What This Book Is About

Was Socrates right when he said, “The unexamined life is not worth living”? In order to disagree with him, you still have to examine your life. Besides, even if he was right, it doesn’t follow that the examined life is worth living. Was Camus right when he said, “Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined”? There’s only one way to find out.

Asking basic questions about yourself can be painful. Suppose the answers hurt or there aren’t any. You may wish to return to the garden of ignorance and innocence, but by now it is too late. The trap of thought is sprung.

Fortunately, as Camus observed, “We get into the habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking.” And for most of us, there are enough daily distractions to keep us going once we’ve acquired that habit. So to be realistic, we shouldn’t overestimate the difference that thinking makes. Nevertheless, this book is based on the assumption that it does make some difference.

The thoughts in this book are reflective not only in the Socratic sense (of examining life) but also in the sense of being about thought itself (thinking about thinking). I use “reflexive” to mean the latter. The reflexive quality of consciousness is the basis of the quest for meaning and the idea of oneself. The process of examining reflexivity is itself reflexive. As you get into it, you may find this labyrinth of echoes and mirrors to be teasing and dizzying. But don’t give up too easily!

This book deals both in experiences and in concepts. Particularly experiential are the first three chapters, where an attempt is made to articulate by example and explanation a variety of feelings and experiences of meaninglessness and alienation that many of us have. Philosophers may be disquieted by the concreteness of this approach, and nonphilosophers may be skeptical of the attempt to put such feelings and experiences into words.

Despite the psychological observations and the sprinklings of anthropology and sociology, the book is essentially philosoph-
Self-Alienation: Cutting and Splicing

Before taking a positive look at self-images (in the next chapter), I want to examine what you might call the "fractured self," despite the fact that there is no single good description of the whole range of phenomena that fall under the heading of self-alienation.

I'm maintaining my double use of the term alienation to include both nonidentification and misidentification. We'll examine cases in which a person fails to identify with part of what he is. It may be his body or physical features, or it may be his actions that seem somehow not to be his own. Sometimes it is difficult to identify with what you are for others, whether it is how you look or how you express yourself. Or it may be your reputation that you can't identify with, not that you should. Finally, you may fail to identify with part of what you are for yourself, your own feelings, for example.

Misidentification about yourself can occur in various ways. I don't mean merely being mistaken about yourself, as surely everyone is to some extent. Rather, I mean over- or underidentifying with what you are. You may emphasize one aspect of yourself to the exclusion of others, thinking that this is all that you are and discounting the rest. An important instance is identifying excessively with what you are for others. Equally important is limiting your identification to what you are for yourself.

Going through the Motions

The scientific way of making sense of the world doesn't provide you with anything personal. As mentioned in Chapter 1, science may underscore the lack of meaningful relation between you and the world. Moreover, despite its pretensions to being comprehensive, science leaves the world in fragments, at least as far as your or my consciousness is concerned. Scientific laws may cover everything, but they don't unify the phenomena they connect. Maybe that's an exaggeration. What I should say, I guess, is that they don't unify things in a humanly relevant way. Scientific laws find no purpose in the scheme of things. They present a scheme without a schemer.

Human actions have a kind of unity that natural phenomena viewed scientifically seem to lack. Human actions are united by purposes, that is, the intents of the actors. Whenever you do something, what you're doing has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Generally, an action is begun with a certain end in mind, even if that end is not consciously recognized. (Here, end means both goal and finish.) If you meet with failure along the way, at least you know what you haven't done. Where intention is present, there is success or failure. A sense of purpose unifies the series of events that make up the action.

Human actions begin and end. Natural occurrences start and stop. There's a difference there. Sure, we can talk about biological evolution, for example, as if the development of progressively higher forms of life reflected something somebody had in mind at the outset, but natural selection depends on unintended mutations, among other things. In general, the patterns science finds in events don't seem to need a designer. Even human history, a vast mixture of human actions and natural events, exhibits no purpose but to those who insist on imagining one. Only specific human actions really have intentions behind them and thus begin and end instead of merely starting and stopping.

The reason I mention all this is that it helps explain a basic type of self-alienation or dissociation. Have you ever experienced your own actions as if they lacked purpose, as if you weren't really performing them? Things done out of force of habit, such as shifting gears in a car, can easily be experienced this way. You're just going through the motions. Something is happening, but you don't have the feeling of doing it (not that anyone else is doing it). You may be daydreaming when suddenly you catch yourself in the act of doing something, almost as though you were observing someone else. Or, have you ever watched somebody else in action when you didn't know what he was doing? A good example is seeing someone talking in a phone booth. His moving lips might strike you as absurd, as would your own if you were making faces at yourself in the mirror. Each moment of motion seems unconnected with the rest; the series is fragmented. Silent movies are particularly good examples of this fragmentation. By distracting and detracting from purpose, silence and jerkiness enhance the portrayal of the ludicrous and the pathetic, as Charlie Chaplin so adroitly showed.
Sometimes I have a dissociated experience while writing this book. As I work at the typewriter, sometimes it seems as if these letters just land on the page automatically. Sometimes, in fact, right now, I watch my fingers punching various letters on the keyboard and I am amazed that these sentences are the result. Or, I reread something I've written and I wonder if it is I who wrote it. Sometimes you may experience your body and your actions as if they were those of a puppet. At least you are the puppeteer (unless you feel that someone else is pulling the strings). When you speak, it's as if you were your own ventriloquist.

These are examples of dissociation from your body (or parts of it) and from your actions. Your actions can be experienced as natural phenomena, mechanical rather than autonomous and purposive. Your body may seem to be the machine producing these events, your limbs the moving parts. They are perceived not as your own but outside yourself. Your actions are observed, not performed.

The separateness and fragmentation of one's actions go together. Actions seem separate from oneself because they lack the purpose involved in actions that are genuinely one's own. And lacking purpose, they lack the overarching meaning that would tie their parts together. Thus, they are internally disconnected as well as seeming disconnected from oneself. What is the cause of this type of self-alienation? Habits and routines may be to blame, since they don't require much attention or invention. Moreover, such dissociation can cause you to see your own actions as utterly pointless. Sometimes you see too far. When you cross the finish line the race is over, so what's the point of running it? You can't answer that, and yet you run it anyway. Then you wonder why you're running and maybe even whether it is you who's doing it. Thus, a sense of the absurd may generate dissociation from one's actions. (Chapter 1 noted conscious strategies that yield the same effect, such as acting absurdly on purpose or alienating yourself from the world by trying to do nothing.)

Most people, so it seems, are involved in most of the things they do. Actually, I suspect that behind the mask of involvement is more alienation than ordinarily imagined. Who knows how much human activity and interaction is pretended involvement? At any rate, where there is genuine involvement, the horizon of awareness stops at the prospective end of the present activity. This activity may be short- or long-term; it may consist of many subsequent steps leading to some relatively ultimate end. In either case, an activity constitutes a little world of its own, much as does a drama or a symphony. It represents a total unit. Everything within it forms part of the whole, including even the obstacles. The whole is defined by the ruling purpose, and things going on within are perceived as either helping or hindering. During the course of action, everything irrelevant to the action is more or less unperceived, although this can be changed in a moment by the intrusion of a violent distraction or a disaster. If you're taking an exam, making love, mopping the floor, or painting a picture, presumably you're conscious of what you're doing, unless your mind is wandering. At that moment, everything else in the world is irrelevant, including the future. However, your attention would be quickly diverted by a fire, an explosion, or the memory of a traumatic experience.

