

INGOLF U. DALFERTH

# We

Humanity, Community,  
and the Right to be Different

*Religion in  
Philosophy and Theology*  
131

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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131





Ingolf U. Dalferth

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Humanity, Community, and  
the Right to be Different

Mohr Siebeck

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Es ist ein hartes Wort und dennoch sag ichs, weil es Wahrheit ist: ich kann kein Volk mir denken, das zerrißner wäre, wie die Deutschen. Handwerker siehst du, aber keine Menschen, Denker, aber keine Menschen, Priester, aber keine Menschen, Herrn und Knechte, Jungen und gesetzte Leute, aber keine Menschen – ist das nicht, wie ein Schlachtfeld, wo Hände und Arme und alle Glieder zerstückelt untereinander liegen, indessen das vergoßne Lebensblut im Sande zerrinnt?

They're harsh words, but I'll say them nonetheless, because it's the truth: I can imagine no people more fragmented than the Germans. You see craftsmen, but no human beings, philosophers, but no human beings, priests, but no human beings, masters and menials, youths and elders, but no human beings – is this not like a battlefield where hands and arms and all the limbs lie about in pieces while the spilled life-blood seeps away into the sand?

Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion, or the Hermit in Greece* (1797–1799), trans. by Howard Gaskill (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019), 131–132.



## Preface

Hyperion's "harsh words" highlight an important point: We know people in their everyday roles and social functions as parents, children, neighbors, businesspeople, teachers, politicians, farmers, journalists, pastors, or members of parliament. But these descriptions conceal something they presuppose, and they always imply more than they say. They all qualify the more fundamental fact that it is humans who perform these roles and functions in society. Only humans can be or do what these descriptions say. They qualify their humanity in a certain respect.

But what is their humanity? Obviously not something that could be included as another item in the list of social roles and functions. We cannot see and observe humanity the way we see and observe craftsmen and philosophers, priests and politicians, masters and servants, young and old. Humanity is not just another descriptive determination that we have, but that without which we couldn't have any determinations. We are human beings, a form of being-there (*Da-Sein*) that we call 'human'. What this means is controversial. But everything that can truly be said of us further qualifies our fundamental determination of being humans. It is always present, but never appears as such. I can interact with philosophers, priests, or politicians in real life only because they exist and because they are human. But I cannot interact with them simply as beings that exist or only as human beings. No one merely exists, and no one is just human.

Neither the existence nor the humanity of human beings are independent phenomena. They never exist alone, but only in conjunction with other qualifications. We can abstract from this. We can focus on our existence and our humanity and ignore everything else. Or, conversely, we can bracket them in a phenomenological *epoché* to focus on other aspects of human life and experience. But we can only do this by using what we bracket in this way. Only those who exist and are human can bracket out the fact that they exist and are human when they think about something. But they cannot do this when they think about themselves, their own humanity, and their own existence. Existence and being human are not phenomena among others, but that without which there would be no phenomena for us. We cannot bracket them out when we think about ourselves, because we cannot think about anything if we are not humans who exist. *We are there* (we exist); we are there *as humans* (we exist *as humans*); we are there *as this particular human individual* (we exist *as this human being*); and we are there *as this particular human being in a particular way* (we exist *as this human being in a specific way* that could be different).



These four existential facts about us correspond to very different responsibilities. It is only because we are human and exist that we can experience, know, desire, or do anything at all. But as long as we exist, we can't do much about the fact that we exist and that we are human. We can end our existence, but only as long as we exist; and we can experiment with our humanity, but only as humans. This is different for the other two facts. We can contribute a lot to how we individualize our humanity and what kind of human being we become: Our identity is always at least partly of our own making. And we are always responsible for how we actually exist as human beings: We cannot escape the challenge of having to make existential decisions. We are not responsible for the fact that we are here (our *existence*), nor for the fact that we are humans (our *being humans*). But we are responsible for the way we exist (our *mode of existence*), and we are co-responsible for what we make of our humanity, how we realize it and how we live our lives as human beings among human beings (our *mode of being human*). A lot depends on us clearly distinguishing between these different areas of responsibility, not only for ourselves but also for our fellow creatures. Otherwise we ask the wrong questions and settle for misleading answers. And the consequences of our misjudgments never just affect us, but always others too.

In this study, I explore these questions by examining the traces of the kaleidoscopic *we* to which we belong in different ways. We say *we* to connect with others, to distinguish ourselves from others, and to oppose others. We use the same expression to differentiate ourselves from others, to emphasize our belonging, to include or to exclude others. And we often keep it open as to how we want to be understood or slip from one usage to another without clearly indicating this.

My argument therefore begins with a phenomenology of the *we* that we affirm when we say *we*. I then focus on the question of existence because the aim is not to understand and analyze narratives about fictional characters, but the lives and interactions of real people. Because no one merely exists, but always exists as something specific, in a next step I ask what it means to exist as a human being. Who and what we are as humans has always been a controversial question. People disagree not only about the *is* of humankind (what humans are and do), but also about the *ought* of a humane humanity (how to live as human beings). Often the two questions are mixed and then moral (ethical) or religious (theological) answers are given to scientific questions or scientific answers to moral or religious questions. But that is just as wrong as trying to reduce both to one question only. We all exist as humans, and what that means is debatable. But we can all live our humanity in a human or inhuman way, and we should strive for the one and avoid the other.

Therefore, we must distinguish between scientific and technological questions about human beings (concepts of humanity) on the one hand, and moral (or ethical) and religious (or theological) questions about the humanity of human life (ideals of humanity) on the other. The first question – *what* we are – can be answered relatively independently of culture, the second – *who* we want or ought to be – is answered differently in different cultures. Both are important when it

comes to the question of humanity, but neither can be adequately answered by looking only at what human beings can do, but by considering the challenges humans beings face today. Only if we address the challenges of the second question will we also have a future as human beings in the sense of the first question. We are beings who can live humanly or inhumanly – that is the fundamental existential decision for or against a humane mode of existence. We can and must decide how we want to live, and we cannot avoid taking responsibility for our lives. The question of what it means to exist as a human being is therefore not only about our humanity, but also about the humanness of our concrete life as a human being. It is not just about our humanity, but about our existence.

As will be shown in a third step, these questions can only be answered in relation to the communities in which people grow up, to which they belong, and in which they become, or fail to become, responsible persons. It is precisely here that the problem of identity comes to the fore in all its severity, because belonging to different groups does not always lead to a consistent and contradiction-free *we* without further ado. The existential challenge lies not in the intersectionality and pluri-determinacy of our concrete humanity, but in the fluidity, flexibility, and complexity of our *we* and the various groups to which we belong or can belong. We have kaleidoscopic possibilities that enable us to create or dissolve, destroy or build communities and commonalities with others and to say *we* in many different ways and registers. It is always *us*, but each time the *us* is a different one.

The study was started in the USA and completed in South Africa. Problems and situations can only be assessed to a limited extent without having experienced them oneself. Participant observation, direct interaction, and personal experience do not always contribute to the clarity of the analysis, but they contribute to a better understanding of the significance of the problems, beliefs, fears, and hopes of people and the emotional energy and political dynamics they generate in the respective private and public contexts. Not every problem occurs in every context, problems are not always seen where they are assumed to be in the Western world, and not everything that seems problematic to us is also considered a problem in other societies and cultures. Humanity and what we share is not understood in the same way everywhere. Identities are always concrete and so are identity conflicts. People are group beings, but group affiliations can be lived and valued in very different ways. Above all, however, human beings are never just members of groups, but also persons who bear responsibility for their own actions and way of life and the effects they have on the lives of others. They are not just all different cases of the same but have a right to be different, especially as members of groups to which they belong without having chosen this themselves. Only communities that allow the right to be different cultivate freedom, independent judgment, responsible decision-making, and voluntary commitment – the basic virtues of a democratic society.

What is criticized as Western universalism is often a rejection of the responsibilities associated with being a person and becoming a responsible self in this sense. However, where this link between personhood and personal responsibility

is broken, identity conflicts between groups increase because people are only seen as group members, but no longer as persons with their own responsibility. One then sees, as Hölderlin's Hyperion writes, "craftsmen, but no human beings, philosophers, but no human beings, priests, but no human beings, masters and menials, youths and elders, but no human beings." The human being disappears from view, and people allow themselves to be driven into the inhumanities, atrocities, and evils that characterize no other being as much as human beings.

The study was completed in November 2023 at STIAS in Stellenbosch under ideal conditions. I would like to thank all my colleagues who, with their very different views and contributions, have helped me to see the problems more clearly and not to rely on simple solutions in the controversial task of clarifying the foundations, forces, and counterforces of a humane humanity. The long struggle against prejudice and misconceptions is never over, and it is always a struggle with one's own preconceptions and prejudices. Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, has shown how difficult it is for reasonable people to see and say the obvious. It was shocking to see otherwise sensible colleagues cheering on a group of brutal killers who rape women, slaughter innocent people, take children hostage, and chop off babies' heads. Scientific rationality does not protect people from losing their moral compass when they confuse science and scholarship with political activism. We are all caught up in our prejudices and preconceptions and are easily blinded and misled by our feelings and convictions. But activism is no substitute for critical analysis. Those who shout the loudest are not always right. And those who rely on feelings and appearances underestimate how easily we can be deceived. We must force ourselves to be self-critical and not be too quick to trust what we take to be obvious. There is no other way out of the misery of prejudice and bias, historical ignorance, political naivety, and moral lukewarmness. If we do not make progress on this path, we will not get anywhere.

