

FLUCTUATION  
&  
INTERACTION  
WITH SELF

ELKA S.



This sculpture is a representation of how people change into new people over time. I want to show the relationship between past, present, future, and inevitability. Each figure represents one of the four time periods associated with specific stages in life.

I was inspired by, and want to capture, a “holy feeling” with my statue because of what the evolution of Self has provided me throughout my life. I have only ever known my own thoughts and experiences, so I only have myself to rely on. Instead of praying to an omnipotent God, I use prayer as a time to reflect on my past and to ask my future for guidance and perspective.

As an Existentialist, I create meaning for my own life. This work validates my own existence and personifies my feelings of how I view my personality and essence. I fluctuate and change; yet, somehow, I am still me.

Elka S

“Hello, my name is Elka Louise Sorensen! What’s your name?” was a common introduction I said to strangers when I was a young child. The audacity of my past behavior still shocks me, looking back now as an inept socializer. Ask anyone in my family and they will tell you that, as a child, I had the characteristics of a daredevil and an adventurer. I never had stage-fright and preferred to overact and belt my note when I had the chance in choir; I looked for large jumps while skiing and went through tight spots between the trees, even after cartoonishly hitting them multiple times. In foreign places, I had little fear of eating new foods or wandering down unfamiliar streets.

Despite being a fairly open and excitable child, my personality back then deviates a lot from who I see myself as today. I no longer associate myself as confident when meeting new people and can hardly be bothered to put myself in the spotlight. For a long time it felt as though I lost a part of my personality. I was not being authentic to myself and failed to meet my “potential”. I believed I was put on this Earth with a genuine self that I had to be to feel complete and was scared that I had diverged from it. Over time, I started to reject that mentality and question my individuality all together. Is there even a true self? What is the effect of the idea that we do have one?

Looking at myself now, I notice I do not view my past to be me, but rather a separate person that I look back on for reference. I use memories and reflect on who I am and who I will be. My past, present, and future become multiple entities in my brain and my source of comfort and perspective when dealing with certain issues. I try to get good grades in school and experiment with other activities so my options for myself can be broader and my future, who I will ultimately become, will be more comfortable. I can try all I want to be more pleased with who I am as a person, but circumstantially I will do whatever I can to survive. I put in effort to live with morals and to do what is right or is accepted in society, but we as people cannot help but deviate from those expectations so we can live to the utmost satisfaction. I have told lies in my life to keep blame far away from me and avoided confrontation so I do not have to deal with my problems. Is this a feature of my personality or is it a decision I make in terms of what I have experienced?

Yet, where I find I have the most difficulty accepting who I am is when other people in my life deny me from not believing in my consistent self. As a Western society, we put a lot of emphasis on the individual through ideas like the American Dream and personality identification. We value those who have made it in the word instead of encouraging those who are up and coming. We see this all throughout our country in our divide of ideals and understanding because of our inability to accept our lack of uniqueness or differences. We have a desire to be consistently talented and believed in by our peers, and when we start to change, we tend to deny it. My friends want to believe that I am who I was when we became close and are scared to think that I might not be. When I was younger, I would say I was more aware and frightened of things like trends. Now I find myself making my own path for my life by going to a new school that is almost the polar opposite from my academic upbringing. Despite always being interested in art, it was never something that was prevalent to other’s views of me. Even with people who were not extremely invested in my life, it always seemed like everyone was surprised when I announced myself to be departing from the place I had spent my entire life in. I averted their expectations by creating more of a life for myself outside what people saw me as so I could grow out of what I believed to be a stagnant high school experience.

I have had a lot of difficulty in my life with people I love where it has been hard for us both to realize we have evolved to be different people who are less attuned with each other. The

relationship does not need to stop, yet a reassessment of what is needed in it is imperative; it is awkward and even sad to acknowledge that it is not what it once was. My mother especially refuses to believe that I am not the same person throughout my life. When I asked her about the difference between present and past me, she admitted there was a shift in my behavior from an extrovert to an introvert, yet she dismissed any idea me not having a true self. What effect does time have on our traits and views of ourselves and why do we want them to stay the same?

