

STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHY
AND HISTORY OF IDEAS 6

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Philosophy, Literature, and the Dissolution of the Subject

Nietzsche, Musil, Atay



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Introduction

To the question ‘what is self?’ philosophers give a variety of answers. Some claim that such a thing does not exist at all, while others say the opposite and attempt to give us an account of the self by grounding it in God, spirit, substance, nature or brain, or body, or some combinations of these. Some turn to antiquity, claiming that we could understand things better if only we could establish a continuity between concepts at different times. In other words, they argue that when the ancients asked questions similar to today’s, like ‘what is the fundamental truth of human nature?’ or ‘what defines the identity of an individual?’ they were, in fact, dealing with the one and the same sort of problem.

Whether such continuity – between the conception of the self in antiquity and in modern philosophical thought – exists or not extends the scope of this book, and despite the fact that our contemporary ideas about self stem from Descartes, it is well known that Greek philosophy is a rich source for philosophers and that they often find themselves in a constant dialogue with the Greeks (Nietzsche). So, I will give a synopsis of the conceptions of the self in different eras before we turn to modern conceptions of the self, and, correspondingly, its ethical ramifications.

Richard Sorabji claims that there is such a thing as self and that there was in the ancient Greek world. He says that *autos* (‘same’, emphatic ‘himself’) and the reflexive *heautos* (‘himself’) often come close.¹ Aristotle describes a friend as another self, *allos autos*. In *Republic* (IX, 589a-b), Plato uses the word *anthropos* (‘human being’) which denotes something closer to ‘self’ or ‘person’.² The ‘self’ in the ancient philosophers is seldom identical with the soul, being sometimes connected with only one aspect of it, sometimes with the body, sometimes with the whole person. For Plato, the true self is reason or intellect. Michel Foucault famously argued that the ‘care of the self’ was a fundamental attitude throughout Greek, Hellenistic and Roman culture. Socrates, for instance, is always associated with the notion of ‘caring for oneself’. The notion of the ‘care of the self’ was important for Plato, as well as for Epicureans, Cynics and Stoics. It is also found

1 Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), p. 32.

2 Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola, Introduction in *Ancient Philosophy of the Self*, ed. Pauliina Remes, Juha Sihvola (London: Springer, 2008), p. 5.

in Christianity, as a positive principle.³ In fact the problem of what a self is may go back as far as Homer.

In Homeric society every individual has a given role and status within a well-defined system of roles and statuses. Kinship and the household are the key structures. In such a society a man knows who he is by knowing his role in these structures and through this he also knows what he owes and what is owed to him. There is no distinction between 'ought' and 'owe' in Greek (*dein*) and in Anglo-Saxon (*ahte*), and in Icelandic the word 'skyldr' ties together 'ought' and 'is kin to'.⁴ Eduard Frankel wrote of Homeric man that

a man and his actions become identical, and he makes himself completely and adequately comprehended in them; he has no hidden depths...In [the epics] factual report of what men do and say, everything that men are, is expressed, because they are no more than what they do and say and suffer.⁵

To judge a man therefore is to judge his actions. In other words, morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society. Thus, the assumption that some modern moral philosophers take to be essential characteristic of human selfhood, that is to say, the capacity to detach oneself from any particular standpoint, to step backwards and judge things from the outside, is just what the self of the heroic age lacks. There is no outside position to which to withdraw without becoming a stranger, or alien. There is no difference between trying to withdraw yourself from a given position and trying to make yourself disappear, in other words, wanting your own death.⁶

The virtues of Homeric society were different from those of Athens. For the Athenian man the question of the relationship between being a good citizen and being a good man becomes central. Then the virtues have their place within the social context of the city state and to be a good man is equal to being a good citizen. The virtues, for Plato, for instance, are not merely compatible with each other but the presence of each requires the presence of all. The assumption behind this thesis is that there is a cosmic order which 'dictates the place of each virtue in a total harmonious scheme of human life'.⁷

3 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 8-10.

4 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), p. 115.

5 Quoted in MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 115.

6 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 118-119.

7 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 133.