I would like to thank Mohr Siebeck and the editors of RPT for including this volume in their series and Dr. Hugh O. Less for his help with proofreading. The publication of this volume would not have been possible without the substantial printing costs subsidy from the Udo Keller Foundation Forum Humanum. I am grateful to Dr. Werntgen and the Udo Keller Foundation for their generous support of my work over many years. I dedicate this volume to my students in Claremont without whom it would not have been written.

Stellenbosch, November 2023

Ingolf U. Dalferth

## Table of Contents

Preface .....	VII
I The Phenomenology of <i>We</i> .....	1
1. <i>The Grammar of We</i> .....	1
2. <i>The Logic of We</i> .....	3
3. <i>The Rhetoric of We</i> .....	4
4. <i>The Ontology of We</i> .....	7
5. <i>Existence, Essence, and Mode</i> .....	10
6. <i>Nature, Culture, and Creation</i> .....	12
II Existence .....	15
1. <i>Individuals and Identity</i> .....	15
1.1 The unique, the singular, and the individual .....	15
1.2 Human singularity and divine uniqueness .....	17
1.3 Individuality, particularity, simplicity, concreteness, and actuality .....	19
1.4 The discourse dependence of our distinctions .....	20
1.5 Persons .....	21
1.6 From <i>we</i> to self .....	22
1.7 Individuals with identities .....	24
1.8 Body, mind, and soul .....	26
1.9 <i>Idem</i> -identities and <i>ipse</i> -identities .....	30
1.10 From self to true self .....	31
2. <i>Identities and Conflicts</i> .....	35
2.1 Cultural labels and stereotypes .....	35
2.2 Identity politics .....	39
2.3 Vulnerability .....	43
2.4 Language taboos .....	45
2.5 Title IX .....	48
2.6 Activism at universities .....	51
2.7 Naivety and terrorism .....	55

2.8 Left-wing and right-wing identity politics .....	60
3. <i>Existence and Indexicality</i> .....	62
3.1 Made to make ourselves .....	63
3.2 To be and to exist .....	65
3.3 <i>Da-sein</i> and indexicality .....	69
3.4 <i>Da-sein</i> , presence, and contingency .....	71
3.5 To exist and to exist <i>as</i> .....	73
3.6 To exist <i>as humans</i> .....	75
3.7 To exist <i>in a specific way</i> .....	77
3.8 To exist as humans in a specific way .....	79
3.9 To exist in a Christian way .....	81
III Humanity .....	85
1. <i>Humanity and Humaneness</i> .....	85
1.1 The ideal of humanity and the challenge of cultural diversity .....	85
1.2 Description and orientation .....	88
1.3 The significance of the mind .....	91
1.4 The Western tradition .....	94
1.5 Beyond eco-anthropology and transhumanism .....	99
1.6 Contemporary challenges .....	102
1.7 Key ideas .....	105
2. <i>The Fabric of Being Human</i> .....	109
2.1 Embeddedness .....	109
2.2 Ideas and ideals of humanity .....	113
(1) Concepts and ideas .....	113
(2) Ideals and values .....	114
(3) The complexity and historicity of ideas and ideals .....	116
(4) Experiences of inhumanity and the ideals of humanity .....	117
2.3 Human enhancement .....	118
(1) Technology is anthropologically indispensable .....	118
(2) Transgressing boundaries .....	119
(3) To human as a verb .....	120
(4) To make the world a better place? .....	122
2.4 Moral responsibility .....	123
(1) The meanings of 'responsibility' .....	123
(2) Full responsibility .....	123
(3) Responsibility and community .....	126
(4) Responsibility and guilt .....	131
(5) Limits of responsibility .....	135
(6) Responsibility and finitude .....	139
2.5 Finite freedom .....	141

(1) Varieties of freedom .....	141
(2) Actions and behaviors .....	142
(3) Freedom as autonomy .....	145
(4) Beyond free will .....	148
(5) Freedom as power .....	150
2.6 Equal dignity .....	152
(1) The challenge of racism .....	152
(2) The discovery of dignity .....	158
(3) The debate about dignity in Germany .....	162
(4) Human dignity and the dignity of human beings .....	166
(5) Dignity and values .....	170
(6) Dignity and personhood .....	174
(7) The failure of the 'Factor X' approach .....	178
(8) Description and orientation .....	182
(9) Dignity and human uniqueness .....	184
(10) Property essentialism and personalism .....	187
2.7 Human diversity .....	189
(1) Diversity and difference .....	189
(2) From individuals to groups .....	190
(3) From fact to value .....	191
(4) From moral value to platitude .....	194
(5) From identity to identities .....	196
2.8 The struggle for justice .....	198
(1) From justice to social justice .....	198
(2) Historical justice and intergenerational justice .....	201
(3) The duty to right the wrongs of the past .....	204
(4) The right to have rights .....	206
(5) Unforgivable and unpunishable .....	209
(6) Beyond victims and perpetrators .....	212
(7) The turn to injustice .....	218
(8) Colonialism and decolonization .....	219
(9) Asymmetrical power relations and the power of difference .....	222
(10) Radical reduction of complexity: The same problem everywhere? .....	228
(11) The dangers of individualism and group egoism .....	232
(12) Academic xenophobia and identity-based groupthink .....	236
(13) A possible way forward .....	237
2.9 A sense of finitude .....	239
(1) Finite and infinite .....	239
(2) <i>Dasein</i> , <i>Wassein</i> , <i>Sosein</i> , <i>Wahrsein</i> .....	241
2.10 The priority of passivity .....	243
(1) Creative passivity .....	243
(2) Contrastive and deep passivity .....	244

2.11 Common creaturehood .....	248
2.12 The kaleidoscopic <i>we</i> .....	249
 IV Communities .....	 253
1. <i>Groups, Communities, and Families</i> .....	253
1.1 Sets and groups .....	253
1.2 From duality to plurality .....	254
1.3 Real groups and abstract groupings .....	256
1.4 Groups and communities .....	259
(1) The principle of charity .....	259
(2) The principle of distrust .....	260
(3) The principle of trust .....	262
(4) Trust, dignity, and trustworthiness .....	264
1.5 Moral communities and organized distrust .....	265
1.6 Religious communities and trust in God .....	267
(1) Trust in God .....	267
(2) The actuality of the possible .....	268
(3) The middle term .....	269
(4) Existential interruption and ultimate presence .....	271
1.7 Natural and social groups: The family .....	272
1.8 Beyond all groups: The universal family .....	275
1.9 The Christian de-particularization of the family .....	281
 2. <i>Family Religions</i> .....	 287
2.1 The communal nature of religion .....	287
2.2 Ubuntu: The extended family .....	288
2.3 Judaism: The people of God .....	299
2.4 Christianity: The universal family .....	304
2.5 Islam: The Muslim family .....	309
2.6 The Latter-day Saints: The eternal family .....	316
2.7 The Unification Church: True parents .....	322
2.8 Religious uses of <i>we</i> .....	331
(1) Ubuntu .....	331
(2) Judaism .....	334
(3) Christianity .....	337
(4) Islam .....	338
(5) The Latter-day Saints .....	343
(6) The Unification Church .....	344
(7) The diversity of the religious use of <i>we</i> .....	344
2.9 Christianity and the right to be different .....	346
 3. <i>The Extended we</i> .....	 348
3.1 Body, mind, and spirit .....	348

3.2 Cosmic <i>ubuntu</i> .....	351
3.3 Legal persons .....	359
(1) Natural and juridical persons .....	359
(2) Rights of nature .....	361
(3) All their own rights .....	364
(4) Property rights .....	367
3.4 Mother Earth .....	372
(1) A spiritual vision .....	372
(2) International Mother Earth Day .....	374
(3) Pachamama spirituality .....	376
3.5 The parliament of things .....	380
3.6 Creation .....	387
 V Becoming Who We Are .....	 393
1. <i>Being Created</i> .....	393
2. <i>Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious Becoming</i> .....	395
3. <i>Christian Becoming</i> .....	396
4. <i>Becoming Truly Human</i> .....	397
 Bibliography .....	 399
<i>Internet Resources</i> .....	428
<i>Abbreviations</i> .....	429
 Name Index .....	 431
Subject Index .....	439





# I The Phenomenology of *We*

## 1. The Grammar of *We*

We use them all the time – the expressions *we*, *us*, and *our*.<sup>1</sup> But how do we use them when we speak or write? Grammar helps answer this question. In English, the expression *we* is used in two distinct ways, as a *personal pronoun* or as a *determiner*. Determiners are words that are used to determine a noun or noun phrase. They show what a noun or noun phrase refers to or how much of something or how many is being referred to. In English determiners include articles (*the*, *a*), demonstratives (*this*, *that*, *these*, *those*), quantifiers (*some*, *most*, *many*, *all*, *a few*, *each*), possessives (*my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our*, *their*) and numbers (*one*, *two*, *three*, etc.).<sup>2</sup> The plural possessive *our* is a form of the first-person plural pronoun *we*. First-person pronouns refer to the speaker or writer or to a group or collective that includes the speaker or writer.<sup>3</sup> In contemporary English they include the words *I*, *we*, *me*, *us*, *mine*, *ours*, *myself*, *ourselves*. They cannot be used without referring to those who use them.

Pronouns are more than just placeholders for nouns. They are part of a system of social orientation for structuring a communication situation. In English this system includes the singular pronouns *I*, *you*, *he/she/it*, and the plural pronouns *we*, *you*, and *they*. These pronouns are used not only in the nominative case as the subject of a sentence, but also in the possessive case (*my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *their*), and in the objective case (*me*, *him*, *her*, *him*, *us*, *them*). In all these uses, however, they function as indexicals that anchor what we say in real life (or in what is reported as real life). To understand them, one must pay attention not only to their relations to other linguistic units, but to the concrete situation in which they are used.

