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The Philosopher's I: Autobiography and the Search for the Self (review)

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Biography, Volume 30, Number 4, Fall 2007, pp. 666-669 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2008.0008>



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Otherwise, though, Bigsby's discussion is consistently competent (which is no mean achievement in a book of some 400 pages). It displays a high degree of perceptiveness and compassion, and students could certainly do a whole lot worse than choosing this volume as a general introduction to issues relating to the (literary) memorialization and representation of the Holocaust.

Lars Fischer

J. Lenore Wright. *The Philosopher's I: Autobiography and the Search for the Self*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. 217 pp. ISBN 0-7914-6914-X, \$24.95.

Autobiography is by definition self-reflective. Autobiographies written by philosophers are also reflections on the nature of the self and of self-examination, or so argues J. Lenore Wright in *The Philosopher's "I": Autobiography and the Search for the Self*. Philosophical autobiography constitutes an especially significant genre, according to Wright, because "autobiographies written by philosophers can help us recognize and reject misleading views of the self and reevaluate the meaning of self-examination" (13). Autobiographical writing automatically raises certain questions about the self—about how one can be both the subject and the writer of the text, both the examiner and what is examined. In the hands of philosophers, these questions become part of the very fabric of the autobiographical exercise.

Wright hopes to accomplish three main objectives through her reflection on philosophical autobiography: first, to "clarify the role that the first-person plays in self-examination"; second, to provide a genealogy of the self, tracing how notions of the self have developed over time; and third, to demonstrate the extent to which human existence is bifurcated existence, and to track cultural responses to this fact (8). While she draws on a remarkably large range of resources in her analysis, Wright's main focus is on Augustine's *Confessions*, Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Rousseau's *The Confessions*, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*, and Hazel Barnes's *The Story I Tell Myself*.

The book comprises four chapters. The first provides an overview of the salient features of philosophical autobiography, and introduces the central theme of the bifurcated self. The act of autobiographical writing, Wright argues, splits the self into an Inner/ontological/writer self and an Outer/rhetorical/subject self. The former is, roughly speaking, the introspected "I," who is perceived as persisting unchanged over time. Wright describes this self in terms of "essence." The Outer self, by contrast, is an embodied, embedded, public figure; the protagonist of the autobiography. Wright describes this self in terms of "identity."

This discussion sets the stage for the long second chapter, which constitutes the heart of the book. Here Wright provides detailed analysis of the bifurcation of the self as it is expressed in the five philosophical autobiographies mentioned earlier. Since each author inscribes the interplay between Inner and Outer self in a different way, the juxtaposition of these texts displays the various and complicated ways in which the divided self can be figured and understood. Looking closely at each author thus reveals how the bifurcation of the self in autobiography provides a space in which new theories of self can emerge. Considering the texts in chronological order also yields Wright's promised genealogy of the self, demonstrating how the concept of self moves from one emphasizing the Inner self as an essence to be discovered (in Augustine and Descartes), through a middle ground (in Rousseau), to an emphasis on the Outer self as a constructed identity (in Nietzsche and Barnes).

Chapters three and four consider questions of truth and interpretation. In chapter three, Wright looks at the complexity of the notion of truth as it applies to autobiography, focusing on issues of self-deception, self-concealment, and literary manipulation. Chapter four turns to the role of the reader, describing the reading of autobiography as "a hermeneutic encounter between a text and a reader" (13). Starting from the theories of Jorge Garcia and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Wright considers the way in which the relative historical position of author and reader figure into the construction of the self. This chapter also includes a discussion of the role of gender in autobiography.

There is much to admire in this book. The idea of using philosophical autobiography as a means of investigating the nature of self and self-examination is a fruitful one. Wright identifies an interesting and important set of issues, and picks a wonderful group of texts through which to address them. In addition to the five philosophical autobiographies that form the core of her investigation, she also makes reference to an astonishingly wide array of philosophers and literary theorists, providing an enormously multifaceted investigation into the philosophy of self.

