

## **Who do you think you are?**

### **Self And Identity in *A Thing of the Moment***

Address to The Wimbledon Philosophical Society, 21 March 2019

Thank you for having me address the Wimbledon Philosophical Society – thank you, Mark, for having invited me, and you, Susan, for welcoming us to your home. I’m going to spend 30 minutes talking about the notions of identity and of the self that formed the basis for my novel that was published last year. It tells the stories of three women, from childhood to early womanhood, each of whom, one might say, has a very different idea of her self, of the kind of person she is. It takes its title from *Straw Dogs*, a book by John Gray, the English political philosopher, in which he wrote, “The *I* is a thing of the moment, and yet our lives are ruled by it. We cannot rid ourselves of this inexistent thing.” Now, that’s a very provocative statement, isn’t it?

How many of us have wrestled with the questions –

Who am I?

Why am I who I am?

Do I choose to be who I am?

Could I be someone else?

Are we just mind or are we just body?

Or are we some combination of the two?

I hoped, by the end of my novel, to have provoked its reader to ask, What kind of person am I? For the purposes of this talk, you're not at a disadvantage if you've not read my novel but I will be quoting from it to illustrate the ideas that had been preoccupying me and some of the arguments and views on identity and the self put forward by Berkeley, Descartes, Hume, Locke and Sartre and I'll be mentioning four characters – Isabella, Mie, Sharon and Sebastian – who, to some extent, will be illustrative of these philosophers' arguments.

I studied philosophy and French literature at Southampton University. My first essay was on *Discourse on the Method* — by René Descartes, the French early 17th century rationalist — and it was so bad that I look back upon it with shame. However, it was through Descartes that I was formally introduced to the notion of dualism – the idea of the mind and body split.

Descartes' answer to the “What am I?” question was, “an immaterial mind,” that is, a mind with no physical constituents even though we possess bodies that exist in the physical world. He wrote in his *Sixth Meditation* that, however, “I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship... I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit.” For Descartes, even though the mind — or the self — was seen as separate to the body, it was inconceivable that it could be tied variously to any number of different bodies. It would take our contemporary philosophers to explore that idea.

But to go back a moment... Like many others, I came to London to find work after university, and, for some years, the closest I came to thinking about philosophy was when I received training on how to make advertisement sales phone calls — I would think, “I spent three years studying philosophy in order to learn how to pick a phone up?”

My wife and I lived in Streatham, as did my brother- and sister-in-law whom we would see regularly on Friday nights for take-aways, my sister-in-law unburdening herself more than us of her week's professional difficulties — well, they were greater than ours. She was an educational psychologist working with abused children whose stories were heart-breaking and so distressing that her husband decidedly firmly one night that he never wanted to hear any of them again.

“How do these boys and girls cope?” he asked in desperation.

“They say it's not happening to them but to their bodies,” she said.

“They what?” I asked.

“They say, ‘This is not happening to me; it's happening to my body.’ It's their coping mechanism, you see,” she explained.

Much of what I'd read at university came rushing back to me. Suddenly, the dry theory, the academic proposition became real — there were real people really ‘living’ the mind/body split! I wondered what that would be like, what it would be like to be able to make that distinction within one's self. I was and had always been ‘me’ — neither mind or body nor mind and body — just me. I was to myself like the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey*. Inscrutable, impermeable, unsubtle — just ‘there’.

I filed this idea — the idea that the mind/body split could be ‘real’ and not just a Cartesian, scholastic exercise — away for further exploration and, in 2013 when I started writing my book, it would inform the first of the three protagonists in it, Isabella — the abused child the sexual abuse of whom prompts this split.

Now to go back another moment... In 1991, fed up with selling advertising space in financial magazines, I got a job as a bond salesman and was given a seat next to a Japanese

saleswoman in S. G. Warburg's trading room. I got to know her well over the next three years. She had left Japan — that country of uniformity and conformity — in order to seek her fortune in the UK. She impressed me with her steely determination, with her strong sense of self, with her adamant quality of unshakeable self-knowledge and her capacity for reinvention. Sitting next to her was like sitting next to a piece of steel or an edge of glass. I admired the quality of conviction with which she led her life, the full ownership of her life, the complete absence of self-doubt... She, I felt, possessed all the answers to the questions I asked at the beginning of my talk. She was to become the model for Mie — the second of my protagonists.