The first-person plural pronoun *we* is used in two different ways in English. Speakers or writers use it to refer to themselves and at least one other person, or to themselves alone. The latter is sometimes called the ‘majestic plural’ or ‘royal we’ (*pluralis maiestatis*) because kings and queens use or used it in their official

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<sup>1</sup> I use italics (*we*) or single quotes (‘we’) for words and double quotation marks for citations (“We, the people”). All entries from internet sources were checked in February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. CAMBRIDGE DICTIONARY, “Determiners” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/grammatik/britisch-grammatik/determiners-the-my-some-this>).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. THOUGHTCO., “First-Person Pronouns” (<https://www.thoughtco.com/first-person-pronouns-1690795>).

pronouncements. Originally its use indicated that the monarch and God speak and act in one voice and as one authority. “Richard I often used the *royal* ‘we’ to assert his rule by divine right, which is the belief that the king answered to no one but God.”<sup>4</sup> Politicians and other officials also often speak in this way when they express themselves not as individuals but as public officials, that is, not as a *persona privata* but a *persona publica*.

In democratic contexts, the other usage prevails. When we say *we*, we want to express agreement with our audience, i.e., say something that they also (should) agree with. This may be a norm, a rule, or a convention that applies to them and the speaker, or a truth that applies to all alike. “We don’t throw stones at cats” is an example of the first, “We are all born equal” is an example of the second. The quantifier ‘all’ can refer to all members of a group or to all who can be members of groups. In the first sense, *we* marks a difference from others; in the second sense, it refers to a commonality shared by all. In both cases, the use of *we* aims to blur the author-addressee divide and evoke a sense of togetherness between speakers or writers and their audience or readership.<sup>5</sup> When speakers succeed in conveying this sense, they express solidarity with the audience – not by what they say, but by how they say it.

Determiners are descriptive words or phrases that modify a noun. They function like qualifiers in sentences like “Some did not arrive on time,” where ‘some’ refers to the passengers who didn’t make it onto the plane. Similarly, “We are British citizens” informs the reader or listener that the speaker or writer distinguishes between people with and without British passports and counts herself, or herself and the addressees, among the first group. When used as a determiner, *we* (or *our*) can include those who are addressed or can mark them off from the group that includes the speaker or writer. It can refer to some people (“Our degrees are from Harvard”, “We have degrees from Harvard, not from Yale”) or to all (“We, the people of the United States”). And it can represent a collective point of view (“We are responsible for what happened”) or express what we think or do in contrast to others (“We never give up”).

<sup>4</sup> GRAMMARIST, “Royal ‘we’” (<https://grammarist.com/usage/royal-we/>).

<sup>5</sup> As PETER MÜHLHÄUSLER/ROM HARRÉ, *Pronouns and People. The Linguistic Construction of Social and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 175 point out, the rhetorical use of ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ also diminishes the responsibilities of the speaker, since he or she is portrayed as collaborating with the hearer. Cf. KJERSTI FLØTTUM/TRINE DAHL/TORODD KINN, *Academic Voices: Across Languages and Disciplines* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006), 100. On the other hand, there is also the authorial ‘we’ that emphasizes the difference between author and audience (cf. KATIE WALES, *Personal Pronouns in Present-Day English* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 65), even though it often functions more like the inclusive ‘we’ of instructional language in lectures or workshops. KJERSTI FLØTTUM et al., *Academic Voices*, 108.

## 2. The Logic of We

What grammar implies here is fully expressed by the logic of *we*. The expression can be used as a personal pronoun or determiner in *inclusive* (we and you), *contrastive* (we rather than you or any other), or *exclusive* (we and not they) ways. Each of them includes the speaker or writer (*I* as one of a *we*), but while the inclusive *we* includes the addressee, the contrastive *we* defines the group to which the speaker belongs in contrast to other groups, and the exclusive *we* explicitly excludes the addressee or anyone else who does not belong to the same group as the speaker. In the first sense whoever says *we* means “me and you (and possibly others),” in the second sense “me and us in contrast to you (and possibly others),” in the third sense “me and everybody who belongs to my group, but not you.”<sup>6</sup>

In an ideal world a language would clearly distinguish these three cases by different pronouns.<sup>7</sup> However, this is rarely the case in the family of languages to which English belongs. Therefore, one must pay attention to the concrete usage. There are languages that distinguish between first-person plural pronouns that include the listener or that exclude the listener. Indeed, one can distinguish groups or families of languages based on this difference. Thus, from “Austronesia to the Andes, many of the languages of the greater Pacific rim take care to distinguish the inclusive from the exclusive use of the first person plural. By contrast, nearly the entire Indo-European family ... pays no heed and adopts undifferentiated first person plural pronouns.”<sup>8</sup> Using the same pronoun to cover both inclusive and exclusive uses of *we* creates a hermeneutical ambiguity because one must decide in each case how the speaker or writer meant it. “When the Declaration of Independence ‘hold[s] these truths to be self-evident,’ it is amply clear that the *we* of the Declaration’s second sentence excludes the intended audience – the great European powers that might otherwise have intervened on behalf of the British crown’s effort to retain its colonies in North America.” On the other hand, it is meant to be inclusive, at least with respect to all (North) Americans, and it is an open question who was and is counted as such then and today (people of European descent, African descent, Asian descent, indigenous

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<sup>6</sup> See ELENA FILIMONOVA (ed.), *Clusivity: Typology and Case Studies of the Inclusive-Exclusive Distinction* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2005). I distinguish between contrastive and exclusive uses of ‘we’ for logical reasons. The contrastive ‘we’ defines the group to which the ‘we’ refers as opposed to other groups; the exclusive ‘we’ excludes other people as not belonging to the group to which the ‘we’ refers.

<sup>7</sup> In many languages this is indeed the case. For example, in the “complex Cherokee pronoun system” there are, according to STEVEN PINKER, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1994), 24, distinct forms for “‘you and I,’ ‘another person and I,’ ‘several other people and I,’ and ‘you, one or more other persons and I,’ which English crudely collapses into the all-purpose pronoun *we*.” In other North American languages it is similar.

<sup>8</sup> JAMES MING CHEN, “First Person Plural,” *Minnesota Legal Studies Research Paper* No. 06–30 (July 9, 2006): 5.

people). As Justice Thurgood Marshall suggested: “In their declaration of the principles that were to provide the cornerstone of the new Nation, therefore, the Framers made it plain that ‘we the people,’ for whose protection the Constitution was designed, did not include those whose skins were the wrong color.”<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Rhetoric of *We*

As mentioned already, the use of *we* has several rhetorical functions that distinguish it from the use of the corresponding names or nouns. “I am here” is different from “Dalferth is here” because the first statement can only be true if the second is true, but the first cannot be replaced by the second because of the special localizing or anchoring function of ‘I’ in the first statement. While the rhetorical change from first- to third-person language does not affect the truth value of a statement (“I am here,” when used by me, can be replaced *salva veritate* by “Dalferth is here”), it obscures an important difference between using names and indexicals. The use of indexicals anchors statements in concrete situations, the use of names frees statements from being tied to particular situations. And as with statements, so with questions. I can answer the question whether the sun shines only if I relate it to a particular place and time, that is, understand it to mean ‘Is the sun shining *here and now*?’ If I ignore this, I can still understand and discuss the meaning of the question, but I cannot answer it. The use of the indexicals anchors what is said in real life.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> U.S. SUPREME COURT, “Regents of the Univ. of California v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265, 389 (1978)” (<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/438/265/>).

<sup>10</sup> For this reason, indexicals or index terms like ‘I’ do not function like concepts or names. Names (like ‘Dalferth’) denote, terms (like ‘– thinks’) describe, index terms (like ‘I’) anchor or localize. Unlike BÉATRICE LONGUENESS, *I, Me, Mine. Back to Kant, and Back Again* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) argues, Kant does *not* use ‘I’ as a concept. It is true that Kant understands “‘I’ as used in ‘I think’ as a designation for an entity” (ibid., 25). But he does not use ‘I’ as a concept from whose semantic content anything true or false could be deduced about the subject to which the statement refers, but exclusively as a means of concretely locating or anchoring what is said (“x thinks”) by attributing it to a real entity here and now. As Kant makes clear at the beginning of § 16 in the Transcendental Deduction – “It must be possible for the ‘I think’ to accompany all my representations” (*KrV* B 131; *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith [New York: Blunt Press, 2003], 152) –, ‘I think’ is a localizing operator that turns a proposition that *can* be true or false (“Dalferth thinks”) not only in a statement that *is* true or false but into *my* assertion (“I am Dalferth and I think here and now”). This is what Kant means when he says: “Through this I or he or it (the thing) which thinks, nothing further is represented than a transcendental subject of the thoughts = X” (A346/B404). All that is said here is that the proposition in question is not merely a proposition (which can be true or false), but a concrete assertion of a real referent (which is true or false). Kant is not concerned, as Longueness suggests, that “*from the mere concept ‘I,’ and a fortiori from the concept ‘I’ as used in ‘I think,’ one cannot derive any property of the entity ‘I’ refers to*” (LONGUENESS, *I, Me, Mine*, 25–26). The reason that nothing at all can

This applies to all utterances of the form “I  $\phi$ ” or “We  $\phi$ .” Grammatically,  $\phi$  stands for a verb denoting an activity, for example, “I eat” or “We run.” But “I sleep” is hardly to be understood in this way, nor is “I dream” or “I think.” It is not a matter of attributing to me a particular activity that is different from other activities. Rather, the point is that ‘I’ or ‘we’ mark the place where something specific – sleeping, dreaming, thinking, etc. – happens or takes place, regardless of whether they are activities or not. Not “I think” but “I am the place where thinking takes place” is the meaning of such utterances. Their point is pragmatic, not descriptive. They do not describe, they localize.

