

Articles

FIRST PERSON PLURAL: SELF-UNITY AND SELF-MULTIPLICITY IN THEOLOGY'S DIALOGUE WITH PSYCHOLOGY

by *Léon P. Turner*

Abstract. In contradistinction to the contemporary human sciences, recent theological accounts of the individual-in-relation continue to defend the concept of the singular continuous self. Consequently, theological anthropology and the human sciences seem to offer widely divergent accounts of the sense of self-fragmentation that many believe pervades the modern world. There has been little constructive interdisciplinary conversation in this area. In this essay I address the damaging implications of this oversight and establish the necessary conditions for future dialogue. I have three primary objectives. First, I show how the notion of personal continuity acquires philosophical theological significance through its close association with the concept of personal particularity. Second, through a discussion of contemporary accounts of self-multiplicity, I clarify the extent of theological anthropology's disagreement with the human sciences. Third, I draw upon narrative accounts of identity to suggest an alternative means of understanding the experiential continuity of personhood that maintains the tension between self-plurality, unity, and particularity and thereby reconnects philosophical theological concerns with human-scientific analyses of the human condition. Narrative approaches to personhood are ideally suited to this purpose, and, I suggest, offer an intriguing solution to understanding and resolving the problem of self-fragmentation that has caused recent theological anthropology so much consternation.

Keywords: dialogue; human sciences; identity; individual; narrative psychology; particularity; personal-continuity; personhood; relationality; self; self-fragmentation; self-multiplicity; self-unity; singularity; theological anthropology

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THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE CRISIS
OF PERSONHOOD

Anthony Thiselton writes, "What is fundamental in theology, finds resonance in all human experience, namely the identity of the self through time as one who loves and is loved" (1995, 74). For Wolfhart Pannenberg, "human unity carries over into self-consciousness, and it makes itself felt at every point in the form of anxiety about the self and of care with regard to its self-affirmation" (1985, 106). Further recent theological assertions of the indivisible wholeness of persons are to be found in the anthropological writings of Ray Anderson (1982), Alistair McFadyen (1990), John Macquarrie (1982), Stanley Grenz (2001), Christoph Schwöbel (1991), Michael Welker (2000), and others. Paradoxically, perhaps, it also is recognized that people sometimes experience themselves as disunified or fragmented. Whether or not self-consciousness is unified, of course, is a very old philosophical problem, but it has resurfaced in theological anthropology, albeit rather timidly, amid the wreckage of modernity's individualism and the turn to relationality that has ensued.

Anglican theologian Vernon White, for example, suggests that the pervasive sense of self-fragmentation, which he identifies with a profound sense of psychological discomfort, is the culmination of modernity's misguided social and philosophical project. He argues that the stable moral traditions of premodernity have been corrupted or displaced by a profusion of disparate subcultures, and people now find it more difficult to maintain a consistent sense of self. For White, the modern focus upon disengaged autonomy inspires the concept of a private self that is conceptually distinct from our social roles and relations, meaning that we have "set up an internal sense of alienation from ourselves, and mental strain is the price that is paid" (White 1996, 50). Although the rise of modernity may have been unsettling, its decline has been cataclysmic. White argues that the opacity and destabilizing rhetoric that has attended a recent flood of anti-modernist critiques has elicited deep "pangs of personal anxiety about our existence" (1996, 6). He elaborates: "If we have been forced to become fractured people flailing around desperately for new horizons of meaning and relation; then these profound conceptual and ontological confusions will also have made us psychologically and socially unstable" (1996, 57).

Whereas White focuses mainly upon the failure of individualism, Thiselton tackles the problem of self-fragmentation that was induced by modernity's assassin. He argues, "The self of postmodernity has become *de-centred*. It no longer regards itself as active agent carving out any possibility with the aid of natural and social sciences, but as an opaque product of variable roles and performances which have been imposed upon it by the constraints of society and by its own inner drives or conflicts" (1995,

121). Thiselton describes a self that is simultaneously pulled in many different directions and denied the self-sufficiency and optimism with which it was endowed by modernity. People must find it difficult, he assumes, to reconcile such disorder with their beliefs in their abiding unity, meaning that uncertainty and anguish will prevail. Like White, Thiselton believes a revitalized Christian understanding of the unified self and the proper foundation of an ethical community shaped by the Christian church will have the power to relieve the angst of fragmentation and restore unity to both society and individuals alike.