In the Platonist thesis concerning the unity of the virtues the idea of the mastery of the self through reason becomes central. To be master of oneself is to have the higher part of the soul (reason) rule over the lower part (desire). Only a rational person can attain the unity of the virtues. The idea of the unity of the virtues appears in Aristotle as well. Like Plato, Aristotle sees the exercise of the virtues as not *a* means to the end of the good for man. What constitutes the good for man is a complete human life lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a central part of such a life, rather than a mere preparatory exercise to secure it.⁸ According to Aristotle, what makes an object the kind of object that it is is what it does, in other words, its function, or characteristics. In this view, to be unified is to be teleologically organized. Correspondingly, a good action for Aristotle is the one conducted at the right time, in the right way, towards the right object, and with the right aim. That is to say, it is one that embodies the right principle. In *Nicomachean Ethics* there is a threefold structure: 1-human-nature-as-it-happens-to-be; 2-human-nature-as-it-could-be-if-it-realised-its-*telos*; 3- the precepts of ethics as the means for the transition from one to the other. There is a fundamental contrast between the first two and this is why we need the third one, namely, ethics which enables men to understand how they make the transition from former to the latter.

Ethics therefore on this view presupposes some account of potentiality and act, some account of the essence of man as a rational animal and above all some account of the human *telos*. The precepts which enjoin the various virtues and prohibit the vices which are their counterparts instruct us how to move from potentiality to act, how to realise our true nature and to reach our true end.⁹

Our desires and emotions are educated by the use of such precepts, and it is reason which shows us what our true end is and how we can reach it. Thus, Aristotle's view is teleological.

Despite this resemblance between Plato and Aristotle, Sorabji, focusing on the on the Stoic theory of four *personae*, shows how ancient philosophy exhibits a large variety of discussions of self and selfhood. For Stoics, moral decision-making presupposed an understanding of one's individual character and position in the world:

And this difference of natures has such force that sometimes one man ought to commit suicide, while another *in the same situation* (in *eadem causa*, only in some mss) ought not. For was Marcus Cato in a different situation (*alia in causa*) from the others who surrendered to Caesar in Africa? But perhaps with the others it would have been attributed to moral failure if they had killed themselves, because their lives had been less austere

8 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 140

9 MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 50

and their habits more easy-going. Since nature had conferred on Cato an incredible gravity, and he had strengthened it by unceasing consistency, and had always persisted in his resolved purpose, it was right for him to die rather than to look on the face of a tyrant.¹⁰

By focusing on the importance of the unique individual of Cato, Sorabji underlines the contrast with the idea of moral obligation found in a modern philosopher such as Kant. While Kant sees moral obligation as applying universally, Cicero claims that Cato's suicide was morally right only for him. Sorabji says: 'It was unique to Cato that suicide was the right course, because his character was unique among those defeated here. The interest here is not only in the individual but in an individual whose character in the situation was unique.'¹¹ Cicero appeals to a theory of *persona* which goes back to the Stoic philosopher Panaetius. It is a view about what you must take into consideration while making decisions about what it is right to do. So the Kantian idea that you must consider the fact that you are a rational being is not enough. According to Panaetius, one needs to make decisions in the light of one's individual *persona* as well, that is: 'of the position you have been born into, the choices you have made, and what fortune has brought you.'¹² *Personae* are of course constituted partly by our roles like fatherhood or motherhood and so it is true that many of these roles are common to many people; nevertheless, there are characteristics that are not shared.¹³

Even though there are different views about whether the use of the word 'self' among the ancients is similar to uses of it today, at least it seems that there are basic assumptions about the ancient philosophy of the self on which many commentators agree:

1. In ancient philosophy the problem of self was usually discussed within metaphysics and ontology.
2. The Notion of selfhood is not construed as a domain of epistemological certainty, unlike Cartesian selfhood.

10 Quoted in Richard Sorabji, 'Greco-Roman Varieties of Self', in *Ancient Philosophy of the Self*, p. 31

11 Sorabji, 'Greco-Roman Varieties of Self', p. 31

12 Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern*, p. 158

13 Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern*, p. 158. In fact, Kant comments on Cato's suicide in his *Lectures on Ethics* but very briefly and he talks about suicide as a point about the legitimacy of the suicide not as a general point about decisions: 'It must certainly be admitted that in a case such as this, where suicide is a virtue, appearances are in its favour. But this is the only example which has given the world the opportunity of defending suicide.' Quoted in Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern*, p. 171

