

The Body and Identity: A History of the Empty Self

Angela Franks, Ph.D.

St. John's Seminary (Boston, U.S.) / The Catholic University of America (Washington, DC, U.S. beginning August 2025)

Introduction

What is identity? What does the word mean? Where is identity to be found? My engagement with theologies of embodiment have led me to pursue philosophical and theological questions of identity, because I realized that such studies of the human body must grapple with the more fundamental reality of the human person, who is expressed by his or her body¹. My work on identity has entailed an open yet critical reception of insights from sociology, biology, psychology, history, neuroscience, and literature, as well as recent continental philosophy and cultural studies. The fruit of this pursuit is the interdisciplinary intellectual history that will be published in August 2025 from the University of Notre Dame Press: *Body and Identity: A History of the Empty Self*.

I am a philosophically trained theologian who engages in a dialogue with contemporary questions and theories. I have gained expertise in Continental post-modern philosophy; by going to the more theoretically sophisticated expressions of contemporary secularism, I have understood at a deeper level how secular Western people understand themselves. In this approach, I have been influenced by John Paul II and Benedict XVI in their tireless engagement with secularizing intellectual currents, for the purpose of breaking open the deeper questions that animate contemporary man. I attempt to show that the deepest questions we ask, even in the secular developed world, are poorly answered by secular theories themselves. Such questions demand the careful elucidations provided by an open reason and theological truth.

Philosophically inflected theory is not the only mode of human reasoning that pertains to identity questions, however. Biology provides invaluable data on the embodied nature of the human person, when the field of study is liberated from the distorting lens of positivistic materialism. Theoretical sociology studies large-scale shifts in self-understanding and the role of group membership. Psychology has made contributions concerning the formation of a sense of self and what constitutes a healthy self, while history gives the larger material context. Neuroscience makes claims about the self and consciousness, as well as giving data on the formation of memory and narratives in one's sense of self. Literature presents stories of self-formation or dissolution, along with imaginative expressions of morality and psychic health or disease. I utilize all of these disciplines in an integrative way first to show that in

¹ A key insight from Pope Saint John Paul II: "The body expresses the person" (John Paul II, 2006, p. 154). I develop this idea in Franks, 2025, pp. 15–16, and in Franks, 2020. All further citations from *Body and Identity* will be parenthetical and abbreviated BI. I will refer to the page numbers in the supplied PDF of the uncorrected page proofs.

which identity consists. Second, I point out the disciplines' internal limitations in presenting anything like a total picture of identity².

In *Body and Identity*, this interdisciplinary method works in the service of a uniquely thorough and theologically informed history of “identity”. I show that philosophy has grappled with the questions of the self and identity, without using these exact words, since antiquity, as thinkers pursued answers to the Delphic Oracle’s command to *know thyself*. Furthermore, the book highlights the central place that Christianity occupies concerning these questions. Christianity places the person at the center of its theology—the Person of Christ, the three divine Persons of the Trinity, and the salvation of the human person. This emphasis is religiously unprecedented. Unfortunately, the significance of Christianity is mostly lost on philosophically trained scholars, who are often blind to the theological ways in which Christian thinkers pursued identity questions.

Expanded Reason’s Four Questions

Let us turn explicitly the four themes of the Expanded Reason project and how they are found in *Body and Identity*, before we explore the book’s content in more detail.

1. The Anthropological Question

The anthropological question is, in fact, coextensive with the identity question. The book delineates the term “identity” into three inter-related meanings. Without this clarity, disputants speak equivocally, and misunderstanding is furthered. The synthesis of the three meanings of identity in this way is ground-breaking; I have not found any comparable attempt to formulate the related aspects of the self in a philosophically and historically literate way.

The most ancient meaning of “identity”—what I call Identity1—is the endurance of a thing through time. Identity1 depends upon metaphysics, and here Aristotelian primary substance was often recruited for its explanatory power. Identity1 is the *most basic*. Identity2 is what the Platonists called the “true self” as summarized in the answer a person gives to the ancient Delphic oracle’s demand: *Gnothi seauton!* Know thyself! Identity2 is the *most central*. Identity3 is a person’s knowledge or emotional or conscious awareness of Identity2. Identity3 is the *most accessible*.

² Neuroscience will make a more significant contribution in the follow-up volume to *Body and Identity*. This book will present constructive responses to the identity-questions raised in *Body and Identity*. For an example of my use of neuroscience as it pertains to identity, see Franks, 2024.

These thematization of the three meanings of “identity” enables us to not only be more precise but also to see that “identity” is not a purely modern phenomenon. What is recent is using the one word “identity” to express all of these meanings.

