Letters to the Editor

The Self as Legion

In the Christian New Testament there is the story of Jesus who encounters a Gerasene demoniac. The unclean spirit had taken possession of the man on so many occasions that he had to be fettered, but to no avail because he would always ‘break the fastenings’ and be driven to the wilds by the devil. When Jesus asked ‘What is your name?’, the reply was ‘Legion,’ because many devils had gone into him [Luke 7:26–34].

The paper by Proulx and Chandler [2009] calls to mind this biblical story in their discussion of study 1b, where young adults were shown to endorse ‘multiplicities,’ a ‘skein of moods and momentary wants – real demoniacs if you will’ (p. 274; italics added), inhabited by numerous impulses, desires and emotions that are evoked by changing circumstances but evacuated of a single volitional center. If the self is not entirely legion (p. 274), it is also not the unified entity longed for by modernists desiring self-integrity, which is to say, a sense of wholeness (Latin, integer). If the self does not entirely break the fastenings of propriety, it does tend to ‘slip the leash’ of responsibility.

This is one of the large claims that Proulx and Chandler [2009] are determined to make on the basis of their clever interview methodology. But there are several others. For example, the authors report that the tendency to endorse multiplicitous self-disunity is strongest when young adults are called to account for bad behavior. Rather than endorse a singular self in volitional control, or even a hierarchical self who recognizes a certain dualistic tension in one’s self-structure, the young adult instead keeps splitting self-construals into reactive multiplicities that are staked to changing circumstances.

Moreover, like the Gerasene whose inner demons were cast off into a swine herd, the young adult externalizes self-perceived failings into multiple contextually dependent selves in a desperate attempt to ‘slip the leash of responsibility’ (p. 280). And if previous researchers missed observing the multiplicitous self who flees agency and escapes freedom in their data, it is because they were addled by William James and his essentialist I-Me solution to the problem of sameness and change.
These are certainly bracing conclusions for which this paper will be cited for a long time. That I do not think the chain of evidence requires us to follow the Gerasene Self into the postmodern, polyphonic sea does not detract from my estimation of its enduring significance. For one thing, the interview data do indeed converge in interesting ways with findings in the self-understanding literature, a fact that should not get overlooked by the more rhetorically vivid conclusions for which this paper will be cited.

For example, the fact that young adolescents report more volitional agency converges with the portrait of the ‘self-observing ego’ drawn by Selman’s [1980] account of interpersonal understanding and by Broughton’s [1978] study of children’s naïve epistemologies. Similarly, the movement towards greater self-differentiation by later adolescence, say, into public-private [Blasi & Milton, 1991], conscious-unconscious [Selman, 1980] and divided selves [Broughton, 1978], or by social roles [Harter & Monsour, 1992] and the attending effort to reconcile the resulting tension is captured anew by Proulx and Chandler’s [2009] observation in their data of the hierarchical self.

Of course, the authors go on to claim that movement towards hierarchical and multiplicitous selfhood by early adulthood is not mere progress in social cognitive development. It is not the orthogenetic principle in action. If it were, why is its operation so selective? Why should the multiplicitous, context-dependent self get invoked only when accounting for one’s own bad behavior, but not for the behavior of others? Similarly, why is one’s praiseworthy behavior attributed to volitional internal causes, but unseemly behavior attributed to multiplicitous and reactive selves who are at the mercy of externality beyond one’s volitional control?

This is where the development of self-understanding meets attribution theory. For if we only examine attributions we see a familiar pattern: most individuals attribute good behavior to internal causes but make external attributions about bad behavior. But this has to be qualified by age-graded variation in conceptions of self-unity. As it turns out, younger teens who endorse the singular self also internalize the causes of bad behavior. In contrast, the multiplicitous self of young adults externalizes responsibility for bad behavior. And the only explanation that makes sense to the authors for why younger teens should make internal attributions for both good and bad behavior while young adults internalize good but externalize bad behavior is that, over time, the self keeps splitting in a desperate desire to escape freedom. By early adulthood, one gives up on volitional agency when confronted with bad behavior in a self-less flight from responsibility.

But I am not so sure. For one thing, the so-called multiplicitous self comes close to a sophisticated social cognitive view of dispositional coherence. On this view, a stable behavioral signature is to be found at the intersection of person × context interactions. This possibility is missed in the present data (I would suggest) because of the authors’ own preference for viewing the social cognitive view of personality as a simple case of synchronic disunity.
There is an irony here. Blasi and Milton [1991] were criticized for using a methodology that rows in the wake of William James’s essentialism. According to the authors, when Blasi and Milton asked the participants where the ‘real me’ is, they were simply giving away the game. But Proulx and Chandler [2009] give away the game, too, and row in the wake of their own meta-theoretical preferences (perhaps this is inevitable). When participants articulate what amounts to a social cognitive view of personality, this can look like ‘context-dependent multiplicities’ (p. 273) only if one starts from the presumption that self and context are either/or options and do not interpenetrate in complex ways. If one does not believe that dispositional coherence can be located at the intersection of person × context interactions then synchronic disunity is all one is ever going to find.

