

⁴⁸ The Dhammapada is a collection of sayings of the Buddha in verse form and is one of the most widely read and revered texts in the Theravāda Buddhist Canon, the oldest surviving Buddhist school. It is regarded as the authoritative scripture in Theravāda countries like Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

⁴⁹ Dhammapada (trans. Thomas Byrom), Shambhala Publications, 1976, verse 277.

⁵⁰ Schwartz might have missed this in his review of Western thought.

⁵¹ Hume, D. “A Treatise of Human Nature”, 1739, “SECT. VI. OF PERSONAL IDENTITY”

For Hume, the self is nothing more than a "*bundle of perceptions*" that arise and pass away. He denied the existence of an original, continuous, unified self, suggesting instead that what we call the self is a collection of discrete sensory experiences and mental states. These experiences are constantly in flux, and there is no stable entity that underlies them. For Hume the self is an illusion created by the mind's tendency to impose coherence on a series of disconnected experiences.

5.3 The Narrative Self: A Story We Tell Ourselves.

The idea that the self is a construct has been explored through various theories of self-concept and identity in the 2nd half of the XX century in both psychology and philosophy. Several of these theories are briefly revisited in Chapters 6 and 7. Among them, one framework warrants particular attention for its conceptual richness and explanatory power: the model of the "Narrative Self".⁵² Although humans have long used narratives to make sense of their lives, the formal exploration of the self as a narrative construct gained prominence only recently. According to this framework, the self is not a real entity but the collection of stories we tell ourselves to create a sense of continuity and coherence in our lives. In other words, we create our identity by constructing life stories that provide collective meaning to our experiences.

This narrative identity is constantly evolving as we reinterpret our past and anticipate our future, further reinforcing the idea that the self is a constructed, rather than an inherent, entity:

"We are, then, composed of a narrative identity, which arises in the dialectic of selfhood and sameness".⁵³

The self here becomes a useful fiction, a narrative that helps us organize our experiences and make sense of the world.⁵⁴ The brain constructs a sense of self by piecing together memories, thoughts, and experiences into a coherent story.

"Our identities are the stories we tell about ourselves. This identity is a composite set of beliefs about what we can and can't do, what we will and won't do. One of the strongest forces of our psyches is that we remain consistent with that self-definition. We each have a model of how we get our needs met, and how we feel life should be. This personal blueprint -our story - governs how we perceive and process things, and the meanings we attach to

⁵² Full disclosure here, this is one of the main frameworks I employ for my Transformational, Executive and Equine Coaching.

⁵³ Ricoeur, Paul, "*Oneself as Another*", University of Chicago Press, 1992. Ricoeur distinguishes between two aspects of identity: 1. Selfhood (Ipsé): the evolving, reflexive sense of self, which represents how we change over time and includes our capacity for growth, decision-making, and transformation (i.e. I can change my beliefs over time but still feel like "myself") and 2. Sameness (Idem), the continuity and stability of identity, which is what remains unchanged over time (e.g., my name, physical characteristics, personal memories). For Ricoeur Identity is formed through the interplay of change (Ipsé) and continuity (Idem). It is not given once and for all - it is reinterpreted and reconstructed over time. The role of our narrative helps us integrate new experiences while maintaining a sense of who we are. See also Ricoeur, Paul, "*Time and Narrative*", University of Chicago Press, 1983.

⁵⁴ McAdams, D. P. "*The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live*", Oxford University Press, 2013

whatever happens to us. When we encounter something that doesn't fit our story of how we feel life should be, we have to change either the blueprint or our story".⁵⁵

Narrative is therefore not just a way to convey information, but a central structure through which people interpret their experiences and construct the self.⁵⁶ This narrative self gives us a sense of personal identity and continuity over time, but it is ultimately a slight of hand of the mind, a center of narrative gravity rather than an objective reality. *"Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don't spin them; they spin us".⁵⁷*

5.4 Neuroscience and the Illusion of Self.

Recent advances in neuroscience seem to confirm the validity of this narrative construct. Studies of brain function suggest that there is no single area of the brain responsible for the self, but rather, that the experience of selfhood emerges from the interaction of multiple neural processes.

Neuroscientists have argued that the brain constructs a model of the self to navigate the world. This model feels real and continuous, but it is just a representation, not a real entity. As one neuroscientist puts it: *"You do not see through the self-model; you see with it".⁵⁸*

This view aligns not only with the "Narrative Self" discussed above (5.3), but also with a substantial body of research that suggest that the self is not a stable, unified entity but a dynamic process that emerges from the brain's attempt to integrate sensory information, emotions, and thoughts.⁵⁹

5.5. Consciousness, the Default Mode Network and the Emergence of the Self.

Central to understanding how the "Narrative Self" is constructed, is the relationship between "Consciousness" and the self. Consciousness is also understood as an emergent property of the brain's complex activity and can be succinctly described as the state of being aware of oneself and the environment.⁶⁰ In the interpretation of modern consciousness theories, consciousness arises when information is transmitted across multiple brain regions, integrating various inputs and cognitive processes. The self, within this framework, is seen as a subset of the conscious experience, one that

⁵⁵ Krueger, D., *"Engaging the Ineffable"*, Paragon House, 2019

⁵⁶ Bruner, J., *"Acts of Meaning"*, Harvard University Press, 1990

⁵⁷ Dennett D., *"Consciousness Explained"*, Little, Brown and Company, 1991

⁵⁸ Metzinger, T., *"Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity"*, MIT Press, 2003 and *"The Ego Tunnel"*, Basic Books, 2010.

⁵⁹ There is an extensive bibliography on the subject, including: Damasio, Antonio (1999). *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. Harcourt Brace.; Gallagher, Shaun (2005). *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford University Press; Varela, Francisco J., Thompson, Evan, & Rosch, Eleanor (1991). *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. MIT Press; Kircher, Tilo, & David, Anthony (Eds.) (2003). *The Self in Neuroscience and Psychiatry*. Cambridge University Press, Seth, Anil K. (2013). Interoceptive inference, emotion, and the embodied self. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 17(11), 565-573.; Northoff, Georg, & Bermpohl, Felix (2004). Cortical midline structures and the self. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 8(3), p.102-107;

⁶⁰ As with the definition of the concept of self, the definition of the concept of "consciousness" is a topic of its own right, with a complex and contentious history, and it is outside the scope of this article.

emerges as the brain synthesizes sensory inputs and memories in a way that forms a coherent narrative.⁶¹

Another important theory supporting this view is rooted in the “Default Mode Network” (DMN), a system of interconnected brain regions that becomes particularly active when a person is at rest and not focused on the external environment. Studies have demonstrated that the DMN is intimately involved in self-referential thinking and autobiographical memory, indicating that the brain actively constructs a sense of self during moments of inward focus.⁶²

The DMN includes regions such as the medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, and inferior parietal lobule, which together process memories, simulate future experiences, and maintain the narrative of personal identity.

These theories are supported by research using brain imaging techniques as fMRI and EEG,⁶³ which show that different aspects of selfhood - the sense of agency, autobiographical memory, control over the body - are processed in distinct neural circuits and then integrated by different networks to create the experience of a coherent, unified self. The “anterior insula”,⁶⁴ for example, has been showed to be involved in the integration of bodily sensations with emotional states, contributing to a sense of bodily self-awareness.⁶⁵

5.6 The Split Brain.

Another avenue of neuroscientific research, the one on “split-brain patients”, also supports the constructed nature of the self. In patients whose corpus callosum (the bundle of nerve fibers connecting the two hemispheres of the brain) has been severed, researchers have observed that the two hemispheres can operate independently, effectively creating two separate centers of consciousness. Each hemisphere may generate its own distinct sense of identity, reinforcing the notion that the self is a product of brain activity rather than an inherent characteristic of the individual.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Dehaene, S., & Changeux, J. P. “*Experimental and theoretical approaches to conscious processing*”, *Neuron*, 2011, 70(2), p.200-227.

⁶² Raichle, M. E. “*The brain’s default mode network*,” *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, n.38 (2015), p. 433-447

⁶³ fMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and EEG (Electroencephalography) are both non-invasive neuroimaging techniques used to study brain activity.

⁶⁴ The anterior insula is a region of the brain located between the frontal and the temporal lobes in the brain. It is essential for a range of functions related to emotional (self-awareness and consciousness in particular) and cognitive processing (especially around complex decision making). The anterior insula is connected to several other brain areas critical to processing emotions, regulating decision-making, and integrating sensory input

⁶⁵ Craig, A. D. “*How do you feel—now? The anterior insula and human awareness*,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 2009, 10(1), p.59-70.

⁶⁶ Gazzaniga, M. S. (2000). “*Cerebral specialization and interhemispheric communication: Does the corpus callosum enable the human condition?*”, *Brain*, 2000, 123(7), p.1293-1326.