Body and Identity emphasizes the aporias that arise from the modern approach to identity. It argues, using Hans Urs von Balthasar, that our identity is rooted in the individual, divine idea God has of each person, which is lived out in time as a mission. Balthasar is quoted in the conclusion of *Body and Identity*:

For each Christian, God has an idea which fixes his or her place within the membership of the Church, and this idea is unique and personal, embodying for each his or her appropriate sanctity. ... The Christian’s supreme aim is to transform his life into this Idea of himself secreted in God, this “individual law” freely promulgated for him by the pure grace of God (Balthasar, 1992, pp. 20–21).

By making a case for the lacunae in contemporary understandings of identity, this book prepares the way for a fuller appreciation of the mystery of the human person as grasped in Christian philosophy and theology.

2. *The Epistemological Question*

The question of truth is addressed indirectly in the book, in that I presume that the work of intellectual history is not simply an account of how ideas unfolded historically but also an attempt to sift through the truth of these ideas. How do the varying accounts of the human person align with reality?

The question of truth is also addressed directly in a few ways. First, the modern reliance on Identity3 (self-knowledge, consciousness) makes no sense if there is no object for that knowledge. Identity3 must be a process of reflecting upon Identity2: who I am now and who I should become. Yet the history of modern thinking on the self is the movement toward an agnosticism concerning any self at all, whether it is the metaphysical substrate of personhood—*hypostasis* or primary substance—or the content of the “true self”—the demands made upon me by my human nature or my call from God. Modernity agrees with the importance of the *Gnothi seauton*, while denying there is any self to know.

The result is the twentieth-century post-modern “death of the subject”, namely, the valorization of a fractured or empty self. “The result is the odd phenomenon of consciousness without an object or a subject, a self constituted solely by its consciousness and unmoored from anything that might fill its consciousness with content” (BI, p. 207).

One contemporary example comes from a book of popular neuroscience, which argues that we *must* make a narrative about our lives, because evolution has made us into beings that crave meaning organized into a story. But we are *free* to make that narrative to be whatever we wish; hence the relativistic injunction: just make a good one. “So, who are you [Identity2]? The answer is: whoever you *think* you are [Identity3]”. It is not surprising that his very next paragraph points to trans-genderism as an illustration (Berns, 2022, p. 3, emphasis original). *Body and Identity* provides the genealogy of this stance and shows that what seems to be the neutral conclusion of science is in fact rooted in ideological convictions.

Related to neuroscience’s materialistic relativism is biology’s materialistic positivism. Chapter two briefly surveys the materialistic reductionism of modern biology. This history reveals that the model of the machine was imposed upon the living human being. Early modern medical researchers were hampered by the ontology with which they had to work. “Because of the loss of final and formal causation in the larger social imaginary, medicine was primed to accept efficient control over (dead) matter as its model. The telos of life was not seen to be the good life, as classically conceived, but rather death: man as an anticipatory corpse” (BI, p. 49). Instead of time being the moving image of eternity, life becomes the moving image of death. The reduction of men to machines is a prime example of closed reason.

3. *The Ethical Question*

Body and Identity is not directly a work of ethics or moral theology; it is an intellectual history probing metaphysical, anthropological, and theological questions about the human person. But it touches upon many ethical questions pertaining to the body, such as transgenderism and transhumanism, because the book concerns the end of the embodied human person.

The section that most addresses the ethical question is the first section of chapter 2, entitled “Liquid Desire”. There I explore recent accounts of desire (Deleuze) or pleasure (Foucault). These presentations deliberately evacuate meaning from desire, by unshackling desire from normative regulation. “This evacuation of significance is ... a way of making our desires insignificant. ... Unshackled from meaning, our desires have become liquid, unfocused, and increasingly trivial” (BI, pp. 25–26).

While Deleuze and Foucault intend their proposals to be revolutionary, concretely this way of thinking serves consumerism. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman shows that consumeristic desire has the form of meaninglessness (the lack of formal causality) and purposelessness (the lack of final causality), exactly as with the post-modern presentation (2008).

End-less desire (desire not ordered to an end) does not flow at all, despite Deleuze and Foucault's hopes. Only teleological desire is humanly fulfilling.

The only natural limit to endless desire is fatigue. The spasm peters out. What is an arrow without a beginning or an end? Perhaps just a seizure, or even a point, paralyzed and static. ... But what if Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault are wrong? What if our desires have both a beginning in a person created by God and an end in something infinitely desirable? What if they are engines designed to direct us toward that goal? If that could be the way things are, maybe our desires deserve some loving consideration. (BI, pp. 34–35)

The next section of this chapter draws on two gender theorists, Judith Butler and Andrea Long Chu, to show how the body has been liquified in contemporary philosophy. For Butler, the person or “subject” is not the substantial support for its desire but rather its result. Her conclusions concerning the body are similar, in that the body (especially its sex as male or female) is not a pre-existing reality that creates the possibility of bodily desires and activities, but rather is the product of our desires and activities.

