

The quest for self in Italian secondary schools: Bridging literature and philosophy

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Abstract

A considerable number of Italian high schools, specifically those classified as *liceo*, offer a program for the final three years in which the history of Western philosophy is taught from its beginnings through to the 20th century. However, little attention is given to the philosophy of mind, even in the final year, while teachers of history and literature emphasise the dissolution of the self as a key theme for understanding 20th-century culture, often referencing authors like James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Luigi Pirandello. The rejection of the self is perhaps presented as a cultural hallmark of the 20th century, yet it is frequently overlooked that, from both psychological and philosophical perspectives, this idea is not new. David Hume, for instance, was a prominent critic of the idea of the self as far back as the 18th century. Moreover, the very authors who questioned the consistency of the self still recognised its presence and activity in the experiences they depicted—albeit as a diminished self. The subject, as portrayed in these narratives, though disrupted and fragmented, was still identified as a self and identified itself as such. Recent studies support the hypothesis that a subject finds complete identity only within a narrative dimension, through a personal internalised story that one constructs about oneself, driven by the need to recognise oneself as the subject of one's experiences and the agent of one's actions. Therefore, a thorough revision of the concept of the 'self' is necessary to make it a central theme in high school curricula, a revision that is best approached through philosophical analysis.

Keywords

fiction, Illusionism, narrative, self

1. Introduction: The status and fate of philosophy in Italian secondary schools

The Italian educational system is rather complex, articulated, often convoluted, and repetitive. There are considerable doubts about its effectiveness, and the pedagogical community has been involved for decades with hypotheses for reforms, some more radical than others, which have either produced insignificant results or contributed to a seeming decline in this scholastic model. Upper secondary schools, usually the final phase of education for students before they embark on academic studies or professional careers, are divided into three categories: professional institutes,

designed to prepare students directly for the working world; technical institutes, aimed at providing students with specialised competencies in various technical areas; and liceo (*lyceum*) high schools, which are intended to provide students with a more theoretical background in different areas, such as mathematics (*liceo scientifico*), ancient Greek and Latin (*liceo classico*), and the humanities (*liceo delle scienze umane*).

One of the distinctive features of lyceum high schools is the continued inclusion of philosophy in their curriculum. Typically, philosophy is taught chronologically: in the third year of the liceo, students begin with the history of ancient and medieval philosophy; in the fourth year, they delve into the history of philosophy from the 15th to the mid-19th century; finally, in the last year, they explore the development of modern philosophy from the second half of the 19th century onward. This organisational structure traces its roots back to the education reform initiated in 1923 by Giovanni Gentile, the fascist Neo-Idealist philosopher and Minister of Public Instruction during Mussolini's first government. Despite the passage of more than a century, the fundamental setup of high schools has remained largely unchanged.

Both students and teachers, generation after generation, have grappled with this system. Usually, it should provide a general background that imparts a certain awareness of the historical evolution of human thought, up until approximately the mid-20th century. However, the unfortunate consequence, particularly in the realm of philosophy, is that graduates may possess a historical perspective that completely overlooks developments after the mid-20th century. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary approach that students are expected to develop towards the end of their educational journey is often misleading. While they may gain some understanding of the cultural landscape of the 20th century, primarily from a historical and literary perspective, they may lack any perception of the ongoing philosophical discourse. The curriculum generally ignores most of the mainstream fields of philosophy, such as recent philosophy of science, language, and mind—especially this last branch of philosophy, which explores issues related to the nature of the mind, consciousness, mental processes, and the self. The self is broadly covered by literature and often adopted as a key notion for understanding the nature of human identity throughout the 20th century. Thus, the picture presented offers a broad understanding of the self in the 20th century, depicting its perceived fragmentation and decomposition. However, there is little analytical and critical reflection extended to this notion. While there exists a general framework regarding the self, its actual significance remains unclear, if it holds any meaning at all.

