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The Underlying “I” in the Multiplicitous Self

Simi Schreiber

The Underlying “I” in the Multiplicitous Self

It is not abnormal to ask yourself at least once in your lifetime the question, “Who am I?” Philosophers and deep thinkers, however, notice that in order to ask, “Who am I?” we must first inquire “*What* am I?” and even, “*What is ‘I’?*” For ages, philosophers have been searching for satisfactory answers to such questions in hopes of understanding the self and its existence. The majority of those in the Western philosophical tradition, often unfortunately and incorrectly deemed the only canonical and worthy thinkers, view the self as something contained and autonomous. Non-western philosophers such as Maria Lugones and Mariana Ortega present different definitions of the self which give more weight to the human experience as a tool to reach accurate conclusions about ourselves and our worlds. I write ‘worlds’ in the plural here since Maria Lugones presents her idea of the self as existent in multiple different worlds and able to travel between them. Based on Lugones’ notion of worlds and world traveling, the self is not singular or contained – it is multiplicitous. Lugones even goes as far as to say that, because of its multiplicitous nature and its different existences within different worlds, the self has no underlying “I” – no underlying thread of connected, continual existence. After discussing Maria Lugones’ world-based philosophy in depth, I will argue both that the existence of an underlying “I” does not contradict any of Lugones’ other claims about the self and that experiential evidence in fact points to the existence of a continuous underlying “I”.

In order to fully appreciate how Maria Lugones’ philosophy differs and offers new insights, it is first important to look at the Western traditional view of the self, as it has

dominated discussions about the self for generations. Rene Descartes famously states, “I think therefore I am,” expressing the dominance of the mind and calling sense experience into doubt. Separating mind and body into distinct substances in his *Discourse*, Descartes presents the mind as representing the continual existence of the self as separate from any perceived continual existence of physical matter (namely, the body).ⁱ Descartes bases this idea of the self upon the fact that one “can doubt the existence of the material world but cannot doubt the existence of himself as a thinking thing.”ⁱⁱ Similarly, Immanuel Kant bases his view of the self on the mind and its capacities which he deems separate from the physical structures of the body. He insists upon subject-object relationships, in which we (the subjects) view the world (objects) only through the structures of our minds.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, our realities are shaped by our own minds. Both Descartes’ and Kant’s philosophies of the self define it as singular and contained, relying on reason over empirical bases. Contrastingly, Lugones describes the self not as something through which to view its surroundings, but rather as something which is affected by its surroundings. Additionally, she derives her ideas from experiential evidence, prioritizing experience over strict reason when it comes to discovering truths.

In her article titled “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception” Maria Lugones presents her world-based philosophy informed by her personal experience (as well as the general experiences of marginalized peoples). As Lugones states, her paper “describes the experience of ‘outsiders’ to the mainstream,” yet her philosophy applies to all, including those who do not have a marginalized identity.^{iv} Lugones’ marginalized identity makes her more acutely aware of her existences within different worlds, since in many realms of her existence (for example, an all-white community) she is considered an outsider. Those who are at ease in the mainstream culture do not have the same experience of the “compulsory nature” of travelling

between worlds as marginalized people do.^v Here, I would like to make a brief comment about my own status as a white, Jewish woman. Living in a predominantly white world, I see my own personal experiences reflected most places I go, although I believe my Jewish identity gives me a little insight into the experiences of a minority living among the majority. In no way do I wish to equate my experiences to those of marginalized peoples. I only hope that this identity of mine, combined with my experience of living in four different states and my open-minded upbringing, helps me to better understand experiences other than my own and has made me slightly more cognizant of worlds and world travelling than the average white American. That being said, Lugones herself states that her world-based philosophy applies to non-marginalized individuals, as well, even if they are less aware of the processes she details. Keeping in mind the epistemic advantages that belong to marginalized peoples, let us detail what exactly Lugones means by “world” and “world-travelling.”

