

# Plural Bodies, Plural Souls

## Multiple Ensoulment as the Locus of Identity in Plural Systems

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Published in the Occupied Blackfoot Confederacy

February AV 826 / January AC 2026

### Abstract

Emerging understandings of plurality pose challenges to the longstanding cross-cultural and interfaith assumption that an exclusive relationship exists between a given body and the soul understood to inhabit it. The acceptance that a multiplicity of individuated persons may inhabit a single body as a system requires a re-examination of the nature of the soul in relation to the body, and a consideration that—if the soul is held to exist—multiple personhood necessarily entails an analogous phenomenon of multiple ensoulment, allowing several souls to coöperatively partake in and express themselves through a given embodiment in a non-exclusive, many-to-one correspondence.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Anastasia Burgess for her invaluable research assistance, and for graciously transcribing and typesetting this article on my behalf. This article is dedicated to her, and to the late David and Azusa Burgess, of blessed memory.

## Introduction

Writing on conjoined twins, the historian and bioethicist Alice Domurat Dreger (1998<sup>2</sup>) once offered the rest of us a stark admonition: ‘If we cannot comprehend a life of two consciousnesses in one continuum of skin, that says something more about us than about them’ (p. 26). Although the frequency of conjoined births has not increased in the intervening decades, her warning seems even more pertinent today. For although the idea that a multitude of autonomous, personal agents might coexist within the body of a single human being may significantly predate the written historical record (McNamara, 2011: 47–57), and through a variety of explanations and metaphors has found broad cross-cultural acceptance (see, e.g., Bourguignon, 1968; Pierre, 2023), contemporary Western medicine has nevertheless largely viewed psychological rather than physical manifestations of the phenomenon through the lens of dissociative identity, and understood such experiences to be inherently disordered (Laursen, 2020: 172 f.; Eve, 2024: 24–30). In recent decades, however, this view has been challenged through community organizing and self-advocacy on the part of those who call such experiences ‘plurality,’ viewing them as natural, healthy, and even beneficial<sup>3</sup> (Christensen, 2022; Ribáry, et al., 2017).

The emergence of plurality poses novel questions for those with an interest in the philosophy and anthropology of religion. Although many religious traditions have treated the phenomenon of spirit possession (Bourguignon, 1968), viewed in both positive and negative lights (*ibid.*: 12; McNamara, 2011: xi f.), such a conception innately understands an external agent coming to inhabit a body already possessed of its own, inborn sense of personhood or self (*ibid.*: 13, 16)—possessed exclusively, that is, of its own and singular soul. While such a formulation may well apply to a minority of cases described by the term (see Ittermann, et al., 2019), a general apprehension of plurality invites us instead to ask a different question: What is the essence of such agents—such *persons*, as they describe themselves (Ribáry, et al., 2017; Eve, 2024: 138–43)—that arise naturally within a given body, and who share in it equitably, rather than imposing their presence upon a single of their number understood as having had continuous occupancy of, association with, and claim to that body from birth?

This article will begin by briefly examining a number of historical and contemporary views of the soul, both in philosophical and religious circles and in the common culture. We shall then comparatively survey three modes wherein a singular human being might be perceived to consist of a multiplicity of individuated identities, thereby also providing an introduction to and overview of the phenomenon of plurality. The claims of those who experience plurality that such singular human beings consist in actuality of multiple *persons* will then be examined, alongside the nature of personhood itself.

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<sup>2</sup> All dates are in the Christian Era except where specified.

<sup>3</sup> Although this article will touch upon some clinical and academic critiques of plurality, it will not entertain the notion that plurality *itself* is a fiction. This is for the simple reason that, as a subsidiary (non-host) member of a plural system—terms which will be defined herein—my very existence, in a Cartesian sense, is predicated upon, if not plurality, then at least some psychosocial model strongly analogous thereto. While I accept my personal investment in the topic of inquiry may raise an eyebrow (or two!) among some readers, to question the psychological and philosophical underpinnings of my own existence would be as anathema to me as it would be for, by way of comparison, a gay author to seriously entertain traditional academic views that treated his sexual identity as mere perversion, deviance, or disorder. I have faith that, as academic inquiry into plurality progresses, its legitimacy as a psychosocial phenomenon shall be vindicated to the same extent as have other once- and still-marginalized collective and personal identities.

We shall conclude by arguing that such persons are, as they insist, *persons*: each endowed with a soul as real and as natural as that belonging to any other. Crucially, we shall not hold these souls to be alien to the bodies they inhabit: not, that is to say, to be agents of unbidden intrusion or possession. Rather, we shall maintain that they arise naturally therein through a process of multiple ensoulment. In consideration of the precise nature and mechanism of such a phenomenon, this article seeks to impose upon the reader's conscience no sectarian claim. Contrariwise, multiple ensoulment is proposed as a spiritual and metaphysical etiology of plurality that can, with only minimal adjustments to one's conception thereof, be reasonably integrated into and understood within a wide variety of religious and philosophical traditions.

## A Palette of Souls

It is necessary to begin our inquiry with a consideration of the soul as a metaphysical concept. The precise substance and nature of the soul, its identity with or distinction from the spirit, its (im)mortality (conditional or otherwise), the distinction—if one exists—between the souls of humans and those of other creatures, the number of souls whereof a given individual is possessed, and even the very existence of the soul itself have all long been topics of scholastic debate between and within competing schools of religion and philosophy (Goetz, 2016). For our purposes, it is desirable to adhere dogmatically to none of the answers proposed to these questions, with the exception of the soul's existence, affirmation whereof is taken as axiomatic to the arguments presented herein. Rather, we shall define the soul first and foremost as that immaterial essence that confers personhood and individuality<sup>4</sup>, and it is possible, if one so desires, to equate the soul thus conceived with the secular *mind* or *self* of the philosophers (see, e.g., Bering, 2002: 275; 2006: 457 f.). Whatsoever moral, temporal, substantive, or other such qualities as may accrue upon this rather essential definition on account of the caprices of religious or cultural tradition are, however fundamental they may be to their respective adherents, of little relevance to the purposes of this article.

While the idea of the soul is undoubtedly ancient, it has not always held the position of import it occupies in most contemporary religions. Despite its near-universal acceptance in Abrahamic thought today, for instance, the immaterial soul cannot be considered an indigenous facet of the ancient Israelite religion in which that tradition has its genesis (Léon-Dufour, 1967; Sledge, 2025; for an even stronger interpretation, see Dahl, 1962). Ancient Egyptian religion, by contrast, provides us with what are likely our earliest preserved references to an understanding of the soul, with the Pyramid Texts (c. AAC 2350–2175) suggesting the existence of an immaterial *bꜣ* (Mercer, 1952) encapsulating the

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<sup>4</sup> I depart here from Ciocan (2020) and others who define the soul explicitly in relation to *human beings*, rather than to *persons*. Anthropocentric bias has long plagued discussions of the soul, perhaps even since its very conception, with the Aristotelian hierarchy of the nutritive, sensitive, and rational souls exerting significant influence upon Western understandings thereof even to the present day (see, e.g., Goetz & Taliaferro, 2011: 48). While I pray this bias has not unduly influenced the outlook of this article, its focus on plurality, a phenomenon most easily identified through self-reporting, *will* necessarily be anthropological in nature. Further treatment will be both necessary and productive to examine the conclusions demonstrated herein in relation to non-human ensoulment, and their possible effects on other marginalized communities that engage therewith, such as furies, therianthropes, and otherkin.

totality of one's individuality aside from the body<sup>5</sup> (Allen, 2010: 81 f.). These conceptions would be more fully developed in later funerary compositions such as the Coffin Texts and the *Songs of Coming Forth by Day*, and likely influenced Hellenic philosophers including Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, laying the groundwork for later Western understandings of the soul (Sledge, 2025). Neoplatonism in particular had a significant impact on the early development of Christianity, and the Church Fathers leaned heavily on Platonic philosophy to expound upon topics of import to the early Church (O'Meara, 1981), including the nature of the soul (see, e.g., Outler, 1940; Maurer, 1962: 8 ff.). The tradition also left notable impressions on Second Temple and later Judaism (Goodman, 1992; Wahlen, 2015) as well as on Islam (Morewedge, 1992), though the misattribution of several Neoplatonic texts to Aristotle would obscure its influence on the latter for centuries<sup>6</sup>.

