

## CHAPTER 3

### Who Am I?

*“And how do I know who I am,  
until I see myself as others see me?”*

Edmund Carpenter,  
*The Terror of Tribal Self-Awareness*

For most people, the pursuit of self knowledge usually begins with the question of “Who am I?” It’s easy to assume that if we can just figure out *who* we are, then we’ll finally know our selves. Yet when we start looking for who we are, a clear picture is often elusive.

I see this with everyone I’ve interviewed. Who they think they are at one moment is usually very different than at another. Sometimes they’re a mother, then they’re Jennifer’s daughter, then they’re the underpaid barista at Starbucks, then they’re an Asian, environmental activist, and so on. Usually they cycle among many different identities, all of which change with their circumstance and none of which define them at their core. Indeed, once they start actually thinking about *who* they really are, they often come away even more uncertain about themselves than ever before.

Partly, this comes from our confusion over what exactly we mean by the term “who.” We can see this with our names, the most common marker of our identity. Like Chevy, Facebook, or any other proper noun, our names are supposed to function like the numbered tags on the ears of penned cattle— words meant to distinguish us from the herd. They aren’t supposed to have any intrinsic value.

But, of course, that’s not how we see them. Names have power. Stalin, Cher, Caligula — these are names that evoke feelings in us. If your parents had named you Hitler, Shleprock,

or Mister Cutie Patootie (something one of my students was saddled with), you would definitely have changed it (he chose to go by Jason). And it's not just names, it's all of our identities that have this power; *all* of the things we associate with "who we are" have emotional connotations. In other words, sometimes it can feel good to be Stephen, a woman, or Catholic, and sometimes it can feel bad to be these things.

And herein lies the trap for us: for "who" we think we are is very entangled with how we are feeling at any given moment. Sometimes we think of ourselves in ways that make us feel better and sometimes we get stuck in identities that confirm our self loathing. I see this with myself. To make myself feel good, I sometimes become preoccupied with living up to a certain persona, such as "Eric the smarty pants professor" or "Eric the helpful neighbor." Or, conversely, I can get stuck in a quagmire of negative self perceptions: "Eric, the terrible person whom nobody likes" is an old favorite. Yet regardless whether they are positive or negative, both delusions are equally narcissistic. And because our different self-perceptions have such powerful emotional charges, they often blind us to our more authentic selves.

If we want to know who we really are, we'll need a proper understanding of what the question "Who am I" entails. To do this, we'll need to delve more deeply into language. For language is really what makes us "who" we are. Language is the distinctive way that humans make Order for their selves. No other creatures have language nor the identities that arise from it. Koalas don't give themselves names; zebras don't think of themselves as striped. Nor do animals judge themselves. Lions never feel bad about killing antelopes; ants aren't proud of their magnificent colonies. It is only humans who give themselves such identities and give those identities moral weight. It is only humans who have the capacity to intentionally reshape their selves into something else. And this is the real issue at hand, for lurking behind the question of who we are is the question of who we want to be. So to better understand "who" we are, let's explore how language shapes the self.

DOMESTICATION

I'm going to start with a seemingly strange question, but bear with me for a moment because it will yield something interesting: What was the first domesticated animal?

Now, if you're like most people, you'd probably say a dog. And this is a pretty good guess. Fossil records show that dogs have an incredibly long connection to humans as co-hunters and protectors, including a 33,000 year-old dog skull recently unearthed in Siberia. We can tell that it's a dog and not a wolf because of its physical features. Early dog skeletons are smaller, more slender, and more juvenile looking than wolves. Yet these findings also present us with a puzzle: for if dogs were domesticated to be hunters and protectors, then why are they less robust than wolves? Shouldn't they be larger and more fierce?

The answers to these questions come from some fascinating experiments started in the 1950s by Russian biologist Dmitry Belyayev. Belyayev was curious about how dogs evolved from wolves and so he thought it might be interesting to try his own experiments in domestication. Using packs of silver foxes, he started selectively breeding on just one behavioral characteristic — docility. He chose only those foxes that were least frightened of humans and bred them with each other.

After only a few generations of selective breeding, he began to notice some major changes, not just in the foxes' behavior, but in their physical appearance as well. With each successive generation, the foxes started becoming friendlier and more communicative. They started barking and following commands. But most interesting, their bodies changed as well: their ears became floppy, their tails became curved, their coats got spotty. Overall, they became more slender and youthful in appearance. Not only did the domesticated foxes start *acting* like dogs, they started *looking* more like them too.



This physical transformation is known as “domestication syndrome” and it is common to most tamed animals. Domesticated rabbits, cows, horses, and sheep all tend to be smaller, “cuter,” and lighter than their feral counterparts. They typically have smaller brains and lower stress levels too. Relieved of having to survive on their own, domesticated animals tend to be less agitated and sharp-witted. Domestication is a softening process.

But these facts also force us to reconsider our earlier question. For if we look at the fossil record, it appears that the first "domesticated" animal was not a dog, but a human being.<sup>1</sup> Compare us to a typical human ancestor that lived about 300,000 years ago and you’ll find some important physical differences. Early homo sapiens were built like olympic wrestlers—tough, bandy-legged and wiry—just the type of robust creature you’d picture fighting off lions and cave bears. They had heavy brows and more brutal looking faces. And, contrary to the myth of caveman stupidity, our early human ancestors had significantly larger brains. They were undoubtedly very quick-minded and attuned to their natural environment. They were physically formidable specimens, a lot more badass than your average person today.

But sometime around a hundred thousand years ago, *modern* homo sapiens appear in the fossil record.<sup>2</sup> We modern humans are smaller in stature than our forebears. We have more delicate faces, with a higher forehead, a smaller nose and more refined cheeks and chins; we’re generally a lot cuter



<sup>1</sup> Leach, HelenM. “Human Domestication Reconsidered.” *Current Anthropology* 44, no. 3 (2003): 349–68. <https://doi.org/10.1086/368119>.

<sup>2</sup> The challenge with all of these assertions is that the hominid fossil record is remarkably sparse. Our homo sapiens population was very small during its first 250,000 years and the fossil evidence is often very fragmentary. Nevertheless, we do see big differences between our modern skeletons and say those of Neanderthals, with whom we shared a common ancestor about 500,000 years ago.

than our hominid predecessors. We have smaller brains too. In other words, we have all the hallmarks of being a domesticated species. And this make sense. After all, if we domesticated so many other creatures, it seems necessary that we would first have to be domesticated ourselves. This, however, raises a curious question: who or what domesticated us?