Theological discussions of self-fragmentation, however rare they may be, are almost always accompanied by the suggestion that the unstable fragmented self may be healed through evangelizing Christian understandings of personal relationality. More often than not, however, theologians who wish to preserve a strong concept of the individual person-in-relation have set out to explain the self's enduring unity without ever considering the possibility of its disunity. Wherever self-fragmentation does become an issue, it is portrayed as some sort of transient psychological aberration. This is seemingly reflected in the theological preference for the term *self-fragmentation*, which carries overtones of a psychopathology that is manifest in the conflict between a person's various self-investments.¹

Clearly, the crisis of contemporary personhood that White, Thiselton, and others describe has philosophical, theological, sociological, and psychological dimensions. It would therefore seem to be a perfect candidate for a truly interdisciplinary study. Unfortunately, the dialogue between this species of theological anthropology and the human sciences on these matters has not yet realized its potential, and there are some major theoretical discrepancies between their respective accounts of self-unity and fragmentation. Perhaps the most remarkable of these, as I explain further on, strikes at the very heart of these theologians' largely unquestioned presupposition—the singularity of the individual self. The first step toward clarifying the nature and extent of the disagreement, then, must be to examine the basis of their claim that the proper form of the human person is both unified and singular.² In those theological anthropologies that have embraced the relationality of individual personhood, the significance of this claim can be clearly discerned in discussions of personal particularity.³

SELF-UNITY, PARTICULARITY, AND RELATIONALITY

Welker observes that “key anthropological concepts (the individual, the I, the subject) *mediate between the individual as a ‘unique one’ and the individual as ‘an example or representative of the species’*” (2000, 96). The duality of meaning inherent to these terms is essential to the understanding of our common genetic and cultural heritage and simultaneously constrains the range of possible variability between distinct individuals. Generally

speaking, the human sciences explain individual differences in terms of discrete social, physiological, and psychological developmental histories. This is an obvious but important point, for the temporal contingency of the individual self is a principle that stands behind all theories of personal identity, irrespective of the specific theoretical framework in which the theories are based. Theologically, this is crucial. Whereas psychologists and sociologists may be interested in individual differences, Christian theologians make the much stronger point that each individual is necessarily completely unique; no two individuals ever have been or ever will be identical.⁴

Existentially, we can acknowledge, as John D. Zizioulas does, that the desire to answer the question Who am I? is “a primordial cry, stemming from the fact that man is faced with a *given* world, and thus forced into self-assertion always via comparison with other beings *already* existing,” and also that the *I* itself is a “claim of being in a unique and unrepeatable way” (1991, 34–35). It is, as White says, as much an ethical as an existential claim:

Whatever basis and conception of individual uniqueness is adopted, its significance for the value of individuals is enormous. A unique centre of consciousness and subjectivity generates a sense of value in various ways. . . . For there is a compelling connection between the perception of uniqueness, irreplaceability and mattering. . . . Such notions (taken together) help convey the very meaning of human existence. (White 1996, 32)

In the Christian tradition, it is both as distinct individuals and as a species as a whole that human beings are compelled to respond to God’s call.

One of the many theological attractions of the theological turn to relationality is the solution it offers to this ancient problem. The particularity of personhood can be secured by understanding individuals in terms of the unique patterns of relations that exist between them, God, and the rest of creation. Here, the relations themselves are the distinctive features of human beings. Individualism failed to account for personal particularity because the self was conceptualized as an unchanging essence that stood apart from the social world and therefore could be understood only in terms of very general characteristics; its representativeness was emphasized at the expense of its uniqueness. As Colin Gunton writes, “If you are real and important not as you particularly are, with your own distinctive strengths and weaknesses, bodily shape and genetic pattern, family history and structure, loves and sorrows, but as the bearer of some general characteristics, what makes you distinctively you becomes irrelevant” (1993, 46).

But particularity is diminished also if individuals are deemed to be constituted entirely by their relations at any given moment. In such a case, the person becomes an interchangeable node in a network of relations; there is nothing distinctive about any given individual in the network other than their location in that network. As McFadyen observes,

If individual identities were to be equated with the moments of their particular responses, then they would have no reality beyond their active engagement in particular relations. The partners to a relation would then be nothing more than turns within it. There could be no sense of continuity to account for the way in which the same individual may be a “turn” in not one but many relations. (1990, 73–74)

Defending the particularity of personhood, then, also entails a tacit rejection of strong postmodern relativism. Postmodernism famously “swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is” (Harvey 1989, 41). Having dissolved personhood into an unconnected series of momentary episodes, the postmodernists place their focus exclusively upon the flux of relations and artificiality.⁵ Not only is there no room for the particularity of personhood in this understanding; there is no room for personhood at all.⁶

At the heart of this theological rejection of both postmodernism and individualism, then, lies the perceived failure to account for the distinctiveness of individual personhood in terms of its unique historical situatedness. In both cases particularity is compromised by the denial of the self’s temporal constitution and thus its unique history of experience. This is central, for people are not just incidental to their historical situation; they are both the products of their histories and the shapers of their futures. Hence, the unity of the self, conceived as an enduring continuity through time, is indispensable to these theological accounts of relational particular personhood. Crucially, however, this is a continuity that embraces changeability over time. The self is continuous by virtue of its relationality, not in spite of it. To deny its changeability is to isolate the self from its interactions with God and the social world once more and thus to reduce it to universal characteristics.