Normally, then, what you are doing, your present activity, is the frame of reference for your consciousness. If you are acting purposefully, then your thoughts will likely extend beyond that purpose. But when you can't focus on what you're doing (I don't mean just a little daydreaming), and particularly when you think too far into the future, your actions tend to lose their integrity—they either fall apart or feel alien or both. This is when people sometimes feel that their only authentic gesture is to do absolutely nothing. Thus, without a sense of purpose and involvement, a person can feel separate from his own actions. His actions seem fragmented, lacking the connecting thread of purpose.

Another type of experience of fragmentation and self-dissociation is tied not to particular actions but to your life as a whole. There are different aspects of your life that you relate to in different ways and that can't be combined satisfactorily. An obvious example is the distinction between work and play. For most people, work is intrinsically painful but necessary, while play is fun but useless ("I must get back to work"; "Thank goodness it's Friday"). This attitude may be due to the nature of the job or to one's upbringing. Either way, it yields a bifurcated life, in which one part is subordinated to the other. Similarly, different realms of experience may seem to have no connection with one another; for example, the intellectual, the aesthetic, the political, and the physical may seem worlds apart. To the extent that a person identifies with one aspect of his life to the exclusion of all others, his life lacks harmony and balance. He may resent the time spent doing things irrelevant to the only activity he thinks important. Equally, he may resent people who don't share his restricted approach to life.

Fragmentation may be so severe that a person fails to identify with even one particular aspect of his life. He feels like Humpty
Dumpty and has no hope of putting the pieces together again. His condition may be aggravated by social demands and bureaucratic nightmares to the point where he loses all sense of purpose in everything he hasn't given up trying to do. Not only is his life a shambles, he wonders whether it's really his own.

Being an Appearance

A second type of self-alienation requires another person to be aware of you. This is commonly called self-consciousness. Suppose you walk into a room full of people listening to a lecture. As you enter, their eyes turn toward you. You're acutely aware of their being aware of you. In fact, that is all you're aware of. You have a horrible sense of petrification. You feel like an object, a thing in their world. You are outside of yourself; you are there for them. Sometimes this feeling occurs when you think you're alone and then realize you're not—someone has quietly entered the room. The disclosure of another's presence sends a shudder of terror down your spine, even though there is no real danger. You might feel naked though fully clothed. Another case is when you make a fool of yourself or when the once hidden truth about yourself (you're a bastard, you're impotent) is revealed. Now they know. Now you're found out.

What counts here isn't so much what the other knows as his way of knowing it, namely by your unwitting exposure of yourself. That's what causes the embarrassment, that helpless feeling of subjugation to another's consciousness.

Alienation from how you appear to others may take a more chronic form. For example, if you are deformed or just plain ugly (by conventional standards), the presence of others may make you ashamed of yourself. You can either allow that shame to be a regular thing, or you can try to get rid of it. But if you are not to avoid others altogether, what can you do? You can pretend that they don't really see you, that what they do see isn't really you, but only your body. However, this requires effecting a mental separation of yourself from your body. Alienation from part of what you are (for others) is the price you must pay to avoid feeling embarrassment. You may try to compensate in some other way ("You'll like my personality!"), but by trying to escape what you are for others, by regarding your body as a shell, you are shielding yourself from them. "They're disgusted with my body, but not with me, for they're not even aware of me." It seems the only alternative is being disgusted with yourself.

Ideally, of course, it would be nice if people didn't take much account of bodily blemishes. Unfortunately, most people don't know you at all, let alone know you well, and thus can't be expected to know you "for yourself." And you can't (and shouldn't) avoid people forever. So you try either to blot out their consciousness of you, or to alienate from yourself what they are conscious of.

There are many ways to feel oppressed by others' consciousness of you. You may feel spied on. You may feel embarrassed by your bad breath or body odor. You may feel hurt at having a bad reputation for doing what you personally believe in. Whatever the case, it seems the pain you feel is predicated on an overemphasis of what you are for others. I'm not saying that what you are for others doesn't count at all. The question is how much it should count. It takes courage not to let it count for too much.

Some people have so little integrity or autonomy that they think of themselves exclusively in terms of what they are for others. A beautiful woman may be just as proud of her looks as a homely one is ashamed of hers, but while the homely one may try to disidentify with her looks (or vainly try to make herself up) and compensate with her personality, the beautiful one overidentifies with her looks, thinking of herself primarily, if not exclusively, as a beautiful woman. No doubt the fact that everybody else sees her that way can only reinforce this overidentification and make it extremely difficult for her to be anything else in the eyes of others, however hard she tries.

Overidentification with what you are for others needn't be painful or pathological if you happen to enjoy it. Still, it leaves something to be desired, as many beauties, politicians, and actors eventually realize. It becomes pathological when it dawns on the person that he really isn't anything else but what he is for others. And this realization makes him see that of course he is something else—what he is for himself. Politicians and entertainers who suffer from this problem of a public "image" often try to solve it by distinguishing between their private and their public lives, but this is just another form of self-alienation.

There are other examples of overidentification with one's exterior. The most extreme is the case of the exhibitionist. I don't feel qualified to venture into the psychological ramifications of this type, but a few generalizations won't hurt. Presumably, the exhibitionist desperately needs attention, and it doesn't particularly matter from whom. He feels so unsure of himself and his significance that anybody will do. And yet by exhibiting himself (or otherwise showing off), he is not relating to the other in anything approaching an intimate manner. He's just presenting an appearance. But for him to get the kind of gratification he needs,
basking in the glow of attention, he must identify fully with that appearance. And so he does.

In this section, we’ve seen a variety of cases of self-alienation involving over- or under-identification with one’s outer appearance. One feels either overly attached to it (or stuck with it), or else severely detached from it. The person may be more or less conscious of what he’s doing, depending on the circumstances. Now let’s turn to the case in which the person is explicitly conscious of the relation between himself and the appearance he presents. There are actually two cases here, one in which he manipulates his appearance and the other in which his appearance seems to manipulate him.

Faking It

Everybody is a fake, at least some of the time. If not by commission, then by omission. What we reveal isn’t necessarily what we feel, and much of what we feel we don’t reveal. This is partly due to the limitations on communication in routine situations, so deeply engrained in us are everyday roles and gestures. Here, the lack of communication is relatively unconscious. I want to focus on the conscious variety, whether it is positive deception or simply holding back. In particular, I want to look at what deception does to the deceiver.

As we’ve already seen, people often fear becoming an object to another. They fear exposure, manipulation, and derision. By deceiving another person, you may be trying to avoid these fearful consequences, indeed by subjecting the other person to them instead. Obviously, deception can serve the purpose of achieving your own ends at the other’s expense. Whatever your reason, part of what you’re doing in manipulating the situation is presenting an appearance that isn’t you to the other person. You want him to think that it is you. Of course, in trying to hide from him, you may be subject to the fear of being found out. Needless to say, that fear can justify itself, since it may cause your deception to fail.

To try to escape from another requires a kind of escape from yourself. I don’t mean this morally or ethically, but rather that putting on an act requires behaving in a way that isn’t expressive of yourself but of whom you want the other to think you are. You’re separating yourself from your actions. It’s not like stage acting, although that can be schizoid sometimes. On the stage you’re not actually trying to fool anybody. In a play, an actor tries to be convincing, in real life, an actor tries to convince. There is a difference.