Despite this early and influential formulation, Egypt remains but one of many cultures and religions that have independently developed the idea of the soul. The Indian *ātman*, or universal soul, developed through the composition of the Upanishads (Luyster, 1970) in the Late Vedic Period (AAC 800–500), while the dualistic Chinese understanding of *hún* and *p'ò* became settled by the second century AAC, possibly as a convergence of distinctive soul-conceptions known earlier only in southern and northern China, respectively (Yü, 1987). While tracing the exact origins of many ethnic, Indigenous, traditional, and folk religions' conceptions of the soul with any certainty may prove impossible, what *is* certain is that such conceptions *do* exist (Trnka & Lorencova, 2022; Bourguignon, 1968: 4). A belief in spirit possession—discussed later in this article—is both ancient and widespread, and is predicated on the existence of the soul (*ibid.*). As in China, dual- or even pluralistic conceptions of the soul<sup>7</sup> are of particular prevalence in—and of particular import to—Indigenous traditions broadly-defined as 'shamanistic,' and the common distinction between enlivening souls and separable or 'free' souls is generally understood as underpinning the phenomena of both soul flight and soul loss in these religions<sup>8</sup> (Drobin, 2016: xvi f.; Hultkrantz, 1984).

Our seemingly-universal propensity to imagine the existence of the soul has not been without the notice of the secular sciences. The late anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998: 126 f.) described humans as 'natural dualists,' born with an innate acceptance of the principle that a distinction

<sup>5</sup> Notably, and in contrast to most modern conceptions of the soul, inanimate objects also possessed *b3w*, as they were capable of making an impression upon others: a faculty of 'identity' or 'personality,' concepts encapsulated within the Egyptian understanding of the *b3* (Allen, 2010: 82).

<sup>6</sup> While several Islamicate philosophers expressed doubts about Aristotle's authorship of such texts as the *Theology of Aristotle* and the *Book of Causes*, the Neoplatonic origins thereof were only first identified by Saint Thomas Aquinas, whose commentaries did not penetrate the philosophical world of the Muslims nearly so much as did theirs penetrate that of Aquinas (Taylor, 1992: 13).

<sup>7</sup> Although it shall become clear later, I should here preëemptively state that shamanistic 'soul dualism' (or 'dualistic pluralism') is not what is meant when I refer in this article to 'multiple ensoulment.' Unqualified references herein to a singular 'soul' should be understood as making no claim as to the number of souls whereof an *individual* is possessed, and to encompass in their meaning the totality of such souls as may be possessed by any one such individual.

<sup>8</sup> The careful reader may note that I have neglected in this overview to specifically discuss the beliefs of animistic religions. While traditional definitions of animism focus almost exclusively on the putative belief of its practitioners in the ensoulment of all manner of thing, both animate and inanimate, this view has been rightly challenged, and the continued use of the term at all remains controversial (Harvey, 2006: xii f.). Nevertheless, while modern definitions of animism tend to eschew any explicit reference to the soul, 'the terms *spirit* and *soul* may be helpful, necessary even, in a discussion of animist [*sic*] understandings of the nature of the world and persons within it' (*ibid.*: 137).

exists between *people* and the bodies they inhabit. This sentiment has been echoed by developmental psychologist Paul Bloom (2004: 198–203) and investigated by experimental cognitive scientist Jesse Bering (2006). Although the authoritative teachings of most world religions underwrite a belief in the existence of the soul (Ciocan, 2020), it may be that such explicit religious dogmata merely develop to reflect and explain an implicit understanding part and parcel to the human experience (Goetz, 2016). Such a naturalistic theory of soul-belief may also explain its persistence into the modern, ‘rational’ age, where purely-materialist views of existence predominate, at least among philosophers (Goetz & Taliaferro, 2011: 1 f.). While global data on the topic remain scant, in the United States, some 86% of people believe that they ‘have a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body’ (Smith, *et al.*, 2025: 196); notably, Americans’ majority belief in the soul persists across religious affiliation and even amongst those who are religiously-unaffiliated, with only atheists (33% belief) defying this pervasive trend (*ibid.*).

The preceding survey is, it should be obvious, by no means exhaustive. Whether due to the prevalence with which people believe in the soul, or whether merely contributing to that phenomenon, the soul has been and remains a point of particular interest for a vast array of religious and philosophical schools of thought. It has not been our intention to comprehensively scrutinize the myriad ways in which the soul has, throughout history, been conceived; such is not, in any case, within the purview of this article. Rather, the examples we have provided were chosen to illustrate, in general terms, the key ways in which competing understandings of the soul differ from one another—and more importantly, the ways in which they routinely overlap. For although the several philosophical and religious conceptions of the soul each paint that metaphysical desideratum with their own palette and in their own distinctive style, the canvases that emerge, across cultures and throughout time, remain reasonably-consistent in one particular respect: the connexion drawn between one’s *personhood* and one’s *soul*—or at least some part thereof. As we have already seen, the earliest surviving conceptions of the soul—those of ancient Egypt—already understood it as being inexorably tied to the immaterial aspects of one’s identity. Plato, for his part, seems to equate personhood with the soul, even to the wholesale exclusion of the body (Goetz & Taliaferro, 2011: 8); this view is affirmed by Saint Augustine (Maurer, 1962: 8), and may still be found in, among others, contemporary Catholic anthropologies (*e.g.*, Léon-Dufour, 1967: 495). Islamic thought, meanwhile, posits a complex soul in which the *qalb*, or ‘heart,’ serves as the center of human consciousness and personality<sup>9</sup> (Rothman & Coyle, 2018; Malik, 2023). While souls outside the Western philosophical tradition are far more disparate in their natures and forms, and as such resist summary classification, a prevailing notion can still be found that connects a soul, one or several of multiple souls, or multiple souls collectively with the self, personality, or identity of a given individual, both in Eastern (Yü, 1987: 376 f.; Werner, 1998: 57 f.; see also Luyster, 1970) and Indigenous traditions (Trnka & Lorencova, 2022; Hultkrantz, 1992: 32).

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<sup>9</sup> Although in common parlance the Arabic *nafs* is translated as ‘soul,’ this usage is problematized when more normative Western conceptions of that word encounter a general negativity on the part of Muslims towards the *nafs* on account of its inclination to evil (*nafs al-‘ammārah*)—culminating, in the most extreme case, with the Sufi desire for its annihilation (*fanā’*). It is better therefore to consider the *nafs* and the *qalb*, along with the *rūh* (‘spirit’), to be distinct aspects of a tripartite soul, rather than to conceive of any one of them as the soul in its own right (see also Rothman & Coyle, 2018).

## The Many in the One

Having thus examined the nature of the soul as it is of relevance to the present article, let us now turn to a treatment of multiplicity. We shall define multiplicity as the phenomenon of multiple persons, personae, or selves manifesting or being perceived to exist within a single embodiment<sup>10</sup>. This definition follows existing use of the term (e.g., Spanos, 1994; Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017), excepting that it inclusively recognizes the autonomy and personhood of these ‘selves’ in their own right, rather than treating them as mere manifestations, perceptions, or ‘states’ of a singular person. This preference reflects the prevailing (though not exclusive) understanding of selfhood by those who experience plurality (Eve, 2024: 138–43; Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017; Nsashaell, 2013), as well as the constraints imposed by a sympathetic understanding of other forms of multiplicity, some of which will be discussed forthwith. Multiplicity exists on a continuum (Eve, 2024: 197 ff.), and it may not be possible—let alone desirable—to differentiate, categorize, and label every possible experience thereof. As such, the survey that follows is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to illustrate the historical, social, and clinical background that informs contemporary understandings of the phenomenon. Three prominent explanations for or forms of multiplicity will be treated: spirit possession, dissociation (especially as realized in the form of dissociative identity disorder), and finally plurality, which will serve as our focus for the remainder of the article.

