Introduction
Theseus’s Paradox

I used to subscribe to People. Then I switched to Us. Now I just read Self.
—My friend Lenny

I love hearing people talk about their “real” selves. I still remember my first girlfriend, the seemingly perfect Natalie Duberman, spooking me with the warning: “Be careful. You don’t know the real me.” Was she a werewolf? Could she be in the witness protection program? No, Natalie explained, “It’s just that I’m not this nice with guys I like.” She went on to detail how insecure, jealous, and passive-aggressive she had been with her first two boyfriends. I wondered what it would take for this new version of Natalie, the one I knew, to assume the mantle of “the real Natalie”? What if we were together for a year and, during that time, she never once became insecure, jealous, or passive-aggressive toward me? What if it stayed that way for ten years? How would she decide when the new Natalie qualified as the real one?

Then there is my friend Lenny, who utilizes an infuriating twist on Natalie’s warning. When Lenny acts badly—which, incidentally, is more or less constantly—he explains it away by saying, “Forgive me. I’m just not myself today.” Really? Who are you, then? Because I’d like to know the name of the guy I’m thinking about punching in the nose right now. And when do you expect your real self to return? I’d like to lodge a complaint with him.
And then there is the issue of myself. How will I be remembered when I die? Will there be an iconic Bob Levine—the guy who looked the way I did at some flattering moment when I was twenty-one, or when I was forty-one—who somehow stood out in peoples’ memories? Or will it be some kind of average me, as if all the people I’ve been were thrown into a blender? One thing I know for sure is that when my loved ones are asked what Bob Levine was truly like, no two accounts will be the same. For one thing, each person will have known me at different times in different situations. None of them, certainly, are going to lay out the only accurate description, which would be to detail every version of me that existed over my lifetime. No one would stick around to listen. I know I wouldn’t.

We tell ourselves that we—our “selves”—are coherent entities. We imagine a thing that we can neatly label and point to as if it were a sculpture sitting on a shelf. But it is just a story we write—or, more precisely, are constantly rewriting. The image we have of the person we are is, in fact, a never-ending narrative in which we do our best to connect all the iterations of ourselves—bodies, minds, and personae—to who we feel like at the particular moment. We filter, distort, and weave the images together as best we can. When the story works, it enables us to think of ourselves as one person. It creates a sense of unity and continuity.

But good storytelling should not be confused with accurate reporting. The self is not a thing. We are, in fact, ultimately indescribable. Always. This holds true for every aspect of our self, from the nuts and bolts of our microbiology to the highest intellect of our minds. One moment my cells and organs work fine. A few hours of a stressful day later, I look and feel like Father Time. Twenty-five years after that I’ve turned into Father Time’s father. The social and psychological transformations are no less incessant. There is the me-as-professor doling out advice to a student. The next moment I’ve become me-as-father getting angry at my son. Next thing you know I’m acting sweet and ingratiating toward an old friend. I sometimes feel as if I’m watching a movie, wondering which version of myself is going to appear on screen.

Here is another thought to consider: If you live long enough, almost every particle in your body will be replaced by a new one. The average lifespan of most human cells is estimated to be less than ten years. As old cells die, new ones are created.
Kleenex. The cells lining our stomach last five days. Red blood cells wear out about every 120 days. The entire human liver gets replaced every three hundred to five hundred days. Our skeleton is replaced about every ten years. It was once assumed that neurons were the single exemption to the replacement pattern, but we now know even this isn't always the case. For example, neurons in the hippocampus, where our memories of faces and places are recorded, die out after an average of twenty to thirty years; it is estimated that we grow 1,400 or so new hippocampal neurons each day. All told, about 98 percent of the atoms in the body are replaced annually. Only the DNA gets passed on.4

This turnover recalls the ancient paradox of Theseus’s ship. According to the Greek legend, Theseus owned a ship that sailed for many years. The planks in the ship decayed over time and, as they did, each was meticulously replaced. Eventually, not a single original plank remained. The question: Did the Athenians still have the same ship that once belonged to Theseus? Later philosophers, notably Thomas Hobbes, added to the puzzle: What if you refurbished the old planks and used them to build a new ship? Which, if either, of the two ships—the old one with the new boards or the new one with the old boards—is the original vessel?5

Our bodies are a lot like the old Greek ship. Imagine that scientists found a way to transplant the cells of preserved bodies to living people. In order to prevent rejection, it would need to be a gradual procedure: 1 percent of your cells would be replaced each week for one hundred weeks. Let’s say I got to acquire the cells from my childhood hero Jackie Robinson. What would the transformation look like? After the first few transplants I would no doubt still be Bob Levine. After one hundred weeks, however, my cells would be totally Jackie Robinson. But what about the time in the middle? At week fifty would you say I was half Bob Levine and half Jackie Robinson? And what in the world would that mean? That I would now be half as good a base runner as the former Brooklyn Dodger?

And isn’t this what happens as we simply grow older? The body we have today and the one in our baby pictures have hardly a molecule in common. Is there a point where I would shift from one identity to the other? Because if there is, it means that one cell makes the difference between being me and not-me, which is absurd. Isn’t it?6
This book is a travelogue of a sort. The chapters that follow take us on an excursion through the landscape that defines the very fabric of our lives: the slippery, quirky, brilliantly creative and often downright ridiculous entity that we call our self. My own field of specialty is social psychology, a discipline that casts a wide net. We focus on both the individual and his or her social surroundings and, most tellingly, on the give and take between the two—what our founding father Kurt Lewin called the “life space.” It is a broad and dynamic approach that, I believe, provides a well-suited lens for our excursion. The pursuit of a better understanding of the self led me to work from an array of sciences, and the insights from these different perspectives turned out to be related to each other in ways I had not expected.

