

MULTIPLE PERSONALITIES AND POSSESSING ENTITIES— ARE THEY REALLY REAL?

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In the summer of 1961, I was a Benedictine monk in St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, studying for ordination as a Roman Catholic priest. That summer I was in charge of the little book store set up for people who came to the Abbey for summer retreats and other events. One of the pamphlets on sale at that book store was *Begone Satan!*, an account of what was up to that point probably the best known and most spectacular case of satanic possession in the history of the United States. (The pamphlet cost 15 cents at the time, but it would set you back the better part of \$100.00 at a rare book store today.) The pamphlet described the possession and exorcism in 1928 of a woman in a small rural town in Iowa. It contains vivid, eye-witness descriptions of how this 40-year-old woman came under the power of the devil and was the centre of extraordinary paranormal occurrences in the process of her exorcism. The exorcist was a Father Theophilus Riesinger, O.M.Cap. (A Capusian monk). When the rite of exorcism began, she was being held down on an iron bed by a number of assisting nuns. As the first words were pronounced, she broke free of their hold and her body was carried high into the air and stuck to the wall above the door of the room. At times her body became horribly distorted (her emaciated frame swelling enormously, with her lips becoming many times their usual size and her head changing shape and colour). On occasion she vomited huge quantities of spaghetti-like material, although she had eaten practically nothing for weeks. This uneducated woman, under the influence of the demon corrected the priest when he misread the Latin words in the ritual of exorcism and showed other signs of having knowledge of things she could not have otherwise known. In the process of the exorcism, the demons who were thrown out included Beelzebub, Lucifer, and Judas. After twenty-three days the exorcism was brought to a successful conclusion.

This account of possession and exorcism was originally written up in a magazine in Germany. It was translated from the German into pamphlet form by a Father Celestine Kapsner, O.S.B., a member of my community. Father Celestine was in charge of the garden, and on occasion, when pulling weeds, I would ask him what he knew about possession. He assured me that such things did happen (in fact he knew the pastor of the parish in which this exorcism had taken place). He had himself seen similar occurrences and been involved in exorcisms. But I have to say to you that I had my doubts. Although I was a monk and about to become a priest, I was really quite a rationalist in my world view, and I could not fit these stories into my way of thinking. It took me some years to change this view, as I will tell you.

In that same summer of 1961, I was also helping out with a pastoral institute that had become an annual tradition at St. John's. Each summer the Abbey invited some of the best known psychiatrists of the country to come and spend a week there and give talks about psychology to workshop groups made up of pastors of all faiths. At that time, American psychiatrists and the American Medical Association was dominated by psychoanalysis, and that was what we were exposed to in those seminars. I was impressed, and the thinking of those men fit in very well with my rationalist turn of thought.



It wasn't until many years later, when I had been practising for some time as a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapist that my thinking began to loosen up. And it was not the Church or religion that forced me to look beyond my rationalism. It was the experiences of my therapy clients which, if I was going to treat them with the serious consideration they deserved, made me look beyond the usual psychological frameworks to get a perspective on what I was hearing.

I had been ordained a priest in 1964 and began practising as a psychotherapist in 1966. By 1969 I had left the monastic life and the priesthood for the secular life of a psychotherapist—and I left it in good standing, so to speak, which was possible in those days of Pope John XXIII. Then in the late 1970's I began working with cases of possession, such as I describe in my book *Multiple Man*, and in the early 1980's I started to see cases of multiple personality—as it was called then.

It was particularly these cases of possession and multiple personality that forced me to stretch my thinking. I could not simply dismiss my clients's experiences as delusions and explain them away in terms of standard psychological models. That approach was totally unsatisfying and—I felt—dishonest. Even if I was left in the uncomfortable position of saying that I did not know precisely what was behind these experiences, I was unwilling to fit them into the Procrustean bed of psychological dogma.

So I have never doubted the reality of these syndromes or the genuineness of the experiences. But I have to say that I have always had questions about the status of the entities involved. I assure myself that one can have these concerns without calling the whole phenomenon into question. The thing that most bothered me about my Catholic religion was the notion that to critically scrutinize the dogmas of the church was a sin—a serious sin. When I left religious life in 1969, I regained my freedom to question, to doubt, to be sceptical, to challenge. I was not about to give them up again as a therapist, in some kind of blind adherence to psychological dogma on the one hand, or new age dogma on the other.

So yes, I have always has serious questions about the status of the personalities of MPD and the spirit entities of possession. And I can tell you right now that my inquiries have led me to conclusions that do not, to my knowledge, coincide with any position that is currently being taken in regard to this matter.

These days, when you work with multiple personality disorder or with spirit possession or harassment, what are you likely to hear from coworkers? In my experience the most frequently asked—or implied—question is: These multiple personalities, these spirit entities—are they really real?

