

Alienation

Alienation is a rich and multi significant term. Its classical roots—*alius*, other; *alienus*, of or pertaining to others-- clearly point to the central function of the term 'alienation,' which refers to the condition of having become foreign or alien to oneself.

To be alien to oneself? What does this mean? Do you know the expression *be yourself*? It seems relevant here. It's what you say to comfort your son who's heading off to University for the first time, and is suddenly uncertain what kind of identity he is bringing with him into a new and supercharged atmosphere. He's got the jitters. You say to him, *just be yourself*, and in fact, although you are not sure what your phrase means, it seems to make him feel better, and it has the same effect on you later that evening when you are about to address a meeting of your board of directors, and are hit by a case of jitters. You mutter internally, shaking yourself, *just be yourself*, and as though you know what the phrase means you nevertheless find yourself feeling better and go on to dazzle them with newly assembled stats on Canadian used car sales. You really score.

What is this self that it is so easy for me to lose touch with being, and why can the evocation of it generate (on lucky occasions) a refreshment of courage and energy? These are two separate questions, but pushing back on them we should be able to make some fundamental discoveries about the kind of animal we are.

The self we easily lose touch with is the things we say, about ourselves, which enhance our identity. We lose touch with the naming process by which we affirm the self. Yes, surprisingly the self is made of language. We are fundamentally made of language. This is our answer to question one.

What we name ourselves—this is the answer to question two—is what we are. Merleau Ponty, the French phenomenalist philosopher, said that the body is 'where there is always something to be done.' The body, like the self, exists by regular reminders of what it is. Like my son, we need constantly to remind ourselves who we are.