This is possible, according to Butler via Foucault, because of a kind of Nietzschean hylomorphism. Rather than the soul forming the body, power itself provides the formative causality. Here the soul has become “an instrument of power through which the body is cultivated and formed” (Butler, 1993, p. 33). If the formal causality of the soul is transformed into power, the human body is no longer anchored in a normative context mediated by one's human nature. We can no longer say what is natural and, hence, good for the embodied human person based on what naturally fulfills us. We become ethically incoherent. The ethical life is reduced to a constant negotiation with external forces of power, as we lose the ability, rooted in our internal ontological stability, to resist power effectively.

A younger gender theorist, Andrea Long Chu, has a similar understanding. Chu, a natal male identifying as a female, was recently awarded a Pulitzer Prize for criticism. Chu defines gender as the process of being defined by another's desire: it is “the self's gentle suicide in the name of someone *else's* desires” (Chu, 2019, p. 35, emphasis original). Because Chu has, like most modern theorists, rejected nature as a normative category, and because he has no place for love in this vision, he has no ability to sift through other people's demands and to reject the dehumanizing ones. “Chu's worldview is an eroticized, photographic negative of Christianity, in which receptivity to God's loving action has been transformed into submission to the imperious dictates of desire” (BI, pp. 46–47).

A better ethical vision of desire is given in Christianity. “Chu does not ever ask about desire's ends, that is, whether desire wants good things. In Christianity, in contrast, desire is

not ultimate but penultimate. The point of desire is to lead us to the good, which is ultimately God, but also to all sorts of intermediate goods along the way” (BI, p. 47). The intermediate good that is sexuality has a particular end, procreation, yet none of the post-modern theorists studied in this chapter attend to it. “To divorce [sexual] desire from [its] natural ends and simultaneously insist that the female remain an incubator— as Chu does— is to write a recipe for submissiveness to abuse by anything anyone can think up” (BI, p. 47).

This early chapter, therefore, argues that the ethical question of the good has been obscured by these thinkers in their rush to “liberate” desire from the meaning and end of the human person. Post-modern liberation is in fact a slavery to desire—one’s own and, explicitly with Chu, others’ desires. Accepting an act’s natural ends provides a better, more humane, and less depersonalized form of praxis than the post-modern versions.

4. *The Question of Meaning*

The previous question has already adverted to the need to make meaning. Are our desires meaningful? Or do they mean nothing except, at best, a ceaseless and unwinnable negotiation with power? The book argues that the question of human identity—*Who am I?*—is in fact a question about the meaning of the human person. The loss of Identity2 (the “true self”) as modernity develops entails the loss of meaning at the core of human existence. What modernity substitutes is unworkable and creates more problems than it solves.

In the premodern world, identity was generally formed according to what Bauman calls “solid” structures: nature, city, class, family, and work (2008). I would understand myself to be a human being sexed as male or female, under God or the gods, with the powers and limits all that entails, while living in a particular city or country to which I belonged, in a certain class determined by my family, and with the duties and work that these realities would bring. These solid structures were so reliable and formative that seeking my identity beyond them was usually not necessary. This social and identitarian stability provides many benefits; one of them is that personal identity (Identity2) is filled out with concrete content.

In modernity, the solid structures were liquified. The impact on identity is manifold; one of the most important changes is that one’s true self now lacks the content that the solid structures provided. Existential crises become possible, because my identity becomes an open question in a way that was not true previously. The person begins, in other words, to ask questions about the meaning of myself. Identity becomes a “project”, as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir argued. The existentialist project depends upon the assumption that either there is no meaning to be found in identity, or else that it is inaccessible. This

supposition is rooted in prior metaphysical and anthropological moves that entail closed reasoning.

At this point, let us turn to the accounts of identity that have been published recently, as examples (in varying degrees) of closed reasoning.

Closed Versus Open Reasoning Concerning the History of Identity

The last decade has seen an explosion in research on the question of identity, much of it centering around political and social questions. While these are worthy topics, the assumption tends to be that our identity crises are recent, with a genealogy around twenty to sixty years long (see the works at BI, p. 252n9). This shortened timeline does not do justice to the deeper history of identity, which goes back to ancient sources.

Other works tend to be innocent of the significant contributions to the question made by Christian theology. An example is Charles Taylor, whose *Sources of the Self* jumps from Plato to Augustine to Descartes, ignoring the immensely important debates in the fourth and fifth centuries concerning the persons of the Trinity and of Christ, as well as the extensive medieval conversations on self-knowledge (see this and other references at BI, pp. 251–52n7). One scholarly exception to this rule, Alain de Libera, notes that “almost all” the modern questions around subject and identity “have been dealt with in Christological debates. Many have been raised in Trinitarian debates” (de Libera, 2011, pp. 19–20). These debates have been neglected often because of simple ignorance.