Although there are lots of popular suspects (trade, settlement, aliens!), I believe the most likely culprit was language. This is a speculative conjecture, but several reasons lead me to believe that "language domesticated us." First off, the timing is right. Our ancestors look like they were domesticated at roughly the same time that modern human language emerged. There are some genetic mutations relating to brain size, language functioning, and sociability that also show up around this time. It's also important to note that the homo sapiens population at this period was incredibly small, somewhere around 5,000 in size; one hundred thousand years ago, homo sapiens was basically an endangered species. This would have allowed for some pretty strong selection pressures and sharing of a new linguistic technology. In short, our bodies started changing at the same time it looks like we really started speaking with each other in a way would we recognize as language.

But the most important reason why I think language domesticated us is what language requires. If you and I are going to share a vocabulary then we'll need to agree on many things. For example, we'll need to agree that the word for fire is going to be "fire." And then we'll need to keep agreeing on this—we can't just keep changing the name for fire whenever one of us feels like it. In other words, we'll need to listen to each other and bind ourselves to some shared norms. Language is based upon cooperation and commitment.

This is how language "selected on" the trait of docility, the same trait that Belyayev used to domesticate the silver foxes. It brought together the tamest of our early human ancestors and rewarded their tractability. In early human tribes, it was the docile people who could learn from each other, build collective vocabularies, and share information. They could make plans, gossip, and flirt. They could form coalitions and shun those ornery loners who were keeping to themselves (and insisting on their own undoubtedly annoying words for

fire). As language emerged, the trait of docility would have suddenly conveyed a huge reproductive advantage.

Domestication also harnessed us to culture - making us totally dependent upon symbolic communication for our survival. Just as with dogs, cows, or any other domesticated species, we became entirely reliant on our domesticator. Only in this case, rather than our domesticator being a person, it was symbols, words, and grammar. In this way, language fundamentally changed the human self and made us distinct from all other living things.

## WHAT IS LANGUAGE

Now you might be thinking, “What does he mean we’re the only species with language? What about all those fantastic bird calls or those mournful whale sounds? What about that gorilla who could do all that sign language?” These are reasonable questions. Most animals (and many plants it turns out) communicate with each other. Some forms, like a bee’s “dances,” are astonishingly sophisticated. But these are all categorically different than how we humans speak and sign to each other. No matter how much we’d like to think that our dog can understand what we are saying or that birds are singing duets, this isn’t really what is going on.

The differences begin with symbols and meaning. When animals communicate, they only use singular, reflexive gestures. They don’t make abstractions. Their grunts or calls can only reference what’s in their environment and they are always bound to the moment: cats never meow about something that happened last night or that’s going to happen tomorrow. Nor can animals creatively manipulate their signals to express new ideas. A dog may growl, whine or yelp, but it doesn’t ever yelp-growl-whine to mean one thing and then growl-whine-yelp to mean another. Most importantly, animals aren’t usually looking to build shared meaning in their gestures or calls. Their communication is a lot like Twitter: one-way signals sent out to the world. When an animal roars, caws, or flings its poo, it is not trying to create mutual understanding, it is just trying to alter something in its surroundings. In short, animals don’t have conversations.

Human language is fundamentally different. All of humanity's 6,000 plus languages make use of abstract symbols: I can say the word "fire" and you'll know what I mean even if there is no fire present.

All human languages have grammar, rules that govern how words are put together and this seems to be inborn. When children learn to speak, they intuitively grasp that they should say "I ate a cookie" rather than "ate a I cookie."

All human languages also have infinite potential; our sentences can be endlessly elaborated to expand their meanings. Only humans can say "Sue saw Tom thinking about what Molly was wearing when she went to the store" and keep this sentence going on and on.

And human language is about building a shared understanding. When we humans speak or gesture to each other, we build a uniform way of interpreting the world. Every time we speak, sign, or read a word, we reinforce a common framework for ordering the self. In doing this, we become bound to all the other people with whom we communicate.

The really big puzzle is how this all came to be. As psychologist Michael Corballis says, "Language is the hardest problem in science: nobody really knows how it works and nobody knows where it came from." There are few areas with as many theories, vicious scientific fights, and rampant conjecture as with the origin and functioning of language.

Part of the challenge comes from its very complexity. Human language involves physical traits that are distinct to our species, such as the particular shape of our tongues, larynx, and pharynx. Language also involves many inborn psychological capabilities, such as our ability to think abstractly and intuit basic rules of grammar. And both the physiology and psychology of language are very complicated. Consider the seemingly simple act of speaking an ordinary sentence. Because we speak by exhaling, our brains need to time our utterances to our breath—they have to make sure there is enough air in the lungs to get you to the end of your sentence. This means that your brain "knows" what you are going to say well before your conscious mind does.

But nobody really knows where exactly the capacity for language lies. Over the past thirty

years, we have discovered some bits and parts. For example, we know that there are some genes, like FOXP2, that are crucial for language — people with abnormal mutations on this gene sequence have a really hard time communicating. We also know that there are couple of regions in the brain's left hemisphere that are essential for language as well. But our knowledge doesn't go much beyond this.

Nor do we know exactly when these parts of our bodies emerged. Some argue this has been a slow process taking millions of years; others argue that there was an evolutionary inflection point around 100,000 years ago that critically changed our language capacity. This question is even more difficult to answer because language is always changing and taking on new forms. For example, Americans now use new words like “selfie” and “emo” while older ones like “scrumping” and “grundy” have vanished from our vocabulary. While we have a pretty clear idea of what our early homo sapiens ancestors looked like, we have no real idea of what their speech was like.

What we do know, however, is that at some point around 100,000 years ago, the communication system that we now recognize as modern human language became evident. This not only made humans distinct from every other species, it fundamentally changed the self. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, if we look back at our ancestral lineage, we see the animal self getting ordered by singularity, time, perception, and sociability. Each of these qualities made the animal self more capable and each trait is shared by our mammalian cousins. But all of these factors are bound to DNA. A zebra's self is the same, regardless of whether it is in the wilds of Africa or in the local zoo. Order is baked into their genes.

This, however, is not the case with us. Because we use language, our selves are also ordered by culture. When our human ancestors began speaking, they started sharing information about the world. They started categorizing things in their environment and drawing inferences from these categories. The result was that the human self was no longer ordered merely by its own innate capacities or even its own experiences; it was now ordered by the experiences of other people as well. Language bound us to each other and created two new dimensions of the self: identity and morality.



## ME, MY SELF, AND I

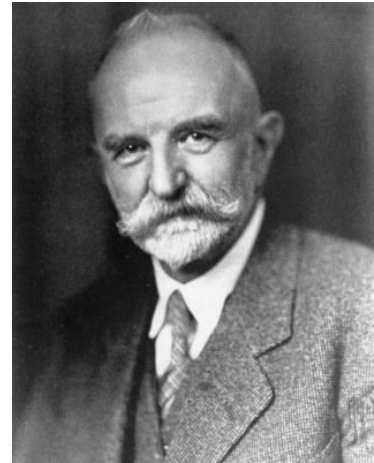
This is a good moment to address a question that often comes up when discussing the self: what is the difference between my self and myself? It's easy to get these terms confused but there is an important distinction between them. The first, "my self," has been the subject of this book so far. As you've seen, it is not really comprised of things that people normally think of when they think of themselves. So far, it's been mostly about the things that operate well below the surface of our conscious awareness, like our energies, DNA, or visual perception. My "self" is all the processes that help perpetuate me as an energy system.