3. Until Plotinus and Augustine, selves were regarded as parts of the objective world, and not addressed as aspects of individual experience.
4. Problems of self were approached within a teleological framework.
5. Ethical and political arguments, especially Plato's and Aristotle's, influenced the ways in which the problem of selfhood was discussed.¹⁴

All these basic assumptions will be addressed at various points, but for now the last assumption is crucial. Firstly, the idea that the concept of the self is inseparable from ethics is a recurring theme of this book; secondly, I shall suggest that our modern notion of the self is related to a particular sense of inwardness, one in which some sort of opposition between the inner/outer or inside/outside seems unavoidable. We tend to think that our thoughts, feelings and desires are 'within' us while the objects exist in the outer world. Taylor writes: 'We are creatures with inner depths; with partly unexplored and dark interiors. We all feel the force of Conrad's image in *Heart of Darkness*.'¹⁵

Even if, as Taylor suggests, the modern notion of the self is unthinkable without Plato's idea of the rational self, it was Augustine who stressed the opposition between the inner and outer man. The inner is the soul, whereas the outer is the bodily things, including our senses and even the memory storage. The road from the lower to the higher (and to the God) goes through our attending to ourselves as inner. This is very different from Plato's idea of finding out about 'the highest principle by looking at the domain of objects which it organises, that is, the field of the Ideas. In other words, Augustine shifts the focus from the domain of objects to be known to the activity of knowing, to the first-person stand point. Here the idea of self-knowledge or our search for our inner self is at the same time our search for God. Augustine's turn to the inner self was a turn to radical reflexivity, a method which will be taken up Descartes. However, Descartes gave a radical direction to the inner man of Augustine, placing the sources of morality, too, within us.¹⁶

It should be noted here even though Descartes is Augustinian in his method of radical reflexivity, it is a method that enables him to move from the first person experience into an objectified, impersonal stand-point. We have to objectify the world and our bodies in order to stand back and withdraw from them so that we

14 For Further discussion see Paulina Remes. Juha Sihvola, *Ancient Philosophy of the Self*, pp. 2-5.

15 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Atheneum Press, 1994), p. 111.

16 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 127-158.

can have a clear and distinct idea about the objects in the outer world, in other words, 'to come to see them mechanistically and functionally, in the same way that uninvolved external observer would.'¹⁷

Descartes' rational self or 'the disengaged reason' is quite different from Plato's idea of self-mastery through reason, for in Plato one can realise his/her true nature 'as a supersensible soul' only when one turns 'towards the supersensible, eternal, immutable things. This turning will no doubt include my seeing and understanding the thing which surround me as participating in the Ideas which give them being.'¹⁸ This is quite different from Descartes' mechanistic world according to which the universe is a mechanical clockwork system of bodies in motion.

Thus far this brief synopsis of the route from Plato's unified self to Descartes' method of radical reflexivity via Augustine may suggest a continuous tradition of thought and a stable background for the modern notion of the self. In contrast, Michel Foucault turns to the Greeks, not in order to emphasise continuity, nor in order to see the Greeks as an attractive alternative, but to defamiliarize the taken-for-granted notions of the self, selfhood and subjectivity that are involved in our discussions of ethics. Foucault's work raises the question of methods of ethics.

We referred briefly to Kant. One criticism of ethical theories of the Kantian sort is that they are too abstract to be able to speak about particular human beings who lead particular lives. This is one way of formulating the old debate about universality and particularity.

In *The Republic* Plato announced that there was a long-standing antagonism between poetry and philosophy.¹⁹ While literature shows us patterns of excellence in such a way that we are drawn towards their imitation, these patterns of excellence are themselves susceptible to judgment. If this is so, the problem arises of whether they are really patterns of excellence. If, having been brought up in a culture where our selves are also shaped through the values and literature of that culture, we can stand back and question whether their claim to be patterns of excellence is justified, then according to Plato, we need to refer to other standards that are beyond all cultural values and, accordingly, beyond literature. In other words, we need a timeless and unchangeable transcendent ground. This, for Plato, can be found in the Forms. Literature is mimesis, or imitation, and secondary to the real world, and the real world is itself an imperfect imitation of the transcendent ground, of the forms. So literature is removed from the transcendent ground by two degrees. In

17 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 145

18 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 145

19 Plato, *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 607b, p. 329.

Plato's account, such a ground can only be found in the realm of Being, as opposed to the world of coming into being and passing away, the world of Becoming.²⁰

Such a notion of a transcendent ground has been influential throughout the history of philosophy. For some philosophers we can access this ground by means of reason, for others we can do so only through faith. Kant, though, undermined this philosophical position to some extent, and this break continues with, for example, Nietzsche. Nietzsche proposes a life not seen in terms of a submission to a moral obligation which is grasped as the most familiar experience of the common man and as the uncanniest of all experiences (Kant), but as a constant process of self-formation, of affirmation of one's own experiences and actions. At the centre of Nietzsche's mature work is an attack on modes of thought, such as Platonism, which posit a dualism between a true world outside the order of time, and an apparent world of change, becoming and mere semblance.