Yet, when we turn to theologians, the situation is not much better. There are certainly many theological articles and books with the word “identity” in the titles. Almost all these works are concerned with the perceived identity of a certain group (see BI, p. 251nn5-6). Yet examinations of racial or national identity are rarely accompanied by any historically and philosophically informed reflection on the nature of identity and its multiple meanings. Further, the question of what specifically Christian thought brings to the topic is too often neglected.

In contrast to these more closed approaches, the method of *Body and Identity* is explicitly interdisciplinary as well as systematic. In addition, even though intellectual history is the primary focus, the text makes strong critiques of various thinkers as well as normative judgments on the issues. Let us turn to the contemporary identity terrain, which is summarized in the book’s first three chapters, before turning to the longer historical section.

Identity in the Contemporary Mission Field

In *Body and Identity*, I frequently come back to the term “contemporary mission field”. By this is meant the mission field of what John Paul II and Benedict XVI called the

“new evangelization”, namely, the developed, post-Christian countries of the West. Three realities of contemporary identity stand out: it is liquid, it makes the body into a totem, and it promotes appearance over being.

1. *Liquid Modernity*

I have already referenced Zygmunt Bauman, a Polish sociologist who produced a stream of books around the concept of “liquid modernity”. He contrasts this with “solid modernity”, which is the original form of modernity. Solid modernity is exemplified in Louis XIV’s Versailles. This age valued size, stability, and institutions, with the conquering of space privileged. Liquid modernity begins, Bauman believes, after World War II. It values speed, choice, and flexibility, striving to conquer time (2008).

Modernity was attracted to liquidity even in its solid beginnings, because liquidity allows for more freedom under stress. Fluids are strong *because* they are flexible. Modernity attempted to liquidate social and ontological solids, promoting a freedom unrestricted by natures, institutions, and other limiting factors.

Liquid modernity brings about the contemporary identity crisis, as identity becomes an unfilled project. This situation sets up the need for identity politics, which provides pre-made roles, obtainable from the internet like suits off the rack, if I don’t feel up to the task of sewing an identity from scratch for myself. Identity politics is the outsourcing of identity.

The body is drawn into this liquid identity formation, because our appearance is more easily changed than our interior. Thus, as a person dips into and out of any number of identities, the identity change is signaled by means of dress, hair style, makeup, and even the modification of sexual attributes. As Bauman points out, liquid identity is great for business, because the process of creating an identity usually involves purchasing the accoutrements that perform the identity-signaling (2008).

2. *The Body as Totem*

In the jurisprudence of the United States in the twentieth century, the body’s function as an identity-marker is exemplified in how the courts began to view sexuality. Legal scholar Helen Alvaré writes that “certain forms of sexual expression achieved constitutional status and came to be identified with nothing less than a human being’s ‘identity’” (2015, p. 476). This move is significant and reflects a culture-wide shift, in which the body and its sexuality plays an increasingly important role in forming identity, while simultaneously becoming a scapegoat when the identity-project seems to fail.

I use Freud's concept of a "totem" (without his Oedipal genealogy) to explain how this works (Freud, 1913/1989)³. A totem is an animal or an object that identifies a particular tribe or social unit. It is often the protagonist in a society's origin myths, leading Freud to argue that it symbolized a primordial tribal ruler. He theorized that the ruler was the victim of a murder and attempted coup (the "taboo" in Freud's title), and the perpetrators assuaged their guilt by divinizing the original ruler into a totem. This explains why the totem animal is so often sacrificed in tribal rituals. Freud believed all of this was a way to address guilt, but ineffectively, because the ritual animal sacrifice distracts from the original crime.

I argue that, for the contemporary developed world, the body functions like a totem: it identifies, fascinates, distracts, and is ultimately sacrificed. The body *identifies*: as the visible pole of the personal body-soul complex, the body is our shortcut to the much more complex problem of personal identity. The body also *fascinates*, in a religious manner, as seen, for example, in the contemporary cult of wellness that replaces any transcendent orientation to the human person. In this way, the body *distracts* us from our seemingly insoluble identity problems. Finally, the body is *sacrificed*: when we are fed up with its demands and its inability to do the impossible task we have given to it, we make it the scapegoat that is now the cause, not the solution, of those problems.

In other words, we both over- and under-value the body. First, we expect the body to provide us with personal identity and a sense of peace. When it does not live up to our unrealistic expectations, we assume the body's current configuration is the problem. Then we deploy the tools of biopower, such as hormones, surgery, and other medical and pharmacological interventions. All this is, however, ineffective, because we are not attending to the real problem, which is internal and not bodily: our lack of a sense of ourselves.