In Section 2 of this article, I outline the official curriculum provided for high schools in Italy where philosophy is taught, and I argue that it is rather inadequate. I suggest an alternative approach to make it more suitable for teenage students by introducing the notion of the self, which can be presented as a converging topic for reflection in both literature and philosophy. In Section 3, I summarise and comment on the image of the self as portrayed in 20th-century literature, arguing that this depiction is at least partially misleading and represents a received view lacking objective balance. In Section 4, I introduce the concept of the self as a constructed representation developed through experience, emphasising that this construction follows a narrative structure. Then, in Section 5, I propose resolving the apparent contradiction between the necessity of a self in humans and its supposed non-existence by adopting an Illusionist strategy. Finally, Section 6 offers a brief conclusion in which I assess the viability of introducing the teaching of the self to high school students and the potential benefits they could gain from it.

2. High scholarly expectations and an educational reflection on the 'self'

The National Guidelines of 2010 from the Italian Ministry of Research, University, and Education (MIUR) concerning the specific learning objectives for activities and teachings in Liceo high school programs are generally vague and not well specified. They state that, by the end of the high school program, students should be aware of the significance of philosophical reflection as a specific and fundamental mode of human reason, which consistently revisits questions about knowledge, human existence, and the meaning of being and existence across different epochs and cultural traditions.

Students should also have acquired a comprehensive understanding of the key points in the historical development of Western thought, appreciating for each author or theme both the connection to the historical and cultural context and the potentially universal scope that each philosophy possesses. Through knowledge of fundamental philosophers and philosophical problems, students should develop personal reflection, critical judgement, an inclination for in-depth study and rational discussion, and the ability to argue a thesis, even in written form, recognising the diversity of methods by which reason comes to understand reality.

This goal should be pursued through the study of various authors and direct reading of their texts, enabling students to orient themselves on the following fundamental issues: ontology, ethics and the question of happiness, the relationship of philosophy with religious traditions, the problem of knowledge, logical problems, the relationship

between philosophy and other forms of knowledge (particularly science), the meaning of beauty, and freedom and power in political thought.

Students should be capable of using the specific lexicon and categories of the discipline, contextualising philosophical questions within different fields of knowledge, understanding the conceptual and philosophical roots of the main currents and problems of contemporary culture, and identifying connections between philosophy and other disciplines.

This kind of educational aim seems more suitable for university students than high school students and is unlikely to be achieved. Students in the Liceo are supposed to attend philosophy classes for at most 99 hours in a school year, including tests and other forms of assessment. If they are lucky, an instructor will be able to teach for 60 to 70 hours at most. The ministerial goals are far too ambitious and, in fact, are not realisable.

In light of this unrealisability, and despite the Ministry's aims written on paper, the programs can be freely interpreted and are regularly downsized (sometimes with an excess of looseness). Thus, any wise philosophy teacher in Italy knows that they can hope to present students with broad historical accounts; however, if they focus on specific thematic areas that may interest boys and girls in their late teenage years (approximately 16 to 19), their efforts will be more successful. Reflection on the characterisation of the self is suitable for this purpose, especially when combined with considerations of the same topic as addressed in literature—provided they have willing colleagues in the literature department.

A well-structured and forward-looking plan at the beginning of the fifth and final curricular year, which combines the exploration of the concept of 'self' in literature with its philosophical investigation, requires a clear understanding of the notion in question. A revision of this concept is necessary to highlight how the traditional approach is somewhat superficial and, ultimately, misleading. With this revised understanding, covered in the first couple of months of the final school year (mid-September to mid-November), students will be better prepared to engage directly with the texts they are expected to read. Gaining conceptual mastery over terms that, when taken for granted, are used superficially and without depth, will already be a significant achievement.

There is also a less didactically relevant but more practically effective advantage to this strategy. This insight comes from my personal experience of several years teaching philosophy in high schools, rather than from established publications. Teenagers are highly intrigued by philosophical questions, although they often

struggle to directly apply the involved speculations to themselves. However, the development of the self can be facilitated through literary and philosophical exploration, which students can effectively utilise for personal growth. This process can help individuals identify their strengths and weaknesses, boost self-confidence and self-esteem, and improve interpersonal relationships with peers and others. It can also enhance awareness in decision-making and align personal values with goals. In general, understanding oneself contributes to personal fulfilment by shaping one's character, making it more adaptable through an awareness of one's limits and resources.

