Ephraim Meir

Dialogical Thought and Identity
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Trans-Different Religiosity in Present Day Societies
To our grandchildren Moshe Meori, Emmanuelle, Natan and Shachar
Preface

The present volume is about identity, dialogically constructed. My own identity as a scholar and writer was shaped and reshaped by many other people to whom I am most grateful. More particularly, the final redaction of this specific book became possible through the attention of some people whom I want to mention now. I wholeheartedly thank Yehoyada Amir for reading the manuscript carefully and with great sensitivity. His detailed, powerful suggestions and ideas were most helpful for the final redaction. Maier Fenster made many critical remarks, through which the present book gained more coherence. With his impeccable logic, Maier forced me to refine the notions of identity, “self-transcendence,” and “trans-difference” that appear throughout this volume. I further thank the very heterogeneous group of people that gathered together each month at our home and with whom I discussed many of the items in this work. My colleague and friend Alexander Even-Chen read the entire manuscript and generously provided me with insights from which I greatly benefited. My student Eliyahu Yoggev read parts of the manuscript and made some helpful remarks. I owe thanks to Michal Michelson, who edited the text. Finally, I express my warmest feelings for Shoshi, the love of my life and the source of my joy, whose constant care, endless patience, great dry humor and permanent encouragement formed the necessary atmosphere in which I could tranquilly write and complete the present work.
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Introduction

The present study focuses on the notion of identity, mainly, but not exclusively, in Jewish dialogical thought. Eight chapters deal with individual and collective identity. An introductory chapter contains reflections on the problems and possibilities involved in the shaping of identity in present day societies. Five chapters study the problem of identity as it is treated by dialogical thinkers, and in the penultimate chapter I present my own thesis on self-transcendence and trans-difference as the crux of identity. The greatness of the subject lies in transcending itself and becoming other to itself in the concrete encounter with others. This identity of the othered self represents the ineffaceable, but often forgotten higher identity, which is the precondition for any dialogical life. I explain how the identity of the subject is shaped by others and how it uniquely shapes itself. In the last chapter, I outline how the self-transcendent and trans-different religious I, in its particularity and in its connection to others, interprets texts that testify to radical “alterity,” which in turn interprets that I.

This book presents the novel approach of a selfhood that is grounded in dialogical thought and its implications for the understanding of what identity is about. I do not approach the self primarily as an entity with consciousness, a theoretical subject. The postmodern view of the self as a conglomerate of impersonal forces is not my assessment, although I recognize a certain truth in this standpoint. Nor do I approach the self as possessing being in itself, in a Heideggerian sense, or will to power in a Nietzschean manner. I conceive of the self primarily as open, related and called to sorority and fraternity before any choice, and as socially and ethically embedded and engaged in the world. Consequently, subjectivity in my view means the end of a closed identity identical to itself; it is rather the concrete possibility of relating and answering with an opened up and open identity which receives and hosts “alterity.” Without denying that the subject is the fountainhead of rational knowledge and culture, I come to an understanding of the subject as elected to live with and for the other and to create a common world for all. The higher identity of the subject is then a kind of non-identity, a self that refuses to return to itself. I call the process of the self that does not primarily assert itself, but rather confirms the other, the process of self-transcendence. At the same time, this subject is also other to the other, unique and ineffable within itself. The self is therefore two-sided: one shapes the self and the self is shaped. The self has an immanent and transcendent component: it has its own concrete existence, and in all its concreteness it is in contact with the other. I maintain that each human being is different and trans-different. Each person is unique and irreplaceable in his inescapable interconnection with the non-I. Each person is also different from the other, but nevertheless, trans-difference or rela-
tion with the other is possible. The other makes the self different, and the self also differs itself from the other. I view the self in two fashions: primarily as a self that extends to the other, at the same time retaining an element of individuality, of difference from the other. Between the self and the other, trans-difference is possible. Such a trans-difference cannot be proved; it can only be lived and described as an elevated form of life.

