



PRACTICES OF  
SELFHOOD

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

REIN RAUD



# Practices of Selfhood



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Zygmunt Bauman &  
Rein Raud

polity

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# Preface

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We first conceived the idea of this book during a winter school at Tallinn University, where Zygmunt was the keynote speaker and Rein one of the heads of the programme committee. One of the events of that school was a discussion between us, open to the public, on many topics touched also in this book. The hour allocated to that conversation was, of course, far from sufficient and thus it continued over dinner and then migrated into our correspondence, soon taking on a more structured shape and organizing all the ideas that have been intriguing both of us along a central core, a concept that we believe to be of fundamental importance to any discussion of the present world – that of selfhood.

How does an individual understand her or his position in the world? Are we determined by our genetic heritage, social circumstances and cultural preferences – and only tricked into believing that we make our own choices? By whom? Other individuals who have been determined similarly? Or are we autonomous – wholly or partly – and, if so, then to what degree? Are we or are we not autonomous enough to control and change the legacy fate has landed us with? How does selfhood emerge? Does it follow the same pattern of development in all people, all cultures, all ages? Or is it itself a socio-cultural construction that should be viewed in its historical context? If so, then what is happening right now – are the patterns of selfhood changing in the present world? Does

contemporary technology allow us more autonomy – or does it tempt us to give up the freedoms we have?

A host of questions... All the dilemmas from which they arise could be plotted on the same axis – one end of which is designated by fate and determination and the other by choice and freedom. Notwithstanding the huge library of social and psychological studies these questions have inspired and continue to inspire, very few of them, if any, evoke obvious (and above all reliable, let alone definitive) answers. Possibly with good reason – some questions are important precisely for the ongoing dialogue they generate. All the same, fundamental as they are ‘to any discussion of the present world’ and also to awareness of the place in the world assigned to or earned by its inhabitants as well as their ability (or its lack) to change their lot, people struggling with their environment yearn for precisely such answers. This is why we felt the need to revisit the theories of self on offer in various places and cultural traditions, surveying their encouraging and disappointing potentials, and occasionally to pinpoint some insufficiently explored tracts or to suggest – even if tentatively – some new and as yet untrodden paths worth following. Needless to say, all the time we remained aware that final, definite, foolproof answers are utterly unlikely to be found or composed; and that the main cause of their evasiveness lies not so much in the (temporary and reparable) insufficiency of our knowledge as in the nature of the world we inhabit – as well as our human, all too human, mode of inhabiting it.

To put it in a nutshell: popular wisdom insists that to know means to control, oblivious to the fact that the controlling power of knowledge depends on its ability to predict with certainty the effects of our actions; the snag, though, is that our world is anything but certain. For better or worse, uncertainty is our fate: for worse, because uncertainty is an un-drying fount of our misery, and for better, because it is also the prime cause of our glory – of human inventiveness, creativity, and our capacity of transcending one by one the limits it sets to human potential.

One way to look at the situation is suggested to us by the studies of Nobel Prize holder Ilya Prigogine, a great natural scientist as well as a philosopher of science. The gist of his message is best conveyed in his reminder that ‘Obviously when fish came to earth not all fish came to earth. When monkeys became human, not all monkeys became human’ (2003: 64). This, in optimally condensed

form, summarizes the worldview prompted by ‘the end of certainty’ and its consequences for modern science.

‘Classical science emphasized order and stability; now, in contrast, we see fluctuation, instability, multiple choices, and limited predictability at all levels of observation’ (Prigogine 1997: 4). According to classical science, probabilities were ‘states of [ignorant or insufficiently informed] mind rather than states of the world’. However, ‘once probabilities are included in the formulation of the basic laws of physics, the future is no longer determined by the present’ (1997: 6); accordingly, science itself can no longer claim absolute certainty, nor can probability be identified with ignorance (1997: 7). ‘The future is no longer given’, Prigogine concludes; ‘Our world is a world of continuous “construction” ruled by probabilistic laws and no longer a kind of automaton. We are led from a world of “being” to a world of “becoming”’ (2003: 39). In other words: for most practical intents and purposes, the condition of ‘uncertainty’ has been shifted from the realm of epistemology (the study of cognition) to that of ontology (the study of being).