Something my daughter said would be the spark for the third. One day, when my confident, friendly, charming, intelligent, high-achieving daughter was about 16 years old, she confided in my wife and me: "When I look in, all I see is a deep black hole." That's not something a parent wants to hear. My daughter is well and content now but she did go through a couple of wobbly years in which she had to find — and succeeded in finding — some internal anchor, an inner point of reference, some kernel of 'selfdom'. What she said was to be the inspiration for my third protagonist, Sharon, who has what I refer to as 'no sense of self'.

So I decided to write a book to explore these ideas, these three ways of being, to explore the questions I asked at the beginning of the talk — not that I had any expectation of coming up with concrete answers.

I wrote Mie's story first. Mie, who is very consciously the subject of her life, decides that English will provide her with her way out of Japan. She studies English and gets a job in the export/import department of a Japanese company from where she manages to find a job in

a bank in London where she'll meet Sharon. Mie says, "To the outside observer, we 300 or more people in the dealing room... resembled battery farm chickens, and yet I was never more certain of being uniquely me. My sense of self consumed me; it fed on itself and expanded within me, like the air in a balloon fitting the balloon's shape exactly. Admittedly, I was a Japanese woman in an almost exclusively male and Caucasian environment but, perhaps augmented by this singularity, my sense of self made me giddy."

Now, this is a philosophy society, so you will know John Locke, the English late 17th century empiricist. Barry Dainton, professor of philosophy at Liverpool University and author of *Self*, paraphrases Locke as follows. "What is needed for an earlier and a later person to be one and the same is for that later person to be mentally continuous with the earlier person... Mental continuity makes for sameness of person irrespective of what else occurs."

Mie goes on to say, "Knowing that a life will be shaped by the incidences one highlights and places emphasis on, leaving others to sink from the memory's surface, I recalled every step that had got me to this point." So, for Mie, as for Locke, memory – the ability to recall an incident or experience – is key to defining or understanding this notion of selfhood but, while this seems straightforward, it is considered problematic today because (and I go back to Dainton) "we are... deluded about our autobiographical memories. Many of us naturally assume that memories are akin to video recordings, which gradually fade with age but remain essentially accurate (if blurred) records of our past experiences. [But] psychological research has shown that they are nothing of the kind. We remember far less of our lives than most of us suppose, and we remember very selectively... Our memories are... active re-creations, which typically involve a sizeable number of fictional elements."

Mie recognises this and continues, “It was odd to think that if I were the sum of those memory-building blocks I chose not to discard, among those rejected, abandoned memories — of experiences, thoughts, events witnessed — lay other, potential selves. Intellectually, I saw this; physiologically, I failed to.” Do you see this? I do. I’m interested by this idea prompted by Locke that if I’d done nothing different in my life to this point but remembered the things I’ve forgotten and forgotten the things I remember I’d be a different person.

Mie’s point of view – her sense of self – is in opposition to that of David Hume, Scotland’s 18th century empiricist. I conceived of Mie’s point of view as a direct rebuttal of Hume’s writing, in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, the following:

“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.... If anyone, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.”

This idea that there is no ‘self’ that feels the pain of, say, a tooth ache, that there is just the tooth ache is not one I can bring myself to countenance. As Dainton puts it, “The fact that you can’t see your eyes doesn’t mean that you don’t have any. If the self is that which is aware of the contents of our consciousness... it clearly isn’t going to appear amid these contents.” Is it too unphilosophical a refutation to say that if Hume’s trousers were on fire he

would have no doubt about whose trousers were burning? And can we really believe Hume when he writes that there is no principle of “something simple and continued” in him?

Well, I thought not until I read Galen Strawson, who was professor of philosophy at Reading University (and now holds the chair of philosophy at Texas University) when my son, who also studied philosophy, passed me one of Strawson’s publications. Strawson wrote, in the early 2000s, about the opposition between the diachronic (or continuous or narrative) self and the episodic (or discontinuous or non-narrative) self. Now, the diachronic can look back at the photograph of their 7-year old self and say, “Yup. That’s me.” I can; I’m such a person. And so is Mie, even though ‘intellectually’ she realises that she could have been someone else. But the episodic can’t recognise their 7-year old self as themselves. Before reading Strawson I had never thought such people existed but they do — and Strawson is one of them. In a 2016 YouTube interview on the Closer to Truth channel titled *What Are Selves?*, Strawson says, “Time for a confession, I am someone who is like this, I – even I look back a minute, I just don’t feel that I’m there.” Now, what can that be like?

Mie is diametrically opposed to Strawson: I have her say, “I, that inner nucleus of me, had an integrity that persisted, despite the fact that every day, I learnt something new and, probably, forgot something old. I made the distinction between that core, that essential *meness* and the social coatings, postures and attitudes that I adopted but could discard like a raincoat, a glove or a hat.”

