



## A Long Way East of Eden 1: Identity After God

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Identity After God

Who Am I? What Am I Worth?

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What are the most important questions in your life?

Do you identify with this?

*The point is, who are you? Not why or how, not even what. I can see what, perhaps, clearly enough. But who are you?... Occasionally I believe I perceive a little of what you are but that's pure accident... It's a joint pretence... What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it, and I'm damn sure you can't either... You're the sum of so many reflections. How many reflections? Whose reflections? Is that what you consist of?[1]*

That's a classic speech from *The Dwarfs*, by the brilliant Harold Pinter; and if you read it with a snatch of recognition, it means the vital questions in your life are very different from those that preoccupied most of your ancestors.

During much of the history of the west, many of the crucial issues have had to do with appeasing –

surviving the final encounter with – God, or the supernatural. From the pyramids to the English long barrows, the remnants of most ancient societies show an anxiety to get things prepared aright, at massive expense if necessary, for the afterlife. The question from Philippi, 'What must I do to be saved?', stands central to the Christian tradition (and from one perspective was the source of decades of seventeenth-century warfare). 'How can a mortal be righteous before God?' is Job's version, from the heart of the Jewish tradition.

Not now, however. In our century, these questions are sidelined as meaningless, or too difficult. The 'big issues' for most of us are very immediate. The questions of *purpose and desire*: What shall I try to do? What do I want, where is my life going and why? The questions of *love and friendship*: How can I find intimacy, get into a relationship that works? What is real love anyway? The questions of *truth and ethics*: How do I know what is right? How can anyone know? And the issues that will be the theme of this chapter, issues of *identity and self-worth*: Who am I? What is my significance?

Unsettling questions that hang over many a bathroom mirror:

*The girl entered our hotel room. It was the day after my wife and I had given a lecture at one of the universities in northern Europe... She was a beautiful Scandinavian girl. Long blonde hair fell over her shoulders. Gracefully she sat down and looked at us with deep and vivid blue eyes... As we discussed her problems, we came back again and again to one basic issue which seemed to be the root of all the others. She could not love herself. In fact, she hated herself to such a degree that she was only one step away from putting an end to her life... We asked her to stand up and take a look in the mirror. She turned her head away.[2]*

Arguably, what's happened in the west over the last four hundred years is that the 'individual', the 'self', has become more and more important, more and more central, has been blown up like a balloon – and then, suddenly, has exploded. We need to understand why. Who am I now? What do I matter?

**Blowing the man up**

It was inevitable that identity should become a key pressure point for us. Nor is it merely an issue for sufferers of extreme trauma, where the individual loses track of who she really is, or what value he has. All too many 'ordinary people' know too well what it is to struggle with these questions.

Part of the reason is sociological. The sheer growth of our urban populations inevitably raises the issue, Am I more than a drop in all this ocean? Technology, reducing all that we are to a nine-figure number, makes the question more pressing still. But if we really want to understand what's happening, we have to look further back. What we're facing is a problem with a history. We inherit the struggles of four centuries as we peer uneasily at our reflections.

The issue has been building up at least since the sixteenth-century 'Reformation'. The Reformation was one of the political and artistic turning-points of our history; but it was triggered at the level of spirituality. Under the influence of Luther, Calvin and others, Christians across Europe broke free from the papal hierarchy. Up till then, the church's authority had dominated medieval belief, defining what was true and what was acceptable to believe. But now the war-cry arose of *sola Scriptura*: the Bible alone, not religious tradition, as the source of God's truth. For the first time the Bible became available in national languages, and each individual had the astounding opportunity of hearing God speak directly to them through it. No longer did they merely have to accept definitions of truth from the establishment.

And Luther, the arch revolutionary, took a further step that gave crucial importance to the individual. He pointed Europe back to the heart of the original Christians' teaching. Our being accepted by God – 'justification' – was not first of all a result of institutionalized church rituals, said Luther. Rather, it was above all an issue of personal *faith*, of the individual's staking everything on the confidence that Christ had died to reconcile each of us to God. This was radical enough; no other world religion had ever dared to downgrade the importance of human religious efforts in this way. It was radically democratic too; it meant heaven and hell hung on the poor man's decision as much as on the king's; and in the years that followed this would have major political implications. It was not surprising that the result

was fierce conflict all over Europe, and that those who translated the Bible into the languages of ordinary people often did so on the run from the authorities.

But above all, the spotlight was now placed firmly on the individual as the centre of the universal drama. It was no accident that Shakespeare chose to make Hamlet a student of Luther's university at Wittenberg, when he presented him standing alone with the whole of his destiny in his hands: '*To be or not to be, that is the question*'. If Luther was right, and the early Christians he looked back to were right, then each human individual, great or small, stood at the crux of history, with their thoughts and choices having enormous, eternal importance.

Another crucial development underlined the individual's significance. Modern philosophy is often seen as commencing with Descartes (1596 1650), who sought to know truth by building a logical system upon one of the most famous assertions of history: *Cogito ergo sum*, '*I think therefore I am*'. Once he had established the reality of the self, Descartes thought, he had a foundation for everything else he believed. Later philosophers would note that instead of starting with 'I think' (which assumed the existence of the 'I' that he was trying to prove), he should simply have said '*There are thoughts...*'. But at the time, his choice of method was historically crucial: the individual soul stood alone, heroic, all-important, at the centre of the universe, gazing outwards...

Descartes himself moved immediately from his proof of the 'I' to a proof of God. God was rather necessary for Descartes, to ensure that what the individual self saw wasn't a delusion. After all, unless our perceptions were guaranteed by God, they might be deceptions from a malignant demon. (It's a possibility that has fascinated modern science fiction writers (eg. *The Matrix*): what if the world is not at all as it seems to me?) But many of the thinkers who followed were less interested in God. Thus after the Reformation came a period known as the 'Enlightenment', in which we see our modern 'loss of God' beginning. One aspect of this enormously fertile era was its commitment to 'reason' over divine 'revelation': we learn about the world firstly by following what is plain to our minds, not what is revealed to us from heaven. God, says Paul Hazard, '*was relegated to*

*a vague and impenetrable heaven, somewhere up in the skies*[3], banished to the periphery. He was the clockwork maker, the God who set the world in motion but then left it alone. Scientific arguments for disbelieving in God would not be available for another hundred years; but God was already being pushed out from practical experience.

In our day, that process is almost completed. But the implications for our identity and value are huge. Once, we could know ourselves as being, each of us, a uniquely valuable creation from the hand of a loving, almighty Creator, charged with a destiny of enormous meaning. Our Father was our Maker, the supreme Artist; we could rejoice in glad self acceptance at having been made as we are, and with a deeply significant future ahead. As one children's song from the Protestant tradition puts it, *'I just thank you, Father, for making me me'*.

But now those beliefs are gone. The sky is emptied; heaven has gone away. We no longer feel we can depend on the reality and purposes of God. From being a unique creature of God, for whom the all wise, loving Father has designed a unique purpose in life, the individual finds herself merely the product of blind forces.[4] For millions of years, the evolutionary mud-pond has bubbled away; now we've clambered to the surface, to bask for a few brief moments in the sun. Tomorrow, the mindless process hurries on again. We're products of chance, without any special 'soul'; less durable than an oak tree, and maybe (since there are so many of us) of less value than an advanced computer. If we slip under a truck tomorrow, there should be flowers on a grave somewhere for a fortnight, but there are many others to take our place. By the law of supply and demand, we have very limited significance.

Here is a pattern that we'll see a number of times in this study. The consequences of the death of God in a particular area are announced first on the intellectual level – by the artists, the philosophers, or both. It takes time for the implications to work through to street level and to our everyday consciousness. What makes our present situation fascinating is that this is happening, explosively, in several key areas at once.

Thus, some years ago, the biochemist Francis

Crick, famous for his work on the DNA molecule, assessed the human situation after the death of God with straightforward directness. *'In your stream of consciousness... the person isn't there. Again man is made up only of these mechanical factors... It isn't just that God is dead; man is dead as well, because he becomes simply the product of the original impersonal with only the addition of the equally impersonal time and chance'*. [5] For Crick, and for many more recent biochemists who have followed him, the individual has no uniquely valuable 'soul', nothing beyond the 'mechanical factors'. Reith lecturer Edmund Leach stated a comparable position: *'There is no sharp break of continuity between what is human and what is mechanical'*, no radical difference between machines and ourselves. (In that case the technology I use may have more value than I do. We sometimes feel that that is the management's attitude too.)