In my reflections on identity, I pay special attention to building religious identity in today’s secular, disenchanted and pluralist societies. These thoughts are, so to speak, the application of my thoughts on the self. They concern the realization of the self in society and deal with the religious self, as well as with the relation of religions to each other and to the world at large. A discussion of religious identity as the quest for the spiritual is much needed, since identity is frequently also religious identity. Judaism and other religions are in flux at present, since they are challenged by the accepted values of the secular world. On the other hand, Western societies have clearly moved beyond secularization. The sudden return to religion is certainly not always a dialogical enterprise, and it is frequently unsuccessful. Nevertheless, religion is again à la mode; we are in what Willaime calls “ultra-modernity,”1 where the relationships between society, religion and state are rearranged, and traditions and institutions reinterpreted and critically evaluated. In this context, reflection on the impact of religious identity upon society becomes crucial. I am looking for an underlying depth structure in this identity rather than searching for an essence or relating to concrete practices and beliefs. My meta-religious standpoint allows for criticism of religions and at the same time for a search for meaning within them. In short: the core concept in the present book is individual and collective identity, with special attention to religious identity as it interacts with society as such. I understand identity in a dialogical way. More specifically, the religious I is in dialogue with secularity, with its past, with the sources of its tradition and with other persons in its peer group as well as in other groups. In the study of identity, dialogue is not some luxury, rather it is an integral element of identity itself: the discussion of contact with otherness and of self-transcendence as openness to the other thus becomes a necessity.

Dialogue with the philosophical discourse of five towering thinkers of the twentieth century forms the philosophical framework for my thoughts. I discuss the views of the self in the philosophies of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Franz Fischer and Emmanuel Levinas. In the thoughts

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1 The term designates the present stage of modernity in which a new dialogue between states, society and religion is taking place. Jean-Paul Willaime, Le retour du religieux dans la sphère publique. Vers une laïcité de reconnaissance et de dialogue (Lyon: Olivétan, 2008).
of these philosophers, as well as in my own thought, identity is reformulated as what is ultimate in the self, and as what makes life meaningful and worth living. In discussion with the aforementioned thinkers, I will develop a new paradigm of the self. I see the self as the result of a confrontation with meaning as well as the result of the active search for uniqueness. From the religious perspective, the self is created, and called to recreate and reshape itself in contact with other selves. In connection with the Ineffable, the self likewise becomes indefinable. In interpreting sources that testify to the connectivity with the Ineffable, the self is called to develop a dialogical identity and a dialogical hermeneutics, in which the attention to the other is central.
Chapter 1
Elucidating Identity and Alterity

This chapter shows how elevated identities are formed through commitments and orientation and, inversely, how problematic, exclusivist identities come into being. On the philosophical level, I maintain that subjectivity immediately implies involvement with the non-I, and that the specificity and loftiness of the subject lie in the transcendence of one’s own self or in the qualitative perspective towards the other. Simultaneously, each self is unique due to the other. In other words: the I is “created” by the other, brought into life and light by the other. This grants it its distinctiveness, but it also shapes itself uniquely as a singular creation and, as a unique being, it lives with others. I not only study the individual self, but also the communal self and show how both selves are interrelated.

Views on Identity

Any reflection on self identity requires that one take into account the scientific viewpoints on the self, more specifically the sociological and psychological views. In the larger setting of the abundant sociological, psychological and cultural studies literature, identity is frequently perceived as the identity of a citizen, as ethnic belonging or as a socio-cultural and gender identity. Yet these are only a few aspects of identity, albeit important ones. One also defines oneself by referring to one’s professional activities. One’s identity, however, is not reducible to one’s function in society or to one’s appearance in public. The self is not to be exclusively identified with one’s public image, as Jorge Luis Borges beautifully illustrated in his short story “Borges and I.” Sartrian gazes neither make up one’s