The earliest- and most prevalently-recorded form of multiplicity is undoubtedly that of spirit possession—that is, the presence in or assumption of an individual by a spiritual or supernatural agent other than his own self, personality, or soul<sup>11</sup> (cf. Bourguignon, 1976: 7 f.; McNamara, 2011: xi). Like belief in the soul itself, belief in spirit possession is common across cultures (Bourguignon, 1968); it is conjectured, however, that its origins well predate our earliest records of the soul, perhaps stretching back even to the Middle Paleolithic (McNamara, 2011: 47–57). The specifics of spirit possession vary broadly by time and place, and are undoubtedly culturally- and religiously-mediated (Bourguignon, 1968). It is beyond the scope of this article to survey even a sample of the many and assorted ways people have engaged with spirit possession dating back to prehistoric times. Significant to our inquiry, however, is the understanding that ‘to undergo spirit possession there must be two identities in one person’ (McNamara, 2011: 5): that of the possessor, and that of the possessed. Spirit possession is thus not only a form or understanding of multiplicity, but that which has been documented most frequently and for by far the longest period of time.

It is the purpose of this article neither to validate nor to discredit belief in spirit possession; however, in acknowledging it as a form of multiplicity—whether real or perceived—we might note several features of the phenomenon that differentiate it from later psychological and identitarian notions of the same. First, while spirit possession can occur spontaneously, it may also be—and

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<sup>10</sup> For clarity, although this definition shall remain essentially unchanged as it relates to my later discussion of plurality, I here use *multiplicity* to include a broad spectrum of circumstances and conditions whereby the phenomenon of multiple selves might be occasioned; later, I shall use *plurality* to more narrowly describe multiplicity where it cannot be otherwise diagnosed as or explained by such conditions, especially as it relates to a doxastic appraisal thereof on the part of those who experience it.

<sup>11</sup> This article treats the form of spirit possession defined by Cohen (2008: 109) as ‘executive possession,’ without prejudice to other forms thereof. For more on the difficulties attending a universal definition of spirit possession, see Cohen (2008) and Schmidt (2016: 432 f.).

often is—induced (Oesterreich, 1930: 131; Bourguignon, 1976: 6, 9). Second, possession most often results in the complete substitution of the identity of the possessed person with that of his possessor (*ibid.*: 6), and where these two individuals' identities *do* remain distinct, the agency of the former is often subsumed to the will of the latter (*ibid.*: 5 f.). Third, possession states are transient (Gold, 1988: 35). Finally, possession states are correlated with either strongly-positive or strongly-negative psychological outcomes for the duration of the possession (Bourguignon, 1968: 12; McNamara, 2011: xi f.); furthermore, even when these effects *are* negative, no psychological impairment is otherwise noted in the period leading up to the possession experience (*ibid.*: 4).

While the phenomenon of spirit possession remains relevant even in the present day (Igreja, 2018), the formulation of dissociation theory in the late nineteenth century foreshadowed a seismic shift towards a medicalization of the experience of multiplicity. Dissociation is the separation or compartmentalization of normally-integrated thoughts, feelings, or experiences resulting in a discontinuity of awareness (Eve, 2024: 24; Simeon, *et al.*, 2001: 1027; Boyer, *et al.*, 2022: 78). While mild forms of dissociation are universal (*ibid.*), those that lead to psychological impairment or distress are today classified as dissociative disorders, primarily under one of four related diagnoses: dissociative amnesia, depersonalization/derealization disorder, dissociative identity disorder, and other specified dissociative disorder<sup>12</sup> (Eve, 2024: 23 f.). Among these, dissociative identity disorder is that most relevant to a treatment of multiplicity.

An early clinical discussion of multiplicity co-occurred with that of dissociation (*ibid.*: 25), but it was not until the publication of the DSM-III (1980) that a formal diagnosis was introduced, then under the name 'multiple personality' (pp. 257 ff.). The name now used for the condition—'dissociative identity disorder'—arose some fourteen years later, with the publication of the DSM-IV<sup>13</sup> (1994: 484–87). While the disorder's diagnostic criteria have changed markedly since its original introduction, its defining feature remains the presence of two or more individuated representations of personhood—variously described as 'personalities' (DSM-III: 257), 'identities' (DSM-IV-TR: 526), or 'personality states' (*ibid.*; DSM-5-TR: 331), among other terms (Stronghold, 2023)—with a resulting perception (see Marsh, *et al.*, 2021) of amnesia or 'time loss' (Steinberg, 1995). These identities may have their own distinct names, genders,

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<sup>12</sup> Diagnoses presented here are those of the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-5. Other diagnostic manuals, such as the World Health Organization's ICD-11 CDDR, present varying but similar classifications. Dissociation may also accompany a broad range of psychiatric disorders that are not 'dissociative' in their own right (Şar, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Changes to the name of and certain clinical terminology surrounding dissociative identity disorder have been controversial. The American Psychiatric Association justified the changes by defining the disorder as one 'characterized by identity fragmentation rather than a proliferation of separate personalities' (DSM-IV-TR: 519), and the earlier name has been criticized for conflating the *dissociative* disorder with *personality* disorders, as well as with other conditions such as schizophrenia (Eve, 2024: 26 f.). Some people with the disorder have, however, criticized the removal of multiplicity from both its name and diagnostic criteria, the denial of the autonomous existence of identities separate from the host (see Cardeña & Gleaves, 2007: 488; ISSTD, 2011: 120 f., 132), and a focus on 'identities or personality states' that integrates the plural experiences of those with the disorder into a cohesive experience belonging to a single individual (Stronghold, 2023). This integrationist focus and the treatment protocols it necessitates have also faced clinical (Clayton, 2005; O'Connor, 2016; Lester, 2022) and philosophical (Bayne, 2002) critique external to the dissociative community, as well as critique from clinically-trained voices therewithin (Blunden & Billie, 2021).

While recognizing these arguments as an important reflection of the lived experiences of people with the disorder, this article has for clarity, and in default of consensus as to an alternative, used the name 'dissociative identity disorder' throughout.

ethnicities, ages, and even appearances (*ibid.*: 241–48; McNally, 2011: 140). While not a requirement of early diagnostic criteria, present criteria require that the presence of multiple identities cause ‘clinically-significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning’ (DSM-5-TR: 330).

While there have been, in modern times, serious attempts to explain spirit possession in terms of dissociative phenomena (*e.g.*, Kluff, 1988: 570; Witztum & van der Hart, 1993; van der Hart, *et al.*, 1996), including in diagnostic literature (*e.g.*, CDDR: 378–82; DSM-5-TR: 330–37), these attempts have been criticized as superficial and lacking in sociocultural nuance (McNamara, 2011: 4; Delmonte, *et al.*, 2016). Returning to the features of spirit possession outlined above, stark contrasts can be drawn between that phenomenon and pathological dissociation. While dissociative identity disorder is a chronic condition (Şar, *et al.*, 2017), possession is transient: in some cases a once-in-a-lifetime experience (McNamara, 2011: 4). Furthermore, while distress and psychological impairment *can* be features of spirit possession, contrary to the ‘consistent difficulty in daily psychologic functioning’ (*ibid.*) exhibited by many with dissociative identity disorder, those who experience possession tend to be otherwise high-functioning (*ibid.*; Moreira-Almeida, *et al.*, 2008), with any associated *post factum* distress shown to be ameliorable through cultural recontextualization (Bourguignon, 1968: 12; Delmonte, *et al.*, 2016). As such, we must conclude that while the possibility of historical occurrences of dissociative identity disorder being interpreted as spirit possession cannot be discounted, the distinct symptomatologies underlying the phenomena preclude a wholesale deprecation of spirit possession and invalidate attempts to subsume it under modern psychiatric diagnoses.