3. *The Doxic Self*

Liquid modernity and totemism lead to a preoccupation with the body because of its identity-signaling capacity. Identities that are rooted primarily in the body, however, tend to be shallow. Post-modern philosophy took over this feature and made it a virtue; as Deleuze said of Foucault's thought, "the inside is an outside operation" (Deleuze, 1984/2016, p. 68).

What occurs in liquid modernity is the rise of appearance over reality. Using Platonic terms, the contemporary mission field emphasizes *doxa* (appearance) over *to on* (being). I call this the contemporary self a "doxic self". What results are liquid bodies and empty

³ I am not making a claim about how well Freud described primitive cultures; I am simply arguing that totems in his sense of the word do flourish today.

selves, in which the near-endless malleability of the body is manipulated on the outside, in order to cover up the lack of a sense of self on the inside.

The Empty and Narcissistic Self: A History

1. A Culture of Narcissism

I draw on cultural theorist Christopher Lasch to argue that the liquid, doxic, and empty self is a narcissistic one. Lasch (1978) presents evidence for a societal-wide shift towards narcissism, which is not at its root a preoccupation with the self (although this is a frequent symptom). Narcissism is fundamentally a matter of a missing inner core to the person—a missing or empty self, in other words⁴.

2. Pre-modern Identity

Beginning in chapter 4, I summarize how various strains of ancient, late antique, and Judeo-Christian thought describe each of the three kinds of identity. I will briefly summarize that history here.

I begin chapter 4 by defending the use of pre-modern sources. Martin Heidegger's genealogy of the subject influentially argued that Descartes's *cogito* was the beginning of the reign of the ego-filled modern subject or self. Yet Descartes's dualism forced him to ascribe subjectivity to both *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, resulting in a neo-Nestorian dual-subject human being. The place of Descartes in developing the modern self is not found here.

Furthermore, pre-modern thinkers were much more engaged with the three aspects of human identity than scholars have generally thought; the difference is that the one word "identity" was not used to name them. I survey Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Hebrew Scriptures and writings, the apostle Paul, Plotinus, the early Church councils and Fathers (especially Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, and Maximus the Confessor), and Thomas Aquinas to show the varieties of ways in which the three kinds of identity were thematized. Among many variations, a consensus emerged.

An unvarying self (Identity1) must underlie change and accidents through time, a self later understood ontologically and given the name *hypostasis* or *persona*. This self can be identified as "true" (Identity2) the closer it approaches the divine, a conviction that had Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and Augustinian flavors. Within Christianity, the true self is more and more equated with the body-soul union and not with one part (such as the intellect) of the person. ... Last, early Christianity buttressed the dual metaphysical contributions of Aristotelian substance— as "this thing" and "this kind of thing"— by reflecting further on what it meant to be a person as subsisting, knowing, and loving, by means of the powers given in a nature.

⁴ See BI, pp. 65–67 for a summary of recent psychological literature on narcissism.

All these approaches relied almost universally on a conception of human nature and on a cosmology in which the world is in relation to the divine. These two elements were often thick enough to provide sufficient content to answer the *Gnothi seauton*, and the surrounding “solid” culture provided the rest. Thus, in this framework, I understand myself to be this kind of being (human), within a tightly hierarchical cosmos, all ordered to God. (BI, p. 106)

This synthesis will not survive modernity, but elements of it will remain in modified form. Here a key truth emerges: *Christianity itself*, even before modernity, encourages the liquidity of identity.

A dissolving element lurks within Christianity that would serve to destabilize the medieval consensus. Christianity relativizes the solid realities of family, work, and tribe by making them of penultimate importance only. The primacy belongs to God’s call, a call that lifts Saul out of his ethnic and religious setting, or Aquinas out of his family and aristocratic career path, and bestows new identities on them. In this way, there is no Jew or Greek before the Christian God because of a new democracy of salvation, open to all. The penultimate structures of family and tribe are not bad, of course, but they are not ultimately determinative of a life. This relativization begins to liquify the cultural solids and transforms the identity question. (BI, p. 107)

While clearly Christianity cannot endorse the moral relativism and other related features of liquid modernity, it is not simply a “solid” institution. It does, in fact, relativize socio-cultural identity solids, replacing them with the call of God that reveals the true identity of the person.