1 See inter alia Heiner Keupp et.al., eds., Identitaetskonstruktionen. Das Patchwork der Identitaeten in der Spaetmoderne (Reinbek: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999).
2 A sad example of a reductive view on identity was the case of Israeli showman Dudu Topaz. This well-known actor and comedian was very successful in the entertainment business. He got involved in a series of attacks on other TV personalities, after he became less wanted in the TV world, was arrested and committed suicide in his cell. Reducing identity to the way one appears to others seems to be extremely problematic. Once one adopts the viewpoint that being is merely appearing, reminiscent of George Berkeley’s saying “esse est percipi” (to be is to be perceived), the way to being becomes blocked from the moment the appearing ceases. Identity is therefore more than appearing, more than seeming and being perceived. One’s face is not a mere façade.
identity, nor do they transform one into an “en soi,” an “in itself.”4 Being looked upon limits, but one is not necessarily caught in the Hegelian master-slave dialectics.5 In my opinion, deeper identity is not definable, since it stems from the recognition of a never-satisfied care for the other and from the fact that the human being is connected to an undefinable Creator. One’s identity ultimately escapes definition because of the vast spaces of one’s interiority that in Tomas Tranströmer’s poetry are as endless as the vaults of a Romanesque church.6 I maintain that deeper identity engages a person in an all-encompassing manner. There is currently a living socio-cultural and psycho-cultural interest in identity, through which one tries to understand one’s attachment to a certain community and culture in se. My approach is a philosophical one: I am interested in meta-identity as that which makes up the uniqueness of a human being and which brings him into contact with the interpellation of the other. In contrast to the Heideggerian ontological difference in which the being and the Being are related, I try to think—in the footsteps of Levinas—of another difference, where the I is I because of the call of the non-I and where life is not seen as something to be possessed, but as something which is received and which is a gift to the other human being. This difference leads to non-indifference and breaks with the violent enterprise of a mastering and possessing being. Something of the non-I takes place in the I, which is called to brotherhood. Yet, unlike Levinas, I give weight to the active formation of the self. The Copernican revolution of Levinas put the other in the center as constituting the self, and not vice versa, but I add that the self also shapes itself in front of the other. Moreover, paying particular attention to the religious self, I call for a new hermeneutics of religious sources, in which one’s own identity is formed not on the negative background of others, but in dialogue with them. Frequently, identity is seen today as problematic and is held in suspect, since it attaches the individual to a collective sameness, without difference. Foucault is an eminent example of a thinker who has shown how identities are ideologically created in oppressive systems that subjugate human beings and make self-transformation utterly impossible.7 Recognizing the importance of identity as

5 Hitler’s “Mein Kampf” is the prime example of the objectifying gaze, degrading human beings into subhuman beings.
6 Tomas Tranströmer, “Romanesque Arches,” in Transtömer, New Collected Poems (Chester Springs, Penn.: Dufour, 1998), 158. The Swedish writer and Nobel Prize winner expresses in his poem that a human being is forever unfinished. In the poem an angel whispers: “Don't be ashamed of being human, be proud! Inside you vault opens behind vault endlessly. You will never be complete, that's how it’s meant to be.”
7 See Michel Foucault’s works, Madness and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception, and even more his books, Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Pris-
a unifying force, I share at the same time the postmodern aversion to a certain version of identity, and defend a deeper self that resists the pressures of a homogenizing and colonializing society. Identities provide human beings with meaning and self-understanding, but the deeper identity is one that is possessed by something foreign to the same; in fact, it leaves the same behind in favor of the other. Self-understanding without understanding of the other seems to be an impossibility. In my reflections on identity and beyond identity, I will employ some terms that are current in sociological and psychological literature, but, in availing myself of this lexicon, I give a quite different meaning to expressions as “self-difference” and “trans-difference,” as will become clear in the last chapters of this book. The use of these two terms, as well as of the term “self-transcendence,” will be clarified in the course of my discussion of different thinkers’ perceptions concerning the self; a final clarification comes only at the end of the book. Provisionally, I provide the reader with a definition of these words; their precise meaning will be further elucidated in the course of this volume. Consciousness, I posit, does not characterize the self, but rather self-transcendence and trans-difference. When employing the concept of “self-transcendence” I refer to the orientation of the self to the other in answer to his call. It is the active reaching out to the other that breaches the closed circle of the self and allows the self to transcend itself in relation to the other. The term “self-difference” is not synonymous with self-transcendence; it denotes becoming other to oneself, discovering the layer of alterity in oneself, as the consequence of self-transcendence. Finally, “trans-difference” is the result of going beyond the differences of the I and the other in a dialogical manner, in the creation of a “between.”