I wrote Sharon’s story after Mie’s. Sharon’s is the episodic non-narrative self. I considered her not so much the refutation as the test of Locke’s thesis that it is mental continuity that constitutes a person. I have Sharon crossing St James’s Park lake on a

footbridge when she recalls the stepping stones she fell from by the castle in Ogmores-by-Sea when a child.

“I was unaware I had stopped until a tourist bumped into me and excused herself. She was saying something else to me. Would I take a picture of her and her friend together?”

“They stood, their bags at their feet and their backs to Buckingham Palace in the middle distance and the low sun behind; their faces would appear dark in the picture, I knew.

“I returned the camera and thought, this is what my life will be like, a series of memories like a series of photographs with nothing to connect them. A join-the-dots life in which the dots remain forever unconnected, as in the pages of [my brother’s] join-the-dots books he never got around to completing. A sequence of stepping stones with no guarantee that anyone would be there to save me by the wrist when I slipped and fell.”

Sharon is everything Mie isn’t — and Sharon recognises this. “Already, in the present,” says Sharon, “I was looking back as though through a series of windows that each presented a different scene, distinct tableaux of past lives into which she and I happened to have ventured: brief, framed moments in which we had coincided. While Mie remained resolutely unchanged behind the façade of her new wardrobe, constantly and recognisably Mie in each image, I had no notion of existing for myself for more than two or three seconds at a time. The only factor that contributed to any sense of continuity, however ironically, was the thought that this notion was familiar to me. While Mie glided serenely and purposefully across a bridge, in that way she had of walking by moving her legs from below the knees only, I advanced hesitantly from one stepping stone to the next, unable to ascertain whether, if the far bank were to be reached, it would be me who would reach it.”

If Sharon's being an episodic self contributes to her unhappiness or malaise, then I think Isabella's is, like her mind/body splitting, part of a coping mechanism. When you feel guilty, despite your innocence, for the terrible thing that has been done to you, perhaps it helps you to think that that terrible thing happened to someone else. When asked what she believes in, Isabella replies, "That you can't step in the same garden twice. That everything I have ever done or said was said or done by different versions of myself. That the selves I've left behind are more strange to me than strangers." This notion of the episodic self is so far removed from me – from the kind of self I consider myself to be – that I find it quite fascinating and, to tell the truth, not a little pitiful.

If we are minds to which bodies are, as Descartes would have it, more or less incidental, then dolls are bodies from which minds are completely absent and so I have them feature a little in my novel – in Isabella's story they drive the action, because it's only when her little brother unknowingly recreates an abusive domestic scene when playing with her friends' dolls that adults become alerted to the abuse he and Isabella have been subjected to. In Mie's and Sharon's stories, they reveal more their states of mind. Mie says of her friends and of their dolls, "While they treasured their manicured, anthropoid puppets, I loathed mine for the audacity they had to mimic human form, however inadequately." Sharon says of her sister and of her dolls, "Sherah's bedroom door closed and with the palm of my hand pressed against it, heart beating quickly for fear that she might catch me in her room and the top of my head barely level with the light switch, I would stand at the end of the two rows of dolls and consider myself their equal. I was just another, bigger version of them... Like them, I was in suspension, waiting for someone to breathe life into me, to flick the switch that grated against the back of my head and spark me into existence, give me definition, a role, a drive. If I knew who I was, I would know what to do. I would stand quite still, unblinking, then, when I raised

my head, my eyelids would fall, quite deliberately, just as [the dolls'] did. If I knew what others wanted me to do, I would know who to be.”

That last sentence is quite a thing to say, I think – an awful and sad thing to think. Unlike Mie whose points of reference are entirely internal, Sharon will only see herself through the eyes of other people. She is the less-loved middle child. The reason for her being less loved is less important than the effect this has on her: she forever seeks to please, to gain favour and so, in always considering others before she considers herself, effaces her self in pursuit of others' love and affection. Her confusion is compounded by her family background — part Catholic, part Jewish, part Polish, part Welsh and part English – what is she really?

Have you ever taken the Myers Briggs Type Indicator test? Mie, were she to take it, would be marked an introvert: she is absolutely certain of herself and would tick the box opposite the statement, “I sometimes forget to check with the outside world to see if my ideas really fit the experience.” Sharon would be marked an extrovert, agreeing with, “I often understand a problem better when I... can hear what others have to say.”