"Myself," by contrast, is a reflexive pronoun. And, as with all pronouns, it is about one's social identity. Individuals in isolation don't need pronouns; only those in groups do. That's also why it's a bit of a misnomer when people today say things like, "he, his, and him are *my* preferred pronouns," for we don't really ever use these particular pronouns on ourselves, other people use them about us, mostly when we're not around. But even the pronouns we use for ourselves arise in relation to others. Me or myself are the social concepts of my self as a person. It is part of my "self" and it's the part of this self that I'm usually most conscious of. And it only exists because of language.

This was the insight of philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead. Writing in the 1920s and 1930s, Mead believed that the self was largely the product of our social interactions. Mead's self started forming in childhood as we acquired language. This was because of what language allows us to do: comprehend ourselves as objects. In Mead's view, a creature without language simply can't reflect on itself. Try to think of yourself without words, it's actually an impossible thing to do. You may be able to see your limbs or to feel your body, but you'll still be very much stuck in a first-person frame of reference. Language allows us to generate a self image and, in doing so, creates an ego identity.

For Mead, this was crystalized in the difference between the words "I" and "me." In Mead's view, the term "I" refers to a primordial being, something that lives largely in the moment. The "I" is our animal self, it is the self that does things and is active in the world.

“Me,” by contrast, holds the residue of all our social interactions. It is the suite of identities we use to negotiate amongst all the people around us. This distinction is evident when we look in the mirror. When we glance at our reflection, we never say “I see I” or even “I see my self.” Rather we see a “me” or “myself.” This “me” is the vessel that contains all the personae by which we interface with the world. Mead’s insight was that language creates this “me.” Like a mirror, language is a tool which we can reflect on our selves, and, in doing so, transforms “my self” into “myself.”



We can see this in childhood. When we’re born, we come into the world without any sense of identity. We are merely a “blooming, buzzing confusion” as psychologist William James aptly described it. This is because human babies are essentially born premature, nature’s tradeoff between our species being both large brained and bipedal. Whereas a new foal can run within minutes after being born, a human baby needs about 12 weeks to gain even some basic cognition. Indeed, infants can’t even discern their parents’ faces until they are at least eight weeks old. And even after this time, human babies don’t really understand themselves as distinct from the world. Up until about 18 months, they don’t differentiate between their own bodies and their mothers, their toys, or anything else. They can’t recognize themselves in a mirror. Babies perceive all of reality as really just one big feeling of “I.”

But by 18 months of age, this changes. Just as children are learning how to speak, they also begin recognizing themselves as distinct from the world. A girl starts referring to herself as “me.” She begins to know her name, she can identify herself in pictures, and she can recognize her own reflection in the mirror. In short, she begins to understand her self as a “myself.”

Now the big question is whether this self awareness is actually *caused* by language. There is a robust scientific debate on this. Some researchers believe that self consciousness exists without language. They often point to the “mirror test,” a famous experiment first developed by psychologist Gordon Gallup in the late 1960s. In the experiment, either a

young child or an animal is presented with a mirror. At first, many animals and children don't even recognize the image they see as themselves; some will even see their reflection as a threat and try to attack it or run away from it. However, over time, the subjects eventually become acclimated to the image in the mirror and many start interacting with it in a way that seems familiar. But do the toddlers and animals who are looking in the mirror actually understand the reflection as themselves?



To answer this question, the experimenters take the mirror away and then surreptitiously mark the subjects' faces with red dye. The newly red-faced animals and children are then placed in front of the mirror again. Some animals, like chimpanzees and elephants, respond to the mark by touching or gesturing towards it. Human children over two years old also seem to recognize the mark as being on their own face, although this varies a lot by culture. Either way, when they connect the red-faced image in the mirror to their own bodies, the subjects seem to be showing some signs of self awareness. They seem to know that the image in the mirror with the red mark is them. For some scientists, these findings indicate that self awareness doesn't require language.

The problem, of course, is that all of these conclusions are made using a very human technology. Mirrors don't exist in the wild. When an animal confronts its mirrored reflection, it is not really confronting itself, it is confronting human culture. It's like giving a chimpanzee a pinball machine: it may be able to flip the switches, but that doesn't mean that it's really *playing* pinball, at least in the way we do. And even if some animals have the latent

capacity for self-awareness, it is something that rarely gets activated in their natural habitat because there is nothing to enable it.

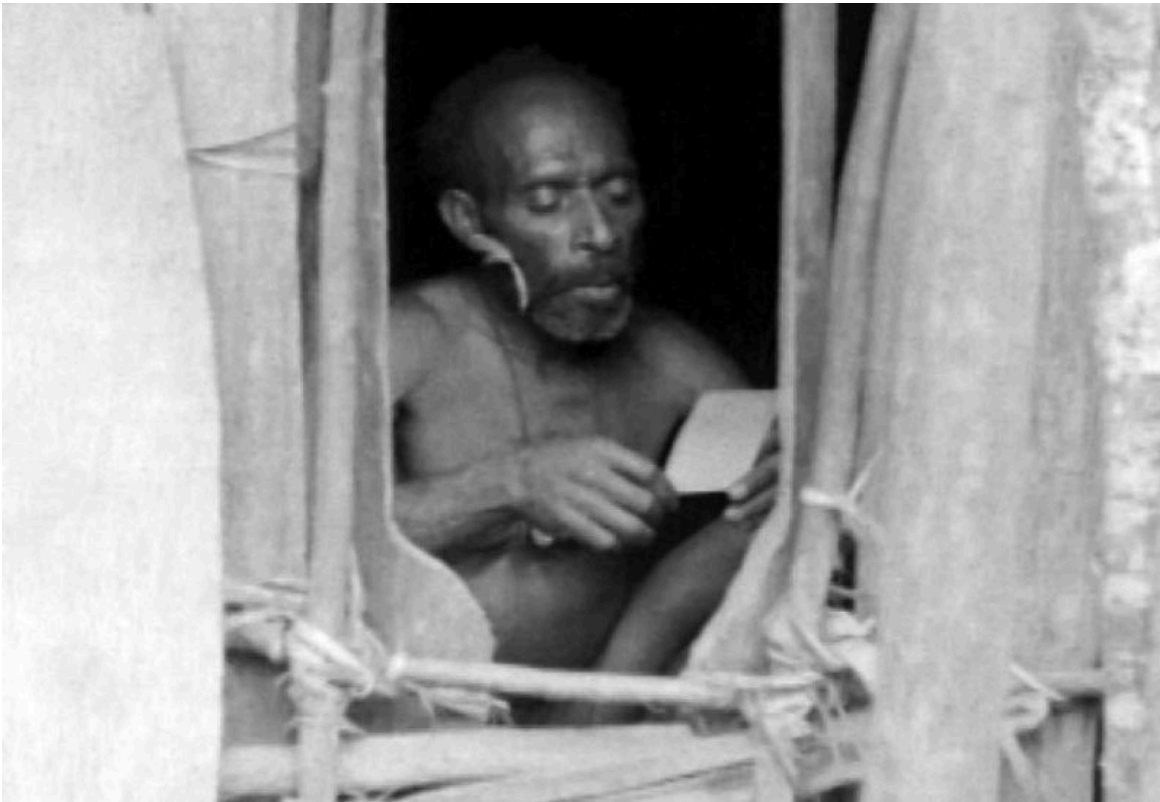
When humans evolved language, we forged a tool that could channel a new type of consciousness. But this new self awareness was highly contingent upon the words at hand. Our first human ancestors were probably not self-aware in the way we are because they probably did not have the same vocabulary that we do. They probably didn't even have pronouns. In other words, self awareness is not a universal experience that you either have or don't have; rather, it is something that co-evolves with language and culture.