5.7 Why Does The Brain Create a Unitary Self?

The brain's most important job is to manage allostasis,⁶⁷ i.e. the active regulation of the body's internal environment in response to external stressors, ensuring that optimal function is maintained. *"Your brain continually invests your energy in the hopes of earning a good return, such as food, shelter, affection, or physical protection, so you can perform nature's most vital task: passing your genes to the next generation".*⁶⁸

All of our brain's mental capacities *"are consequences of a central mission to keep you alive and well by managing your body budget. Everything your brain creates, from memories to hallucinations, from ecstasy to shame, is part of this mission".*⁶⁹ In this context, it's easy to understand why a unitary constructed self makes sense.....from the brain viewpoint. Dealing continuously with a plethora of identities, shadows, conflicting information, desires, feelings, emotions, would be overwhelming. Our body would go bankrupt! The only way to manage energy consumption for the brain is to say: *this is who you are, this is what you like, this is how you behave!* It's fiction but it works. It works so well that even when we know the self is a constructed illusion, we forget about it and pretend it's not. But this does not make it real.

5.8 The Implications of the Self as a Mental Construct.

What comes out of the most recent neuroscience is therefore a complex system that enables the brain to constantly integrate past experiences and future projections into a coherent sense of who we are, a useful construct that helps us live our life more efficiently.

However, the sense of continuity that this creates is an illusion produced by neural activity rather than a reflection of an innate, immutable self. But the idea that the self is a mental construct has profound implications for our understanding of identity. If the self is not a real, enduring entity, but rather a construct created by the mind, then our sense of who we are is not fixed or essential but fluid and malleable, shaped not only by our genetics, but also by our experiences, social interactions, and cognitive processes. And if the self is not real, if it's everchanging, it cannot be either "Authentic" or innately "Good". The whole new-age framework crumbles to the ground.

And while it is true that a certain genetic makeup, a particular type of upbringing, in a particular culture, have created a certain trajectory for your mind,⁷⁰ it is also true that adulthood allows for new and different options on how to further develop. Not total freedom, but at least some.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Feldman-Barrett, L. "7 ½ lessons about the Brain", Mariner Books, 2020, p.9

⁶⁸ Ibid. p.9

⁶⁹ Ibid. p.52

⁷⁰ We will discuss the stages of evolution in a person's life in a future essay;

⁷¹ See 7.4

6. Three Aspects Of The Emerging Self.

If the self is a fiction created by our brain, if it is “emergent”, it follows that our identity is hereditary (influenced by our genes), dynamic (it changes over time) and social (it develops interacting with its environment).

6.1 The Hereditary Self.

Recent advancements in genetic research have sparked interest in how much of our identity is determined by our biological inheritance. What follows is a very brief summary.

6.1.1. Personality Traits.

A substantial body of research in “behavioral genetics” suggests that many aspects of personality and behavior are influenced, to varying degrees, by genetic factors.⁷² Studies on identical twins who share their genetic makeup have provided some insights into the heritability of personality traits of the Five-Factor Model.⁷³ For example, some of these studies showed that even when the twins were raised apart in entirely different environments, they exhibited remarkable similarities in personality.⁷⁴

6.1.2. Behaviors.

Additionally, genetics influences other behaviors related to identity, such as aggression, risk-taking and impulsivity, all of which are linked to the regulation of neurotransmitters like dopamine and serotonin. Variations in genes that regulate these chemicals can influence behavioral tendencies and emotional regulation, which in turn shape how individuals interact with the world and define themselves.⁷⁵

6.1.3. Cognitive Abilities and Talents.

Genetic factors also contribute to cognitive abilities, which are central to how individuals perceive themselves and their environment. A large-scale meta-analysis found that genetic factors contribute to approximately 50-70% of the variability in IQ across individuals.⁷⁶ These findings suggest that cognitive

⁷² Plomin, R., *Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are*, MIT Press, 2018.

⁷³ The Five-Factor Model (FFM) – also known as the Big Five Personality Traits, categorize human personality into five broad dimensions: 1. openness to experience, 2. conscientiousness, 3. extraversion, 4. agreeableness, and 5. neuroticism** (often abbreviated as OCEAN). These traits were derived from factor analysis of personality survey data, suggesting that personality could be described as a collection of stable traits that vary across individuals.

1. Openness to Experience: Reflects an individual's drive for adventure, imagination, curiosity, and creativity.

2. Conscientiousness: Relates to goal-oriented behaviors, self-discipline and organization.

3. Extraversion: Involves sociability, assertiveness, and enthusiasm for interaction.

4. Agreeableness: Describes a person's tendency to be compassionate, cooperative, and kind.

5. Neuroticism: Measures emotional instability, anxiety, and moodiness.

These traits are generally considered stable over time, giving researchers a structured way to categorize and compare personalities, and can be viewed as both biological predispositions and social constructs that shape how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others; McAdams, D. P., & Olson, B. D. “Personality development: Continuity and change over the life course”. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 2010, 61, 517-542.

⁷⁴ Bouchard, T. J., Lykken, D. T., McGue, M., Segal, N. L., & Tellegen, A. “*Genetics and personality: An analysis of adopted twins reared apart*”, *Biological Psychiatry*, Elsevier Science, 1989, Volume 25

⁷⁵ Plomin, R., *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Plomin, R., & Deary, I. J. “*Genetics and intelligence differences: Five special findings*”, *Molecular Psychiatry*, 2015, 20, 98–108.

capacities, such as memory, problem-solving skills, and the ability to process information, are significantly influenced by genetic inheritance.

Moreover, genetic predispositions can contribute to specialized talents, such as musical ability, athletic performance, or mathematical reasoning. For example, specific genes associated with muscle fiber composition can influence physical endurance and strength, while other genes involved in neural plasticity and synaptic efficiency may affect cognitive abilities related to creativity and learning.

6.1.4. Mental Health.

The role of genetics in mental health is another area where significant evidence shows the impact of hereditary factors on identity formation. A growing body of evidence supports the idea that mental health conditions, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, major depression, have significant genetic components, with schizophrenia having an estimated heritability of over 80%.⁷⁷ Similarly, studies on bipolar disorder⁷⁸ and depression⁷⁹ have identified specific genetic variants that increase the likelihood of developing these conditions, further underscoring the role of genetics in shaping our psychological identity and mental well-being.

These mental health conditions can profoundly shape an individual's sense of self and identity, often influencing how people perceive their relationships, ambitions, and overall worldview. For instance, someone with chronic depression might struggle with feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem, which becomes a defining feature of their identity. In contrast, individuals who inherit genetic resilience against certain mental health conditions may experience greater emotional stability, contributing to a more positive self-concept.

6.1.5. The Role and limits of Epigenetics in Shaping Identity.

While traditional genetics focuses on the inheritance of DNA sequences, the field of “Epigenetics” has introduced a new dimension to our understanding of how genetic factors influence the self. The word Epigenetics can be translated as “beyond creation” or “above origins”,⁸⁰ and refers to changes in gene expression that are not caused by alterations in the DNA sequence itself but by external or environmental factors that affect how genes are activated or silenced. Studies on epigenetic changes in identical twins, who share the same genetic code, reveal that their gene expression patterns can diverge over time due to differences in their life experiences.⁸¹ This may suggest that

⁷⁷ Sullivan, P. F., Kendler, K. S., & Neale, M. C. “Schizophrenia as a complex trait: Evidence from a meta-analysis of twin studies”, *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 2003, 60(12), 1187–1192

⁷⁸ Craddock, N., & Sklar, P. “Genetics of bipolar disorder: Recent advances and future prospects”. *Human Molecular Genetics*, 2009, 18(R2), R163–R172.

⁷⁹ Sullivan, P. F., Neale, M. C., & Kendler, K. S. “Genetic epidemiology of major depression: Review and meta-analysis”. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 2000, 157(10), 1552–1562.

⁸⁰ Epigenetics is derived from Greek roots, with “Epi-” (ἐπι) meaning “above” or “beyond” and “Genetics” (from Greek genetikos / γενετικός) related to “origin” or “birth,” derived from “genesis” (γενεσις), meaning “origin” or “creation.”

⁸¹ Fraga, M. F., Ballestar, E., Paz, M. F., Ropero, S., Setien, F., Ballestar, M. L., & Esteller, M. “Epigenetic differences arise during the lifetime of monozygotic twins”. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2005, 102(30), 10604–10609

while genetic factors provide the foundation for identity, environmental interactions can modulate and even change genetic expression, adding complexity to the relationship between genetics and the self.