So, there is a sense in which the struggle to defend concepts of the individual-in-relation in the face of relativism and individualism can be recast as a philosophical struggle to defend the conceptual continuity of personhood. It must be noted, though, that despite a general family resemblance underlying relational approaches to personhood, they are not homogenous. Some, including Gunton, Zizioulas, and Schwöbel, affirm the indispensability of personal continuity indirectly by grounding the particularity of personhood explicitly in a perichoretic understanding of the Triune God. Schwöbel even argues that the relationality of human being, “rooted in the relationship of the triune God to humanity,” is *the* distinctive Christian anthropological thesis (1991, 142). These approaches depend upon the grounding of historical concepts of personhood in patristic thought and the drawing of an analogy between the trinitarian Persons and human persons. Gunton, for example, writes, “if persons are, like the persons of the Trinity . . . *hypostases*, concrete and particular, then their particularity too is central to their being” (1993, 196). Pannenberg takes a different approach by making an explanation of the apparent continuity of personhood

throughout personal development a primary goal of his anthropology and seeking theological significance in the anthropological data itself (see Pannenberg 1985). McFadyen (1990), on the other hand, establishes the importance of personal continuity in theological terms and only then goes on to describe how this might be understood psychologically. Despite various differences between these approaches, the concept of personal continuity is essential to each.

But alongside these conceptual concerns, as I have suggested, lies an equally deep concern for the *experiential* continuity of the individual. Theological anthropologists have tended to assume not just that people *are* continuous particular beings but also that people must *experience* themselves as continuous beings. It is an important distinction. After all, the sociocultural crisis described by White and Thiselton threatens the experience but not the metaphysical basis of personal continuity. Quite apart from the anxiety that allegedly arises from the experience of self-fragmentation, the capacity both to experience oneself as continuous and particular and to treat others as continuous particular beings with individual histories and futures, as White, McFadyen, and Pannenberg all recognize, has tremendous ethical significance. Pannenberg ties these principles together neatly when he writes, "Those who make a promise that they can keep only many years later, or over a whole life, have to retain their identity if they are to meet the promise" (1994, 202).

The philosophical and theological significance of personal continuity in its metaphysical and existential dimensions is clear, but this discourse has further implications that are significant as regards theology's relationship with the human sciences. According to the theological perspective I have outlined here, personal continuity is coterminous with the singularity of self: The sense of being a continuous person is dependent upon the sense of being singular. Certainly, there is a dearth of theological literature addressing the possibility that a sense of self-fragmentation may reflect an underlying multiplicity of self. Even theologians who have engaged in explicit dialogue with psychology strongly emphasize the individual person's structural and experiential singularity (Pannenberg 1985; McFadyen 1990). Self-fragmentation is understood as a disruption of a person's sense of continuity precisely because of the impact it has upon a person's sense of being one and the same person over time.

Unfortunately, this all stands in explicit contradiction to most contemporary psychological and sociological accounts of personhood, which challenge both the idea that the sense of self-fragmentation is necessarily pathological and the idea that the self is singular. Although the consensus is not yet unanimous, there is now widespread agreement that the differences between the ways people behave and experience themselves from moment to moment reflect the actual structural and experiential plurality of self.

SELF-MULTIPLICITY IN THE HUMAN SCIENCES

Sociologically, as is well known, the plurality of self is most commonly grounded in the cultural conditions of postmodernity—a combination of potent destabilizing influences, including the proliferation of ephemeral trends and fashions and the rapid expansion of global communications. Collectively they have eroded selfhood's traditional foundations in local communities and expedited the development of a "postmodern consciousness" that precludes personal experience of singularity and unity.⁷ Essentially, people need to produce more and more personas as they adapt to their rapidly changing surroundings, and this adaptability is manifest in a constant shifting between practically independent identities. Consequently, the argument goes, people have become discontinuous casts of characters, each of which is ascribed a degree of autonomy and independence (also see Rowan and Cooper 1999; Rappoport, Baumgardner, and Boone 1999). Kenneth Gergen (1991) coined the term "multiphrenia" to describe this distinctively postmodern condition.