To do this, indexicals must perform at least two tasks. They must provide a system of distinctions that helps us to structure a situation, i.e., to order it in a certain way for ourselves and others, and they must enable us to locate ourselves in this ordered situation, that is, to determine our position in relation to others and thus to anchor ourselves in the concrete situation. The personal pronouns are a good example of this. No one can speak or act without existing, and no one can say ‘I’ without bringing into play the whole system of personal pronouns *I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they*. Whoever says ‘I’ can also say ‘you,’ ‘he,’ and ‘we,’ and if he can’t do that, he can’t say ‘I.’ But whoever says ‘I’ not only brings this system of communicative orientation into play, but also concretely locates himself and others in the situation in which he uses it. The ordering or structuring of a communication situation thus occurs through a system of distinctions that we have all imbibed with our mother’s milk, even if they differ in different languages and cultures. Localization or anchoring, on the other hand, happens through the concrete application of this system, that is, by applying it to ourselves and to others. In this way, we signal to others how we locate ourselves and them in this situation. Thus, we use systems of spatial-temporal orientation (*here/there, front/back, now/then, yesterday/today/tomorrow*, etc.), systems of communicative orientation (personal pronouns), and a variety of systems of social and cultural orientation, which are regulated with varying degrees of rigidity, e.g. systems of social hierarchy and personal closeness or distance, as evidenced by the use of personal or more formal second-person personal pronouns in German (*Du* or

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be derived from it is because it is not a concept that says anything at all, but an index term that locates what is said in the speaker’s, i.e., *my* situation by ascribing it *to me*. Kant’s use of ‘transcendental’ in the phrase “a transcendental subject of the thoughts = *X*” is very close to the classical distinction between *transcendental* and *categorical* terms: Whereas ‘transcendental’ is used to refer to the different aspects of whatever is real (being), ‘categorical’ is used to indicate the various ways in which we can make true statements about what is real. Categories such as substance, quantity, quality, relation etc. are conceptual or semantic structures that allow us to describe and determine an entity in a certain respect, transcendentals such as being, being one, being good, being beautiful, etc. are pragmatic or existential properties of everything real about which we can make true categorical statements. In this sense, “a transcendental subject of thoughts” is not just something that could possibly be, but something that is real and exists – because only someone who exists can assert “I think,” and only I can assert “I think” without the possibility of being mistaken.

*Sie*) or in French (*tu* or *vous*); familial systems (*father, mother, grandmother, uncle, aunt, paternal aunt, maternal uncle ...*); professional systems (*professor, student, secretary ...*), ecclesiastical systems (*priest, parish council member, parishioner ...*), political systems (*left, right, progressive, conservative, citizen, member of parliament, deputy, secretary of state ...*). etc. In every society or culture there are such systems of distinction. One must know them to be able to communicate efficiently and behave correctly in the relevant social situations.

These systems of distinction do not last forever, even if they are used for generations. In dynamic societies like ours they change very quickly, especially in the social sphere, so that one can no longer easily orient oneself in the way one has acquired in one's life so far. Younger people use different social distinctions, and that repeatedly leads to misunderstandings and tensions between the generations. But the need to identify someone as the same always arises, and one must orient oneself socially, even if this is no longer easily accomplished.

All this is also true of the use of *we*. Pronouns are neither nouns nor verbs but orienting devices which we use in anaphoric or cataphoric ways to relate to antecedent and later expressions: "When he arrived at school, John fell asleep;" "This is what I believe: that all men were created equal." However, the point of this use of pronouns is not merely to establish a relation of sameness at the semantic level of a proposition (e.g., 'he' and 'John'; 'this' and "all men were created equal"), but to make the pragmatic point of indicating the position of the speaker or agent in question with respect to what is said or articulated. Pronouns, in particular personal pronouns, are used to structure a communicative situation in such a way that certain relationships in this situation become obvious to all participants. Therefore, pronouns have been called "words with changeable signification" (Adolf Noreen), "moveable identifiers" (Roman Jakobson), or "indexes" or "indicators" (Peirce). And this is why one cannot use a personal pronoun like 'I' or 'we' without in fact bringing the whole scheme of personal pronouns into play (*I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they*).

Personal pronouns cannot be defined semantically (by specifying a context-independent meaning), but their meaning coincides with their pragmatic or situational function. They are used to locate human beings in situations of communication and indicate how they relate to each other in social and communicative interactions. We become a *you* by responding to an address; an *I* by addressing others; a *he* or *she* by being referred to by those who communicate about us; a *we* by addressing our shared communality or by marking us off from others who don't share it; a (plural) *you* by addressing a group of those who share our situations; and a *they* by referring to those who are not active participants in the actual web of interlocution at the moment. In so far as we can be located at any of these communicative points of reference, we can in principle be located at any of the others as well. For if one can use a scheme of orientation at all, then to use it in one respect necessarily brings the other respects into play as well. They are ways of structuring a situation and using the scheme of personal pronouns is a way of structuring communicative situations shared with others. To be able to do this

shows you to be a potential self;<sup>11</sup> and humans become selves who are able to do this by being actively and passively involved in communicative processes.

In the case of *we*, this is in most cases a reference to belonging or not belonging to a group or collective. We use it to express our belonging with (some) others (inclusive use) or our otherness from (some) others (contrastive or exclusive use). In using *we*, we anchor ourselves in a particular social group or collective that is distinguished from others by a set of characteristics that we also exhibit, at least to a relevant degree, ourselves. And we suggest that others are also part of this group – either those we are addressing, or those who, like us, are different from those we are addressing.

When we say *we* to distinguish ourselves from others, we can do so in different ways. We can do this in a polemical way to distance ourselves from others and draw a dividing line between us and them. Whatever they may think, they do not belong to us. But we can also say *we* to indicate that we do not want to maintain the differences between ourselves and others, but to emphasize the similarities. This relaxing use of *we* can take two different forms. It may be aimed at identifying the commonalities or the common ground between us and others. Or it may aim at highlighting the differences between us in such a way that it becomes clear why we cannot ignore them. In the second case, it is not a matter of finding out what we have in common, but of identifying the reasons that make it impossible for us to ignore our differences. While the search for commonalities leads to a common *we*, the search for defensible differences aims at a mutual recognition of the reasons that allow us to agree to differ. The *common ground we* and the *defensible differences we* work in opposite directions. The first is a rhetorical strategy to reduce differences, while the second is to show why reduction is not possible. Both must be kept in mind when clarifying the pragmatic role of the rhetorical *we*.

#### 4. The Ontology of *We*

It has long been discussed whether humans are to be understood first as individuals and then as members of a group or vice versa, or whether both are equally original, because the human being as *zoon logon echon* (ζῷον λόγον ἔχον) is always also a *zoon politikon* (ζῷον πολιτικόν) and vice versa. The system of personal pronouns in English conventionally names first the singular (*I, you, helshelit*) and then the plural pronouns (*we, you, they*). This suggests an order that

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<sup>11</sup> Those who can use the scheme of personal pronouns are potential selves or individuals, and those who use it to become responsible individuals become actual selves. That is, and this is how I am using the terms: *Humans* are beings with a certain character that distinguishes them from other non-human beings and entities; insofar as they exist, they are *persons* (otherwise only potential persons); insofar as they become responsible individuals in the course of their lives, they are *selves* or *subjects* or *responsible persons*.



begins with the individual and progresses to the many. But this is wrong, and the grammatical convention creates an ontological illusion. It is wrong because one cannot use a single pronoun without bringing the whole system into play, so one could never have only singular or only plural pronouns. Each member of the list is what it is only by its differences from all the others. The illusion of an ontological order seems to be due to the fact that it is always individuals who speak and use the system of personal pronouns, even if it is a polyphonic conversation in which many are involved. However, this does not allow any ontological conclusions. Ontologically, it rather seems to be the other way around: All people begin life as members of a group, and they must always first become an individual. We are born into a family and must always first become a self.

This raises several questions. Are only individuals the basic elements of social reality or must groups or collectives also be taken as realities in their own right? What types of groups are there, and should they all be understood and treated the same? And how do individual entities differ from subjects or selves? The first question is ontological. It is about the difference between individuals and groups (singularity vs. plurality)<sup>12</sup> and raises the question of ontological individualism. The second question is conceptual and raises the question of a metaphysics of groups (real groups vs. virtual collections).<sup>13</sup> The third question distinguishes different types of individuals. It is not only about the difference between concrete and abstract individuals (things vs. numbers), but about the difference between concrete individuals and selves (things vs. selves) and raises the issue of subjectivity.

Groups are collections of people, things or abstract entities that are considered as a unit because they share the same identity. They include human beings (persons), concrete objects (things) or abstract objects (numbers, concepts, ideas). Groups of persons are either real (actual social agents) or virtual (formal collections based on common characteristics), they can be closely linked and well connected, or aggregates of individuals loosely associated with one another. Real groups that are more than just aggregates of people have or can develop a collective agency and mind of their own.<sup>14</sup> Virtual groups, on the other hand, result from purely abstract grouping. They can also have no members if they are defined in such a way that, although it is not impossible to belong to them, it is not in fact the case because no one meets the conditions set for them.