Sharon's eagerness to please leads to her promiscuity that, actually, has some salutary benefit. Sharon says, “A joyous, guiltless voyage of self-discovery, the act of sex told me nothing of who I was, it just affirmed that I was. It wasn't so much, for me, a fulfilment as a filling, a completing, a providing of evidence that, if only for a moment, I existed if not for myself then at least for someone else. ”

This is in sharp contrast to Mie who on the night she takes the firm decision to opt for a celibate life, says, “Loose, general ideas, the germs of which I realised I had carried for years, began to coalesce in my mind. I recalled the drops of blood in my father's butcher's shop prep room and the manner in which, when two of them touched and their surface tension

broke, they were each obliterated and combined to become one bigger droplet of blood, and I shuddered at the thought of eliminating myself in another... How different a kernel of an idea, that develops in one's mind into a life philosophy, from a parasitic seed that grows inside one's womb, ruptures one and continues to suck on one's emotional, physical and financial resources, on one's reserves of personhood.”

Isabella's attitude to sex is altogether different, formed as it is by the abuse her father and his friends subject her to from an early age. I wrote her story last. I sensed it would be the most difficult, both emotionally and literally. She, as I have said, will cope with the abuse she was at the receiving end of by separating her mind from her body and, in order to give her some assistance, I ensure she has a predisposition to do so and the language with which to address these questions – I make her grandfather a theologian and her father a philosophy Don, who entertains fellow philosophers at home.

This is an abridged conversation that takes place in her father's study.

“‘Isn't there more to philosophy,’ asked Mr Baden or Mr Lewis tentatively, ‘than the mind and body split?’

My father raised his hand and addressed the young men equably. ‘So, tell me, you see Descartes' problem – how would you reconcile the mind with the body?’

‘I'm not sure I would want to separate the two in the first place,’ said Mr Lewis or Mr Baden.

‘Too late,’ said Dr Dearman, ‘Plato has already done so.’

‘Crisps,’ said my father, looking at me. ‘And beer, please.’

‘Let's ask Isabella!’ suggested Dr Dearman as I rose to replenish the bowls.

I stood, pleased to be included in the conversation.

‘Do you have a body?’ Dr Dearman asked me very seriously, perched on the edge of the Chesterfield.

‘Yes!’ I replied, delighted at the ease with which I answered the question.

‘And what a lovely little body it is,’ remarked Dr Dearman, before adding hastily, ‘And do you have a mind?’

‘Yes, of course!’ I giggled.

‘And is it the same as your body?’

‘No!’ I found the line of questioning hilarious... [but] the whole thing — how the mind chose the body to carry it or how the body selected the mind to fit it — remained a mystery to me.”

And this is an abridged conversation in Isabella’s grandfather’s vicarage that takes place after the abuse of her has begun. Cosmo is her brother.

“Cosmo slept on Mama’s lap. I cradled his feet in my hands.

‘Don’t we all have a soul, Grandpa,’ I asked, turning from Cosmo to him abruptly.

‘Of course,’ he replied, surprised at my addressing him so directly.

‘And do you inhabit your soul in the same way that you inhabit your body?’

‘Surely, it’s the soul that inhabits the body,’ suggested Papa.

‘So, really, you are your soul. Your soul is you,’ I thought to add helpfully.

‘Well, I think so,’ replied Grandpa.

‘So, if someone hurts you, then they’re not really hurting you, they’re not wanting to hurt you at all, just your body?’

‘What a strange girl,’ observed Grandpa.

‘Strange?’ said Mama defensively, more loudly than she had intended, and Cosmo started in his sleep... I could feel Cosmo’s pulse on the inner side of the ankle, a determined rise and fall below my two fingers, an affirmation of the body while the mind slept.”

Isabella is hurt — very much — by the people closest to her and when she turns 18 she leaves Oxford for London. “When I had thought that I’d been answering London’s call, it felt to me now as though I’d been running away from Oxford. When I had thought that I might have been running away from my father, I now had to accept the possibility that I had been running away from myself. There is a paradox about the self that when you try to grasp it you change it, that the unreflective self is no longer such when reflected upon.” That’s the quantum theory, the theory that the observer affects the observed. I have Isabella say it because I believe it to be true and because I consider it another refutation of Hume’s theory of the self as a bundle of perceptions, as is the following, when Isabella takes Ecstasy for the first time. You’ll see she mentions Bishop Berkeley, the Irish early 18th century rationalist. He wrote, “How often must I repeat, that I know or am conscious of my own being; and that I myself am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas.” That’s in polar opposition to Hume.