Refusing to express yourself and instead expressing a fake self is one phenomenon. Another is simply being unable to express yourself. Take any occasion in which the “rules of the game” require certain sorts of behavior and presume certain sorts of underlying feelings. The scene may be a street corner, an office, a ballpark, a mortuary, or a university. Behaving yourself, in an effort to avoid offending others or to avoid involving them, may interfere with being yourself. No doubt there are those who don’t recognize this, who feel at home in every situation whatever its dictates. They behave themselves and think they’re being themselves. But once you recognize the limitations, the arbitrariness, the impersonality, and the prefabrication typifying everyday situations, you’re faced with the problem of how to act. You’re no longer content merely to react. I’m not saying that you should, in every case, make yourself offensive or otherwise obtrusive. Maybe you shouldn’t. However, no matter what your action, you’re aware of a conflict between expressing yourself and doing what you’re expected (presumably) to do. And to avoid alienating yourself from the other, you must alienate yourself from yourself.

An added point about these situations: sometimes both (or all) persons involved may feel the same way, that is, hemmed in by the rules. But neither recognizes that the other feels the same way, and each acts as if the other doesn’t. If only they both knew—but they don’t. Rather than take a risk, they behave themselves in deference to the imagined wishes of the other. And what are the rules they’re both following? Nothing more than a general, mutual expectation that certain things are to be done in certain situations. As a result of knowing the rules, two people can mutually misrepresent themselves by misconstruing the other.

This phenomenon can occur even when the rule applies only to the two persons involved. In a marriage, for example, a couple can come to develop certain mutual expectations as the result of what you might call “uncontested precedents.” These determine who washes the dishes, who takes out the garbage, and when and how love is made. A status quo becomes established, and neither person sees fit to challenge it for fear of antagonizing the other. Little by little, they both begin to feel constructed by the relationship. Neither feels free to be himself, and neither realizes the other feels the same way. Only open communication can solve the problem, but that may be one of the things their unspoken rules prohibit.

In both the above cases, each person is self-alienated in order (he thinks) not to be alienated from the equally self-alienated other.
All of the examples in this section illustrate the type of self-alienation due to limited self-expression. It depends essentially on the presence of another, for the conflict is between how the person sees himself and how the other sees him (more precisely, how he imagines the other to see him). He may create a false self-intentionally, in order to manipulate the other. Or, due to the limitations of the situation and his own unwillingness to break the rules, he may be unable to express himself genuinely.

I won't pass moral judgment on the self-alienation of faking it. Even when the deception is deliberate, it may be justified (you don't want to hurt others; you do need that job). As for socially sanctioned deception, such as most common courtesies, I recognize the ideal of total communication, but I find it difficult to envisage the utopia in which everybody cares about everyone else and wants everyone else to care about him, and in which there is universal trust. Short of such a utopia, it may be that the deception and self-stultification demanded by convention are unavoidable.

Not expressing yourself or expressing a pseudo-self needn't be conscious and needn't be due just to social constraints. There may be something deeper, namely the inability to have fully and freely the kind of emotions that demand expression.

Express Yourself

Inability to express yourself may not be due solely to the confining effects of real or imagined social expectations. Maybe you simply don't know how to express yourself. Possibly you think it's "cool" to be cool. Perhaps your ability to have and to express emotions has been stifled for so long that you're not even aware of how to express them. To use a currently popular phrase, you're not "in touch with yourself." The subject of knowing yourself will be explored in the entire chapter that follows. For now, I want to look at this problem of emotional expression.

Naively, we think of expression of emotion as a cause-effect process: you have an emotion and your behavior issues from it. This may be true of animals and infants, but it is hardly true of those old enough to calculate, control, and feign emotional expression. At best, an emotion tends to be given bodily or verbal expression, but contrary to the naive view, this expression may be suppressed, altered, exaggerated, or faked. Often, we cannot express emotions we do have and express ones we don't have. Furthermore, these expressions of emotion can interact with the emotions they express. For example, the intensity of the experience of screaming or crying may amplify the fear or pain felt. The screaming may commit you to feeling scared. Or, if you're acting, the realism of your performance may succeed in getting you to feel what you started to express fraudulently.

Thus, the relation between emotion and its expression is far from straightforward. As we saw in the previous section, it is further complicated by social factors. You aren't supposed to express every emotion in every situation, no matter whom you're with; and you are supposed to express certain emotions even when you don't feel them. For example, you shouldn't express disgust at someone's looks or fondness for someone's wife, and you should express sympathy at funerals, loyalty at college reunions, or enthusiasm at weddings—even though you may not happen to feel sad, loyal, or excited. Some emotions get suppressed and others get faked. In general, the expression of emotion has to be tempered so that smooth, unthreatening social interaction can take place without a fuss. But the cumulative effect of all this, whether cultivated as a matter of personal pride ("a man never cries") or of social propriety ("don't upset the apple cart"), is that the emotions themselves become stultified. One simply has fewer and less intense emotions as their expression becomes more curtailed. Eventually, one develops anxiety over being unable to have or to express emotions. The prejudice that expressing (and hence, possessing) certain intense emotions reflects a shameful lack of self-control is an additional inhibitor. It follows that controlling one's emotions indicates an abundance of self-control. I recall how the term self-control used to be applied in grammar school to children who "behave themselves." In fact, such self-control implies not self-determination but self-inhibition. Beyond such basics as toilet-training, this idea of self-control is a hoax. Expression of emotion is a person's genuine expression of himself, since the emotion is his emotion. It should hardly be the product of calculation; on the contrary, a calculated emotion is hardly genuine.

Knowledge of your own emotions is no easy matter, and the way in which you express them may not help your understanding. A person who always expresses his emotions may only be fooling himself. Constant expression may in fact trivialize the emotions expressed, as in the case of telling everyone how much you adore them. That is, if you express strong emotions all the time, they don't really count for much. In another case, a person may have serious doubts about the genuineness of his own emotional expression, thinking that he only thinks he cares for his dying mother, for example. Although she is such a bother to him, he knows how guilty he would feel if he thought he wanted her
to die, so such emotions must be held in check. But this attempt at self-understanding, requiring self-reflection and generating uncertainty, may succeed only in destroying the spontaneity of feeling.

Finally, a person who has an inconsistent emotional pattern may have a difficult time convincing himself that his emotions are real because they change so often. He may think that he should be consistent in how he feels and that irregular outbursts don’t really reflect himself. He may find it hard to accept the fact that he is someone who feels different at different times. But why should his feelings have to be consistent?

The same pattern applies to desires as to feelings. Desires don’t have to be consistent, either. You’re entitled to different moods. You’re not obligated to be the same all the time. Of course, if your moods and wants fluctuate too often, you can become hopelessly confused about what you really want. For example, you may do something rash one moment and then wonder later why you did it. It may strike you that whoever did that couldn’t have been the same person who’s now thinking about it. That’s all right. You don’t have to be the same all the time.

Knowing what you want is a difficult problem in any case. Of course, what you “really” want is what you want. You can’t want something and not want it. But you can wonder why you want it and whether you should. And you can be genuinely ambivalent about it. You may vacillate, but what obligates you to make up your mind?

The Dilemma of Self-Alienation

In the previous chapter, I distinguished between the alienation of nonidentification and that of misidentification. The distinction applies also to self-alienation, though less clearly. We have seen examples of how a person might fail to identify with his actions, with his bodily characteristics, or generally, with what he is for others. This failure of identification may be specific—the person may fail to identify with his long nose—or it may be pervasive—the person may fail utterly to identify with his body or with his actions. Or he may altogether refuse to. Also, he may fail to identify with what he is for himself, especially with his emotions. He may hide them, fake them, or not even recognize them. He may pretend to be what he isn’t or not to be what he is, and he may even succeed in fooling himself.