This point was well-illustrated in another famous experiment that took place around the same time Gallup was marking the faces of sedated chimpanzees. In the late 1960s, anthropologist Edmund Carpenter visited the Biama tribe of Papua New Guinea. At this time, the Biama existed in very primitive conditions, largely isolated from the modern world. As far as Carpenter knew, none of them had ever seen their own images before and he was curious how they might react to mirrors and polaroid pictures.

At first sight, they were horrified by their own reflections. They knew who they were, but they simply didn't have any experience with visual representations of themselves. The mirrors and polaroids forced them to reconcile a self-image they carried around in their own heads with an image that now existed outside of them. It was like when we hear a recording of our own voice — it was something both familiar and alien. They could now see themselves as others saw them. And Carpenter believed it was this vulnerability, this inability to control how others saw them, which was so terrifying.

But Carpenter's experiment revealed something else. Soon after Carpenter had taken out the mirror, the Biama stopped being afraid of their reflections. In fact, they quickly became really intrigued. They even started using the mirrors to help groom themselves and became more preoccupied with their appearance. By giving them a new mechanism of self reflection, Carpenter irrevocably changed Biama culture and the way they understood themselves. And this was Mead's point. Language is like a mirror, a human constructed technology that not only allows us to reflect on ourselves but fundamentally changes us once

we use it. When we start learning words for ourselves, we fundamentally alter our self-perception.

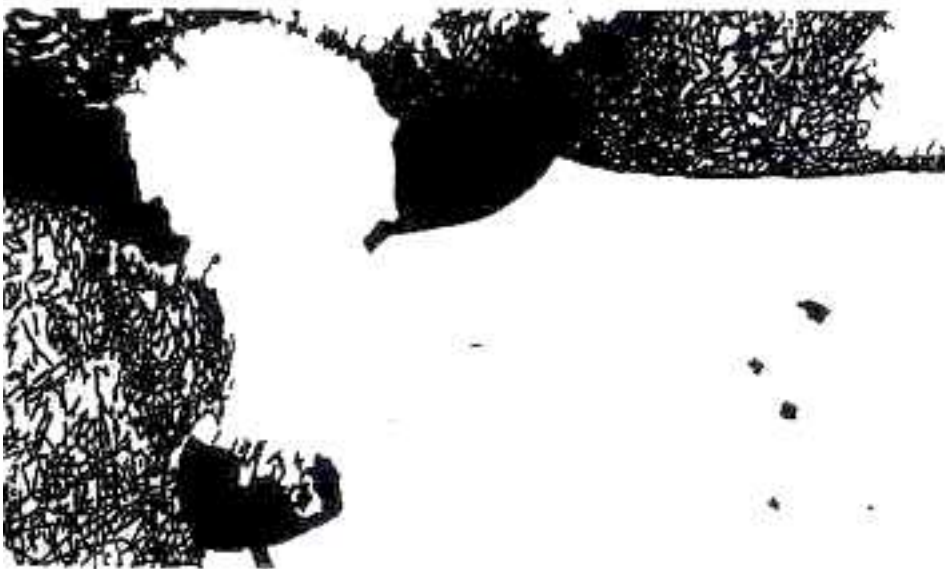


Once again, we can see this with children. As children start discerning the world, they begin to start making “maps” of their reality. This makes human children like that of almost any other vertebrate. What separates us, however, is that human children are also adding words to their perceptions. As they learn to speak, they also start categorizing objects by certain qualities. Some things are now “books,” others are “toys,” others are “dogs,” etc. But these words don’t simply differentiate objects from each other, they also convey information. When children learn that something with pages is a “book” they make a lot of inferences about it. A “book” will not bite you nor pee on the rug, while a “dog” is not going to tell you a story.

This also happens with the self. At the same time children are developing language, they are also acquiring words that describe themselves. A child learns that his name is Ryan, that the game he likes is baseball, that he is Irish-Italian, that he lives in Westwood, New Jersey. These words don’t simply describe Ryan, they begin to tell him things about himself.

Vocabularies create self images and, because language is shared, these identities become public. Other people know that Ryan is the baseball loving boy from New Jersey. Like the mirror and the Biami, words allow Ryan to understand how other people see him. This is how the self is a social creation. Not only does I now understand my self through language, I understand myself through particular linguistic identities. The former frames my cognition; the latter frames my ego.

And this is also how language irrevocably shapes us. For once we see things as being a certain way, it becomes really difficult to see them any differently. This actually occurs with all the concepts we use to describe the world. As we take in images of our surroundings, we begin perceiving the world relative to our expectations. As an example of this, consider the illustration below. If you haven't seen it before, it may seem indecipherable, just a random set of scratch marks. But take a look and see if you can discern an image.



If you still can't, let me give you a clue: it's a picture of a cow. The cow's head is on the left half of the picture, the two large dark spots are its ears, and the large black spot at the bottom is its snout. Its torso tracks right across the page. If you still can't see the cow, then look at the picture at the end of this chapter then come back and look at this image again. Hopefully now you can see the cow.

But here's the funny thing, once you see the cow in the picture, your perception of the image is permanently changed. Now you can't encounter the image *without* seeing the cow. The image is now stuck and you can't go back to seeing the jumbled picture you saw before.

An analogous process happens with language and our self image. Once we adopt an identity, we begin to see it as intrinsic to our selves. Once the Biami saw themselves in the mirror, their self image could never go back to how it was. They now irrevocably viewed themselves as others did. This happens with all our identities. They are sticky. Once we see ourselves in certain ways, it becomes very difficult to see ourselves as otherwise. This is why insults can be so painful. Someone calls us ugly or stupid and it adheres itself to us.