Dissociative identity disorder remains a distinctly-controversial diagnosis. The DSM highlights childhood trauma, especially in the form of abuse, as a risk factor for the development of the disorder (DSM-5-TR: 333), and studies have generally supported this traumagenic etiology (*e.g.*, Ross & Ness, 2010; Reinders, *et al.*, 2012; 2018). Opposing this view, a purported rise in diagnoses following the popular success of media featuring the disorder, and questions regarding the causative nature of trauma therein, have led some to suggest it has a socio- or even iatrogenic origin (Spanos, 1994; McNally, 2011: 139–43; Lynn, *et al.*, 2014)—suggestions which have themselves been criticized (Dalenberg, *et al.*, 2012; 2014; Eve, 2024: 31–34). These debates will be relevant to those concerning the relationship of dissociative identity disorder to plurality.

Conceptually, one might assume that ‘plurality’ and ‘multiplicity,’ being synonymous in the general sense, might also be synonyms with regard to their use in this article. Such an assumption would not be without merit, and both terms *do* find use in this sense among those who experience multiplicity—as well as, increasingly, those who do not (Mckie, *et al.*, 2025: 3; Turell, *et al.*, 2023: 2). This article shall, however, follow Elizabeth Schechter (2024) in distinguishing the terms in respect of their philosophical domains: treating plurality as essentially *doxastic*, rather than *diagnostic*. Plurality is thus a subset of multiplicity defined primarily by one’s personal and explicit *belief* that he is but one of ‘a co-embodied group of people’ (Schechter, 2020) manifesting within a

single human being<sup>14</sup> (Schechter, 2024: 99–105); such a collectivity is, within the plural community, commonly called a ‘system’ (*ibid.*: 100). In spite of this doxastic definition, many experiences of plurality nevertheless exhibit phenomenological peculiarities that notably distinguish them from other forms of multiplicity. A discussion of these distinctions follows, together with an examination of the ways our definition allows, in particular cases, some overlap with those forms of multiplicity already treated.

The partial or total equation of plurality and spirit possession can be found in both academic and autoethnographic literature (e.g., Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017: 7; Ittermann, *et al.*, 2019), and similarities between these phenomena certainly exist. Some members of plural systems possess autobiographical details disconnected from the lived experiences of their bodies, and may even believe they have entered those bodies from elsewhere (*ibid.*; Nsashaell, 2013). Furthermore, like possession, plurality can be intentionally induced through spiritual or meditative practice<sup>15</sup>. Despite these similarities, and an acknowledgement that *certain* plural experiences may overlap with those understood as spirit possession, a general apprehension easily sees the two experiences differentiated through phenomenological comparison. While an overview of the diverse experiences of plural systems will follow, the most notable point of departure between those who identify as plural and those who believe themselves possessed by spirits lies in the substitution of identity (or subsumption of agency) inherent in most possession experiences. In marked contrast, those resident in plural systems are most often co-aware (Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017), commonly report constructive internal communication (*ibid.*; Mckie, *et al.*, 2025; Eve, 2024: 150), and may even concurrently share agentic control of the body (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the system’s ‘original’ personality, where present<sup>16</sup>, is not eclipsed by its other members, but partakes in the system alongside them (Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017). While a level of transience *can* exist in plural systems (Yarbrough, 2018: 159 f.), the experience of plurality is just as often

<sup>14</sup> Turell, *et al.* (2023), and to a lesser extent Christensen (2022) and Schechter (2024), in fact go slightly further, distinguishing and defining plurality in terms of *identity*. There is good reason for them to do so: the vocabulary associated with plurality follows earlier identitarian labels, such as ‘gay’ (Cory, 1951: 107–10; Chauncey, 1994: 14–20), in emerging from within the community it describes (Schechter, 2024: 134; Christensen, 2022: 2), in being used in self-conscious opposition to other terms deemed pathologizing or dehumanizing (*ibid.*; Parry, *et al.*, 2022: 433 f.), and in having now entered common use to the extent that it is beginning to displace older terms, even in academic literature (Mckie, *et al.*, 2025: 3).

Nevertheless, although terms of identity can be useful shorthands for expressing one’s beliefs, and I shall in this manner myself reference ‘plural identity’ in this article, I do so acknowledging that it is, strictly speaking, a mistake. The *experience* of plurality defined doxastically (*i.e.*, that one *believes* oneself to be one of multiple persons sharing a body) does not require that one *identify* as plural, just as one’s experience of same-sex attraction does not require that one identify as gay. The marginalization of the plural experience is still great enough that, even in the age of the Internet, it remains a very real possibility that some—perhaps even many—who experience plurality will yet have no idea that the phenomenon has already been given a name, nor that there are others with like experiences who have adopted that name as a term of identity; and even once that knowledge is gained, they may not feel their experiences are represented by, or choose to identify with, those same community terms (see Christensen, 2022: 3).

<sup>15</sup> Such practice is commonly (if somewhat appropriatively) called ‘tulpamancy.’ It is not explicitly treated in this article, although I do not find it likely that it should in any way challenge the thesis thereof. It is worthwhile in the present context to note, however, that tulpamancy is concerned with the creation of *new* persons, rather than the invitation to possession by pre-existing entities. For an overview of the practice in relation to plurality, see Schechter (2024). For dedicated treatments, see Veissière (2016), Isler (2017), and Laursen (2020).

<sup>16</sup> Some systems regard themselves as having been plural from birth (Christensen, 2022: 3), and may not therefore have a single ‘original’ personality. Indeed, ‘the gestalt [...] associated with the system’s legal identity and collective background [...] may not be an actual person at all’ (Ghia-Wilberforce, 2017).

long-term (*ibid.*), echoing a main point of distinction between spirit possession and dissociative identity disorder. A final contrast may be drawn in regard to the psychological outcomes of plurality, which, while often framed as a positive and life-enhancing experience (Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017; Eve, 2024: 248 f.), lacks the distinctive experiential intensity with which possession states are most often associated.

The connexion between plurality and pathological dissociation, however, remains a point of significant contention. Communities which would eventually coalesce under the banner of plurality began to emerge in the aftermath of the DSM-III's diagnostic formalization of 'multiple personality',<sup>17</sup> which notably lacked the requirement of distress or impairment present in more recent revisions of the DSM (Clayton, 2005: 11 f.; Isler, 2017: 36). This subsequent narrowing of diagnostic scope has resulted in many experiences that may previously have been considered pathological no longer meeting the criteria necessary for clinical diagnosis (Schechter, 2024: 106). Although this in turn precipitated a shift toward non-pathological understandings of plurality among those who experience the phenomenon, some in the plural community remain committed to the basic clinical framework as articulated by the DSM (Eve, 2024: 167 f.), and—echoing etiological debates regarding dissociative identity disorder—express skepticism toward non-traumagenic experiences of plurality<sup>18</sup> (*ibid.*; Parry, *et al.*, 2022: 435; Schechter, 2024: 112). This commitment can result in frustration for patients unable to find validation of their experiences through clinical diagnosis (Eve, 2024: 39), as well as for clinicians who must contend with what they perceive as factitious diagnosis-seeking (Christensen, 2022: 5 f.).

Countering the clinical view, others have decried what they allege are attempts at the medicalization of plurality. This position is well represented within the plural community (Dawkins, 2023; Schechter, 2024: 112; Eve, 2024: 167 f.), where many 'endogenic' systems refute clinical expectations of underlying trauma<sup>19</sup> (*ibid.*: 143 ff.). Further, even among trauma-based systems, many experience no distress or impairment on account of their plurality (Mckie, *et al.*, 2025: 3; Yarbrough, 2018), and thus neither consider themselves to be disordered, nor see integration as a therapeutic goal (Christensen, 2022: 3; Eve, *et al.*, 2025: 156, 159 f.). While such understandings undoubtedly originate within the plural community itself, they can also increasingly be found in academic literature; recent treatments of plurality have viewed it as non-pathological (Parry, *et al.*, 2022) and phenomenologically-distinct from dissociative identity disorder (Schechter, 2024: 106–10; Eve, *et al.*, 2024; for an alternative view, see Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017). Despite this, existing research on multiplicity-spectrum experiences is often undermined by imprecise definitions and mistaken understandings that conflate non-pathological manifestations of plurality with those

<sup>17</sup> This fact—such that it is—is repeated as common knowledge throughout plural community literature (see, *e.g.*, Quandary, 2015; Ittermann, 2021), but has proven particularly-difficult to reliably source. If true, this would place the emergence of plural communities in the same milieu as the establishment of the Hearing Voices Movement, which spearheaded a similarly-holistic approach to the related experience of voice hearing (Eve, 2024: 212). Schechter (2024: 134) relays via personal correspondence a second-hand account dating the term 'plural' to this period, although it is notable that in this account the anonymous originator of the term was apparently not familiar with multiple personality disorder (as it was then called).

