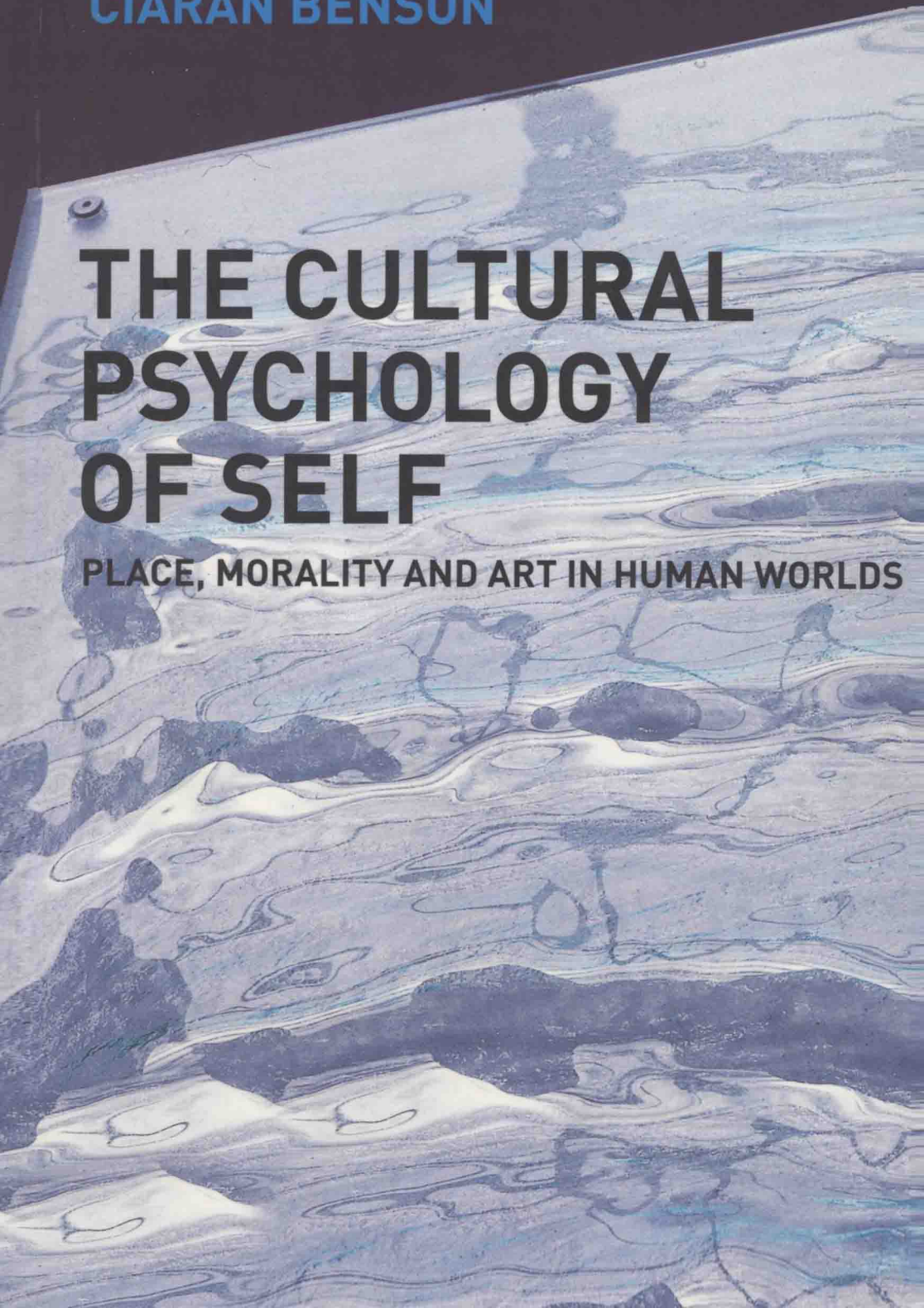


**CIARÁN BENSON**

# **THE CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF**

**PLACE, MORALITY AND ART IN HUMAN WORLDS**



# THE CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF

Place, morality and art in human worlds

*Ciarán Benson*



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## PREFACE

The self is a location, not a substance or an attribute. The sense of self is the sense of being located at a point in space, of having a perspective in time and of having a variety of positions in local moral orders. It is not having an awareness of some kind of being, particularly not an awareness of an entity at the core of one's being.

