

Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh,
Truth is Stranger Than It Used To Be
Chapter Three:
"The Decentered Self"

1. What are the causes of insanity?46

To be unable to answer the questions: where am I? Who am I?

2. What is the essential core answer of modernity to the question: who am I? 47

Homo autonomous: independent, self reliant, self-centering, self-integrating rational subjects. Self constructed, and constructs self at the center of the world.

1. When did this understanding of man originally develop, and what is the contribution of the myth of Prometheus and of Pico Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man? 47

The Promethean myth is used to reinterpret the Adam and Eve story. Man arrives at his determination and fulfills his being only by using the gift of creation itself, his primary power. It is now ascribed not just to humanity in general, but to the individual.

The Oration on the Dignity of Man allows man to define himself freely and to shape his own nature.

1. What are the reasons for the demise of the modern, autonomous self centered self? 49f

1. Such a view of the self can maintain itself only when it masters not only the natural world, but also other human beings, esp. those unable to defend themselves. It leads to anthropology of violence.

At the same time, this violence is against itself. The bureaucracies and economic structures end up turning on man, who becomes managed and conquered.

2. The humanist self-understanding as homo autonomous is recognized as a socially constructed anthropology and therefore a fiction. If reality is a social construct, then so is this view of man; it is not based on some universal foundation or truth. Social structures structure how we see ourselves and notions of the self.

The self is a linguistically constructed self. Self is a function of discourse. Language thinks man and his world. Homo autonomous is now homo linguisticus. Language pre-exists the individual; words represent the individual, not reality itself.

5. What is the result of the deconstruction of the modernist version of the self? 51

Doubt about all previous beliefs about humanness; postmodern identity crisis of immense proportions. Am I crazy? Trudy the bag lady. Good riddance to the Promethean hero of modernity. "I see the signs of my undoing." Losing grip on self and world. Now the postmodern self is asking who am I?

6. What does Kenneth Gergen mean by his phrase: the saturated self? 52

It is the postmodern self identity crisis. Many voices proffering alternative identities. Incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. Infinitely malleable self. Continuous construction and reconstruction. Self gives way to a new self.

1. What does the Woody Allen film Zelig offer about the postmodern self identity crisis? 53

Postmodern self is unstable and decentered. And after he is cured of psychosis, the media attention is so great that he is worse off than before.

8. Is the decentering of the self something to be celebrated? 53

You can be whatever you want to be. You are an ersatz being. Live out a series of incoherent posturings. Try truth on like funny hats. Serious concerns left at carnival gate.

9. What is the difference between modern and postmodern comedy?

Monty Python; Saturday Night Live; David Letterman. It's no longer the other who is the object of the joke but the self. Self-parody is the essence of Pomo comedy. All actions are subject to satire. All good efforts can be punctured with wit. Postmodernity breeds a culture of jokesters, pranksters, jesters, and clowns.

10. What "technologies of the self" have been developed to assist the postmodern person in his/her self-development?

- Career counseling
- Business counseling
- Tanning salons
- Fitness centers
- Self help groups
- Adult ed programs

- Psychotherapeutic programs.

11. How does TV and MTV influence postmodern self-development? 54f

TV produces images that it can make up, mimic, discard at will. Fleeting images need for its construction.

MTV as style not substance. Images and identities to try out. Postmodern self is consumptive of images and experiences. Homo autonomous is now a postmodern solitary soul in front of TV seeking satisfaction for unclear needs and desires.

12. What is “multiphrenia” and its relation to multiple personality disorder and to the story in Mark 5? 55f

Multiphrenia: a multiplicity of self-investments, plethora of selves, a chorus of invitations.

Multiple personality disorder:

Mark 5: my name is legion; we are many. Who are we? We are legion!

And the relationship of the first to second question is this: where we are depends on who we are, and the kind of reality we have constructed.

10. What is the relation of the questions: where are we? Who are we? What am I to do?

Who we are leads to the answer of where we are, which in turns influences what or how we are to live. What we are to do is impossible if we don't who and where we are?

14. What is the example of the Indigo Girls on the problem of identity? 57.

The less I seek my source for some definitive, the closer I am to fine. No definite answer to the question of identity in pomo.

Leads to moral paralysis; problematic to enter into a relationship of commitment and intimacy. 57. No self to enter into commitments; called by Lasch the 'minimal self.'

15. If the postmodern self is ultimately homeless without any measures to give guidance and stability, but where life is a continuous pursuit of the carnival, then “how is it possibly to live meaningfully if our ethical norms are simply our own construction, not given to us either by God or nature?” 58

There are several responses:

Ethical normativity becomes a matter of choice. We must decide on which ethical framework we will adopt or construct. The act of choosing is more important than content. The accent in the act of choice is on freedom, but only a freedom of market preference. Postmodern ethical selves are units of consumption at the center of market economies and democratic societies.

Also the choice is a choice not of responsibility but of escape. There is no rationality in the choice just a shopping mall choice of available moralities. It results in consumer exhaustion.

There are no modern grounds or reasons for a choice. Its free floating and we are left in a normless universe. Confusion is the result and there is nothing left to say or do. What is postmodern action and praxis?

16. If normativity is the causality of postmodernity, then what of suffering and pain? 61

We can't just play the dandy and piss in the wind, even though pomo morality is little more than macho masturbation and a celebration of self-serving autonomy. It is a cheerful nihilism and the leisure of the theory class. WE HAVE MOVED FROM THE CARNIVAL TO THE MALL TO THE SEA, BUT WITHOUT THE ABILITY TO NAVIGATE IT.