And, to cut a long story short: we now know, understand and believe that the non-attainability of certainty, as well as the impossibility of predicting the future other than in probability terms is not an effect of the dearth of knowledge, but of the excessive, principally unlimited, complexity of the universe. The history of humans as much as the history of universe needs to be retold in terms of ‘events’ – something not-inevitable, underdetermined; something that might but also might not happen. Let us repeat what needs to be recognized, reconciled to, and permanently kept in our minds: history is *not* given before it turns into the present (that means, reaching the moment of its recycling into the past); it is instead, as Prigogine insists, ‘under perpetual construction’ – as much as the history of any individual, namely ‘biography’.

The bold – or rather, arrogant – conviction of Pierre-Simon de Laplace that ‘once we know the initial conditions, we can calculate all subsequent states as well as the preceding ones’ (Prigogine 1997: 11), can no longer be sustained – and this applies as much to the states of the universe as to the states of individual humans. As for the latter, Prigogine (1997: 186) cites an unpublished manuscript of Carl Rubino – ‘For human men and women, for us, immutability, freedom from change, total security, immunity from life’s maddening ups and downs, will come only when we depart

this life, by dying, or becoming gods.’ And comments: ‘Odysseus is fortunate enough to be given the choice between immortality, by remaining forever the lover of Calypso, and a return to humanity and ultimately old age and death. In the end, he chooses time over eternity, human fate over the fate of the gods.’ Jorge Luis Borges, an exquisitely sublime practitioner and theorist of *belles lettres* as well as one of the greatest philosophers of the human condition, serenely accepts the consequences of such a choice: ‘Time is the substance of which I am made. Time is a river that sweeps me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that mangles me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire. The world, unfortunately, is real; I, unfortunately, am Borges’ (1999: 332).

What are the implications of Prigogine’s scientific insights and Borges’ eloquent statements on the human condition? Is it at all possible to speak with sense about something called ‘selfhood’ in a world where certainty, too, has been demystified? Where and when we no longer consider strict frameworks and streamlined processes the primary structural model for explaining anything? Perhaps it is indeed hopeless to proceed from a holistic vision of the human self to its particular manifestations in social and cultural practice. In any case, that is the assumption that has prompted us to move our conversation from topic to topic, from aspect to aspect, and to try to see how selfhood is brought together and taken apart in social practice, through language, through efforts of self-presentation, through programmatic attempts of self-realization – as well as, last but not least, through interaction with other selves.

Spelling out and trying to unpack the contents of the quandaries listed above have sometimes kept both of us up to the wee hours and checking emails first thing in the morning. Both reassurances and provocations have made us rethink our positions and prove, not only to each other but also to ourselves, that things we have considered obvious are indeed so – and sometimes discover that they are not. But this is what such dialogues are for. Presenting them to you, our readers, we hope that you enjoy them as much as we have enjoyed composing them.

Zygmunt Bauman  
Rein Raud

# 1

## Starting Out

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**Rein Raud** In a sense, it could perhaps be said that the history of modernity is also a history of a certain type of self: the basically rational individual, the singular person in control of and answerable for her/his actions, capable of associating her-/himself with, or disassociating her-/himself from, larger communities and causes. But, for most of the time, modernity has also cherished a view of truth we might call scientific – that there must necessarily be a single, universal and objective truth out there – and therefore this view of human selfhood, too, has presented a claim to universality, a claim to characterize the way how people are and have been everywhere and throughout history. The variability of the idea of the self through time and between cultures of different types is a topic I'd like to come back to at a later moment. For now, could we perhaps try to diagnose the position of the self in the present world? Since Freud and Nietzsche, Western thought has also come a long way in abandoning the idea of a single, indivisible, self-contained and self-controlled individual. At least in theory. In our social practice, the view of what we are still seems to conform to a rather more simplistic concept of the individual as a political, economic and cultural subject. The word 'crisis' has obviously gone through a rather steep inflation, so I'm not going to talk about a 'crisis' of selfhood. But, at the same time, it still seems quite clear that under the circumstances of 'liquid modernity', to use your term, this inherited view of selfhood is no longer either adequate or functional.