The interpretation of the self can be tailored to the specifics of one's identity, and this becomes easier when understanding it through a notion that, while directive, must be adaptable to particular life contingencies. In this context, papers such as the late Daniel Dennett's 'The Self as a narrative center of gravity' (1992), despite its somewhat radical implications, is well-suited for this purpose: it is engaging, provocative, and has now become a classic. Introducing high school students to an article like Dennett's (or similar ones) would require fundamentally changing the approach to philosophy in the final year, shifting from a chronological to a more thematic and problem-based perspective. This shift would also necessitate adopting a different intellectual framework, one that is not primarily historical.

Thus, the highly ambitious targets of ministerial philosophy programs can be transformed from merely educational and disciplinary aspirations into practices that shape and train personalities. This transformation can be achieved by interpreting the ministerial guidelines with some flexibility, without distorting them. Waiting for ministerial changes to the curriculum would be futile, as there is a well-documented history of failed attempts to revise these programs from the 1970s to the present day.

Since the curriculum allows for a broad degree of interpretation, almost to the point of arbitrariness, philosophy teachers could easily design their schedules to include a significant portion dedicated to a topic like the 'self'. This topic would be a refreshing change from the monotonous ministerial guidelines, which are typically focused on historical and chronological approaches. It could also encourage students to engage in personal reflection on their own subjective identity. They could be prompted to critically evaluate both their private and public profiles, considering whether these profiles accurately reflect their beliefs about their identity, and whether they might aim to modify them. This reflection would be based on the understanding that one's identity is shaped through interaction with others and is not an innate, fixed structure.

Therefore, teaching the concept of the 'self' would not only renew a rigid scholastic curriculum but also foster personal growth.

3. The received view of the self from the literature of the 20th century

Traditionally, in the final year of Italian high school, it is taught how literature and philosophy of the 20th century, particularly of the early 20th century and the mid-20th century, tend to represent the disintegration and dissolution of the self. This is an undeniable cultural trend, which likely reflected an epochal historical crisis in the society of this time, its values, certainties, and identity. The crisis of society is reflected in the individual, who sees their own personal and subjective coherence lost in an increasingly heterogeneous and complex dimension. However, within this perspective, the traditional image of the self is still presented as a unified, monolithic entity, without any critical analysis or nuanced examination. For a deeper understanding of the concept of the self, an analytical characterisation is necessary, and this should be studied beforehand.

In numerous works of 20th century fiction, the self is depicted as fragmented and disintegrated, due to traumatic experiences as well as internal conflicts, or due to unsustainable social pressures. Many characters are portrayed as alienated and isolated, unable to recognise themselves, and detached from the world around them: from Luigi Pirandello's *Mattia Pascal* to Franz Kafka's *Gregor Samsa*, from Albert Camus's *Meursault* to JD Salinger's *Holden Caulfield*, from Samuel Beckett's *Unnamable* to Italo Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*. Each author insists on how the progressive disappearance of the self leads to a loss of one's identity and to an increasingly blurred distinction between the individual and society, to a progressively fainter boundary between the conscious and the unconscious, to a systematic blending of the rational and the irrational. The individual's mind assumes an even more elusive profile than it already had in its unobservability, and finds refuge in anonymity or in withdrawal from the social dimension.

This condition is well captured by *continental* philosophical reflection, particularly by Existentialism, which in the 20th century parallels the developments in literature involving the self. Already in 1927 Martin Heidegger (2008), although not an existentialist, had intended to provide a prospective identity to the self, but certainly French authors like Sartre (2007, 2013) and Camus (1989) fully represent the existential angst of the self, its perception of the absurdity of existence, and the lack of meaning in the world.