This is a question to which I am not inclined to give a hasty answer. Over the years I have come to respect that fact that nobody asks such a question without a host of assumptions and preconceptions lurking in the background. So before I offer an answer that can be grabbed, chewed up, swallowed, digested, and finally excreted in a form that I barely recognize, I want to see if we can *really* communicate about this matter. So to the question—“Are multiple personalities and spirit entities really real?”—I will not answer Yes or No or even Maybe. I will respond instead: “Let me tell you my thoughts about whether *anything* we say about our subjective experience is really real.” And if at this point my questioner's eyes do not glaze over, I will continue.

To let you know where I am going with this, I would like to call your attention to a group of thinkers who have a very special way of looking at things psychological. If you were to talk to someone from this group, you would see that he thinks about us human beings in terms of how strongly we are affected by the ideas and mores of our society. He believes that our attitudes about life, love, death and everything else is determined by the categories current in our culture. In keeping with this stance,



he sees multiple personalities and possessing entities as creations of our society, developed to deal with the vicissitudes of life. In other words, he sees them as social constructions.

Notice what our social constructionist is *not* saying. Obviously he is not someone who believes that these personalities and spirits are what they claim to be—entities existing in their own right. But neither is he the psychological reductionist, who sees them as complex products of the individual's unconscious, formed to handle an internal conflict.

No, the social constructionist is saying something else, and we have to pay attention to the subtleties of his view. He is saying that the personalities of MPD and the spirits of possession are realities, indeed, but not the kind of realities that they purport to be. Instead they are social realities, formed within a particular culture to satisfy particular needs within that culture. They are, in other words, the product of their times, and while they refer to genuine experiences and are not mere unconscious figments, they can be given no absolute status apart from the peculiar cultural environment which gave birth to them.

Ian Hacking, a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto, has recently written a book called *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personalities and the Sciences of Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Hacking might be numbered among the social constructionists in regard to multiple personality. He puts it this way. He believes that one's culture determines what form a disorder can take and is in turn influenced by the form that disorder does in fact take, so that a kind of feedback loop is set up. In the case of multiple personality, he calls the multiple a "thoroughly crafted person" and suggests that multiple personality is a modern disorder, one that could only come into being in a specific cultural context. He talks about multiple personality disorder as a kind of "parasite" that requires a culturally prepared host, consisting of recognized phenomena that can be used to explain the disorder. He says that when multiple personality first came into being in the last half of the nineteenth century, the host was hysteria, hypnotism, and positivism. Today, says Hacking, the host is child abuse, which in the multiple personality movement is universally accepted as the principal cause of the disorder. Both then and now, the concept of psychological trauma with amnesia connects cause with effect.

Hacking is not saying that multiple personality disorder is not real. Neither is he saying, as some do, that the memories and behaviour of the multiple is caused by the therapist. But he does say that the multiple is likely to reinterpret her past in terms of current understandings of how the disorder arises. In this way, says Hacking, "multiple personality provided a new way to be an unhappy person" (p. 236).

Now I know Ian Hacking to be an admirable person and a fine thinker. His ideas derive from a thorough knowledge of the history of psychological ideas, and I believe they deserve serious consideration. Hacking is moving in a direction being taken up by other contemporary researchers, such as Allan Young, who has produced an impressive criticism of post traumatic stress disorder as a diagnosis in a book called *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Young says that our mental disorders are not disease entities, as we tend to think them to be. They have not always been around, like the tuberculosis bug has, and they do not possess an intrinsic unity. If they have a unity, it is one imposed from the outside by our culture, which has flagged a certain set of symptoms as fitting under a certain recently constructed diagnosis. Young says of post traumatic stress disorder that as a disease entity it is "glued together by the practices, technologies, and narratives with which it is diagnosed, studied, and treated" (p. 5). Like Hacking in regard to MPD, Young is not saying that post traumatic stress disorder is not real, but that it has been *made* real by the action of our culture.



So thank God, we can say that the more sane of the social constructionists are not proposing that multiple personalities and, by extension, spirit possession is not real. At least we are not ensnared here into that old, useless debate about empirical evidence. You know, that's the one in which one side claims there is no scientific evidence for the existence of multiple personalities, or spirit entities, or psychokinesis, or clairvoyance, or whatever else is out of the academic favour, and the other side heaps up mounds of evidence for the existence of these things through controlled studies of mediums, laboratory experiments with the psychically gifted, or thousands of accounts of events that point to the reality of these phenomena. That old debate is, in my opinion, a complete waste of time, for I believe it is intrinsically impossible to prove these things to someone not predisposed to accept them. But more importantly, that debate entirely misses the main point. The main point is not how much evidence do we have for the existence of these things, but rather precisely what do we mean when we ask whether something is *real*.

