

Owning and the Creation of Individual Selves

Abstract:

If we suppose familiarity with cases in which some ideas seem to be our own and other ideas seem to belong to someone else, then we generate a problem for an adequate conception of the individual self. Both my ideas and the ideas of others occupy a place in a single mental life (mine), and we must discover some basis for this mental distinction. I draw on the work of Max Scheler to demonstrate that a traditional, broadly Cartesian account of selfhood cannot accommodate this distinction. I then turn to Scheler's description of an anonymous stream of experience, in virtue of which an individual self is gradually discovered. I criticize the descriptive adequacy of this view, its reliance on an essentialist account of personhood, and its consequent limitation to epistemological claims. Alternatively, I describe immediate experience as disjoint and discontinuous, and argue for an *a posteriori* conception of the individual.

Let us suppose we are familiar with cases in which some ideas seem to be our own and other ideas seem to belong to someone else. For example, I attribute a particular literary idea to its author, but claim ownership of my personal reflections about that idea. Let us further assume that our own ideas make an important contribution to our individual selves. Now, because I think both kinds of ideas, or else I would be unaware of their distinct senses, it is clear that both my ideas and the ideas of others occupy a place in a single mental life (mine). What does this mean for our understanding of the individual self? How can we develop the concepts of ownness and otherness implicit in a single intellect? How can we generate a viable concept of the *individual self*—the self that has its *own* feelings, ideas, values, and mental life generally?

Some accounts of the self will not adequately accommodate these distinctions of ownness discovered in experience. Certainly, we must do more than just consider identity through time. Furthermore, it is far from clear how a Cartesian *cogito* could ground such distinctions. And one might not even accept the validity of this *cogito*.

My proposal in this essay, then, is to show how distinctions among types of ownness have a special relevance to the ontology of the self, and how they might be understood. For this purpose, I rehabilitate an account from Max Scheler, for whom the best way to make sense of these distinctions is by grounding them in a more basic shared social experience.¹ This view in turn suggests that the individual self is an achievement contingent on a particular development that can be thwarted or overshadowed. But what kind of achievement is this self and how is it possible? Is the process of individuation a matter of cognitively discovering a self, as Scheler seems to claim? I will argue against this view. Toward an alternative position, I will describe several patterns of experience suggesting that the individual may be *created* in acts at least as much as it is discovered in them. Thus, against an essentialist, *a priori* account of the self, I shall urge that an anti-essentialist, *a posteriori* concept of the self is viable.

1. Explication of Scheler's View

The suggestion that the individual self may be derivative or achieved arises in the context of Scheler's discussion of the problem of other minds. The view that makes the perception of other minds a philosophical problem begins with the commonsense claim that we are each aware of our own mental states in a privileged way (238). This starting point requires one to find lurking in the contents of one's mind—perhaps in comparison of one's perception of other physical bodies to one's own²—some necessary relation to others in order justify the knowledge of their independent existence. On this view, one

¹ Scheler, Max. *The Nature of Sympathy*. Intro. Graham McAleer. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008). Quotes in parentheses come from Part III, "Other Minds," in this text.

² Cf. Husserl, E. *Cartesian Mediations*. Trans. Dorion Cairns (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).

must somehow connect representations of an other inside one's own mind with an actual other outside the mind, which makes a skeptical wedge between the representation and the concrete other a possibility. I call this the "traditional" view.

The traditional view owes its skeptical conclusion to the perfunctory logical steps that follow a questionable assumption, namely, that our mental states are always our "own" in a sense adequate to establish a distinct, individual self. This is the assumption that everything showing up in subjective reflection is *mine*, and signifies *my* mind. But why should we identify the perception of *a* mind with the perception of *my* mind? According to Scheler, when one attends to the phenomenological data without the presupposition that a "*real substratum*" (e.g. the nervous system, a logical pole of identity, or consciousness) provides a reference point for identifying all and only those things that are mine, then one encounters a field of mental life differentiated entirely differently between what is mine and yours (245). Among my own mental states, I constantly attribute some to others. I express a thought in conversation that I got from a friend; I sympathize with a loved one's pain; I do the will of some authority figure. These are experienced differences in the ownership of a mental state, which deny one a full claim to them.

For Scheler, these assignments of mental states to one's self and others are symbolic or representational in nature.³ That is, in assigning mental states, we are in a detached, cognitive state in which we *judge* some mental contents to be mine. However these

³ "This ... [individuation] only occurs to the extent that [he] *objectifies* the experiences of his environment in which he lives and partakes, and thereby gains *detachment* from them" (247). Again: "[A]n experience only becomes a concrete experience... inasmuch as I thereby apprehend an individual self *in* it, or as it becomes a *symbol* to me for the presence of such an individual" (243).

assignments are all taking place “in” my own mind. Thus, we discover an unexpected tension between senses of “ownness”: on the one hand, every mental state that presents itself in the course of conscious life is ascribed to me; on the other hand, I refer at least some of those contents to others. I may be mistaken (as a matter of fact) about these references, but my sense that some genuine attribution is possible within my mental life does not make sense on the traditional view in which all mental states are categorically my own. Thus we must look for some more fundamental source from which the differentiation of experience into yours and mine is possible *within* the compass of my mental life.