Psychologically, there are many ways to describe the inherent multiplicity of selfhood (see Ashmore and Jussim 1997; Rowan and Cooper 1999). William James famously observed that a person could be considered to have "as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind" (1890, 294). But it is not just social psychologists who have turned away from the idea of the unified singular self. Cognitive psychologists have argued that multiple schematized self-concepts direct individual behavior according to specific circumstances and allow predictions of the likely outcome of events based upon previous experience (Markus and Wurf 1987). In attempting to establish the validity of a computational metaphor for mind, these psychologists (especially in the formative years of the discipline) were driven by the need to describe mind and self in terms of subsystems and programmes, and remain convinced that such plurality is an inevitable by-product of a complex cognitive system.⁸

Psychologists always have struggled to account for the variation between the ways people appear to both themselves and others in different social situations. The idea that the inherently unified person is capable of adopting a number of context-specific social roles has been commonplace for more than a century, but in recent years this notion has retreated, and a much deeper sense of multiplicity has emerged at the subpersonal level. As psychologists have turned a critical eye upon modernity's infatuation with systematicity and unity, the idea that these social roles may actually represent more autonomous ways of being, and entail genuinely distinct and potentially enduring senses of self, has come to the fore.⁹ Indeed, the existence of multiple subpersonalities (or subselves) now receives almost unqualified clinical, experimental, and common anecdotal support.¹⁰ As

Mick Cooper argues, “many—if not all—individuals, encounter their world through a variety of different ‘modes’ . . . These modes of Being are not ‘things’ within a ‘psyche,’ but stances: tendencies towards particular constellations of behavioural, affective, and cognitive acts-in-the-world” (1999, 66). In a similar vein, psychologists Herbert Hermans and Harry Kempen (1993) have proposed a theory of the “dialogical self” in which the self is constituted by a multitude of different “I-positions,” each possessed of a unique “voice.” According to these self-pluralistic perspectives, selves are seen no longer as distinct autonomous entities but rather as dispositions toward experiencing oneself in different ways in different contexts, which develop in and through social interaction. Our experiences of everyday life precipitate a successive alternation between subpersonalities, which may be instantaneous, radical, and relatively enduring or merely partial and ephemeral (Markus and Wurf 1987; Gergen and Gergen 1988; Braude 1991; Gergen 1991; McAdams 1985; 1997; Cooper 1999; Rowan 1999).

Furthermore, neither contemporary sociology nor psychology necessarily imbues the multiplicity of self with any specifically negative connotations. Many secular theorists see the postmodern pluralization of the self as a positive social adaptation—a means of coping with a complex world. Zygmunt Bauman (2001), Gergen (1991; 2002), and Robert Lifton (1973) are among the more optimistic of postmodern writers, seeing opportunities everywhere for revival, renewal, and the creative construction of new self-images, all enabled by the demise of the unified self. Joseph Davis summarizes this optimism well: “In these celebratory versions of postmodernism, the performative ability to transcend and reconstitute one’s self is the very definition of freedom” (2000, 156). Leon Rappoport, Steve Baumgardner, and G. Boone have argued that the normalization of self-pluralism is a distinctively postmodern contribution to concepts of mental health, suggesting that “What *is* new, and essentially postmodern, is the idea that pluralism is not necessarily bad, or something to be reduced or eliminated in favor of hierarchical integration” (Rappoport, Baumgardner, and Boone 1999, 96; see also Fee 2000).

We are thus forced to acknowledge a degree of methodological and conceptual disharmony between the human sciences and theological accounts of the individual-in-relation. The former, at ease with the idea of multiple selves existing side by side, normalize the experience of disunity to an extent that the latter find unacceptable. Theologians have largely conceptualized the sense of self-fragmentation as a tension between the multiple investments of a singular self as they constantly vie for supremacy. Uncertainty and anxiety, I have argued, are a product of the conflict between a person’s experience of disunity and his or her prior belief that people are singular and continuous entities. Given the identification, here, of personal continuity and self-singularity, and the concomitant neglect of the possibility that a sense of personal disunity reflects a natural structural

plurality of self, it is inevitable that all experiences of disunity will be interpreted as pathological. Consequently, the perceived causes of self-fragmentation, namely the sociocultural conditions of postmodernity, are themselves condemned in the strongest possible terms. The usual theological solution to the problem has been to reaffirm the unity and continuity of personhood and to encourage the wider dissemination of this knowledge in and through the community of the Christian church. Although Linda Woodhead deliberately caricatures this approach to both understanding and resolving the contemporary crisis of personhood, she accurately portrays the broad consensus when she writes, "it is the task of the Christian to reassert belief in a self given by God and a God who gives himself to the self. By such a means, Christianity can reassert belief in love and relationality, and so 'dissolve the acids of suspicion and deception'" (1999, 69).