(R. Harré, *Social Being*, 2nd edn., 1993, p. 4)

'Who' and 'what' you are is a function of 'where' you are. This book is a series of reflections on this theme of selfhood, location and ways of being placed in and displaced within human worlds. The word 'location' rarely appears in the index of a psychology book, and yet it seems to me to be an idea capable of being a very efficient organiser of much contemporary thinking – philosophical, psychological, anthropological and aesthetic – on the nature of 'self' and 'identity'. In discussions of 'self' the ideas of being in place, having a place, losing one's place, changing one's place are ubiquitous, as are the correlative conceptions of the types of space or place in which these processes of place-gaining and place-changing occur. In the essays that follow I want to articulate an understanding of location and human space not simply as necessary conditions for 'self', but also as a way of encapsulating a primary *raison d'être* of self as a human universal.

It is often surprising how insulated writers on this topic seem to be from the work of other thinkers, and from other disciplines with cognate concerns. Sheer volume of publications as much as the apparent incommensurability of perspectives and languages add momentum to the formation of these intellectual islands. It is a matter of some chance as to which island you find yourself on for your initial socialisation into thinking about human experience, self, identity, mind, consciousness and so on. The need for synoptic attempts at organising our understanding of 'big' issues like self and identity is compelling. Jerome Bruner has a point when he says that psychology 'seems to have lost its centre and its great integrating questions.'<sup>1</sup> The rationale for mapping a federation of interests is often visible only when we raise our eyes to a wider horizon.

Despite the jadedness of the old nature–nurture construct and its controversies, its influence continues to be evident in contemporary debate, particularly in the thinking of some evolutionary psychologists. Their polemical intent (Steven Pinker comes to mind<sup>2</sup>) is to stimulate discussion and confront what they think is the woolliness of those who argue for the powers of ‘culture’ to constitute ‘human being’. For the culturalists, the polemic of much from the side of evolutionary psychology, artificial intelligence, and neurology misses the points they think they are making and fails to appreciate the nature of the social construction of ‘the real’ and the questions which this opens up. Bruner’s contrast between culturalist concern with specifically human meaning making and computationalist preoccupation with information processing in all and any systems, including human systems, is helpful.

How we navigate our spatial world is obviously dependent upon our brains and perceptual-motor systems, which in turn are the polished tools of a long evolutionary process. Things are much less clear-cut when it comes to the navigation of human worlds, fabricated as they are with meanings. Undoubtedly our genetic structure, courtesy again of evolutionary processes, is foundational. No body, no world, no need to find our way. But evolution did not produce scripts for writing, maps, signposts, laws, codes of manners, moral codes, political organisations for the distribution of power and privilege, and so on. Culture did. Once again I find Bruner compelling when he suggests that ‘Culture is probably biology’s last great evolutionary trick. It frees *Homo sapiens* to construct a symbolic world flexible enough to meet local needs and to adapt to a myriad of ecological circumstances.’<sup>3</sup>

My understanding of the emerging perspective of cultural psychology is that it can be a sufficiently broad church to accommodate the powerful understandings emerging from both the neurosciences and the social sciences as they relate to human experience. Calling the book *The Cultural Psychology of Self* is not an attempt to consolidate an opposition to naturalists but instead an attempt to contribute to an inclusive framework within which the findings and perspectives of both might find a meaningful place.<sup>4</sup>

This is emphatically not a textbook on the cultural psychology of self. All too often, a textbook can become a dead hand lying heavily on its topic. Textbooks record findings, refer to methods and ‘organise’ chapters in analytic sequence. They remind me of those faces used in studying infant perception where the eyes, nose and mouth are jumbled up on the two-dimensional face, and where all hint of the powers that organise and animate the meaningful use of the face as an instrument of relationship are necessarily excluded. In self-defence, Jacques Lacan once spoke of academic texts as being ‘like the amber which holds the fly so as to know nothing of its flight’.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the style of Lacan’s own texts can make a reader grateful for the stalling powers of amber. But there is a justifiable complaint here.

If textbooks distort their fields by removing the uncertain, kinetic energy of questioning in order to present a static map for reference purposes, then in this book I would like to sacrifice some of that tidiness in order to appreciate how a cultural psychology might think about how being placed in the world lies at the heart of being a self. It is in essence a series of essays, each short enough to be read at one sitting and designed to take the reader on a journey without the interruption of sub-headings or references. Taken together, the fourteen essays and two introductions cover a great deal of contemporary work relevant to the idea of self as being a primary means for navigating human worlds.

