The Self as Legion

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In the Christian New Testament there is the story of Jesus who encounters a Gerasene demoniac. The unclean spirit had taken possession of the man on so many occasions that he had to be fettered, but to no avail because he would always "break the fastenings" and be driven to the wilds by the devil. When Jesus asked "What is your name?" the reply was "*Legion*, because many devils had gone in to him" (LK7: 26-34).

The paper by Proulx and Chandler calls to mind this biblical story in their discussion of Study 1b, where young adults were shown to endorse "multiplicities", a "skein of moods and momentary wants---*real demoniacs if you will*" (p. 274, my emphasis), inhabited by numerous impulses, desires and emotions that are evoked by changing circumstances but evacuated of a single volitional center. If the self is not entirely *legion* (p. 274, emphasis in original) it is also not the unified entity longed for by modernists desiring self-integrity, which is to say, a sense of *wholeness* (Latin, *integer)*. If the self does not entirely break the fastenings of propriety it does tend to "slip the leash" of responsibility.

This is one of the large claims that Proulx and Chandler are determined to make on the basis of their clever interview methodology. But there are several others. For example, the authors report that the tendency to endorse multiplicitous self-disunity is strongest when young adults are called to account for bad behavior. Rather than endorse a singular self in volitional control, or even a hierarchical self who recognizes a certain dualistic tension in one's self structure, the young adult instead *keeps splitting* self-construals into reactive multiplicities that are staked to changing circumstances.

Moreover, like the Gerasene whose inner demons were cast off into a swine herd, the young adult externalizes self-perceived failings into multiple contextually-dependent selves in a desperate attempt to "slip the leash of responsibility." And if previous researchers missed observing the multiplicitous self who flees agency and escapes freedom in their data it is because they were addled by William James and his essentialist I-Me solution to the problem of sameness and change.

These are certainly bracing conclusions for which this paper will be cited for a long time. That I do not think the chain-of-evidence requires us to follow the Gerasene Self into the post-modern, polyphonous sea does not detract from my estimation of its enduring significance. For one thing, the interview data does indeed converge in interesting ways with findings in the self-understanding literature, a fact should not get overlooked by the more rhetorically vivid conclusions for which this paper will be cited.

For example, the fact that young adolescents report more volitional agency converges with the portrait of the "self-observing ego" drawn by Selman's account of interpersonal understanding and by Broughton's study of children's naïve epistemologies. Similarly, the movement towards greater self-differentiation by later adolescence, say, into public-private (Blasi & Milton), conscious-unconscious (Selman) and divided selves (Broughton), or by social roles (Harter & Monsour) and the attending effort to reconcile the resulting tension is captured anew by Proulx and Chandler's observation in their data of the hierarchical self.

Of course, the authors go on to claim that movement towards hierarchical and multiplicitous selfhood by early adulthood is not mere progress in social cognitive development. It is not the orthogenetic principle in action. If it were why is its operation so selective? Why should the multiplicitous, context-dependent self get invoked only when accounting for one's own bad behavior, but not for the behavior of others? Similarly, why is one's praiseworthy behavior attributed to volitional internal causes, but unseemly behavior attributed to multiplicitous and reactive selves who are at the mercy of externalities beyond one's volitional control?

This is where the development of self-understanding meets attribution theory. For if we only examine attributions we see a familiar pattern: most individuals attribute good behavior to internal causes but

make external attributions about bad behavior. But this has to be qualified by age-graded variation in conceptions of self-unity. As it turns out, younger teens who endorse the Singular Self also internalize the causes of bad behavior. In contrast the Multiplicitous Self of young adults externalize responsibility for bad behavior. And the only explanation that makes sense to the authors for why younger teens should make internal attributions for both good and bad behavior while young adults internalize good but externalize bad behavior is that, over time, the self *keeps splitting* in a desperate desire to escape freedom. By early adulthood one gives up on volitional agency when confronted with bad behavior in a self-less flight from responsibility.

But I am not so sure. For one thing, what is the called the multiplicitous self comes close to a sophisticated social cognitive view of dispositional coherence. On this view a stable behavioral signature is to be found at the intersection of person x context interactions. This possibility is missed in the present data (I would suggest) because of the authors' own preference for viewing the social cognitive view of personality as simple case of synchronic disunity.

There is an irony here. Blasi and Milton are criticized for using a methodology that rows in the wake of William James's essentialism. According to the authors, when Blasi and Milton asked participants where is the "real me" they were simply giving away the game. But Proulx and Chandler give away the game, too, and row in the wake of their own meta-theoretical preferences (perhaps this is inevitable). When participants articulate what amounts to a social cognitive view of personality this can look like "context-dependent multiplicities" only if one starts from the presumption that self and context are either/or options and do not interpenetrate in complex ways. If one does not believe that dispositional coherence can be located at the intersection of person x context interactions then synchronic disunity is all one is ever going to find.

One way to read the present data, then, is to say that participants were struggling with how to articulate a social cognitive view of dispositional coherence. They were not running from freedom or giving up on volitional agency. They were not endlessly splitting the self. Indeed, the participants coded as multiplicitous began the interview "by asserting flatly that the individual in question retains a unified self" (p. 269). It is of interest, of course, that participants tended to be good social cognitive theorists only when accounting for their misbehavior. But this self-enhancement effect is a well-known bias in social cognition and is proof further of a "fat relentless ego" (to use Iris Murdoch's expression) that is vigilant for ways to shore up its defenses.

There is no denying that self-excusing evasions in our moral life are all too common and all too human, and that investigations of the responsible self are badly needed. The authors are on to something in their exploration of how self-serving attributions in the moral domain intersect with conceptions of self-unity. The implications of the data for the ontology of the moral self, for modernist and post-modernist reflections on selfhood, or even for common sense notions of integrity and wholeness, is not as clear.