Where we arrive at the end of the high medieval period is, therefore, a developed metaphysical and epistemological account of the person along with a residual skepticism concerning the old, solid ways of filling out the person with content. This skepticism Christianity will bequeath to modernity, which will develop formal personal structures in its own— antimetaphysical— way, while carrying the skepticism to an agnostic pitch. By the time we get to Kant, the self is a formal activity that has no material content. (BI, p. 107)

3. *Modern Identity: The Fifteenth through Seventeenth Centuries*

The introductory section of chapter 5 provides the most material history in the book. It presents the effects upon identity that the far-reaching changes of early modernity wrought. Some of key moments in the fifteenth century are the invention of the printing press, the development of the *via moderna* in both philosophy and spirituality, and the rise of national identity.

With the printing press, written documents become available at an unprecedented scale. And it is not just writing that is printed; pictures were reproduced, pasted onto walls, and framed in homes, initiating the analog version of our now-digital image culture. For the

first time, continent-wide celebrity became possible. “The cult of personality ... was powerfully reinforced after the advent of printing” (Eisenstein, 2005, p. 146).

Many things became less influenced by the local culture. For example, standardized usage in print smoothed away local dialects. No longer was the village priest or aristocrat the main source of news beyond the town walls; for the first time, people had access to stories and opinions that were more global in outlook (and the feeding of this desire for trans-local affairs would propel the first newspapers into existence in the seventeenth century). Identity begins to shift from being rooted in a precise locality to becoming national.

In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther masterfully harnessed the possibilities of this technology to create what one scholar has called “Brand Luther” (Pettegree, 2015). His genius is seen not only in the means he chose but also in the message he promoted through them. Despite Luther’s larger-than-life personality, he promoted an early form of the empty self. He commented thusly on Gal 2: 20: “‘I do not live in my own person now, but Christ lives in me.’ . . . Christ is speaking, acting, and performing all actions in [Paul]; these belong not to the Paul-life, but to the Christ-life” (Rittgers, 2018, pp. 387–88).

His theology of humility ... teeters on the edge of a non-Christian loss of personhood. Here Luther is consistent across his theology, which reads the destructive aspects of the Fall as more total than in Catholicism. The result is a theoretical support for the modern empty self, even if later modern thinkers will fill this emptiness in a way completely foreign to Luther, namely, through Pelagian self-formative activity. (BI, p. 118)

Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon contributed to the nascent modern-but-empty self by their emphatic denial of formal and final causality, which lead to the loss of a sense of meaning and direction in the human person. Descartes added his idiosyncratic yet influential dualism, while both thinkers emphasized the primacy of usefulness in human scientific and philosophical endeavors. In this way, they contributed to the anthropological and epistemological reductions of the human being and to the rise of positivistic technocracy in managing man.

4. John Locke

One of the most important figures in early modernity for the topic of identity is John Locke, because he is the first to use the term “identity” to mean more than Identity¹ (continuity through time), and then to elevate consciousness (an aspect of Identity³, my awareness of myself) to a place of supreme importance.

In his journal in 1682, Locke wrote, “Identity of persons lies not in having the same numerical body made up of the same particles, nor, if the mind consists of incorporeal spirits, in their being the same. But [it is found] in the *memory* of one’s past self and actions continued on under the *consciousness* of being the same person, whereby *every man owns himself*” (Balibar, 2013, p. 41, emphasis mine). This draft captures all the important aspects of his later account of identity in the 1694 edition of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*.

Locke assumed that Identity2 (the true self) is unknowable and possibly non-existent, much as he judged Aristotelian primary substance to be the same. Given that he had discarded the metaphysical basis for Identity1 in his metaphysical deconstruction, he needed a substitute. This he found in consciousness, extended through time in memory. The result is the loss of Identity2 and the conflation of Identity1 into Identity3, which is the only kind of identity that now remains. The radical nature of Lockean identity is a clear forerunner of the closed reasoning of contemporary neuroscientists, for whom there is no real self, only what one constructs through the memory of one’s consciousness.

5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The complicated figure of Rousseau adds another significant piece to our identity-story, namely the aspect of “authenticity”. While this idea is not lacking in pre-modern accounts of the “true self”, Rousseau makes identity derived solely from oneself, not normed from the outside. The human “subject” should be formed in “subjection” to oneself alone, not to any divine or social reality.

This circularity is problematic. Receiving one’s authentic self would require being subject to the giver of identity, which Rousseau’s closed reason eliminated *a priori*. Therefore, the authentic self can only be one’s own creation, and it is discovered emotionally, through feelings of authenticity. Rousseau creates an identity-circle that provides no real assistance in answering the identity question:

I am authentic when I am living within myself; or, my self is my authentic self. ... Rousseau writes in *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, “What does one enjoy in such a situation [of solitary reveries]? Nothing exterior to the self, nothing except the self and one’s existence. As long as this state lasts, one is sufficient to oneself, like God” (Hartle, 1983, p. 150). ... The Rousseauian self is measured by how “self” it is, something that cannot admit of any external norming. (BI, p. 135)

6. Immanuel Kant

While Kant discarded the centrality of emotion, his appropriation of his revered master Rousseau came in the later thinker's distinctive reworking of authenticity and independence. Freedom for Kant is not defined in any positive way but instead negatively, as the freedom from external constraint. Further, the self as a "noumenal" reality is not accessible to mind, which only organizes "phenomenal" data according to the categories of the mind (such as substance, which no longer plays a role in Identity¹).