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<sup>12</sup> BRIAN EPSTEIN, "Ontological Individualism Reconsidered," *Synthese* 166 (2009): 187–213.

<sup>13</sup> NIKK EFFINGHAM, "The Metaphysics of Groups," *Philosophical Studies* 149 (2010): 21–67; AMIE L. THOMASSON, "The Ontology of Social Groups," *Synthese* 196 (2019): 4829–4845.

<sup>14</sup> PHILIPP PETTIT, "Groups with Minds of Their Own," in *Socializing Metaphysics. The Nature of Social Reality*, ed. by Frederick F. Schmitt (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 167–193; CHRISTIAN LIST/PHILIPP PETTIT, *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design and Status of Corporate Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Non-virtual groups include at least two members (minimal group), many members (finite group), or an infinite number of members (infinite group). In the first case their logical structure is a duality<sup>15</sup>, in the second case a plurality, in the third case an infinite plurality. Infinite groups cannot result from grouping together an infinite number of finite entities because no totality of finite entities results in an infinity (against actual infinity). Rather, they are abstract objects that are defined by a finite set of characteristics which each of their members must possess, and there may be an infinite number of such members. We thus have to distinguish between groups of abstract objects (abstract groups), collections construed in terms of a set of characteristics that define their identity and are shared by all members of that group (virtual groups), concrete groups that are actual social units in a society, have a collective agency, and whose members may share a number of different overlapping identities over and beyond the identity they share as members of that group (social groups) and within social groups between those we can join or leave voluntarily (elective social groups such as choirs, soccer clubs, or churches) and those we cannot join or leave because we are born into them and cannot be who we are without belonging to them (non-elective social groups such as families, brothers and sisters, or age groups such as the old or the young).

These conceptual considerations have ontological consequences. Not only do we have to distinguish between abstract and concrete groups, but the ontological question regarding concrete groups can be understood in two different ways. It can be a question about which categories do we need to explain social facts.<sup>16</sup> Or it can be a question about which entities make up the social world. The first asks about conceptual primitives that we need to make our theories work: Can we do only with individuals, or do we also need groups? The second is about the structure of the world itself: Does it include groups or only individuals as real entities that make up the social world? Explanatory individualism claims that all social facts can be explained in terms of conceptual primitives that do not comprise groups. This is a thesis about the working of theories: We don't need groups as conceptual entities to explain social realities, but only individuals and their activities. Ontological individualism, on the other hand, claims that facts about individuals exhaustively determine social facts, so we don't need groups as independent ontological categories. This is a thesis about the structure of the social world: There are no activities of groups in the world that go beyond the activities

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. ANDREANA DRENCEVA/WEE CHAN AU, "Bringing the Family Logic in: From Duality to Plurality in Social Enterprises," *J Bus Ethics* 182 (2023): 77–93. In logical terms, a duality is different from a dichotomy. Dichotomy has been defined as "a set of two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive alternatives," whereas a duality is a pairing of at least two distinct aspects within a shared identity. An example of the first would be 'day and night' (temporal totality), an example of the second 'mother and father' (family).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. LARS UDEHN, *Methodological Individualism: Background, History, and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 2014).

of the individuals they comprise. Explanatory individualism is controversial, to say the least, whereas ontological individualism is wrong.<sup>17</sup> The workings of society cannot be understood without reference to collective structures such as groups, corporations, institutions, or systems that cannot be reduced to individual activities or the activities of individuals but have a collective agency of their own.<sup>18</sup> Corporative agency is more than the sum of the individual agencies in a corporation. And this is also true of families, soccer clubs, and churches.

## 5. Existence, Essence, and Mode

All who say *we*, exist (it is true that they are), they exist *as something* (it is true that they are something), and they exist what they are *in a certain way* (it is true that they exist whatever they are in a certain mode). The first marks their *Dasein* (existence), the second their *Wassein* (nature or essence),<sup>19</sup> the third their *Sosein* (mode).

Existence is the correlate to the localizing function of *we*. Those who say *we* localize themselves here and now in the reality in which they live together with others. In doing so, they engage three fundamental distinctions that build on each other: they distinguish the place where they speak or think or act ontologically as a place in being from non-being (*being/non-being*). They distinguish being modally as reality from possibility (*actual/possible*), thus determining being as real or actual being and not merely as possible being. And they distinguish between the possible and the impossible (*possible/impossible*), because only what is possible can become reality, but not the impossible. The train of thought thus leads from existence here and now, via the real (the possible that has become actual) to the possible. The localizing function of the use of *we* thus anchors the speakers in a reality that could not be actual if it were not possible, and not possible if it were impossible. Therefore, it can only be adequately understood within the framework of an ontology of possibility.

Essence is the correlate to the determining function of *we*. It is not something that is necessarily the case, but something contingent that could also not be, or that could also be something else, or in whose place something else could be. Essence here means the contingent nature of a contingent being – that which something can be because it is that, although it could also be something else or not be at all. Those who say *we* in a way that others can understand are *human* beings. Their contingent essence is their humanity. They may understand their humanity in different ways. But only when they understand themselves as people

<sup>17</sup> EPSTEIN, "Ontological Individualism," 187–213.

<sup>18</sup> See LIST/PETTIT, *Group Agency*.

<sup>19</sup> *Nature* or *essence* is used here in a very open sense. It means everything that can be answered correctly to the question "What is it?", and that is usually the particular case of a general term – a flower, a woman, a mountain, a citizen, a student.

## Name Index

- Abbas, Amanat 310  
Abbot, Dorian 53  
Acevedo, David 53  
Acosta, Alberto 364  
Adloff, Frank 361, 364  
Adriano, Elvia Arcelia Quintana 360  
Aeschylus 230  
Agada, Ada 221  
Ahmad, Khurshid 57, 342  
Ahmed, Sara 156  
Akhtar, Aayad 48  
Albertz, Rainer 302  
Alcoff, Linda 156  
Alkier, Stefan 301  
Altmannshofer, Johanna 369, 370  
Amundsen, Inge 216  
Anderson, Kevin B. 200  
Andorno, Roberto 160  
Appadurai, Arjun 381  
Appiah, Kwame Anthony 35, 37, 38, 40, 41, 157  
Arendt, Hannah 133, 134, 137, 138  
Attoe, Aribiah David 221, 318  
Au, Wee Chan 9  
Augustus 277, 281  
  
Babbitt, Susan E. 157  
Badinter, Élisabeth 231  
Badura, Peter 163  
Bahler, Brock 258  
Bahn, Theresa 370, 371  
Bailey, J. Michael 54  
Bailey, Tom 266  
Baker, Eileen 322–324  
Baker, Lynne Rudder 21, 22, 27, 65, 110  
Barad, Karen 388  
Bard, Mitchell 57  
Barlow, Philip L. 318, 319  
Barney, Nick 194  
  
Barvinok, Alexander 192  
Basad, Judith Sevinç 53  
Battle, Michael 23  
Bauerlein, Mark 192, 194  
Bauer-Wolf, Jeremy 50  
Bayertz, Kurt 96  
Beal, James 54  
Beauvoir, Simone de 231  
Beck, Lewis White 125  
Beckerman, Wilfred 211  
Bedau, Hugo Adam 161  
Bell, Mike 366  
Ben-Porath, Sigal 233  
Bensoussan, Georges 57  
Bentham, Jeremy 161  
Bernauer, James W. 133  
Berry, Thomas 366, 379  
Bertel, Maria 362  
Beyers, Jaco 41  
Bhengu, Mfuniselwa John 357  
Biggar, Nigel 219  
Blage, Judith 60  
Blaxland, Beth 106  
Bloch, Ernst 241  
Block, Marlene 51, 189  
Blumenfeld, Jacob 368  
Böckenförde, Ernst-Wolfgang 163  
Boehm, Omri 205  
Braslavsky, Paula-Irene Villa 238  
Brecher, Bob 203, 210  
Brennan, Eileen 208  
Broodryk, Johann 353  
Brown, James H. 53  
Brown, Michael 210  
Brown, Samuel Morris 319  
Brumm, Henrik 74  
Buchenau, Artur 144  
Burke, Edmund 161  
Burri, Erika 221

- Buruma, Ian 327  
 Busche, Hubertus 75  
 Buser, Andreas 364  
 Busse, Tanja 364  
 Butler, Judith 59  
  
 Cahill, Kevin M. 121  
 Campbell, Sue 157  
 Carter, Quamina 235  
 Caruso, Gregg D. 123, 124  
 Césaire, Aimé 157  
 Chasi, Colin 296  
 Chebel, Malek 310  
 Chen, James Ming 2  
 Chereni, Admire 289, 290  
 Chimakonam, Jonathan O. 221  
 Chua, Amy 60  
 Claassen, Kristy 355  
 Cobuild, Collins 300  
 Cohen, Henry 360  
 Cohen, Shayej D. 299, 300, 302  
 Coontz, Stephanie 277  
 Cordeiro-Rodrigues, Luis 352  
 Correm, Tal 134  
 Cossa, José 357  
 Coulmas, Florian 233  
 Cramme, Olaf 199  
 Crane, Tim 66  
 Crepaz, Markus M. L. 196  
 Criss, Doug 316  
 Crombie, Ian M. 86  
  