One way to read the present data, then, is to say that participants were struggling with how to articulate a social cognitive view of dispositional coherence. They were not running from freedom or giving up on volitional agency. They were not endlessly splitting the self. Indeed, the participants coded as multiplicitous began the interview ‘by asserting flatly that the individual in question retains a unified self’ (p. 269). It is of interest, of course, that participants tended to be good social cognitive theorists only when accounting for their misbehavior. But this self-enhancement effect is a well-known bias in social cognition and is further proof of a ‘fat relentless ego’ (to use Iris Murdoch’s expression) that is vigilant for ways to shore up its defenses.

There is no denying that self-excusing evasions in our moral lives are all too common and all too human, and that investigations of the responsible self are badly needed. The authors are on to something in their exploration of how self-serving attributions in the moral domain intersect with conceptions of self-unity. The implications of the data for the ontology of the moral self, for modernist and postmodernist reflections on selfhood, or even for common sense notions of integrity and wholeness are not as clear.

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References


There Is No Self without Responsibility, as There Is No Responsibility without the Self

I was curious to read Proulx and Chandler’s [2009] article that was informally advertised by the editor of this journal as ‘one of the most engaging articles on the development of self and morality to have been published in the past 10 years’ [L. Nucci, pers. commun., September 24, 2009]. Surprisingly, there is some uneasiness by the authors themselves to make exactly this connection. In a footnote, it is pointed out that many episodes that made up the raw material for the empirical studies (i.e., events research participants chose to talk about) were not full-blown moral but involved mostly harmless situations. Only very few references to the literature on moral development are made that turn out to be somewhat outdated (e.g., the reference to Kohlberg’s stage 41/2, a stage that has been abandoned in the 1980s). By contrast, more than 25 years of theoretical and empirical research on the development of the moral self have been completely left out [for an overview, see Bergman, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2005]. Perhaps wisely so, as a fair assessment of what Proulx and Chandler [2009] may have to offer to this literature would have required many more pages clearly exceeding the limits of a journal article.

At first, it looks as if Proulx and Chandler [2009] have successfully dismantled a core and guiding principle of research on the moral self, the idea that individuals strive for unity and consistency. However, such a conclusion would be premature. The notion of self-multiplicity without unity is similar to the self-defeating denial of any truth that still claims one truth, namely that there is no truth. It is a self that endorses multiple selves. Thus, embracing multiplicity can be considered just another way to establish unity. Because of this apparent self-contradiction in the discourse on self-multiplicity we might want to rid ourselves of any self notion (a ‘Rortyan’ advice Proulx and Chandler do not follow since they still engage in self-talk) or we might be inclined to accept a multiplistic epistemology where it all depends on the perspective people take. In the latter
case, we are set up for a ‘split’ approach Chandler and colleagues elsewhere have so eloquently argued against [Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003]. Rather than engaging in a seemingly meaningful but – as a matter of fact – meaningless discussion because of the incommensurable perspectives opponents take, we need to ask: How do Proulx and Chandler’s insights relate to studies on the moral self that has been one of the most important areas in post-Kohlbergian research on moral development [Frimer & Walker, 2008]?

When discussing their findings, Proulx and Chandler [2009] raised doubts about the validity of the interview procedures that have been used in the moral-self literature. It is speculated that researchers may have imposed meanings on their research participants they never would have generated on their own (p. 282). Somewhat similar concerns apply to the methods chosen by Proulx and Chandler, in particular with regard to study 2. Adolescents were asked to provide examples for behaviors they were ‘proud of.’ To experience pride typically requires a sense of accomplishment and, thus, necessarily implies internal attributions [e.g., Lewis, 2000]. The contrasting event was framed as behavior participants ‘were not proud of’ and thus left it up to the interviewees whether they wanted to select an event about something they have done or about something that happened to them (e.g., an embarrassing situation). Given this way of posing the question, it is not surprising that Proulx and Chandler found an almost even number of externally and internally attributed events for the ‘not proud of’ question [see Proux & Chandler, 2009, table 3]. What would have happened if the researchers had asked their interviewees about behaviors that provoked guilt feelings? Guilt, similar to pride, requires internal attributions. It is very likely that study 2 would have produced a largely different outcome, if a slightly different procedure had been used.