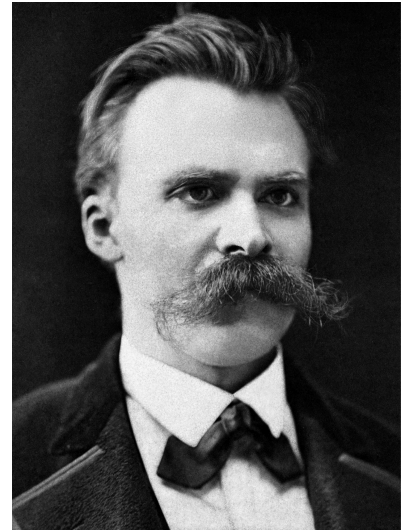
This highlights the biggest side effect of our identities—they make us feel particular ways. Language doesn't merely describes things, it also *ascribes* qualities. No matter how we think of ourselves, all our attributes inevitably make us feel some way. Sometimes that identity will feel great, and sometimes it will feel lousy. And this comes from the other byproducts of human language: politics and morality.

## BEING GOOD

Are you a good person? The answer, of course, depends on how you define good. Most people like to think of themselves as good, or at least try to be that way. This usually means helping others and not being selfish, mean, or destructive. "Good" people live by values and principles and will sometimes sacrifice themselves for others. These propositions are so ingrained in us as to seem self-evident. This was definitely the case for me. When I was young, I never really pondered what being good was — it just seemed like an unquestionable truth. Then I read the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and, like many people, I've never thought about morality the same way again.

Nietzsche is widely quoted and often misunderstood, so we always need to approach him with a bit of caution. He is a challenging philosopher who offers a lot of transgressive ideas about equality and justice. But he is also a brilliantly provocative writer. To fully appreciate

Nietzsche, it's helpful to see him in his context. Most philosophers of his day thought morality was either something handed down by God or something that evolved naturally within us. Few really questioned the worthiness of their values, they just assumed that the "good" was either just intrinsically moral or based in some natural order.



Nietzsche saw this differently. In his view, morality was not an immutable truth but something that reflected social power. Morality is a tool that certain people use to assert their will on others. Nietzsche's most provocative claim was that our idea of good (i.e., selflessness) is not a natural inclination nor even a sound idea. Rather, it is a relatively recent notion, something that came from the politics of western Christendom.

To illustrate his point, Nietzsche traced changes in the literal meaning of terms like good and bad over time. In its earliest incarnations, "good," in most western languages, was a term that meant noble or aristocratic. It was good in the way we might describe a good horse or a good sword: it connoted strength, power, and majesty. And this was because good was a moral term the ruling classes used to describe and differentiate themselves. "Bad," by contrast, usually meant things like common, weak, or incapable. Bad was all the things that were not part of the aristocracy, so it was a term meant to describe ordinary people or things that were dysfunctional.

But over time this began to change. In languages like German and Greek, the definitions of good and bad got inverted. Things that once meant "bad" (meek, selfless, humble) came to be defined as moral; traits that used to be considered "good" (power, dominance, exerting one's will) came to be known as immoral.

A good illustration of this is to compare an ancient story, the *Illiad*, with a later one, the *New Testament*. The heroes of the *Illiad*, Achilles, Hector, and Odysseus, are brutal killers. They have few compunctions about murder, rape, and theft, particularly when it comes to



enemies. They are “good” simply by virtue of their martial prowess, craftiness, and strength. Jesus of Nazareth, by contrast, is heroic in his gentleness. He willingly allows his own crucifixion, offering himself up to death in order to redeem the sins of his followers. His goodness comes from self-sacrifice and the forgiveness of his tormentors, not from his self-assertion.

Nietzsche believed this type of moral shift arises from the political maneuvers of the “priestly classes,” those groups that have knowledge but no power. Without physical strength, their only way of fighting against the coercive might of their warrior overlords was to demonize the very traits that these overlords used to rule the masses. These “priests” (Nietzsche uses the term loosely) connived to replace a “noble morality” (where goodness was equated with physical prowess) with a “slave morality” (where goodness meant meekness and subjugation). In Europe, this took the form of a Judeo-Christian ethic. Early Christians fought against the Roman Empire with phrases like “Humble yourself before God” or “Only the meek shall inherit the Earth.” Christianity was initially a weapon of the weak and a very effective one at that.

We see this type of maneuvering in contemporary American politics, where groups of all ideological stripes claim some moral high ground based on their victimization. This is actually a common strategy in any kind of political struggle: the weaker party always wants to expand the scope of conflict to bring others in and improve their odds. And moral claims are a key way to do this. Say, for example, you are fighting with someone who has more money, power, popular support, or standing than you do. Your best option is to try and reframe the contest. You try to enlist allies but attacking the very things that give your opponent an advantage. At the same time, your weakness or victimization becomes an enabling trait, something that entitles you to make unquestionable assertions.

Nietzsche also thought this type of moral shape-shifting was corrosive to our character. By adopting this “slave morality” as an absolute moral truth, we stifled our inborn potential. As he says, “Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying ‘yes’ to itself, slave morality says ‘no’ on principle to everything that is ‘outside,’ ‘other,’ and ‘non-self.’” In other words, our current morality, our deepest notions of what we consider good, is treacherously

self-abnegating.

This is a really uncomfortable claim and it is easy to misinterpret. It also doesn't help that so many reactionary propagandists invoke Nietzsche to justify their racism or authoritarianism. So it's not surprising that so many people scorn Nietzsche as an apologist for sociopaths. However, Nietzsche was neither a Nazi nor a monster. His writings are far more subtle and complicated than that. Nietzsche raises difficult and important questions for us about where, exactly, our moral systems come from and what they do to us. And in tracing the genealogy of words like good and bad, Nietzsche was one of the first thinkers to consider how language shapes the self.

To see this, let us go back in time to our earliest hominid ancestor. Although we don't know exactly what this species was like, it probably resembled a modern chimpanzee.<sup>3</sup> If we look at chimpanzees today as a guide, we could make some reasonable assumptions about how this ancestor lived. It probably gathered in small bands of about 20 to 30 individuals who kept together with a complicated set of political maneuvers. At the top of the troupe were the Alphas. They bullied everyone to get first dibs on food, sex, or whatever else they wanted.

Then came the Betas. They jockeyed amongst each other for ever diminishing scraps, the further they fell down the pecking order. Sometimes they'd suck up to Alphas by grooming them or supporting them in alliances. Sometimes they might support the efforts of a rival Beta to overthrow an Alpha. But all of this was done through episodic gestures of physical coercion and violence. There were no morals to regulate their actions, no standards of behavior to restrain them. Like modern chimpanzees, our early ancestors probably behaved as the moment allowed.