 Dahl, Trine 2  
 Dalferth, Ingolf U. 4, 15, 17, 23, 33, 47,  
     51, 65, 66, 67, 68, 71, 79, 93, 95, 102,  
     109, 113, 174, 182, 184, 189, 190,  
     233, 243, 248, 259, 265, 267, 281  
 Davie, Michael 293  
 Daynes, Kathryn M. 319  
 Degen, Johanna L. 195  
 Degens, Philipp 364  
 DeLong-Bas, Natana J. 310  
 Denemark, Robert A. 196  
 Descartes, René 230  
 Desmond, Hugh 119, 289  
 Devitt, Michael 165  
 DiAngelo, Robin 234  
 Diaz, Suzanna 54  
  
 Dicke, Klaus 160  
 Dietrich, Walter 300  
 Dimond, Patrick 199  
 Diogenes Laërtius 94  
 Dollahite, David Curtis 317  
 Dreier, Horst 163  
 Drencheva, Andreana 9  
 Drescher, Seymour 209  
 Drozdowski, Mark J. 50  
 Duckworth, Craig 211  
 Dübgen, Franziska 221  
 Dürig, Günter 162, 163  
 Duncan, George Martin 75  
 Durante, Daniel 66  
 Durkheim, Émile 274, 275, 277  
 Dussel, Enrique 230  
 Dyer, Richard 156  
 Dyzenhaus, David 158  
  
 Effingham, Nikk 8  
 Enders, Christoph 159  
 Engels, Friedrich 281  
 Epstein, Brian 8  
 Eriksen, Thomas H. 157  
 Esack, Farid 81  
 Esposito, John L. 310  
 Esposito, Roberto 11  
 Etieyibo, Edwin E. 221, 352  
 Eze, Michael Onyebuchi 292, 298  
  
 Fanon, Frantz 41, 157, 222, 223  
 Farnet-Betancourt, Raúl 230  
 Farris, Sara R. 231  
 Fenton, Steve 157  
 Ferreira da Silva, Denise 157  
 Finley, Moses I. 276  
 Filimonova, Elena 3  
 Fiorella, Battaglia 87, 96  
 Fisch, Max H. 287  
 Fischer, Johannes 39, 61, 284  
 Fitsch, Hannah 388  
 Flaig, Egon 204, 209–211, 217  
 Flaubert, Gustave 230  
 Fløttum, Kjersti 2  
 Flügge, Thomas 109  
 Forbes, Scott 281  
 Fortes, Meyer 256  
 Forster, Dion A. 200, 209, 214

- Frankenberg, Ruth 156  
 Frederick, James L. 8  
 Frey, Tom David 58, 60  
 Fukuyama, Francis 39, 60, 178, 233  
 Fuller, Michael 104  
 Furner, James 200  
 Fustel de Coulanges, Numa Denis 273–  
     277, 279  
  
 Gabriel, Gottfried 66  
 Gabriel, Markus 65, 66  
 Gade, Christian B. N. 201, 288, 290  
 Gaines, Jeremy 277  
 Ganten, Detlev 96  
 Gaskill, Howard 112  
 Geddert-Steinacher, Tatjana 163  
 Gehlen, Arnold 120  
 Gerhardt, Volker 96  
 Gesang, Bernward 163  
 Gestrich, Andreas 281, 283  
 Giese, Bernhard 162  
 Gilfillan, Gregor D. 74  
 Giovanni, George di 87, 174  
 Givens, Terry L. 318, 319  
 Glass, Chris 255  
 Gobodo-Madikizela, Pumla 214, 215,  
     226  
 Goldblatt, Mark 55  
 Goodman, Amy 59  
 Goody, Jack 281  
 Goos, Christoph 162  
 Goppel, Anna 201  
 Gordon, Lewis R. 157  
 Goymann, Wolfgang 74  
 Graness, Anke 262  
 Gregor, Mary J. 91, 124  
 Griffel, Frank 310  
 Grigat, Stephan 57, 136  
 Grimm, Dieter 177, 178  
 Grøn, Arne 184  
 Grosfoguel, Ramón 230  
 Grosshans, Hans-Peter 148  
 Grossberg, Lawrence 381  
 Gudynas, Eduardo 362  
 Gumpłowicz, Ludwig 46  
 Gunn, Giles 81  
 Gustafsson, Martin 121  
 Gutmann, Amy 35  
 Gutmann, Andreas 364  
 Gyekye, Kwame 128  
  
 Haarmann, Anke 96  
 Habeck, Robert 285  
 Häberle, Peter 163  
 Hage, Ghassan 157  
 Haidt, Jonathan 45, 46  
 Hallaq, Wael B. 310  
 Hansen, Hendrik 60  
 Hannon, Elizabeth 97  
 Hanson, Robin 16  
 Hanson, Scott Alen 197  
 Haratsch, Andreas 158  
 Haraway, Donna J. 354, 387  
 Harré, Rom 2  
 Hartmann, Nikolas 48  
 Hartshorne, Charles 17, 19  
 Harvey, Clarence L. 357  
 Hauswald, Rico 75  
 Hayek, Friedrich A. 199  
 Hegel, Georg Friedrich Wilhelm 93  
 Hendry, Lisa 153  
 Hengel, Martin 299  
 Hennette-Vauchez, Stéphanie 159  
 Heschel, Susannah 177, 178  
 Heuss, Theodor 162  
 Hicks, Robert Drew 94  
 Hinckley, Gordon B. 316, 317, 320  
 Hirsch-Luipold, Rainer 283  
 Hobbes, Thomas 197, 261  
 Hobsbawm, Eric J. 157  
 Höfling, Wolfram 170  
 Hölderlin, Friedrich 112  
 Hoerster, Norbert 163  
 Hofmann, Hasso 163  
 Holbrook, Kate 319  
 Holzhüter, Werner 163  
 Homer 230  
 Homolka, Walter 304  
 Hong, Edna H. 243, 247  
 Hong, Howard V. 243, 247  
 Hookway, Christopher 87  
 Horsthemke, Kai 352  
 Hountondji, Paulin J. 221, 230  
 Hudson, Valerie M. 318  
 Huggard, E. M. 144  
 Hull, David 87, 97

- Humphreys, Sarah C. 276  
 Hurston, Zora Neale 353  
  
 Idowu, Samuel O. 211  
 Ienca, Marcello 362  
 Ilo, Stan Chu 357  
 Ingold, Tim 121  
 Introvigne, Massimo 328  
 Ireland, Patrick R. 196  
 Isensee, Josef 163  
  
 Jaber, Dunja 163  
 Jäckle, Sebastian 45  
 Jahn, Jahnheinz 226  
 Janowski, Bernd 280, 300, 301  
 Jansen, Jonathan D. 237, 333  
 Jemie, Chinweizu Onwuchekwa 226  
 Jewsiewicki, Bogumil 226  
 Joas, Hans 273, 275–277, 280, 287  
 John Paul II 377  
 Jones, Doris L. 277  
 Jones, Steve 42  
  
 Kant, Immanuel 4, 41, 63, 67, 69, 72, 91,  
     93, 95, 124–130, 142, 145, 146, 147,  
     151, 152, 160, 164, 170–176, 182,  
     199, 217, 238, 261, 298, 362  
 Kappeler, Peter M. 74  
 Kateb, George 158  
 Kates, Isabella Colalillo 357  
 Kauffman, Craig M. 361, 362  
 Kaufmann, Walter 177  
 Keevy, Itze 358  
 Kelsen, Hans 360  
 Kemmerer, Alexandra 177, 178  
 Kendi, Ibram X. 234  
 Kershner, Stephan 203, 210  
 Kessler, Rainer 300  
 Keulemans, Chris 348  
 Kierkegaard, Søren 17, 18, 23, 32–34,  
     72, 79, 190, 216, 241–243, 247, 268–  
     270, 395, 396  
 Kim, Hyeongjoo 362  
 Kinn, Torodd 2  
 Kirchhoff, Paul 163  
 Kissinger, Henry 230  
 Kittrell, Corey V. 35  
 Kizilhan, Jan Ilhan 60  
  
 Klaue, Magnus 59  
 Klein, Eckart 161  
 Klein, Stephanie 281  
 Kleinschmidt, Sebastian 209  
 Kloepfer, Michael 163  
 Knight, Max 360  
 Knoppers, Bartha Maria 160  
 Kodric-Brown, Astrid 53  
 Köchy, Kristian 96  
 Koehleer, Conrad J. 66  
 Köhlmoos, Melanie 301  
 Kononov, Nikolay V. 204, 206  
 Kortepeter, Katie 53  
 Kosgaard, Christine 370  
 Kostner, Sarah 198  
 Kramm, Matthias 361  
 Krause, Jens-Uwe 281  
 Kretzmer, David 161  
 Krischke, Wolfgang 235  
 Kronfeldner, Maria 87, 96–98, 100  
 Kunze, Rolf-Ulrich 281  
 Kurzweil, Raymond 16  
 Kuttner, Robert 50  
  
 Ladwig, Bernd 370  
 Lajul, Wilfred 221, 298  
 Lash, Scott 380, 381, 385  
 Lawler, Peter A. 180, 181  
 Lawrence, Thomas Edward 230  
 Latour, Bruno 33, 124, 354, 380–387  
 Leclerc, Ivor 19  
 Le Grange, Lesley 357  
 Lehtonen, Jussi 53  
 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm 17, 18, 67,  
     75, 144, 243  
 Lemanski, Jens 75  
 Lengwe-Katembula, Mwansa 291  
 Lerche, Peter 163  
 Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim 185  
 Lévi-Strauss, Claude 157  
 Lévinas, Emmanuel 42, 196, 211, 257,  
     258  
 Lewens, Tim 97  
 Lewis, Clive Staples 122  
 Lewis, Sophie 281  
 Lilla, Mark 60  
 Lindsay, James 233  
 List, Christian 10