To account for this sense of otherness within my own mental life, Scheler considers an “immediate flow of experiences, *undifferentiated as between mine and thine*” (246), and a “stream flooding” over the self (247). I will call this the “common stream of experience” (CSE).⁴ To describe the CSE, Scheler offers the experience in which a mental state is given with an indeterminate reference to oneself or the other. Ideas *in the air* (political ideas, fads) or the pervasive mood of a rock concert serve as examples. Such mental states are clearly presented, even if one has doubts about who “owns” them. One falls in with ideas or moods presented in this undifferentiated state, and is governed by them. The mental lives of children and primitive peoples provide exemplary cases of the common stream for Scheler: children are bound by a “family feeling,” or a dominant set of ideas, feelings, or tendencies handed over from their close relatives long before

⁴ Here I follow W. Schroeder (conversation), who has also called it a “primordial level of experience” (Schroeder, W. R. *Sartre and his Predecessors* (Boston: Routledge, 1984). Pg. 52.)

complex symbolic capacities develop; primitive cultures tend to prioritize different possible experiences through communal norms, such that those experiences that might lead to individuality are never taken up or explicitly pursued.⁵ The CSE provides the grounds for a common, shared understanding of one's environment (247-8), and a pervasive background from which one can slowly begin to collect and organize experiences into distinct categories of self and other.

What is the nature of this self, and how can it emerge? My goal in answering this question is to characterize the relation between an un-individuated entity and its environment that initiates the individuating process, which makes this impersonal agent an individual self.

Scheler's view on this matter must be constructed from some scattered remarks. He claims, for instance: (i) that all experience necessarily belongs to an individual self, distinct from Others, as an essential (formal) condition (246); and (ii) that a unique person, a concrete whole, underlies all of our acts, and therefore provides the grounds for the individuation of the self from the CSE.⁶ These claims suggest a general account of an entity galvanized by the tension between one's essential personality and one's received values and ideas in the CSE. The unitary person provides an implicit criterion for judging the acts, ideas, and values presented in mental life for their authentic connection with a more basic, essential nature. With the right sensitivity to the "call" of this essential nature combined with the necessary symbolic capacities one may gradually

⁵ The community "overshadows the private life of the individual" (248).

⁶ "Personality is the substance of which acts are attributes" (224 ff.). "Both self and body acquire their ultimate individual character from their evident connection with the unitary *person*" (243).

articulate one's authentic, individual self. This achieved self is an uncovered or discovered self. It provides the meaning of being true to one's own nature.

In what follows, I shall bracket this essentialist thesis that the self is discovered, and pursue instead the thesis that selves may be positively created. My assumption is that we should accept essentialism only if an anti-essentialist position proves inadequate for making sense of individual selves. In Scheler's case, adopting an essentialist position for the ontology of selves ensures that his description of achieving individuality is purely epistemological—it is a matter of coming to *know* our true selves. I shall pursue the view that we actually come to *be* our selves by working through the common stream of experience. Thus I hope to transition Scheler's claims to ontology, rather than epistemology.

2. Structure in Experience

Scheler's vision of an "immediate flow of experiences" (246) streaming through a channel of "sociologically conditioned patterns" of mental life (247) suggests that the CSE provides a continuous source of meaning in terms of which a person lives, and from which one might never need to distinguish oneself. I will suggest a vision of the CSE that is often opposed to this view. In keeping with the figure of the stream, I wish to demonstrate some ways in which our common experience may often be too turbulent or shallow to suppress the emergence of a self; indeed, the specific features of the CSE often *force* us to individuate ourselves in important ways. Thus, I am looking for aspects of our engagement in the CSE that facilitate individuation without recourse to an

essential personality. I focus on two general patterns of experience, which I call “discord” and “displacement.”

The basic structure of *discord* is a tension or incommensurability posed by the specific content constituting the common stream—these are tensions built into features of the shared values, thoughts, and styles of life presented in shared experience, which only present themselves under certain conditions. Discord arises in cases in which our shared experience presents an issue or poses a challenge to us and reveals its discontinuity or its inability to *settle* the matter for us. It forces us to affirm one particular dimension of shared experience over another—to prioritize—or generate an alternative to the typical patterns available to us. In this act, we modify the structure of the self in some distinctive, if minor way, in a way that contrasts with the common stream. That is, in such acts we cease to be a mere *embodiment* of the specific contours of the common stream and instead come to engender a difference in the form of a resolution to some problematic aspect of the CSE.