Now, I’ve never taken Ecstasy but there are a lot of websites – both professional (i.e. pharmacological) and otherwise – where users describe the effect the drug has on them. Isabella says, “With tremendous clarity, I understood that what I saw when I looked at [Freddie] was not her but the relationship I had with her; that, really, that was all she was to me and I to her... The air above the dance floor filled with the unfiltered joyous truths of the distillation of people who held the essence of their selves before them like masks at a Venetian festival and then, suddenly as if on a collective whim, flew them like kites on a

string. I marvelled that all these beings did not alight on others' bodies and inhabit them out of mischief, for innocent fun: an unwritten social, metaphysical code for life on earth respected from the goodness of all of our hearts. Echoes sounded of Papa and his friends citing Berkeley's notion that only ideas in the minds of perceivers exist — if only as barriers between us and material objects — if material objects exist at all. How right Berkeley had been! The intuited revelation that Berkeley had taken Ecstasy was sensational — I wanted to share it with Papa.”

Berkeley had proposed what he called ‘immaterialism’ and what later came to be called ‘subjective idealism’, the notion that material objects do not exist and that all objects are but ideas in the minds of perceivers.

So what do we have? Three young women one of whom is secure in who she is and who suffers no self-doubt; one who is lost (figuratively), who struggles to achieve any meaningful ‘self-definition’; and one who can and frequently does disassociate herself from her body, one for whom – to revisit Descartes – the self is almost literally the body's pilot. You may be familiar with this idea – the idea of the homunculus, most recently encapsulated by Robert Downey Jr in the *Iron Man* films, the concept of the little man — the agent — driving the bigger.

This is one of Isabella's short chapters, one that takes us back to Descartes' idea of the self as the sailor or pilot of a ship called ‘Body’.

‘Gaia.’ Pierre beckons me, his eyes shifting left to right, along the dark and empty corridor, down and up, from my high-heeled shoes to my halter top, his cocked finger frozen in summons, his pupils black pricks in a backlit head, the silver halo of his hair interrupted

symmetrically by two jugged ears, his mouth and nose grey scars on a waste ground, the whole a Rorschach inkblot the meaning of which is indubitably clear.

My immediate thought is that Wanda must be away.

The light from Pierre's office streams past and around him, finds me and pulls me in. I am back in Papa's study: the look in Pierre's eyes is the same as the look Papa had in his, the look of wanting something he shouldn't have, of having what he shouldn't want, of a man who has relegated shame and conscience to another time and place. The office is windowless and the couch in it stained. We both place our hands on my halter top; when he pulls up, I tug down. I clutch my breasts so that he can't.

'Don't be ridiculous!' pants Pierre. His exertion and anger in the artificial light lend him the illusion of having applied rouge. I can't help but see his point of view: when I sleep with so many, why not with him?

My point of view is clear to me: I am my own homunculus, I sit behind the bridge of my nose and look out of two clear blue windows the shades of which fall and rise as I blink. Pierre insults me, or tries to; what he says is mostly correct. My resistance infuriates him.

From my pilot's seat on the bridge, I manoeuvre towards an escape. I feel I am of my body but not my body, in it but not part of it; it is a craft to which I am essential but not it to me. I have to stand to better navigate and watch my feet below my lower eyelids' lashes. I am clumsy: Pierre protests I have hurt him and holds his hand to his lip. I need to get out of his office and to think. It occurs to me, on this the first occasion I have defended my body, that my body might be essential to me. I am desperate to think. I turn the office door handle.

Wanda contemplates Pierre and me. He and I run our hands through our hair and pat it down at the same time, as though one were a mirror of the other. I smooth my halter top

down. Pierre tugs at his shirt sleeves. Wanda's eyes are dead in the gloom of the corridor but I don't have to see them to know that I will have to find work elsewhere.

I look at Pierre who looks at Wanda who looks at me. We all know that we are what the other sees us to be.

I pull one lever and push another and turn, steady myself against the corridor wall and start to make my way up, driving forward and up, one mechanical step after the other, up.

You will have noticed that Pierre calls Isabella Gaia – that's the name she adopts as a stage name once in London. It happens to be the name of her stillborn sister and the name of James Lovelock's 1971 book in which he puts forward the Gaia hypothesis that proposes that all living and non-living parts of the Earth form a complex interacting system that can be thought of as one single organism. In my novel, the hypothesis is unknowingly expounded by Sebastian, an options trader, whom we meet late in the book and who will, by its end, have got to know all three girls to varying degrees.