Ultimately, both the wholesale condemnation of postmodern society in which White, Thiselton, and others engage and the assumption that self-fragmentation is always pathological depend upon a naive psychological thesis of the continuity and singularity of self, which, as often as not, is grounded in prior philosophical and theological arguments, not upon psychological or sociological data or theory. Unfortunately, this ubiquitous focus upon self-unity leads to an understanding of personhood that seems unnecessarily restrictive from the human sciences' point of view. What must be understood theologically as transient pathological disruptions of the singular self, the human sciences can see as the natural, even adaptive, ability to switch between alternative modes of being as and when circumstances demand. Where theologians have seen intolerable tension and an urgent need for reunification, the human sciences often see freedom, creative space, and a celebration of diversity.

All of this serves to alienate much of recent theological anthropology from the human sciences and compromises an otherwise flourishing dialogue. The lack of engagement between theological accounts of self-unity and an important body of psychological and sociological literature concerning the multiplicity of self can lead only to theoretical isolation and will further incubate the suspicion with which the disciplines too often regard each other. On one hand, the human sciences will continue to claim that theologians have little of interest to say about personhood in its contemporary context. On the other hand, theologians will continue to point to the human sciences' failure to understand the historical origins of personhood in Christian thought and thus the meaning of personhood at its deepest levels. Practically speaking, the human sciences will continue to resent theology's self-conferred authority to speak about the human condition and the solution to its problems, and theology's mission to evangelize the benefits of the stability and ethical coherence of the Christian way of life will be all the more difficult as a result.

SELF-UNITY IN NARRATIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Is there anything to be gained from bringing theological and human scientific accounts of personhood into closer contact? Given the extent of the theoretical disparity, is dialogue even possible? Both questions should be answered in the affirmative. It clearly is unrealistic to expect a complete integration of their respective aims, ideals, and methodologies, but perhaps it is possible to reduce the friction between their accounts of individual personhood without forsaking certain core principles on each side. The success of this enterprise as a whole will depend upon a successful mediation between theology's concerns with personal continuity and particularity and the human sciences' focus upon the inherent plurality of self. If there is to be reconciliation, the tension between the sense of personal continuity, the structural multiplicity of self, and the diversity of modes of self-experience must be maintained, not resolved on one side or the other. What is required, then, is a way of understanding personal continuity that is not tied so tightly to the structural or experiential singularity of self. Hence, in the final part of this essay, I explore a possible means through which theological anthropology might contextualize self-multiplicity rather than rejecting or pathologizing it.

The human sciences have not yet completely forsaken all notions of self-unity, although these are now largely restricted to minimalist understandings of the continuous person that pay due heed to the plurality of self. The distinction between the person and the self here is critical, because it is largely agreed that whatever unity can be ascribed to human being must be ascribed at the personal level, not at the subpersonal level where psychologists have grounded so many models of selves. Generally speaking, the human sciences continue to speak about unity through narrative approaches to identity, which now command so much attention.¹¹ Narrative perspectives do not replace the need for a variety of ways and means of talking about selves and persons, fragmented or otherwise, but they represent the last bastion of hope for those who seek a modicum of existential cohesion amid the complexity and diversity of individual psychological life.

By appealing to the concept of narrative identity, weaker postmodern theories, such as that described by Bauman, especially in his later works, continue to make space for the individual who enjoys the continuity of a reflexively constructed personal narrative (or life story). It is the process of narration that gives a sort of unity to the episodic moments of a person's life. There is still no room for a "hidden inside" to the person, there is no core self or essence and no overarching unified subject that stands behind the mask of a particular social role, but there is space for a personal history of experience and thus a sense of particularity. Bauman, who emphasizes the episodic nature and discontinuity of contemporary life so strongly,

introduces the term *identification* to replace *identity*, which still carries overtures of a solid core to the self. He writes, “Perhaps instead of talking about identities, inherited or acquired, it would be more in keeping with the realities of the globalizing world to speak of *identification*, a never-ending, always incomplete, unfinished and open-ended activity in which we all, by necessity or by choice, are engaged” (2001, 152).

As Rom Harré notes, the “organizing narrative” is now also the dominant motif of a burgeoning psychological literature addressing the problem of the self’s coherence over time (1998, 87). Narrative approaches are by no means homogenous, and some strong constructivist notions do reduce selves and persons to the moments of their relations; I am a self only inasmuch as I am part of a given relationship at a given time.¹² But, more commonly perhaps, the idea of the organizing narrative refers simply to the principle that every person who uses the personal pronoun *I* uses it somehow to claim experiences for him- or herself and index them as events in a personal history of existing. This is the approach favored by Dan McAdams, for example, who, like Bauman, describes the subject in process terms as an ongoing construction of identity rather than a static experiencing entity (McAdams 1993; 1997). The *I* of individual experience for McAdams is a product of “selfing”: “To self—or to maintain the ‘stance’ of an ‘I’ in the world—is to apprehend and appropriate experience as a subject, to grasp phenomenal experience as one’s own, as belonging ‘to me.’ To self, furthermore, is to locate the source of subjective experience as oneself” (1997, 56).