For Lugones, reality is made up of countless “worlds” which we can dwell within and travel between. By “world,” Lugones refers to spheres of existences, each of which have their own particular values and communal understandings. For something to be a world, “it has to be inhabited at present by some flesh and blood people...it cannot be a utopia. It may also be inhabited by some imaginary people.”^{vi} This is all to say that a world is something that actually exists. Lugones counts connections to the dead or imaginary peoples as real since they are often considered very real to the flesh and blood people inhabiting the world. Similarly, not everything in a world is physical – ideas have realities, too.^{vii} A world is not limited by its size – it “need not be a construction of a whole society.”^{viii} Rather, a world can be a whole society, a small subset of a society, a friend group, or even made up of just one person (yourself). Thus, a Lugonesian world is a sphere of existence, whether it be big or small, in which there are common

understandings, values, and norms. A friend group, for example, can be its own world; it has its own mutual understandings of the people within it, inside jokes, and norms of interaction. Thus, while the United States of America has its own unique culture and common understandings and can be deemed a world, so too can the state of Texas or New York – so too can a religious group, a college course/classroom, or a family unit each be considered a distinct world. To dwell within a world, you do not necessarily need to understand the constructions of it, nor do you have to agree with them.^{ix} Importantly, “one can ‘travel between these ‘worlds’ and one can inhabit more than one of these ‘worlds’ at the very same time.”^x

“World-traveling” can ensue out of either necessity or choice and can be done consciously or unconsciously. Lugones thinks that those “who are outside the mainstream of, for example, the U.S. dominant construction or organization of life are “world travelers” as a matter of necessity and of survival.”^{xi} This is not to say that *only* marginalized peoples are world-travelers. People with social privilege do inhabit multiple worlds, as well. However, their beliefs and understandings are often reaffirmed in other worlds, making a shift between worlds less noticeable. It follows, then, that if you are of marginalized social standing, you are more acutely aware of the different worlds. For example, when I travel from my family household world to the world of my college friend group/campus world, I may not realize that I have travelled into a different world because the changes between the two are subtle. But, if a native-Spanish speaker goes from their Spanish-speaking home to an English-speaking university (or even out to a public place in a white, predominantly English-speaking suburb), they are likely to be more aware of the shift in worlds. The realities of world traveling pose one main logical contradiction: how can one logically inhabit multiple worlds at once? Thus, her statement that one not only can, but *does*, travel between different worlds presents itself as “ontologically problematic.”^{xii}

Lugones’ idea of “world-traveling” and its fundamental production of ontological confusion is what fuels her theory of the uncontinuous self. She says, “those of us who are ‘world’-travelers have the distinct experience of being different in different ‘worlds’” and can remember ourselves in other worlds, as well.^{xiii} We are not the same in each world. Now, we not only have the question of how we can inhabit multiple worlds at once, but also the question of how it is possible that we exist differently – possess and display different qualities – in different worlds. Lugones makes sense of these ontological confusions by denouncing the existence of any underlying “I”. Therefore, she deems world-travel as “the shift from being one person to being a different person.”^{xiv} Lugones is therefore saying that when one travels into a different world, and thus takes on different characteristics and attitudes, one becomes a wholly different “one” and not simply a different version of the same self. She emphasizes this point, stating that, although a shift can be done willfully, “it is not a matter of acting”^{xv} – one does not *choose* to take on a different personality or act in a different manner; they simply *are* different. This phenomenon, I think, is something most of us can relate to. I, for instance, do not *choose* to stay quiet in a room of people I do not know; my brain is simply void of anything I could possibly say. With my family, however, I often do not stop talking even though I am not consciously making the choice to think of things to say and say them. It just happens. Lugones takes this notion of one being quiet in one world and loud in another – playful in one and not playful in another, etc. – and argues that it is not the same ‘one’ that exists in each of these worlds. She goes as far as to say that “One does not *experience* any underlying ‘I.’”^{xvi} Thus, the underlying “I,” according to Lugones, does not exist.