But there are also some worrying features. While Wright's choice of texts is compelling, her treatment of those texts is sometimes less so. Her readings are typically presented as straightforward philosophical scholarship, providing interpretations of some of the central texts in the history of Western philosophy. Taken as such, however, they seem thin and disconnected from broader philosophical discussion. Frequently textual subtleties and years of scholarly debate are left unacknowledged. Wright pronounces, for instance, that Descartes is "not committed to the view he presents; the author-subject is a smoke screen. Political forces seem to drive his arguments," as if these are established facts (76). Certainly there is some truth to these claims, but exactly how sincere Descartes is, and to what extent and in what regards his

view is constructed with the aim of avoiding persecution, are complex and much disputed questions. A stand of the sort Wright takes requires more defense and engagement with existing literature than she provides. Another instance of this phenomenon occurs in chapter three, where Wright tells us that “traditional interpreters” of Plato pay no attention to the literary form of his dialogues. “They extract and dissect, premise by premise, the arguments proffered by Plato’s characters from the subtexts and contexts in which they appear. They regard Platonic Socrates as Plato’s alter ego and argue that he, therefore, espouses the views that Plato holds to be true” (131). While this may have been a fair assessment a few decades ago, there now exists a rich philosophical literature that attends to the literary elements of Plato’s dialogues, and an extensive and ongoing discussion of when, if ever, the character Socrates can be taken to represent Plato’s views.

Of course it may be that the discussion of these texts is not intended as interpretive scholarship in the traditional sense. Indeed, Wright’s account of reading in chapter four seems to suggest that it is not, and that she is interested in interacting with these works in a somewhat different way. But her descriptions of these texts are frequently presented as if what is being offered is a simple representation of what is written on the page. Moreover, if these readings are not supposed to provide interpretations that exclude other, competing readings, it is not clear how Wright can make the argument that philosophical autobiography plays a special role in understanding the self.

There is, in fact, a somewhat larger question about precisely what the unique contribution of philosophical autobiography amounts to in the end. The bifurcation of the self that autobiographical writing entails is arguably found elsewhere as well. Human existence is, as Wright observes, bifurcated existence, and she certainly cannot want to claim that humans are split in this way *only* when they write autobiographies. Philosophers and non-philosophers alike engage in a wide range of reflective activities, many of which involve self-examination. It is not immediately obvious what philosophical autobiography provides that cannot be found in these other forms of self-reflection. Of course, since the genre on which Wright focuses is produced by philosophers, it will involve a certain kind of theoretical reflection specific to the discipline. But it is not so much the reflection that goes on *within* these texts from which Wright thinks we can learn about the self. It seems, rather, to be our philosophical meta-reflection on how these different philosophers theorize the self that illuminates the peculiar space wherein self-examination takes place. One wonders, then, why we might not just as easily examine the same phenomenon in novels that address issues of self, or religious, psychological, or sociological examinations of self.

It is also not entirely obvious what the ultimate upshot of Wright's discussion is meant to be. At times it seems as if there is no specific conclusion being drawn, but only a demonstration of different ways in which the bifurcation of the self has been handled by philosophers. But surely such a demonstration is only valuable if it provides some specific illumination, and frequently the rhetoric of Wright's text suggests that it does. What is not so clear is whether the conclusions we are to draw are exclusively about the activity of self-understanding (that it takes place in the space between Inner and Outer self), or also about the nature of the self (that it is neither the Inner nor Outer self, but a dynamic entity that arises out of the interplay between the different elements of the bifurcated self). In either case, it would be useful to have a better sense of how specific the claim is supposed to be. Each of the authors discussed displays a different mode of self-examination and a different conception of the self. Are some of these better than others, or is there no relevant sense of "better" in this context?

The Philosopher's I tackles an important problem, employs an intriguing methodology to address it, and makes some interesting discoveries. It can, at times, be somewhat tough going, but anyone interested in autobiography or problems of the self is likely to find something of value in its pages.

Marya Schechtman