

Sustainable selves

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My ideas about multiple selves and green consumerism are fragmentary, premature, and speculative. So there's little point in pretending that I can craft a smooth scientific narrative that deploys a consistent theory and compelling evidence to yield crisp policy recommendations. It's too early for that. Instead I'll simply list twenty-seven thoughts that bubbled up from my interest, as an evolutionary psychologist, in how people display their traits to others. If I'm lucky, some of these thoughts might prove irritating or intriguing enough to provoke others to test a few of these thoughts empirically.

1. There's nothing mysterious about growing, displaying, and switching amongst multiple selves. We all do it all the time. It's perfectly natural. It's the basic texture and tempo of social life for a species of big-brained narcissists like us, in all of our status-seeking, sexual-strategizing, self-deceptive glory.

2. Our capacities for displaying different selves in different social contexts have a deep evolutionary history: 85 million years as primates, 35 million years as social apes, 4 million years as hyper-social hominids. That's plenty of time for our ancestors to get good at crafting different masks for different audiences, even before language. Then, about 10,000 years ago, some human populations started to develop agriculture, cities, trade, money, divisions of labor, social classes, sub-cultures, professions, named roles, and specialized mating markets. The demand for multiple selves boomed, and the supply of selves followed. We learned to apply our evolved capacities for self-display to these more complex and intricate conditions. The number and diversity of selves multiplied, both per society and per individual.

3. As species genetically adapt to specific ecosystems and mating systems, our selves developmentally adapt to specific economic, social, and sexual roles.

4. Prehistoric hominids played a just a few roles calling for a few different selves in their small-scale societies – roles such as hunter, gatherer, lover, parent, friend, ally, enemy, leader, follower, mentor, and student. Such roles recurred millions of time over human evolutionary history, so we evolved genetic propensities to form certain types of selves with certain features well-adapted to those roles. We are neurogenetically well-adapted to inhabit such ancient selves, so they feel comfortable and natural, like Jungian archetypes.

5. By contrast, after civilization, we were forced to grow a wider variety of selves for more diverse roles. Economic divisions of labor called for roles such as warrior, priest, scribe, craftsman, trader, customer, investor, and, eventually, marketer. More intricate mating markets, family structures, inheritance norms, and political systems called for differentiations between dads and cads, wives and whores, first-borns and later-borns, extroverts and introverts, conservatives and liberals, police and criminals, zealots and apostates, optimists and pessimists. For such evolutionarily novel social roles, we acquire useful selves as best we can,

given the role models and social norms available in our cultures. These novel selves may feel alienated, awkward, and mutually contradictory. Evolution has not had time to optimize, ritualize, and compartmentalize them. In each such modern role we may feel cognitive dissonance, ambivalence, uncertainty, and alienation. They don't fit as comfortably as those old Jungian archetypes.

6. Some of our selves interact with markets for goods and services, as buyers, sellers, consumers, workers, investors, observers, critics, and gossips – but most of our selves do not. Among the selves that interact with markets, there are diverse and often contradictory goals in the acquisition, use, and display of products, so these selves feel internally fragmented. Further, even our economic selves are never just economically oriented (much less economically rational); all are alloyed with social, sexual, familial, and status concerns.

7. A game theorist might observe that the markets for different goods and services are different sorts of positive-sum, mixed-motive games, with different players, rules, principles, payoffs, discourses, equilibrium selection heuristics, coordination focal points, information asymmetries, commitment mechanisms, and signaling strategies. But we need not explore such technical details here. It's sufficient to say that these different games demand different strategic attitudes, which are ritualized over our lives into different selves called forth by different economic and social contexts.

8. From a psychologist's viewpoint, each 'self' includes and comprises:

- a set of habits and compromises to play a social role
- a performance, both well-practiced and creatively improvised
- a narrator for a certain genre of life-story
- a mode of operation for the human brain, like a smartphone app
- a profile of hormones, neurotransmitters, and other physiological parameters
- a set of perceptual and attentional filters
- a system of beliefs and desires
- a set of activation thresholds for various emotions, moods, and cognitive styles
- an altered state of consciousness, sparked by a role rather than a drug
- a style of adaptive self-deception, with a self-justifying ideology
- a way of Being-in-the-World (in Heidegger's sense)
- a certain style of Bad Faith (in Sartre's sense)
- a specialized defence against the existential dread of death and cosmic meaninglessness (if Terror Management Theory is right)
- a set of costly signals displayed, unconsciously, for a particular audience
- a way of manipulating other people's Theory of Mind (mind-reading, perspective-taking, person perception), so they draw certain inferences about our traits and propensities