**Zygmunt Bauman** No disagreement here: indeed, the ‘history of modernity’ is also a history of ‘a certain type of self’. But what kind of self? Or, rather, of what kind of its ‘existential modality’? It is, in my view, the latter that changed radically with the advent of modernity.

I’d suggest that its modality underwent three seminal alterations, or in other words acquired three new, essentially modern, qualities. First, it became an object of attention, scrutiny and contemplation. Second, it has been set apart, as a subject, from the rest of perceived entities, which by the same token were cast as its objects. Third, it has simultaneously been promoted to the status of the primary, privileged object of that newly construed subject. Let us note that all those three properties, defining between themselves the ‘modern self’, were brought together and blended in Pico della Mirandola’s 1486 manifesto recorded under the trail-blazing title of the ‘Oration on the Dignity of Man’ and destined to turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The ‘dignity’ in that title has been unpacked in the ‘Oration’ as a status bringing to mind a sort of remarkable – and thoroughly unique – ‘three in one, one in three’ merger/union of a violinist, a violin, and the recipient and judge of the quality of pleasurable sounds which the violinist extracts from the violin.

The first new (modern) quality was, to deploy Martin Heidegger’s distinction, a result of recasting the ‘self’ from the modality of *Zuhanden* into that of *Vorhanden*; from something given, too obvious to be paid any attention, indeed ‘hidden in the light’ of its obviousness, unnoticed and unproblematic – into a task: a challenge calling for close examination and needing to be studied in depth in order to be fully comprehended, tackled, dealt with, acted upon, revised, improved on; in short, as thoroughly and perpetually, endemically, problematic.

The second new quality found its seminal articulation in the Cartesian duo of subject and object. As a sensing, thinking, designing and acting subject, the ‘self’ transforms the rest of the world into an aggregate of passive objects of its sensations, thoughts, designs and actions. Descartes’ *cogito* was more, much more than a short shrift to neo-Pyrrhonians, a declaration of self-confidence as well a legitimation of the self’s truth-seeking ambitions; in a somewhat oblique yet no less resolute way, it was also an act of self’s coronation: of perching the self at the peak of creation,

endowed with the double prerogative of the supreme tribunal and the legislator-in-chief of truth – not only an artist capable of painting a faithful likeness of the world, but potentially also the chief engineer of the world whose truth is sought, explored and decreed. The *cogito* was calculated to lift the ‘self’ from its existential uncertainty, placate its existential anxiety, and to reverse the relation of mastery and dependence between the self as cognizing subject and the world, the object of its cognition.

The third novelty is the duty of the self’s self-concern, self-creation, self-scrutiny and self-control. The subject itself has joined the ranks of the objects of the self’s cognitive zeal, care and creative intervention. The supreme maker of things doubles in the role of the primary object of its making/remaking concerns. Socrates astonished, puzzled, nonplussed and embarrassed his fellow Athenians when suggesting that they ought to take care of their πνεύμα (pneuma). They found this demand oxymoronic – but that contradiction in terms turned in the modern era into a no longer questioned life truth.

It was Cicero who coined, metaphorically, the concept of *cultura animi*. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century his idea was resurrected in France and, alongside English ‘refinement’ and German *Bildung*, entered into the core, canonical vocabulary of modern discourse, fast losing the memory of its metaphorical origins. What that concept conveyed was the message of the incompleteness of nature’s work: humans are not *born* human, but *made* – in the incessant self-formation, self-assertion and self-improvement effort – all of them guided, directed, aided and abetted by the human community which they entered at birth.