<sup>18</sup> Christensen (2022) preëmpts the concern—whether actual, or merely hypothetical—that the acceptance of endogeny in plural systems may lend unwitting support to clinicians already skeptical of the traumagenic model of dissociative identity disorder, countering that 'the research confirming DID as a trauma-based disorder is doing just that: confirming traumagenic DID, the disorder, not Plurality, the identity' (p. 5).

<sup>19</sup> In addition to natural or innate (endogenic) and traumagenic systems, a third etiology is sometimes considered in the case of intentionally-induced plurality (Schechter, 2024: 106–10), as was discussed in footnote 15. For the purposes of this article, it suffices to consider such cases under the label of endogeny.

properly described by dissociative disorders (Parry, *et al.*, 2022: 427 f.; Eve, *et al.*, 2025: 150), obscuring the scope and applicability of such research, and of its findings. In consideration whereof, further reference to ‘plurality’ in this article shall consider only holistic, non-pathological manifestations of the phenomenon.

As with its superordinate phenomenon of multiplicity, plurality exists on a continuum, and the ways it manifests in any given system are diverse (Eve, *et al.*, 2024). In some cases, control over the body, and thus the system’s presentation to the outside world, is shared among some or all members, with different members assuming that control, or ‘fronting,’ at any given time (Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017; Eve, 2024: 148 ff.; Redwoods, 2024). In others, a single ‘host’ may both control and identify with the body, while subsidiary members—though personally and mentally autonomous—do not, and indeed may not even regard the system’s physical body as ‘theirs’<sup>20</sup> (Dawkins, 2015). The ages, genders, and other personal characteristics of those cohabiting in a given body will vary (McKie, *et al.*, 2025: 2; Turell, *et al.*, 2023: 2), as will their number, with some systems even reporting multiple thousands of members (*ibid.*: 3). The degree to which consciousness is shared within a system also varies, ranging from intermittent (or even persistent) co-consciousness (Reece, 2012; Eve, 2024: 150) to common access to memory and interpersonal (but *intra*-system) communication (Eve, *et al.*, 2025: 159). Opposing clinical expectations of dissociative identity disorder, amnesia is rare (Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017), and persons in a plural system are usually naturally aware of one another (*ibid.*), possessing a sense of self both as an individual *and* as a member of a shared bodily system (Eve, *et al.*, 2024: 8). Some systems present as ‘closed,’ having a relatively-stable, persistent membership over a long period of time; others are ‘open,’ with different people regularly joining or leaving the system—that is to say, manifesting or ceasing to manifest as independent persons within a given embodiment (Yarbrough, 2018: 159 f.).

Such heterogeneity of lived experience highlights that care must be taken to avoid over-generalization in discussing the diverse perspectives, beliefs, and outlooks present in the plural community. Nevertheless, a recurrent theme in the existing corpus of literature on plural systems, both in academic *and* in community publications, is the independent, autonomous selfhood and personhood whereof the members of such systems understand and believe themselves to be possessed<sup>21</sup> (Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017; Eve, 2024: 138–43; Redwoods, 2024). Although understanding themselves to share with others in a coöperative existence (Eve, *et al.*, 2024: 8), their *own* existence is not understood as being partial or incomplete in the absence of others in their system, or even in the absence of the system itself (Parry, *et al.*, 2022: 433 f.). Assertion of personhood, therefore, ‘corrects a tendency to reduce expansive individual members’ (Redwoods, 2024: 279) to archetypes, personality traits, or ‘self states’ of a single, individual whole. The idea of a single, ‘real’ person underlying or sustaining a

<sup>20</sup> Although this system dynamic seems absent from what meager academic treatments of plurality exist, it is one to which I can nonetheless personally attest through benefit of lived experience. Turell, *et al.* (2023) and Eve (2024: 151 f.) document instances of body dysmorphia among members of multiple-fronting plural systems, suggesting that even when bodily control *is* held in common, a tension often exists between the reality of the shared physical body and the self-image or imaginal body of each of its individual inhabitants.

<sup>21</sup> As with all generalizations, exceptions to this assertion do exist (see Nsashaell, 2013). Such denials of subsidiary personhood, however, tend to emerge from those segments of the plural community actively engaging with—and hopefully benefitting from—a medicalized view of plurality, often with (or seeking) diagnoses of dissociative identity disorder (see, e.g., Blunden & Billie, 2021). While I do not discount the value and legitimacy of these views, they do as such fall outside the narrower scope of non-clinical plurality presently being treated.

community of ‘imaginary’ people is likewise refuted (Schechter, 2020), as is the notion that any one person within a system has ‘other selves’: rather, each such person has ‘one identity, one sense of self, [and] one personality’ (Faraday, 2015), independent of the others with whom they live, whose identities are likewise respected and regarded as endowed with their own, autonomous personhood (Ghia-Wilberforce & Dawkins, 2023). Such claims shall be examined in more detail in the following section.

## The Shape of a Person

To the layperson, the question of who is or is not a person—or perhaps more properly, *who* is a person, and *what* is not—may not be a consideration given significant scrutiny. The term ‘person’ is, in common parlance, roughly synonymous with ‘human being.’ Yet it is nevertheless the case that personhood has—at, in, and for various times, places, and reasons—been philosophically, legally, or polemically denied to broad segments of the human population, including women, the enslaved, racial and ethnic minorities, and the mentally- and physically-disabled (Arstein-Kerslake, 2024). We hope that the contemporary reader will agree that these realities are archaic and dehumanizing. Yet could we be expected to find a similar level of agreement on the well-established legal fiction of *corporate* personhood (see Hull, 2025), or indeed on recent and ongoing efforts—some of them successful—to extend the legal rights and protections of that status to chimpanzees, dolphins, elephants, rainforests, rivers, and mountains<sup>22</sup> (Holden, 2023; Geddis & Ruru, 2019; Gordon, 2018)? There is, regardless, increasing legal, societal, and philosophical recognition that persons exist—or at least *may* exist—beyond the scope of individually-embodied human beings.

What, then, of those who are not themselves embodied independently of a plural system? A self-understanding and -assertion of personhood has, as discussed, been commonly made in such cases. Yet as with other conceptions of personhood that challenge dominant societal norms, the acceptance of such claims has not been an accommodation readily afforded to those who experience plurality, nor indeed to those who experience other forms of multiplicity. Current treatment guidelines for dissociative identity disorder require clinicians to pursue the integration of patients’ identities (ISSTD, 2011: 132), and discourage the use of language considered to recognize those identities’ autonomous personhood, even when it is asserted (*ibid.*: 121). In some arguments, dissociated identities have even been reduced to the status of metaphor (Merckelbach, *et al.*, 2002). Concern has also been raised that societally-recognized persons sharing a body may lack collective capacity, justifying coercive legal action that may—ironically—*imperil* rather than enhance the rights of those experiencing multiplicity (Halleck, 1990; Piper, 1995: 156 f.). While such a pessimistic view has been refuted by more recent literature (e.g., Brennan, 2020; Mckie, *et al.*, 2025), the effects of widespread societal recognition of such subsidiary personhood remain, at best, speculative<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Legal personhood is not, of course, *moral* personhood, but the two routinely intersect, with philosophical considerations of moral status underwriting both the extension *and* the denial of the legal rights and responsibilities associated with personhood (Arstein-Kerslake, 2024: 1–5).

<sup>23</sup> It might be noted, for example, that contemporary backsliding in legal policy and societal attitudes towards other marginalized groups—most notably transgender people, whose experiences share significant overlap with those of the plural community (Dawkins & Dawkins, 2017; Mckie, *et al.*, 2025)—shows that the risk of coercive persecution may never solely remain an artefact of a darker past.