I am different from others, but, when constructing my identity, that identity is also built by others. Identity is primarily located in the foreignness of the self to itself or in the positive alienation from oneself in contact with the other. In the growing globalization of our societies, in which differences are gradually effaced, the question of individualization is a burning one. However, the individual, in its uniqueness, as I see it, is not the result of a permanent return of the self to itself; it rather consists of its centrifugal movement towards the other. In liberal societies, there is a multiplicity of choices; more than ever one may dynamically shape oneself. However, more choices do not automatically guarantee a good life. Additional freedom and freedom of choice do not lead per se to increased spiritual freedom and to a more responsible civil society. Postmodernists such as Jean-François Lyotard have criticized the possibility and ideal of absolute freedom.8

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Identity is less the result of endless freedom than of being inspired by the other’s happiness, being close to his pleasure and laughter and also being haunted by nearness to the other’s pain, tears and suffering. This book therefore deals with man as the problem of all philosophy, with his being what Protagoras called the measure of all things, and with man in his creativity. A person’s identity is not a substance, but a non-substance; it is the marvel of “passing” from the same to the other. It is the transformation of a given to a gift, trans-substantiation as “conversion” to the other. The terms “passing” and “conversion” are pivotal in this work and I will clarify these notions in the course of my book.

In the socio-psychological literature on identity, one employs the terminology of autonomous self-management, identity achievement, formation of identity, identity negotiation, construction of identity, reshaping identity, search for identity and identity policy; one also discusses the enterprise self, self-creation, self theory and self-narrative. Old theories of identity are definitively gone. Identities were frequently thought of as being formed by means of being the object of a meta-narrative. Today, we assist in the collapse of meta-narratives in order to encourage the speedy growth of individual narratives. We advance the challenge to classical patterns such as the traditional family with its fixed roles for man and woman. Collective identities are also being transformed. Homogenous religious communities are suddenly being confronted more and more with religious experiences that are sometimes radically other, and exposed to alternative forms of life. There is even a current “supermarket” of religions, and religious people are frequently obliged to explain their own position to others. In this context, apologetics are not necessarily bad. Fear of the challenges of plurality may lead to the false security of a traditional life without surprises from the “outside,” whereas respect and enthusiasm for alternative lifestyles may lead to the respect for or integration of heterogeneous elements in one’s own life. In democratic societies, the I is less dominated by control mechanisms and social pressure; instead, the I emancipates itself from controlling instances. In such societies, heterogeneity is celebrated, and young and old, left and right, secular and religious, newcomers and the original population thrive.

9 Jean-Luc Marion remarks that, at the Council of Trent, the term “transsubstantiatio” was equal to “conversio” or to the metabolè of the Greek fathers (Dieu sans l’être [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991], 229). He further notes that the verb transsubstantiare is attested in 1202, before the substantive transsubstantiatio, which appears from 1215 on.

side by side. Totalitarian societies or totalitarian elements in democratic societies still try to fashion collective memory through ideological reeducation and propaganda. In free societies, however, the individual endeavors to escape collective pressure, and, concomitantly, frequently has the accompanying uneasy feeling of being without roots. At any rate, democratic societies have the advantage of allowing for diversity, self-realization and freedom of expression, which is denied in exclusivist, homogeneous groups and in colonializing thoughts.

Questions are legion in today's research: how does the subject understand himself in this ever-changing world? Is there a fixed, hard core in the I—do I have some unchangeable substance, a soul, for instance (as in Descartes' thought), or is everything fluid? Am I different from one moment to the next or not? Is our identity a patchwork? Should one get used to the lack of orientation in rapidly changing societies? Is there anything that remains stable and fixed in a society that highlights mobility, speed, flexibility and short term relations? What happens when one looks for a "pure" identity in closed, homogeneous societies? Or when one is not linked to traditions? What should we think about a fundamentalist self that harbors exclusive "we" feelings? Is the self an illusion, as Buddhists think? Should we give up certain beliefs about personal identity? Should we celebrate identity as non-identity in a globalized world? What is the exact relationship between inner coherence and the outer society? Does the emphasis put upon the realization of the self lead to an erosion of social life? Is individualization a threat to solidarity or can one think of both phenomena together? How are societies with their control mechanisms reacting to the growing individualization? Should one adjust oneself and in a conformist manner adapt oneself to the larger society? Or, on the contrary, should society be respectful of any self-creating individual? Should one look for harmonization or live the tension between the I and society at large? Is it relevant to speak about particular identities, such as white identity, black identity or Latino identity? Is the West too engrossed with individuality such that it is to the detriment of society, and is the East so focused upon

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11 Prof. Dorji Wangchuk informs me that the Buddha talked about the self (atma) in a very cautious way. He compared the human being and his self with a tiger that takes his young animals in the mouth, not too strongly or tightly, but also not too loosely.