**RR** I’d like to add a fourth characteristic to the status of the modern self – its relation to time. The medieval self had had to project itself against the background of eternity, as it were, and to be guided by considerations about the fate of the immortal soul. The modern self, while not immediately abandoning these concerns, still started to operate with a totally different timeframe. Perhaps we can say this happened as if in a film, when the focus shifts from the background to the hazy object in the foreground, and we start to see it clearly, but the background fades. Or, to use another, maybe more appropriate simile: the shutter speed changed. In a medieval painting, which depicts the life of a saint, we find

it perfectly natural to see the same man in different places, because the painting represents his whole lifetime, still a mere moment compared to eternity. Not so in the modern painting from the Renaissance onwards, which is able to catch its actors in a momentary scene. Of course the self became more important if the coordinates that delimited its existence changed from eternity to something shorter, such as the lifespan of a single human being. What happened during that span acquired much more weight. But this also increased individual responsibility, and made the ideal of human dignity possible. Or *Bildung*. The ideal life of the previous period had been emulation, the repetition or enactment of a pre-existing matrix, something akin to Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ* (c.1427) – now, little by little, self-formation became the responsibility of the individual human being, something unrepeatable, totally her own. And it has stayed so to this day, even though the way selves are built has changed. I suppose this is a corollary of the idea of freedom, if we think of freedom as a state that characterizes one's being in society, and not just within one's mind.

**ZB** When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after – as the remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day (Wisdom V. 15.) – the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of space of which I know nothing and which knows nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there, now rather than then. (Pascal 1966: 48)

So complained great Pascal in the name of his contemporaries. And he added: 'Man's greatness comes from knowing he is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched.' 'Knowing, unlike any other living being, that we are mortal – and knowing it from the early moments of our lives', we are bound to live in the shadow of that knowledge. Living in its shadow, being aware of the laughable brevity of the life-span when compared with the eternity of the universe, and of the miserable minuteness of the place to which life will be confined if compared with the infinity of space, means knowing that 'there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then'. 'No reason' equals 'no meaning'. But meaninglessness for a *Homo sapiens* is

an unbearable condition. Human life is therefore an incessant effort to fill the appalling void, to *render life meaningful*; or – alternatively – either to forget life’s existential meaninglessness or to suppress it, to declare it irrelevant, to play it down or to shift it onto a side burner and keep it there for the duration; in a nutshell, to make life-with-awareness-of-one’s-own-mortality bearable – indeed, livable. That incessant effort we call *culture*. ‘Culture’ is another name for that greatness which Pascal spotted in our shared wretchedness.

You are right of course when pointing out that a new relation to time should be added as the fourth characteristic of the modern self – because we, moderns, have found a remedy for the suffering which Pascal lamented. I would even say, to strengthen your point, that seeking such remedies and finding them or deeming to have found them is the modern self’s foremost trait – in as far as designing the ways of making life livable despite the awareness of mortality was, is, and probably will forever remain the main engine of culture and the common thread of its history. Modern ways of tackling that problem are indeed starkly distinct from the pre-modern.

I believe that the Christian solution was the most radical and indeed egalitarian of all alternative suggestions I can think of: according to Christianity, everyone had the prospect of eternity both guaranteed and inescapable (even if only in a spiritual form – as soul, not the body), but whether this immortality of soul would prove to be a blessing or a curse depended on the way the corporeal life was lived. This solution assigned to the brief episode of life-on-earth enormous significance of the only, not-to-be-repeated chance of influencing the *quality* of the eternal duration. (The pressure to do good and to avoid doing evil was in addition formidably strengthened by the concept of a hereditary original sin that set the stakes *a priori* in Hell’s favour – everyone having been born already burdened with guilt; unless great effort was made to outweigh the awesome burden of original sin in the course of the earthly life, the chances of ending up in Hell outweighed those of reaching the Paradise.) The eternal fate of the immortal, indestructible soul could be influenced only during its captivity in the fleshy body – and would be decided there and then, once and for all. Once it lost its bodily carapace, there would be no chance to renegotiate its status and fate.