The concept of “genetic determinism”, i.e. the idea that genes completely dictate identity, which seems implicit in the “Authentic Self” framework,⁸² is a gross oversimplification. Most contemporary scientists in fact favor an “interactionist” approach, where both genetics and environment (the social, dynamic and ecological elements of the self that we will review in the coming chapters) interact to shape our identity.⁸³ Is it essential to underline here how epigenetics is a relatively new field of study, and significant research is needed to fully comprehend the timing and mechanisms of gene-environment interactions.

6.2 The Dynamic Self.

The first critical aspect which is completely misunderstood by the new age theories is that the self is not a static entity, but rather an emergent dynamic one, always changing, always evolving. Our identity is inherently fluid, shaped by our experiences, interactions, and evolving understanding of the world. Both neuroscience (see 5.8 above) and modern psychological and philosophical perspectives on the self often emphasize its dynamic nature, arguing that who we are is in a constant state of flux. Our desires, values, and sense of self can shift over time as we encounter new challenges, form new relationships, and develop new perspectives.

This idea of the dynamic self, already present in the works of Plato and Aristotle,⁸⁴ Locke and Kant, was fully developed in the XX century in both Philosophy (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Foucault) and in Psychology (Fred, Jung, Piaget, Erickson).

6.2.1 The early Dynamic Self.

For both John Locke and Immanuel Kant, the self is neither static nor “Authentic”, but dynamic, as personal experiences become central to our identity. Locke proposed that the self is tied to personal identity through consciousness, personal experience and memory.⁸⁵ Kant emphasized the role of the self in synthesizing experience, acting as the organizing principle for perception and cognition.⁸⁶ Anticipating ideas that will be proposed by neuroscientists centuries later (see 5.5-5.8), Kant introduced the concept of

⁸² Some new-age “models” do not explicitly mention genes, but use vaguely defined terms as “energies” and “spirits”, but the concept does not vary fundamentally.

⁸³ Rutter, M. *Genes and behavior: Nature-nurture interplay explained*, Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

⁸⁴ The Greek world was centered on the idea of an immutable and permanent Cosmos or Nature. The ideal self in Greek thought was one that achieved harmony with the Cosmos through the cultivation of virtues and self-discipline. Men (in the sense of mankind) were born to develop, procreate and die. It was a dynamic process in a finite time horizon, as there was no afterlife.

⁸⁵ Locke, J. *On Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Penguin Classic, 1989

⁸⁶ Kant, I, *Complete Works of Immanuel Kant: Including The Critique of Pure Reason (1781), The Critique of Practical Reason & many others*, Grapevine editions, 2023

the “transcendental ego,” a necessary condition that unifies disparate sensory inputs into a coherent experience of the world.

6.2.2 The Dynamic Self in XX century Philosophy.

Friedrich Nietzsche vehemently opposed the idea of an inherent, authentic self. He argued that life is a process of continual becoming, and that there is no “Authentic Self” hidden beneath societal roles and masks. Instead, Nietzsche advocated for a self-creation, emphasizing the need to shape oneself in the face of life's chaos and uncertainty.⁸⁷ This process, for Nietzsche, is not about discovering an inner core but about overcoming external influences and forging a self through individual will. To “*become what we are*” is not a passive acceptance of one's given traits or identity but an active process of creation. This dynamic act of value formation is central to the process of self-realization.

At the heart this philosophy is the concept of “*große Überwindung*” or the “overcoming of the self”. To achieve self-realization, one must constantly challenge oneself, rejecting complacency and comfort in favor of growth and transformation. This process is never simple, as it involves continuous questioning of one's beliefs, habits, and actions. This perpetual striving, never fully completed, reflects Nietzsche's rejection of static identities and his embrace of life as flux and transformation.

6.2.3 Martin Heidegger.

Martin Heidegger also critiqued the simplistic notion of authenticity of the self. He argued that authenticity does not involve discovering a pre-existing self but rather involves a process of engaging with one's “*being-in-the-world*”.⁸⁸ Heidegger rejected the Cartesian notion of the self as a detached thinking subject, proposing instead that our selfhood is always embedded in a social context, and authenticity is achieved not by retreating from society but by confronting the complexities of existence and making deliberate choices in the face of uncertainty.

6.2.4 Sartre.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, any belief in a fixed, authentic self can be included in the concept of “*mauvaise foi*” or “bad faith”, a denial of the freedom to continually reshape who we are.⁸⁹ Sartre's motto that “*existence precedes essence*” directly challenges the notion of any “Authentic Self”.⁹⁰ According to Sartre, we are constantly in the process of defining who we are, and there is no divine authority, no pre-determined essence or authentic self to uncover. We are “*condemned to be free*”.

This leads to an inherent ambiguity in the idea of authenticity: if there is no core self to be authentic to, then what does it mean to live authentically? For

⁸⁷ Nietzsche, F., “*Beyond Good and Evil*” (1886), Penguin Classics, 2003

⁸⁸ Heidegger, M., “*Being and Time*” (1927), Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008

⁸⁹ The concept of “self-deception” in Sartre's philosophy will be an integral part of an article on the illusion of knowing what we desire.

⁹⁰ Sartre, J.P., “*Being and Nothingness*”, Philosophical Library, 1943

Sartre, it is only through their actions and choices that human beings define themselves.

6.2.5 Foucault.

Postmodern philosophers go even further in critiquing the idea of authenticity. Michel Foucault argued that the self is a product of “*discourses of power*” and social norms.⁹¹ In his view, the notion of an authentic self is itself a cultural construct, one that is used to enforce conformity to particular ideals of individuality. The very idea that we have an innate, static self to discover through thought, Foucault argued, is a form of social control, encouraging individuals to internalize societal expectations rather than question them. Exactly the opposite of what the new-age theories propose.

6.2.6 The Dynamic Self in XX century Psychology.

The self-help portrayal of authenticity suggests that the “Authentic Self” is something that can be discovered and aligned with relatively quickly through introspection or mindfulness. However, XX century psychology viewed the realization of the self as a lifelong process of growth and development. Individuation is not a one-time discovery of the true self, but a continual, dynamic process of integrating conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche over time.

6.2.7. The Humanists and the “Real Self”: Rogers and Maslow.

Without repeating the critiques expressed above (4.9) to the idea of “Authentic” Self, it is worth noticing that even Carl Roger’s framework of the “Real” self is a dynamic framework rather than a static one.

Rogers believed that each person possesses an inherent drive toward “self-actualization”, which is not an end state, but an ongoing process of becoming more congruent, open to new experiences, and true to one’s inner values.

Moreover, even Rogers acknowledges - talking about a patient’s attempt to reach the real self - “*if such a self exists*”.⁹²

It's important to emphasize here how the critique to Carl Rogers’ theory of the self does not diminish his important contribution to Psychology, particular with respect to his therapeutic approach.⁹³ And the same applies to another humanist psychologist, Abraham Maslow.

Maslow also talked about a real self, but his conception is deeply intertwined with his broader ideas about self-actualization, growth, and human potential.

⁹¹ Foucault, M., “*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*”, Vintage Books, 1977.

⁹² Ibid., pag 165

⁹³ Rogers’ therapeutic approach is known as “person-centered therapy”. His goal of therapy was to create a safe and non-judgmental space where clients feel free to explore their true feelings and experiences. Rogers identified three core conditions necessary for effective therapy: 1) empathy, which involves the therapist deeply understanding the client’s experience and reflecting that understanding back to them. 2) unconditional positive regard, accepting the client without judgment, allowing them to express their real self without fear of rejection and 3) therapist congruence which, refers to the therapist being genuine and authentic, modeling the congruence that the client is trying to achieve in their own life. Today these 3 core conditions are universally accepted and used both in Therapy and in Coaching. Rogers, Carl R. “*A Theory of Therapy, Personality, and Interpersonal Relationships as Developed in the Client-Centered Framework*.” In “*Psychology: A Study of a Science*”, edited by S. Koch, McGraw-Hill, 1959.

Throughout his work Maslow identified a number of characteristics that define this self. These include autonomy, creativity, authenticity, a deep sense of morality, and the capacity for peak experiences. But there is no indication in Maslow's writing that these characteristics were static, immutable. He emphasized throughout his writings that reaching the real self is not a static process but a continual journey.⁹⁴

6.2.8. Jung.

In Jungian psychology, the self is the central archetype, the organizing principle that brings together all of the various components of the psyche - conscious and unconscious - and representing the totality of the personality of the individual.⁹⁵ This self includes not only the present reality of the individual but also the potential for growth and future development. In essence, it is a synthesis of who we are and who we could become.

