

Introduction

‘We know, or think we know, so much about man, about human nature – and yet we know so little. The terms we employ are names to cover our ignorance; they are abstracted descriptions which never give us the concrete wholeness of human lives nor explain the rich complexity of human experience.’

(Pfuetze, 1975)¹

Our understanding of the human self remains far from comprehensive. In fact there is still little or no general agreement about what selves actually are. Contemporary approaches are still very much afflicted by the same enigmatic paradoxes and contradictions that have plagued this subject for centuries. Simultaneously, it seems, the self is both ‘me’ and ‘I’; it is both the object of experience and the experiencing subject; it is both the source and the product of identity; it is immanent and physiological yet transcendent and immaterial; it is unique, singular and individual, but also universal, plural and relational. These are the sorts of issues that are referred to generically as ‘the problem of the self’.

The focus of this book is upon a single one of these paradoxes – the multiplicity and unity of self. The intuition we each have of ourselves as a unified and continuous person over time is seemingly amongst the most basic of all human experiences, but we perhaps ought not to take this for granted. Certainly, it has proved very difficult to explain, either philosophically or psychologically. This much can be deduced from the vast literature that is dedicated to the problem in one form or another. But even if a complete explanation of self-unity eludes us, can we not agree that a sense of disunity – a sense of being multiple rather than singular – would be profoundly abnormal?

This perception of self-disunity has a very long history. It is at least as old as the idea of the inner self, as the creator of the inner self, St Augustine, makes clear in his *Confessions*.² The biblical story of the Gerasene demoniac also brings the strangeness of self-multiplicity into sharp relief. According to the account in Mark’s gospel, Jesus casts out a number of demons from a man who, when asked his name, makes plain his disunity with the words, ‘My name is Legion, for we are many.’ Once the legion of demons (and so the disunity) have been expelled, the man returns to his right mind. The story has received a variety of allegorical interpretations, and it would clearly be a mistake strictly to interpret Legion’s condition in the terms of modern psychology, but the identification both of self-multiplicity with madness, and singularity with normality is striking nonetheless.

1 Pfuetze (1975) p.23.

2 St Augustine (1961), Book VIII.

Our ideas about the abnormality of self-multiplicity, however, may have to change. Amongst all the philosophical disagreement is an emerging acquiescence that a degree of self-multiplicity is the norm. The contemporary self has become destabilised, both theoretically and experientially, as modernity's individualism continues to retreat from the postmodern world. Individualism's gradual but relentless decline, and increasing contemporary scepticism about the unified self-creating person have both been charted in a number of influential works, including Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1992), Carver Yu's *Being and Relation: A Theological Critique of Western Dualism and Individualism* (1987) and Kenneth Gergen's *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Modern Life* (1991). Whereas the unity of the experiencing subject has always been philosophically problematic, a broad consensus suggests that the self's existential predicament became increasingly precarious as local communities and their idiosyncratic customs and traditions gave way to the globalised society. Individuals ceased to define themselves in simple monolithic terms as the range of competing demands upon their self-images proliferated. In the final decades of the twentieth century, the fragmenting process is supposed to have accelerated rapidly as technological innovations created new and more devastating ways to strip the self of its coherence. As the traditional sources of identity crumbled away, a novel and distinctive kind of identity emerged characterised by its multiplicity, mobility, ephemerality and superficiality.

As well as the obvious interest such dramatic change holds for sociologists and historians, philosophically, the conceptual dethroning of the unified essential subject evokes questions about the basic importance of continuity and unity to concepts of self and identity, and gives renewed impetus to critiques of the substantial self. Psychologically, this idea points to a hitherto unrealised malleability of developmental processes, and to the complexity of the relationship between the social fabric of reality and private experiences of self. For Christian theology, the implications seem even more severe, since the possibility of such change must be considered in relation to fundamental Christian ideas about our createdness in God's image, our enduring particularity as individual beings, and our relatedness to God.

From a psychological perspective, the unity of the individual has traditionally seemed so intuitively plausible that, historically, few have resigned themselves to a conception of the human being as an irredeemable plurality of completely autonomous sub-components. Even Hume, whose intimate self-reflection led him to the conclusion that no self existed behind the multitude of beliefs, desires, impressions and emotions that an individual human being is subject to, acknowledged that the positing of an enduring self-reflexively unified subject was an inescapable practical reality.³ Certainly, from the advent of modern psychology, self-unity has been a recurrent and popular theme. For example, William James, one of the pioneers of modern psychology, famously ascribed unity to consciousness

3 Hume 1941.

itself, whereas the symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead appealed to a concept of the generalised other to explain the intuitive sense of an underlying unity beneath the multiplicity of social selves.⁴ Yet both implicitly acknowledged that concepts of self-multiplicity and unity are not necessarily polar opposites, and most subsequent psychological theorising in this area has proceeded according to a subtle understanding of their interrelationship. Hence structural, processual and phenomenological explanations of self-unity have been combined in various forms, and with varying degrees of coherence, with concepts of self-multiplicity.