The debate about binary oppositions like Being and Becoming, the unitary self and the 'self' regarded as constant becoming also leads to a discussion between the language of philosophy and of literature. As we have seen, Plato regards literature as an imitation of the real world, so it can never provide a timeless transcendent measure; being a product of culture, which is itself to be judged, literature is also open to interpretation, to change. However, this is precisely why Nietzsche appreciates literature.²¹ Nietzsche says that the discovery of our true life can be made through the creation of a work of art and this view captures his belief that one should 'become what one is.' Indeed, literature and art provided models of how to understand the world:

...we should learn from artists while being wiser than they are in other matters. For with them this subtle power usually comes to an end where art ends and life begins; but we want to be the poets of our life – first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.²²

20 Michael Weston, *Philosophy, Literature and the Human Good* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), p. xi.

21 Nietzsche was not alone in his attempt to bring philosophy closer to literature. This was the main objective of some Romantics as well. For instance Schlegel claims that poetry and philosophy should be made one and that 'transcendental poetry' is still in a state of becoming. The distinguishing feature of humanity, for Schlegel, is that we can make our life a poem. Every individual 'bears within him his own poetry which must and should remain his own as surely as he is himself, as surely as there is anything original to him.' Friedrich von Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. E. Behler and R. Struc Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1968), p. 54.

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 299, p. 240. Hereafter *GS*.

Nietzsche has been very influential in his attempt to relate literature and philosophy. Following Nietzsche's critique of western metaphysics and the concept of unitary self, many contemporary thinkers claim that the language of philosophy which tends to conceptualize and generalize cannot be a good source for addressing the problems of human conduct, especially ethics. As a result of this they turn to literary works. For both Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum, for instance, there is a general question of how we should live which is the concern of both philosophy and literature. The question is both empirical and practical. It is empirical because we don't have access to a transcendent standpoint, and practical since we must be able to experience it. Only literature can show in detail how we should conduct our lives. Murdoch claims that good art shows us not only the illusory unity of the self but also its real disunity. Post-Nietzschean philosophers like Derrida, Bataille and Blanchot claim that literature becomes the place where the fascination of dissolution can operate on our discontinuous selves. Similarly, D.Z. Philips claims that moral change is not progress, but coming to a new perspective on one's life, and that when we accept this we will be able to reinterpret the ethical value of the unity of a life in terms of becoming rather than eternity. In that sense, to engage with literature is to contemplate the possibilities and the impossibilities of sense for us.²³

There are many other philosophers of ethics who subscribe to a form of inquiry which places literature at its centre. However, although one of the common features of the philosophers mentioned above is that they see in literature a richer account of the nature of ethical experience and of the idea of the self as becoming, they still tend to see literary works as a source of 'illustrations' of basically philosophical points. I try to avoid this, and to see literature as an activity that has its own claims to make. My aim is not only to discuss Nietzsche's critique of the constitution of the modern self and its ethical contents, but also to explore the ways in which this Nietzschean theme appears in literature. I will focus in particular on Nietzschean motifs in the writings of Robert Musil (1880-1940) and Oğuz Atay (1934-1977).

In order to do this I will focus on one aspect of this clearly large topic: the dissolution of the subject and its ethical content. Such ideas are found in Nietzsche's treatment of the self which, in turn, is strongly related to his notion of freedom, but they are also worked out and extended in the writings of Robert Musil and Oğuz Atay, both of whom were inspired by Nietzsche. I will ask three main questions.