There is at least one existing precedent for the recognition of multiple persons existing within a single human body. Despite the juridical difficulties inevitably encountered by affording separate legal personhood to conjoined twins (see also Sheldon & Wilkinson, 1997), courts have readily done so (Munro, 2001: 465), and have even offered comment on the ethical inappropriateness of considering arguments to the contrary (*ibid.*: 480 n. 4). Perhaps due to the fact that the dual consciousness of conjoined twins can in some sense be *observed*, such a view also seems to predominate both amongst the public and within the medical profession (see Dreger, 1998: 11 f., 19). In her consideration of the plural identity claim, meanwhile, philosopher Elizabeth Schechter (2024) appraises but ultimately rejects animalist objections to the individual personhood of conjoined twins (p. 118; cf. Olson, 2014); yet it is notable that she avoids explicitly extending her recognition of that individual personhood to the members of plural systems<sup>24</sup>.

The phenomenon of conjoined twins, with which our article began, offers intriguing parallels with that of plurality<sup>25</sup>. As a rule, such twins demonstrate differences of personality and personal taste, and speak in the first person singularly for themselves, rather than for the twins as a conjoint being (Dreger, 1998: 9). As in many plural systems (Mckie, *et al.*, 2025; Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017), control of the body must be negotiated and shared, with compromises found and settlements reached to bring harmony to a common existence (Dreger, 1998: 9). Despite these challenges, many find benefits in their being conjoined (*ibid.*: 9 f.), and much as those who experience plurality overwhelmingly reject the desirability of therapeutic integration, conjoined twins universally reject the desirability of *separation* (*ibid.*: 10). Indeed, it is notable in both cases the extent to which those who are *not* conjoined or plural advocate ‘treatments’ that seek to eliminate the possibility of multiple persons existing within one body, even when doing so will result in at least one of those persons’ deaths (*ibid.*: 11–25; Clayton, 2005).

The language of death may seem inappropriate (or at the very least hyperbolic) in relation to the phenomenon of plurality; the integration of plural identities does not, after all, involve the cessation of biological function implicit in contemporary medical and legal definitions of death (see Wicks, 2017). Yet plural systems have been known to report the deaths of their individual members (Riesman, 2019), after which they cease to manifest as independent persons within the affected systems; and faced with a clinically-imposed regime of integration, horrified patients have even been known to accuse their therapists of ‘murdering [their] inner people’ (van der Hart, *et al.*, 2006: 338; see also Dawkins, 2024). While it may be tempting to treat such language as mere metaphor, a growing school of philosophy posits that death should be defined in relation to the conscious mind, not

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<sup>24</sup> It is speculative whether this reluctance is due to Schechter’s commitment to agnosticism on the phenomenological reality of plurality, or whether it is perhaps due to plural systems not sharing conjoined twins’ benefit of observability. I consider it, in any case, a mistake in terms of logical consistency. Of course, my own view of what is logically consistent with regard to plurality may not mirror that of Schechter—insofar as I am plural, and she is not. Just as it is apparently difficult for many people to accept the claims of plural systems, it is sometimes difficult for those who experience plurality to fathom *just* what seems so novel about our condition to those who lack firsthand knowledge thereof.

<sup>25</sup> A strict adherence to this article’s definition of multiplicity ought to include conjoined twins; yet as their condition is not of particular relevance to its thesis, I have opted not to consider them as such. Normal embryonic development would, in any case, result in the *in utero* separation of conjoined twins (Kaufman, 2004); the same can obviously not be said for psychological forms of multiplicity.

merely in relation to the body that houses it<sup>26</sup> (Wicks, 2017: 122 ff.). Timothy J. Bayne (2002), with an eye toward prevailing therapeutic protocols for patients with dissociative identity disorder, convincingly surveys the ethical dangers of refusing to recognize subsidiary personhood in consideration of the possibility that patients' dissociated identities *do* independently possess full moral status. By way of analogy, he notes that 'putting someone in a permanent coma may not bring about their death *qua* organism, but it is seriously immoral because it brings about their death (or extinction) *qua* person' (p. 100).

In consideration of the potential for such external hostility to their very existence, it is possible that the greatest claim that the members of plural systems have to personhood is quite simply that they do *claim* that status<sup>27</sup>. There is as yet no philosophical consensus on the criteria for personhood, nor on just who happens to meet those criteria (Schechter, 2024: 125 f.), yet common propositions for such include consciousness, moral agency, and the capacity both to reason and to value one's own existence (Wicks, 2017: 123). It may be impossible for a member of a plural system to prove these criteria independent of his system as a whole (Schechter, 2024: 119–23); it is incontrovertible, however, that we would—or at least *should*—accept testimony on such matters from any human being claiming to possess only a single personality. Indeed, by way of comparison, Jack and Noël Dawkins (2017) note that those who experience plurality are not the only ones to make novel claims of selfhood that contrast with the ways in which others in society perceive them, and are persuasive in comparing plural and transgender identities:

'Transgender people can separate the body from their individual identities, and view their self-schema as something that exists in and of itself, rather than something that is determined by the shape of their body—or the way in which that body is perceived in society—as an essential definer of the self that it contains. [...]

'Members of multiple systems perceive themselves as people, experiencing the same range of emotions, thoughts, and other mental trappings of personhood that embodied people do. As opposed to occupying physical space, they occupy cognitive, philosophical space. Embodiment, in and of itself, does not serve as the criterion for personhood: rather, it is sentience and self-perception that serve to define what a "person" is. As with transgender people, it is not solely the shape of the body that determines the person: the thoughts, experiences, and self-perceptions are instrumental in creating the cognitive and philosophical boundaries between persons. The shape of a life, not the shape of skin, bone, and blood on their own.'

It is now, after many years of study, broadly-recognized that accepting rather than pathologizing the subjective claims made by transgender people with regard to their identities and genders has positive, long-term outcomes for their overall health (Nguyen, *et al.*, forthcoming; Sevelius, *et al.*, 2021; Glynn, *et al.*,

<sup>26</sup> Such a person-based approach to death must contend with significant ethical quandaries, foremost among them its sometime tendency towards that same archaic and dehumanizing denial of personhood to those seen as lacking the requisite mental capacity (Wicks, 2017: 122 ff., 126 ff.). I invoke the theory here due to its inverse potential to expand rather than restrict standard ideas of personhood; this should not, however, be mistaken for a wholesale endorsement.

<sup>27</sup> This is not, of course, enough to legitimate such a claim with any degree of certainty. A large language model could also claim personhood, for example, yet the predictive and algorithmic architecture underlying such models does not inspire confidence that their claims are anything more than constructed approximations of those that may be made by *actual* persons. Yet it seems reasonable to insist that claims of personhood should not count for *nothing*: they are not, after all, being made by the putative persons we have nevertheless managed to find in the form of chimpanzees and rainforests.

2016). While the academic study of plurality is yet only in its infancy, it shall be greatly benefited by learning from the history and trajectory of transgender studies, and adopting a paradigm of respect for and acceptance of the lived experiences of plural systems that fosters a reciprocal trust between those systems, clinicians, and researchers. One does not need to *believe* the personhood claims of the individual members of plural systems to accept that they subjectively experience themselves as *people*. It may well turn out that, as the Dawkinses (2017) quote Douglas Hofstadter (2007: 234) in surmising, 'a person is a *point of view*.'

## A Locus of Identity

This article has thus far surveyed the historical and contemporary understandings of two seemingly-distinct and -disconnected matters of inquiry: the metaphysical soul, and the psychosocial phenomenon of plurality as considered within the context of other multiplicity-spectrum experiences. As has been shown, however, these matters share common ground in their connexion with and concern for the nature of individual personhood. We have argued that the soul is the seat of consciousness and identity that individuates the autonomous and independent person. Plurality, meanwhile, demonstrates that multiple such identities can exist within a single embodiment, each asserting themselves as fully-autonomous persons. Synthesis of these claims therefore holds that the several persons present within a plural system must be discretely possessed of their own, individual souls. In consequence, the common, cross-cultural understanding that an exclusive relationship exists between one body and one person—or one body and one soul—must be abandoned. In its place, we propose a theory of multiple ensoulment, whereby several persons may find expression through a single, shared body: each of a necessity enlivened by a soul which is *not* shared, but which rather is exclusive to the individual person.