I have divided the book into two parts, each of which has an introductory essay and each of which contains seven essays. Part I introduces my understanding of some key contemporary work on the cultural psychology of self, but slanted towards illuminating an understanding of self as, what I call, a 'locative system'. The focus is on the centrality of being located for self. Part II applies that understanding to a range of issues in the psychology of morality and art which I take to be central to questions of the good life. The themes centre on the issue of change approached under the headings of location, dislocation and relocation.

The essay introducing Part I advances the idea that self is primarily a psychological system of location designed by evolution and culture for negotiating our ways through human worlds. Filling out the details of this claim takes us on a journey through a whole range of contemporary work in psychology, philosophy, neurology, history and aesthetics. It involves exploring the idea that having a sense of self requires the idea of being 'in place'. I believe that a cultural psychology which is sympathetic to neuroscience, and which knows its own boundaries and proper domain, is particularly well placed to advance a synthetic understanding of self.

A primary task of the central nervous system is to constitute an organism's world and position in that world. This is true for human beings also, so the brain's work in locating the person needs to be outlined. The idea of self-as-a-story-told, as a narrative structure, functions to place oneself as a moral agent in and across personal time. Kinds of moral and symbolic placement also depend on the repertoires of cultural-historical options which are available to people and their communities. Powers of self-creation and self-responsibility need to be considered as do linguistic ways of placing ourselves in the conversation that is human life. And the role of feeling and emotion in guiding us well or badly through human worlds also needs review.

These are the themes of Part I. In exploring them I draw on the work of many thinkers but particularly on the recent work of Edward Casey, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Antonio Damasio, Jerome Bruner, Charles Taylor, Julian Jaynes, and Rom Harré, among others.

Part II deals with some aspects of how we locate ourselves among other

## PREFACE

people, and particularly with the ideas of choice, responsibility and related feelings. Since the general claim of cultural psychology is that our worlds are largely the constructions of social groups, how do we go about locating ourselves in relation to ourselves and to other people? The essay themes in Part II reflect personal interests of my own. How do we become the sorts of people who believe we should accept responsibility for what we do? Why is it that so many people act pitilessly and without sympathy? Why is it that victims often feel unreasonably guilty? What is the connection between what I call the negative absorption of agony (as in torture) and the positive absorption so associated with aesthetic experience? What happens to our senses of inside and outside, and to our own personal boundaries, when artists deploy different types of point of view and none? How do psychologists think about where human development should lead? These are large questions on which I offer some reflections.

This second set of essays will take us on a journey through childhood, accounts of the perpetrators of the Holocaust, the stories of some former victims of torture and survivors of the Holocaust, aesthetic experience and 'I', light and Ganzfeld Spheres in the work of James Turrell, issues to do with the relationship of individual and national identity, and a critical look at ideals of psychological development. The thread uniting them all continues to be the thread of location, dislocation and relocation and its significance for the processes of self as a locative system.

The story of this book could be said to be part of the millennial *Zeitgeist*, where the acceleration of technological-cultural change, and the interaction of globalising and localising tendencies, must be linked to the emergence of interest in mapping, navigating, searching, reevaluating. The remarkable adaptability and versatility of human beings, young and old, must be linked to basic processes of constituting ourselves as we situate and re-situate ourselves in our incessantly reconfiguring worlds. Only a generously spirited cultural-historical psychology can, I believe, face the challenge of describing what is going on at the level of selfhood and the person.

My hope is that, despite the wide-ranging nature of these essays, the power of the idea of location as an underlying dynamic of self will serve to link them together to prove its cogency and their coherence. The American philosopher Edward Casey is right to claim that 'If limits have to do with distinctions between nature and culture, orientation takes us to the point of their merging.'<sup>16</sup> The means and purpose of that merging should be a focus for the cultural psychology of self.

## PREFACE

### Notes

- 1 J. Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 167.
- 2 S. Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, London, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1997. I find myself agreeing with Michael Tomasello when he writes: 'In all, the tired old philosophical categories of nature versus nurture, innate versus learned, and even genes versus environment are just not up to the task – they are too static and categorical – if our goal is a dynamic Darwinian account of human cognition in its evolutionary, historical, and ontogenetic dimensions.' See his *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 217.
- 3 Bruner, op. cit., p. 184.
- 4 Clifford Geertz doubts that such a rapprochement can be easily achieved or even, perhaps, that it should be. See his *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2000, Chapter IX.
- 5 A. Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. D. Macey, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. xv.
- 6 E. S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Bloomington, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 33.