As for misidentification, you might wonder how it is possible to misidentify as your own what is part of you. How could this be misidentification? It could be, at least as a matter of degree. That is, identifying fully and exclusively with only part of what you are means that you are leaving something out. The examples of overidentifying with what you are for others illustrate misidentification. They consist in failing to include what you are for yourself. It is possible, as we saw, to overidentify with what you are for yourself by trying to discount what you are for others. It appears, then, that the two types of self-alienation (nonidentification and misidentification) may go hand in hand.

Oscillation between these two varieties of self-alienation may occur when you are acutely conscious of the difference between your private self and your public self-selves. Sometimes the distinction between what you are for yourself and what you are for others may appear to be in insuperable opposition. There may seem to be no hope of harmonizing the two, perhaps because others can’t know you as you really are, or perhaps because you can’t be yourself in their presence. Then the dilemma is this: either you feel alienated from your actions and appearance, that is, from yourself as others see you, or you identify with the image that others see, rather than with how you see yourself. Neither of these alternatives is desirable by itself, but there seems to be no way to combine them. So switching back and forth between them may be the only compromise.

You feel either stuck in the world of others or cut off from it. If you feel stuck in their world, an object for their conscious consumption, then your own consciousness may seem to be an insubstantial parasite that has no legitimate place of its own. And if you feel isolated in a world of your own, in which you emphasize your consciousness and subordinate your actions and appearance, then you may feel invisible. For now, the part of you that counts is that least available to others. Besides, by deemphasizing the part of you that others are aware of, you’re more or less denying their consciousness—if you are not there for them, then they are there for you.

I wish I knew what to say to enable someone stuck in the dilemma of dual alienation to integrate the direct and indirect ways of looking at himself. If it’s a psychiatric problem, then I’m not equipped to solve it. (An implied theme of this book is that certain psychiatric problems are really philosophical—that is, there’s nothing pathologically wrong with the person who has the problem.) Perhaps elaborating on the nature of this dilemma can only aggravate it. The analysis itself of the components of the dilemma can make them seem more separate. If you are subject to self-alienation, then being acutely aware of what your choices are can make them seem mutually exclusive. It would be
nice to say that it is enough to recognize, calmly and coolly, that a person does have an inner and an outer aspect, and that there is no real problem involved in integrating the two. But how does one go about achieving it?

Clarity of thought and firmness of will are not enough. You can understand fully what is involved in your self-alienation, and why you feel as you do and be determined to do something about it. But what can you do? You realize that you cannot escape your own subjectivity (what you are for yourself) except by rendering yourself less conscious. And you realize that nobody who knows you can know you fully or accurately, for you understand that they can't read your mind, however open and honest you might be. They will always draw conclusions, some faulty, and they will inevitably misinterpret and simplify. What else can you expect? Should you make it easy for them by being nothing more and nothing other than what they think you are? Certainly not. Besides, they'll undoubtedly disagree among themselves. Should you be utterly indifferent to what they think? No, for this will only harden the shell around you.

One solution may be to recognize that others may have the same problem themselves. And if they don't, they should. For if they don't, then they have either succumbed to their image or are trapped in their shells. Surely, it is better to be somewhere between these two states, even if that means wavering between them and wondering how to stabilize and integrate yourself (-selves). Maybe you should share your problem with them, particularly if you care enough about them to care about what they think of you. After all, they are, besides yourself, the source of your problem. And maybe you're the source, partly, of theirs.

Since the dilemma of self-alienation, as defined above, involves reference to others, perhaps we need to learn to appreciate solitude. People today seem to have an almost pathological fear of being alone. They want to be part of what's happening and fear most being left out. The self-alienation involved here, overidentifying with what one is for others, reflects an insecurity about what one is for oneself. Perhaps the fear of facing what one is, for oneself, is based on the fear of losing it. In any case, being at home with oneself seems a necessary balance to needing others.

Who Do You Think You Are, Anyway?

You probably have some fairly fixed idea of who you are. It may include what you were and what perhaps you will be. It may even include much of what in fact you are not. No doubt it is affected considerably by what you think others think you are. Whatever it is, who you are is what this chapter is about.

Of course, since I don't know a thing about you, except that you're reading this, I'll have to speak in generalities. You'll have to apply them or reject them.

What a person is is his identity. At least, that's how I'll use the term identity. What he thinks he is is his self-image. What others think he is is his image. What he thinks others think he is is his secondhand image.

What is the importance of a person's self-image? Obviously, it is the basis for his self-esteem, if he has any. In other words, what you think you're worth is based on what you think you are. Your degree of self-esteem determines what you're proud or ashamed of, what you're confident of, and what you're afraid of. Your belief in yourself, or lack of it, affects your dealings with others. It is intimately connected with your capacity, or incapacity, for loving and being loved, since thinking yourself worthless renders your love worthless and you worthless for being loved.

Think of all the feelings and emotions built around the self-image: guilt, shame, pride, confidence, ambition, despair. Some are directed to the past and some to the future, and yet they all implicate oneself right now. To feel guilty about something you did is to feel bad about yourself now, not merely then. To feel pride in some past deed is to feel a sense of worth now, not merely of worth then. Analogously, to feel successful when your successes have yet to be achieved is to feel now what you will be later. People count their chickens before they're hatched—and after they've flown the coop.
Your secondhand image deeply affects your self-image. If people accept you, you probably accept yourself. If they don’t, it is difficult to accept yourself. It is hard not to think that something is fundamentally and irrevocably wrong with you if everyone else seems to think so.

Your secondhand image doesn’t necessarily determine your self-image. A person with what psychologists call ego strength doesn’t need as much support from others as do those who have less self-assurance. Your self-image can affect your secondhand image. For example, if you think yourself duller than you are, you’ll likely think that others think similarly. That is, what you think others think of you can be distorted by an unrealistically high (or low) opinion of yourself. It is easy for your self-image not to correspond with your secondhand image. You may be fooling yourself and others may be fooling you. Or you may be fooling yourself about what they think. Romances and feuds get a lot of mileage out of mutual deception—each has mistaken ideas about the other and about the other’s ideas about himself.

A person’s self-image is not merely a private matter. Everyone has a social identity that gets incorporated to some degree into his self-image. By social identity I mean the whole set of characteristics by which a person is generally recognized and identified in a society. Included are obvious physical features, sex, age, race, class, profession, and nationality. These and other characteristics determine how people perceive each other and roughly what people expect from each other in everyday encounters. Particular groups, membership in which forms part of a person’s social identity, provide not only things for people to be but also other people to be with. Within the confines of a group, terms for encounter and transaction and an atmosphere of relative mutual acceptance are established.

Today, the number of social identity options is overwhelming. For example, in terms of occupation or life style. This abundance of choice seems to have created an unprecedented sense of ambiguity, uncertainty, and malaise. The sheer number can make each option seem dubious, each choice arbitrary, and can create an attitude of, “what difference does it make?” in the swamp of alternatives. In some circles, many of the conventional options have been discredited, such as military service or marriage. Of course, the category of disenchanted and dropouts has itself been constituted as a group of sorts, complete with identity symbols and norms of behavior ranging from hair style to life style.

Nevertheless, for many, identity has become more and more a private matter, and social identity counts less. As social identity becomes less of a supplier and supporter of private identity, identity becomes more of a personal problem. As with the problem of meaning, because the problem of identity involves reflection, it is something you face most directly when alone.

I must add, however, the undeniable fact that the quest for identity has itself become a fad. That is, it has become something people do because it is the thing to do, because other people do it. On the other hand, because it pertains directly to oneself, it is more significant than most other fads. Besides, it is not merely a fad, but the inevitable result of a social environment in which the fulfillment of basic needs is taken for granted (by many), and in which most traditional values are no longer taken for granted.

Do You Really Matter?