6.2.8.1 Circumambulation and Synchronicity

There are two critical elements that need to be understood to fully appreciate the concept of the self in Jung. The first concept is the one of "synchronicity", or "meaningful coincidences," which Jung believed offered profound insights into the human psyche. These coincidences, he argued, could serve as subtle guidance, nudging individuals along their path of personal growth. Unlike fate or determinism, Jungian psychology suggests that destiny is not an external force. Instead, it is shaped by the inner workings of the psyche itself, with the unconscious constantly striving towards self-realization, whether consciously perceived or not. In this framework, our focus on a particular interest among many may be driven by unconscious processes beyond our immediate awareness. This focused attention can then lead us down a specific path of personal development, a path chosen from among numerous potential trajectories.⁹⁶

The second concept is the one of "circumambulation", i.e. the idea that personal development does not happen in a straight, linear fashion. Instead, it is a winding, exploratory journey where a person circles around their potential essence, gradually moving closer to it through experiences, struggles, and self-reflection.⁹⁷ Reaching one's potential is a lifelong process for Jung, one that requires patience, reflection, and the willingness to revisit and integrate past experiences in new ways, in other words, the opposite of going back to an innate "Authentic Self".

⁹⁴ Maslow, A. H. (1968). *Toward a Psychology of Being* (2nd ed.). Van Nostrand Reinhold.

⁹⁵ Jung called this process "individuation" and described it as a dynamic lifelong process of personal development that begins in adolescence and continues throughout life.

⁹⁶ There is of course a different way to explain the same path of self-development, more similar to the idea of genetic potential, which revolves around the concept that while our DNA provides a blueprint for our biological and psychological traits, not all of our genetic possibilities are realized at birth. Instead, environmental factors, experiences, and even personal choices influence which genes get "turned on" or "turned off" throughout our lives. Our genes provide a range of possibilities, but our choices, experiences, and environment determine which potentials become reality. Genetic potential isn't a fixed destiny - it's a set of latent possibilities waiting to be activated through how you live your life.

⁹⁷ This is a different, more nuanced, perspective than the one mentioned in 3.4.

6.2.9 Developmental psychology.

Developmental psychology⁹⁸ (Piaget, Erikson) also challenged the notion of a singular, unchanging self, emphasizing that identity formation is a dynamic process, influenced by early experiences, family environments, and cultural norms. The self, according to this view, is not something that exists fully formed and unspoiled, but is instead a product of complex developmental processes shaped by the interaction between genetics, environment, and social context.

Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development - which emphasize that individuals face different challenges and crises at each stage of life - shape their sense of self. The self that is "Real" or "Authentic" at one point in life may not remain consistent as an individual encounters new challenges and environments, further questioning the notion of a stable, immutable real self.⁹⁹ This undermines the idea that authenticity can be achieved by simply stripping away societal influence to reveal a pre-existing "good" self.

6.2.9 Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT).

Even recent psychological theories - which are mostly "thought-based"¹⁰⁰ - as CBT, do not assume the existence of an Authentic Self and rather focus on the malleability of the mind. CBT assumes that thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are interconnected, and that individuals can reshape their self-perception through changing cognitive patterns.¹⁰¹ From this perspective, authenticity is less about finding a hidden true self and more about developing adaptive, flexible ways of interacting with the world.

⁹⁸ Here we use the term "Developmental Psychology" in the widest possible sense, casting a wide net that include "Attachment" and "Cognitive Developmental" theories.

⁹⁹ Erikson, E. H., "Childhood and Society", W. W. Norton & Company, 1950

¹⁰⁰ Proponents of "thought-based" approaches assert that by simply altering our individual thoughts, we can fundamentally change our circumstances and experiences.

¹⁰¹ Beck, A.T., "Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders", International Universities Press, 1976.

6.3 The Social Self.

The assertion that social and external influences constitute an unnecessary, even detrimental, overlay to an authentic self, demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of how interactions, experiences, social bonds, roles, responsibilities, and cultural contexts significantly shape individual identity. This is the second key feature of the emerging self that this article will explore.

The concept of a “Social” self was introduced in modern psychology by William James. In his seminal work *“The Principles of Psychology”* he first distinguished between the “I” and the “Me”.¹⁰² The “I” refers to the subjective experience of being, a fleeting sense of presence, while the “Me” is the objective aspect of the self, shaped by one's interactions with society. James argued that the self is not fixed but is continually reconstructed through lived experience. This idea was then further developed by the social psychologist George Herbert Mead. According to Mead, the self is not something we are born with; rather, it develops through our interactions with others and the internalization of social roles and expectations.¹⁰³

*“The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience”.*¹⁰⁴

In this context, individuals shape their self-concept also on the basis of how they believe others perceive them. People imagine how they appear to others, interpret others’ judgments of them, and develop feelings and self-views (positive or negative) based on these perceived evaluations.¹⁰⁵ This “looking-glass self” underscores the importance of feedback from others in shaping one's identity.

6.3.1 Attachment Theory.

This feedback process starts early. According to the “Attachment Theory”, the bond between infants and their primary caregivers plays a critical role in forming the child’s self-concept and emotional regulation. A secure attachment allows the child to develop a sense of safety and trust, which in turn fosters a healthy sense of self.¹⁰⁶ Children who develop secure attachments are more likely to have higher self-esteem and better emotional regulation in later life. On the other hand, children with insecure attachments

¹⁰² James, W. *“The Principles of Psychology”*. Harvard University Press, 1890.

¹⁰³ Some of these concepts had already been argued by G.W.F. Hegel in his *“Phenomenology of Spirit”* (1807). Hegel introduced the concept of the “master-slave dialectic,” where the self becomes aware of itself only in relation to another. He argued that self-identity is formed through a process of mutual recognition between individuals. Without others to recognize us, we have no clear sense of self.

¹⁰⁴ Mead G.H., *“Mind, Self, and Society”*, University of Chicago Press, 1934;

¹⁰⁵ Cooley, C. H. *“Human Nature and the Social Order”*, Charles Scribner's Sons., 1902

¹⁰⁶ Ainsworth, M.D.S., Blehar M.C., Waters E., Wall S., *“Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation”*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978

may develop negative self-concepts, feeling unworthy or disconnected from others.¹⁰⁷

These early relational patterns can carry forward into adulthood, influencing how individuals interact with others and view themselves. Individuals derive part of their identity not only from the caregivers and from defined individuals, but also from the groups to which they belong, whether based on nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, or other social categories.¹⁰⁸ Even arbitrary group assignments could lead people to favor their own group, demonstrating the powerful role that group identity plays in shaping behavior and self-perception.¹⁰⁹

6.3.2. Contemporary Theories of Relational Psychoanalysis

Two popular contemporary psychoanalytic frameworks, Object Relations Theory (ORT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), are also centered on how the self is continually shaped through relationships with others, a dynamic construct that evolves through interactions with the social world. ORT focuses on interpersonal relationships and their role in shaping the psyche, particularly in the early years.¹¹⁰ SDT is centered on the idea that human beings are naturally inclined towards growth, mastery, and self-actualization when their psychological needs are satisfied.¹¹¹

While ORT is more naturally aligned with Relational Psychoanalysis due to its psychoanalytic origins and focus on internalized relational dynamics, SDT can also be considered within the broader conversation of relational psychoanalysis, particularly due to its emphasis on relatedness as a basic psychological need. Both theories enrich the understanding of how relationships shape the self, well-being, and motivation, making them relevant to modern relational approaches to psychoanalysis. However, they approach these issues from different theoretical backgrounds - psychoanalytic¹¹² versus humanistic psychology - and therefore contribute in distinct but complementary ways.

¹⁰⁷ Bowlby, J. *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books, 1969

¹⁰⁸ Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C., "An integrative theory of intergroup conflict". In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (pp. 33-47). Brooks/Cole, 1979

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Greenberg, J. R., & Mitchell, S. A., *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory*, Harvard University Press, 1983

¹¹¹ Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*, Springer, 1985. The theory emphasizes the importance of *intrinsic motivation*—doing activities for their inherent satisfaction rather than external rewards.

¹¹² ORT emerges from Freudian psychoanalysis, but it shifts emphasis from biological drives to the importance of early relational experiences in forming the self.