9. Different selves are different modes of judgment and decision-making that unconsciously seek different 'fitness affordances' – different objects, situations, experiences, and relationships that tend to promote survival and reproductive success. But each self is also a specialized mode of display, a different 'fitness indicator', a form of costly, reliable, hard-to-fake signaling that displays certain traits through certain signals to certain audiences.

10. Here are my 'selves' at the time of writing, each semi-conscious and semi-salient, ready for specific modes of perception and action as needed:

- A psychology professor drafting a book chapter on multiple selves in relation to sustainable consumerism

- A machine for turning coffee into science
- A father worrying about his daughter's well-being during her school trip to Bhutan
- A home-owner waiting for a plumber to arrive, to fix a root-damaged pipe
- A day-dreamer covetous of a BMW 550i, but grudgingly content with a 13-year-old Toyota

11. These selves show different degrees and styles of green consumerism in different circumstances. The coffee-drinker may favor fair-trade, shade-grown, organic coffee when grocery shopping, but may not care about the beans' provenance when grabbing a cappuccino before a faculty meeting. The worried father may favor other tourists using small, efficient hybrid vehicles when exploring developing countries, but may wish his own daughter to be cocooned in an armored, five-ton truck with 26 air-bags and the acceleration to out-run would-be kidnappers. The home-owner may attend to the sustainability of retail PVC pipe when shopping at Home Depot, but may not question the plumber's own choice of wholesale piping. As for the BMW, no comment.

12. For some goods and services, I may be aware of green branding, sustainability issues, socially responsible companies, ethical investment opportunities, and local social norms concerning morally acceptable consumerism. These green-salient markets, at this moment in Euro-American capitalism, include food, clothing, cars, houses, tourism, charities, and equities. In other markets, green issues remain invisible, inactionable, undiscussed with friends or family, and unshaped by social norms so far. These non-green (or pre-green) markets, at the moment, concern goods and services such as knives, smartphones, paintings, televisions, furniture, pets, recreational drugs, live music, spectator sports, movies, casinos, treasury bonds, educational credentials, research grants, parties, holidays, and feasts. Many will disagree with this list, which illustrates the culture-specific, sub-culture-modulated, ever-expanding nature of green consumerism.

13. Each self is a different brand aimed at a different market segment (lovers, friends, family members) through different advertising content and channels. Selves as brands undergo updates, make-overs, brand extensions, differentiations, mergers, and co-branding relationships, in response to shifting market conditions.

14. For example, if one's lover is relaxed at home, she/he may value one's displaying cues of kindness and sensitivity (high agreeableness), as manifest in soft-hearted green consumerism. Yet if one's lover is threatened in public by a mugger or rapist, she/he may value one's displaying cues of aggressiveness and formidability (low agreeableness), as manifest in hard-hearted pugilism.

15. The couple in love, early in courtship, may value consumerist decisions that display high openness, impulsivity, status-seeking, and romantic sentimentalism. Later, once the woman is pregnant, she may value consumerist attitudes that signal conservatism, cautiousness, humility, and practical rationality. Standards of green consumerism may shift as relationships develop. They may slip as constraints of time and money loom larger for families. As mates, friends, and relatives become enthused or burnt out about various green issues, our moral accountabilities to them shift.

16. For example, my daughter watches the documentaries *Food, Inc.* and *Our Daily Bread* about the food industry, and learns that eating battery-farmed chickens and non-organic beef is immoral, disgusting, and harmful. She decides never to eat chicken or beef again. In response,

my behavior as her grocery-shopping father changes so our family dinners include more fish and tofu. But I still eat chicken or beef for lunch sometimes in restaurants. This is an inconsistency, but it is maladaptive? Perhaps only if my daughter finds out about it.