23 Weston, *Philosophy, Literature*, pp. xvi-xix.

Firstly, if the self is an ‘illusion’, how can we still talk about ethical issues like promising and responsibility? In *On The Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche tries to establish a connection between guilt, debt (*Schuld*), responsibility, punishment, conscience and the memory of punishment. This connection is quite speculative and also brief. But Musil explores these connections at great length through various transgressive characters who appear in his writings, in particular Moosbrugger, Törless and Ulrich, the central protagonist of Musil’s master work *The Man without Qualities*, who throws off or ignores debts to the past or to tradition, and seeks to shape a future for himself. Musil’s work is often an ironic commentary on such efforts.

Secondly, if there is not a unitary self, in other words, if the self is in a state of becoming, what kind of future can we create for ourselves and for others? Nietzschean ethics rests primarily on a ‘relationship with oneself’, but here I want to add that Musil’s art enables him to explore ethical experiences while problematising the Nietzschean self and, correspondingly, Nietzschean ethics. Seen in these terms, the first two parts of *The Man without Qualities* are an experimental examination of Nietzschean ethics, while part three is an exploration of different modes of participation with the world and others. This difference is paralleled by a difference between monologic and dialogic presentation of the main characters.

Thirdly, Atay takes up Nietzsche’s idea that ‘the doer behind the deed’ is a fiction in order to experiment with the idea of a life of pure imitation; if the doer is a fiction then can one become anyone by imitating the deeds of others? In *The Disconnected* the subjecthood of the main characters gives way to a state in which each of them is everyone and no-one, in which neither self-oriented nor other-oriented ethics seems to apply. Atay’s subjects suffer from radical groundlessness, and as such the novel contains a problematisation of the Cartesian account of the subject, which regards the subject as a fixed identity and which assumes a human essence.

Here I should emphasise that I maintain a distinction between the ‘subject’ and the ‘self’. Nietzsche’s, Musil’s and Atay’s critique/problematisation of the ‘subject’ is directed against the Cartesian subject, the subject being the knower of the known (subject-object separation, ‘the disengaged reason’). However, my main argument is that the idea of the dissolution of the subject was regarded by all of them as an opening toward a new discussion of the ‘self’. Neither Nietzsche’s nor Musil’s anti-Cartesian thrust is directed so much against substance, or against the ‘inner’ self, as against the subject regarded as a defence mechanism. Against what?

With Hans Blumenberg we can say ‘the absolutism of reality’. Blumenberg uses this phrase in the course of an argument whose centre is the claim that ‘man came close to not having control of the conditions of his existence and, what is more important, believed that he simply lacked control of them.’²⁴ For Blumenberg, man is a limited being with limited resources and can survive only if he puts some distance between himself and the external world, which otherwise may overwhelm him. Overcoming the absolutism of reality is a function of many forms of human cognition: myths, stories, metaphors, religion, philosophy, science and technology. These may be seen as a defence mechanism, as a means of self-preservation for a vulnerable creature. The work of Nietzsche and Musil is of interest here because both appear to experiment with the idea of a defenceless self. Defencelessness can take several forms, but broadly speaking we may say that Nietzsche is in the tradition of the Participatory Self (joining the stream of reality-nature, becoming one with fate, blurring the distinction between outside and inside: a very Greek concept of the self in fact), while Musil is in the tradition of the Transcendental Self (withdrawing into its own reality, existing differently as a matrix of potentialities). There is, however, a third position, which we may call simply ambivalence. And that is one that I will associate with Oğuz Atay, who while rejecting the Cartesian self, does not seem to suggest any remedy. This is partly because of Atay’s use of language, which more radically than Musil’s, is hard to reconcile with a familiar philosophy of the ‘self’.

The book is organised along the following lines. I begin with a brief overview of Nietzsche’s position. According to Nietzsche, Descartes’ formulation of the thinking ‘I’ and his formulation of the *a priori* belief in the ‘I’ as a substance is based upon a mistake. Descartes argues that ‘if there is a thought there must be a thinker’ and that consequently the existence of the ‘I’ is certain. Substance is given an *a priori* status and it is conceived as something beyond experience. Thinking, which is the basic ground of existence, is inseparable from the ‘I’, so that the ‘I’ can be found with certainty in its act of thinking. In the *Second Meditation*, Descartes states: ‘I am a thinking thing, which is real, which truly exists.’²⁵ Nietzsche criticises the Cartesian account of the nature of ‘I’ which gives priority to the ‘thinking act’ of the knower over what is known; he also rejects the term *true existence*, principally because such an ontology is merely a projection of language:

24 Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert Wallace (Cambridge; Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 3-4.