Prepare to cover a lot of ground. We will explore cutting-edge research, along with case studies and other insights, from experts across these many disciplines—from the so-called hard sciences like neurology and genetics to soft sciences like social psychology. We will also hear from artists and writers who target many of the same questions from a less systematic but often more provocative perspective. Some of the stops delve into facets of experience that are familiar to all of us. Others describe experiences that few of us will ever face. The latter are not intended as mere curiosities, although curious they certainly are. I believe these extremes offer perspectives we all can learn from. Pathologies enable description. Description enables possibilities.

Be warned up front that our journey never reaches a destination. It is, in this way, like trying to penetrate the essence of any complex geographic place. Think about a trip to, say, Paris. If you are a diligent tourist, you might walk the neighborhoods, ride the metro, visit a few museums, sit around some cafés, and the like. If you’re lucky, you get to chat with some Parisians and perhaps some Algerian immigrants. Maybe you even get invited to stay with a friend for a few nights to experience “the real Paris.” You explore as many facets of the city as you can, and the more you do, the more you learn. But you will not find a nugget at the center—just more facets. And if you visit a year later, everything has changed. Even the boundaries might have shifted. The real Paris? It might as well

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be the sign at the airport that reads “Bienvenue à Paris.” Then again, the airport is twenty-five kilometers outside the city.

So it will be with our exploration of the self. We will travel inside and outside, from the micro to the macro, from seemingly tangible physical organs to the invisible forces of collective behavior, with plenty of stops in between. But don’t expect a singular, take home photo (dare I say selfie?) waiting at the end of the road. Our very identity, the conduit for everything we experience, turns out to be more like a city or a country than a thing. There must, we are convinced, be a there there. After all, every person is different from every other, just as “there is no place like Paris.” But capturing the totality of the person you call yourself, all at once, head on, is not to be. It is like trying to capture light or time. You can see reflections. But the whole is simply a story we weave to convince ourselves that the parts fit together. “Trying to define yourself is like trying to bite your own teeth,” the philosopher Alan Watts once observed. To me, this doesn’t diminish the pursuit but is what makes it such a compelling journey. It is, in fact, my intention to not only demonstrate that our prey is beyond capture but to do this from as many perspectives as I can.

Much of what follows may at first seem to be anecdotal and idiosyncratic. But I hope to show that, taken together, the research and observations to be covered point to four overarching themes. First, the boundaries of the self are vague and arbitrary. Looking outward, there is not so much a line between ourselves and the outside as there is an ever-changing gray zone. Looking inward, we are, literally, part us, part other.

Second, we are more like a republic than an individual, a collection of the many, diverse, and sometimes adversarial. “I am large, I contain multitudes,” Walt Whitman famously wrote. The great poet was right on more levels than he probably imagined. In the chapters that follow we see that the entities we call “my body,” “my brain” and “my mind” are, in fact, conglomerates. We consist of the many from the bottom up—from the biology of our chromosomes and cells to the underpinnings of our thoughts and our actions. And, we will see, our various selves often seem to have minds of their own. They can be self-centered, pigheaded, and poor listeners. Sometimes, in fact, they go to battle. One role subverts
another role. The present self makes life unnecessarily difficult for its future self.

Third, we are malleable to the core. Everything about us, from our bodies to our neural circuitry to our personalities, is in perpetual flux. Change is our resting state. I hope to demonstrate how marvelously elastic we humans are, inside and outside, from situation to situation and, most curiously, from one time frame to another. It’s not a question of whether we are able to change. We are nothing but change. You’ve heard the old Taoist saying, “The only thing that is constant is change itself.” That is us.

To say that we lack a true self has a hollow ring to it. But the stories in this book are not meant to belittle. Rather, I hope to show, they reveal tremendous possibilities. This leads to a fourth theme: The very features of the self that can be so problematic—its arbitrary boundaries, multiplicity, and malleability—creates possibilities for change.

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The questions we explore in the following chapters address fundamental human nature: Who are we? What does it mean to have a “self”? Where is the line between ourselves and everything else? Can we control the person we become? The questions are clear, but the answers are anything but.

Scientific knowledge has accumulated so rapidly in recent years that some contemporary scholars envision a time not so far away when science as we know it will have reached the end of its mission. Astronomers, for example, can now peer so far back in time that they can almost see—literally see—what the universe looked like at the moment of the big bang. Physicists are closing in on the tiniest particles that constitute matter. Biologists have mapped the entire human genome and are now well on their way to building genomes of life forms from scratch; designer organisms are just around the corner. And neuroscientists are mapping the structure and function of previously unimagined details in the brain so swiftly it’s hard to keep up. When it comes to the issues in this book, however, this “end of science” eulogy is just chatter. In fact, it is the mystery of the self that makes it such a compelling subject. Even the questions it raises are ripe with opportunity.
“How can it be that, of all things, one is *this* thing, so that one can say, astonishingly . . . ‘here I am?’” the writer Rebecca Goldstein eloquently asked. But who is “*this* thing”? And exactly where is the “here” that I might find him?

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A note about the progression of the chapters: I’ve tried to arrange to move from the perspectives of the harder sciences to those of the softer ones—from neurology and biology to the social sciences, from our bodily selves to the self of personal experience. With that, let us begin, at the beginning, with the machine that runs the operation.