Language changed all of this. First off, words empowered members of the troupe to start monitoring each other. For once we humans could start talking, we could also keep track of what other people were doing, even when they were not around. We could start gossiping

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<sup>3</sup> Yes I know the bonobos, the close cousins of chimpanzees, have a very different social structure than other primates, but they are really the exception that proves the rule. For the vast majority of vertebrates, it is males who fight each other over breeding prerogatives.

about others, telling stories about the various heroic or nefarious things they did. With language, people started gaining reputations. Some were now trustworthy, some were treacherous, and this was important. We could now make better guesses if someone else might make a good ally or a dangerous foe. We could also undermine each other with lies and misinformation. We could spread rumors and make accusations.

With language, our ancestor's politics shifted from purely brutish to something far more Machiavellian. The strong were not merely the ones who could bully everyone else, they were the ones who could manipulate reputations. If Nietzsche was right about the importance of language for shaping morality, he was probably mistaken about the time frame. Language has always been creating new sources of power.

This is because of something else language does: it allows us to start make rules. Without words, it is impossible to establish laws or even many customs. Sure we may learn things from witnessing our brethren's misfortunes or triumphs first hand. But all of these experiences are episodic and have to be conveyed one-on-one. Language allows individual lessons to be generalized and eventually unquestioned.

For example, someone might tell the tribe "hey I got a bad rash from that red plant over there." Someone else might then deduce, "hey we should probably stay away from all red plants." Over time this may get translated into a commandment: "Thou shalt not touch red plants!" Generations later, people in the tribe know that it is forbidden to touch red plants without really knowing why. Avoiding red plants is just something their tribe does and nobody really disputes this until some free thinker comes along and wonders, "hey but what about those yummy looking apples?" This is how morality evolves and changes.

Although humans make moral judgments about seemingly everything, most codes revolve around the key aspects of survival: food, sex, and security. All human cultures have some kind of food regulations and usually these focus on protecting resources. For example, the Hindu ban on eating beef probably evolved as a way to maintain cows as a source for plowing and fertilization. Similarly, all human cultures have moral codes about death. These death rules range from prohibitions on murder to elaborate rituals for dealing with corpses.

But amongst all rules, the most far reaching ones usually involve sex. And this is because sex is one of our most complicated resources. The problem with sex is two fold. On the one hand, in nearly all traditional cultures, children are seen as valuable assets. Kids not only are an important source of labor, but can also help defend the tribe from outside threats and, through marriage, build alliances with other tribes. On the other hand, not everyone gets to have children. Like many species, we humans have big asymmetries in reproduction: males can potentially impregnate hundreds of women while most females can only have about 15 pregnancies. This makes female reproduction a scarce resource and, like any scarce resource, it is in high demand. It also makes the competition amongst males for these reproductive opportunities really fierce. It also incentivizes females to be more selective in who they mate with.

Our primate cousins usually regulated this “reproductive economy” through status and violence. The social organization of chimpanzees and gorillas males is organized around the physical strength of dominant males. These alphas basically try to monopolize all the sex for themselves by physically subjugating all other members of the troupe, although primatologists note that those crafty Betas are often sneaking sex on the side. Nevertheless, across most simian species, alpha males tend to fiercely protect their reproductive prerogatives — they ruthlessly patrol their borders and carefully monitor their subordinate to make sure that have prime access to females in estrus. And it’s likely that a similar situation occurred with our hominid ancestors.<sup>4</sup>

However, when language displaced physical power as the basis for social order, a sexual resource crisis was created. Consider the following scenario. A band of betas conspire amongst themselves to depose the tyrannical alpha. They come together and drive him away or kill him. But the fall of the alpha creates a political vacuum. For who gets to decide how the sex gets divided when the dictator is gone?

The answer was morality. All human societies have some regulations regarding sex, usually

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<sup>4</sup> This claim is usually based on the physical asymmetries between males and females. In any species where males are much larger, it is typically because males dominate mating opportunities with females. The large size reflects selection pressures and competition amongst males. Species with greater symmetries tend to have more pair-bonding types of reproduction or less over competition for breeding.

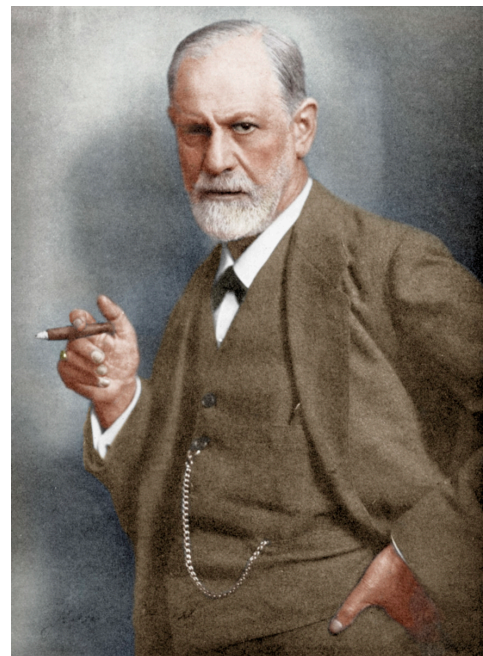
enforcing incest taboos, virginity protections, and severe prohibitions against adultery. These rules usually come at the expense of poor males and female autonomy. Historically, most human cultures were polygamous, with rich or powerful males claiming several “wives” and using their moral codes to protect their sexual prerogatives. And sex is something widely policed. Visit any traditional society and you’ll witness a lot of social monitoring around sexual behavior. We can also see this in ourselves: our strong appetite for sex-related gossip also suggests that we have a natural inclination to track each other’s peccadilloes.

But the sex police can only go so far. Sexuality is one of the strongest forces in nature—it is at the essence of the life force. No one can monitor their neighbors all the time, that would be too time consuming. At some point, sexual morality will only work when humans begin to regulate themselves. Now the interesting question is how this came to be and one of the first people to propose a good answer was Sigmund Freud.

## SELF POLICING

Like Nietzsche, Freud merits an introduction. Few thinkers have shaped modern culture as much as Freud, and few are as widely caricatured.

Most people see Freud as a slightly ridiculous figure with a Germanic accent asking them to talk about their mothers. Granted, such misgivings are not entirely unfounded. Many of Freud’s ideas (penis envy, repressed memories, and the Oedipal complex) haven’t held up well over time. Critics often see him as less the scientist he claimed to be and more the fabricator of a circular and self-justifying mythology. But to dismiss Freud for his mistakes or the messianic quality of his follows is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Freud was a bold, creative, and experimental thinker and his explorations into the unconscious mind were



pathbreaking. For all that he got wrong, there is also much he got right.