25 Rene Descartes, *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 18.

[Language] everywhere sees a doer and doing;...it believes in the ego, in the ego as being, in the ego as substance, and it projects this faith in the ego substance upon all things – only thereby does it first *create* the concept of ‘thing’...the concept of being follows and is derivative of, the concept of ego.²⁶

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes: ‘there is no such substratum; there is no “being” behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; “the doer” is invented as an after-thought, – the doing is everything.’²⁷ The subject is a mere fiction or an addition; it becomes merely a product of the conceptual structure of philological, psychological, ontological and epistemological frameworks. Correspondingly, Nietzsche rejects the idea that the self has an idealized unity and an identity.

The basic problem that Nietzsche sees as following from this is ‘how one becomes what one is’, that is to say, becomes a creative individual who wills his/her will. This is not obviously an ethical question but – despite the *Übermensch* – in Nietzsche’s hands it is. But ethics here does not primarily rest on our relation with others, but on our relation with ourselves, on the art of self-mastery and self-governance. Becoming what one is means being engaged in a constant process of affirmation of one’s own experiences and actions; of enlarging the capacity for assuming responsibility for oneself; this Nietzsche calls ‘freedom’. Moreover, his critique of the constitution of modern subjectivity is inseparable from his critique of the bourgeois-Christian subjectivity of his era.

In *Daybreak* Nietzsche draws our attention to the tension between culture and the individual, yet his understanding of the ‘dissolution of the subject’ in his criticism of culture is also the positive definition of the overman. The elements of the ‘dissolution of the subject’ – of the Ego, of form – which constitute the key to Nietzsche’s work as criticism of culture are not pure symptoms of decadence. While it is true that Nietzsche regards culture as a tyranny against nature, he also believes that there is a selective object of culture which functions as forming a man capable of making use of the future, a free and powerful individual who is active. Nietzsche does not simply reject culture; nor does he suggest going back to nature: ‘any custom is better than no custom.’²⁸ He criticizes a particular culture, the bourgeois-Christian culture in which the (Cartesian) subject is the centre of

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, (London: Chatto&Windus, 1971), ‘Reason in Philosophy’, 5.

27 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), I:13, p. 28. Hereafter *GM*.

28 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), I:16, p. 15.

meaning, an *agential self* who can be separated from its actions (Kant), and in which the chief purpose is to tame the ‘human animal’ and to give birth to a rational human being who has freedom of the will. For this freedom means the ability to subjugate oneself to a universal moral law.

This era is also one that lacks true philosophers, free spirits who can transform the culture, who will revalue values. The overman is not coming in an unknown future, she is precisely the individual without a centre, or, to anticipate the discussion in Part II, the individual without qualities. Gianni Vattimo insists that ‘dissolution is what positively characterizes the overman.’²⁹ Nietzsche’s overman is the result of liberating our potentialities for life from the restrictive concepts of man or human essence.

The ‘dissolution of the subject’, of the Ego or ‘form’, is an important theme of early twentieth century avant-garde literature, and it is no accident that Vattimo refers to Robert Musil as an example. Musil, born in Klagenfurt in 1880, is one of the great figures in German literature and one of the most remarkable in the history of the modern novel.³⁰ His major work *The Man without Qualities* was begun early in the nineteen-twenties, and the first volume was published in 1930. Although Musil died before he could finish the novel, it is one of the longest in literature.

The Man without Qualities is set in Vienna in 1913, and presents the pains and conflicts of the individuals and the degenerated morality of the bourgeois order through the eyes of its central character, the 32-year-old Ulrich. A synopsis of the novel is made difficult not only by its length and complexity, but also by the fact that the ‘action’ does not take place so much in the conduct of the characters or through events, but within the minds of the protagonists, so that we read of their emotions, the conflicts between their thoughts and behaviour, and their relations to each other, especially to *The Man without Qualities* – Ulrich – himself. I will focus on one central aspect of this complex web of representations of subjective reality in the novel: the ‘dissolution of the subject’ as a condition of becoming a ‘man without qualities’. By means of this focus, I will also attempt to explore Musil’s critique of the social order of his era since, like Nietzsche’s, his critique of the constitution of modern subjectivity is inseparable from his critique of the culture and morality of his era.