Discord figures in life at any stage. For adults, discord appears in many practical or moral choices. One may be faced with a choice between two academic positions, each presenting a significantly different arrangement of values: a high-pressure position in a prestigious department amenable to one's career or a teaching position amenable to one's family life. One may have to choose, as in Sartre's famous case, between a commitment to a family member (one's mother) or to a political cause.⁷ But such discord appears in life even for young children. It opposes the complete

⁷ Sartre, J. P. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*.

“overshadowing” of the mental life of a child in the ethos of a family. For instance, a child faces the diffuse influences of her parents: parents may assent to entirely opposed activities, have differing temperaments and moods, express themselves in different gestures or patterns of language, and embody different styles or attitudes toward life. Much of the complex turbulence of a concrete romantic relationship is impressed upon the child, and not just the celebrated connections it provides between people. Some of these differences can be combined or reconciled, but others are confrontational or contradictory. They present alternative ways of being a person. Even life with a single parent can be complicated by shifts in mood, temperament, and expectations. Moreover, the child usually collects other experiences outside the family, which disturb its regular common experience. It is of course possible that a dominant member of a family will override many of the sources of discord as they arise—an oppressive husband and father may leave little room for alternatives. But it is doubtful that such interventions can always succeed. A child, like an adult, may also be carried by inertia or indecision past the relevant contextual conditions in which the discord arises, and thus may not have to face it at all. But at least sometimes the child, like the adult, must act in order to resolve the discord and is therefore forced to situate himself among the alternatives. This act of overcoming the discord in one’s experience may be as simple as an assent to one idea over another. Discord is not necessarily coincident with strife or stress (one may be presented with very different, but equally positive values to pursue). Instead, discord simply refers to the forced moment in one’s experience where one must individuate oneself with respect to alternatives.

Displacement refers to a loneliness in which one must offer up a personal act in order to re-engage with one's environment. It is form of detachment forcing one to respond to gaps in the structure of the common stream of experience—instances in which the common stream carves out an island, as it were, and no longer carries one along in a continuous shared experience. This is not necessarily an intellectual detachment, because one's experience may be characterized by impulses or emotions. One's impulses are disconnected from the situation in a way that articulates or develops them in a new way, however.

Displacement, like discord, is often unavoidable. Even in a crowded room, in the bustle before a holiday dinner, a young child may find herself displaced: the adults move around her like satellites in indifferent orbits—they are *busy*, wrapped up in putting the turkey on the table, filling glasses, chattering; the child drifts in the space between the adults, but isn't present to them. Here the practices informing the common stream of experience have suddenly left a gap, a pocket into which the child falls with no immediate expectations, no requirements, and no desires but those she can muster on her own. Now she must speak or act in order to fill the practical space left to her, to reconnect with her environment. Of course, she cannot produce her act *ex nihilo*, but must draw on the resources available to her. Nonetheless, raising one activity to prominence—to go explore outside, to raid the dessert early—is to affirm that activity in a way only made possible from the space opened up in displacement. In displacement, one's own desires and ideas have a chance to materialize and move one to action in a new way; the source of one's acts moves from the anonymous dictation of the common

stream to something more immediately one's own. Displacement forces this new distinction between being drawn along by practical engagements and moving oneself along. Thus we discover another starting point for the substantive sense of self—that is, a self attached to specific contents by means of individual acts.

What follows from these patterns of discord and displacement? If these patterns accurately describe part of our experience in the CSE, then we have some evidence against the postulation of an essential self in accounting for individuation. If these patterns could be buttressed with additional patterns, then the process may become completely *a posteriori*. What largely underlies and motivates the process of individuation, what galvanizes the agent to action, is the experienced features of the CSE in which our lives begin. One's self is defined initially in terms of the governing CSE. But this initial foundation proves inadequate for fully containing the mental life of an agent because it is too turbulent and incomplete. One must therefore be involved in creating oneself, rather than discovering oneself, and we have the beginning of an account of how some mental contents acquire that special qualification of self-ownership, as against others and sheer anonymity.

Of course this leaves many critical questions unanswered. For instance, first, how is it possible for an anonymous agent to take a stand at all on the discord or displacement generated in the course of her experience, for this still seems to require some basis for making a choice between alternatives? Second, how can we account for novel or original mental contents, which seem to be owned in an even stronger sense than I have explored? Third, what are the far-reaching implications of an *a posteriori* account of the

self along the lines I have suggested? For instance, does such an account imply that selves may be impossible under certain circumstances? For the first two questions, I shall only suggest that answering them requires a general account of creativity or of a choice-making capacity, but that such a capacity does not clearly require an essential personality underlying them. The final question makes the further pursuit of this kind of account all the more interesting and important.