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Professor Hanna Damasio for permission to use and adapt her Figure 10.1 from Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, New York, Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999, p. 310.

Excerpt from *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink, London, Phoenix House, 1998.

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Part I

THE CENTRALITY OF  
PLACE FOR SELFHOOD



# INTRODUCTION

Where we are – the place we occupy, however briefly – has everything to do with what and who we are (and finally, *that* we are).

(E. S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 1993, p. xiii)

Just as you cannot fully understand human action without taking account of its biological evolutionary roots and, at the same time, understanding how it is construed in the meaning making of the actors involved in it, so you cannot understand it fully without knowing how and where it is situated. For, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, knowledge and action are always local, always situated in a network of particulars.

(J. Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 1996, p. 167)

By the time we can first think about it we have already become the sorts of beings who live in human worlds. Our particular world will have shaped us in specific ways for its own needs. It will have taught us some of the paths worth following and how to find our way within what, at that point, will be ‘our’ world. It may or may not have given us the adaptive skills necessary were the configuration of our being in this world to change radically, or were we to find ourselves in new worlds. Either way, whether embedded in deeply traditional worlds or in transition between new fast-changing ones, a fundamental problem confronting every one of us, and indeed every sentient creature, is how to position ourselves in the worlds we inhabit and how to find our way around them. Skills in navigating human worlds are primary requirements for successful human being. Location is a basic ontological category for psychology.

In this book I want to explore the idea that a primary function of the psychological system which is commonly called ‘self’ is to locate or position the person for themselves in relation to others. I want to suggest that *self* is a *locative system* with both evolutionary and cultural antecedents.

We cannot imagine being nowhere. We can visualise ourselves being lost, but that is to be somewhere unfamiliar to us, possibly without the means of getting back to a place we know. Where and when, place and time, are the conditions of existence. Being nowhere is quite simply a contradiction in terms. Without being

placed or located I would not be, and where I find myself implaced influences not just the fact of my being but also its nature. Where, when and who are mutually constitutive. Lives, selves, identities are threaded across times and places. Who you are is a function of where you are, of where you have been and of where you hope to arrive. There cannot be a 'here' without a 'you' or an 'I' or a 'now'. Self, acts of self-location and locations are inextricably linked and mutually constructive.

'Self' functions primarily as a locative system, a means of reference and orientation in worlds of space-time (perceptual worlds) and in worlds of meaning and place-time (cultural worlds). This understanding of self as an ongoing, living process of constant auto-referred locating recognises the centrality both of the body and of social relations. The antecedents of bodily location are well understood in evolutionary terms, whereas those of personal location among other persons are best understood culturally.

Selfhood and mentality are the most sophisticated synthetic achievements of body and culture in the universe known to human beings. In addition, as Jerome Bruner reminds us, 'Perhaps the single most universal thing about human experience is the phenomenon of "Self".'<sup>1</sup>

There is a forceful view that some ultimate account of 'self' will be adequately framed in neural and computational terms alone. I don't share this position. I do believe that the body is a primary and necessary condition for selfhood but also that the additional sufficiency for selfhood has to be supplied by culture. My belief is that a cultural psychology of self offers the most satisfying prospect of integrating the currently far-flung accounts of self and identity.

The field of self studies is now vast, and its creators as cosmopolitan a mix as any in contemporary thought. Philosophy, psychology, neurology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, gender studies, geography, literary theory and political science all lay claim to concepts of self and identity in one form or another. Attempts at synopsis are needed for reasons of intellectual economy. A synoptic account of selfhood, as with any synthetic enterprise, must be conceptually parsimonious. Parsimony requires superordinate concepts which can be tested for their organisational powers against the various theoretical and empirical claims made about self.

I want to propose the merits of 'location' as one such concept, though not of course the only one. My perspective is cultural-historical but with a strong belief in the constructive powers of the body. I suggest that a primary function of self is to orient the person in human and humanised worlds, and to efficiently stabilise that orientation within the flux of ever-changing experience.

By 'orient' I mean more than merely direct. Perceptual systems orient organisms. For the sake of survival even the simplest creatures must be able to register 'where-they-are'. This generally has to do with some form of evaluation of that

with which they are in immediate physical relationship. Senses of touch, of hot and cold, of vibration and movement, of light, and chemical senses to signal the noxious or the nice, are evolutionary solutions of a fairly direct kind to the problem of locating an organism *vis-à-vis* other organisms and relevant environmental features.