Lugones’ claim that there exists no underlying “I” – no continuous thread of the self – and her reasonings behind it remind me of the familiar question of whether identity persists over

time. This area of thought essentially asks whether anything, including the self, can exist continuously through time and change.^{xvii} For example, am I the same person as I was when I was two years old? I've wildly changed both physically and mentally, so what connects my identity to that of that little redheaded two-year-old? Some people answer these difficult questions by saying that current-day me and little me are in fact not the same person.^{xviii} The reasonings behind this solution are akin to Lugones' argument that there is no underlying "I;" however, where philosophers have discussed the possible conundrum of identity not existing *through time*, Lugones discusses the nonexistence of a continuous self *between worlds*, not over time. This is an innovative contribution to the question of identity and change. I, however, believe that there does exist a continuous thread within the self both throughout time and between worlds and that an underlying "I" can coincide nicely with Lugones' notions of world and world travel. The existence of an underlying "I" is necessary for ourselves to have any sort of identity and be held to the consequences of our actions. Therefore, having a continuous self is important to our own existential peace as well as to a successful society. The importance of its existence, however, is not the only reason I believe in an underlying "I" in combination with Lugones' world-based reality.

What Lugones says doesn't necessarily prove the absence of an underlying "I" nor does it require its nonexistence. Applying a different solution to the issues of ontological confusion and changes in identities/personalities between worlds makes it so the existence of an underlying "I" does not contradict Lugones' world-based philosophies and its experiential truths. Lugones presents a double image of herself as "playful and as not playful" which produces an issue: how can she be both playful *and* not playful?^{xix} Based on formal logic, you cannot both be and not be something simultaneously; it's a contradiction. So, how can one be both A and not A? Lugones

solves this problem by saying that it is not the same thing that is A and not A – the subject which possesses A is not the same subject which does not possess A. Let’s say that Maria is both playful and not playful; essentially, Lugones solves this contradiction by saying it is not the same maria. She amends the statement to say that Maria₁ is playful, and Maria₂ is not playful. I would solve this problem differently, changing the terms in which Maria is A/not A rather than changing the person. I would amend the statement to: Maria is A at time/in situation 1, and Maria is not A at time/in situation 2. This rephrase of the statement shows that the contradiction can be completely solved in a way that still allows for the existence of an underlying “I.” While both reiterations of the statement solve the issue of contradiction, I hope to prove that experiential evidence lends itself more towards the latter solution and points to the existence of a continuous self.

Evidence, both logical and empirical, supports the existence of an underlying “I” in the self. Firstly, the fact that people can inhabit the same worlds and still experience them or perceive them differently seems to promote the idea that something continuous exists within the self. Why do I experience and act within a world differently than another girl who has the same main identifications as me: white, Jewish, female. Perhaps you would answer that it is because, although we overlap in one world, I live within a different set of worlds – have experienced a different set of worlds – than she. This answer, though, suggests that my experience in one world (and/or the combined experiences of the set of worlds in which I have dwelled) could affect my experience in a different world. If one is a wholly different person in each world as Lugones argues, though, this could not happen. How could my being and experience in one world affect (whether it be consciously or subliminally) my being in a different world if not for some continual thread connecting those two iterations of myself to each other? Perhaps you could