When Mie asks Sebastian what he really believes in, he replies,

“When I meet someone, at a party — wherever — I never ask them what they do for a living. Knowing what they do, what their profession is, only gives you the illusion of knowing them but, actually, you see them less, you see them through a veil, you bring to them your preconception of what a lawyer, banker, baker is; what that person really is, that becomes harder to grasp.

‘If I had to believe in anything, it would be in something like a life force – Spinoza called it *conatus*, the inner drive of every being to persist in its existence, but let's call it Life. Life wants only to persist through time, to survive, and we all — people, gorillas, crocodiles,

amoebae, spiders, ants, birds, fish, germs — are Life’s multiplications of its chances of continuance. Species are just rolls of the dice. Life is indifferent about which survives. Life doesn’t care that the dinosaurs have died; there will be dead ends, blind alleys, but evolution will open other paths. Environmental destruction? Life doesn’t care. Organisms that feed on carbon dioxide and higher temperatures will thrive. Ants and ivy may take over the world — well, that’s Life. May humans become extinct, destroy themselves? Yes. Is that necessarily a bad thing? No, not from Life’s perspective: more than any other species we have destroyed more species and so closed more doors, blocked more ends than any species before us. Every species seeks to protect itself and to propagate itself according to Life’s programme. What’s interesting about our species is that we, perhaps more than any other, have developed the fiction of the self in order to do so. We believe this little collection of cells that is us — you, me — to be important, worthy of protection and propagation and so, at the individual level, by maximising our own chance of survival, we do the same for our species.”

Mie, the arch-solipsist with the great ego doesn’t like that message and rejects Sebastian, she kicks him out, it’s not what she wants to hear; there’s no meeting of minds and, certainly, no meeting of bodies. Sebastian’s relationship with Sharon is different, it’s physical but it peters out. However, his relationship with Isabella will be longer lasting, in part because they think the same way.

When Isabella says, “Our identities blend, they change... the coincidence of our bodies with our selves is striking, wondrous — miraculous. We lose and find ourselves at a steady rhythm. We are lazy: it’s that much easier assigning one self to one body, that’s all, it’s less confusing and easier to follow and to keep tabs on, it’s easier to advance the existence of, to have flourish, every little parcel of cells that comprise each one of us than to admit of the

self as a fiction, as an essential and efficient narrative that enables the persistence of us, of Life” — when she says that, she doesn’t know that she’s echoing what Sebastian has tried to say to Mie earlier in the day.

Gaia theory helps get us back to the title of my book, from John Gray’s *Straw Dogs*: “The *I* is a thing of the moment, and yet our lives are ruled by it. We cannot rid ourselves of this non-existent thing.” Some philosophers, Gray amongst them, argue that we are all victims of an impressive trick: we are being deluded into thinking our selves exist when in fact they don’t. In *The Ego Trick*, Julian Baggini wrote, “The Ego Trick is not to persuade us that we exist when we do not, but to make us believe that we are more substantial and enduring than we really are.” And John Hood in *The Self Illusion*: “We all certainly experience some form of self but what we experience is a powerful deception generated by our brains for our own benefit.”

Do I really believe that? Well, my novel finishes with Isabella’s words, “*We are one!*” but, actually, I was just looking for a good and relevant title for my book when I came across this idea. It all sounds rather clever. It sounds like the kind of thing I’d like to believe. And, intellectually, I embrace Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis in its entirety right up to that point when we are left to conclude that the self is a fiction. I can believe that there are people like Isabella who, somehow, live on two planes and others like Sharon who tip-toe through an uncertain world from stepping stone to stepping stone. And I know there are people like Mie because I’m one of them.

If we can think of these three ways of being as ‘frames’, we can ask, what adorns them? If they form three skeletons, what forms the flesh? If you have three steel structures, what decides what facades you hang on them? As Mie puts it, “I knew that taking ownership

of myself and of my public image in a new, different society could mean changing — a liberating, thrilling prospect of reinventing not my essential self but my superficialities, similar to the identical modern steel structures that I witnessed rising all around Tokyo, which appeared so different on completion once their facades were clad in disparate materials.”

That’s one of my answers and a theme that runs through the book. When I stood at the top of the Swiss Alps recently and was told to admire the view by my Swiss friends, I got bored after half a minute and suggested we ski on. I said that that view of snow-crested mountains was not a patch on the view over London from Wimbledon. My friends looked at me incredulously. “These mountains are there because they’re there.” I tried to explain. “Whereas the view of London speaks of human endeavour, ambition, creativity — it’s uplifting because it’s all about us.”

