

# Forgetting the facts of life

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**Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory.** By Ian Hacking. Princeton University Press: 1995. Pp. 336. \$24.95, £19.95.

REGARDLESS of their familiarity with the Gospel according to St Matthew, psychiatrists should adopt the motto "Seek and ye shall find". Until 1972, there were only about a hundred recorded cases of multiple personality — indeed, the classification was not listed in the official US psychiatric diagnostic manual until 1980. But from the mid-1970s, American psychiatrists began using this diagnosis more and more frequently, until now the United States contains tens of thousands of 'multiple personalities', with hospitals devoted entirely to their treatment and a learned society dedicated exclusively to their study. In the rest of the world — including the United Kingdom — there are still only a handful of cases. How can this be? Do American psychiatrists suffer from a form of mass hysteria, has there been a sudden change in the symptomatology of their patients, have they in the past simply failed to diagnose the disorder — if it is a disorder — or are they merely finding what they are looking for?

All four elements probably played a part in the surge of 'multiples', as they are now known in the jargon of the trade, but there are several further causes. One is the recent fascination with child abuse, particularly sexual abuse. For reasons Ian Hacking does not adequately explain, many psychiatrists believe that a multiple personality is the result of child abuse. If all multiples have been abused, making this diagnosis increases the supposed prevalence of child abuse. Moreover, once an illness becomes headline news, more and more people believe they are suffering from it. Forty years ago myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME, better known as 'yuppie flu') did not exist nor did attention-deficit disorder in children: now they are common. Both the psychiatrist and his patients are influenced by diagnostic fads. The psychiatrist can present original case studies of new disorders, while the patient has an excuse for misbehaving, which may and indeed has absolved her (most multiples are women) from a sentence for murder committed when a different personality was in control.

Finally, every profession tries to justify itself by claiming arcane knowledge

opposed to common sense: Freud rose to fame by constructing a brilliantly implausible theory, psychiatrists exhibit their skills by spotting and (according to Hacking) creating multiples, while social workers are adept at uncovering nonexistent child abuse. Part of the popularity of the last concept comes from people's morbid delight in persecuting imagined evil-doers — be they child abusers, witches or (in Nazi Germany) Jews. Once the evil is publicized, there is no shortage of people claiming to have experienced it, as witness the crop of patients who alleged they had been the victims of Satanic rituals: the prevalence of such rituals can be gauged by the fact that at one time just as many patients claimed to have been abducted by aliens.



Double Portrait by Hans von Marées, 1863.

Playing the part of a multiple ensures attention, but are multiples merely playing a part? To the extent to which switches between different alters (alternative personalities) are involuntary, they are not: moreover, the amnesia under one alter (usually a subordinate one) about what happened when under another one appears to be genuine, although it is only autobiographical facts that are forgotten not how to talk or dress.

The history of multiple personality and its connection with child abuse is a good story, but Hacking does not tell it well. His prose is convoluted and he often takes several pages to make an obvious point. For example, he distinguishes psychiatrists' conscious knowledge from their methods of practice, of which they may not be consciously aware. But he confounds the reader by using the term "knowledge" when what is relevant is psychiatrists' beliefs, and he has a lengthy digression on Foucault who, although not the first to make the distinction, succeeded in making it more obscurely than any of his predecessors. Having made the point, Hacking makes nothing of it. He raises many hares but catches few. It is

unclear whether he believes that the sole cause of multiple personality is child abuse: he presents no evidence either way. And although it is clear that many recovered memories are fantasies (often implanted by psychotherapists eager to keep up with fashion), he equivocates on the prevalence of child abuse. He does, however, hint that it may be harmless, at least if no cruelty is involved: as a child, Louis XIII of France repeatedly had his genitals stroked in public. In the past, children in the West were treated much more savagely than those of today. They were beaten, sent up chimneys, starved and disease ridden. Although cruelty to children cannot be condoned, it does not necessarily lead to multiple personalities or any other forms of mental disorder.

Despite its subtitle, there is nothing in *Rewriting the Soul* about the science of memory, which in any case throws no light whatsoever on multiple personality. Hacking believes that only if we define a person through the continuity of his or her memory could the concept of multiple personality have arisen and he contrasts this view of personality with thinking of the 'soul'. But the concept of different souls existing in the same body is just as easy to grasp as different sets of memories, and indeed it goes back a long time — that is what exorcism was about. On the other hand, Hacking is occasionally sage: he argues that the publicity given to child abuse will almost certainly increase its practice, just as suicides portrayed on television are followed by an increased number of real suicides (unfortunately he fails to quote the definitive reference on this point).

In psychiatry, both treatment and diagnosis are often based on caprice rather than reason. Hacking describes Pierre Janet's method of helping women who had suffered a childhood trauma, by hypnotizing them into believing that the traumatic event never occurred. He also describes the modern technique of dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder — persuade the patient to relive the event. But he does not call attention to the fact that these therapeutic methods are exact contraries, although he seems to accept the dubious cures claimed by both sets of clinicians.

Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the whole story is that not a single scientific study of the aetiology or treatment of multiple personality is reported: presumably none has taken place. Clinical judgements are notoriously unreliable and despite all the seeking and finding, we know no more about this condition than did Morton Prince a hundred years ago. The human mind remains a more elusive entity than the most distant galaxy. □

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