Candidates for the Kantian self, such as the "transcendental apperception", are in fact functions, not content. These functions include "what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself", because "the human being is his own final end" (Kant, 1798/2007, p. 231, emphasis original). With Kant, we see the apex of the modern move to an autonomous, acting but empty subject, with no content but with plenty to do.

The Empty Self in Modern Literature

I do not have the space to summarize chapter 6 in any detail. Its purpose is to show how the modern self is portrayed not only in the concepts discussed in the previous chapter but also in the social imaginary. The chapter examines the critique of the doxic self in Jane Austen, the presentation of liquid bodies and empty selves in vampire and zombie stories (with help from the poetry of T. S. Eliot), and the devastating yet ultimately redemptive picture of the narcissistic empty self in C. S. Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*.

Secularism and The Nineteenth Century

1. Secularism

Chapter 7 returns to the historical narrative of the development of the modern empty self by looking at the impact of the growing secular nature of the developed world. I argue that modern secularism is a necessarily *post-Christian* phenomenon, in that it does not and cannot effect a return to pre-Christian paganism. Rather, secularism depends upon the Judeo-Christian bright line divided the Creator from creation.

This strong distinction, which sets Judeo-Christianity apart from paganism, makes cutting off the transcendent divinity a live possibility, conceptually, for the first time. Pagans believed the world was permeated with divinity; post-Christian conceived the world as independent from divinity. This could only happen because the relative autonomy of creation was promoted in Christianity's *analogia entis*. In secularism, the relative autonomy becomes absolute.

This move creates what I call the "ninety-degree turn" in secular thinking. The transcendence that was previously attributed to the triune God is now turned ninety degrees and found in immanence, in the flow of the liquid world. Post-Christian secularism might

find moments of mysticism and magic in the world, but it is a resolutely immanent world, closed off ontologically and rationally from the divine.

The implications for identity are significant. Christianity liquidated, by relativizing, the solid ways of forming identity, but it replaced that content with the call of God. With secularism, God's idea of myself is no longer an option, or certainly not the default, for that identity-content.

A thoroughly secular world is a world in which identity is not received but only self-constructed. This sounds like a recipe for an inflated, Promethean self. But, in fact, its default is the narcissistic empty self, who fruitlessly attempts to construct a self *ex nihilo* rather than receive it from beyond himself. ... Thus, the secular denial of divinely given identity is the ultimate cause of the problem of the empty self. (BI, pp. 180, 182)

2. *Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Identity*

In the nineteenth century, Hegel provides three decisive contributions to modern identity. He plots the historical development of *substance* into *subject*; he advances the importance of the recognition of others to create identity; and he proposes a refined version of the immanentizing of divinity into national identity.

Hegelian recognition is a social and dialectical version of Rousseau's authenticity ... By tying the subject closely to history and to concrete content, Hegel overcomes the modern elevation of the empty subject. This comes, however, at the price of the subject's dependency upon others for recognition. This aspect of recognition is obvious in today's identity struggles, which include a strong demand for social recognition within a context of conflict, always with the anxiety that the needed recognition will not be given or will be insufficient. (BI, pp. 188–89)

The rest of the century will follow Hegel's lead in finding in nationalism a replacement for religion in identity-formation.

By the twentieth century, the hegemonic take-over of identity by Identity3 was complete, and the resulting lack of content for personal identity led to a generalized identity crisis. The social psychologist Erik Erikson captured the moment by formulating the term in his 1950 book *Childhood and Society*. Identity became an explicit topic of research for numerous sociologists, psychologists, and others, with no consensus, however, on what the term meant. Some, such as Erving Goffman, embraced the doxic self by proposing that we are no more than our social roles. Others, especially beginning in the 1960s, promoted racial, sexual, ethnic, or national identities, as identity-politics became a formidable political force.

Recent Philosophy's Displaced Subject

1. *Martin Heidegger's Influence*

The last chapter begins with Heidegger, given his importance for post-modern philosophers. Three aspects of his reflections are significant: first, his mistaken history of the passage of metaphysics into subjectivity; second, his rejection of Aristotelian substances or “beings” as revelatory of Being and his substitution of “selfhood”; and, third, his constructive yet problematic account of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) and identity.