Who cares what you are? You do. Maybe others do too, but not in the way you do. Suppose we ignore them for the moment. Why should what you are matter, even to you?

I must explain why I have raised such a seemingly bizarre question. I am not asking why anything should matter to you. Presumably some things do, even if there is no ultimate reason why they should (or shouldn’t). I am not asking about them. I am asking about you. Why should you matter to you? What I have in mind is this: why should you matter to you over and above whatever else matters to you? Why should you be among the things that matter to you? After all, aren’t you simply that which the things that matter matter to?

From your own point of view, you are not just another one of those things that matter. You are not simply in the world with them. The world is your world, from your point of view. You are not there; you are here.

That was from your point of view. From my point of view, the world is my world, and I am not one of the things in it. They, including you, are there; I am here.

Now, if you’re not one of the things in your world, for the reason just given, then you shouldn’t matter to yourself. You are, rather, the presupposition of anything mattering to you. In a sense, then, you can’t really matter to yourself.

In saying that you shouldn’t, and can’t really, matter to yourself, naturally I don’t mean that you should be indifferent to pain, disease, poverty, and other personal misfortunes. After all, they are among the things that matter to you. Similarly, improving yourself, making something of yourself, is valuable as a means of attaining things that matter. For example, exercise and education may enable you to achieve better things for yourself. Their
value does not consist in their making a better thing out of yourself; their value is a means, not an end.

I am rejecting the idea that you ought to make something out of yourself because you are, or ought to be, important. Important to whom? I remember amusing myself once at a party by going around asking people to "justify your existence in 25 words or less." Those who didn't find the question offensive saw that they didn't need to justify their existence, to me or to anybody else.

There is another way in which what you are doesn't matter, or shouldn't. Many people place a premium on uniqueness. They think you should be different from everybody else, that you should be an "individual." It makes no difference what everybody else is like. You should be different from all of them. Now I can see the point of being different from everyone whom I don't want to be like, but why should I go out of my way to be different just for the sake of being different? That makes no more sense than being like everybody else simply for the sake of being the same. Isn't it enough to be what you want to be even if it turns out that somebody else happens to be like you? Is there some sort of indignity in not being unique? There is nothing better per se about being different. You can still do your own thing even if it happens also to be somebody else's.

There is nothing inherently good about being special. Furthermore, if there is anything that makes you unique, it is the same thing that makes everybody else unique. How's that for paradoxes? I'd better explain it fast.

Nobody knows what it's like to be you. Right? In fact, this is probably one reason people value uniqueness. Nobody knows, and nobody could ever really know, what it's like to be in your shoes. The reason is not, as you might suppose, that each person is different from everybody else. If that were the reason, it would simply make it difficult for anyone to understand anyone else. Rather, the reason is that nobody else can know you the way you do, "from the inside." Being unique is not what puts you in your unique position. Being you is what does.

Even if everyone were identical, no one would be able to conceive of being someone other than himself. He could imagine being different from the way he is. He could imagine changing. But that's a far cry from imagining not being himself and being someone else instead. The point is that your identity, the set of your salient characteristics, does not define you, since they might be someone else's as well. At least, it is theoretically possible. Your identity does not guarantee, hence does not determine, your uniqueness. Who you are is not merely what you are.

Everybody is unique in that each person has a point of view that no one else does have or could have. This principle for people is analogous to the principle for objects that two objects cannot occupy the same place at the same time. Having your point of view on the world is what it is to be you. That no one else can have it is not an accomplishment but a necessity. Of course, the very fact that makes you different from everyone else does the same for everyone else. So, no matter what you are like, mentally or physically, no one else can know what it's like to be you, to have your point of view. But anyone else can know something very much like that. He can know what it's like to be himself.

You Are Subject

People are persons, not mere things. They have bodies, but they aren't merely their bodies. They, I mean we, have not only physical characteristics but mental ones as well. We are conscious. Our consciousness and our bodies are not disconnected. Sensations occur in your body and are of your body. And it is through your body that you and the rest of the world interact. What you do is done with your body, and what you perceive is by means of your bodily senses.

A person can do much more than act and perceive. Your awareness may extend beyond the present, beyond the here and now. You can think of things going on elsewhere. You can remember the past and envisage the future. In addition to ideas about how the world is, was, or will be, you have ideas about how it ought to be. More specifically, you have desires and intentions that may or may not materialize into action.

Although your awareness extends beyond the here and now in all these ways, still it is centered on the immediate present. For example, to have an idea of something elsewhere implies that the object has a definite spatial relation between what is here in the immediate vicinity and what is somewhere else. You may not know where it is, but it must have some location or other relative to you. Otherwise, it can be only imaginary. Similarly, events past and future must have a definite temporal relationship to what is happening right now. They must have occurred before or after your thought of them, or else they will never have occurred at all. Ultimately, then, to conceive of anything in the world requires conceiving it in relation to what is here and now.

Another way to put the point is this: to conceive of something is in effect to conceive of being in its presence. That means being able, at least imaginably, to be in its vicinity in space and time rather than here and now. Nevertheless, identifying that place and time must be done in terms of its relation to here and now.
Consider, then, how reference is made to things here and now. Ultimately, the only way to refer to something present is to think of it as "this chair," "the chair over there," or whatever. Just describing it as a "chair" is not enough for there might be another chair just like it. Only by singling it out as "this chair here" can unique reference be made. In other words, it must be referred to as the one here and now (if there are several, the reference must be narrowed down further).

Contrary to the myth of objectivity—that there is a universal frame of reference—a person's frame of reference is unavoidably egocentric. To refer to anything in the universe there must be a center of the universe in relation to which reference is made. The idea of a center is, of course, relative. But that's precisely the point—its relativity. I am the center of my universe, and you of yours, but it's the same universe. It can be contemplated only from somewhere and somehow. Things in it can be referred to only from somewhere and somehow. That is, here and now. What counts as here and now is relative and everchanging. In this sense, then, I am the center of the universe, if only from my point of view, but it is only from points of view (mine, yours, or whoever's) that the universe can be considered in the first place.

Now we get to the important point in this analysis. If I am aware of things other than myself in relation to myself (here and now), then how am I aware of myself? I don't mean how I am aware of my body, but how I am aware of myself. To be sure, I am aware of my body in a unique way (from the inside) and it is always around, but still I am not it, or at least not merely it. How am I aware of myself as a conscious being, rather than merely as a physical being? An essential requirement, surely, is that I be aware of at least some of my conscious states. And, of course, I have this awareness, in states of what I have been calling reflexive consciousness. In those states, I am aware not only of the object of consciousness (for example, my typewriter) but also of the fact of being conscious of it. That's why I call it a "reflexive" state, since it is consciousness of consciousness of something.

As a conscious being, I am a subject of consciousness, or that which is conscious. So, the question I am asking can be rephrased thus: how am I aware of myself as a subject of consciousness? It seems as if to be aware of myself as a subject, I must make myself into an object of consciousness. After all, it is I whom I am to be aware of. To exploit grammar to formulate the question, how can I be aware of it? I can only be aware of me.

Before trying to answer this question, I want to consider the fact that I (and you, too) am a being in time. What I am is not what I was or what I will be. I don't mean that I am changing all the time, though perhaps I am, at least subtly. What I do mean is something quite obvious, though by no means trivial in its implications. Look at it from your point of view. What you are, you now, is what you were at the beginning of this sentence, not what you are now, at the end of this sentence. For you then is gone, while you now is here, or was. Whatever you are now is, by the time you finish this sentence, what you were, then.