I do not believe anymore that I was born with a purpose that was determined by some greater fate. That does not necessarily mean I do not find meaning in my life, but rather that I have to determine it for myself through my experiences. This constitutes me as an existentialist. Existentialism states that all living creations exist first and essence follows, whereas most other creations are built with a purpose intended. Jean Paul Sartre emphasized this philosophy by stating that “existentialism is a humanism” and there is no God to tell us why we were put on this Earth. We have to figure that out for ourselves by creating our identities through what we do. The point of evaluating our lives is not to discover or know exactly what is going on, but rather to change the way life is seen. To be authentic to ourselves, we must first put emphasis on our emotions and feelings so we can distance ourselves from logical or cultural conclusions of existence. Things like anxiety helps us recognize our own consciousness and affirm what we fear for ourselves and our future. We confirm the absurdity of our existence and freedom rather than depend on our independence to show us our authenticity. Individuality these days is seen more as a cultural trend that celebrates ones differences than something that confirms our independent thought.

From this, I have derived meaning from myself. I have never had a strong relationship with religion, it being something I just grew up without. As I have thought about it though, the more I considered the idea of the omnipresent being coming from within my brain versus an outside ambiguous force. God, in its many definitions, can be defined as the moral authority or “The Infinite Mind” when describing what it does for the world and humanity. Because I feel as though different points in my life are so distant from each other, I look to my other selves for advice and to understand my reality. What I have learned from my past and the endless possibilities for my future give me the potential to be that infinite mind that I look for in my prayer. When I pray, I talk to myself and express what I desire going forward. I address the “me” from the forthcoming time to give me the ability to see perspective and broad scope of my options down the road. Most people see that as asking God for guidance, but I believe it to be a time of reflection with myself to see what the present wants with everything I have known and gained up to that point.

Despite there being a truth to wants a needs, there is no true self. If one strips away every component of the things they like and dislike, there is nothing left but a husk. Our personalities seem to be purely circumstantial to everything we experience. Erving Goffman, a philosopher who analyzed human interaction and observations of contemporary life, agreed that “We display a series of masks to others” that is based off of the circumstances we find ourselves in everyday. There is nothing lying underneath all of those personalities we put on and we mistake our masks for our authenticity to our identity instead of the idea that our realities and roles stay somewhat consistent and do not shift very often. Goffman believed that there are tactics to social interaction and we form ourselves to the image we want. Despite the theory, it is still very difficult to not believe in a deep down desire or personality that people inhabit. Even Goffman made some assumptions about gender that have been broken down over time because of his broad generalizations that he gained from the types of people he was constantly around. It is hard to

excuse people because of the situations they are and have been in and anyone can fall into the trap of deciding who someone is before they truly know what they have been through.

At the same time there is no essential self, it does not contradict the commonly known phrase “Know Thyself” inscribed on the Temple of Apollo. The self is an appearance or illusion that exists because of the ability to recognize that very thought. You cannot think you do not exist because in order to claim you do not, you must first exist. Rene Descartes, a man attempting to find foundational truths in knowledge, believed “I think therefore I am,” which applies to appearance and thoughts and is the only true idea in life. Even when left with nothing, we still have ourselves. No matter the influence or wrong conclusions we can come to, we are still able to recognize our beings and have doubts about anything outside ourselves. The fact that the self is only a thought process does not change the fact that we can learn to understand that our thoughts keep us making rational choices and ones that help us adapt. Yet the true self is still an illusion that is a separate entity from the human body. The bare minimum we can do is recognize our consciousness, no deceiver can prove that fact otherwise.

Though, even if we are able to perceive our souls, what makes us, us? If one were to exchange their brain for another’s, are they still true to their own being? If people discover that this phenomenon has happened, how would they decide who is who? Simply put, people would pretty easily decide that if anybody has the mind, memories, and thoughts of the original person, it does not matter the physical appearance they take on, they are still the same as they were before. Identity is associated with the human mind because we see our body as something we have versus something we are.

Yet take this brain-swap scenario and apply it to Franz Kafka’s (a German short story novelist) *Metamorphosis*. In the story, Kafka presents his ideas of self-identification with his main character, Gregor Samsa, turning into a bug when he wakes up. Unfortunately for Gregor, in his conscious reality, he is put in a position where he can no longer be consistent to his life thus far. His family no longer recognizes him, he cannot communicate that he is still the same consciousness, and he is extremely distant from who he was before. He even starts to turn against things he liked as a human and doubts his deservedness to continue living. Because of the different turn his life took on him, his actions and perspective completely change from what they were. Kafka wants to show through his short story that behavior is not consistent and can change as quickly as our environments fall down around us. We go through these changes slowly every day through consequence of time. Essentially, no one is safe from metamorphosis and we lose who we used to be constantly.