6.3.3 The Impact of Culture

An additional and distinct critique to the concept of authenticity of the self is that it fails to account for the ways in which cultural norms shape its development. What feels "authentic" is often a reflection of these norms rather than an inner truth. For example, behaviors that are considered authentic in one culture may not be seen that way in another.¹¹³

In individualistic cultures, the self is often seen as distinct from others, and personal achievement is highly valued. In collectivist cultures, the self is understood in relational terms, with a strong emphasis on social roles and group belonging. This cultural variation shows that the role of others in shaping identity is not universal but mediated by the values and norms of the society in which one lives.¹¹⁴

6.3.4 The Impact of Roles and Expectations

Finally, in contemporary society, individuals are exposed to multiple, often conflicting, roles and expectations, leading to a self that is fragmented rather than unified. Navigating identity crises, particularly during adolescence, when people experiment with different roles and ideas to form a cohesive sense of self,¹¹⁵ is part of the journey. In this process, individuals still retain some agency as not all of the aspects of the self are unconscious. We may choose which groups to belong to, which relationships to maintain, and how to interpret the feedback we receive from others. For example, a person may identify as a mother, a professional, a member of a religious community, and a citizen, all at the same time. These multiple identities may come into conflict or require negotiation depending on the social context. It is not that we are "authentic" when we are with our partner, but "fake" when we are with our colleagues, or vice versa. We simply express different aspects of our constructed, multifaced identity.¹¹⁶ Identity is not simply imposed from the outside but co-created through a dynamic interplay between the individual and their social environment.¹¹⁷ individuals are able to express different aspects of their identity depending on the social context.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Geertz, C. *"The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays"*, Basic Books, 1973

¹¹⁴ Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. *"Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation"*, *Psychological Review*, 98(2), p.224-253, 1991.

¹¹⁵ Erikson, E. H. *"Identity: Youth and Crisis"*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1968

¹¹⁶ As mentioned above, Self-determination Theory, for example, highlights the importance of balancing personal autonomy - identity is shaped the degree to which individuals can fulfill their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness - with the need for relatedness and societal engagement, challenging the idea that an authentic Self exists in isolation. 5

¹¹⁷ Bandura, A. *"Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective"* in *Annual Review of Psychology* 52(1), 2001, p.1-26

¹¹⁸ Kenneth Gergen, *"The Saturated Self"*, Basic Books, 1991;

6.4 The Ecological Self, Part of a Larger System

The idea of a self which emerges from the interaction with the wider society was further developed by Gregory Bateson, who looked at the individual self as a part of an interconnected ecological system. His famous *“the pattern that connects,”* emphasized the interrelatedness of all living systems, from the smallest organisms to entire ecosystems. For him, the human mind should not be viewed as an isolated processor of information but rather as a node within a larger ecological network.¹¹⁹ In an ecological system our identity can only be understood in terms of relationships and patterns within this broader system, where there is no boundary between the human mind and the environment in which it operates.¹²⁰ This concept of the “Ecological Self” reflects Bateson’s belief in the interconnectedness of mind, body, and environment. Not only he rejected the Cartesian dualism of mind and body, but he argued instead that humans are part of a “cybernetic loop” with their environment.¹²¹

Bateson believed that our failure to recognize our place in this larger system was a fundamental cause of many social and environmental problems. He argued that modern societies’ tendency to view individuals as separate from their environment led to exploitative behaviors and environmental degradation. From this perspective, Bateson’s “ecological self” challenges the individualistic and anthropocentric notions of identity that dominate Christian theology and Western thought.¹²² With Bateson we return to a concept of nature which resembles the one envisioned by the ancient Greeks, where humanity is a part of a larger, orderly cosmos. Nature has its own intrinsic rationality, and humans are called to live in harmony with it rather than dominate it.

6.5. The Self: illusory, dynamic, social, ecological.

In summary, most of the modern psychological approaches to the idea of *Self* support the view that it is a constructed, emergent, fluid, dynamic construct rather than a fixed, internal essence. It is exactly the opposite of what new-age self-help theories propose. Our identity is not fixed but can shift depending on our social context, relationships, and life experiences.¹²³ The self is shaped also by the roles we play, the cultural narrative we adopt, the feedback we receive from others and the wider environment in which we operate.

“The self consists of both the conscious and unconscious minds, of psychological self and body self, and the superordinate entity of self-synthesizing all components. We continuously

¹¹⁹ Bateson, G. *“Steps to an Ecology of Mind”*, University of Chicago Press, 1972

¹²⁰ Bateson, G. *“Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity”*, E.P. Dutton, 1979.

¹²¹ identity is seen as emerging from the flow of information between a person and their environment, in a continuous feedback loop.

¹²² See above chapter 4.5

¹²³ Goffman, Erving, *“The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”*, Penguin, 1956.

evolve, change, and add new information. Earlier selves remain housed in a container of time and place, preserved carefully to avoid rearranging”¹²⁴.

¹²⁴ Krueger, D., *“Engaging the Ineffable: Toward Mindfulness and Meaning”*, Paragon House, 2019.

7. The Role of the Unconscious.

In the 20th century, psychoanalytic theory, especially through the work of Sigmund Freud, added depth to the understanding of the self by introducing the unconscious.

7.1 The Freudian model

Re-elaborating some ideas already present in Schopenhauer's work,¹²⁵ Freud argued that the self is not fully conscious, but it is shaped by unconscious desires, conflicts, and social conditioning. The Freudian model divided the self into three interconnecting parts:

1. **"Id" (Es):** The Id is the primal, unconscious part of the psyche, representing our most basic and instinctual desires, such as the drive for survival, sexual pleasure, and aggression. The Id is amoral and exists only to satisfy these urges, irrespective of reality or societal expectations.
2. **Ego (Ich):** This is the rational part of the mind, responsible for decision-making, planning, and problem-solving. It develops out of the Id and serves to mediate between the Id's instinctual desires and the external world. The Ego works to find realistic and socially acceptable ways to satisfy the urges of the Id while navigating the constraints imposed by the Superego.
3. **Superego (Über-Ich):** The Superego is the moral component of the psyche, representing internalized societal rules, norms, and parental guidance. It operates on the morality principle, judging the actions and thoughts of the Ego and attempting to suppress the unacceptable behaviors deriving from the Id.

According to Freud, Individuals may consciously believe they desire one thing, while their unconscious mind harbors deeper, repressed desires that they are unwilling to acknowledge. This conflict between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the self creates a fertile ground for self-deception, as individuals develop elaborate rationalizations to avoid confronting their true, often socially unacceptable, desires.

¹²⁵ "The philosophers who have made the most profound impact upon psychoanalysis were, first of all, Schopenhauer, whose doctrine of the primacy of the will and of the unconscious motivations of our actions anticipated the fundamental principle of psychoanalysis by many years": Freud, Sigmund. "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis.", Norton, 1933, Lecture XXXIV).

One of Freud's significant contributions was his exploration of how the Ego manages the often-conflicting demands of the Id and Superego. To do this, the Ego employs various "defense mechanisms", which are unconscious strategies used to protect the self from anxiety and distress,¹²⁶ including:

- Denial: Refusing to acknowledge reality, facts or events;
- Repression: Pushing unacceptable thoughts or desires into the unconscious;
- Displacement: Redirecting emotions to a safer substitute target;
- Projection: Attributing one's own undesirable thoughts or feelings to others;

It follows that if the self is not fully a conscious construction and if we lack a conscious awareness of a large portion of what goes on in our mind, we have no way of investigating what is our "Authentic Self" and we only have very limited (conscious) tools of intervention - even assuming that there was something like the Authentic Self as proposed by new age theories.

7.2 The Jungian elaboration.

We have already seen how the concept of the unconscious is also a central element in Carl Gustav Jung's psychology. While Freud saw the unconscious primarily as a repository for repressed desires and conflicts (the "Id"), Jung conceptualized it as a much more expansive and dynamic realm that plays an essential role in the formation of the self and individual identity.¹²⁷ In summary, Jung distinguished between two layers of unconscious:¹²⁸

- **Personal:** it contains experiences, thoughts, and memories that have been forgotten or repressed. It is unique to each individual and is similar to Freud's concept of the "Id". However, Jung emphasized that not all content of the personal unconscious is repressed; much of it includes material that has simply not been brought to consciousness.

We are introduced to concept of the "shadow", the part of the self that contains repressed desires, instincts, and emotions. Jung argued that authenticity involves not just expressing one's construed self, but also confronting and integrating the shadow. This process can be uncomfortable and challenging, as it requires individuals to acknowledge aspects of themselves that they may find undesirable or socially unacceptable.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ It's evident here how much the IFS therapy has borrowed for this model.

¹²⁷ Jung, C. G. "Two Essays on Analytical Psychology". In "Collected Works of C.G. Jung" (Vol. 7), 2nd edition, Bollinger Series, Princeton University Press, 1970

¹²⁸ Fordham, M. "An Introduction to Jung's Psychology". Penguin Books, 1957

¹²⁹ Jung, C.G., "Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self" (1951) in "Collected Works of C.G. Jung" Vol.9 2nd edition, Bollinger Series, Princeton University Press, 1970

- **Collective:** this refers to a deeper layer of the unconscious that is universal and shared among all humans.¹³⁰ This layer contains “archetypes”, which are innate, universal symbols and patterns of behavior that shape human experience and psychological development.