Perhaps Freud's greatest insight was into the mystery of how the mind controls itself. Prior to Freud, the human mind was a black box. Nobody really knew how even basic human psychology functioned. Most philosophers (psychologists didn't really exist until the late 19th century) equated the mind with conscious thought. This view had strong moral implications. If our minds were basically what we think, then how we act should be entirely under our conscious control. Yes there were the feeble and insane, but these people were seen as suffering from sicknesses or demonic possession. Barring this, all of our behaviors were understood to be the result of our deliberate choices. The conscious mind was supposed to be in full control. Any deviance was thus a sign of weakness, immorality, or depravity.

Freud fundamentally changed our thinking about this. He argued that our thoughts and behaviors actually arose from the unconscious parts of the psyche. Our deliberate, conscious mind—the part of our selves that we identify as being “me”—was only a small part of our mental process and a relatively weak one at that. Freud got us to understand that we aren't really who we think we are and that there is a lot more to our psychology than what is visible in thought. Most of the mind is something that occurs below the surface of consciousness. This was a revolutionary insight and western culture has never been the same since.

Freud described all of this with a three-part model. At the mind's core was the “id,” a torrential wellspring of sexual desire, aggression, and other feral impulses. These urges were key to our survival as animals and they exert themselves upon us with terrific force. To keep these impulses in check, the mind generates a deliberate, conscious manager. This is what Freud called the “ego.” It was our sense of self, the suite of identities that we use to negotiate with the world. In Freud's view, the ego is continually trying to reconcile between the demands of the id (the “pleasure principle”) and the outside world (the “reality principle”). Our egos basically exist to help us navigate through our surroundings and to accommodate our drives as best it can.

I like to think of the “id” like a rock band from the 1970s and the ego like their manager. The band wants to express itself, do lots of drugs, destroy hotel rooms, and not deal with any hassles from the world. The manager has to deal with his unruly clients, steer them to their next venue, keep them out of jail, and prevent them from overdosing, by only using pleas, cajoling, and various tricks of negotiation. This metaphor also illustrates the ego’s problem: it is simply too weak to control the id. And because our id’s desires are incompatible with polite society, this weakness threatens to bring the whole thing crashing down.

Our minds solved this existential crisis with a bit of psychic jujitsu. Freud speculated that, during childhood, the mind began to take all the id’s powerful, aggressive impulses and redirect them against itself. Freud called this redirection the “super-ego.” We commonly know it as our conscience. It was the part of our minds that polices our thoughts and desires. But rather than being a hapless angel on one shoulder, the superego is the fierce enforcer of the ego, relentlessly punishing us for our own natural impulses. It keeps us in check, making us conform to the values of our culture.

In Freud’s view, the superego was also civilization’s curse. Prior to homo sapiens, animals didn’t really police themselves. They simply acted according to competing impulses, all of which were determined by their immediate surroundings. A beta chimpanzee might want to mate with a female in estrus, but fear of the nearby alpha keeps his desire in check. Civilization forced this to change. Our behaviors were no longer shaped solely by circumstance but by abstract rules. We could no longer shit wherever we wanted or beat someone up simply because we felt like it. We now had to control our impulses, even if no one else was around.

We did this by basically going to war with our selves. To uphold the values of our culture, we would have to continually beat our selves down, relentlessly pushing back against our own desires. Civilization armed us with new psychological weapons, feelings like anxiety, guilt, shame and self-hatred. And we continually use these feelings to keep ourselves under control. According to Freud, the price of a well-ordered society is the perpetual discontentment of its members.

Although we might quibble with the details of Freud's argument, his realization that we police ourselves through feelings of anxiety and guilt are pretty undeniable. For who among us doesn't harbor any remorse for past mistakes? Who doesn't sometimes worry about whether they are a good enough person? Freud's greatest insight was that the mind internalizes the rules of its society, incorporating them into the very fabric of the psyche. As we grow from infants, our parents and caretakers impart lessons upon us. We learn to hold in our poop, to keep ourselves clean, to not steal or hit others, to basically restrain our animalistic impulses. These rules become essential to who we are and we act on them without question. Freud believed that most of this occurs beneath the surface of conscious awareness. Civilization tricks us into regulating ourselves without even being aware that we are doing this.

In hindsight, it is clear that all of this comes from language. Language not only allows us to make rules, laws, and commandments, it forces us to order our selves in accordance with these strictures. Language is what makes guilt, anxiety, and self-loathing possible. This is because of what language does — it creates an abstract symbol out of our selves. As Mead recognized, language allows us to view and judge ourselves from a distance. And, as Nietzsche noted, these judgements get framed by our moral lexicon. Words not only tell me that stealing is bad or sex before marriage is a sin, but that I'm bad for even wanting these things. The "me" which feels the urge to steal that donut or sleep with my roommate's boyfriend, is now a "bad" person for even having such desires. And, as with anything that is bad, these sinful parts of "me" become the subject of scorn and disgust. Language thus gives us the means to hate ourselves.

It doesn't stop there, for language does something else to our moral sentiments — it extends our selves in time. As I noted in Chapter 2, the animal self is regulated by time in that animals have memory. But these memories are mostly unconscious. Animal memories are mostly operant conditioning. My dog runs to the kitchen when he hears the can opener not because he remembers that dinner time is at 5 o'clock but because he unconsciously associates the sound of cranking with food.

But most of the time, animals exist in the present. They may feel fear, playfulness, or



aggression, but they only feel these things relative to what is around them. Animals in the wild don't worry about the future, or at least anything beyond a one or two minute time horizon. This is because they have no way of picturing time. Similarly, animals don't feel bad about the past — they have no means of evoking memories in a way that puts them in previous eras.

Language changed this. With words, we began to actively imagine ourselves in temporal dimensions. We can evoke memories of the past, place ourselves in those previous moments, and punish ourselves for former misdeeds (or revel in former glories).

Conversely, language also lets us project ourselves into the future. We can use words to imagine all kinds of terrible outcomes, stoking up fears into perpetual moods of anxiety. In short, language allows us to project ourselves both forward and backwards in time, it also creates emotions that exist in temporal space.

But our time-traveling self is entirely an imaginary one. It doesn't really exist outside of our heads. Nevertheless, it still carries an emotional potency. We often spend much our present time in emotional anguish about things that happened long ago or about concerns for future events which may never materialize.

I'll share a personal example of this. When I was ten years old, I was terribly jealous that my friend Clay got an electronic football game for Christmas. It was a simple, crude device by today's standards but at the time we were obsessed with it. One day, after playing at his house, I stole it. Once I got home, I felt so terrible about what I had done, I threw the game away. Clay never confronted me about this nor did I confess, but our friendship was never the same afterwards. And here's the weird thing, years afterwards I continue to feel really horrible about my impulsive theft. Whenever I looked back on that event, a terrible sensation of self loathing still grips me. Part of me is still stuck in a moment that existed over forty-five years ago. In these times, my self is continuing to berate me for something I did long ago.