You are a being in time, and aware of yourself in time. If you focus not on what you are in general but on what you are right now, if you reflect on your present state of consciousness, you must realize that while you are continuing to be, whatever you are at one moment is at the next what you were. From your own standpoint in time, at any moment what you are is distinct from what you were or what you will be. You are continuously passing through time (or is it passing through you? I won't argue the point). Then, how can you ever have an adequate conception of what you are, even right now?

(With this space, I thought I'd give you a little time to find out.) It seems that as soon as you focus on what you are right now, your idea of yourself then, not of yourself now, reflecting. Your image of yourself may be accurate, but it is necessarily a bit out of date.

Return now to the question: How am I aware of myself as subject? It seems that insofar as I am aware of myself at all, I am aware of myself as an object. That is, what I am aware of does not seem to be identical with what is aware. I. Partly the reason is that what I am aware of is, as stated above, already in the past. My awareness is always a little ahead of myself. A further reason is this: when I am aware of what I just was, specifically I am aware of myself being (having been) conscious of some object, say, the typewriter again. That is, I am aware of myself in the context of being aware of something else. Moreover, I don't have an image of myself. I have nothing of the sort. Rather, I am aware of myself essentially as being that which is aware of the typewriter. I am aware of myself not as what I am but as what I am not. I am aware of myself not being that (the object of awareness).

In sum, then, I am never quite aware of what I am. And to the extent that I am aware of what I am, it is in relation to what I am not, namely the object of consciousness. Only thus can I be aware of myself as subject.

This subject-object distinction is no mere intellectual fine point. Think of what it means to be aware of yourself as subject. As subject, you are what you are by virtue of what you're aware
of. For example, if you are looking up at the sky, what you are, looking up at the sky, is in relation to the sky. As subject, you are nothing in itself, but something only in relation to something else. This is true even if that something else is a hallucination. So, if you seem to be seeing an oncoming army of six-foot long red ants, what you are is in relation to them, imagined though they be. That is, a description of you (as subject) giving your present state of awareness must include a description of the object of your awareness.

Think about this. As subject, you are nothing in yourself, save what you are in relation to whatever you’re aware of. That’s all. Whether it is the public world of physical objects or the private world of dreams and hallucinations, as subject, you are but a transparent presence, a vacuous invader, a parasitical receptacle. As subject, you are utterly insubstantial. You lack even the shape of a shadow.

Of course, you have a body. It is a physical object to which you have a peculiarly intimate and relatively permanent connection. Unlike everything else, it is the one thing that you are aware of from the inside rather than from the outside. But, still is something that you can, and often in dreams do, dissociate yourself from. It is still an object, even if a very special one. Its presence is not a guaranteed deterrent to the terror of subjectivity.

The “Real Self”

A person’s identity is what he is and that, you might well say, includes more than what he is right now. Similarly, his self-image isn’t just a reflection on his latest state of consciousness but his idea of what he is in general. I don’t deny that a person’s identity and his self-image cover more time than a moment. It might even be said that they are, in a sense, outside time, abstracted from time. What someone is, from this standpoint, is not what he is from moment to moment but what he is overall, as a rule. People sometimes talk about their “real self,” which their actions, if “genuine,” supposedly reflect. And, presumably, their self-image is of this “real self,” not of states from moment to moment.

As you might have guessed, I think this “real self” is unreal. Certainly, a person may have a character, a set of traits that are relatively unchanging over time and that are reflected in behavior only from time to time. A person can be kind, for example, even though he doesn’t engage in acts of kindness all day every day. But to speak of character traits is not to imply some underlying atemporal self. If there is such a thing, I’m unaware of it.

What I am aware of about myself, in addition to some of my moment-to-moment states, are certain general patterns. They include my beliefs, my desires, my ways with others, my interests, and so on. But these are patterns of myself and my behavior in time, not features of some underlying core outside time.

To be sure, sometimes I might do something unusual for me and later think, “I wasn’t myself. That wasn’t the real me.” But this only means that I wasn’t acting the way I normally do, perhaps due to some unusual condition or circumstance I was in. Maybe I wasn’t even responsible for what I did. Still, this doesn’t imply some atemporal self that normally underlies my actions, but only that I wasn’t the way I normally am.

Another possibility is that I had actually changed, if only for the time being. Maybe it wasn’t that I wasn’t myself but that for the time being I wasn’t the way I usually am.

In any case, there is no reason why I must be one way. What is to prevent me from changing all the time? Only myself. I am not saying that I (or you) should change all the time. But if I did change all the time, then I couldn’t begin to have this notion of my “real self.” Nothing would qualify.

Even if you don’t change all the time and are thereby able to maintain a fairly steady self-image, don’t fall into the trap of supposing that there is some timeless you who underlies yourself from moment to moment. This is not just a metaphysical mistake. It will make you think that what you are is what you have to be. You exist in time. What you are right now may be what you’ve always been and always will be. But it needn’t be. You don’t have to, but you can change.

Sometimes people talk about “fulfilling” or “actualizing” themselves, and about “realizing their potential.” It might be suggested, contrary to what I have been saying, that implied here is an underlying self which only partly “reaches the surface,” while the rest is “buried deep inside.” I think it’s important not to take this talk literally, however well-meaning its intent, which is that a person should become whatever is possible for him to be. Try the same terminology on an oak tree and an acorn. The oak tree is not buried deep inside the acorn, although the genetic potential is, of course, there. Similarly, there is no “real self” buried within a person.

I don’t deny that you should have some idea of yourself or your possibilities. We have ideas of all sorts of things. We generalize. We abstract. About all sorts of things, including people. And including ourselves.

Yet there is something special about having an idea of yourself. In this case, the thing the idea is of is the very thing that has
the idea—you. What an apple, a book, or a zebra is doesn't need you to think it to be that. But much of what you are is because you think you are. And much of what you "have" to be is really only what you think you have to be. For example, you may be afraid to do something or think you can't. As a result, you don't do it, thereby proving that you can't.

What you are when you are thinking about what you are is someone who is thinking about what he is. What you are when you are thinking about what you have to be is someone who happens to be thinking about what he has to be.

The Trap of Identity

While admitting that each person has his limitations, I have denied the common assumption that for each person there is some underlying "real self" constituting his essential nature—as if there were some concealed "real you" waiting to be made manifest if only you would cut the string and open the wrapper. Or, supposing it's not so simple as that, if only you would solve the puzzle, figuring out what the pieces are and how they fit together.

Something like this assumption was made by Michelangelo, but about marble, not people. With undue modesty, he thought his sculpturing to be nothing more than the uncovering, layer by layer, of the form already contained in the marble. His attitude may have been admirable, but we can't take it seriously. After all, any form that Michelangelo chose to uncover would have been concealed in the marble already. Just as no single form is embedded in a chunk of marble, no single form is embedded in a chunk of consciousness. But you may think there is. And that's enough to make it true. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Your identity is what you are, in those respects that matter to you. Your self-image is what you think your identity is. The trap of identity, as I will call it, is this: thinking that what you are is what you have to be.

I am not referring to the fact, common as it is, that you can be mistaken about yourself. I have something else in mind, as illustrated in the following episode. A famed jurist by the name of Learned Mouth is lecturing on the Doctrine of Dirty Feet. His insights fascinate me so much that I want to praise him afterward for his thrilling exposition. When he concludes amidst tumultuous applause, I rush forward to congratulate him. I reach the platform, deftly dodging people in the process, and there he is before me: we are eyeball to eyeball. And then, much to my shame, I clam up. No words issue forth. Embarrassed, I smile meekly and allow others to congratulate him. I think to myself, "What could I have expected? I am still as shy as ever."