Mie, however, sees, in the city of Tokyo, something that challenges her sense of self, of individuality, of uniqueness. “The city, seen from a vantage point of considerable elevation, was a lattice of horizontals crossing from left to right and back, of verticals screaming vertiginously down and of perpendiculars streaming to a distant endpoint to obliterate us all. In this vista of aerial and linear perspectives, we travel and toil, ride lifts and escalators up and down, journey in trains and cars here and there and beetle from home to conveyance to work and back. It was a picture, seen from the great height of Mr Omochi’s double-glazed office window, of a silent metropolis in which all hope was expunged and the individual obliterated. We share neither the common purpose of ants nor the individualist grace and vacillations of butterflies. We teem in this city that dehumanises us and reduces us to our basic mechanistic, mineral selves, to non-identities that function according to biology,

custom and physical limitations. I looked up and my faint reflection looked back at me sternly.”

For me, our built environment is formative, extremely so. I frequently wondered, on this skiing holiday, how different a person I’d be to the person I am today — and in what way I’d be different — had I been born and lived in the mountains (or the country). I know for certain that my book would have been different. I’ll quote my two favourite lines from my book.

Isabella says, of her and her father’s walk, across Oxford, “As we threaded our way along residential streets, our steps the sutures that stitch our selves to the towns and cities of our past and present, it felt to me as though I were leading him rather than he me.” That’s something I feel very strongly, that, somehow, who I am is interwoven with the cities I’ve lived in.

Mie, says, of her and Sebastian’s walk from Tate Britain, “We left the Tate and rambled, with the sun in our eyes, along Millbank and then turned onto Vauxhall Bridge and crossed the Thames. A long way ahead of us, on the other side of the bridge, was another couple, two people of indeterminate sex, side by side like two inverted commas; we must have looked the same to them, and the bridge a long equivocal statement between two pairs of quotation marks.” I like that, that idea of the human completing the city, the humans placing the architectural feature in quotation marks, neither making sense without the other. Here, I feel compelled to remark that the description of London at the climax of my book is really a description of the sex act but no reader has spotted that yet. As one friend said, “It’s best they don’t. It’s like the 1930s’ films’ steam-train-into-a-tunnel scene. If they get it, it’s because it’s too obvious.”

But if there's one thing that I believe made me, one thing more than any other from which I derived my values, it's the books I read as a child and a young adult. Here I combine both influences — cities and books — when Mie says, “Sebastian's eyes wandered around my sitting room, lingering on my books and videos. He looked around me to take the measure of me. And rightly so, I thought. Every book is a brick in the building I have become and every film a feature. My parents and the culture I was born into may have laid the foundations but the interior and exterior are mine.”

Sharon, however, doesn't like reading. “When I read,” she says, “I feel uneasy. I become jealous of the book's characters... I feel under threat. I feel that for them to live, I have to give away a little of myself... It's like I have hardly enough self for myself as it is.” “You are a funny bird,” says Sebastian. “If I am the sum total of every book I've read, what are you?” When Sharon asks him if that's how he thinks of himself, he replies, “Yes. More or less.”

The key element of literature, I believe, is that you give yourself fully to it; that you have to in order for it to live; that you can discover who you are by how you react to it; the book you hold before you — the choice of book — really can be a mirror. Someone once said that Count Vronsky's grief in *Anna Karenina* is the grief the reader brings to the book and I quite see that.

A key element of cities and buildings — especially modern ones with modern, reflective glass — is the opportunities they give you to see yourself — think of how many times you see your reflection every day. In the bathroom mirror in the mornings. In the mirrors in the hallway and in the car. In your bedroom and kitchen windows when it's still dark outside. In the train, shop and office windows you walk past. In the mirrors above the

hand basins at work. And what about the many photos of you that you see or post on social media? We probably see ourselves — that is, reflections and pictures of ourselves — about a hundred times a day. That’s about 99 times more than our ancestors who probably only glimpsed poor, distorted reflections of themselves in pools of water or in burnished tin or copper. I wonder what that has done to us, to our notions of selfhood, I wonder how it has changed us. In my novel, reflections play a large part in Mie’s, Sharon’s and Isabella’s getting to know themselves and considering how they might appear to others.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, the French 20th century existentialist, how you appear to others, or, specifically, the shame you might feel when you appear to others at certain moments is an essential condition of human existence and is at the heart of the discovery of the self. When I peep through a keyhole, I am absorbed in what I am seeing and I do not feature in my consciousness. (So far, so Hume.) However, when I hear a floorboard creaking behind me, I become aware of myself as an object of the other's look.