For clarity, it shall be helpful to demonstrate by illustration several examples of what multiple ensoulment is *not*. Firstly, as has been shown, many conceptions of the soul are innately pluralistic; this 'soul dualism' is particularly common in shamanistic faiths (Hultkrantz, 1984), but it is also a feature present in other Indigenous as well as Chinese religions (Trnka & Lorencova, 2022; Yü, 1987). Yet clearly such souls do not individually give rise to personhood, such that the mere presence within a given body of a plurality of souls should necessitate its playing host to a system of multiple persons. Rather, all such souls are understood to collectively belong to a single person. Multiple ensoulment within such a paradigm thus requires that the full collection of such souls as are necessary for the manifestation of singular personhood should *as a set* be multiplied within the body that hosts a plural system.

We also do not mean by 'multiple ensoulment' the mere presence within a single body of multiple souls (or such collections thereof) without regard to their origins. If we accept the soul as the locus of identity, the phenomenon of spirit possession must be understood to involve such a presence (Bourguignon, 1968: 4; McNamara, 2011: 5). Yet the possessing entity in such a case has no implicit claim to the body it possesses; indeed, it is necessarily alien thereto (*ibid.*: 13, 16). While we accept that such an explanation may hold epistemological validity for or within a minority of plural systems (see Ittermann, *et al.*, 2019), we have also outlined a differential diagnosis that shows spirit possession and plurality to be phenomenologically-distinct.

Additional to these ontological considerations, it is important to note that it would not be appropriate for us to suggest such an etiology in cases of multiplicity where individual personhood is not self-professed *by* the several selves or identities present within a given body. The validity of multiple ensoulment necessarily relies upon the reality of such subsidiary personhood, and we cannot discount or devalue the lived experiences of those who assert that they are, in fact, one ‘person’ with several ‘parts’ (see, e.g., Blunden & Billie, 2021). It should nevertheless be recognized that the persistence with which current clinical guidelines devalue and dismiss the possibility of multiple persons manifesting within a single body (e.g., ISSTD, 2011) may itself inspire such a denial of personhood on the part of patients (Schechter, 2024: 106), whether because they ascribe to a ‘doctor knows best’ mentality of professional infallibility, or because they believe that acceding to such an assertion is necessary to obtain diagnosis, therapy, or treatment<sup>28</sup> (Eve, 2024: 235).

For those who *do* experience themselves as being multiple persons in a single body, however, our theory offers a genetic model of plurality that is metaphysical rather than psychological, eschewing the need to reconcile the existing endo- and traumagenic etiologies proposed for that phenomenon. It does not, of course, *replace* these models, and they may remain preferable to members of plural systems who are partial to a secular, psychological view of their experiences. Nevertheless, it remains the case that many who experience plurality are less concerned by the particulars of its origins than by living well as a plural system (Eve, 2024: 145). Those already inclined toward spiritual or otherwise-metaphysical explanations for worldly phenomena may find in the theory of multiple ensoulment a means of situating plurality—whether or not it is personally experienced—within a broad range of existing philosophical and religious traditions. While this would in any case aid in a general understanding and appreciation of plurality, it may prove especially beneficial if conservative voices within those traditions prove hostile towards the acceptance of plurality or otherwise-unaffirming of plural identities and experiences. While such skepticism is, perhaps, inevitable, a cross-cultural and interfaith framework amenable to our proposal nevertheless does already exist.

Despite its pervasive assumption of ‘one soul, per person, per body,’ challenges to this formulation have managed to repeatedly find voice within the Western philosophical canon. Plato, in his *Apology of Socrates*, ascribed to the philosopher in his own voice a *daimonion*, ‘a sort of voice that comes to me’ (Plato, *Apology* 31d3), that arose to oppose him when he should make a wrong decision (Brickhouse & Smith, 1989). No less than Carl Jung (1963), meanwhile, wrote of his conversation with Philemon, described as a figure of fantasy who seemed ‘quite real, as if he were a living personality’ (p. 176). To Jung, ‘Philemon represented a force which was not myself [...] and he said things which I had not consciously thought’ (*ibid.*). The experiences attributed to Socrates and professed by Jung have both been considered potential early forerunners of modern plural identity (Pierre, 2023). While we have shown spirit possession to be less directly comparable to plurality, the abundance of such traditions across the Western religious landscape<sup>29</sup> nevertheless betrays a fluidity in the body–soul and body–person relationships that undermines the exclusivity commonly attributed to such dyads. The frequency of such beliefs outside the West (see Bourguignon, 1968) likewise

<sup>28</sup> For personal testimonies on the challenges faced by plural systems in accessing clinical services, see Turell, *et al.* (2023: 6), Eve (2024: 141 f., 165–68), and Mckie, *et al.* (2025: 8).

<sup>29</sup> Consider, for example, the *dybbuk* and *ibbur* of Jewish folklore, demon possession and spiritual baptism in Christianity, and *jinn* possession in Islam. For treatments, see Goldish (2003), Levack (2013), Yun (2003), and Philips (2007).

supports the fluidity of these connexions. While much existing literature on culture-bound notions of personhood in non-Western contexts focuses on its dividuality (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 2010), it has also been argued that such understandings of identity, being less rigid, may serve to localize to Western contexts those theories of trauma that underwrite prevailing clinical understandings of multiplicity (Stocks, 2007). Such a process of localization may in turn allow greater room for *non*-clinical manifestations of multiplicity beyond the West. While an apprehension of the extent and cultural interpretation of plurality in these contexts anxiously awaits further research, these considerations suggest that neither Western nor non-Western contexts should necessarily be metaphysically troubled by the possibility of multiple ensoulment.

Yet if a body should come to be imbued with multiple souls, by what is this phenomenon occasioned? The particulars of such a mechanism will, of course, rely heavily on the specific religious or philosophical framework in which it is considered, just as specific beliefs already vary in regard to (singular) ensoulment (see Hall, 2006). This article shall neither consider nor pursue potential answers to this question, as it is not our purpose to persuade the reader of the truth of any one faith or school of philosophy. Two points that relate to our apprehension of the diversity and heterogeneity of the plural experience do, however, bear mentioning, as account shall inevitably need to be taken of them by any sectarian consideration of multiple ensoulment, especially if regard is paid thereby to the means or mechanism of that process. The first point is that the individual persons who comprise a given plural system may arise or manifest in relation to that system—that is to say, in relation to their common body—at diverse times. The second is that those persons may, at some later time, cease to be members of or to participate in that system.

While some who experience the condition consider themselves to have been plural since birth (Christensen, 2022: 3), multiplicity-spectrum experiences more commonly develop (or are realized) later in life, especially in adolescence (Eve, *et al.*, 2025: 151; *cf.* Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017). Plural systems form as new persons manifest within a body previously understood to be inhabited by a single personality. While this delayed onset is sometimes explained as the discovery of persons who were unknown but already present (Yarbrough, 2018; Nsashaell, 2013), it is also possible for new persons to emerge without any conception of having had a prior existence (see also Eve, 2024: 143 ff.). This phenomenon has implications for the theory of multiple ensoulment, as it suggests that it is 'multiple' not merely as a factor of the number of souls, but in fact on account of the number of ensoulment *events*. That is to say, it is not enough to conceive of a singular event through which multiple souls are concurrently animated or awakened within a given body, for while this could account for plurality experienced (or otherwise believed to have been present) from birth, it cannot so easily explain the wholesale emergence of additional persons later in that body's natural life. To account for this circumstance, we must rather admit the possibility that such a body in fact experiences a collection of *individual* ensoulment events, and that such events occur at several and discrete points in time.