Hacking and Young and their ilk at least are not caught up in that dead end. They say that these social constructions are real. They are not faked. They are not dreamed up by therapist and client. They are not fabrications of an overactive unconscious. But Hacking and Young and the rest do not take up the next question: Are they *really* real?

While I was mulling over this question in my mind, I came across an article by Theodore Sarbin, professor of social psychology at the University of California at Santa Cruz. The article is a rather polemical demolition of multiple personality, published in the *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* in 1995 (43, 163-183), and it reminded me that not all social constructionists are as even handed as Hacking and Young. Sarbin says that those who accept multiple personalities as real are guilty of the "metaphor to myth" fallacy. That is, they take descriptions of experiences and reify them, make them into *things*—a tendency noted by William James when he said, "All thought tends to assume the form of personal consciousness" (*Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 1, New York: Henry Holt, 1890, p. 229). So, says Sarbin, with multiple personality, they make different states of consciousness in an individual into personalities, separately existing entities that have a kind of substantialness. Thus what was originally a metaphorical way of speaking (at times I feel so changed that it is as if I am a different person) now becomes a myth (I have multiple personalities).

In describing how we come to understand ourselves, Sarbin talks about story telling. He says that we try to give our life meaning by telling stories that make sense of it. The main thing is to make the story credible to the listener. In therapy, says Sarbin, the client, as the story teller, picks and chooses among his experiences and selects those that his imaginative skills can weave into a story that makes sense of his problems. He uses the theories of his therapist as the thread that holds his story together and in that way gives meaning to what he has experienced. Sarbin says that in our society today there is a special subculture of psychiatrists, psychologists, family therapists, and healers who see a whole gamut of symptoms as arising from childhood sexual abuse. They see the client as a passive victim of unconscious forces that create distinct identities that are separated from each other by quasi neurological mechanisms. Once the patient recognizes that this is the thought framework that makes sense to his therapist, he tells his story in these terms. In this subculture, the therapist becomes coauthor of the client's self-narrative. Concepts like dissociation, repressed memories, and MPD provide the material for rewriting one's self-story.

Now, Sarbin does not really help us in deciding our question: "Are multiple personalities and possessing spirits really real?" In fact he does not say anything about what is *real* or *true*. One might wonder how, in Sarbin's framework of thought, one ever arrives at something that might be called the "truth" about oneself. Sarbin does not talk about truth. Only about "validation" of one's story. The strong



implication in the article is that the only true validation is given by our social context. In other words Sarbin posits a kind of *cultural common sense* as the criterion for the validity of our understanding of ourselves. If our culture validates our explanatory story, then it is OK. If it does not, if instead validation comes from a *subculture* within our society, then it is not. So Sarbin ends up relying on an incredible blind faith in culturally determined truth. This stance not only rules out the validity of subcultural views, it also denies any credibility to unique experiences, intuitive realizations that are not culturally preapproved. Within this framework, truth or validity seems to be reduced to a matter of vote. The majority view, the predominant cultural view, is the valid one. A “subcultural” view, being presumably that of a minority of society, is invalid. So if we were to reframe our question in his terms, it would have to be: “Multiple personalities and possessing entities—are they really valid?” And then we would answer the question by asking: what is our culture’s view of the matter, what is culturally orthodox?

Some years ago Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch wrote a fascinating book about how cultural groups try to establish the validity of their views. In the book entitled *Frames of Meaning: The Social Construction of Extraordinary Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), they talked about how in regard to the acceptance of the reality of *paranormal phenomena*, there are two cultural groups that stand opposed, each trying to gain the adherence of people’s hearts and minds. They said that there are the believers and nonbelievers. They both claim to be working within the framework of science, but their metaphysical assumptions differ and so they approach their subject very differently. Believers accept the possibility of paranormal phenomena, phenomena not explainable in terms of current scientific thinking; on the other hand, nonbelievers identify themselves with current scientific opinion—they *are* the scientific establishment. Believers and nonbelievers belong to different paradigm groups and cannot communicate. They inhabit what amounts to different worlds, and they talk through each other. Each paradigm group has its own language, and there is no third extraparadigmatic language that can be called on to mediate a dialogue.

If we translate the findings of Collins and Pinch to our discussion of multiple personality (and, by extension, possession), we find Sarbin telling us that he belongs to the group of the nonbelievers, and that they represent the accepted view of our culture. Believers are, therefore, a “*subculture*,” not part of the establishment, and by that very fact their views cannot be validated or taken seriously. By resorting to this one-up, polemical language, he demonstrates the point of Collins and Pinch: that there is little chance of real communication between the two paradigms.

