

Keep Your Mind Open

By Richard A. Shweder

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And watch it closely, because it's apt to change.

THE PROTEAN SELF

Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation.

By Robert Jay Lifton.

262 pp. New York:

Basic Books. \$25.

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IN Greek mythology Proteus is the seer whose apparent identity is so unstable that no one knows who he is. First he poses as an old man, then a tall green tree, then a blinding fire. He is constantly changing form. This capacity for shape-shifting suits Proteus, for he is a reluctant wizard who wants to evade his clients. Because Proteus has the power to radically transmogrify his identity, no one can pin him down long enough to make him reveal the truth.

Robert Jay Lifton is not a reluctant seer. He is a psychiatrist who is eager to reveal the truth that consistency is not a virtue. In "The Protean Self," Dr. Lifton constructs a post-modern character type, a shapeshifter capable of assuming multiple identities without pathological fragmentation: first a hippie, then a member of Students for a Democratic Society, then a Jew for Jesus, then a business executive. The upbeat message of Dr. Lifton's book is that a "protean self" is a source of strength and value and ought to be accepted as a new psychological ideal.

A person with a protean self is a "willful eclectic" who draws strength from the variety and disorderliness of historical change and upheaval. His or her integrity is defined by an ability to stay on the move between partial, incomplete and irreconcilable realities. According to Dr. Lifton, life is not a straight line. Instead, it is, and ought to be, experienced as a collage.

The "protean self" is not alone in the contemporary world. It has, as an alter ego, the "fundamentalist self," which is the second character type constructed by Dr. Lifton. The fundamentalist self is a consistency freak who avoids psychological fragmentation by defending the world against evil, embracing a totalizing world view and looking forward to the end of time. Unlike the "protean self," the "fundamentalist self" responds to the mix and complexity of existence with a sense of gnostic revulsion so profound that even a nuclear war seems welcome. The idea of apocalyptic conflagration is endowed with a divine purpose: bringing the world to an end is a way to clean the messy slate.

Both character types, protean and fundamentalist, have their many voices in Dr. Lifton's book. Among the "proteans" there is Francine C., an agnostic who hangs around with Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka, and Arthur M., the abused child from a "strange" Jewish family (they didn't read books!) who becomes a human rights advocate. And there are Lucy G. and George R. and Carol C., as well as Vaclav Havel and Salman

Richard A. Shweder, an anthropologist and professor of human development at the University of Chicago, is the author of "Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology."

Rushdie. Then there are many allusions to protean personalities from the writings of James Joyce, Don DeLillo, Saul Bellow, Erica Jong and others. Among the "fundamentalists" there is Nigel T., who discusses his conversion experience while being interviewed in his private club, and Ian X., a church organist who "has centered his life on the return of Jesus and thinks that nuclear holocaust will somehow play an important role in millennial events."

Unlike Proteus, Dr. Lifton does not evade his clients. For several decades he has interviewed people involved in social movements in the United States. Many people have talked to him, in various disaster areas and political hot spots of the world like China and Eastern Europe. Their disjointed and tangled life stories, pasted together by the author yet narrated with a ring of authenticity, are the core of his book.

In "The Protean Self" Dr. Lifton is an enthusiastic and wide-eyed author who marvels at the idea that inconsistency is a source of resiliency in human beings. Undoubtedly some readers will perceive a deep irony in his advocacy of proteanism as a psychological ideal, because Dr. Lifton himself does not appear to be a shapeshifter. Over the years, in volumes like "The Nazi Doctors" and "Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima," he has been a rather unwavering voice speaking out against the wraiths and shadows of modernism that darkened the 20th century. His own career trajectory looks integrated, almost linear. Some chapters from his life story are narrated in the book; indeed, his voice almost comes to seem juxtaposed with the voices of Carol C., George R. and the rest. Other parts of his curriculum vitae are well known. There is not much that is protean,

*Is your self shattered,
your life riddled with
inconsistency? Cheer
up. That means you are
resilient, post-modern.*

contradictory or elusive about the identity of a nomadic, secularized, Jewish male of Eastern European background who becomes a distinguished member of the intellectual circle that once surrounded Erik Erikson (the near legendary and very seer-like ego psychologist, psychoanalyst and humanist) and then searches for transcendental values in New York City while directing the Center on Violence and Human Survival at John Jay College.

Why is this rather undivided author in awe of discontinuous change? Why is he eager to view the power to alter the self in a glorious light? To answer that, one must understand something of post-modern discourse, because when Dr. Lifton looks into his heart of hearts at his own rather fundamental identity, what he sees is an affirmative post-modern soul.

"The Protean Self" is a fascinating and appealing book because it is a near-perfect

example of an intellectual stance that skeptics sometimes disparage as "post-modernism with a happy face." In case you still haven't figured out what post-modernism is all about (the only precise definition states that post-modernism is not modernism and it is not pre-modernism either) you may be pleased to learn that there are two varieties of it: affirmative and skeptical.

Pauline Marie Rosenau, a political theorist and the author of "Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences," has surveyed the post-modern scene and kept some notes on the two species. She maintains that skeptical post-modernists react against modernism (the quest for certainty and unitary truth) by arguing "that the post-modern age is one of fragmentation, disintegration... absence of moral parameters... the demise of the subject... the end of the author... the impossibility of truth, and the abrogation of the Order of Representation." The skeptics do not have a happy face although, despite the end of the author, they keep putting their names on their books.

THE affirmative post-modernists also react against modernism, she says, but without the leap into nihilism (the idea of a world without meaning) and without the despair. The affirmatives agree with the skeptics that the loose change of daily living does not add up or make consistent sense. They agree that one should not look for life's bottom line, because there is none. They don't try to wrap up the truth in a simple package. However, in contrast to the skeptics, the affirmatives don't play the meaning-of-life game by all-or-nothing rules. The affirmatives honor plurality and multiplicity, delighting in the partial and inconsistent meanings revealed by disparate forms and alternative ways of life.

With the publication of "The Protean Self," Dr. Lifton establishes the current standard for affirmative post-modern commentary on the problem of personal identity. There can be no doubt that he is vulnerable to criticism from many angles. His two character portraits, fundamentalist and protean, are painted with a coarse brush. Totalitarian impulses, the desire for consistency, the doctrine of strict interpretation, Gnosticism, millenarianism and ideas about nuclear war are all mixed together and somewhat conflated on a canvas called fundamentalism. On a second canvas he plays a bit fast and loose with the contrast between the one and the many, the unitary and the multiple, the same and the different, the merely different and the truly contradictory. He is perhaps too prone to interpret every change or disruption in life circumstances as psychologically deep and protean.

Nevertheless this is a smart, sensitive and up-to-date book. As he revises the psychology of the self, Dr. Lifton is subtle, even profound, in drawing a line between multiplicity and fragmentation. To those who are nostalgic for the age of the unitary ego, his message is that it is better to be fluid, resilient and on the move than to be firm, fixed, self-assured and settled. To those who worry that the post-modern age is an age of shattered selves, dissociative states, multiple personality disorders and identity diffusion, Dr. Lifton brings the good news that discontinuity can be a mirror of reality, and the standard for a reasonable life. □