17. Alternatively, my wife learns how cheap it is to prevent iodine deficiency in India, which causes serious mental retardation in millions of children, and wants to support charities that promote salt iodization in India. So we may buy fewer organic vegetables and more conventionally-grown vegetables, so we can donate the difference to the Network on Sustained Elimination of Iodine Deficiency Disorders. Our food choices now look less sustainable, but our spending overall may be more virtuous according to the triple bottom line: financial good, social good, and environmental good. Asked about our eating or charity habits, we may downplay the iodine-over-organic decision in the company of organic food zealots, but we may highlight it when visiting Bangalore or Mumbai. Another case of adaptive inconsistency.

18. This last example highlights the complexity of trade-offs in green consumer decision-making. Economists expect consumers to maximize subjective expected utility across all possible product choices. This is hard enough even given perfect rationality, including stable, transitive preferences. It is exponentially harder if one is trying to maximize welfare across all living and future generations of all people, animals, plants, and environments. The problem of achieving rational consistency across consumer choices then becomes impossible, given uncertainties about the total welfare impacts of each product choice.

19. In particular, the media present consumers with an ever-changing set of research results concerning the welfare side-effects (negative externalities) of each consumer decision. One week, new hybrid cars seem obviously superior to old SUVs; the next week, concerns about the toxic side-effects of manufacturing hybrid car batteries makes the old SUVs seem worth keeping. Information about product externalities is a dynamic kaleidoscope of consumer confusion. Almost no consumer externalities are reliably measured, widely reported, or rationally comparable to qualitatively different externalities (e.g. how should we compare carcinogens vs. child labor vs. global warming?).

20. Ralph Waldo Emerson: A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. Consistency may be laudable integrity, or rigid inflexibility. Where a philosopher may see logical inconsistency, a biologist may see adaptive flexibility. So, what is the optimal degree of inconsistency among our distinct selves, for we imperfect humans in an imperfect world with conflicting demands?

21. Some see multiple selves as broken fragments of some original, integral, and hypothetical soul. I see multiple selves as the biological norm for any social species in a complex, dynamic environment.

22. Some of our consumer selves become self-consciously green, and strive for rational consistency of green principles across different products, markets, and social relationships. Most do not bother. If our selves are multiple, domain-specific, relationship-specific, shaped by different habits and social norms, influenced by different sets of genes, environments, and random developmental nudges, we should not expect a principled consistency across selves. Further, if our propensity to develop, use, and display multiple selves is adaptive, then forcing consistency among those multiple selves is likely to be maladaptive, even if theoretically possible.

23. Consistency among selves may be maladaptively reduced in those with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, high neuroticism, high impulsivity, or addiction. Consistency may be adaptively reduced among spies, psychopaths, con men, politicians, philanderers, and marketers.

24. Consistency among selves may become a conspicuous, costly display of 'integrity' in its own right, pursued by those with unusually strong conscientiousness, obsessive-compulsive disorder, self-critical depression, or religious zealotry. For them, consistency of principles and values – and hence consumer preferences – is a personal achievement driven by metacognition, critical self-reflection, a vivid autobiographical memory, and a misguided existential yearning for unity of personhood across time and context. Consistency arises only if demanded by some sort of internalized Immanuel Kant, Peter Singer, or Dalai Lama. Seeking moral consistency across selves and across consumer domains would become just another costly signal of one's moral virtues, intelligence, or personality traits such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, or openness. The super-consistent seek a stable identity through a backbone of articulated principles, not through the stable genotype that suffices for all other organisms.

25. We shouldn't expect moral or ideological consistency across multiple selves any more than we should expect different software applications to operate according to the same principles. The computer's multiple selves – Word, Excel, Powerpoint, Outlook, Explorer – are all consistent with the hardware of the CPU, RAM, and hard drive, as our multiple selves are all consistent with our brains. But they have different personalities, and so they should.

26. Policy implications? Don't try to force consistency among people's existing consumer selves, which are already brittle and rusty with age, and mutually repellent like neodymium magnets. Instead, encourage the growth of fresh new consumer selves that owe nothing to old habits or identities. Inject each person with a new green consumer conscience, rather than trying to engineer an awkward compromise among existing selves. This will work best when there are intense new social norms that demand a re-branding of each human identity.

27. Change the soul's social environment, and the soul will adapt. A new green costume ball will demand new green masks, and that's OK. Old selves die, new selves arise. We are free to play whatever tricks upon our minds that we can, to save our civilization, species, and planet.