The preparatory groundwork for the disappearance of the self is typically attributed to the work of Sigmund Freud, who was the first author to effectively explore the

Unconscious. In schools, Freud is typically introduced in the third volume of Italian handbooks on the history of philosophy. Indeed, as Freud asserted in his 1916 *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Freud 1968), following Copernicus' demonstration that humanity was not at the centre of the universe, and Darwin's illustration of the evolutionary descent of human nature from animal origins, psychoanalysis delivered a third decisive blow by revealing that individuals were not fully conscious of the contents of their own minds. Thus, according to a widely-shared opinion, Freud's notion of the disintegration of the self as a unitary entity, challenged by the Unconscious, is pivotal in understanding the slippery slope of the mind towards the abyss of self-ignorance, a state that humans previously did not even suspect. So far, so good. However, this perspective fails to sufficiently highlight the dualist legacy that Freud himself, like many other authors and theorists, inherited from the Cartesian stance. Freud also conceived of human nature as divided, both across different mental realms (rather than in the opposition of the mental against the physical), and between reason and passion.

Likely, this dualist approach to the mind has led to ambiguity in interpreting the role played by Freud's Unconscious, which has been erroneously viewed as the origin of the aforementioned dissolution of the self. In fact, the Freudian self does not disintegrate. Rather, due to the Unconscious, the Freudian self, in a sense, proliferates.

In both the first (Conscious, Preconscious, Unconscious) and the second (Ego, Id, Superego) Freudian topographies of the mind, there exist contrasting psychical energies. However, the individual subject, though arriving at resolutions after real battles among these different energies, maintains a personal identity. This identity is difficult, often afflicted, and perhaps contradictory, yet it remains recognisable as a self in which the internal conflicts of an individual ultimately conclude. Therefore, it is highly debatable to argue that the self becomes extinguished; the self endures both in Freud's work and in the writings of other authors, whether philosophers or writers, who delve into the challenging task of narrating deep inner struggles. In some instances, the self undergoes a rebirth after enduring internal distress caused by conflicting impulses.

Let's consider one of the most well-known passages of the author who is considered the most emblematic for his radical willingness to rid himself of the Ego: Luigi Pirandello. In the conclusion of *One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*, Pirandello (1990) wrote, 'This is the only way I can live now. To be reborn moment by moment' (p. 160). If one thinks about it carefully, the Ego doesn't disappear here but is regenerated; moreover, it is always associated with a profile that, in recognising the

loss of its own identity, reaffirms itself: that of the narrative subject. In fact, as much as it may be reiterated, as Pirandello's Moscarda does, that a characteristic identity cannot be given to the Ego, the subject of the narrative, at the moment of its narration, is automatically identified and identifies itself as an Ego, as a Self.

Thus, despite the desire of many 20th-century authors to eradicate the self, a sentiment perhaps amplified by their interpreters, the self persists. Its endurance is a necessity dictated by the structure of narratives purporting to depict the demise of the self. Pirandello's character, Moscarda, when questioning himself, offers insight into the proliferation of selves resulting from the internal conflicts in which he, like many others, is embroiled: 'But what other did I have inside me, except this torment that revealed me as no one and one hundred thousand?' (Pirandello 1990, p. 120). He claims to be lost in the absurdity of the world and in the turmoil of the masks (façades, or personas) that he has presented and will continue to present to the world, which conceal his true thoughts, feelings or identities. However, he does so while maintaining a sense of self, albeit always veiled by a mask: the mask is necessary to provide a cohesive profile for the unfolding of a story that would otherwise be impossible. Therefore, it is curious that even in the most significant tale about the disappearance of the self by one of the most notable writers who asserts the impossibility of identifying a self, the self is reaffirmed.

This means that advocating for the dissolution of the self requires a clearer definition of what is meant by 'self'. In everyday life, as well as in literature, the concept may seem straightforward, but philosophical reflection reveals it to be far more complex. Philosophical analysis should expose how the self is polysemous and open to multiple interpretations, which must be considered before any claims about it can be made.

4. The narratives by which a self lives

The self, though often portrayed as compromised, remains a necessary condition of a narrated story. In most narratives, the self serves as a central aspect of storytelling, offering a focal point for character development, emotional engagement, and thematic exploration. Characters' identities, motivations and internal conflicts often propel the plot forward and shape the trajectory of the narrative.