12 Derek Parfit casts doubt on some of these beliefs. He maintains that self-interest, fear of death or of irreversibly passing time is lessened if one adopts his way of thinking on the problem of personal identity. He formulates his remarks on personal identity in a science fiction-like discussion with David Wiggins, who imagined his own operation in which his brain is divided and transplanted into new bodies, while retaining the same character and apparent memories of his life. See i.a. Derek Parfit, "The Unimportance of Identity," in Henry Harris (ed.), *Identity: Essays Based on Herbert Spencer Lectures Given in the University of Oxford* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), 13-45; "An Interview with Derek Parfit," in *Cogito* 9 (1995), 115-125.
sociality that it suffocates individuality? Does not the West excessively define itself as the opposite of the East and vice versa? What about the problematic contrast between North and South? Are sovereignty and heteronomy, autonomy and communal affiliation, freedom and adherence to transcendence radically opposed or may they exist together? Should one overcome a particular tradition in an increasingly global world that erodes distinct ways of existence or has particularity its proper place in the larger society? It is not my intention to answer all of these questions regarding the self in different contexts within the limits of the present volume, yet I hope that my reflections offer a range of possible answers to a number of the above questions that daily occupy our minds and even haunt us. I will address the question of deep identity as orientation of the self to the other, notwithstanding many changes that may take place in one’s identity. I will also discuss the realities of homogeneous and heterogeneous, exclusive and inclusive societies, as well as the relationships between the individual and the collective self and between particularity and universalism.

One thing is clear: what was once fixed—our bodies, our social roles, our belonging to nations and religious groups—all this has become increasingly subject to change. To a significant extent, the I has become a place of experi-

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13 It has been argued that theorizing in Western societies puts a strong emphasis on personal identity and achievements. Issues of the self are usually conceived from the standpoint of the individual. Nevertheless, selfhood is affected by the groups to which one belongs and social factors influence self-definition. See Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears and Bertjan Doosje, “Self and Social Identity,” in Annual Review of Psychology 53 (2002): 161-186. These scholars have shown how social selves have a powerful impact upon the individual; they describe the complex interaction between the personal and collective levels of the self and conclude that group commitment and features of the social context are crucial determinants for the individual self. Mordechai Rotenberg (Hasidic Psychology. Making Space for Others [Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2003]) is also alert to the other-centered aspect of the I. He works with the concept of “tsimtsum” (contraction) in order to demonstrate the other-centeredness of therapy from the Jewish perspective. He refers to the Hasidic idea that the wise man “who learns from everybody” (Mishna Avot 4,1) is the one who looks in the mirror of the other and knows his own faults by seeing the faults of his fellow man. Rotenberg discusses this mirroring process. He also brings the well-known parable of the indik (turkey) who sits naked under the table and only eats sunflower seeds. The parable exemplifies the other-centered idea of uplifting the other by going down to his level and thus restoring the one who behaves as an indik to his previous status of a prince. Central in Rotenberg’s book is the Jewish idea of “arevim zeh ba-zeh” (Shavuot 39.1), of mutual responsibility.

