

The Divided Self :Excerpt

by [Albert Norton, Jr.](#) (March 2025)



Split Personality (Gertrude Abercrombie, 1954)

As a mechanism of moral evasion

This is a condensed excerpt from chapter 3 of my upcoming book *The Discovered Self* and includes one of the central themes of the book. The “negotiated” self is also an integrated self. The therapeutic mentality produces a self divided into the discovering, or host, self, on the one hand, and the discovered self, Identity, on the other.

The Negotiated Self

Out there is God's moral universe. In here is the weird and startling "I" of my own metacognition; my self-aware consciousness. It is in this personal consciousness that I look out on the world and engage with it. This is active and intentional participation, the self not just passively receiving and processing world-facts, but interacting with people, places, and things in a way that informs the conception of self. This is a "negotiated" sense of self because it is formed dynamically in my agentic participation with the exterior world. I push against the world and it pushes against me, and I form a conception of my place in that world through participatory interaction with it. The resulting sense of self is in this sense "negotiated."

The self, in this understanding, is formed in a "place" that represents the point of my interaction with the world outside my head. That place of interaction with the exterior world is the living edge of my formation of self, like the cambium of a tree is the living result of its interactions with its environment. The focus of the negotiated self is the world out there. Introspection concerning the self is "subsidiary," to use the language of Michael Polanyi. The conception of selfhood is tacit knowledge, building a self-confident but outward-directed sense of self. The negotiated self is just me in here interacting with the world out there.

The negotiation with the world entails putting oneself on the line, so to speak, morally. It means accepting responsibility for what one does and doesn't do. To fully grasp this, we must first grasp the reality of a moral structure to the world. We must leave behind an amoral, materialist understanding.

Moral good and moral evil are real and extant in the world, however, just as are love, and spirit, and mathematical

realism, and Platonic ideals, and the categorical ontological differentiations unfolding into the complex physical and idealistic structure of the world. Human agency corresponds to the reality of that moral structure.

The Divided Self

But suppose I desire to avoid moral responsibility for what I do and don't do? This desire becomes acute, if I have rejected God, because there is then a felt need to disregard also His moral structure to reality, because that moral structure inheres in the conscience, and so continues to indict; it creates a dissonance in one's simplistic atheism. This dissonance uncomfortably supervenes upon the negotiated self.

The self alive to moral implications of agency may turn inward to escape it, to re-examine selfhood without the searing indictment that evil resides even in me. The turn inward is an attempt to turn away from the imperatives of agentic decision-making in a morally charged world. It is an attempt to replace the moral landscape with one imagined to be amoral, its dynamism imagined instead to consist of subjectively-felt instincts and emotions.

When one looks outwardly at the world from this perspective, it is not to exercise one's own agency to interact with it on its own (moral) terms. Rather, it is to assess world-facts in relation to their impact on the preferred interior psychological well-being. We imagine the self being formed is not the result of a negotiation with the exterior world; that it is instead formed in the interior being. Instead of having an integrated, single point of consciousness of self, a *me* formed in thinking and interacting agentially with the external world, I process world-facts on dimensions of host and identity, no longer integrated, resulting in the internal dissonance of a divided self.

This sets up a double perspective. We're considering "the discovered self," but then what self is being discovered, and what self is doing the discovering? These are in a sense separate selves. The idea of a divided self is not so strange as it might seem at first glance. Whenever we turn inward to plan or self-recriminate or resolve to do or not do something, we necessarily adopt a two-dimension conception of self. When you make a New Year's resolution, for example, there's you making the resolution, and another "you" who keeps it or fails to keep it.

There are likewise two dimensions of self involved in our natural sociability. You have a purely subjective self-conception in your solitude, but then when you interact with others socially, you adopt simultaneously another self-conception: how you imagine the Other(s) conceive(s) of you. You carry both of these subjective conceptions of self in your social interactions, and this double-conception is what enables a "we" perspective in addition to the "I."