If you are shy, then in social situations, you will act shyly. You are likely to be aware of your shyness, all too poignantly aware, no doubt. Shyness is part of your self-image, an unpleasant and perhaps even shameful part. Now the incident described above illustrates how a person can use an element of his self-image to justify or to explain himself (to himself or to others). To explain your shyness by saying, "That's the way I am," is to pretend that that's the way you have to be. No doubt being shy is difficult to overcome, but to give up on the grounds that that's the way you are is to make it be true that that's the way you have to be.

Take another case in point. Prim Rose, a young lady reared in the ways of righteousness, believed in God, flag, and motherhood. Her parents made the mistake of sending her to a respectable college for women. It wasn't long before Prim Rose was challenged by her peers on all three of her primal objects of devotion. Needless to say, the challenge took her by surprise. She was shocked by their questioning the unquestionable. She couldn't understand why the others didn't think as she did, and whenever they would probe deeply enough to seek the reasons for her beliefs, all she could say was, "That's what I was taught," or, "That's the way I was brought up."

Prim Rose had no reasons for she had never needed any. What is given and obvious to all needs no reasons. She hadn't arrived at these beliefs; she was implanted with them. She wasn't so much an accepter of these beliefs as, you might say, a carrier of them. Because she was taught them and they were entrenched so deeply, she couldn't help having and continuing to have them.

True, she couldn't help having them when they had never been questioned. But once they were questioned, she was put in the position of being able to evaluate them. Perhaps she would continue to hold these beliefs, but she would do so not because (not as the result) of her training but because (for the reason) of what she had examined. Once she realized that her training made her the way she was, she could no longer use it as an explanation, for now it was up to her either to continue being that way (for reasons of her own) or to change.

What I have called the trap of identity (thinking you have to be what you are) is sometimes referred to as bad faith or coping out. But these labels are subtly misleading. As commonly used, they imply that someone guilty of bad faith is somehow betraying or untrue to himself. I would put it more accurately, if paradoxically, by saying that he is being untrue to himself by being true to himself. That is, he is being true to his self-image by
thinking he has to be what he is. He is selling himself out by selling himself short.

I don’t mean to suggest that everything about a person he can do something about. Obviously not. You can’t change your skin color, though you can change your hair color. You can’t change who your parents are, your native country, your age, or (until recently) your sex. You can change your weight, not easily maybe, but no diet will help you lose height. Your abilities are largely natural. That includes both physical and mental ones. Still, it is up to you to find out what they are and to do what you will with them.

Social, economic, and religious characteristics are more changeable than natural ones. To be sure, the opportunities and choices available limit what you can be. In a society in which class is hereditary, the only way for you to change your status would be to change the society itself, or to leave it. Revolution requires supreme commitment, and leaving is not an easy out. Your economic position may similarly depend on matters pretty much out of your control, depending on the type of economic system you are dealing with and at what level you were born into it.

The point I am making about the trap of identity is that precisely when there is choice about, say, what you “do for a living,” there is danger of coming to think that you have to be what you’ve chosen to be. Perhaps you have undergone extensive training or have otherwise invested much time and money in a career. A commitment of self or of resources may seem irrevocable, even though you are capable of changing your mind at any time. What keeps most people from doing so is not merely the commitment but the belief that “this is what I do,” as if what you do is what you have to do.

It goes without saying, although I am hereby saying it, that economic and educational deprivation, not to mention racial or sexual discrimination, place severe hardships on anyone who might make something of himself. In this section, I have not pretended that there are options where there are none. There are immense political obstacles to opening up full options and opportunities to everyone. I have said only that where these opportunities exist, there is the trap of thinking that what you are is what you have to be (the trap of identity). This is to deny the existence of real options that are closed off only by one’s self-conception. A different trap, of a political nature, is the ideological pretense that certain options are available to all, when in fact they are not.

The trap of identity can be exposed more radically. Simply but paradoxically, I am not whatever I conceive myself to be. Less paradoxically, I am not merely what I conceive myself to be. It doesn’t matter what that conception is, for the issue is not with its accuracy or inaccuracy but with the very fact that I have it. I am a conscious being, a being in time. Indeed, in order to realize that fact, I must be a reflexively conscious being (unlike animals). If you’ll pardon a grossly mixed metaphor, I’m in the wake of my past, in the reflection of my present, and in the beacon of my future. I realize this as long as I am aware of myself continuing through time. However, as we’ve seen, the conception I have of myself is an abstraction outside time. To have this conception, I must think of myself as a thing, albeit a special kind of thing, with traits determined more or less immutably. To say to myself, “This is what I am,” is to treat myself as something virtually outside myself, as something “there” for my examination. Whatever the results of the examination, whatever I come to think of myself, it is the very act of examining that inevitably falsifies the results. To engage in such an examination is to seek a conception of the sort of thing I am, all the while neglecting the fact that I am not a thing at all, or at least not merely a thing. I am not something whose character can be established, but someone who establishes his character.

Let me say this a bit differently. Recall that the trap of identity is to think that what you are is what you have to be. In fact, it goes even deeper than that. Whatever I take myself to be can be only what I have been. However accurate and complete this historical self-conception, it is only of what I was and of what I can’t help continuing to be. But, insofar as I needn’t continue to be what I’ve been, my conception of myself as continuing to be that is an implicit admission that I can’t be anything else. And yet, I can. I can change precisely because I’m aware of what I’ve been and am thereby in a position to do something about it. Thus, my self-conception is mistaken not because it is misinformation but because it is misdirected. It is directed at what I am rather than at what I’ve been.

My conception of myself is false or, rather, out of date precisely because it is I who has that conception. Examining myself cannot be done independently of what is being examined, since it is I who is being examined. For one thing, the very fact of being aware of myself as such-and-such is a fact additional to the fact that I am such-and-such. And being aware that I am (have been)
such-and-such puts this fact into question, since I am in a position to do something about it. If it is something that is not beyond my control, then to accept it as a fact about myself is to want to continue to be such-and-such. Otherwise, I can accept it only as a fact about what I was.

It is precisely because I am the one who has this conception of what I am that this conception is invalid. Someone else can have a conception of me (or of someone else) without there being an interaction between that conception and what the conception is of. Unless I know what that conception is, it doesn’t affect my own conception of myself. Thus, I can be an object or a thing to another but not to myself, at least not without denying part of what I am. Part of what I am, of course, is a reflexively conscious being capable of changing myself.

Interestingly, some people (including me, by the way) resent being defined by others. “Whatever you say I am, I am not,” they insist. They don’t want to be reduced to mere objects in the minds of others. One way to avoid this is to be secretive about yourself. Another is to be consciously inconsistent and unpredictable, thereby escaping anybody’s definition of you. As you might have guessed, this strategy is self-defeating, since it succeeds in rendering one definable as “evading definition.”

In concluding this section, I want to relate what has just been said to the positions of Chapters 2 and 3 on alienation and self-alienation. The dilemma of identification, you may recall, is that one of the two types of alienation is unavoidable. You either fail to identify with something outside yourself, or you falsely identify with it. Clearly, the reason for this dilemma is that identification, as an attempted relationship between yourself and something else, requires defining yourself in objective terms. Since you are not merely objective but subjective, such definition is doomed to failure.

Self-alienation is the inevitable result of imagining yourself to have an objective essence, for this requires treating yourself as an object capable of being completely defined. You are not such a thing. If you treat yourself in this way, if you overidentify with what you are for others (or with what you’ve been), then you are misidentifying as yourself what is only part of you. You are leaving out what you are for yourself, which always transcends any prior conception.