Nonetheless, a major conclusion that can be drawn from Proulx and Chandler’s [2009] study remains untouched. They remind us of the important fact that any discourse about self and morality is intimately tied to the notion of responsibility. By denying responsibility people establish boundaries of their moral self. This is the focus of Proulx and Chandler’s study. However, there is a flip side of this coin that is present in Proulx and Chandler’s data as well: responsibility-taking. People take responsibility for their moral actions. They do so in different ways and on different scales. This is the major topic of research on the moral self. When formulating his ‘self model,’ Blasi [1983] introduced the notion of responsibility judgments that were supposed to function as a bridge over the divide that separates moral judgment from action. Responsibility judgments were postulated to depend on one’s self-definition. In Blasi’s model, self and responsibility are intimately connected. Ironically, research on the moral self never took this connection seriously. Instead, it largely bypassed the notion of responsibility and chose volunteerism and moral exemplariness as main criteria for studying the self-relevance of morality. Note that responsibility-taking does not necessarily show up in action but is equally well reflected in moral emotions (such as guilt).
Moreover, responsibility does not imply consistency across situations and contexts because what matters to the person from a moral point of view can be highly specific (e.g., honesty towards a particular person rather than as a general moral attribute). From this perspective, research on the moral self should not be confused with the perhaps futile search for a moral master trait.

Proulx and Chandler [2009] brought the concept of responsibility back to center stage in the discourse on the moral self. Of course, this is done in a way that runs counter to the role responsibility typically plays in the moral-self literature. For Proulx and Chandler, responsibility is a post hoc rationalization of good and bad behavior people engage in to ultimately feel good about themselves. Towards the end of their article, responsibility became more and more illusionary, neither acceptable nor desirable. As Moshman [2009] in his commentary pointed out, there is little in Proulx and Chandler’s data that warrants such a conclusion. Still, considering the empirical evidence amassed from various areas of psychological research, there is hardly any doubt that individuals use a wide array of techniques to neutralize immoral behavior and to alleviate their sense of responsibility. Does this imply that responsibility is nothing but an illusion? Only if we follow a binary logic of either/or. Without being trapped in this logic, we can safely conclude that responsibility is both illusionary and real. For some individuals, under certain circumstances, being responsible gives them an important motive to act morally. Others, under the very same circumstances, might deny responsibility because they feel that an action is way beyond what they can be legitimately asked for. Psychology needs to understand the factors that make the difference.

Today, there is the tendency to reduce morality to a set of cognitive heuristics, to evolutionary adaptations, or to brain processes (as well documented by the three volumes on Moral Psychology edited by Sinnott-Amstrong [2008]). If morality were an outcome only of such impersonal systems without any involvement of an agentic self, responsibility would not exist. By feeling responsible, individuals take ownership of their actions (and vice versa). The discourse about self and responsibility is therefore indispensable for moral psychology. Proulx and Chandler [2009] provide a fresh look on an important issue. By doing so, they greatly contribute to keeping the discourse about self and responsibility well and alive.

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References


Is Development Always Progressive?

I appreciate Proulx and Chandler [2009] for undertaking an innovative study of the compelling and perplexing issue of self-unity. I also appreciate how eloquently the study was contextualized and presented. The findings definitely provide food for thought for those studying self, identity, agency, and morality. In fact, the first thought that came to my mind was a question: is development always progressive? Are all changes that occur across adolescence and young adulthood necessarily improvements in psychological and social functioning?

Life span developmental psychologists remind us that change across the life span is not always progressive, but also involves digression or decline [Baltes, 1987]. Although the best examples are things like work on cognitive aging that demonstrate cognitive declines that occur late in life, such digressive changes can occur during all phases of the life span. For example, few
would call adolescent risk taking progression in its own right, even though it is partly brought on by brain developments that occur during this period of life [Steinberg, 2008]. Thus, developmental change is a dynamic process involving progression and digression.

What does this have to do with Proulx and Chandler’s [2009] wonderful study? They explored the ways in which people of different ages explicitly made sense of seemingly incongruous acts conducted by themselves and others. As such, they identified age differences in conceptions of self-unity (and behavioral attributions). However, it is unclear whether such age differences necessarily represent progression. In other words, their data show what is but not necessarily what ought to be. More specifically, is the multiplicitous self common in late adolescence and young adulthood necessarily more advanced or adaptive than the hierarchical self or the singular self common in early and middle adolescence? Similarly, is the transition to a greater tendency to externally attribute bad behavior in late adolescence a welcome development?