For Jung integrating unconscious elements into conscious awareness is the only avenue that allows individuals to explore the deeper, often hidden aspects of the self, achieving a greater sense of psychological wholeness.

7.3 Elements of the Unconscious In Contemporary Psychology.

In the 2nd part of the XX century Freud's and Jung's intuitions about the unconscious have been further developed in a number of different areas (and it remains very much a work in progress). We understand today that the unconscious governs a substantial part of our life. Much of our decision-making, especially in social contexts, is influenced by automatic, unconscious processes rather than deliberate, conscious thought. Automaticity, i.e. the ability to perform tasks without conscious awareness, is pervasive, affecting behaviors ranging from habits to emotional reactions.¹³¹ For the purpose of this article, there are three specific aspects of the unconscious relating to the idea of an “Authentic Self” that are worth mentioning:

a. Cognitive Dissonance.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald famously wrote that:

*“The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function”.*¹³²

In psychology, the conflict between different beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors is known as “cognitive dissonance”.¹³³ Individuals often adapt their beliefs or actions to alleviate this dissonance.¹³⁴ However, this raises the question: which self is truly authentic - the original or the adapted one? The concept of reducing dissonance suggests a dynamic, evolving self. If people can shift their beliefs or identities to ease discomfort, the notion of a fixed, singular self becomes less tenable.

¹³⁰ Jung, C. G. “The Concept of the Collective Unconscious”. In “Collected Works of C.G. Jung” (Vol. 9, part 2), 2nd edition, Bollinger Series, Princeton University Press, 1970.

¹³¹ Bargh, J. A. “The Four Horsemen of Automaticity: Awareness, Efficiency, Intention, and Control in Social Cognition”. In R. S. Wyer & T. K. Srull (Eds.), “Handbook of Social Cognition” (pp. 1–40). Erlbaum, 1994.

¹³² Fitzgerald, F.S., “The Crack-Up”, Esquire, 1936.

¹³³ Festinger, L. “A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance”, Stanford University Press, 1957.

¹³⁴ We will see below how the Brain does not like “unnecessary” energetic expenditure that are not directly linked to either survival or procreation.

b. Cognitive Biases.

Another very significant challenge to the idea of an “Authentic Self” is the fact that the brain relies on cognitive shortcuts, known as biases, to make sense of the world. Some of the most studied ones are the Confirmation Bias,¹³⁵ the Anchoring Bias,¹³⁶ the Hindsight Bias,¹³⁷ the Self-Serving Bias,¹³⁸ and the Availability Heuristic.¹³⁹

Our brain's operating system is riddled with such biases, which function as malware infecting our neural network, distorting our perceptions, hijacking our logic, and warping our decision-making. In addition, these biases operate in the shadow of our unconscious, so we are often completely unaware of when and how they take over our mind.

For what concern the self, these biases make it difficult for people to achieve true self-awareness, let alone determine whether they are living in accordance with an authentic self.

c. The illusion of understanding.

We all have tendency to believe that we understand complex situations or phenomena more deeply than we actually do. The illusion arises from our inherent desire for simplicity and coherence in our interpretations of the world, leading us to construct narratives that offer explanations – as discussed in 5.7 - even if these explanations are incomplete, biased, or oversimplified. Indeed, these stories often fail to account for the underlying complexity, randomness, or the influence of chance events, leading to overconfidence in our ability to predict future events, explain past events, and make decisions based on incomplete information.¹⁴⁰

For what concern the self, this illusion of understanding allows us not only to construct simplified explanations for external events, but also to construct an abridged - and often erroneous - narrative about our own lives in order to give ourselves a sense of identity. But research on implicit attitudes and behaviors shows that people often act in ways that are inconsistent with their stated beliefs or self-perception.¹⁴¹ So, again, if individuals are unaware of the biases and unconscious processes that shape their beliefs, desires and behavior, how can they determine whether their actions are truly authentic or congruent with their “Authentic Self”?

¹³⁵ The tendency to consider information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs, while giving less consideration to alternative possibilities;

¹³⁶ The tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information (the “anchor”) encountered when making decisions, even if it is not very relevant or significant.

¹³⁷ The tendency to see events as having been predictable after they have already occurred.

¹³⁸ The tendency to attribute positive events to one's own character but negative events to external factors.

¹³⁹ The tendency to overestimate the likelihood of events based on their availability in memory.

¹⁴⁰ Kahneman, D. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011

¹⁴¹ Some examples of research in this field includes Implicit Association Test (IAT) and Implicit Bias in Hiring and Evaluation studies, which have consistently found that people often hold implicit biases (racial, gender) that differ from their explicit beliefs. Key studies include Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz (1998), Sabin, Nosek, Greenwald, & Rivara (2009), Bertrand & Mullainathan (2004), Rudman & Glick (2001).

7.4. The Conscious strikes back.

Modern neuroscience has challenged the absolute dominance of the unconscious by demonstrating the significant role of the prefrontal cortex, especially around “executive functions” such as decision-making, impulse control, planning, and social behavior. Neuroscientific research using brain imaging technologies previously discussed, such as fMRI and EEG, has shown that the prefrontal cortex is actively involved in inhibiting impulsive responses,¹⁴² and allowing individuals to make deliberate, reasoned choices.¹⁴³

One of the most compelling arguments in favor of an important role of conscious processes comes from research on “Neuroplasticity”, which refers to the brain’s ability to reorganize and form new neural connections in response to learning, experience, or conscious effort (meditation, therapy, coaching),¹⁴⁴ allowing individuals to influence the unconscious thought patterns and behaviors.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, research on mindfulness meditation has demonstrated that regular practice can lead to structural changes in the prefrontal cortex.¹⁴⁶ Even Kahneman suggests that, under particular circumstances, the conscious mind can step in to correct, regulate, and make more reflective choices. This regulation is especially important in complex decisions,¹⁴⁷ and situations that require ethical considerations, long-term planning, or impulse suppression.¹⁴⁸

Conversely, there are still significant challenges to the thesis that the conscious brain can override the unconscious in many circumstances, and particularly in the event of depression, bipolar disorders schizophrenia and traumas. In PTSD, for example, individuals experience flashbacks, nightmares, and hyperarousal that are triggered by reminders of traumatic events, often without any conscious awareness or control. Research has shown how the prefrontal cortex - which normally helps regulate emotional responses - becomes less effective at controlling these unconscious fear responses.¹⁴⁹ This imbalance makes it incredibly difficult for individuals to consciously override the unconscious trauma responses triggered by PTSD.

Moreover, our understanding on how neuroplasticity happens is still in the early days, and it will probably be a long time until we will fully understand how different conscious techniques modify our thoughts patterns and our habits, in what circumstances,¹⁵⁰ and to what extent.

¹⁴² Botvinick, M. M., Braver, T. S., Barch, D. M., Carter, C. S., & Cohen, J. D. (2001). “Conflict monitoring and cognitive control”, *Psychological Review*, 2001, 108(3), 624–652

¹⁴³ Aron, A. R., Robbins, T. W., & Poldrack, R. A. “Inhibition and the right inferior frontal cortex”, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2004, 8(4), 170-177

¹⁴⁴ Davidson, R. J., & McEwen, B. S., “Social influences on neuroplasticity: Stress and interventions to promote well-being”. *Nature Neuroscience*, 2012, 15(5), 689–695

¹⁴⁵ Pittenger, C., Kelmendi, B., Bloch, M., Krystal, J. H., & Coric, V. “Clinical treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder”, *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 2011, 34(3), 639–657

¹⁴⁶ Hölzel, B. K., Carmody, J., Vangel, M., Congleton, C., Yerramsetti, S. M., Gard, T., & Lazar, S. W., “Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density”, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 2011, 191(1), 36–43

¹⁴⁷ Kahneman, D., *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ For example, Kouider and Dehaene have propose a “global workspace” theory, where unconscious processes feed into a global cognitive workspace that becomes available to conscious thought when decisions or actions require more deliberation: Kouider, S., & Dehaene, S. “Levels of Processing During Non-conscious Perception: A Critical Review of Visual Masking”. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 2007, 362(1481), 857–875

¹⁴⁹ Shin, L. M., Rauch, S. L., & Pitman, R. K. “Amygdala, medial prefrontal cortex, and hippocampal function in PTSD”. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 2006, 1071(1), 67–79.