While there are narratives where the self may not play a prominent role or may even be deliberately obscured or deconstructed—such as in experimental or avant-garde works—these literary endeavours still appeal to a self, whether identified with a central figure or embodied through the narrator's voice. It is difficult to conceive of a narrative devoid of a self, as it is the self (or selves) that lend cohesion to the story and its progression. Events, actions and emotions revolve around selves.

Given the recurrence of the notion of self, it is essential to clarify its meaning. By 'self', I refer to an individual's sense of identity, consciousness and existence as a coherent, distinct and autonomous being, persisting through time and aware of its agency—capable of performing actions. This encompasses one's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, experiences and perceptions of oneself and the world around them. Such a sense of self is the outcome of a constructive, cumulative processing that is elaborated by an individual since its early days of existence.

However, for individuals to identify themselves, they also need recognition as psychological subjects endowed with those features, attributes that may be ascribed by other individuals possessing similar features, as well as by themselves. The complete recognition of the self is achieved when one's identification is pursued through a structure that makes sense of its coherence over time; and the most effective structure for this purpose is a narrative.

I don't think it is purely accidental that some authors, both philosophers and psychologists, have theorised about the notion of a 'narrative self'. Indeed, the concept of the narrative self precisely suggests that individuals construct their sense of identity and selfhood through the stories they tell about themselves. These stories involve recounting personal experiences, memories and beliefs which help individuals make sense of their lives and understand who they are. Various authors have proposed different interpretations of the narrative self (cf. McAdams 2001, 2015, Bruner 1996, 2004; Di Francesco, Marraffa & Paternoster 2016; Hutto 2007, 2009).

Children begin to develop a sense of the self towards the end of preschool age, after becoming aware of themselves as bodily entities, psychological subjects, and, finally, agents. Several theorists have reasonably concluded that this developmental pattern is relatively linear. Following an infant's experience of their relationship with their mother or caregiver during the gestation period and in the first days of life, they begin to grasp their partial autonomy. While they move independently from other bodies, they do not perceive themselves as such. It's not until the third year that the toddler starts to realise their ability to move their body and to be the source of their actions. At this point, they can identify themselves as an agent, thanks to primitive bodily schemes, enabling them to navigate their environment. Rochat (2010, p. 38) termed this stage, situated in a physical and material context, as the 'ecological self', drawing from Neisser's (1988) reinterpretation. It serves as the foundation for the baby's self-recognition and self-identification as an agent, as demonstrated by the mirror test (cf. Gallup (1970)), typically passed after the second year of life. Children understand that

they can be both subjects and objects of their perception; conceiving of themselves as bodily unified and autonomous entities.

This bodily self-image provides children with an early introspective insight into their individual spaces, including emotions and intentions, as hidden causes of their actions. Caregivers contribute to modulating internal emotions and intentions, while interactions with others expand the social environment of children, including peers and teachers. Innate competencies enable children to interact with both the physical and social dimensions of this context. Among these competencies, the ability to ascribe beliefs and permanent psychological states to other subjects, likely forms the basis for self-ascribing beliefs. Carruthers (e.g. 2010, 2011, 2013) proposes that interpreting other entities as agents is the starting point for interpreting oneself, contrary to the belief that assigns primacy to the first person. Understanding others generally precedes understanding oneself, as observing and explaining others is simpler than investigating oneself. Self-knowledge at the first person is more complex, lacking objective evidence or the ability to share or amend views. Between the ages of three and five, children gain inspiration to explore the social and inner worlds, coinciding with the mastery of language. While language mastery is not essential for navigating the social environment (contra Vygotsky 2012), it enhances understanding of others and oneself. In the early years of life, language is not intrinsic for self-characterisation, but later it becomes important for developing the self into a structured, coherent, unitary, and persistent entity: the narrative self.