From this perspective, moments of conscious self-experience are linked together through the telling of personal stories. Narratization encourages a sense of being diachronically singular—of having been, and continuing to be, a continuous person over time, regardless of the different senses of self that may have inhered in different ways at different times. A single person, of course, can tell a variety of stories about his or her life.¹³ A self-narrative is not a singular objective history of self-development, and the process of narratization neither structurally unifies self-images into a coherent whole nor unifies experiences of self from moment to moment; it merely allows someone to recount the transition from one self-image and one experience of self to another. From the narrative perspective, a person is revealed in the act of telling stories, it is not just *what* we tell stories about.¹⁴ The multiplicity of self, however it is conceived, is not diminished by this process. Different modes of being give rise to minor episodic narratives that often are nested one within the other, and find their coherence—their limited unity—only through their participation in a larger whole.¹⁵ The life-story relates the narrative contexts of discrete selves to each other as if they were the characters and plots of a novel, each of which is identified with a particular set of experiences, and none of which represents a single true or authentic self. The continuity of the narrative as a

whole remains in tension with the multiplicity and occasional discontinuity of its contributory subplots.

In narrative terms, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, the answer to the question of “who” is, “I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else’s,” but the concept of narrative identity does not just supply a means of accounting for phenomenological self-unity (1981, 202). It also provides a means of grounding historically significant forms of personhood in the contemporary social milieu and understanding the dramatic changes to personhood that have been wrought by the social upheaval of the late modern or postmodern turn. After all, personal narratives, as Harré insists, “depend for their structure as much on the conventions for narrating lives as the historical verisimilitude of their accounts of the events they describe” (1998, 87). These narrative traditions provide the rules for storytelling and the context in which individuals situate themselves and others. Individual narrative identities are likely to be highly context-specific; one would expect persons from different places at different times to narrate their own personal autobiographies in different ways. In the complex contemporary world, where the rules of storytelling are less well-defined than they were, it is only to be expected that individuals draw upon more than one narrative tradition to write their autobiographies.

If identity is understood in narrative terms, we have a means of understanding how individual persons can remain continuous despite the structural plurality of self and the diversity of modes of self-experience. This is achieved by effectively divorcing the concept of personal continuity from any notion of the singularity of self. Narrative approaches to identity do not deny the relationality of personhood. Nor do they conflict with the philosophical theological principle that people are continuous, because a plurality of selves can be just as enduring as a singular self. However, they have the added advantages both of reattaching discourses of personhood to sociological and psychological theory and data and of keeping the multiplicity of self and the sense of continuity in tension without lapsing into relativism or individualism.

THEOLOGY, NARRATIVE, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE

Thus far, theology’s dialogue with the human sciences has not adequately encompassed the sort of narrative psychological approach that does justice to self-multiplicity and self-unity. In many ways this is surprising given that narrative approaches to personhood are now commonplace in theological anthropology. Hans Frei, Stanley Hauerwas, and Thiselton (among others) all have written at length on this subject. Thiselton even acknowledges the role that Paul Ricoeur’s concept of narrative may play in mediating between modernity’s autonomous self and the decentered self of postmodernism as well as its potential to secure the enduring continuity of personhood (Thiselton 1995, 73–78). However, he quickly returns to the

subject of postmodernism's social, ethical, and philosophical inadequacies without ever engaging with specifically psychological theories of self-multiplicity or narrative identity. Thiselton's self remains singular and continuous, despite the plurality of its possible social roles.

There has been some theological engagement with concepts of narrative on important psychological issues. Hauerwas, for example, has tackled the problem of moral development in narrative terms through an analysis of Lawrence Kohlberg (Hauerwas 2001). Ulrike Popp-Baier (2002) has offered a detailed survey of narrative approaches to conversion. Gergen himself (2002) has undertaken a study of the many important implications that narrative approaches might have for practical theological issues. There has even been some (very limited) theological engagement with specifically psychological ideas of narrative identity. McFadyen's book *The Call to Personhood* (1990) belongs in this category. Though he appeals to the concept of narrative autobiography only infrequently, traces of Ricoeur's philosophy are evident, and much of McFadyen's psychological theorizing is appropriated from the work of Harré (specifically his book *Personal Being* [1983]). Harré's own reasons for finding narrative psychology attractive should make McFadyen's work amenable to such an interpretation, but McFadyen never quite breaks away from an abiding concern with self-unity (see Harré 1983).