Put differently, is relegating responsibility for one’s actions to situational factors in the best interest of individuals, relationships, and society? Probably not. There is plenty of evidence to show the downsides of surrendering agency over one’s actions. Bandura [2002] has beautifully outlined various strategies of moral disengagement which he sees as playing a role in many of the most heinous acts of inhumanity in history. He has often referred to the phenomena as selective moral disengagement, which seems an apt label for the tendency of Proulx and Chandler’s participants to take responsibility for good deeds but not for bad deeds. They selectively disengaged their moral responsibility for actions that would make them feel bad or look bad to others.

In fact, all this leads me to wonder whether what Proulx and Chandler observed in their data is largely a process of learning a particular cultural worldview regarding self-unity and responsibility. This is because Proulx and Chandler set out to simply show what people perceive or report regarding self-unity, not the real nature of self-unity. In other words, whether someone tells the researcher their actions are situationally determined is largely independent of whether or not they actually are. Thus, humans may have agency over their actions, but during adolescence and young adulthood, may come to believe that they don’t (through socialization, education, and certain life experiences). I am unaware of any research on this, but it seems a viable thesis. It appears that if what we were dealing with is a true cognitive advance, Proulx and Chandler’s participants would have applied the multiplicitous self view and external attribution of behavior more broadly, rather than just for certain people in certain situations (the authors actually acknowledge this themselves).

On a related note, over the last few decades some here at my institution have been interested in the concept of self-betrayal [Warner & Olson, 1981]. The idea is that we all have an intuitive sense of right and wrong, and sometimes we act inconsistent with this moral sense. However, in the moment we make a choice to act consistent or inconsistent with that moral sense,
and this choice is in itself a moral act, it is the choice of whether or not to live truthfully. When we make the choice to act inconsistent with our moral sense (i.e., when we decide not to live truthfully), we at the same time create a narrative that positions us as victims, thereby seemingly absolving ourselves of moral responsibility for the acts. This seems to map onto the description given of the multiplicitous self view, so Proulx and Chandler’s findings may demonstrate an increase in the tendency toward self-betrayal.

However, it is unclear how Proulx and Chandler’s findings fit with work showing an increased sense of moral responsibility with age. For example, Blasi [2001] has reported how adolescents anticipate more negative affect following wrongdoing than younger children. In fact, a marker of moral identity may be one’s tendency to feel guilt following violation of one’s moral sense [Hardy & Carlo, 2005]. This is all in line with work on moral internalization [Hoffman, 2000] showing an increased understanding across adolescence in the consequences of one’s acts on others, coupled with increases in moral affect such as empathy and guilt. Thus, teens are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors based on empathy for others and refrain from antisocial behaviors based on anticipatory negative self-evaluative affect (e.g. guilt). In light of these developments, it is unclear why it seems that teens show increases in moral responsibility and moral affect, but at the same time increases in the tendency to externally attribute bad behaviors. Perhaps it is this increased negative reaction (e.g. guilt) to bad behaviors that partially motivates moral disengagement from such behaviors. Perhaps individuals are making a choice to betray their own moral sense in order to avoid feeling bad.

Lastly, what is the status of the virtue of integrity in light of Proulx and Chandler’s findings? Even the ancients like Aristotle extolled the virtue of integrity or continence, which entails having one’s desires and behaviors in line with one’s sense of right. This is validated by recent work on moral exemplars [Colby & Damon, 1992]. Such examples of moral excellence seem to demonstrate unity between individuals’ sense of self and their sense of what is right. Further, integrity is central to lay conceptions of being a moral person [Walker & Pitts, 1998] and being a hero [Schlenker, Weigold, & Schlenker, 2008]. More directly to the issue at hand, Frimer and Walker [in press] recently showed that people’s tendency to agentically reconcile potential discrepancies between self- and other-oriented values is predictive of moral action. Similarly, concern for integrity to moral principles is related negatively to antisocial behaviors and positively to prosocial behaviors [Schlenker, 2008]. Thus, I suspect future research may show the hierarchical self and singular self views to be adaptive in many respects compared to the multiplicitous self view.

In sum, while I very much applaud the way Proulx and Chandler conducted and presented their study, it left me wondering about the interpretation and implications of their interesting
findings. Although they observed age differences in conceptions of self-unity and behavioral attributions, I am skeptical as to whether these possible developmental changes are necessarily progressive. Rather, I wonder to what extent these different approaches to self-unity are learned, and what the implications of each approach are for the well-being of individuals, relationships, and society.

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References