*'All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man including oneself as an object'*, suggested the French existentialist thinker Sartre; *'that is, as a set of predetermined reactions, in no way different from the patterns of qualities or phenomena which constitute a table or a chair or a stone'*. [6] It happens that we can walk and talk, but that does not alter what we are: chance objects of no inherent value in a chance universe. Hollywood screen goddess Raquel Welch put it more bluntly still: *'I am just a piece of meat'*.

All that may seem fairly abstract, until the unemployment market brings the issue into the everyday. What gives us value as individuals, since there is no God? The question is not just a philosophical conundrum; it comes down to street-level in a culture with so many ways of denying our worth. The job market underlines how many people there are who are just as skilled, as *valuable*, as we are; the presence of so many competitors trumpets our own lack of distinctiveness. We are dispensable; we have no obvious intrinsic value. The marriage market can have the same effect.

And looking for the further logic of this: how do we, in Sartre's terms, 'treat objects'? What do you do with stones? What do you do with meat? Does Raquel Welch's remark give us one way to begin understanding what underlies the horrendous misery embodied in the sexual assault rate, for

example? (A gang of Harlem teenagers – mostly 14 and 15 year olds – picked on a woman jogger in the park, beat her senseless, dragged her into the bushes and then raped her repeatedly. 'She wasn't nothing', said one afterwards.)

## Sorry, but your soul just died...

This was the title of a striking piece by Tom Wolfe, renowned culture-critic and king of the 'New Journalism'. In it he described what he claims to be *'the great intellectual event of the late twentieth century'*. What did he mean?

Other chapters in this book will focus on areas of rock, literature, and popular culture. But here it's essential that we realize what's being debated on the philosophical and scientific frontiers. That's the theme of this next section. Some of what's being argued may seem strange and abstruse; but sooner or later it will impact us directly. And, if we intend to preserve our self-image against the logic from those frontiers, we will need a good basis for doing so.

What's increasingly at stake is the suggestion that, as Crick put it, with God dead, *'the person isn't there'*. The permanent 'soul' described in (for example) the Bible simply doesn't exist. For many thinkers on the cutting-edge, there is no real 'I'. A series of mental and bodily events take place within the same skin, but that may not amount to something stable enough to justify the notion of personhood.

The radical doubts about the self came into the arts first. George Steiner, in *Real Presences*, sees the trend starting a century ago. He points to the French poet Rimbaud and his famous statement *'Je est un autre', 'I is somebody else'*. This, comments Steiner, was a *'provocation'* that *'is deliberately, necessarily, anti-theological. As invariably in Rimbaud, the target is God... "Je est un autre"; is an uncompromising negation of the supreme ... act of grammatical self-definition in God's "I am who I am" (God's self-revelation in the book of Exodus).[7]* Rimbaud, says Steiner, was querying the self so as to deny God; that's where it starts.

The consequences of that denial of the divine 'I Am' for our human 'I Am' become clearer half a century later, in another anti-Christian French

writer. In Sartre's novel *Nausea*, the central character Roquentin reaches this conclusion:

*Now when I say "I", it seems hollow to me. I can no longer manage to feel myself, I am so forgotten. The only real thing left in me is some existence which can feel itself existing. I give a long, voluptuous yawn. Nobody. Antoine Roquentin exists for Nobody. That amuses me. And exactly what is Antoine Roquentin? An abstraction. A pale little memory of myself wavers in my consciousness. Antoine Roquentin.... And suddenly the "I" pales, pales, and finally goes out...[8]*

But the experience of being nobody isn't always so amusing or voluptuous. Besides, Sartre is cheating: 'Roquentin' may be a piece of poor classification, but Sartre tells his story as if it had some continuous meaning and Roquentin himself had a real personality. Other, postwar artists would experiment with going further. There are the cardboard figures of Ionesco's plays, for example. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett reduces his human beings to a pair of tramps hanging around nowhere in particular, visited by people who cannot remember them from one day to another. Then, in Beckett's later works, the personalities, such as they are, disintegrate – for example into the mad voice gabbling away, disconnected from any mind, in *Not I. "I," say I. Unbelieving'*, Beckett writes at the beginning of *The Unnameable*; and later: *'I won't say "I" any more, I'll never utter the word again; it's just too damn stupid. Every time I hear it, I'll use the third person instead'*.

That denial appears elsewhere. Sociologist Erving Goffman, for example, in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, viewed the self as a 'peg' on which the clothes of the various 'roles' we play get hung from time to time; little 'substantial self' exists beyond the role playing. More recently, the respected British philosopher Derek Parfit argues powerfully, in his widely-acclaimed *Reasons and Persons*, that *'persons are not, as we mistakenly believe, fundamental'*[9] A conscious atheist[10], Parfit deliberately sets himself against his own intuitions of personal identity as traditionally understood, that depend on a notion of a non-physical soul.[11] He argues from the personality changes observed when the brain's hemispheres are split that persons such as we usually 'believe

ourselves to be' exist only in the very loose, conventional sense that nations exist.[12] We have no lasting personal identity beyond the physical continuity of our brains, and the psychological continuity of our experiences and memories.[13] Both these sources of our connectedness are very much 'a matter of degree'[14] and tend to lessen over time; and if anything happens to disrupt either of them (such as the division of the brain hemispheres), the unitive 'person' supposedly underlying them is revealed as illusory. Thus whether my future self should be described as 'I' is an 'empty question', says Parfit; there is no absolute difference 'between some future person being me, and his being someone else'.[15]

'What you are, or appear to be to me, or appear to be to you, changes so quickly, so horrifyingly, I certainly can't keep up with it, and I'm damn sure you can't either' (Pinter). And the same denial of the 'person' marks the current of ideas evolving under such names as post structuralism, deconstructionism, post modernism: thinkers like Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, and then Lyotard or Baudrillard. Sturrock, writing a few years ago, observed in some of these writers 'a common ideology... of dissolution, of disbelief in the ego'. Barthes, for example, 'professes a philosophy of disintegration, whereby the presumed unity of any individual is dissolved into a plurality and we each of us turn out to be many instead of one. Barthes will have no truck with oneness, and certainly not with God, the One of Ones: he supports whatever is plural or discontinuous. Thus biography is especially offensive to him... because it represents a counterfeit integration of its subject'. [16]

The 'individual' thus becomes little more than an illusion, an 'unstable, replaceable form within a soulless system', or, as Culler puts it, an 'unstable collection of fragments with no unity or centre'. [17] Sturrock links Barthes' thought to that of Foucault, to whom 'the self, in the traditional sense, would appear ... a "theological" notion, a false transcendence'. [18] For the neo Freudian psychologist Lacan, the 'ego' is a false, if comforting, mental construct that we create because of such experiences as 'seeing ourselves reflected in mirrors and so assuming that we possess a permanent and unchanging kernel of identity'. [19] American postmodernist Rorty

describes the self as 'a network of beliefs, desires and emotions with nothing behind it'. [20] Whereas in the 'modern' world the problem was the *alienation* of the self, argues Fredric Jameson, in postmodernity now the crucial issue is the self's *fragmentation*. [21]

Obviously such styles of thinking fundamentally challenge the assumption of the individual's coherent value. Not surprisingly, some of the most vocal objections have come from writers on the political left, who have seen that the 'end of the individual' might well mean the end of political ethics and morality. Sociologist Leo Lowenthal, one of the key figures in the Frankfurt School, has remarked, 'I am perhaps an old fashioned man because I have the feeling that in the prevailing literary theory that is called post structuralism, we are witnessing the further liquidation of the individual. And with that liquidation, we are losing all yardsticks of value, which connect aesthetic to ethical and political questions... Nothing is very important, so anything goes'. [22] It is easy enough to understand his concern. Certainly the postmodernists have had a fascination for freedom, and an ideal of 'free play'. But the totalitarian possibilities of their denial of the individual are obvious. After all, if the 'individual' is an illusion, what price democracy, which is supposed to be based on the significance of the individual?

But the challenges to our 'sense of self' as a 'person' now come most overwhelmingly from psychology, where the idea of the individual 'mind', the 'ghost in the machine', has come to seem a clumsy and unscientific concept. As we grow more familiar with the workings of the human brain, we are increasingly able to identify what parts of the 'mechanism' trigger our experiences of pleasure, pain, fear, anger, sexual arousal, and so on. Indeed, as we become more aware of these triggers, the question arises as to how many can be duplicated, or even improved upon, by computers. Will computers soon be able to defeat any human chess player (Gary Kasparov went down to Deep Blue in 1997)? Will computers – because they are 'better machines' – be able to synthesize a soundtrack giving greater stimulation to our pleasure response than any human voice? Are human chess players and human singers at the end of their respective reigns? Not only do we learn we are only

machines, but it's doubtful whether we are even particularly competent ones.