Conversely, plural systems can experience not only the emergence of new members, but the loss of existing ones. Phenomenologically, this may be described as individuals ceasing to manifest as distinct persons within a given system, but such a neat definition inevitably glosses over the rich nuance present in how systems interpret these loss events, with analytical differences manifesting not only between systems, but between distinct loss events as experienced by a particular system. As previously discussed, some systems are relatively fluid in terms of their membership

(Eve, 2024: 144; Yarbrough, 2018: 159 f.), and ‘people may come and go’ throughout the course of such a system’s life (*ibid.*). Even more stable systems, however, have spoken of their members having ‘gone to sleep,’ even if their ‘stirrings’ can still, on occasion, be felt (Henkin, 1998: 175 f.; cf. Ribáry, *et al.*, 2017: 5). People have also been known to leave systems for the span of several years in the aftermath of traumatic experiences (*ibid.*: 4); as previously discussed, such losses may in extreme cases be permanent, with the deaths of such members being the logical conclusion reached as to their fates by those who survive them (cf. Riesman, 2019). We have already shown that such a phenomenon of intra-system death may be incompatible with prevailing secular definitions of that term; conceptions of death that specifically treat the soul, in contrast, may prove more accommodating of the plural experience. A belief in (corporeal) death as a marker of the permanent departure of the soul from the body is widespread (Davies, 2017: 105 f.), and lends itself naturally to an understanding that the departure of any one soul marks the death of but one particular person—leaving its erstwhile body to be animated by such other souls as yet remain with it. Contrariwise, however, merely-temporary departures may prove less agreeable to those traditions that *only* treat the separation of body and soul at the point of death than they would to those traditions that are already accustomed to the treatment of soul loss.

We would encourage any philosophical understanding of plurality to accept the lived experiences of the members of plural systems at face value, and thus to accommodate the broad spectrum of such experiences as might be found represented in their testimonies. Yet we also acknowledge that religious and philosophical schools are necessarily selective in their acceptance of all manner of phenomena. Accordingly, it may emerge that different traditions will find differing interpretations of plural experiences to be more or less agreeable to their established worldviews. We present the theory of multiple ensoulment as one means whereby emerging understandings of plurality might be incorporated into these worldviews, and thereby find a home within a broad variety of traditions.

## Limitations

This article is the work of a single researcher, and while lived experience within a plural system and with personal connexions to other plural systems has benefited the author’s ability to engage with the under-studied topics addressed herein, the potential remains that that same lived experience has engendered implicit personal biases which may unduly limit the scope of inquiry and influence the conclusions ultimately reached.

Philosophical, religious, and metaphysical theories will always remain significantly open to interpretation, and while this article aimed to take a broad approach to these topics, future studies would benefit from narrower inquiry along discrete sectarian lines, as well as from specific inquiry into the religious beliefs held by members of plural systems in relation to their experiences. Such theories are additionally highly integrated into the cultures in which they develop. With specific regard to lesser-studied conceptions of the soul, such as those in Indigenous religious traditions, post-colonial anthropological research was, where possible, prioritized for review to address this concern. While this literature did support cross-cultural agreement in connecting the soul to personhood, it is important to note that a substantial majority of the referenced corpus is in

English<sup>30</sup>, suggesting a Western lens that may obscure contrasting, non-Western conceptions of personhood<sup>31</sup> (Azuma, 1994).

Existing research surveying plural experiences has likewise been developed in largely-Western contexts, drawing from interviews—conducted predominantly in English—with American- and European-based systems having access to the Internet. These linguistic, geographic, and economic limitations may introduce into the literature implicitly-shared assumptions regarding the nature of plurality. Further research is needed to develop a common understanding of the role played by culture in mediating both personal and collective understandings of plurality and other forms of multiplicity.

## Conclusion

‘The Western notion of one coherent, consistent, stable, and enduring self per body is a historical and cultural peculiarity’ (Lester, 2022: 2). For members of plural systems—a cohort in which the author of this article is included—the experience of selfhood is one wholly divorced from embodiment. Although a given person may rely upon a body to sustain him, this dependence is not identity, nor is the relationship of his self to that body in any way exclusive. Yet if we hold the soul to be the enlivening force that individuates the autonomous person, the body in which a plurality of such persons reside must itself play host to a multitude of souls.

Whether or not they are themselves plural, those who respectfully interact with and recognize the personhood of those who are also implicitly acknowledge and accept their individual ensoulment. We speak to one another’s conscious minds, not our ears. We love one another as personalities, not merely as flesh and blood. We share mirth in laughter, and sorrow in tears. We mourn our dead, whether or not they leave behind a corpse. In short, we partake in one another’s lives and in one another’s souls, whether or not those souls give rise to physical form.

We cannot expect that everyone who reads this article will come to accept its conclusions, but we hope that, if you are a member of a plural system, you will consider the fact that you have a soul, find it in yourself to care for it, and nurture your existence in whatever ways you can. And if you are not plural, but have acquaintances who are, we hope that you will treat them with the same respect that you would afford to those who are not. We cannot rely on the material sciences to locate the soul, nor to measure the particulars of its existence. Rather, we must do that work for ourselves. We must search for the soul in one another, and behold it in all its unique and intricate glory; and when we do, we shall find it in ourselves to treat one another with the kindness, compassion, and humanity that all such souls are due.

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<sup>30</sup> Of those references relevant to this issue, Oesterreich (1930) and Léon-Dufour (1967) originally published in German and French, respectively, but authorized translations of their works into English were consulted for this article; both remain, in any case, firmly within the Western scholarly tradition. Additional literature was surveyed in French, Hungarian, Persian, and Urdu, in translation, but excluded from citation on various grounds unrelated to the issue at hand.

<sup>31</sup> For more on the discordance of Western psychosocial models with non-Western conceptions of personhood, see Cross & Markus (1999), Stocks (2007), and Markus & Kitayama (2010). For a review thereof with respect to multiplicity-spectrum experiences, see Eve (2024: 209 ff.).

## Disclosures

Mako Burgess-Yoitz is an independent researcher with lived experience as a subsidiary member of a plural system. Neither she nor any other member of her system have received funding, nor do they have competing financial interests, in relation to the content of this article.

## Acknowledgements

This article is dedicated to David, Anastasia, and Azusa Burgess.

The author would additionally like to thank Ellie McKeown for her research assistance and for providing feedback on a draft of this article, and Dr Susan C. Turell for providing access to the article she co-authored cited herein. The section title 'A Palette of Souls' was inspired by the writings of Hasekura Isuna; 'The Shape of a Person' was inspired by the quote from Jack and Noël Dawkins with which that section concludes. The author is especially grateful to those plural systems who have undertaken to publish accounts of their experiences, and to such other academics, researchers, clinicians, and scholars who have taken those experiences seriously.

This article was researched, prepared, and published on the traditional territories of the Blackfoot Confederacy and of diverse other nations of the Great Plains, including the Sarcee, Sioux, Stoney, and Plains Cree, whose presence in these lands reaches back to time immemorial. It is asserted that an enduring justice demands the full resumption of Indigenous sovereignty over these and all other colonized and occupied territories.

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**Résumé**

*Les nouvelles compréhensions de la pluralité remettent en question l'hypothèse interculturelle et interreligieuse de longue date selon laquelle il existerait une relation exclusive entre un corps particulier et l'âme censée l'habiter. L'acceptation qu'une multiplicité de personnes individuées puisse habiter un seul corps considéré comme un système exige un réexamen de la nature de l'âme en relation avec le corps, ainsi qu'une réflexion sur le fait que — si l'on pose l'existence de l'âme — une pluralité de personnes entraîne nécessairement un phénomène analogue d'infusion plurielle des âmes, permettant à plusieurs âmes de participer de manière coopérative et de s'exprimer à travers une incarnation spécifique selon une correspondance non exclusive plusieurs-à-un.*

**Plural Bodies, Plural Souls:**

*Multiple Ensoulment as the Locus of Identity in Plural Systems*

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**Digital Object Identifier**

10.17613/m0t22-7bk97

**Keywords:** *plurality, multiplicity, dissociative identity disorder, personhood, ensoulment, soul, philosophy of religion*

**Recommended Citation:** Burgess-Yoïtz, Mako. 'Plural Bodies, Plural Souls: Multiple Ensoulment as the Locus of Identity in Plural Systems.' *Knowledge Commons*, 2026. doi: 10.17613/m0t22-7bk97.