29 Gianni Vattimo, *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 160.

30 Ernst Kaiser, and Eithne Wilkins, foreword in *The Man without Qualities* by Robert Musil trans. by Ernst Kaiser and Eithne Wilkins (London: Picador, 1982), p. viii.

Like Nietzsche, Musil criticizes the Cartesian conception of the self and he ‘experiments’ with the notion of the infinite possibilities of existence, which demands the ‘dissolution of the subject’. The positive meaning of the ‘dissolution of the subject’ and the corresponding understanding of the subject in the process of ‘becoming’ is also encountered in Musil, however, it should be noted that Musil is also critical of Nietzsche’s suggestion of a new understanding of morality, what he calls ‘a trying morality’. In addition, what makes Musil different is that he realizes his critique through literature rather than through a poetic style of philosophy.

The protagonist Ulrich rejects the morality of his era, seeks ways of creating his own values and wishes to experience his individual freedom. At one point he proposes the idea of living ‘hypothetically’; one who does so ‘suspects that the given order of things is not as solid as it pretends to be; no thing, no self, no form, no principle is safe, everything is undergoing an invisible but ceaseless transformation, the unsettled holds more of the future than the settled, and the present is nothing but a hypothesis that has not yet been surmounted.’³¹ Ulrich refuses to become the professor he might have been, refuses to take sides or indeed ‘be’ anything. His neutrality is embodied in the fact that his surname is never mentioned.³² Such a person wishes to free himself/herself from the world in which the rules are ready-made. Ulrich appreciates an experimental life which enables one to be open to new experiences, to the ‘possibilities of life’. A conversation between his friends Walter and Clarisse points this out:

‘He is a man without qualities.’

‘What is that?’ Clarisse asked, with a little laugh.

‘Nothing. That is the point- it is nothing!... You cannot guess at any profession from what he looks like, and yet he does not look like a man who has no profession, either.....Nothing is stable for him. Everything is fluctuating, a part of a whole, among innumerable wholes that are presumably part of a super-whole, which, however, he does not know the slightest thing about. So every one of his answers is a part-answer, every one of his feelings only a point of view, and whatever a thing is, it

31 Vattimo, *Dialogue*, p. 269

32 Kafka is well known for not giving the names or the full names of the characters. For instance, Joseph K., the protagonist of *The Trial*; *A Country Doctor* (short story); *A Hunger Artist* (short story) etc. In fact, Kafka was not the first who used this devise. We encounter it in the novellas of Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811). For instance in *The Marquise of O* (1808) the Marquise of O was a daughter of a Colonel G. who was in charge in the citadel of the town M. Kafka was an admirer of Kleist. See Heinrich von Kleist, *The Marquis of O—: and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1978).

does not matter to him what it is, it is only some accompanying ‘way in which it is’, some addition or other, that matters to him.³³

The influence of Nietzsche on Musil is undeniable. Emer Herity suggests that ‘An indication of Nietzsche’s significance for Musil is given by the fact that only Goethe’s name occurs more often than Nietzsche’s in Musil’s collected works, where references to the philosopher span a period of more than forty years and the full name is often abbreviated to ‘N’, a habit which suggests familiarity.’³⁴ Musil declared it ‘Schicksal: Daß ich Nietzsche gerade mit achtzehn Jahren zum ersten Male in die Hand bekam. Gerade nach meinem Austritt vom Militär. Gerade im so und so vielen Entwicklungsjahr.’³⁵

Nietzsche’s significance for writers and thinkers was not limited to the German speaking world, nor even to European intellectual life. Just as Vattimo refers to Musil as an important yet oddly isolated figure in the twentieth-century avant-garde literature, so does Berna Moran refer to the Turkish writer Oğuz Atay.

According to Moran, *The Disconnected*, written in 1968 (published in 1971), was written in an atmosphere in which realist novels which aim to enlighten and inform people were respected and ‘formalism and individualism were counted among aesthetic crimes.’³⁶ Considering the general atmosphere and the trends in Turkish literature of this era *The Disconnected* can be regarded as an avant-garde novel for 1970s in terms of its style and its subject, which handles the inner conflicts of individuals. As Moran says, *The Disconnected* is a novel ‘which has turned its back on the realism of the 19th century, with one foot in modernism and the other in post-modernism.’³⁷ As Part II will suggest, Musil’s novel, written half a century earlier, might be said to have one foot in modernism and one in realism.