argue that it is not my world experience that makes me act and think differently than someone else, but that it is simply my unique comprehensive set of identifications. Not only am I always white, Jewish, and female, I am also always 50% Iraqi, the youngest of three children, 5 feet and 2 inches tall (forgive me for rounding up)...and so on. It is probably impossible (or at the very least, incredibly unlikely) that there exists another person with my exact same set of identities. But, if that person did exist, it is possible they would act the same way I do in different worlds. Regardless, though, the sheer fact that each person has a unique set of identities which are true no matter what world they exist in at any moment *is in itself* an aspect of the continuous self that transverses worlds. If I brought this up to Lugones, I think she would press the fact that my being Jewish, for example, manifests differently when I'm in a Jewish community versus when I'm in a notably Christian-dominated place (and same goes for being white in a predominantly white versus a predominantly non-white place, as well as her experience of being Hispanic in a predominantly white space versus in a predominantly Hispanic community, etc.). I would not be satisfied with this response. Yes, the space you are in causes you to unconsciously act and feel different even with the same set of identities; however, that does not change the fact that you still possess the same set of basic identities when in different worlds. Sure, in some worlds you may gain different characteristics (such as being playful or not playful), but that does not affect the fact that you retain the same *core of unchanging identities*. Perhaps it is this core that constitutes the underlying "I." In case this proposition is not satisfactory, I will state another.

It is possible that the "I" – the consistent "self" – is the conglomerate of all the different iterations of yourself in different worlds. You may feel like a different person in each world, but even the fact that you don't feel like yourself in certain worlds is an attribute of your underlying self. Although I know I do not come close to representing the experience of marginalized peoples

(who experience this phenomenon most intensely), I will use myself to illustrate this point as I can only speak to the truth of my own experiences. What if I defined myself not just “Simi: white, Jewish, female” but also by my experiences in different worlds. Then, I would define myself, saying that I am Simi, I am white, I am Jewish, I am female; I am Simi, I am louder around family and friends, I am quieter amongst people I don’t know, I am eager in my philosophy classes, I am not eager in my language classes. I am comfortable in casual situations, and I am more reserved in formal situations. I act differently around my friends than I do around my family, and I cannot help that nor can I pinpoint exactly why. Like Lugones argues, I do not make the conscious choice to act as I do – *be* as I am – in each of these different spheres of existences. Rather, I just am different. Or as I would phrase it: I *have* different iterations of my existence which belong to the *same* self. I thus could define my self as the cumulative combination of all of the different iterations of existence that I experience.

I also *remember* and *acknowledge* the differences in my actions and ways of being between worlds. There is something consistent in the memory of myself – I carry who I am from one world into who I am in another world, even if it just is through reflection. Lugones does address the faculty of memory in “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,” saying that while we have memory of ourselves in different worlds, the first-person statement of “ourselves” is non-inferential as we only ever experience things in the first person.^{xx} However, I do not remember other peoples’ experiences in the same way that I remember my own. Therefore, there must be something unique to the memories I make – that this self which I call mine makes – since I do not and cannot experience or remember others’ memories in the same manner. The way in which I experience my own memories is unique to me, subsequently implying the existence of a *me*. Additionally, experiences I go through affect who I am and how

I exist in different worlds even if I do not realize it. This leads me to another possible version of the underlying “I,” one similar to the self that decolonial philosopher Mariana Ortega presents.

Mariana Ortega praises Maria Lugones’ world-travelling philosophy and works to explain its intricate facets (as well as how they interact with and give insight into Martin Heidegger’s ideas of being) in her article “‘New Mestizas,’ ‘World’-Travelers,’ and ‘Dasein’: Phenomenology and the Multi-Voiced, Multi-Cultural Self.” In agreement with Lugones, Ortega presents the self not as singular and autonomous like the Western philosophical tradition states, but as “a multiplicitous self caught in between the norms and practices of different cultures, classes, races, or ‘worlds.’”^{xxi} Ortega emphasizes the seemingly ontologically confusing aspects of this multiplicituous self, saying that one who holds marginalized identities must juggle “beliefs and practices from two, three, and sometimes more cultures, beliefs and norms which in many cases are completely different or even contradictory.”^{xxii} Although the multiplicitous self presented by Ortega seems almost synonymous with Lugones’ self, there is one crucial difference: Ortega describes the multiplicitous self as having a continual existence and thus an underlying “I.”^{xxiii} For Ortega, the underlying “I” consists in the self’s ability to shift from one world to another. She pulls from feminist philosopher Chéla Sandoval to describe the unique consciousness of a multiplicitous self as enabling “‘movement between and among ideological positionings’ by serving the role of a clutch in a car, the ‘mechanism that permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power.’”^{xxiv} This notion of the self as “serving the role of a clutch in a car,” can explain the continuous thread of the self as the unique perspective (“mechanism”) which guides our actions and experiences. Thus, the way in which you perceive the world *is* your underlying self. The self need not be a soul or a substance; it can be a continuously changing and growing unique outlook on reality which is