This development continues to mature throughout adolescence and into adulthood, as emphasised by narrative psychology, a branch of psychology that explores how individuals use storytelling to create meaning and understand themselves. Overall, the narrative self highlights the role of storytelling in the construction of identity and emphasises the importance of narrative as a fundamental aspect of human experience. As Dennett (1992) wrote:

... it does seem that we are virtuoso novelists, who find ourselves engaged in all sorts of behavior, more or less unified, but sometimes disunified, and we always put the best 'faces' on it we can. We try to make all of our material cohere into a single good story. And that story is our autobiography. (p. 114)

Dennett approached an investigation of the self with a fairly eliminativist, rather than reductionist, intent. He claimed that, in fact, there is no self at all; the self is an abstraction, a Reichenbachian *abstractum*, much like the centre of gravity of any physical object. It is an abstract entity postulated by the structural requirements of a theory: the theory about one's life, which is not formulated in terms of mathematical

expressions of physical laws, but as a narrative that must adhere to coherence criteria. Just as it would be a categorical mistake to aim to identify the centre of gravity of a physical object with a specific spatial-temporal locus, so too would it be to seek the physical (neurophysiological) counterpart of a self. Both selves and centres of gravity are fictional objects (cf. Dennett 1991, Chapter 13).

However, Dennett maintained that by recognising an object as fictional, he did not mean to disparage it. Just as fictional objects like centres of gravity have a legitimate place within physical science, selves also play a rather relevant role in the story and experiences of an individual. For example, although abstract, they can be causally relevant.

Not many narrativists share Dennett's nihilist position. Nevertheless, this perspective confirms the relevance of narratives for the self: a self may not materially exist (as it is an abstraction), yet narratives coalesce around selves, which, in turn, are necessary for making sense of narratives. Thus, there is no narrative without a self, nor is there a self without a narrative. The construction of one's ego is much more akin to the work of a novelist than one might expect.

Introducing students to this kind of reflection, from the perspective of the philosophy of mind, can clarify how complex, ongoing, and open-ended the process of developing one's identity is. This approach can illustrate how individuals acquire aspects of their personality by narrating their own life stories, learning from how others narrate theirs, and comparing different perspectives; constantly refining their self-concept based on the distinctions and correspondences between different narratives. Like a novelist, each person tells their story, shaping it through experience—both in linear and critical moments—crafting coherence on a foundation of a unified narrative path. Using this analogy, students can adopt a critical approach to their own selves by examining examples portrayed in literature and reflecting on the notion that the self is not a fixed entity, but something constructed and, most importantly, capable of further change.

5. Selves, narratives and illusions

Thus, we find ourselves with an account of the self that lies somewhere between a developmental hypothesis and a narratological conjecture. On one hand, it differs significantly from the negating notion that seemed prevalent in 20th-century Western literature, as it emphasises the importance of the self as the foundation for identity. On the other hand, it also aligns with this notion by rejecting the idea of a stable self-identity that can be captured through intrinsic and/or transcendental metaphysical self-awareness. This perspective is well-suited for literary reflection, as it unfolds in a narrative style that resonates with the novels that dominated 20th-century literature.

Indeed, the vanishing self, celebrated in literary works, emerged as a contradictory concept that, nevertheless, could not avoid being subjected to a process of identification. What is crucial now is to understand whether this process can capture the primary insight of self-awareness and how it can be identified without entailing any reification of the self as an essential element of our experience and reality.

In fact, there are two conflicting intuitions about our self. The first is the Cartesian intuition of the grasp of an essential character. Such is the character able to experience, feel, own, think, whom each of us recognises as ourself. I am the one who is now writing what I am writing, thinking of it, feeling my fingertips tapping on the keyboard. This is the intuition that pushes us to focus on the self as if it were something present and real, as a Cartesian *thinking thing* (cf. Descartes 1993, I). The other is the skeptical, Humean perspective that, as a matter of fact, there is no experience at all of the self: 'I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never observe anything but the perception' (Hume 2007, I, VI). Very few can deny that the sense of the self is an experience which, at best, one can vaguely report.