Contemporary theologians are broadly agreed that the extreme individualistic concepts of person and self that dominated modern secular thought until relatively recently require fundamental revision, but the theological response to the postmodern fragmentation of self is polarised. Some, such as the radically orthodox theologian John Milbank, and the 'sea of faith' movement (though they approach postmodern theology from very different perspectives) see great liberation in the dissolution of the metanarratives that have constrained modern theorising, and celebrate the disappearance of the unitary essential subject. Others are more suspicious and have sought to preserve a notion of unified and particular social personhood that strongly relativistic and individualistic theories forsake. It is in this context, in its pastoral concern for postmodernity's unstable selves, that theology's interest in the unity and fragmentation of the self has most often encouraged a dialogue with the human sciences.

Most frequently that dialogue has been geared towards understanding and remedying those distortions in the interrelationship of (post)modern individuals, society and culture deemed responsible for the self's diminishing coherence. In this context, self-multiplicity is almost always treated as pathological in some sense, not as the natural even adaptive development that much of the human sciences now assume it to be. This is despite a concerted effort by several theologians to engage with contemporary psychology in formulating interdisciplinary theories of self and identity to rejuvenate contemporary theological anthropology. Notable works in this area include Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (1985) and his three-volume *Systematic Theology* (1991–7), and Alistair McFadyen's *The Call to Personhood. A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (1990a). Several authors have even examined sociological and philosophical accounts of self-fragmentation from a theological perspective, notably Anthony Thiselton in *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self: On Meaning Manipulation and Promise* (1995), Vernon White in *Paying Attention to People: An Essay on Individualism and Christian Belief* (1997), and Stanley Grenz in *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (2001). However, in these works, as elsewhere, the theological assumption that a healthy self is always a unified self remains unquestioned. My arguments in this book strongly challenge this assumption.

4 James 1890; Mead 1934, 1981

There is, unfortunately, a dearth of theological literature that engages with alternative depictions of the self in recent secular thought, despite a resurgence of theological interest in personhood in the 1990s. Alistair McFadyen, Vernon White, Anthony Thiselton and Colin Gunton, for example, though each chastises modernity for its individualism, also fail to do justice to recent psychological and sociological accounts of the plural self. Rather, the unity of the self is more or less taken for granted. It is a presupposition of their work, not a reasoned conclusion. The failure constructively to engage with this dimension of secular accounts of personhood is mystifying given the potential implications of such radical conceptual revision for our understanding of anthropological doctrine. After all, if the concept of the true and unified self is replaced by a multiplicity of divergent self-images, who or what, exactly, bears God's image? If identities are transitory and fragmented, who or what is burdened by sin, and who is finally redeemed by Christ?

This book is not a philosophical investigation into the epistemological or ontological status of the self in recent theology or an attempt to position contemporary theological anthropology in relation to modernism or postmodernism in general. Nor is it a work of apologetics or systematic theology. It is primarily a critical evaluation of the recent relationship between theological anthropology and the human sciences with respect to the concepts of self, personhood and identity. I undertake three major tasks. First, I provide an extensive critical examination of recent human-scientific thinking about self-multiplicity and self-unity. Secondly, I aim to explain theology's reticence to engage with the concept of self-plurality as it appears in the contemporary human sciences through an original critique of contemporary theological anthropology's appropriation of psychological theories and concepts. Thirdly, using the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Alistair McFadyen to illustrate my arguments, I explore the possibilities for a constructive dialogue between contemporary theological anthropology and psychology on the unity of personhood. The brightest prospects for future dialogue in this area, I believe, are presented by narrative psychological approaches to identity. The notion of narrative identity has recently received considerable attention from the human sciences and although several theologians have already begun to engage with this body of theories, its potential to form a solid foundation for an interdisciplinary dialogue is far from being fully recognised.

The first chapter introduces the idea that there is no single unitary discourse of self-fragmentation. Concepts of self-fragmentation are themselves fragmented and confused by the multitude of different disciplinary contexts in which they originate and evolve. The central aim of this chapter is to situate these ideas in the context of recent theological engagements with the human sciences. Using Vernon White's book *Paying Attention to People* (1997) to illustrate the major areas of dialogue on this subject, I argue that self-fragmentation must be explored in the context of its concrete sociological and psychological manifestations, not just through abstract philosophical analysis. Theology's reticence to engage with contemporary psychological accounts of self-multiplicity, I suggest, lies in the

wish to retain a strong concept of the individual following the philosophical turn to relationality, and the mistaken assumption that the concepts of self-unity and personal particularity are co-dependent.

Chapter 2 tackles the problem of the fragmented self in modern social theory. Here, I explore the widespread ideas that people are now subject to greater fragmenting and destabilising pressures than ever before as a result of unprecedented sociocultural changes, and that the stable unified identities of pre-modernity are gone forever. I argue that there are stronger and weaker descriptions of the changes that characterise the contemporary era, and show how many have turned to concepts of narrative autobiography to explain how people can retain a sense of continuity in spite of the continuous flux of postmodern culture. Although it is widely agreed that the postmodern self has lost the essential unity eulogised by the moderns, it is also clear that many theorists do not necessarily problematise this predicament, and some even celebrate the multiplication of the self as adaptive and emancipatory.