The dissonance in selfhood can become even more attenuated than that. One may self-divide to escape the effect of alienation or anger at the way the world is; perhaps as an escape from anxiety over irreconcilable and even hostile worldviews. Ideology may present itself as a way of smoothing the differences; as therapeutic. Psychological well-being seems to reside in finding the flow and going with it, and that in turn seems to mean declining to resist the ideological turns presented by zeitgeist narrative. And so we can willingly divide the mind, in self-delusion imagining the ideologically compliant discovered self to emerge unbidden and uncreated.

The divided self is recognized sometimes in psychology, though perhaps with inadequate understanding, or encrusted with materialist theory. J.D. Laing, for example, did so in a book actually titled *The Divided Self*, taking social oppression to be a source of "ontological insecurity" manifesting in a

schizoid tendency to a divided self. By “schizoid” he meant neurotic self-division that stops short of psychotic.

One of his key theses was that the schizoid response to neglect or what we might now call psychological trauma can be a sense of having a separate self more true than what presents to the outside world. A feature of the schizoid personality is that the inner person (what we might now call “Identity”) is not withdrawn from the world and its harshness, but to the contrary is touchily vulnerable; more sensitive, not less, to pressures against his “ontological insecurity,” his very sense of existence: Ontological insecurity, according to Laing, results in a schizoid “divided self.”

Resilience

The therapeutic mindset creates the divided self. The project of seeking therapeutic wholeness *presupposes* an internal self distinct from that which presents to the external world. This is in part a legacy of Freud’s concept of the internal interaction of id and superego. After Freud we’re all alert to warring inner drives and consequent need for care of the inner being. This sensitivity impairs resilience, making one actually more vulnerable to disappointments in close relationships; more likely to consider them traumatic, and more likely to ascribe psychological harm to them. “Ontological insecurity” results not from heightened trauma, but from heightened sensitivity.

It is psychological harm either way, however. As with so much else in life, the answer is not to attempt to eliminate the stressors, but to strengthen oneself against their impact. The therapeutic mentality reverses this understanding, so the vulnerable are “traumatized” by ever less traumatizing circumstances. The response of the vulnerable is schizoid, to use Laing’s language: a division of self. The true self is

seen as the vulnerable inner being protected by the combative attention-directing self fending off threats from the world. The therapeutic mindset reinforces perception of trauma, which debilitates resilience, which makes one vulnerable to mistaking any upsetting environment as traumatic, which reinforces the victimhood mentality of the mindset, all in a vicious spiraling-down. We become more subject to traumatization or “ontological insecurity” because the therapeutic imperative itself debilitates that resilience.

Without stronger resilience, internal dissonance seems easier to manage than dissonance with the outside world. The therapeutically sensitive person can develop a departure from integrated selfhood. The dissonant, divided self manifests a timorous discovered self on tenterhooks against stirrings of psychological trauma, vulnerable to victimhood to the point of seeking therapeutic wholeness at the expense of an objective moral sense.

Host and Identity

The discovering and discovered selves can be referred to respectively as host and Identity. A person lost in the ideology of the therapeutic is a host self; host to a distinct manifestation of self, that of *Identity*. Self-as-host becomes the passive spectator of what the esoterically-charged Identity does in the exercise of *its* conscious agency. The meaning of “esoteric” in this context is mystical, but instead of being sourced in spiritual gnosis, it is receptivity to the comforting social *geist* of therapeutic self-conception. Identity seems to well up unbidden from the depths of the subconscious. Identity is the self discovered.

This separation of self in dimensions of host and identity is a mechanism for unimagining one’s own agency, to the end of avoiding moral responsibility. The dynamic of moral

choosing–agency–is veiled in the dissonant two-dimension host/identity formation of self. The affirmative moral choices of the negotiated self are replaced with passive and amoral recognition of emerging Identity.

This is a roundabout form of self-deluded moral evasion. To admit to oneself that this is actually a purposeful activity kept just under the surface of the active consciousness would be to cancel the magic; to expose the affirmative choosing rather than continue the illusion of passive reception. It is an elaborate evasion of the reality of moral structure to the world.

[Table of Contents](#)

Albert Norton, Jr is an attorney and author. His most recent book is [The Mountain and the River: Genesis, Postmodernism, and the Machine](#) (New English Review Press 2023).

NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)