¹⁵⁰ For example, there seem to be limitations to the impact of neuroplasticity after certain nerve injury to the brain: Socolovsky M, Malessy M., “Brain changes after peripheral nerve repair: limitations of neuroplasticity”, *Journal of Neurosurgical Sciences* 2021 August;65(4):421-30; Navarro X., “Neural Plasticity After Nerve Injury and Regeneration”, *International Review of Neurobiology*, Volume 87, 2009, Pages 483-505

7.5 A complex interplay.

In conclusion, the idea that the unconscious controls a large portion of our life has a strong basis in both psychoanalytic theory and cognitive science. However, despite significant advancements, our understanding of the unconscious's influence on behavior, its precise relationship to conscious processes, and the extent of its impact remains incomplete. While neuroscience confirms the interplay of conscious and unconscious systems, it's also true that conscious awareness can significantly modulate unconscious drives through attention and learning.¹⁵¹ This suggests a degree of human agency in shaping unconscious processes, with their relative influences varying across individuals and contexts.¹⁵² But if both conscious and unconscious factors contribute to human experience, any framework of the self solely rooted in conscious processes – as the “Authentic Self” – is inherently flawed.

¹⁵¹ Eagleman, D. “Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain”. Pantheon Books, 2011

¹⁵² Interestingly, a number of esoteric eastern practices have arrived to the same conclusions from very different perspectives: *“It is quite simple. Your five senses are collecting data from the outside world every moment of your life. You are literally being bombarded with stimuli at every instant. Over time, this enormous volume of sense impressions begins to assume a certain distinctive pattern within you. This pattern slowly shapes itself into behavioral tendencies. A cluster of tendencies hardens over time into what you call your personality, or what you claim to be your true nature. It works in the reverse as well: Your mind shapes the way you experience the world around you. This becomes your karma—an orientation to life that you have created for yourself in relative unawareness. You are not aware of how these tendencies develop. But what you consider to be “myself” is just an accumulation of habits, predispositions, and tendencies you have acquired over time without being conscious of the process.....But this software is not a fate to be endured. It can be rewritten, dropped, or distanced.”* Sadhguru, “Karma”, Harmony Books, 2021

8. The Illusion of a “Good” Self.

The nature of humanity – whether inherently good, neutral, or evil – remains a core question in philosophy and psychology. The belief in an inherently good nature, while influential, has been criticized for oversimplifying human behavior and potentially hindering self-development. This view significantly impacts our understanding of the self, influencing our concepts of identity, morality, and personal growth.

This chapter will explore the historical roots of the idea that societal and cultural forces can corrupt an innately good human nature, imposing constraints and artificiality on the "Authentic Self." This concept, tracing back to early human societies and evolving through the Enlightenment, continues to influence contemporary perspectives.

8.1 . Early Human Social Structures and Prehistoric Tribes.

The hunter-gatherer societies have often been portrayed as egalitarian. They have provided a model of a culture where individuals could act more freely, with fewer external pressures to conform. Some modern interpretations - Rousseau's, for example (see below 8.5) - have romanticized these societies, viewing them as closer to a natural state where individuals were less "corrupted" by complex social structures.

However, human societies were far more complex and varied than Rousseau imagined. The idea that early humans lived in an idyllic, harmonious state is not supported by much of the anthropological evidence. While some small hunter-gatherer groups may have had relatively egalitarian structures, other early societies exhibited significant violence, competition for resources, engagement in warfare and hierarchical social structures.¹⁵³ Indeed, according to evolutionary biology, many behaviors that may appear to be altruistic are, in fact, strategies for genetic survival.¹⁵⁴

Moreover, even in small communities, social norms and expectations have always played a significant role in shaping behavior. Survival in harsh environments required cooperation, and the need to conform to group dynamics likely limited personal freedom. While these early societies may have been less hierarchical, they were not devoid of rules, and individuals were still bound by collective needs and expectations.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Diamond, J., *The World Until Yesterday*, Penguin, 2012

¹⁵⁴ Dawkins, R., *The Selfish Gene* (1976), as in *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition*, Oxford Landmark Science, 4th Edition, 2016

¹⁵⁵ Graeber, D., Wengrow, D. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, Picador Paper, 2021

8.2. Ancient Greece: Plato and the Corruption of the Soul.

In Western philosophy, one of the earliest formal articulations of the idea that society corrupts the individual comes from Plato. In his “Republic”, he argued that the ideal society would be governed by philosopher-kings, individuals who were able to transcend the distractions and moral corruptions of ordinary society. He believed that material society and its preoccupations (wealth, power, fame) distracted individuals from their higher purpose. Though Plato did not frame his ideas in terms of an innately good self, his philosophical framework laid the groundwork for later notions that society could distort or suppress an individual’s higher potential.

8.3 Confucianism: Innate Human Goodness.

In Eastern philosophy, Confucianism also holds that human beings possess an inherently good nature. Confucian philosopher Mencius (4th century BC) argued that humans are born with the seeds of virtue, such as compassion, benevolence, and righteousness. He used the metaphor of a child falling into a well to illustrate that humans naturally feel compassion when witnessing another’s suffering.¹⁵⁶ For Mencius, this innate compassion reflects the natural goodness of human beings, and the task of moral development is to cultivate and expand these inherent virtues.

However, contrary to the way this concept is portrayed in the Judaic-Christian tradition, for Mencius the self is not an isolated or self-serving entity but is fundamentally relational, defined by its connections with others and its capacity for moral responsibility. People are not inherently evil, but moral failure can occur if the self is not cultivated. In this sense, the self is both an ethical and social being, whose development depends on nurturing its inherent virtues through education, reflection, and participation in a harmonious society. Remarkable similarities to Aristotle's conception of the individual's role in society are readily apparent.

8.4. Christianity.

In Christian theology - as discussed in 4.2-4.6 - the concept of a good, pure self, corrupted by external forces, is viewed through different lenses. On one hand, at the onset of Christianity it was believed that withdrawing from society and its temptations (wealth, power, and pleasure) was necessary for achieving spiritual purity and salvation. Hence the proliferation of early monastic traditions.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, the spirit of the Authentic Self was less about moral purity and more about fallen imperfection in need of divine intervention and spiritual redemption.

¹⁵⁶ Mencius, “The Mencius”, Penguin Classic, 1985

¹⁵⁷ Harmless, W., “Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism”, Oxford University Press, 2004

8.5. Rousseau and the Enlightenment: Society as a Source of Corruption.

One of the most prominent modern advocates of the benign nature of humanity was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His concept of the "*noble savage*" is central to his critique of modern society. He argued that in the state of nature, humans were more in tune with their true selves. They care for their own well-being while also extending empathy and compassion toward others. It is society and its institutions that corrupt them.¹⁵⁸ He famously claimed in the *Social Contract* (1762) that, "*L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers*" (*Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains*).¹⁵⁹

Rousseau viewed the corruption of this benign nature as a product of societal influences, particularly competition, inequality, and the desire for social approval ("amour-propre"). This perspective suggests that personal growth involves returning to a more authentic, compassionate self that is free from the corrupting influence of societal norms. Sounds familiar?

Rousseau's critique of society had a profound influence on Romanticism, a movement that celebrated emotion, nature, and the individual's inner life as a response to the perceived artificiality of modern civilization. Romantic poets like William Wordsworth and philosophers like Friedrich Schiller echoed Rousseau's belief that society could alienate individuals from their authentic selves.

8.6. The Humanist movement and Society.

In the 20th century, the idea that societal norms corrupt the individual changes its focus, as philosophers started to explore the tension between a dynamic, ever changing, self and social conformity.

The humanistic movement, spearheaded by Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, emphasized the idea of self-actualization, where individuals could reach their true potential by overcoming societal and psychological barriers. Rogers, believed that society often imposed "conditions of worth" on individuals, leading them to abandon their authentic selves in order to gain acceptance or approval. He argued that individuals have a "self-actualizing tendency," an inherent motivation to develop their potential, pursue meaningful goals, and become the best version of themselves. This drive is not only about personal achievement but also about cultivating deep relationships, empathy, and altruism.¹⁶⁰

Abraham Maslow, another prominent humanistic psychologist, expanded on the idea of self-actualization through his theory of needs.¹⁶¹ Maslow's model,¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Rousseau, J.J. "*The Basic Political Writings*", 2nd ed., Hackett, 2012

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Rogers, C. "*On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*", Houghton Mifflin, 1961

¹⁶¹ We will summarize this theory, often misconstrued, in a future article.

¹⁶² Maslow, A., "*Motivation and Personality*", Harper & Brothers, 1954

theorized that that human beings are motivated by a series of hierarchical needs. Maslow's view of human nature aligns with the belief in an inherent benign quality. He argued that once basic survival needs are met, humans naturally seek to fulfill higher-order needs related to connection, creativity, and personal growth. Maslow believed that self-actualized individuals are characterized by qualities such as empathy, creativity, and altruism, suggesting that the self, when fully realized, is not only good but also capable of contributing positively to society.