14 For an analysis of tensions and misunderstandings between the West and China in view of forging new relationships, see Lu-nian Zheng and Daniel Haber, Chine-Occident. Le grand malentendu du xxie siècle (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010). Haber describes (115) how the West sees China as a child that has to learn how to stand upon its feet, but for intellectuals of the Chinese civilization, it is the West that is only a child.
ments, a conglomeration of functions and a complex of sub-identities. However, I deal with the I that is involved in rather unavoidable processes of change because of its contact with the other. In postmodern times, the I is more and more a platform where a variety of self-concepts are tried out in a multiplicity of situations. Given the actual context, one has to accept a permanent change in the self, a mobility and modifiability in its interaction with a dynamic, ever-altering society. Hence, the I needs to be flexible and ready to change in the process of its search for and construction of identity. But if this is the case, is there anything that remains permanent? Is the subject not always connected to the larger community? How should one conceive of the self and the interconnection between identity and alterity? Do we have to admit in a post-different society that the subject is “dead,” in analogy to the “death of God” that preceded it? That for too long of a time it has been subjected to oppressive meta-narratives or grand narratives, to big systems and discourses of power? Or is the survival of the subject possible? And if yes, what are the conditions necessary for such a survival? The present book suggests that we may come to a renaissance, a rebirth of the subject within the relationship between the self and the other. The subject may be conceived of differently, namely as that unique reality where “othering” or “altering” takes place. Identities are in flux, but there is something permanent: the orientation to the other, the Buberian I-you, is at the heart of a meta-identity that does not chain the I to itself, but frees it in engagement with the other.

Identity: A Fictitious Story?

According to Paris-based philosopher Ali Benmakhlouf, one’s identity is always ascribed by another person. One’s personal identity and also collective identity are allotted (attribué) by the non-I. In Lewis Carroll’s fairytale, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865), Alice’s identity is not clear; it is in fact without frontiers, a labyrinth, a vertigo. When asked who she is, she answers that she doesn’t know; once she was tall, now she is small. She has completely changed. Reflecting on the playful story, Benmakhlouf concludes that one changes from one minute to another, that the link between one minute and another is a construction, and that identity in itself with its fixed structure and substantiality is an illusion, a fiction.

My colleague Even-Chen remarks that the problem with the above view is that it disregards memory. Even if there were no relation between one moment and another, memory binds these moments together. Benmakhlouf could object that memory arbitrarily binds them together. Yet, the bond between the various

moments created by memory nevertheless remains. A person lives with his own narrative that was formed by his memory and this is not fiction.

I share Benmakhlouf’s view that identity is attributed, as well as his suspicion of the word “identity.” One’s identity is indeed shaped, in context, but one’s identity is also out of context: one changes. Human beings alter, as do things and words, which also change in the course of time. Identity is constantly floating between multiplicity and unity, between similarity and dissimilarity, between resemblance and difference. I further agree that one should not bind the individual or a collective with stereotypes and that one may develop in different directions, since every human being may have access to culture with the potential to empower them and to give voice to all.

I certainly agree that identity is allotted by others, but in still another way than that supposed by Benmakhlouf. The other may indeed limit me, catch me in a Sartrian gaze and define me, making the crossing of my own frontiers virtually impossible. But the other also urges me to traverse the frontiers of the self, in order to visit him and allow him to visit me. The other challenges me to become self-different, undetermined. The always-situated I may construct itself, for it is always in context and determined, but also out of context and undetermined because of the appeal of the other to me, which makes up my higher identity, or the surprise of otherness in the same. In constructing myself I permanently change, but this permanent change is ultimately made possible by the challenge that the other human being represents to me: his appeal urges me to become self-transcendent. This challenge of the I by the other may shed new light upon the traditional Jewish saying: “It is greater to be commanded and to do than not to be commanded and to do” (gadol ha-metsuveh ve’oseh yoter mi-mi she-’eno metsuveh ve’oseh; Baba Qama, 38 a). Higher identity therefore is not based primarily upon one’s will and willingness; it stems from one’s being commanded by the other. With this orientation, the shaping of the self becomes meaningful.

The identity of things and therefore the question of the same and the other is discussed in Thisus’s paradox. Various philosophers, including Plato, raised the question of the same and the other by asking if Theseus’s ship, whose parts were gradually replaced by others until it became entirely new, was the same ship as the original vessel or not. In the same vein, Heraclitus thought that one cannot swim into the same river twice. His saying was surpassed by Cratylus, who proclaimed that one cannot even swim in the same river once, for streams change all the time. And so do words. The implications of words whose meaning constantly changes will be discussed in the last chapter, when I debate the relationship between believers and their founding documents. A modern variant of Thisus’s paradox lies in the question of if the famous ceiling painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine chapel, which was restored at the end of the preceding century, is still the same ceiling after restoration. Similarly, the believers’ movement of returning to their sources will never be a simple return to what once was.
“Othering” as Openness of the I