Sarbin’s polemical approach to his subject is not that rare. In reviewing Carl Sagan’s final book, entitled *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, Harvard biologist Richard Lewontin points out that many scientists are in a strange dilemma, for they are using *rhetoric* to convince people that they should only be convinced by *scientific fact*. (“Billions and Billions of Demons,” *New York Review of Books*, 44, No. 1 (Jan. 9, 1997), pp. 28 ff.). Lewontin says:

In the end we must trust the [scientific] experts and they, in turn, exploit their authority as experts and their rhetorical skills to secure our attention and our belief in things that we do not really understand....Conscientious and wholly admirable popularizers of science like Carl Sagan use both rhetoric and expertise to form the mind of masses because they believe, like the Evangelist John, that the truth shall make you free. But they are wrong. It is not the truth that makes you free. It is your possession of the power to discover the truth. Our dilemma is that we do not know how to provide that power. (p. 32)



Lewontin, writing of Carl Sagan's views, admirably describes the paradigm world view of the Collins and Pinch's unbeliever:

Sagan's argument is straightforward. We exist as material beings in a material world, all of whose phenomena are the consequences of physical relations among material entities....Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural. We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. (pp. 28 & 31)

So what happens when we put rhetoric aside? What happens when we give up the notion that we can convince the unbeliever by amassing mounds of empirical evidence? Can we actually say something meaningful to the unbeliever about the question: Are multiple personalities and possessing entities really real? I believe we can.

First let me say something about multiple personalities and possessing spirits on a descriptive level. How do we determine whether we are dealing with alter personalities or spirits, with MPD or possession? We rely on the experience of our client. We listen to how these identities present themselves. Multiple personalities are identities who manifest within one body and who do not claim a life history attached to a different time and space from that of the body. Possessing entities are identities who manifest within one body and who *do* claim such a life history.

When we ask the question about whether either kind of identity is really real, we are not asking whether they really exist separately from the main functioning personality of the individual in the exact same way that you and I exist separately. You and I clearly have separate bodies, and that is usually enough to satisfy any doubts about distinctness. In the case of MPD and possession, we do not have any such simple solution. But if we are not speaking about separateness in the sense that you and I are separate, are we speaking about separateness in some analogous way? Is it possible to say that multiple personalities differ from each other and possessing spirits differ from each other, and from the host, in some clearly identifiable analogy to those who have separate bodies? I think so.

Morton Prince (therapist of the famous Sally Beauchamp case of MPD), writing in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* in 1907 ("A Symposium in the Subconscious", Vol. 2), said:

The only grounds which I have for believing that my fellow beings have thoughts like myself are that their actions are like my own, exhibit intelligence like my own, and when I ask them they tell me they have consciousness, which as described is like my own. Now, when I observe the so-called automatic actions [e.g., an alter personality], I find that they are of a similar character, and when I ask of whatever it is that performs these actions, Whether it is conscious or not? The written reply is, that it is and that consciously it feels, thinks and wills the actions, etc. The evidence being the same in the one case as in the other, the presumption is that the automatic intelligence is as conscious as the personal intelligence. (p. 69)



So Prince was saying, among other things, that when you and I deal with each other, we make an important assumption: the assumption that the other is like me. I can never *prove* such an assumption about you, because I will never have access to your subjective experience of yourself to know that it is the same as mine. And vice is also versa.

Now to take this a little further, I would like to describe my subjective experience of myself. When I think and make choices, I experience myself as an irreducible unity, a point source from which I am thinking and choosing at this moment. This is not to deny my complexity and my changeability. I realize that I experience conflicting thoughts and inclinations and that I change from day to day, and even moment to moment. Nevertheless, at any particular instant of thought or decision, I experience myself as a unified centre.

Now, I see you apparently thinking and apparently making choices. When I ask you about that, you describe a subjective experience that seems to be just like mine. So I make the *assumption* that you are like me in this very important way: that you are also a unified centre of thought and will—something we call a *person*.

As Morton Prince said, when I interact with the alter personalities of a multiple, they strike me in the very same way. They too seem to be unified centres of thought and will; they too seem to be persons. There does not seem to be any reason to make that assumption in one case and not in the other, unless, of course, there is some intrinsic reason why one body *must* by definition mean one person. However, there does not seem to be any compelling argument for that position. As odd as it may seem to the predominant view of some cultures (notably our own), there is no intrinsic impossibility for having more than one person associated with one body.

The same holds true of my experience of possessing spirits. When these identities interact with me, they come across as centres of personal unity and I find no compelling reason to reject that view of them.

So are multiple personalities and possessing spirits really real? Since I have no reason to make a different assumption about them, I would have to say that from my point of view, and from my experience of them, they are *as real as you are*. If you are really real, then so are they.

All the rest is a matter of cultural preference. Since we are not dealing with intrinsic impossibility, we are dealing with cultural taste. Some cultures feel quite at home with these assumptions, others feel at home only when the assumption applies to one-body-one-person. There is no way to establish the validity of one cultural preference over the other. All we can do is live within our cultures—or our subcultures—and make the best of it.

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