However, both Rogers' and Maslow's frameworks diverge from Rousseau's – and from the new age theories - in important ways. While Rousseau viewed society as the primary cause of inequality and moral corruption, Maslow and Rogers argued that individuals can achieve their highest potential and moral development through positive social interactions and self-awareness, even within the structures of society. While both Rogers and Maslow believed in the inherent potential for goodness and growth in humans, they emphasized the role of self-actualization and personal responsibility, with an emphasis on the personal development of the individual potential within society, in a manner not dissimilar to what was proposed by Mencius. The focus of their work is on the “self-development” rather than on the return to an “Authentic Self”.

8.7 The Critics.

The idea of inherent human goodness, neglects however the darker, more aggressive aspects of human nature that are self-evident in the history of mankind. While it is true that social environments play a significant role in shaping behavior, the philosophical assumption of an entirely benign human nature overlooks the ways in which individuals are capable of both great kindness and cruelty, depending on circumstances and internal motivations. Critics argue that the “noble savage” perspective may both lead to an unrealistic denial of negative emotions, aggression, and selfishness - which are part of the human experience – and encourage individuals to suppress or deny parts of themselves that do not conform to this ideal, resulting in a lack of self-awareness and psychological integration.¹⁶³

8.7.1 Friedrich Nietzsche and the “will to power”.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that much of human behavior is not driven by a natural goodness, but by the “will to power,” an intrinsic desire to assert dominance and control over others.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, in his opinion, the idealization of human goodness only serves to suppress more authentic expressions of individual strength and creativity, leading to a denial of the self. This can lead to a fragmented sense of self, in which individuals are unable to fully integrate or understand their own motivations and desires.

8.7.2 Freud and the Conflict with the Unconscious.

For Sigmund Freud, the idea that humans are inherently good or benign was untenable, as much of human behavior is motivated by unconscious conflicts and destructive impulses drive toward destruction, aggression, and self-sabotage.¹⁶⁵ By acknowledging the darker, more destructive aspects of the psyche, Freud provided a more comprehensive understanding of human motivation.

8.7.3. Jung and the Shadow Self.

Indeed, the idealization of human nature as benign can have a profound negative impact on the development of the self. When individuals are taught to believe that they are naturally good and that their negative emotions or impulses are aberrations caused by external factors, they may fail to develop a realistic understanding of their own inner lives. This can lead to what Carl Jung described as the creation of a “shadow self” (as introduced in 7.2) the parts of the self that are repressed or denied because they do not fit with the

¹⁶³ This is consistent with Jung’s shadow self.

¹⁶⁴ Nietzsche introduced the idea of “Will to Power” (*Der Wille zur Macht*) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), and further developed it in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). The term became however more systematically known through the book by the same name published posthumously in 1901, which was a collection of Nietzsche’s unpublished notes edited by his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. However, there is some agreement among scholars that this book does accurately represent Nietzsche’s full intentions and that his sister edited some of the notes to align them with her more nationalist tendencies.

¹⁶⁵ Freud, S., “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*” (1920), as in “*Beyond the Pleasure Principle: And Other Writings*”, Penguin Classic, 2003

idealized self-image. Jung argued that failing to confront and integrate the shadow can lead to a fragmented self, where individuals are disconnected from parts of their own psyche.¹⁶⁶

8.8 Moral Responsibility and the Denial of Agency.

Another critical consequence of the benign nature thesis – which is self-evident in the contemporary world - is its potential to undermine moral responsibility. If humans are seen as inherently good, with harmful behaviors being attributed to external influences, individuals may be less inclined to take responsibility for their actions. This view can lead to a form of moral complacency, where individuals blame society and external circumstances for their failings, rather than recognizing their own agency in shaping their behavior.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Jung, C.G., *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, 2nd edition, Bollinger Series, Princeton University Press, 1970

¹⁶⁷ This leads to a discussion on the nature of "Free Will", which will be the object of a future article. For the purpose of what it is discussed here, our thesis is that the concepts of agency and responsibility are both personally and socially beneficial, even they are an illusion of the Self.

9. The Negative Repercussions of the Authentic Self Narrative.

A final, important issue with the “Authentic Self” model is the long-term effect on the individuals who fall for this narrative. Reducing the self to a static “true” essence that can only be accessed through personal work has often serious counterproductive effects.

9.1 Inauthenticity and Inadequacy.

Individuals can become trapped in an endless search for this native essence, leading to feelings of “inauthenticity” and “dissatisfaction” when they cannot reconcile their multifaceted, constructed selves with the promise of a singular authenticity.¹⁶⁸ This modern pursuit of authenticity can be indeed problematic when it turns into a rigid, individualistic obsession. The demand to “be true to oneself” creates a constant pressure to search for something pure and unwavering within, often resulting in frustration when this ideal remains elusive. It is not uncommon that this process leads to a form of narcissism where individuals become disconnected from their social context, focusing only on their internal desires and emotions. This creates an inherent paradox: the more one focuses on authenticity, the more elusive it becomes,¹⁶⁹ creating a pervasive sense of inauthenticity, anxiety and a deep sense of inadequacy.¹⁷⁰ This is particularly common in individuals who feel that their lives do not reflect their inner desires or that their external circumstances - such as their job, relationships, or social roles - are at odds with their internal identity.

9.2 The prison of Authenticity.

Furthermore, by suggesting that there is a “right” way to live authentically, the self-help industry perpetuates the very same norms and expectations that XX century philosophy tried to dismantle. Instead of liberating individuals to explore their full range of possibilities, it often prescribes a narrow set of ideals. By encouraging individuals to look inward for certainty in a world that is constantly changing and socially constructed, the narrative of the “Authentic Self” reinforces conformity rather than encouraging genuine freedom and self-exploration.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, C. “*The Ethics of Authenticity*”, Harvard University Press, 1991 and “*Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity*,” Harvard University Press, 1989.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Gergen, K.J. “*The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*”, Basic Books, 1991

¹⁷¹ Fromm, E., “*Escape from Freedom*”, Farrar & Rinehart, 1941

9.3 The endless process.

Finally, yet another danger of the “Authentic Self” narrative is that it encourages individuals to engage in never-ending process of self-discovery. The promise of authenticity is that it will bring peace and satisfaction once attained, yet the process of self-discovery often becomes a downward spiral. Individuals are encouraged to question their desires, motivations, and actions endlessly, searching for deeper layers of truth about themselves. This constant self-examination can become paralyzing, leading individuals to feel that they are never quite finished with the task of discovering their true self. Also, as we have seen, our identity is largely shaped by the “others”. So, this quest for authenticity is inherently tied to the desire for external validation and societal approval. When individuals measure their authenticity against social expectations, they become trapped in a cycle of seeking and doubting, always wondering whether they are truly living in accordance with their inner self or simply performing a socially acceptable version of authenticity,¹⁷² which is exactly the opposite of what they were trying to achieve in the first place.

¹⁷² Botton, A. de. “Status Anxiety”, Vintage Books, 2004

10. Conclusions

In the contemporary self-help world, the idea of discovering and living out one's "Authentic Self" is often marketed as a path to personal fulfillment. While this framework offers some practical short-term benefits - such as the value of self-reflection and emotional transparency - It advances a conceptually limited account of the self, reducing the intricate, multilayered dynamics of identity formation to an overly simplistic narrative. The notion of a singular, innate, stable and "good" self is challenged by all sides from XX century philosophy, theories of social construction, developmental psychology, neuroscience, anthropology and evolutionary biology.

The self can be understood today as an internal psychological construct, a byproduct of complex neural processes, rather than a pre-existing entity in nature. This self is emergent, dynamic, interactive and connected to the wider environment. Buddhist doctrine, as we have seen, had reached the very same conclusion quite some time ago.

Our comprehension of how we construct the illusion of a unified self is still in its nascent stages. It's entirely possible that we may never fully unravel this complex process. Embracing this uncertainty and repudiating appealing but flawed solutions, as with countless other life's enigmas, is the fundamental moral lesson to be learned. Being oneself does not mean adhering to an apparent authenticity but accepting the internal contradictions that inhabit us. Recognizing our limitations and learning to coexist with unresolved questions is, in fact, the enduring human condition.

"In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever beasts invented knowing. That was the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history'—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star grew cold, and the clever beasts had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. There were eternities during which it did not exist; and when it has disappeared again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no additional mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world's axis turned within it.

But if we could communicate with a gnat, we would learn that it floats through the air with the same self-importance, feeling within itself the flying center of the world. There is nothing in nature so despicable or insignificant that would not immediately swell up like a balloon at the slightest puff of that force of knowing; and just as every porter wants an admirer, the proudest human being, the philosopher, thinks that he sees the eyes of the universe telescopically focused upon his actions and thoughts."¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Translation by Daniel Breazeale in "Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s," Humanities Press, 1979. The original title of the essay is "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne", 1873

Friedrich Nietzsche, *"On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense"*, 1873