The changes in the self urged by present day society are important in themselves, but their description and impact upon identity are a function of what I call “meta-identity,” which is the actual object of the present study. The permanent feature in the self is the change of the self in service of the other. Central to this volume is the reflection on alterity as a precondition of the self and on self-difference as the insertion of a foreign element into the self without dissonance, which is necessary for the creation of a “higher” identity. Such an identity, or—perhaps better—“meta-identity,” is distinguished from the shaping of identity that is seen in social and psychological studies. In this “othered” identity, there is no a priori tension between the self and its being embedded in the larger society: on the contrary, the tie to society or the lived fraternity on a non-ethnic, radically heterogeneous basis is inherent in the identity that I discuss here. A quite different way of becoming other to oneself is present in the experience caused by psychedelics. However, this experience of the self, producing illusions without encountering the other, only leads to self-indulgence and pathological situations. The alterity that I am discussing is not an estrangement from the self nor an estrangement from society, but rather the ennoblement of the self in “passing” to the time of the other and engaging in conversation with him. Alterity at the heart of identity constitutes the real transcendence of the human being. The process of becoming different to oneself is present in “self-transcendence.” The result of an altered self is “self-difference.” Consequently, the I that becomes other to itself in a relationship is not the I that is psychologically in need of recognition by the other, but rather the I that, challenged by the other, recognizes the other and his or her needs and wishes. This recognition leads to self-transcendence and finally to self-difference. The I as different from the other and the other as different from the I may both further develop a trans-different attitude and strive for a lofty, dialogical condition.

Self-Creation or Created Self?

With the foregoing remarks I do not plead for a return to some form of an essentialist or substantial I. On the contrary, I describe how the I makes an exodus out of itself, in a movement that does not allow a return to the self. I do not go back to a definition of the I, certainly not an essentialist one, and gladly accept the protest of postmodernism against the I that is conceived of in such a way. I do not define identity as something hyper-individual that distinguishes the I from the other, although they both belong to an all-encompassing category. What I try to
do, following Levinas, is to develop an approach to the I as embodying reception of and relation to otherness, since the I is not only self-created, it is also “created,” a gift to others, a “me” embedded in a network of relationships. The I does not only shape itself, it is shaped by the other. It constantly transforms itself and is transformed by the non-I. Religiously formulated, the I is God’s creature, one among other creations, gifted with a soul and under the Law. In the framework of creation the I acknowledges that it is not absolutely autonomous, the master of its own being, and that its life is given and as such the result of an exteriority that cannot be absorbed in the totality of the same. In the words of Heschel’s religious philosophy: man is the object of God’s care. Formulated in a secular manner: the I is not a thing, to be manipulated and objectified or put in a category; it is not only there in the world persisting in its being, it is there in care and compassion for the other, a gift for the non-I. The I gets rid of its closed identity by taking an exit without return, in the turn to the other and in the context of a living relationship with him. The self transcends itself in relation to the other; in doing so, it is no longer purely in itself, but outside of itself, projected to the other. The otherness in the self as a result of the basic openness of the self to the other is the higher dimension in a particular existence, giving meaning to existence. Concomitantly, the I also creates itself in a unique manner, and it is here where I depart from Levinas. In my perspective, the existence of every human being is a self-shaping process. However, the individual’s existence is also shaped, because existence is necessarily coexistence. Individual identity and collective identity are therefore immediately intertwined: how one understands oneself is the way one conceives of oneself as part and parcel of the larger society. The I is not merely a part of a whole, yet, neither is the I a monadic entity without windows.

In sum, I am discussing a meta-identity; this is not an identity in some new meta-narrative, but an identity that is bound to the rights of the other human being and committed to the other with care for his irreducible alterity. To be is to care, to be yourself is to live with concern for the other. “Know[ing] yourself” is not the best way of reaching yourself, for the I is not primarily consciousness of the self. Reaching yourself takes place in “passing” to the other’s life. “Care,” not for yourself, but for the other, forms the I. The self is not first of all to be known by oneself, for the self is located elsewhere: in being concerned with the other. The deepest layer of the I is experienced and uncovered in the shaping of a unique self that is other to the other as well as in humble service of the other. Meta-identity and self-difference are realized when one leaves, like Abraham, the land of the self and all that is known and that links one to oneself, in order to go to an