Chapter 3 is divided into two halves. First, I offer support for the idea that, psychologically, self-multiplicity and self-unity can be conceived in a variety of different ways, which reflect very different agendas. I consequently introduce two broad theoretical distinctions in order to facilitate a nuanced understanding of self-multiplicity. On the one hand, I distinguish between representational and experiential theories of selfhood, and on the other, I distinguish between theories of diachronic and synchronic self-multiplicity. In the second half of this chapter, I explore the concept of self-multiplicity in relation to representational theories of self, particularly theories of cognitive schemata. I suggest that people naturally form a variety of enduring concepts of self, which remain relatively autonomous from one another. According to this way of conceptualising self-multiplicity, it is both inevitable and adaptive.

The fourth chapter examines multiplicity and unity from the perspective of experiential theories of self. I explore the possibility that all people, whether or not they suffer from psychological disorders have the capacity to experience themselves in very different ways from moment to moment. The analysis is led by a discussion of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). I argue that at any given moment, the ‘normal’ person has a unified sense of self, but that over the course of a life, individuals each construct a variety of relatively autonomous sub-personalities. What primarily distinguishes DID sufferers from normal people, I argue, is the fact that DID sufferers are unable to lay claim to their experiences in such a way as to be able to tell a single coherent life story. They lack ‘narrative coherence’. Drawing upon a rapidly expanding psychological literature devoted to the construction of ‘narrative identity’, I explain how the ‘normal’ individual can still manage to retain a sense of singularity despite the plurality of self.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I reconnect my analysis of self-multiplicity and unity to the recent theological dialogue with contemporary psychology. Using the conceptual scheme developed in Chapters 3 and 4, my specific aim in Chapter 5 is to establish what sorts of self-unity are deemed important to these projects. My arguments here

are directed towards the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Alistair McFadyen, who, in their respective engagements with psychology, make very similar claims regarding the unity of self. Theologically, I demonstrate, both place their primary emphasis upon the continuity of identity. Their opinions on this matter, I suggest, are shaped significantly by their interpretations of the doctrine of *imago Dei*.

I turn to the explicitly psychological aspects of Pannenberg's and McFadyen's anthropologies in Chapter 6, and examine their respective theories of identity formation. Once again, both make similar strong claims regarding the unity of self and identity. Pannenberg's theory of identity formation, I argue, conflates different understandings of self and personal unity. Hence, although he wishes first and foremost to explain the individual's sense of enduring identity and the unity of the sense of self at any given moment, he also indirectly supports the idea that the self is representationally unified at any given moment and over time. This leads to a damaging inflexibility in his account of the sense of self, in which all forms of self-multiplicity are implicitly pathologised through their identification with sinfulness. McFadyen's theory of the individual in social relationships is subject to many of the same criticisms as Pannenberg's theory of identity formation. Although McFadyen employs a radically different concept of self and identity to Pannenberg, he also elaborates a theory of personhood that is too inflexible (by the general standards of contemporary psychology) to account for the radical changes to the sources of identity that characterise the postmodern era. Once again, I argue, this is due to a failure to recognise that self-unity and multiplicity can be described in a variety of different ways and are not necessarily incompatible concepts. Both McFadyen's and Pannenberg's theories of identity formation bring them within the purview of narrative psychology. I propose that a closer engagement with the concept of narrative identity might lead to the resolution of many of the difficulties that I identify with their theories.

In this final chapter, I summarise my conclusions regarding the status of self-multiplicity in the contemporary dialogue between psychology and theology. To date the dialogue has yielded some extremely beneficial insights, but it currently struggles to transcend its overriding concern with debunking modern individualism and the associated discourses of isolation, fragmentation and self-alienation. A greater specificity and systematicity is called for if it is to remain a genuine dialogue, and a more explicit engagement with narrative approaches to personhood is strongly endorsed.

Although this book is primarily concerned with debates about self-multiplicity and unity, it also engages with fundamental questions about the relationship between theological and secular scientific accounts of personhood. It seeks to reposition interdisciplinary work in this area in relation to wider cultural and philosophical issues, particularly those arising from the postmodern disintegration of the autonomous individual. Such a theoretically pluralistic approach to the study of the self hopefully makes a significant contribution to theology's ongoing dialogue with the human sciences. Despite the popular opinion that theological anthropology and the human sciences still have much to say to each other on the

subject of the self, the continued disregard for a significant body of psychological and social theory risks compromising the broader dialogue. The implications of the current imbalance extend far beyond the realm of abstract psychological concepts, and affect theological anthropology's ability adequately to address the dramatic sociocultural changes of the last 50 years. If it is to remain in touch with contemporary theorising, theological anthropology cannot afford to ignore these issues. Above all else, this book seeks to address and rectify this oversight.