On the other hand, if you recognize all this and make a conscious effort not to overidentify with what you are objectively (that is, what you are for others and what you have been), you can easily underidentify with this, pretending that it isn’t you at all. In the previous chapter, we considered such cases as failing to identify with your body or with your actions. The result is a sense of dissociation with what you are objectively, as if that has nothing to do with what you “really” are. This leads, as we saw, to a sense of utter separation from others, since what they are aware of can never be the “real” (subjective) you. The only way to strike a balance is to recognize the limits of any self-conception.

The Sense of Self

To have a self-image is to be deluded about oneself, at least if it is taken as final. If its reference is to some imagined self that transcends the bounds of time, it is sheer fancy. If its result is to foreclose any future change in the name of necessity, it is sheer folly. Nevertheless, to recognize this about one’s self-image is not to eliminate it. Maybe eliminating it is not necessary anyway, and seeing its silliness is enough. In any case, the fact is that we have self-images. It is a fact worth explaining, so I’ll try.

Why do we draw conclusions about ourselves? That’s what we’re doing, after all, when we abstract from the moments of our lives some overall self-conception. Perhaps it is just a special case (and a central one) of our demand in general that things make sense. Perhaps it is a part of our general resistance to indefiniteness, ambiguity, and uncertainty. We want to have a clear snapshot of what is fuzzy, changing, and partly concealed. If this is our demand, then no wonder we cannot be content with the knowledge that we exist and that we are the way we are but don’t have to be.

Part of the explanation, no doubt, is other people. People judge each other. We classify and evaluate one another. Therefore, each person is subject to the classification of others, just as others are subject to his. There is no classification without categories. These classifications draw many lines of distinction: physical, aesthetic, social, political, economic, and psychological. Each person is in the position of knowing that everybody judges everybody in all these different respects. Even if people decided to call a truce to this war of the words and agreed to regard each other as equals in spite of their differences, there would likely be those who would refuse and who would be classified by everyone as refusing and as disagreeable. Then the classification game would continue as before, with some people recognized as agreeable, some as not.

The common practice in all sectors of modern society to categorize and evaluate people makes each person conscious of what others think of him. For he knows that he has an image. Of course, there is no single such image, but one per person who knows him. His own image of this image is thus a composite, a
There is a reciprocal or polar relationship involved here. To have a conception of things I must think of them as not being me, or states of my mind. And to have a conception of myself, I must think of myself as not being them. In short, I must distinguish between my experiences and the objects of those experiences.

Moreover, to think of those experiences as mine, I must be able to contrast them with the experiences had by others. This means having the idea of experiences that I don't have. And to conceive of others as being conscious, as not mere things, I must think of them as being fundamentally like myself. In this way, I can have the idea of objectivity, of things that can exist without my experiencing them and of their being experienced without my doing so. But to think of things as being outside of me and to think of others as not being me is to think of myself as not being them. My awareness of the world and of the people and things it involves distinguishing them from me. I am aware of myself (as subject) as not being in that world, although I am aware of myself as being affected by and affecting it. And, I am aware also of being there (as object) for others, of being in their world(s).

I am suggesting, then, that underlying a person's self-image is his sense of self, which develops and is constituted in the way just described. Your self-image includes the various qualities you attribute to yourself. It defines what you are in particular. But you must first have a sense of what you are ascribing these qualities to: yourself. Your sense of self is the core of your self-image.

Your sense of self is of existing over time with experiences past, present, and future. Your memories, for example, presuppose the thought of having had experiences, conceived of as yours and as past. Similarly, your desires and expectations include an idea of experiences not yet had, conceived of as yours and as future. In contrast to your sense of self there is, as stated above, your awareness of the world outside you, and of others who experience it too, each other, and you.

To appreciate what this sense of self encompasses, try to imagine a situation in which it is lacking. Perhaps you have even been in such a situation. Suppose your experience of the world were haphazard and chaotic, with gross spatial, temporal, and qualitative discontinuities. It would be something like a film with many flashbacks, flashforwards, and general changes of scene occurring at an unfathomable rate. Perhaps you've seen such a film and were totally confused. If your experience of the world were like that, there would be an unfortunate difference: you wouldn't be able to say, "It's only a movie." The theater, lights, seats, audience, and the world into which you reemerge when the movie is over are not part of the movie. Everything is part of the world.
An all-embracing chaos would surely overwhelm your cognitive faculties. Your experience would be utterly fragmented. Nothing would make any sense, for you couldn’t put the pieces together. Unlike assembling a jigsaw puzzle, you would be at your wit’s end even trying to figure out what the pieces are. Your memory would be swamped in more confusion than when you hear ultramodern music, see an absurdist drama, or have a wild dream.

Whether this chaos were the world’s fault or your brain’s, you couldn’t maintain a sense of self. You would be disoriented, lost, and confused. You would not know what was happening from one moment to the next, being unable to keep track of the past or anticipate the future in its broadest outline. You wouldn’t know which way is up.

You’d be unable to keep track of your own past experiences, for how could you tell whether you were remembering them or fabricating them? You couldn’t, if the world would never confirm your suspicions or alleviate your doubts. You couldn’t maintain an ongoing conception of the world and your relation to it, a sense of interaction with it, inasmuch as your experiences and abortive actions would never mesh with the world. Similarly, you couldn’t develop a sense of connection with the future, for you could in no way anticipate, let alone plan, anything. You would thus be stranded in the present, where, in isolation from a coherent picture of past and future, fact and fantasy merge. There would be no way to distinguish what is from what was or will be, or from what isn’t at all.

If you were in such a chaotic state—and some people are—you would be totally lost, utterly mystified about where, when, or who you were. You might even be unable to raise such questions. If you have never been in such a state, it is difficult to imagine being in it. It is also difficult to appreciate how amazing your normal state is. You emerged from your mother’s womb having had no experience of the world, but having enough mental and physical equipment to figure it out some—with a little help, of course. It is hard to appreciate that your ability to put the pieces together is not automatic or guaranteed. If ever you lose that ability, when and if it returns you’ll appreciate it.

Your sense of self is precarious. Having it is to maintain a certain relationship with the world and with other people. It requires having a conception of things in the world as distinct from your experiences of them. It requires that things behave fairly consistently. It requires that you realize that you can interact with things in perception and in action and with people in communication. It is only having a general sense of self, of being in these relationships with the world, that you can even begin to have a sense of identity, of who you are in particular.

I want now to crystallize the thoughts of this chapter. Your self-image is seemingly of what you are. It is illusion insofar as what you are is thought to be some underlying “self,” for there is no such thing. That is, there is no atemporal, unchanging “real you” hiding behind your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Otherwise, your self-image can be only an image of what you were, or what you imagine yourself to have to be. It cannot include what you will become, if that is taken as necessary, for that is a matter of choice, not of introspection. And, insofar as you are a subjective being in time, your self-image can never be complete or up to date. It can’t even include the experience you’re having right now. Thus, to have a self-image and to be committed to it is to limit yourself in the way that only an object can be limited.

Your sense of self is the core of your self-image, but it does not justify thinking of yourself as a thing. It is not the sense of being a thing at all, but of being related to the world and to things in the world. Being in this relationship is essentially what you are, and this is a relation in consciousness. That is, upon reflection you are aware of yourself as subject (as that which has states of consciousness) in relation to the world as object (as that which you are conscious of).

What you think your identity is, no matter what it might be, cannot adequately define you. It is a betrayal of yourself to think that it does—and a metaphysical mistake. You might have found this to be utterly shocking. I tried to cushion the blow by arguing that from your point of view you don’t matter. Rather, from your point of view you are what things matter to. So don’t take yourself so seriously.

That’s easier said than done. Doing it is the subject of the next (and last) chapter.