But the behaviouristic school of psychology has asked more ruthless questions than these. John B. Watson, the founder of behaviourism, complained right back in 1930 that *'Human beings do not want to class themselves as animals. They are willing to admit that they are animals but "something else in addition". It is this "something else" that causes the trouble. In this "something else" is bound up everything that is classed as religion, the life hereafter, morals, love of children, parents, country, and the like. The raw fact that you, as a psychologist, if you are to remain scientific, must describe the behaviour of man in no other terms than you would use in describing the behaviour of the ox you slaughter, drove and still drives many timid souls away from behaviourism'*.<sup>[23]</sup> What the *'timid souls'* realize is, presumably, that this denial of any *'something else'* – this insistence that *'morals, love of children, parents, country and the like'* are no more than mechanical responses or animal drives – takes away much of their meaning. There is no reason why we *'ought'* to act according to them, rather than by completely opposite stimuli and drives that might equally well be triggered within our mechanism.

Watson's most prominent successor was B.F. Skinner, famous for a book deliberately titled *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. For Skinner, *'autonomous man'*, a person with a free will that is not determined by external causes, was *'a device used to explain what we cannot explain in any other way'*. Now, however, we know that stimuli in our environment determine all our behaviour; ultimately, therefore, *'man is a machine'*, and the free individual is an illusion. So *'to man qua man we readily say good riddance. Only by dispossessing him can we turn to the real causes of human behaviour. Only then can we turn from the inferred to the observed, from the miraculous to the natural, from the inaccessible to the manipulable'*. But Skinner's attitude to that *'manipulation'*, in a world that denies the reality of individual freedom, had alarming, though logical, implications for democracy: *'A permissive government is a government that leaves control to other sources'*.<sup>[24]</sup> A more logically-minded government might not make that mistake.

A final ingredient, however, comes with the development of sociobiology and genetic neuroscience over the last decade. These have switched the source of psychological control from the environments of the behaviourists to our evolutionary genetic inheritance – but in the process have made freedom, free will, even more improbable. *'Neuroscience, the science of the brain and the central nervous system, is on the threshold of a unified theory that will have an impact as powerful as that of Darwinism a hundred years ago'*, argues Tom Wolfe.<sup>[25]</sup> The theory contends that our genetic history determines far more of our attributes than we will want to believe, determines them beyond our power to do very much about it: *'Many neuroscientists believe that genetics determine not only things such as temperament, role preferences, emotional responses, and levels of aggression, but also many of our most revered moral choices, which are not choices at all in any free-will sense but tendencies imprinted in the hypothalamus and limbic regions of the brain'*. And younger scientists, says Wolfe, are now drawing the logical conclusion: *'Since consciousness and thought are entirely physical products of your brain and nervous system – and since your brain arrived fully imprinted at birth – what makes you think you have free will? What "ghost", what "mind", what "self", what "soul", what anything that will not be immediately grabbed by those scornful quotation marks, is going to bubble up your brainstem to give it you?... You can look and look and you will not find any ghostly self inside, or any mind, or any soul'*; just a genetic machine.

It is crucial to remember that all this follows from an assumption of the absence of God. Christians have always affirmed that a central aspect of the gospel is *'grace'*, the almighty power of God's Spirit to break through any kind of determinism and create genuine free choice. Indeed, Christians would not be totally uncomfortable with the notion that, apart from the Spirit, psychological freedom is limited. St Paul described man's natural state as being in bondage to a process he termed the *'law of sin and death'*; he used the word *'dead'* to describe our natural condition, implying that only reunion with the *'Spirit of life'* of God makes full personality possible. It is only *'if the Son sets you free'* that *'you will be free indeed'*, in Jesus' words. There is

also Paul's famous account of psychological determinism in practice: *'I am... sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do'*. He describes himself as *'a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?'* – before adding, *'Thanks be to God, through Jesus!'*[26] For Paul, the *'bondage'* to physical drives is insuperable – until the supernatural (the *'miraculous'*, as Skinner terms it in the passage quoted above) is taken into account.

But now we know that there is no supernatural, what will all this mean in our culture? Wolfe's assessment is pessimistic. *'The conclusion people out beyond the laboratory walls are drawing is: the fix is in! We're all hardwired! That, and: don't blame me! I'm wired wrong!'*... The notion of a self – a self who exercises self-discipline, postpones gratification, curbs the sexual appetite, stops short of aggression and criminal behaviour – is already slipping away... The male of the human species is genetically hardwired to be polygamous, ie, unfaithful to his legal mate. Any magazine-reading male gets the picture soon enough. (Three million years of evolution made me do it!)... Most murders are the result of genetically hardwired compulsions. (Convicts can read, too, and they report to the prison psychiatrist: "Something came over me... and then the knife went in.") Where does that leave self-control? Where, indeed, if people believe this ghostly self does not even exist, and brain imaging proves it, once and for all? (Other writers have observed that, if there is no such thing as free choice, it becomes much harder to distinguish murder from accidental stabbing;[27] it also becomes difficult to distinguish rape from normal sex.)

And where does all this leave individual significance? Wolfe continues, *'The peculiarly American faith in the power of the individual to transform himself from a helpless cipher into a giant among men ... is now as moribund as the god for whom Nietzsche wrote an obituary'*, says Wolfe. *'The most popular study currently... is David Lykken and Auke Tellegen's study at the University of Minnesota of two thousand twins that shows, according to these two evolutionary psychologists, that an individual's happiness is largely genetic. Some people are hardwired to be*

*happy and some are not. Success (or failure) in matters of love, money, reputation or power is transient stuff; you soon settle back down (or up) to the level of happiness you were born with genetically'*.

*'Helpless ciphers'*. Communist shop steward Jimmy Reid declared in his famous rectorial address at Glasgow University that the *'major social problem in Britain'* was *'alienation... the cry of men who feel themselves the victims of blind economic forces beyond their control... the feeling of despair and hopelessness that pervades people who feel with justification that they have no real say in shaping or determining their own destinies'*. *'Reject these attitudes'*, he urged the students. *'Reject the values and false moralities that underlie these attitudes. A rat race is for rats. We're not rats. We're human beings. Reject the insidious pressures in society that would blunt your critical faculties... This is how it starts, and before you know where you are, you're a fully paid up member of the rat pack. The price is too high. It entails the loss of your dignity and human spirit. Or as Christ put it, "For what is a man profited if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"'*

Fine words. But as we look back, Reid seems open to the accusation of talking mere emotive idealism. We are rats. Or have we any reason for believing – after the death of God – that we have a *'soul'* to lose, that we can ever truly *'reject the pressures'* in our environment or be anything but the victim of *'blind forces'* beyond our control? What is this *'dignity'* (the term Skinner hates) that Reid assumes as a given? *'We're not rats. We're human beings'* - does that have defensible value, or does our increasing understanding reveal it as a sentimental slogan?

The issue we face, then, is that noted by Erich Fromm: *'In the nineteenth century the problem was that God is dead, in the twentieth century the problem is that man is dead'*. [28] How long will all this remain a matter of esoteric doctrine, and how will it start to shape the ways we interact and care (or not) for each other? (Remember Sartre: *'All kinds of materialism lead one to treat every man including oneself as an object ... in no way different from the patterns or qualities and phenomena which constitute a table or a chair or a stone'*). Do I have any true personality? Or am I

simply lacking courage to face the conclusions reached by the 'cold realists' of the mind?

Humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers wrote: *'We are not fond of a mechanistically oriented, hard headed empiricism. But what will we put in its place? An existential mysticism will not, in my judgment, be good enough. Private subjective opinion will not be good enough.'*[29]

So we arrive back from the scientific frontier to the bathroom mirror. Since we know there is no God, are my human 'dignity', my very individuality, merely comforting fables? Who, really, am 'I'?

*Sorry, but your soul just died...*

What does it really mean when the concept of unified personality collapses?