Higher up the evolutionary scale, perceptual systems creative of distance, such as visual and auditory systems, multiply the adaptive challenges and powers of those creatures that possess them. In doing so they also fundamentally elaborate the kinds of space or field or frame or ecosystem or world within which the species of creature must incessantly locate itself.

With our powers to create symbolic worlds we human beings face locational problems of an order unknown in the rest of the animal world. Our perceptual processes work symbiotically with our symbolic powers. In human worlds the literal coexists with the metaphorical, the true with the false, the transient with the durable, the real with the imaginary, the actual with the possible, the desirable with the forbidden. New *types* of world (in evolutionary terms) and new *worlds* (in cultural-historical terms) require novel solutions for the perennial problems of orientation and location. What we call 'self' is one such solution to the human problem of location in time and place, in meaning and moral order, in cultural place-time as well as in physical space-time.

With human beings, and possibly with other primates such as chimpanzees, these locational solutions entail a 'doubleness'. At the perceptual level, there is that which is perceived (the objective) and there is what it is like for the perceiving subject to perceive that object (the subjective). Some thinkers like Descartes have dichotomised this doubleness into distinctive worlds, whereas others (most anti-dualists) have insisted that the apparent doubleness is fundamentally a singleness constituted by a relationship that may be considered from different aspects, sometimes from 'my' point of view and sometimes from an 'other' point of view. This doubleness also characterises people's relationships with symbolic objects, in that there is a psychological distinction between the meaning of something and that something's meaning for me.

I am especially interested in the 'subjective' aspects of this doubleness, in the significance for me of the ways and means by which I locate myself and am enabled to do so biologically and culturally which, taken together, constitute a fundamental part of my psychology. The concept of self lies at the heart of this psychology of location.

The language of location pivots on the preposition 'in'. If I ask where I am, all sorts of answers using 'in' might come to mind depending on the context of the question: 'I am in my head, two inches or so behind my eyes', 'I am in my study', 'I am in second place in the competition', 'I'm in the middle of negotiations', 'I'm in love', 'I'm in a mess', 'I'm in disgrace', 'I'm working in the university',



'I'm in the early stages of the disease', 'I'm in the opening months of the twenty-first century', 'I'm in the chat room', 'I was lost in the book', and so on.

We use the word 'in' when speaking about our selves to situate ourselves within the body, to position ourselves geographically as bodies, to place ourselves in time, to locate ourselves within kinship and other social systems, to specify where we currently are on the internet, to identify an organisation we are part of, to specify the degree of our progress in completing a task, to convey the quality of experience within a relationship, or to specify how a powerful process shaping our future and of known stages is progressing.

Corresponding to each of these usages are ideas of the structure of the places/spaces within which the self is said to be contained, enrolled, enmeshed, entangled, enthused, entertained, enraged, engaged, enveloped, enchanted. There are ideas of cosmic space, social space, mental space, personal space, spiritual space, semantic space, cyberspace, pictorial space, evolutionary design space, dynamic phase space, and so on. Some of these spaces are understood as ontologically literal, others as metaphorical. The point is that ideas of space, place and location are recruited and relied upon at every level of human experience.

What ideas are available to enable us to construct a theory of space, place and position? The history of such ideas has been explored with particular phenomenological insight by the American philosopher Edward Casey.<sup>2</sup> His intellectual history of ideas of space, place, time and position is fascinating, and for those interested in it Casey provides one of the most acute accounts, particularly in respect to phenomenological ideas, of the body's role in generating a sense of place. For my purposes I will cherry-pick some of his conclusions which bear strongly on the case I want to make for the significance of the body's structure in the formation of 'place'.

In Western thought, as with so much else, histories of the notion of space are particularly indebted to Aristotle. He held, like Archytas of Tarentum before him, that place precedes all things. Nothing can be without being in place. Place is a condition of existence. Later in the history of the concept there emerges the idea that 'Place situates time by giving it a local habitation. Time arises *from* places and passes (away) *between* them.'<sup>3</sup>

But what is meant by 'place' as against 'space'? My understanding of 'place', and the sense in which I use it, is that place is humanised, personalised space. I use the idea of place-time to indicate that in personal and collective memory certain places are inexorably constituted as those places by their connection with, and embodiment of, certain moments in experiential time. Experiential time is time as a person experiences it and has paces of ebb and flow that don't map onto the rigid regularity with which clock time is arranged to pass. Our sense of the familiarity of places is intimately connected to the idea of place-time. 'When