Even though Gregor Samsa goes through the inner turmoil of losing his identity, the audience never doubts that he is the same mind he was when he was in his human form. Yet when we compare this idea to the metamorphosis of a caterpillar, where it changes virtually everything about itself in it’s cocoon over a long period of time, it is truly the same being? Same goes for the thought experiment/paradox of the Ship of Theseus where every part of a ship is replaced with new materials overtime to restore its conditions. People go back and forth on if the ship is fundamentally the same, yet we never do that for humans, despite going through the exact same process ourselves.

So if the authentic self does not exist, why do we cling on to the concept so tightly? We all want to believe that we can all be happy if our lives our stable and that our dreams could one day be fulfilled. I, for example, want to be some sort of artist when I am older, but that could change throughout time depending what I go through and whom I meet. Yet, I do not want it to change because what I want in the future is beyond my grasp and I want my goals for my

existence to be worthwhile. As existentialists, we find meaning for ourselves while stumbling around blindly trying to understand the world. To find meaning, we seek consistency. We need to believe that there is a consistency because then we could possibly have a blueprint to our life that is largely random and difficult. Nice people are always going to be nice and generous people are always going to give. Yet no person is ever capable of showing the same characteristics constantly and what we do can be purely based on what has happened to us. Maybe something happens where the nice person is pushed to the point of discomfort or even snapping and displays unkind characteristics. Because that moment was purely situational, they revert back to a usual response of kindness afterwards. Of course everyone has limits to what they can take emotionally, but why does that not prove the idea that the characteristics we show are purely based off what is capable for us in that current situation?

Erik Erikson, a German-American philosopher, created the “eight stages of development” for a person throughout their life. He tried to prove that humans, no matter what stage they are in, still go through times of discovery and evolution. Each stage has two qualities that counteract each other to decide what life will be like until the next point of realization. For example, the first stage, basic trust vs. mistrust, which occurs during infancy can determine a lot of how we process the world in our growth later down the line. Almost all the effects of these marks come from outside people and situations that we can reflect back on to decide how we react and think about the society around us. Throughout our lives, new people become important and play roles in how successful and satisfying our life is, which only come into factor after other stages determine our livelihood. It is all a domino effect of situation and surroundings to situation and surroundings. With age comes experience and with experience comes with a new way of looking at ourselves, our environments, and things/those we care about.

People want to believe that they are the same deep down but that they are also capable of change. If someone did a heinous crime towards another person, it is reasonable to infer that the victim has a hard time believing that the criminal is able to create a new mindset. Yet even if the criminal believes they have changed and that their crime was committed even by a different person separate from themselves, we have little tolerance in hearing out that separation. Believing in the deep down person we must have can get us in trouble where we lose hope in some and put too much in others. When someone does something that the larger society deems as unacceptable, it can be difficult because then suddenly our whole perspective of that person is stuck at an impasse. We also seem to turn against people very quickly when these issues become popular because it is easier to believe in a new consistency and be with others than be alone and question someone’s actions.

Ultimately, we have expectations for our humanity. We filter and censor the world and it's difficult questions until it is something we are comfortable living in. Our expectations direct our mind to what we see and how we see it. Yet, people are flexible and will adapt to any stage of life. In this age of strong individualism, it is hard to believe we are more than who we appear to be, both to each other and to ourselves. We quiz our personalities, asking people questions from if they will be successful later in life to what kind of scent they are. One of the most popular quizzes is the Myers-Briggs test that puts everyone’s personality into one of sixteen different categories. When I took the test, I received INFJ, which essentially means I am “vision and meaning oriented, quietly intense, creative, sensitive, seek[ing] harmony and growth, perceiving and inspiring.” I would say this test is accurate in how I see myself at the moment, yet while I was taking it, I felt rather uncommitted to every decision I made. I still don’t feel

confident in who I am. But sure, tests like these validate the way I think, yet it feels more like my certificate for how others see me than how I see myself.

Every cell in our body gets replaced around every seven years and even parts of our brain turn over every once in awhile, yet we still want to be special and not like anyone else despite us all going through similar things. Believing we are original is a nice temporary actualization, yet it hinders our ability interact with ourselves in a meaningful way. If we cannot realize we are more than what people say of us or what we want to believe ourselves as, we cannot continue to evolve and fluctuate. I want to show my own personal beliefs within myself and my humanity, and what I believe might get people to understand each other better.

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