One response: In a remarkable trial in Wisconsin, USA, Mark, a 29-year-old shop assistant, was accused of raping Sarah, 27. What made the trial unusual was that Sarah suffered from multiple personality disorder, and alleged that the sexual act they shared in his car was rape because it occurred without the agreement of her dominant, and indeed other, personalities. Mark, it was alleged, had summoned 'Jennifer', a 20-year-old personality who 'likes to dance and have fun'. But while they were having sex, a different personality called 'Emily' had appeared. (A psychiatrist told the court that Sarah's body was home to at least 48 different personalities.) 'Emily' informed the dominant 'Sarah' personality, and Sarah phoned the police to say that she had been assaulted.

As the trial proceeded, the judge and prosecutor questioned Sarah, and then 'summoned' and swore in both 'Jennifer' and 'Franny', a further personality inhabiting the same body (this time a '30-year-old').

Bizarre... Yet if (as both psychologists and philosophers are telling us) none of our personalities are truly unified from month to

month or even day to day, what is a judge – or anyone else – to do?

## God and Identity

*'To treat every man, including oneself, as an object... in no way different from a table or a chair or a stone'*. In fact it is hard to live as if there were no coherent 'I' inside our skin. But the onus increasingly will be on us; we have to learn to handle the retention, or reconstruction, of identity after the death of God.

We have seen how the 'death of God' has led logically to the 'death of the "I"'. But it can also impact a related area that will decide our ability to feel comfortable about ourselves: our confidence or self worth.

It's important to understand how much, experientially, the reality of God can mean for identity and self-worth. Sonship, and daughterhood, to the God who named himself 'I AM WHO I AM' can be a linchpin to the personality.

Several implications grow from the nature of God as Trinity.

First, Christians confess God as Father, as Creator. And if he is our Maker, then as we look at ourselves in the mirror, with all our follies and weaknesses, we know we are seeing a unique, eternal masterpiece (*'fearfully and wonderfully made'*, Psalm 139), from the greatest craftsman in the universe.[30] Whether we like what we see or not, that gives us real worth – body and soul! If every least scrawl of a Picasso has tremendous value because Picasso made it, so we too as God's creations each have unimaginable, intrinsic worth. The nature of God as Creator also has enormous power to integrate and give value to our diverging roles. Because my Maker is my Father, then the many other parts of my life – my love, my work, my interests, my hurts – belong together and have significance, since they, too, are foreseen and foreordained by a wise and

caring God.

The word 'Father' presents another implication: that of profound and unconditional love.[31] It means that I am never truly alone, never truly lost: I can look up on a starlit night from a totally foreign city, and with me – yet also above the farthest galaxy – is one I can call Father, my Maker who loves me deeply as an individual, and on whom I can totally rely. *'I was built for infinite love from Someone who needs nothing in return, and for eternal impact through Someone whose purposes are supremely important. Only God can satisfy what my soul most deeply desires'*, writes Christian psychiatrist Lawrence Crabb.[32] To grasp that infinite, unchanging love is to begin to understand self-worth.[33]

Second, Christians confess God as revealed in Christ, God the Son; and a vital component of identity derives from the way Jesus treats people in the gospels. Evidently his respect and his love do not have to be earned: we see this from the sensitive and affectionate way he relates to the poor, the aged, the failing and even the crooked. That, Christians believe, is the love and dignity with which we can trust him to relate to each of us.

But still more, self-worth derives from a grasp of the profundity of Christ's cross, and the forgiveness resulting from it. Christ's unimaginable agony on Calvary, dying (or, Christians believe, enduring 'hell') for each man or woman individually, shows the worth God sets upon every one of us. We learn that we are worth so much to God, loved so enormously, that the Father sent his own Son to die for us, exactly as we are. *'A friend is one who knows the worst about you, and loves you just the same'*; that acceptance is both value and security.

As Keyes puts it, *'If your self-acceptance rests on maintaining an image of yourself as a nice, good person who never did anything wrong on purpose, then you cannot afford to allow much truth into your field of vision. True self-acceptance is in stark contrast to this self-delusion. Self-acceptance does not survive honesty; it rests on it... The Christian is not someone who is so brave or thick-skinned that he can face the truth about himself unafraid; rather he is a sinner who can face his sin because he has confidence that God has forgiven and accepted him in spite of it. The*

*acceptance of God is the basis of self-worth'*.[34] This sense of secure openness is the reverse of what sociologists such as Goffmann have described as the *'performing self'*, continually surrounded by scrutiny hence forever uneasily self-conscious. It is the haven that Bonhoeffer famously expressed from the Nazi jail: *'Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine'*.

Thirdly, identity and self-worth derive from God the Holy Spirit, whom Christians confess as God's presence in the soul of everyone who welcomes him. Each believer, says St Paul, now has a unique gifting from the Spirit *'for the common good'*, indispensable and irreplaceable.[35] Or, working with the different shade of meaning he employs in Ephesians: each believer *is* a gift of God to the total 'body' or community; and *'from him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love'* – but only *'as each part does its work'*.[36] Each of us has value; each of us is unique; each of us is indispensable.

These elements don't constitute a simple, ten-minute route to a healthy self-image. They are concepts which take a great deal of reflection and meditation, amid ongoing life-experience, to internalise fully.[37] (That is why, for example, at the heart of Christian communal experience is the shared meal of bread and wine that Christ ordained as a symbol of himself and his cross, the broken body and the shed blood. As we partake of it, again and again and year after year, we reflect on its meaning for us from different angles, we come to grasp it ever more profoundly.)

## D-I-Y Identity

But anyway we now know none of that was true; we are merely products of an arbitrary process. We have bidden farewell to the loving Father-Creator who made us his masterpieces. The Christ who declared us worth hell on Calvary is also now dead for us. What this means is that our value has no *givenness*. Identity and self-worth become something we have to manufacture for ourselves, effectively or ineffectively, or else receive from others. What are the implications?

Many of us have friends exhibiting, say, aggressiveness, or depression, or unjustified insistence on their own failures – or we see traces

of similar issues in ourselves. And we've found that these problems make sense when they're viewed in terms of self-worth and identity; just as physical symptoms make sense when fitted into, say, a framework of possible diabetes. Indeed, even truly healthy individuals can benefit from assessing where they're at with such questions – for example when we're taking time to reflect on the growth of our marriage, or on the kind of working situation in which we most flourish.

And, culturally, these issues are becoming more urgent. It's widely recognized that the disintegration of stable parenthood, plus the dehumanizing pressures of contemporary life and the experiences of negation and rejection they bring, can pose a formidable challenge to our retaining adequate self worth. And this experience of inadequacy may underlie a wide range of other problems: insecurity, self disgust, over anxiety, dependence, depression, self pity, perfectionism, escapism, masochism, promiscuity, or a desperate quest to please others and find acceptance, if we blame ourselves; aggressiveness, resentment, hatred, the attempt to control or possess others, etc., if we blame our inadequacy on people outside us.[38] Keyes summarizes it like this:

*A person with a strong and true sense of identity will experience peace with himself, others, and God. He will have a certain self-forgetfulness, a lack of self-absorption and self-consciousness. By contrast, the person with a weak sense of identity is painfully concerned with himself. He is keenly conscious of being one who is fragile, unreal, and insubstantial. He feels himself to be a loosely held together collection of roles played to the audience of others' expectations and determined by forces outside of his control. He might describe himself as a mass of contradictory selves, or as several actors on a stage without a script or director. This lack of cohesion usually goes together with feelings of self-hate. Complaints of "I don't know who I am" often go along with "I can't stand myself". [39]*

Reading these words after our section on postmodernism and neuroscience might well make us ask if the whole trend of western thought 'after God' isn't institutionalizing a broken sense of identity. Later in this study we'll see further grounds for such a concern. Keyes' useful book

suggests that a sense of identity can be made up of four components: what he terms 'morals', or a clear sense of what things and values are '*more valuable than others... worth living for, perhaps even worth dying for*'; 'models', or examples ('*heroes and heroines... pictures, stories, images, things to aspire to*'); 'dominion', or purposeful activity leading to '*mastery over some bit of the world to some degree*'; and receiving and giving love. We shall see in the next four chapters that each of these has been rendered highly problematic by the 'death of God'. Purposeful activity is no longer easy to define; values are notoriously unclear; the nature of the exemplary 'hero' is problematic; and we doubt whether love is anything more than a word. In all these regards, the contemporary west may have cut off the branches its identity was resting on.

If, then, self worth is not for me a 'given', something intrinsic, it becomes something I have to earn, or construct. Thus our 'post-God' culture appears marked, all too often, by the pressures – and wrecks – of the battle to create our self-worth. How many ways are there in which different personalities respond to this dilemma? What (if not God, or besides God) are those things that make me feel good about myself, about being who I am?