The many literary authors who aimed at making the self disappear have remained anchored to the Cartesian legacy. How could they have approached this differently, given that they were writing narratives? A narrative is a form of storytelling that requires characters, and characters have their selves. Therefore, selves could not disappear from narratives. The fidelity to the Cartesian intuition entailed the neglect of the Humean one, which is seemingly little congenial to common sense and a bit disquieting. Yet, it is precisely Hume's idea that reveals a more grounded foundation, likely supported by most, if not all, recent discoveries in the sciences of the mind. It is now a few decades since the mind has turned out to be a bundle of autonomous systems and activities implemented by a hardly conceivable number of muddles of neurons and synapses, where it is impossible to identify a homogeneous and unitary flow of conscious thought. The problem lies in how to make sense of the phenomenon of the self as it is experienced, while knowing that there is no unitary self in the scientific image that humans have of their inner activity.

There are several hypotheses compatible with the apparent absence of the self, despite recognising it as a fundamental aspect of human life. These hypotheses span from purely eliminativist positions, akin to Dennett's, to the conceptualisation of the self as a process, wherein 'self-interpretation is a theory-driven activity of narrative re-appropriation of the products of the neurocognitive unconscious' (Di Francesco, Marraffa & Paternoster 2016, p. 94).

Many of these hypotheses can be encompassed by the recent approach to consciousness and inner experience known as Illusionism, a multifaceted conception spearheaded by Keith Frankish (cf. 2016). As the term suggests, Illusionism explains phenomenal experiences, including the sense of self, as products of deceptive cognitive mechanisms employed by the human brain.

The notion that the self, along with other phenomenal experiences, is an illusion, is not a novel concept; it was introduced by Hume and is also present in Buddhist philosophy. Presently, a distinguished group of theorists are inclined to support the Illusionist proposition that:

Illusionists deny that experiences have phenomenal properties and focus on explaining why they seem to have them. They typically allow that we are introspectively aware of our sensory states but argue that this awareness is partial and distorted, leading us to misrepresent the states as having phenomenal properties. (Frankish 2016, p. 14)

In the Illusionist camp, we may consider figures such as Daniel Dennett (2016), Nicholas Humphrey (2016), Thomas Metzinger (2010) (although he may not embrace the label), Jay Garfield (2016), Bruce Hood (2013), Michael Gazzaniga (2011), and Georges Rey (2016). They, in various ways, endorse the idea that there are no underlying states or processes corresponding to deep introspective phenomenal experiences, such as the self.

However, the Illusionist approach does not seek to entirely eliminate the sense of self or deny its existence. Instead, it views the self as an illusion, similar to optical effects that deceive our visual perception. For example, consider the Kanizsa triangle, where despite the absence of actual lines outlining the triangle, one perceives a white triangle in the centre surrounded by three black circles or Pac-Man shapes.

In a similar vein, an Illusionist perspective elucidates the concept of the self, which emerges from the narratives that shape it. Often, narratives are fictional, and fiction itself is a construct or product of illusion. Consequently, the self can be conceptualised as the narrative fiction that an individual constructs about themselves—a notion of a substantial, unchanging, independent, and unified entity, possessing an essential core that both experiences and inhabits the body, yet remains distinct from it. This narrative fiction also serves as the agent controlling one's actions, desires and thoughts (cf. Struhl 2020, pp. 2–3). Unlike many literary narratives, those constructed within the depths of human consciousness are not merely recreational; rather, they serve a significant role in organising one's fragmented internal experiences, thereby facilitating better management when perceived as unified within a singular entity.

Whether fictitious or plausible, the narrative self proves to be a vital support for one's sense of identity and uniqueness. It may not be an essential illusion, yet it is undeniably valuable: its absence could lead to a significant alteration and weakening of one's personality, resulting in an unstable behavioral profile that disorients one's life and interactions with others (cf. Struhl 2020, p. 128).

The idea underlying this claim is important for the educational message that students should grasp. Subjective identity characterises each human being, but it is not something we are born with. Rather, it is something we shape based on our experiences, our lives, and our cultural, familial, and personal heritage. Identity defines the self, even though it is the result of a process shaped by the interaction of various factors and does not rest on a solid ontological foundation. This ontological lightness makes identity flexible, and flexibility is what allows identity to adapt to the diverse experiences we face daily, while still balancing with the coherence of certain non-negotiable principles. Thus, students learn that they are not simply *made one way or another*; they have the ability to shape themselves. In this process of self-making, they must discern which principles are non-negotiable and which can be adapted. It is the responsibility of their teachers, educational institutions, and closest mentors to guide them in this. Literature and philosophy can serve as training grounds for learning these lessons.