The English philosophical establishment never much liked Sartre and so I was pleased to read in Dainton's *Self* that, according to Dainton, “we are not like any other kind of thing at all. Most of us think we have potential — even if we aren’t always making the most of what we have. According to my account of the self, there is a very real sense in which we are *nothing but potential...*”

I wonder if Dainton knows how similar that is to Sartre’s starting point — and this is where I try to paraphrase the first few hundred pages of *Being and Nothingness* from memory... There are beings-*in*-themselves that are what they are. A stone is a stone. But we are not stones. So, quite logically, if we’re not ‘things that are what they are’ we must be ‘things that are what they’re not’. (Sartre calls them beings-*for*-themselves.) So, embracing

this idea of a self — of a person, of a human being — is potential and the constant renewal of one's self because there is, too, in 'being what you are not' and 'not being what you are' an element of nothingness, of negativity, of the negation of the ego and this – to my mind – is where Western philosophy, at this point of existentialism, meets Eastern philosophy, or Buddhism. The tension at the heart of Sartre's idea of the self is that you are never your own subject – you only ever know yourself as the object of a subject, of someone else's look – you require the other to complete you or, as Sharon put it, to provide the “evidence that, if only for a moment, I exist if not for myself then at least for someone else”.

Still, Sartre's famous dictum — “existence precedes essence” — consists for me of the three most empowering words in Western philosophy: you don't come into a world to which meaning has been assigned (i.e. by a church or by a state), it's *you* who gives meaning to the world, *you* decide upon its values, *you* determine its essence. Essentially, like Mie and unlike Sharon, *you* set your values and you don't live your life by the lights of others. *You* determine who you are.

Or so I thought.

The Jesuits are reputed to have said that if you give them the boy at 7, they'll give you the man.

In the 1950s, the English psychiatrist John Bowlby, showed that if a child failed to develop a healthy relationship with a primary care giver before the age of 2, the likelihood of behavioural problems in adulthood — depleted self-worth, lack of trust and empathy — increases measurably.

More recently, in 2016, Raoul Martinez wrote, in *Creating Freedom*, “We do not choose our parents, nor whether they'll be... knowledgeable or ignorant... attentive or

neglectful. The knowledge we possess, the beliefs we hold... — the very lives we lead — depend entirely on our biological inheritance and the environment to which we are exposed. This is the lottery of birth... The implications are far reaching: if we don't create ourselves, how can we be responsible for the way we are?" And Strawson put it like this: "Both the particular way in which one is moved to try to change oneself, and the degree of one's success in the attempt at change, will be determined by how one already is as a result of heredity and experience."

And yet more recently, last year in fact, in *Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are*, Robert Plomin, professor of behavioural genetics at KCL who has been studying the genetics of personality for over 40 years, presented the conclusions of his research that purported to show that the only thing that matters for our personalities and much else is the DNA we inherit. So, forget the age of 7, forget the ages of 0 to 2, who you are is decided before you're born! I haven't read *Blueprint* — only reviews of it — but I think I should, if only because I'm not sure I like its conclusion. Like most lucky people, I would hazard a guess, I prefer the empowering existentialist idea that I am who I choose to be and that my virtues are the result of, well, *my* virtues.

I'll close with a word on the idea of the self in the computer age. My novel follows its three protagonists from the 1970s through to the 1990s partly because I felt happiest writing about the London I'd discovered in the 80s and 90s but mainly because I thought it too ambitious to attempt a novel around this topic — of identity, of the self — at the time of the internet. I recall some time in the late 90s when I held my Barclays Visa card statement in one hand and my Sainsbury's Rewards statement in the other with their lists of what I'd spent my money on and where and said to my wife, "Gosh! Someone, somewhere out there is going to

know me better than I know myself.” And that’s before I heard about the successful internet dating agencies a decade or so later that were successful because they learned to ignore what people stated as their preferences (in terms of gender, hair colour and eyes colour, etc) and instead got to know their preferences by monitoring their online behaviour.

Today’s computing technicians and neuro-scientists are looking very far ahead, to a time when tele-transportation becomes a possibility. The philosophers among them ask, If you are replicated atom for atom from one place to another, would that other person still be you? And some futurologists anticipate something yet more radical: the uploading of one’s self into computer-created virtual worlds that will be limited only by our imaginations. I guess that by then, if we don’t yet know *who* we are, we’ll at least know who *we want to be*.

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