connected to the different versions of our existences simply because it helped us move from that existence into another one.

There is one last attribute of my argument that I would like to address: its ambiguity. I am aware that I provided many different options for what the underlying “I” *could* be and yet do not state ever what it actually *is*. However, I do not believe this weakens my argument that the underlying self does indeed exist since ambiguity deals only with the character/nature of the self and not its existence. Many things which exist are characteristically ambiguous. Ortega and the philosophers she converses with affirm both the existence of the underlying self and its ambiguity.^{xxv} Even Lugones states that the being she is at any point is ambiguous.^{xxvi}

As we know, for Lugones, there is no single “self” – no core – that travels to different worlds or lives within different worlds. However, this concession is not necessary to Lugones’ claims that we exist in a multiple-world reality (marginalized peoples being more aware of this fact) in which we travel between worlds consciously, unconsciously, or, for minorities, out of sheer necessity. The existence of an underlying “I” does not require the existence of a singular, autonomous, contained self. If defined as the conglomeration of existences, the unification of memories and experiences, or the unique perspective with which one uses to navigate the world, the underlying “I” can still be a changing, affectable entity that coincides with Lugones’ proposed reality. So much of what Lugones says about worlds and world-traveling rings true to my own experience (even though I have mostly non-marginalized identities) and so I strongly believe in the multiplicitous self and the countless worlds which Lugones describes. However, I also experience (as I believe others like Ortega do, as well), that my memories, perspectives, and core identities which transverse worlds imply the existence of an underlying “I,” regardless of its ambiguous nature.

Notes

- ⁱ Hatfield, Gary. "René Descartes." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, January 16, 2014.
- ⁱⁱ Hatfield, 2014.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Brook, Andrew, and Julian Wuerth. "Kant's View of the Mind and Consciousness of Self." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, October 8, 2020.
- ^{iv} Lugones, María. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2, no. 2 (1987): 3–19, p. 3.
- ^v Lugones, 3.
- ^{vi} Lugones, 9.
- ^{vii} Lugones, 10.
- ^{viii} Lugones, 10.
- ^{ix} Lugones, 10.
- ^x Lugones, 10-11.
- ^{xi} Lugones, 11.
- ^{xii} Lugones, 13.
- ^{xiii} Lugones, 13.
- ^{xiv} Lugones, 11.
- ^{xv} Lugones, 11.
- ^{xvi} Lugones, 12.
- ^{xvii} Gallois, Andre. "Identity over Time." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, October 6, 2016.
- ^{xviii} De Rizzo, Julio. "A Guide to 5 (Families of) Paradoxes." Universitat Wien Lecture Guide, June 15, 2022, pg. 4.
- ^{xix} Lugones, 13.
- ^{xx} Lugones, 11.
- ^{xxi} Ortega, Mariana. "'New Mestizas,' 'World'-Travelers,' and 'Dasein': Phenomenology and the Multi-Voiced, Multi-Cultural Self." *Hypatia* 16, no. 3 (2001): 1–29. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810558>, pg. 4.
- ^{xxii} Ortega, 4.
- ^{xxiii} Ortega, 5.
- ^{xxiv} Ortega, 5.
- ^{xxv} Ortega, 14.
- ^{xxvi} Lugones, 13.

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