Atay’s subjects, like some of Musil’s, suffer from groundlessness.³⁸ *The Disconnected* begins with the protagonist Turgut receiving the news that his friend Selim has committed suicide and left a letter for Turgut behind him. The death of

33 Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (London: Picador, 1995), pp. 62-63.

34 Emer Herity, ‘Robert Musil and Nietzsche’, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (Oct., 1991), p. 911.

35 Herity, ‘Musil and Nietzsche,’ p. 911

36 Yıldız Ecevit, “Ben Buradayım....”: Oğuz Atay’ın Biyografik ve Kurmaca Dünyası (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), p. 235.

37 Berna Moran, *Türk Romanına Eleştirel Bir Bakış* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1992), V:2, p. 199.

38 Suna Ertuğrul, ‘Belated Modernity and Modernity as Belatedness in *Tutunamayanlar*’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, No. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2003), pp. 629-645.

Selim and this letter shatter the everyday order in which silence and acceptance are dominant and lead Turgut to question his own situation. We encounter the protagonist Selim as impersonal, freed from fixed identities and fixed ideas. He is in a position of lack and imitation, in other words, of non-position, which provokes the question of human essence and identity. This groundlessness has led Selim to a constant search for identity, which has turned out to be a search for something which is not there. Throughout the novel the reader follows Turgut's becoming disconnected by following the traces of Selim. In other words, Turgut learns how to be in a position of lack and imitation by imitating Selim. The 'dissolution of the subject' is an important theme in *The Disconnected*; but it has different consequences from those that face *The Man without Qualities*.

Like Musil's Ulrich, Selim and Turgut are constantly questioning the artificiality of the social order and of the identities reproduced by it. Both reject it, yet, both seek ways of experiencing their individual freedom within it. In *The Disconnected*, the critique of the modern project that grounds meaning in the unity of the subject and human essence and the critique of the bourgeois order is also a commentary on Turkey in the 1960s, as is Musil's novel on Austria in 1913.

In the first three chapters I focus on Nietzsche's critique of the concept of the 'self' in the context of western metaphysics. Nietzsche claims that the constitution of the modern concept of the 'self' is inseparable from the context of culture, particularly bourgeois-Christian culture – morality – of his era. However, before the discussion of this, I present Nietzsche's critique of the distinctions between subject-object and cause-effect, since this provides the theoretical foundation for the modern conception of the 'self' which is followed by a dialogue of Nietzsche with both Kant and Spinoza both of whom Nietzsche admired but also criticised. However, I investigate the relationship between Nietzsche and these philosophers not to compare or contrast them but because for both Kant and Spinoza the concepts of the self and freedom are inseparable; as this is a recurring theme in Nietzsche's philosophy it is helpful to read him through Spinoza and Kant, who Nietzsche appreciated more than moralists of emotions such as Schopenhauer and Ree.

In the fourth and fifth chapters I focus on one central aspect of the complex web of representations of subjective reality in Musil's writings: the relationship between the 'dissolution of the subject', becoming a 'man without qualities', and ethics. Musil's ethics is mainly concerned with the experience of reality in the modern era, and I reflect on the role of time in his writing, in particular his account of how to turn an orientation to the present into a positive resource. Central to this is his idea of essayism, as a way of writing but also as a way of living.

In the last two chapters I focus on *The Disconnected*. Atay's Selim and Turgut, like Ulrich, reject the existing order of society, yet unlike Ulrich, they never appear to be in control of the processes of exploration that they undertake. Ulrich's search is a kind of experiment and he, as a trained scientist, knows it to be an experiment from which he may withdraw; Selim and Turgut are involved in something that, once begun, seems difficult to stop, except by means of suicide (Selim) or escape/withdrawal (Turgut).

The two novels were written in different times and different places, and so it is no surprise that, although they may have themes in common – the critique of the constitution of the modern 'self' and the 'dissolution of the subject', the creation of values and individual freedom – they are handled differently. While Ulrich does, to a certain extent, manage to live his life hypothetically, Selim and Turgut cannot realize that aim in their society. The cultural and historical differences that might have influenced the attitudes of the characters cannot be explored here. Instead, I attempt to explore both Atay's and Musil's critique of the modern conception of the subject, in other words what it means to be a 'man without qualities' or to be 'disconnected'.