Many of us find a real degree of identity in our job: *I have value because of my work. 'I have that normal male thing of valuing myself according to the job I do'*, admitted Conservative politician Michael Portillo. John Thaw (Inspector Morse) offered a particularly striking example in *TV Times*: *'I suppose I am a workaholic. It's all about needing to work to give yourself some importance, to prove that you exist. If I have a month or two off with nothing happening I get very fidgety, nervy; edgy. It isn't insecurity because I know there's work coming up. It must be, I suppose, that I need to work so as to be able to say to people: "Look, I'm here. I exist".'*

We would expect this to function as a significant area of identity for the craftsman, and for skilled – or powerful – professionals. (The apparently pointless nature of many contemporary jobs makes it less meaningful for others.) But it does leave us vulnerable: loss of work, through retirement or unemployment, comes to mean loss of identity. And since the one is inevitable and the

other (now there are far fewer 'jobs for life') a strong possibility, to make our work the heart of our self-worth is to leave ourselves exposed. Hence too the fury of a Jimmy Reid against employers who 'see people as units of production' (that is, deny their value), and therefore disposable: 'You have to see the hurt and despair in the eyes of a man suddenly told he is redundant without provision made for suitable alternative employment, with the prospect, in the West of Scotland... of spending the rest of his life in the Labour Exchange. Someone, somewhere has decided he is unwanted, unneeded'.

All of us rightly seek some self-worth in our achievements, what Keyes might term the 'mastery' element; that is, *I have value because I achieve*. The issue arising here is of a different kind: when success becomes not a component but a linchpin of our identity, we grow prone to the aggressive, stress related 'Type A' behaviour that lies at the root of so much heart disease. The 'driven' personality, continually impelled to compete, to 'prove themselves', certainly hasn't 'achieved' one thing – self-worth itself. Schultze notes how this pattern is handed down in families where parents impose their own drivenness on their offspring, for whom it may have painful results – 'the common middle-class practice of imposing adult standards of competition and performance on young children, who then grow up to be fretful adults'.<sup>[40]</sup> Related, of course, is identity embodied in the accumulation of signs of past achievement – very precisely, of 'status symbols' (car size, designer clothes): *I must have value, because I possess*. That is a route to self-worth the marketing men want us all to follow. 'Having accomplished little with their own hands', writes Schultze of American youth, 'their self-esteem is low and their dependence upon the products produced by others is very high... Real joy is purchasing the latest product or catching the latest entertainment, especially if it bestows status. The pattern for finding identity and intimacy is increasingly clear: reach out and touch something – your wallet.'<sup>[41]</sup> ('I shop therefore I am'; is the compulsive shopper using acquisition to try and fill a gap where the love of God could have been?)

For others, romance seems the most compelling route: *I have value if I am loved* – or alternatively, *I don't have value because I'm not loved*. That is, 'If

*I could find the right partner, everything would be OK*'; or even, 'A brief affair would put me right'. ('You're nobody till somebody loves you', to quote the title of a Dean Martin classic; or megastar Whitney Houston on her marriage: 'Women are supposed to have husbands; we validate ourselves that way'.) Most of us will have experienced the sense of devaluation when a treasured love-relationship ends (or fails to come into being): maybe I have no value after all! ('Without you I'm nothing': the song title on Placebo adverts.) But to what extent does finding a partner solve the question in practice? Often a great deal; a positive, affirming relationship is an enormously healing contribution to a healthy self-image. The problems come when our sense of worth depends too strongly on our need to feel loved, leading us into unhealthy codependency (holding on desperately, by sex, to a poor relationship, because we dare not face losing it); or to draining our partner, putting demands on one relationship after another that destroy them. ('Prove to me you still care for me! Show me I am tolerable, loveable!') The situation is exacerbated now that sex no longer implies long-term commitment. The sexual embrace, where the ultimate openness could imply the ultimate loving security, becomes instead a proving-ground for technique, where once again value has to be earned. ('Did he think I'm good?')<sup>[42]</sup>

Are there pitfalls common to these DIY identities? Let's consider some others. *I have value because I look good*; in the mirror is a good body, accessorized with the latest styles: Comme des Garçons, Dolce e Gabbana, whatever. Great for clubbing, gym and disco culture; but trapped by the demands of this particular prison, we know, may be a 'poseur' – or an anorexic. (150,000 American women die of anorexia every year; up to 200,000 Britons suffer from anorexia or bulimia.) *I must have value because I am busy, because of my packed schedule*: the destructive self-worth of the workaholic. *I have value because people like (or respect or want) me*; leading perhaps to a different kind of vulnerability and servitude, where our self-worth depends on fulfilling others' expectations – but leading also, in some cases, to narcotics or unwanted pregnancy as we try to hold on to affection. (Marilyn Monroe became a supreme feminine icon; slept with a president, died in misery. 'Her sexual value to men was the only value she was sure of', writes Gloria

Steinem. 'By exciting and arousing, she could turn herself from the invisible, unworthy Norma Jean into the visible, worthwhile Marilyn'.) *I have value because I enjoy* – a sport, an art. This is maybe one of the healthiest approaches, because what gives identity is at a certain psychic distance from the self. Its disadvantage, albeit minor, is that my sense of identity becomes located largely in one segment of my time.

Then there is *I have value because I remember*.<sup>[43]</sup> For myself, photographs and souvenirs convey a real sense of the significance of the past, of meaning in the accumulation of experiences, in the binding together of memories. But there is vulnerability here too, once we cease believing in a loving, divine Providence who gives our lives significant direction. Does the past, indeed, have meaning? Or are all the memories and souvenirs merely a heap (as they may seem one day to my grandchildren) of pointless rubbish... 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' (T.S. Eliot)? (The question is answered clearly, and depressingly, in Beckett's glumly-titled play *Krapp's Last Tape*.) There is *I have value because of my pain*: where a hurt cannot be released, forgiven and outgrown, has to be remembered and cosseted, because it seems the only meaningful thing in a person's life. (An especially damaging variant is *I retain identity through my failure or my sickness*<sup>[44]</sup> – I am an alcoholic, I always fail, I am a depressive.) *I have identity because of what I belong to* – because of the party or the regiment or the religious sect, because I am gay, because of a Metallica jacket or a Millwall scarf... Having a place where we truly belong is a basic human need, and a significant component of identity. But the need to turn it into a 'linchpin' for identity explains the bizarre degrees of loyalty we sometimes see; or the furious insistence on distinctness from other, similar groups. (Such tribalism seems an increasing feature of postmodernity.)

If 'creating our own identity' is a key issue in our culture, we might expect that the marketplace will attempt to satisfy our need (there is money in it)

by offering a variety of off-the-peg identities. I am buying a new type of jacket; do I want to be that type of person? Reyner Banham wrote about the wide range of choice available in the purchase of a pair of sunglasses: 'That, probably, is what it's about anyway: instant role playing. "Look, crowd, I'm John Lennon / Lolita / the dreaded Grimley Fiendish / les Tons-tons Macoutes / Beethoven / Brigitte Bardot / your Aunt Edna".<sup>[45]</sup> ('You're the sum of so many reflections' (Pinter))

## The Snag With D-I-Y

'The point is,' asks Pinter in *The Dwarfs*, 'Who are you?'

What is happening in these examples? Nearly all the sources we have described have their place in a mature sense of identity. Even suffering, properly 'digested', is surely a component of mature identity. But one thing has disappeared with the 'death of God': the 'linchpin' to a coherent framework in which the different aspects find their place.

In the Christian picture, our sense of identity is made up of numerous components, none absolutely crucial but each finding its place in relation to our inmost self's central, immutable relationship with God. (Bonhoeffer again: 'Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine'). With that relationship gone, however, there is no centre to the framework. For some of us, then, a difficulty lies in retaining a sense of identity from various unrelated components, which come and go at different stages. The result can be that the framework lacks coherence; nothing quite brings the sense of identity, and we sense we're playing a fragmented, unstable hotchpotch of disconnected roles: 'several actors on a stage without script or director', to cite Keyes again. (Or we may feel like we're posing, or inauthentic; 29% of all Americans say they feel like a fake, phony or hypocrite most of the time.<sup>[46]</sup>) Or, we may move different particulars into the central 'linchpin' role, the 'God-position' foundational to our identity. The result can be that good things become twisted and destroyed

through carrying a weight they cannot ultimately bear.