Because of the *Seinsvergessenheit* within metaphysics, Heidegger believes that subjectivity-language is a power-play to wrest control of beings through technology. Even though he is quite critical of modern philosophy, Heidegger proposes a similarly empty self, one that is marked by its steadfastness to being appropriated (*eignen*) by *Seyn* (as he began to write “being” in his works in the 1930s). What is one’s own (*eigen*) or the root of one’s authenticity entails this surrender to *Seyn*.

Yet this seemingly abstract call to self-surrender had very precise content. As his addresses in the 1930s show, the *Volk* is called to sacrifice to the state, led by the *Führer*; making a decision in favor of being was actually deciding in favor of the demands made by the German state⁵. Heidegger’s brilliant but dangerous move is to reintroduce racial and national categories into the vacuum left by the loss of Identity2 in modernity. “Heidegger retains and repurposes the modern language of own-ness or authenticity (Identity3) by realigning it with a new, philosophically influential defense of Identity2. By the twentieth century, Identity2 had been emptied of content for centuries; Heidegger replenished it with meaning through recourse to racial and national categories” (BI, p. 221). This move would be common by the end of the century up through today.

2. *Sartre, Structuralism, Althusser, Foucault*

The end of the first section of chapter 8 highlights the empty selves of other major philosophers in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Sartrean existentialism posits the self as pure possibility, which requires existential decision to be fleshed out. Structuralism attempts to replace the self with the structure; as Louis Althusser said, within the structure “the ‘subject’ plays, not the part it believes it is playing, but the part which is assigned to it by the mechanism of the process” (Althusser, 1965/2015, p. 26). Althusser’s own proposals utilized Freud and Marx to argue that the unconscious and the ensemble of social relations (respectively) deconstructed the human “subject” and demonstrated that it was the product of ideology. Foucault sought out anonymity, which he found in part in the underground gay life

⁵ See BI, pp. 218–221 for quotes and citations.

of the 1970s and 80s: there, “you stop being imprisoned inside your own face, your own past, your own identity”. The important thing was “the assertion of non-identity” (Macey, 1993, p. xv).

3. *Deleuze: Is Being the Blood of Dionysus or the Vineyard of the Lord?*

The book closes by returning to Deleuze, who presents perhaps the most comprehensive counter-ontology of the fractured self, against ancient and Christian pictures of holistic human identity. Deleuze explicitly embraces the univocity of being, in which all being is a Spinozistic unitary phenomenon of (Nietzsche’s) Dionysus, that is, the will to power.

The Dionysian theater is symbolized in all its cruelty by the severed head of Pentheus [from Euripides’s *The Bacchae*]; the Christian theater is symbolized by its liturgical origin, the flowing blood and water from the side of the crucified God-man. Pentheus is indeed the fractured I, torn apart by his various roles and ultimately by the intoxicating force of Dionysian flow. Pentheus does not affirm; he will not return. The pierced side of Christ, on the other hand, returns creatures to wholeness, so that their voices can participate in the polyphony of being. The one-voiced clamor of being versus the many voices of redeemed men singing to and with their God: Deleuze reveals that these are the basic options. (BI, p. 243)

Conclusion

I can only gesture toward a fuller answer to the questions raised in *Body and Identity*. The contribution by Balthasar, shared by Joseph Ratzinger, is that personal identity is rooted in divine mission. This answer does not simply attempt to replace contemporary liquidity with solidity; as already explained, Christianity contains many liquifying impulses. Only within Christianity can this fluidity can be properly understood.

The distinctively contemporary emphasis on liquidity and appearance— seen clearly in “gender fluidity” ... — inchoately senses what I will call the “vector-dimension of the human person”, but badly misreads this dimension. Rather than seeing these vectors as characterizing the reality of man who consists of a coming-from and going-toward a transcendent origin and goal, contemporary theory loads all this fluidity onto the body while immanentizing and liquifying human nature. Just as previous eras arguably erred on the side of excessive rigidity in social and human structures, so our age errs on the side of excessive fluidity. But both stability and fluidity are marks of the human person. They must, however, be properly understood. (BI, p. 4)

Judeo-Christianity is the great defender of particularity. Only here does God call a particular people to a particular land to be particular promises. Only here does the fulfillment of those promises take the form of a particular man, born at a particular time. Christianity is

the last and only great defender of personal identity in its fullness. Her dogmas have embedded the metaphysics necessary for Identity¹, and Christian reflections upon topics such as discernment of spirits have advanced thought concerning Identity³. More significantly, it is only within Christianity that the ninety-degree turn of secularity is overcome while still maintaining that God-world distinction that modernity rightly senses is necessary if I am to be myself.

Open reason is capable of understanding human identity properly, if it does not *a priori* close off the transcendent. *Body and Identity* shows why this is necessary.

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