- Lohfink, Norbert 336  
 Longueness, Béatrice 4  
 Lorz, Ralph Alexander 163  
 Lotter, Maria-Sybilla 43, 44, 46–48  
 Louw, Dirk J. 293, 297, 298  
 Lovejoy, Arthur O. 295  
 Lovelock, James 354  
 Ludenhoff, Karel 200  
 Luhmann, Niklas 277  
 Lukianoff, Greg 45  
  
 Maani, Sama 44  
 MacDonald, Neil 308  
 Machery, Edouard 97  
 MackIntosh, Hugh R. 244  
 Macklin, Ruth 158, 179  
 Madubuike, Ihechukwu 226  
 Maier, Charles 207  
 Makumbi, Jennifer 375  
 Malhi, Yadvinder 355  
 Mandrella, Isabelle 75  
 Mangena, Fainos 289, 332, 357  
 Mansour, Ahmad 57  
 Maphalala, Mncedisi Christian 351–353  
 Marder, Lisa 106  
 Marmor, Andrei 360  
 Marttila, Marko 336  
 Martin, Pamela L. 361  
 Maruggi, Matthew 82  
 Marx, Karl 52, 161, 192, 200  
 Mashininga, Kudzai 197  
 Matolino, Bernard 299  
 Mbembe, Achille 41, 351, 352  
 Mbiti, John S. 293, 294  
 Mboti, Nayasha 296, 297  
 Meineke, Eckhard 45  
 McMillan, Clare 120  
 McWhorter, John 258, 327  
 Melanchthon, Philipp 143  
 Menke, Karl-Heinz 245  
 Menkiti, Ifeanyi A. 128  
 Merwe, Chris van der 215  
 Metz, Thaddeus 209, 352, 358  
 Metzinger, Thomas 99  
 Meyer, Eduard 275, 277  
 Meyer, Lukas Heinrich 201, 202, 204  
 Meyersohn, Nathaniel 56  
 Midson, Scott A. 248, 249  
  
 Mieth, Corinna 201  
 Miguel, Marie 132  
 Miller, Robert D. 336  
 Min, Anselm K. 82  
 Minogne, Kenneth R. 197  
 Mirus, Jeff 181, 184  
 Mitchell, Basil 86  
 Mitchell, Les 352  
 Mizruchi, Susan L. 81  
 Mittler, Elmar 30  
 Mittelstrass, Jürgen 90  
 Mitterauer, Michael 281  
 Mkhabela, Mpumelelo 216  
 Möllers, Christoph 177, 178  
 Montefiore, Simon Sebag 59  
 Moon, Sun Myung 322–330  
 Morgan, Lewis Henry 256, 281  
 Mota, Aurea 364  
 Mucina, Devi Dee 353  
 Mühlhäusler, Peter 2  
 Müller, Hans-Peter 275  
 Müller, Jörn 163  
 Müller, Reinhard 336  
 Mugumbate, Jacob Rugare 289, 290  
 Mupedziswa, Rodreck 291  
 Murove, Munyaradzi Felix 353  
  
 Ndaba, Mthobisi 51  
 Ndaba, W. J. 293  
 Nel, Marius J. 201  
 Nelson, Cary 381  
 Nelson, Russell M. 318  
 Nemo, Philippe 258  
 Nettesheim, Martin 163  
 Neuhäuser, Christian 201  
 Newbury, David S. 226  
 Ngūgĩ wa, Thiong'o 226  
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 47, 81, 86, 93, 149, 177, 183, 241  
 Nkrumah, Kwame 220, 222  
 Nordhaus, Ted 382  
 Nüsslein-Volhard, Christiane 53  
 Nussbaum, Martha 96, 98  
  
 O'Collins, Gerald 336  
 Ogbonnaya, Uchenna 221  
 Ogude, James 291  
 O'Hear, Anthony 89



- Okasha, Samir 100  
 Okolo, Chukwudum B. 292, 296, 297  
 Okoye, James 336  
 O'Neill, Onora 264  
 Ostrer, Harry 335  
 Ott, Hermann E. 364  
 Otto, Jan Michiel 310  
 Owens, Eric 192  
 Oyedola, David A. 35  
 Ozoemena, Leo Chigozie 299
- Pakkala, Juha 336  
 Parker, Geoff A. 53  
 Pascal, Blaise 63, 104, 105  
 Pereboom, Derk 124  
 Perez, Nahshon 203  
 Perlberg, Heather 56  
 Perpich, Diane 258  
 Perrier, Raymond E. 15, 102, 113  
 Peterlini, Hans Karl 36  
 Pettit, Philipp 8, 10  
 Pfister, René 48  
 Pikart, Eberhard 162  
 Pillemer, Karl 120  
 Pines, Sarah 234  
 Pinker, Steven 3, 97, 159, 179–181, 184  
 Pinkham, Joan 157  
 Plakans, Andrejs 256  
 Plant, Deborah G. 353  
 Plöhn, Jürgen 45  
 Pluckrose, Helen 233  
 Pope, Alexander 237  
 Porter, Catherine 157, 382  
 Posner, Hans 60  
 Prager, Jeffrey 215  
 Prozesky, Martin H. 332  
 Prüfer, Tillmann 285  
 Purtill, Corinne 123
- Quijano, Aníbal 230  
 Quine, William V. O. 65, 66, 68
- Rabanka, Leiland 157  
 Ramsey, Grant 87, 97, 119  
 Ranger, Terence 157  
 Rankopo, Morena 291  
 Rapp, Friedrich 90  
 Raspé, Carolin 369
- Raven, Michael 25  
 Reckwitz, Andreas 62  
 Rees, Martin 105  
 Rescher, Nicholas 75  
 Reuer, Bruno 60  
 Rhonheimer, Martin 199  
 Ribi, Thomas 230, 362  
 Richert, Friedemann 209  
 Ricoeur, Paul 30, 190, 208  
 Rippin, Andrew 310  
 Rivet, Daniel 230  
 Roig, Emilia 281  
 Rosslenbroich, Bernd 119  
 Roudinesco, Elisabeth 157, 219, 223, 229, 230  
 Roughley, Neil 87, 96  
 Rufo, Christopher F. 194  
 Russell, Bertrand 269, 318, 360
- Safranski, Rüdiger 23  
 Sager, Alex 122  
 Said, Edward W. 230  
 Samkagne, Stanlake John Thompson 290  
 Samkagne, Tommie Marie 290  
 Santos, Bonaventura de Sousa 230  
 Sapolsky, Robert M. 142  
 Sass, Hartmut von 27  
 Satgar, Vishwas 365  
 Schachter, Oscar 161  
 Schaede, Stephan 177  
 Schäfer, Peter 299  
 Schälke, Julius 163  
 Schefczyk, Michael 201, 217  
 Schehr, Lawrence R. 33  
 Schellenberg, John L. 87  
 Schiffers, Julianne 243  
 Scheu, René 198  
 Schleiermacher, Friedrich Daniel Ernst 17, 18, 27, 93, 178, 244, 256  
 Schmid, Birgit 54, 194, 196  
 Schmid, Carlo 162  
 Schmidt-Aßmann, Eberhard 163  
 Schmitt, Frederick F. 8  
 Schmitt, Rüdiger 302  
 Schönecker, Dieter 362  
 Schreiter, Max 162  
 Schröder, Bianca 219

- Schroeder, Doris 203, 210  
 Schröder, Tim 45  
 Schubbe, Daniel 75  
 Schubert, Karsten 52  
 Schwarzer, Alice 231  
 Schwerin, Ulrich von 56  
 Scoralick, Klinger 258  
 Seelmann, Kurt 163  
 Seidel, Esther 304  
 Seidel, Thomas A. 209  
 Serequeberhan, Tsenay 221, 225  
 Serres, Michel 382, 386  
 Steinhoff, Uwe 54  
 Seuk, Joon Ho 325, 327, 329  
 Shellenberger, Michael 382  
 Sher, George 201, 210  
 Shutte, Augustine 289  
 Simons, Massimiliano 382  
 Skupien, Stefan 221  
 Small, Willard 273  
 Smith, Jane I. 309  
 Smith, Joseph 316, 319  
 Smith, Norman Kemp 4, 125  
 Sökefeld, Martin 60  
 Solón, Pablo 365, 372, 378  
 Sousa, Ronald de 87  
 Spaemann, Robert 163  
 Spitzer, Helmut 291  
 Spivak, Gayatri 381  
 Starck, Christian 162  
 Stefon, Matt 310  
 Steinhoff, Uwe 54, 58  
 Steinkellner, Judith 368  
 Stengers, Isabelle 354  
 Stern, Klaus 163  
 Stewart, James S. 244  
 Stock, Kathleen 45, 52, 53, 80  
 Stokke, Eirik 46  
 Stone, Christopher D. 361, 370  
 Stucki, Saskia 369  
 Sumption, Jonathan 228, 229  
 Susnow, Matthew 277  
  
 Tang, Audrey 348  
 Táíwò, Olúfẹ́mi O. 216, 226, 228  
 Tanner, Kathryn 89  
 Taylor, Keith 200  
 Teifke, Nils 170  
  