What strain is created if we come to locate our self worth and identity heavily in, say, our successes? To do so can involve the endless demand, Give me more: let me keep on achieving enough to reaffirm my value. Ordinarily, we may simply not get enough of the 'means' of identity to justify its central role in our self-worth. So we need more: more achievements, more assurances of love or likeability, or more status-symbols. A 'means' that could have been a simple source of pleasure becomes the source of a sense of failure, because it cannot offer enough to supply the self-worth we need.

From a Christian perspective, C.S. Lewis argued (for example in *The Great Divorce* and *The Screwtape Letters*) that putting anything other than God in the 'God-position' was an idolatry which ultimately both disappointed the idolator and distorted the idol. We can think of numerous examples. Children whose 'success' or 'happiness' is so central to the parent's self-esteem that the relationship becomes hopelessly controlling and unpleasant. Or, our identity so much needs the proof of love that our relationship becomes stifling; work means so much to our self-worth that it takes over our lives; the possessions or photos or souvenirs matter too much to be left where they can be enjoyed; the sporting ability matters so much that pleasure is destroyed because now *'winning is not the main thing, it's the only thing'*. The same occurs in an identity-option we have not yet mentioned, *I have value because I help others*, when our need for self worth manifests in a compulsion to know we have *'done good works'*[47] – leading to a *'need to be needed'* where our actions actually become counter-productive for others' self-reliance. Only God is big enough to fill the 'God-position'; but as God is dead we are forcing other things into his place, and that can destroy them.

Crabb comments interestingly about the need for us to take this weight off our relationships, if they are to be healthy. Inevitably, he suggests, there will be some sense of disappointment in any relationship, in any lover; the issue is what we do with that disappointment. It can lead us into bitterness, to a belief that no fulfilment exists anywhere. But if we cease making our

relationship into an idol, and recognise its inadequacy to meet, totally, the thirst of our psyche, it frees us to receive the relationship, and the lover, for what they truly are; with their own value, based on reality, but without having to satisfy all the demands of our psyche. *'When we learn to accept people who disappoint us by no longer requiring them to satisfy us, then we're free to love them, to reach toward them for their sake without having to protect ourselves from feeling disappointed by their response to us'*[48] But Crabb writes as a Christian, assuming that we can find in God a deeper fulfilment for our identity.

There is a further snare to avoid. In locating our self-worth and identity within one area, we create a prison for ourselves. If, deep down, our identity feeds on the thought, *I must have value since I have so much to do*, it creates a behaviour-pattern leading straight into servitude. But so too can *I have value because of my work* and *I have value if people like me*. Many of us have been down these roads.

And thirdly, there is the issue of whether our source of affirmation will prove, if not a prison, then a house built on sand. *'I spent my years being a successful wife and mother. Is that it?' 'Did I want to spend my life getting to the top as a bureaucrat?'* And we are vulnerable to their loss. Jesus told a famous story about the futile death of a rich man who had grounded his self-worth in his possessions. But the issue applies in numerous areas: we retire, or otherwise lose the work that is the base of our identity; our valued expertise grows obsolete; we grow bald, or pregnant, and no longer derive self worth from our appearance; a lover or partner leaves us (one third of British marriages end in divorce), or dies. T.S. Eliot could write of being *'Fixed in the certainty of love unchanging'*, but Eliot believed in God.

In the absence of God, then, contemporary, postmodern (wo)man needs to be a skilled juggler: balancing value from various sources, over-committed to none. Here, perhaps, we see one of the roots of the 'cool', the detachment, that is a hallmark of postmodern identity. But here too is a root of that discontinuity in our sense of self that often seems to accompany it.[49] We are friend, lover, office performer, housewife, party girl, mother – depending on the occasion and the state of the hormones (and maybe someone

different again on the internet). But we feel a lack of integrity, of a 'ground' on which all these hold together.

It should not be implied that the existence of God would provide instant solutions to these problems. Even the New Testament's concept of 'salvation' seems to be one where rebirth through the presence of God takes place at the core of our being, and then slowly spreads through different aspects of the personality. The 'ground' here is the conviction that there is a true and guaranteed identity which we grow into, and that, in time, integration will spread across the entire personality. We are loyal not to who we are (our genetics, environment, education, etc.) but to who we are becoming – the final integration towards which our identity develops, through all our diverse roles and experiences, under the lovingly creative hand of God. In his absence, however, no such final integration is guaranteed, and we are left with the discontinuities and inconsistencies on our own. To what extent can I then trust my intentions, make my promises?[50] Who – or which – will I feel like tomorrow? Who will be inside this skin tomorrow?

## The Power Alternative

There are also ways of resolving these tensions that are largely destructive – and for which our culture may pay a significant price.

Travellers in post-communist countries will have seen many cases of the self-worth of the bureaucrat, *I have value because I have power*, I can be reassured of my significance because I can keep people standing in line for hours. But in the west, too, the hunger for identity through power can lead to comical forms of status seeking. A Canadian friend, an office furniture salesman, expressed his amazement at the '*little opportunistic games*' his business customers played. When a manager gets a new assistant, a new desk is needed; because his desk must be slightly bigger than his assistant's; his chair must not be quite the same.

But this can lead to something more serious. How do I know I have the power that gives me significance, unless I can see its effects experienced by someone else?[51] The obvious possibility is of a shift into *I have significance*

*because I can cause inconvenience or pain. ('Not to perish from internal distress or doubt when one inflicts great suffering and hears the cry of it', wrote Nietzsche, 'that is great, that belongs to greatness'.[52])*

Many of the postmodernists, Foucault especially, would anyway insist that power-expression (*the endlessly repeated play of dominations*) is the most basic reality of society. And all this is not restricted to the publicly powerful. Not long back I watched deliverymen park a van in such a way that they successfully blocked a main street, including eight buses with all their passengers. The reaction, when they realized what had happened, was evident pleasure. Why is such a situation so satisfying? Or why is it enjoyable to block an underground train door, so preventing it from closing and the train from leaving? Surely the pleasure element is the proof of my own significance through others' inconvenience.

And we could think of less petty examples. How far is this a key factor behind street violence (*'Someone is going to notice me'*)?[53] Is it so unpredictable that a society which has lost its basis for identity as a 'God-given' should find its 'underclass' – those to whom it increasingly says *'You have no (spending) power, you have no value'* – responding by proving their significance? If your name is visible in graffiti all over the Bakerloo line – or if you have broken someone's face – you have clearly shown that you matter, in their life at least; you are strong, semi-Stallone, quasi-Schwarzenegger. (Rape is often at root an expression of power.) The man who can halt a whole production process by putting glass in a tin of beans, or rat poison in a Mars bar, has likewise established his importance. A similar option is often celebrated in rap music, where the musician's identity is affirmed in terms of competence for brutal violence.[54]

To the God-believer, there is a logic in why these things are so – and why they do not have to be that way. We don't have to be trapped in this wasteful battle to create worth and identity, if ultimately it's intrinsic, something given us forever by a God who loved us enough to die for us. Too many of us have become drawn into an exhausting struggle to validate ourselves, because we've lost that God.

But maybe he never existed. It does matter which is true.

Here is a story told by Tony Blair, back when he was an ordinary Labour MP:

*'Gary was walking home around midnight after an evening out in Spennymoor, Co Durham. He never saw his attackers clearly. They jumped on him from behind, stove in his face with billiard cues and left him bloody and unconscious. The object of the crime was not mercenary: no money was taken... In another village only a few miles away, a different gang forced a car, driven by an elderly couple, to stop and smashed its windows and bonnet.'*

And what drove these gangs to violence? Their members, argued Blair, *'devoid of the discipline that comes from recognizing that the value of oneself is in some way related to the value given to others, prove their "worth", that they are "somebody", by inflicting fear upon someone else'*.

Around the same time the trial took place of the 'Chelsea Mob', football supporters involved in brutal violence both in Britain and overseas. (During one ambush, of a Manchester City supporters' coach, they had kicked a policeman unconscious.) But the 'Chelsea Mob' weren't from the underclass; the leader was a solicitor's clerk with a respected City law firm. So what drove them on? At their trial, the police commented on the meticulous way the group recorded their deeds: *'A lot of these people are fairly insignificant individuals in their ordinary lives. Perhaps this was their way of achieving some glamour'*. If significance can be found no other way, we may reach for it through *'inflicting fear upon someone else'*: self-worth through violence, identity through power...