And this, ultimately, is how language domesticates us. It wasn't simply that language selected on the most docile members of our species, it is that it tamed the most feral parts of

ourselves. Language made morality our master. It controls and dominates us in ways to which we are largely oblivious. It draws us into emotional states that arise from entirely imaginary circumstances. It propels our conscious thoughts into a perpetual seesaw of past remembrances and future woes. And, according to both Nietzsche and Freud, it condemns us to a lifetime of unease. This, ultimately, is why life often feels so unsatisfying — it is the price of living in a clean and well-ordered society.

### THE UPSIDE OF DOMESTICATION

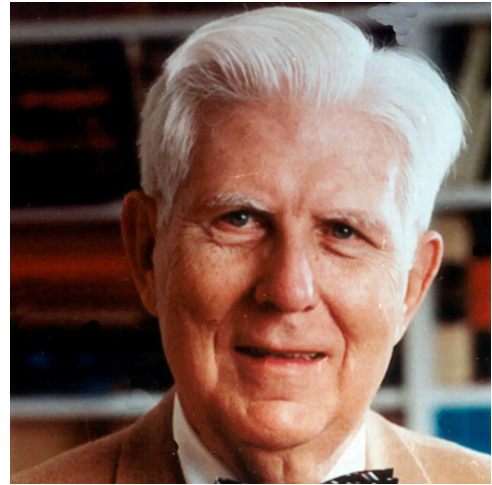
Well that's depressing. It's really hard to read Freud or Nietzsche without a lingering feeling of despondency. For here are two of modernity's greatest thinkers, telling us that the self we inhabit is a cursed one. When our ancestors were animals, their world was dominated by coercion and chaos, but they existed in a self that was true to its own nature. Language domesticated us and freed us from the arbitrary violence of social hierarchies, but it didn't necessarily make human existence any better. Our rules, morals, and laws cost us our souls. And the more we tried to improve our society, the more imbalanced the Order and Vitality within our selves becomes.

But in hindsight, perhaps Freud and Nietzsche were too pessimistic. In the time since they wrote, psychology has greatly matured as a field of science and, with this, a much more hopeful perspective has emerged. Psychologists have found many new ways to help us find better balance between Order and Vitality. One of the most effective techniques has been Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). What's distinctive about CBT is not simply that it has proven remarkably effective for helping people resolve chronic feelings of guilt, anxiety and depression, but that it relies on language as the primary means of helping us reorder our selves. Language, it turns out, is not simply the jailer of our psyche, it can also be our liberator as well.

CBT traces its roots all the way back to the stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and the yogic practices of Hindu India. But in the west, it was really advanced with the pathbreaking work of American psychologist Aaron Beck in the 1960s. Beck's idea was pretty straight-

forward. He thought that much of the suffering within our minds occurs because our thoughts get caught in distorted, habitual patterns.

Say, for example, you get passed over for a promotion at work. This makes you feel bad and you start thinking, “well, maybe I’m just not good enough.” So you try less hard at your job, your performance sags, and you don’t even try for a promotion the next time one is open. Your negative thoughts become a self-fulfilling prophesy. Beck believed that through



deliberate and mindful actions, we could correct these negative thought patterns. We could redraw our cognitive maps of the world and our place in it; we could become the makers of our own self processes and live better as a result.

If this sounds familiar, it’s because Beck’s insights are echoed in scores of popular self-help books. From Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* to Gary John Bishop’s more contemporary *Unf\*ck Yourself*, the message across these books is roughly the same: you have the power to intentionally reorder your self and your relationship to others. As best selling author and therapist Wayne Dyer writes in *You’ll See It When You Believe It*, “you can make your most impossible dreams come true, turn obstacles into opportunity, rid yourself of guilt and inner turmoil, and spend every day doing things you love.”

The key lies in the words and identities that frame our self conceptions. By adopting new storylines about ourselves, we can disrupt habitual patterns that keep us trapped in negative emotional states. With CBT, this is done with the assistance of a therapist; with the popular self help books, it is usually accomplished with some peppy aphorisms, inspirational stories, or self-guided exercises.

In psychology, the general principle behind all of this is called self-efficacy. It is the idea that we can achieve our life goals if we have the proper mindset. Too often we languish in self doubt, unable to get the things we want (a better job, nurturing relationships, a fuller life)

because we don't believe in our own abilities. The theory of self-efficacy is that we have the power to change all of this. By intentionally confronting our self-doubts and replacing them with more positive, affirming statements, we can actually motivate and empower ourselves.

Or at least this is the theory. In practice, this is often more challenging. Part of the problem simply comes in the scale of the task at hand. Our negative self-conceptions are often deeply baked within us. Many of them come from times in our early childhood that we can no longer remember. Just as we probably can't recall when we learned the words for many things, it is often hard to remember when we started feeling good or bad about ourselves. Like our language, our identities are ingrained into our minds. Our self concepts are a central way our selves make Order and like any type of habit, it takes a lot of effort to unlearn them.

This is why self help books are usually only effective in the short run. They are a lot like diet books (which is also why they are in the same section of the bookstore). Yes, you can read this inspiring book and feel better/lose weight in the short run. But keeping that positive self-image is akin to keeping the weight off. Inevitably, most of us will regress back to the weight or self image we had before. Like dieting, changing your self-efficacy is something really hard to sustain. That's probably also why self-help books, like diet books, tend to come in faddish waves. They are only temporarily successful.

This is also why CBT (or similar approaches) are so much more effective when one works with a therapist. Here again, it's analogous to getting a personal trainer. You can try to lose weight on your own, but if you want to get drop pounds, it helps enormously to have someone else pushing you beyond your normal boundaries. The same goes with self-efficacy. You can draw upon self help books and they may be useful, but if you really want to get at some challenging and unhealthy habits, having a trained professional help you is invaluable.

But even the best therapist cannot do this alone. Self-efficacy can only work if you have some knowledge of your self to begin with. This is what I call the Stuart Smalley Problem. Stuart Smalley was Al Franken's character on Saturday Night Live during the 1990s. A

caricature of self-help and support group devotees, Stuart constantly tried to buttress his own feeble self-image by repeating the daily affirmation of “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and doggone it, people like me.” Yet despite his steady stream of catchphrases (“That’s just stinkin’ thinkin!”), he never gets to the real source of his problems. In other words, without seeing the wellspring of our anxiety, guilt, or self-loathing, simply trying to talk ourselves into feeling better will only go so far.

Genuine transformation thus requires something far more profound: real self understanding. Shedding our negative identities requires us to figure out how and why we are holding on to those self images in the first place. Transcending guilt and anxiety means seeing where these feelings originate. Finding our more authentic selves means seeing how the self fabricates its own reality. And the way we do all of this is by delving a little deeper into what makes our own conscious experience. So let us turn now to what shapes your own self awareness. We’ll take this up with our next big question: what are your dreams telling you?

Oh and here is the picture of the cow if you didn’t see it above.