The Illusionist approach to the enigma of the self can reconcile both its elusive nature and its perceived presence. It acknowledges the role of storytelling, which not only structures an individual's sense of self but also bears remarkable similarities to literary narratives. The qualities that render a character coherent in a literary work mirror those that establish coherence within the self. This is because the structure of a narrative inherently involves a minimal self, and for the self to be robust, rational and complete, it necessitates a narrative framework. They are mutually complementary.

6. A short conclusion

Some considerations regarding one of the presumed goals of 20th-century literary works—particularly narrative ones—namely, the annihilation of the self, reveal, upon closer scrutiny, that this aim is ineffective. This is because narrative structures inherently require a self to function; without it, they could hardly be considered narratives. This observation should serve as a starting point to demonstrate that philosophical investigations, some dating back centuries, rather than literary narratives, have provided a more effective challenge to the concept of the self. Although the notion of the self, when taken for granted in common usage, is logically and epistemologically unfounded, it has been preserved in literature for its crucial role

in the dramatic portrayal of what makes an individual the subject they are—an ongoing and open-ended process. A philosophical reflection can help to clarify just how controversial this concept may be.

Philosophical analysis explains that the self is evanescent. Individuals, like literary works, preserve it to satisfy their structural need for coherence and completeness. Such a need creates tension: something is required that is not identifiable and likely does not exist. It is the narrative framework that demands a self, in literature as well as in human existence. Illusionism suggests a solution for this seeming contradiction; if a self is wanted, it may be provided as a fictitious entity, clearly so in literature, and likewise in the psychological world. The processing of a self in the inner dimension of a person is thus similar to the playwriting of a storyteller.

The general significance of this reflection on the self in literature and philosophy can have a dual significance.

First, addressing literary works with the analysis performed in contemporary philosophy of mind may provide stimulating and, at least for Italian schools, refreshing interdisciplinary perspectives. Furthermore, it encourages conceiving philosophical reflection as a tool for interpreting issues that are not only relative and related to a past cultural and historical framework but are also part of an actual and universal speculative task that enhances personal understanding of one's inner life.

Second, understanding one's self as the product of a novelist's composition may invite individuals to rethink and reconceive their personal profiles. High school students are teenagers who are often committed to asserting themselves, sometimes with a certain pride.

If students are taught that the self they wish to affirm is not a fixed, unchanging profile, they may initially react with aversion and disorientation. This was, in fact, the first response from one of my classes when I encouraged them to see themselves not as defined by a set of static traits. They immediately rejected the idea of distancing themselves from the way of being they had fought so hard to affirm, holding onto it with strong conviction.

However, beneath their impulsive resistance lay a fear of losing their sense of stability and control. They believed that an effective identity must be anchored in a persistent, immutable feature. I explained to them that being flexible in their identity does not mean lacking coherence or authenticity; rather, it invites growth and change. The experiences, relationships and challenges they encounter along the way do not erase

who they are. Instead, these experiences offer an opportunity for enrichment, allowing them to review, refine and transform certain aspects of themselves.

I tried to help them understand that rigidity in defining oneself can easily become a stereotype, a cage. The willingness to explore new dimensions of the self, on the other hand, opens up opportunities to live a more vibrant and conscious life. Despite their initial scepticism, I noticed sparks of curiosity in some of them. Perhaps they began to realise that constraining themselves within a rigid version of identity is limiting, rather than preserving some unyielding sense of coherence. They started to see that evolving within certain boundaries is not a sign of inconsistency, but rather a path to growth. Revising one's identity is not a weakness, but a courageous and intelligent choice. Knowing that their self is not something innate but can be modified and improved, rather than imposed, may inspire them to become liberal authors of their private narratives. They can learn that they could be the storytellers of their inner lives; narratives that are worth interpreting and reinterpreting forever.

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