## In Summary...

Our loss of belief in God, and therefore in the 'soul', triggers major problems with questions like Who (or What) am 'I'? Dominant thinkers in contemporary psychology and philosophy are now sceptical whether there exists any 'I' to talk about. Even if there is, what value or 'worth' could 'I' possess? Self-worth, in our society 'after God', becomes something to be earned or constructed, with difficulty, rather than being gifted to us by a

Creator.

The consequences, both personally and socially, can be painful and far-reaching. It matters very considerably whether there exists a God – and an 'I' – or not...

Additional Note: Choice Is All We Need?

One other identity option, formerly quite significant, seems to be losing ground in our postmodern culture: the credo of existentialism, *I have identity because I create myself through my free choices*. In one sense this too derives from Nietzsche, the arch exponent of the death of God. Nietzsche called for the emergence of the Superman who, knowing God is non-existent, knows too that all behavioural norms are buried in his tomb, and so steps out to create his own identity in his own way. Sartre was a key proponent more recently: *'If I have excluded God the Father, there must be somebody to invent values'*, he says.[55]

For this observer at least, a doubt exists as to how far the act of choosing *entirely in itself* can now satisfy the need for assurance of identity at a gut level. But there are three other points worth noting.

First, if the psychological determinists are right, the whole idea is absurd. If we have no free will, we cannot create our identity by our free choices. We do not 'decide'; at best we can 'predict' what we will do.[56]

Secondly, as the existentialists realised, if identity is created by free choice, then the originality of the choice is of prime importance. To fall in line with traditional ways of acting is an act of *'bad faith'*, is to forfeit identity. But then authentic, original action is defined not by itself, but by its opposition to or deviation from accepted norms. This creates a bondage – doesn't true freedom come when we do something neither out of subservience nor compelled by rebellion, but simply because it is the right thing? But the need to show deviation from accepted norms can drive us into dark places. The problems this creates are highlighted in Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*, where the key figure, Raskolnikov, murders a 'useless' old woman, to prove himself an individual of Napoleonic stature who can break

free and create his own identity. Unfortunately, in the rest of the book he finds that good and evil are not just words, that crime is a reality.

If identity is something to be carved out in the face of the social totality, we would naturally expect the Rebel to be a dominant mode. And so it was, in the period of mid-century modernity most influenced by existentialism. We find it: in philosophy, in Camus (most obviously in *The Rebel*); in cinema, in James Dean (*Rebel Without a Cause*); in police thrillers, where the protagonist is so often a rebel figure armed with a deft gun and equally deft one liners (Clint Eastwood, Starsky and Hutch); in music, in Presley, Jagger, and successive subcultures – teddy boys, hell's angels, punk. The question is how far self-definition by 'rebellion' offers a lastingly satisfying base for identity on its own.

But thirdly, 'Create yourself by choosing' tends to be coupled with another contemporary commandment: 'Be yourself'. An episode of the American school soap *Degrassi Junior High* presents a girl struggling to live up to an image that isn't really genuine, finally concluding 'I'm going to be myself'. When it's over, the announcer pauses before the next programme to tell his youthful audience, 'Being yourself is the most important thing, you know!... I'm going to be me'. It appears so self evidently right; yet it is a phrasing that would not exist in many cultural contexts. The Christian approach, as we noted above, would be significantly different. If there is a God who is steadily leading us into a glorious new identity, then the 'self' which deserves our loyalty is not one existing right now (which may well be scarred in all kinds of ways and trapped in self destructive patterns; at best it is the product of our heredity and environment in a broken, 'fallen' world). Rather, we are called to be true to the self we will become. But all that presupposes the possibility of discovering the future identity and 'calling' that a God has purposed for us.

With God dead, therefore, 'Create yourself', or else 'Be yourself', became frequent guidelines for 'modern' identity. Yet don't these challenges sometimes sound like mockeries, when we are already doubting our self worth and our ability to carve out our identity, as we take on the universe single-handed? And isn't that doubly the case when the brain scientists tell us we are merely

being 'true' in our supposedly 'free choices' to the hidden stimuli of our genetics or environment; and the postmodernists explain that we have no stable core of 'self' to be 'true' to anyway?

[Go to Chapter 2]

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- [2] Walter Trobisch, *Love Yourself: Self-Acceptance and Depression* (Downers Grove, 1976), pp.7-8.
- [3] Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680 1715* (1935), p.xvii.
- [4] It is worth noting that this shift may also affect our perception of the whole natural 'creation' or environment. To call God 'Father' was to state that he alone was the one of whom the word could rightly be used; any earthly father merited the term only because, at his best, he might resemble the qualities of the divine Father. But the Bible presents God as the original, the archetype, of many other things too: he is the 'true bread', the 'living water', the 'true vine', 'everlasting burnings', 'the Rock', 'like a dove', and so on. It is as if God created a universe that is a colossal artwork full of revelations of himself! The loss of this vision turns the cosmos into something colder, less homely, more impersonal, more mechanical. Lynn Barber, in *The Heyday of Natural History*, points out that before the 19th century loss of God, popular nature books sold almost as well in England as Dickens' novels. But once man no longer looked 'through Nature up to Nature's God', and 'the pious rationale had been removed, as it was so effectively after 1859 (when Darwin's Origin of Species was published), plants and animals lost their popular appeal.' The shift is obviously limited in its effect. But its end point would be the refusal of a postmodern novelist like Robbe Grillet to countenance the use of the word 'sublime' for, say, Mont Blanc, which (he would argue) is imposing human categories of sublimity on something that existed without them for millions of

years.

[5] Quoted in Francis Schaeffer, *Back to Freedom and Dignity* (1973), p.19.

[6] Jean Paul Sartre, in *Communists and Peace*, quoted in Clark Pinnock, *Set Forth Your Case* (Chicago, 1971), p.137.

[7] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (1989), p.99.

[8] Sartre, *Nausea* (1938), trans. Robert Baldick (1965), p.241.

[9] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (1991 edition), p.445.

[10] Cf. p.454. Although Parfit presents his position as deliberately 'non-religious', he notes similar beliefs in the quasi-atheism of the original form of Buddhism, citing the following passages among others: *'Buddha has spoken thus: "O Brethren, actions do exist, and also their consequences, but the person that acts does not. There exists no Individual, it is only a conventional name given to a set of elements' (p.502). 'Here there is no human being to be found' (p.503). "'Nagasena" is only a name, for no person is found here' (p.502). 'But when we use the expression "Caitra remembers", what does it mean?... In the current of phenomena which is designated by the name Caitra, a recollection appears' (p.503).*

[11] *'It is hard to be serenely confident in my Reductionist conclusions. It is hard to believe that personal identity is not what matters. If tomorrow someone will be in agony, it is hard to believe that it could be an empty question whether this agony will be felt by me. And it is hard to believe that if I am about to lose consciousness, there might be no answer to the question "Am I about to die?"' (p.280). But he adds, 'Instead of saying, "I shall be dead", I should say, "There will be no future experiences that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences". Because it reminds me what this fact involves, this redescription makes this fact less depressing. Suppose next that I must undergo some ordeal. Instead of saying, "The person suffering will be me", I should say, "There will be suffering that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences". Once again, the redescribed fact seems to me less bad... The effect on others may be different' (pp.281-82). This final sentence, at least, is probably correct.*

[12] p.445. Cf. pp.471-72: *'A nation is not a separately existing entity, something other than its citizens, and the land they inhabit. A nation's existence just consists in the existence of its*

*citizens, acting together in various ways on its territory'.* Parfit frequently selects the idea of the nation as a useful parallel for personhood.

[13] p.307.

[14] p.276.

[15] p.278. One of Parfit's qualities is his honesty about the weaknesses of his own position, and its potentially destructive implications. He cites his critics' claims that, if he was right, *'we would have no reason to be specially concerned about our own futures'* (with indifference to continued life, or suicide, being a reasonable implication), *'and that most of morality would be undermined. These writers believe that it is only the deep further fact of personal identity which gives us reason for special concern, and supports most of morality. There seems to be no argument that refutes this view'* (p.445), although it can be *'defensibly denied'* (p.446). Even Parfit himself considers that the *'weakening of psychological connections'*, and thus of our personal continuity, that occurs over time, may reduce the basis for both our *'responsibility for past crimes, and obligations to fulfil past commitments'* (p.446). (He is not the only one thinking in that direction: a recent postmodernist critic defended the wartime fascist outpourings of poet Ezra Pound by appealing to *'deconstruction's dematerialisation of an accountable self'*).