Perhaps the most significant contribution of narrative approaches to theological discussions of identity, however, concerns the role of the Christian community in reestablishing the stability that postmodernity lacks (Taylor 1992; Thiselton 1995; White 1997; Grenz 2001; Hauerwas 2001). This is the approach that stands behind theological anthropology's proposed "cure" for self-fragmentation. By the early 1970s Hauerwas was already arguing that a narrative understanding of self supplied a crucial dimension to Christian ethics, and he later wrote a famous essay based upon Richard Adams's novel *Watership Down* (1974) in which he reemphasized the significance of narrative traditions in shaping moral communities.¹⁶ According to this strand of thought, it is only the self that is rooted in the stable moral narratives of the church, what Grenz (2001) calls "the ecclesial self," that achieves a unity of purpose and action. Outside this community the self is subject to all the to-ing and fro-ing of (post)modernity and remains a passive victim of its inherently competing interests.

In this approach there is an explicit acknowledgment of the multiple sources of personhood, and a commendable sensitivity to its sociocultural and historical contexts, but attention is also diverted from other ways of understanding self-multiplicity, specifically those described by contemporary psychology. These theologians seek to establish unity through the realignment of the singular self's multiple investments toward a common understanding of the good. Psychological theories of the enduring plurality of self have no part in this project. It is an inspiring attempt to reform

ethical individualism according to the insights of Christian theology, but if we are to take current psychological and sociological theorizing seriously, we must reject the possibility that the specter of self-multiplicity per se will be exorcised by the reformation of stable Christian communities.

If theology's conversation with human scientific approaches to personhood is going to bear the fruit it promises, it cannot skirt over those areas that are potentially problematic. A thorough engagement between narrative psychology and theological anthropology has the potential to yield significant benefits both for theology and the human sciences over and above the reduction of friction between their respective focuses upon self-unity and self-multiplicity. The kind of engagement that I am advocating also implicitly discourages the scattergun theological condemnation of postmodern society that has been all too common in recent years, by supporting a constructive dialogue with various ways of conceiving of self and personhood.¹⁷ After all, not all portrayals of the postmodern self are negative. Such an approach may also benefit the differentiation of genuinely pathological forms of self-multiplicity from those that are natural or even beneficial.

Equally significant are the implications for a theologically sensitive psychology of religion. Certain issues, including the study of fundamentalism, religious experience, conversion, and moral development, to name but a few, stand to be greatly enriched by an analysis of the plurality of self-experiences and representations to which an individual is subject over time. For example, resisting the reduction of the individual-in-relation to a singular self means that the conversion experience need not be understood simply as a complete replacement of an old with a new identity but rather as a complex interplay of old and new attitudes, experiential dispositions, values, and styles of communication. Such complexity is absent from a unitary and singular understanding of self.

Finally, I want to tentatively suggest one other possible benefit of a comprehensive dialogue between theological anthropology and narrative psychology. As I have observed, it is commonly alleged that a sense of existential angst necessarily accompanies the sense of self-fragmentation because this experience conflicts with people's prior beliefs in their enduring unity. The theological solution has been to redouble the search for a secure foundation for personal continuity, and the seemingly obvious alternative—that we embrace our self-multiplicity—has been ignored. If such a multiplicity does indeed compromise the continuity of personhood, it will necessarily be unacceptable theologically. However, if self-multiplicity can exist in harmony with personal continuity, this alternative no longer carries such a threat. Perhaps the personal conflict that theologians have sought to resolve can be alleviated not by seeking to reaffirm a strong sense of self-unity but by surrendering it and accepting that the continuity of personhood is not coterminous with the singularity of the self.

Gergen, in his most famous work, *The Saturated Self*, makes a closely related point. When the postmodern consciousness is fully realized, he suggests, the sacrifice of the idea of an enduring *I* behind different experiences will lead to an escape from the “severe stresses of multiphrenia” (1991, 156). From this perspective, self-alienation is conquered not through the restoration of common stable systems of meaning, or through the discovery of an authentic enduring self, but through the acceptance that persons are fundamentally plural and the relinquishing of the stressful battle to be unified. Gergen attributes a pointed quote to the Arabian poet Sami Ma’ari: “Identities are highly complex, tension filled, contradictory, and inconsistent entities. Only the one who claims to have a simple, definite, and clear-cut identity has an identity problem” (in Gergen 1991, 155). Not everyone will feel comfortable with such an extreme position as Gergen’s, who at times appears to seek release from the angst of multiphrenia through the abnegation of personal responsibility. But it is not necessary to jettison either all possible concepts of self-unity or the ideal of a truly ethical individualism in the process of acknowledging a degree of self-multiplicity. Narrative psychological approaches to identity make just such a coalition between multiplicity and unity possible. The potential benefits of theology’s dialogue with this body of theories, then, are not just theoretical; they may also be profoundly practical, and they should not be dismissed lightly.

NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at the Annual Conference of the BSA Sociology of Religion Study Group, 4 April 2006.

1. Dan McAdams (1997) observes that whereas the term *multiplicity* tends to be used to refer to models of self that advocate an adaptive perspective of multiple selves, *fragmentation* tends to be used when it is discussed in the context of pathology.

2. The historical development of this belief is, of course, exceedingly complex, and I do not attempt to summarize it here. A number of comprehensive accounts capture the complexity of the historical struggle to frame the unity of personhood (see Taylor 1992; Grenz 2001).

3. For a broad survey of the implications for theological anthropology of the philosophical turn to relationality, see Shults 2003.

4. Historically, the struggle to secure the particularity of personhood extends back at least 1,400 years to Boethius’s prototypical conception of the individual. His concept of persons as individual substances of a rational nature (*Rationalis naturae individua substantia*), as Grenz observes (2001, 65–67), is widely agreed to have “provided the impetus” for Western philosophy’s subsequent grounding of unique identity in the self. For further detailed discussion of this point, see Schwöbel 1991; Habgood 1998.

5. Jean Baudrillard (1988) coined the term *hyperreality* to describe the kind of reality that we are forced to accept once we accept that the objective realities of modernity are but products of their own histories of portrayal.

6. Referring to the postmodern critique of the concept of personhood, Calvin Schrag writes, “This motif has taken on a variety of formulations, to wit the ‘death of man,’ the ‘death of the author,’ the ‘deconstruction of the subject,’ the ‘displacement of the ego,’ the ‘dissolution of self-identity,’ and at times a combination of all the above” (1997, 2).

7. The distinction between *postmodernism* and *postmodernity* reflects the academic division between political, epistemological, and theoretical discourse and sociocultural analyses. Postmodernism, in Robert Dunn’s words, refers to a reasonably well-defined “series of theoretical and epistemological claims or positions.” Postmodernity, on the other hand, refers to “an

objective sociohistorical condition rooted in material and technological change and corresponding transformations in the production and consumption of culture" (Dunn 1998, 2).

8. Daniel Dennett (1991), taking this idea to its extreme, argues that the idea of distinct mental modules is sufficient to explain all phenomena that are typically regarded as related to the self and suggests we abandon notions of a superordinate self altogether.

9. See Lifton 1973; Rosenberg and Gara 1985; Markus and Wurf 1987; Braude 1991; Gergen 1991; Hermans and Kempen 1993; McAdams 1997; Rosenberg 1997; Cooper 1999; Rowan 1999; Rappoport, Baumgardner, and Boone 1999; Wilkes 1999. For subpersonalities as "subsystems," see Dennett 1991.

10. John Rowan observes that there are at least twenty-five synonyms for "subpersonalities," including "Ego states, subselves, subidentities, identity states, alter-personalities, deeper potentials and so on" (1999, 12).

11. For recent psychological discussions of narrative identity see Harré 1998; Sarbin 1986; Polkinghorne 1988; Braude 1991; Bruner 1991; Gergen 1994; Ashmore and Jussim 1997; McAdams 1993; 1997; Bauman 2001. For contemporary accounts of the historical development of the concept of narrative in relation to the study of the self, see Polkinghorne 1988; Taylor 1992; Brennan 1990; Grenz 2001.

12. Gergen and Harré, for example, place less emphasis on the individual possession of a given narrative than others. For Gergen and Harré narratives belong to relationships, not to individuals, though they acknowledge that individuals experience the narrative constructions from singular centered points of view (see Gergen 1994; Harré 1998).

13. As Gergen argues, "if selves are realized within social encounters there is good reason to believe that there is *no one* story to tell" (1994, 202).

14. Schrag writes that "the scripting of self retains an open texture, informed by possibilities that the self has not yet actualised, subject to a creative advance toward the future, and as such it should never be construed as simply the sedimentation of past habitual responses" (1997, 40).

15. The notion of nested narratives was introduced by Gergen (1994, 202–3).

16. See Hauerwas 1974; 1981. These ideas were brought to a wider audience by MacIntyre in his seminal work *After Virtue* (1981).

17. Woodhead (1999) is emphatic in her opinion that such an increased sensitivity is necessary.

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