[16] John Sturrock, ed., *Structuralism and Since* (1979), p.53. Terence Hawkes likewise links Barthes' undermining of human individuality with an assault on the Protestant notion of *'the individual's personal relationship to God'* (*Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977), p.119).

[17] Jonathan Culler, *Barthes* (1983), p.114. Culler cites Barthes' remark in *Le Grain de la Voix*: *'The subject that I am is not unified'*.

[18] *'Nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men'*, says Foucault in his essay *'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'*.

[19] Sturrock, pp.13 15.

[20] Richard Rorty, *'Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism'*, *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983). This essay is reprinted in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (1993), a fine selection which gives an excellent introduction to many aspects of postmodernism.

[21] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), p.63.

[22] *California Monthly*, December 1984.

Lowenthal described 'the work of all the members of the [Frankfurt] School' as focusing around the 'precarious fate of the individual in modern society', and added that, in his eighties, he wished to go on working on a counter position to post structuralism with regard to the 'concept of the individual', which 'has to be saved if everything is not to be allowed to go to pot'.

[23] John B. Watson, *Behaviourism* (Chicago, 1930), quoted in C. Stephen Evans' excellent study *Preserving the Person* (1977), p.46.

[24] B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1972), pp.191, 193. It is unsurprising that Skinner's rejection of the Protestant conception of the self should accompany a problematizing of democracy; there is a clear historical connection between the rise of Protestantism, with its emphasis on the value of the individual's choice, and the development of democracy.

[25] I am deliberately using Wolfe's summary of the issues, because what is most important for our purposes here is not the precise positions of scientific debate but the effect these have as they spread through the wider culture. Wolfe's article 'Sorry, But Your Soul Just Died' (which originally appeared in *Forbes ASAP* but is copyright 1979 by Tom Wolfe himself) is alluding particularly to Edward O. Wilson, *The Insect Societies* and *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, and James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense*.

[26] Romans 8:1, Ephesians 2:1, John 8:36, Romans 7:14-15,23-25. Of course the neuroscientific debate might well be viewed as irrelevant to the existence of God, since the maximum it could demonstrate was that the reasons why people believe or disbelieve in God were 'hardwired in' from the beginning. This would obviously not establish whether or not there was a God in the first place. It might even be congenial to the strictly predestinarian forms of Calvinistic Christianity.

[27] Evans, p.72.

[28] Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (1956), p.360.

[29] Quoted in Mark P. Cosgrove, *Psychology Gone Awry* (1982), p.120.

[30] The writer of Psalm 8 asks God, 'What is man?' And the answer comes back: 'You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour'.

[31] In practical reality, any Christian pastoral worker will know how hard it is for many people to relate to the idea of God as being, in the richest

sense, 'Father', because of their own experiences of negative or even abusive fatherhood. ('If he's like my father I sure would hate him', a New York kid told Carl Burke (*God is For Real, Man* (1967), p.133).) This can result in a series of dysfunctional relationships with authority figures – and with God. One book on this area that seems extremely valuable in practice is Floyd McClung, *The Father Heart of God* (1985).

[32] Lawrence Crabb, *Inside Out* (1988), p.82.

[33] 'God's love is not only at the root of the divine decision to create the world (answering the question why God created) but also describes the most fundamental character of reality (what God created)... It is, therefore, not trite to respond to Descartes' famous dictum cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am) with a more biblical sum amatus ergo sum (I am loved therefore I am).' (J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be* (1995), p.149.)

[34] Richard Keyes, *Beyond Identity* (1998), p.99.

[35] 1 Corinthians 12:7, 21-26.

[36] Ephesians 4:7,11,16.

[37] Keyes has an excellent chapter on this process in *Beyond Identity*, pp.73-101.

[38] This section draws heavily on material on inner healing developed by Jack and Mary Anne Voelkel of the Unidad Cristiana Universitaria in Colombia, based on their extensive experiences with students in Latin America.

[39] Keyes, pp.4-5.

[40] Quentin Schultze *et al*, *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, 1991), p.257, citing *The Hurried Child* by child psychologist David Elkind.

[41] Schultze, pp.11, 7.

[42] African colleagues have mentioned another area in which relationships impact identity, *I have value because I have had a child* – or lack it because I haven't. In some countries, a woman could be a top lawyer, but without bearing a child she was a nobody. Indeed, a British Family Planning Association spokeswoman remarked recently, with regard to single mothers, that 'What is sad is that for some girls, a baby is the only possible way of giving their lives emotional meaning'. And remember the Burt Reynolds movie where its hero was desperately anxious to establish his identity by siring a child: 'He wants you to have his baby...?'

[43] 'Trained, shared remembrance... safeguards the core of individuality. What is committed to memory and susceptible of recall constitutes the

*ballast of the self'* ( Steiner, *Real Presences*, p.10).

[44] A related variant is the therapy junkie: *I have value so long as a counsellor listens to me.*

[45] *Arts in Society*, ed. Paul Barker (1977), p.159.

[46] James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told The Truth* (New York, 1991), p.38.

[47] A substantial part of St Paul's argument in Romans is directed against the misunderstanding that value can come from our own good works rather than from our acceptance by God through Christ.

[48] Crabb, *Inside Out*, p.108.

[49] A number of ideas in this section derive from a valuable seminar led by Andrew Shudall of the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship.

[50] Cf. Kwan Kai Man, writing from Hong Kong, on how our 'decentred' postmodern sense of self, grounded in nothing more permanent than our feelings, affects our competence for promise-keeping: 'Anyway, who is to say the I who does not feel like keeping the promise is identical to the I who made the promise? For traditional people, it makes sense to say although I now feel strongly different from before, I am still the same person and am obliged by that promise. This does not work, however, for a post-modern personality, for whom feelings constitute the personal identity'. (He goes on to apply that to our weakened marriage commitments; *For the Living of these Days*, ed. Han Chul-Ho and Tan Kiem Kiok, p.44.)

[51] Steiner notes that, from Hegel to Nietzsche to Freud, there is an influential theory of personality that is essentially a theory of oppression, of identity defined 'against the identity of others... The consciousness of the full self will implicate the subjection, perhaps the destruction of another'. (*In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), p.46.)

[52] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), section 325.

[53] In a perceptive chapter, Keyes comments on the way that anger, despite its destructiveness, can give a profound if temporary sense of identity: 'A particularly passionate expression of anger, especially if it involves physical violence, can have the psychological result of giving a person a sense of intense, total involvement. He might experience an integration of his personality that he seldom finds at other times. For this reason, some have compared violent anger to sexual and religious experiences of ecstasy. Rollo May points to a self-transcendence and total absorption that lies at the heart of many acts of violence and also

*explains the wider fascination with violence that most of us feel'. (Keyes, p.189; the reference to May is to *Power and Innocence* (New York, 1972), p.167).*

[54] For Surrealist leader Andre Breton, the ultimate expression of personal freedom, with God dead, would have been to take a gun and fire at random in the street. One British inner-city pastor remarked, after an outbreak of drive-by shootings, 'The problem is the young men have to have respect on the street. For the older community that means being Christian and having a good education. Now the young people earn this if they carry a gun'.

[55] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (1968 tr.edn.), p.54. On p.28 he remarks that the individual's power to choose and so create himself is the reason why 'man is of a greater dignity than a stone or a table.... Man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so'.

[56] 'It is not necessary to believe that a person's choices are always free to preserve the image of the personal, but it does seem necessary to believe that they are sometimes free. If [psychological] freedom is eliminated' (that is, if increasingly our 'choices' seem only to be responses to stimuli, internal and external, in a 'post-soul', totally material world), 'then the distinction between an action' (or an apparent choice) 'and a mere event disappears... Nor would the activity of deliberating or deciding what to do seem to have much point. It would seem more appropriate to attempt to predict one's future actions on the basis of past experience, just as one does not attempt to decide what a rock falling down a hill will do, but rather attempts to anticipate or predict its behaviour'. (Evans, *Preserving the Person*, pp.72-73.) But then no 'self' is being 'created by choosing' (in Sartre's terms), in this world without God. (Remarkably, this 'predicting' emerges even at the close of Sartre's own *Existentialism and Humanism*, where he is questioned about a young man he had advised, 'seeking freedom', to 'choose, that is, invent' his future (p.38). Sartre's final words about this 'moment of choice' are: 'Besides, I knew what he was going to do, and that is what he did').

[Go to Chapter 2]

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