 Tellenbach, Hubertus 284  
 Tharps, Lori L. 155  
 Thierse, Wolfgang 60  
 Thiel, Thomas 59  
 Thomasson, Amie L. 8  
 Thompsell, Angela 289  
 Thompson, Janna 211  
 Thorpe, Lucas 127  
 Tirosh-Samuels, Hava 102  
 Tomaselli, Keyan G. 236  
 Tomasello, Michael 89  
 Torpey, John 207, 215  
 Trapp, Rainer W. 66  
 Trautmann, Thomas R. 256  
 Tremmel, Joerg 211  
 Tugendhat, Ernst 67  
 Tuttle, Russell Howard 152  
 Tutu, Desmond 289, 295  
 Twikirize, Janestic Mwende 291  
  
 Udehn, Lars 9  
 Ukpokolo, Isaac E. 221, 298  
 Ukwamedua, Nelson Udoka 333  
 Ukwuoma, Ikeagwuchi Ikechukwu 293,  
 297  
 Utzschneider, Helmut 300  
  
 Vanberg, Viktor J. 199  
 Vázquez, Rolando 230  
 Veit, Thomas 163  
 Verbeek, Peter-Paul 356  
 Vitzthum, Wolfgang Graf 163  
 Völker, Susanne 388  
 Vorndran, Jürgen 336  
  
 Wærhaug, Sølvi 46  
 Waghid, Yusef 357  
 Wagner, Erika M. 361, 368, 369  
 Waldron, Jeremy 159, 161  
 Wale, Kim 215  
 Wales, Katie 2  
 Walker, Benjamin 310  
 Warnke, Camilla 276  
 Weber, Ekkehard 277  
 Weber, Max 159, 280  
 Wedberg, Anders 360  
 Weibel, Peter 382  
 Weinstock, Nathan 57

- Weissenberg, Hanne von 316  
Wentzer, Thomas Schwarz 121  
Werner, Wolfram 162  
Wesche, Tilo 361  
Wetz, Franz Josef 163  
Whitehead, Alfred North 287  
Wildt, Andreas 81  
Wilkinson, David 104  
Williams, Bernard 96  
Winter, Leon de 57  
Wingert, Lutz 205  
Wintrich, Josef 162  
Wipf, Thomas 109  
Wiredu, Kwasi 128, 262  
Wise, Steven M. 369  
Wit, Hans de 235  
Wittgenstein, Ludwig 87, 202  
Wolffsohn, Michael 335  
Wong, Jenni 153  
Wood, Allen W. 174  
Wright, Richard A. 128  
Zalasiewicz, Jan 355  
Zenger, Erich 336  
Ziehm, Cornelia 370  
Zoja, Luigi 285

## Subject Index

- Activism 38, 43, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 54,  
55, 58, 86, 200, 201, 207, 219
- Actuality 19, 21, 24, 172, 174, 245, 268,  
269, 271, 393, 395, 398
- Aesthetic 353, 395, 396
- Anthropology 96, 99, 109, 120, 122,  
123, 210, 249, 256, 292, 382
- Body 11, 12, 26–31, 55, 89, 91, 95, 99,  
106, 120, 126, 146, 156, 160, 169,  
175, 179, 187, 234, 238, 255, 276,  
278, 305–307, 317–321, 326, 328,  
331, 340, 342, 348–350, 369, 373,  
394
- Christendom 34, 79, 278, 280, 340, 341,  
347, 394
- Christianity 27, 34, 79, 81, 82, 95, 275,  
276, 277, 278, 280, 281, 284, 285,  
286, 288, 299, 304, 307, 309, 316,  
318, 320, 322, 331, 334, 337, 339,  
340, 341, 342, 343, 345, 346, 347,  
387, 394,
- Colonialism 36, 42, 45, 53, 54, 58–60,  
104, 131–135, 157, 192, 200, 204,  
209, 219–234, 258, 296, 362
- anti-colonialist 224, 227
  - decolonization 50, 56, 59, 131, 135,  
219–230, 232, 352
  - neo-colonialism 135, 230
  - post-colonialism 58, 59, 60, 86, 135,  
156, 157, 208, 220, 228–230, 296,  
298
  - post-decolonization 205
- Community 12, 22, 29, 30, 34, 49, 52,  
57, 90, 93, 96, 112, 116, 118, 126–  
130, 134, 159, 163, 167–169, 174,  
176, 191, 205, 214, 227, 228, 231,  
234, 241, 250, 251, 255, 256, 263,  
265, 266, 272, 274, 278, 280, 282,  
283, 286–300, 302, 305–307, 310–  
312, 321, 325, 326, 329, 331–334,  
337–339, 342–348, 351–359, 363–  
367, 371–373, 376–380, 382, 386,  
387, 391, 398
- Concept 4, 5, 30, 44, 62, 66, 86–89, 96,  
98–100, 113, 114, 124, 132, 133, 149,  
157–161, 173, 176–184, 192–195,  
199, 201, 202, 204, 207, 210–212,  
232, 238, 262, 279–281, 289, 291,  
292, 299, 312, 315, 345, 346, 355,  
365, 367
- Creation/creature 3, 6, 8, 12, 13, 16, 17,  
24, 27, 28, 32–37, 41, 62–64, 69, 77,  
81–83, 86, 88–91, 93, 95, 98–100,  
102–112, 118–120, 122, 130, 141,  
148–150, 157, 162, 164, 174, 177,  
178, 181, 185–188, 242–249, 267–  
272, 278–286, 307–311, 316–318,  
323–331, 337–343, 347–352, 357–  
360, 370, 371, 377, 378, 380, 381,  
387–398.
- Culture 6, 12, 35–38, 48, 54, 58, 73, 74,  
85, 89–91, 93, 97, 98, 103, 106–111,  
118, 120, 131, 149, 155, 157, 158,  
177, 181, 183, 191, 196, 198, 210,  
220, 222–229, 232, 235, 236, 243,  
254, 274, 281, 285, 286, 296, 310,  
312–315, 321, 325, 326, 329, 330,  
342–244, 351, 352, 355, 357, 358,  
372, 376, 381, 397
- Dasein 10, 32, 34, 64, 69, 120, 238, 241,  
268, 272, 297, 349–351
- Description 22, 86, 88, 115, 127, 128,  
149, 172, 182, 183, 208, 219, 254,  
292, 348, 358, 390, 391

- Difference 2–4, 8, 18, 20, 22, 28, 33, 34,  
 37, 59, 69, 72, 77, 79, 82, 88, 94–96,  
 98, 99, 102, 106–108, 126, 127, 139,  
 141–143, 149, 150, 165, 187–192,  
 219, 220, 222, 223, 227, 228, 234,  
 240–243, 250, 257, 258, 260, 266–  
 268, 271, 273, 278–280, 286, 311,  
 322, 336–340, 342, 344, 347, 349,  
 353, 366, 377, 381, 382, 388, 389,  
 395  
 Dignity 22, 25, 81, 91, 104, 107–109,  
 112, 141, 146, 152–190, 198, 205,  
 225, 233, 238, 247, 249, 250, 264,  
 290, 291, 351, 363, 370, 371, 394  
 Discourse 20, 48, 53, 55, 63–66, 68, 69,  
 88, 157, 159, 161, 170, 178, 180, 182,  
 184, 185, 187, 193, 197, 225, 284,  
 381, 388  
 Distinction 3, 5, 6, 12, 15, 16, 20, 28, 30,  
 31, 35, 37, 46, 47, 58, 63, 73, 74, 92–  
 95, 103, 105–108, 111, 114, 120, 132,  
 133, 136, 137, 142, 143, 149, 155,  
 156, 161, 170, 173, 174, 177, 178,  
 180–182, 184–188, 190, 203, 204,  
 217, 219, 239, 240, 244–246, 250,  
 267, 269, 275, 278, 279, 282–284,  
 288, 299, 304, 335, 339–342, 347,  
 350, 377, 380–383, 388, 394, 396  
 Diversity 34, 42, 49–51, 54, 60, 67, 68,  
 74, 75, 85, 100–103, 107–109, 142,  
 152, 153, 189–198, 224, 227, 228,  
 233–238, 247, 249, 250, 256, 258,  
 282, 283, 343, 344, 363, 364, 374,  
 375  
 Duality 9, 174, 254–256, 303, 381  
 Embeddedness 109–113  
 Enhancement 94, 106, 109, 118, 247,  
 249, 250  
 Equality 2, 6, 34, 37, 45, 49, 54, 57, 61,  
 85, 103, 104, 107–109, 152–160, 178,  
 185, 186, 190, 195, 197–199, 201,  
 218, 222, 225, 228, 230, 234, 235,  
 247, 249, 250, 254, 261, 264, 276,  
 285, 309, 317, 320, 370, 380, 384,  
 396  
 Essence 10, 18, 19, 26, 34, 87, 90, 91,  
 96, 97, 166, 167, 173, 268, 276, 290,  
 296  
 Ethics/ethical 17, 18, 20, 42, 48, 80, 87,  
 98, 117, 119, 149, 151, 153, 159, 160,  
 179, 180, 184, 188, 201, 207, 214,  
 257, 258, 262, 289, 290, 297, 327,  
 332, 351–354, 357, 358, 364, 365,  
 395, 396  
 Existence 10–12, 15, 22, 26–28, 32–34,  
 62–79, 83, 88, 91, 93, 99, 108, 111,  
 115, 116, 144–147, 153, 157, 166–  
 168, 173, 202, 203, 221, 224, 230,  
 239–247, 249, 250, 255, 268, 273,  
 283–287, 297, 303, 315, 328, 334,  
 337, 338, 342, 345, 347, 349, 350,  
 359, 360, 362–366, 381, 382, 385,  
 388–391, 393, 394, 396, 397  
 Faith 27, 34, 77–79, 137, 138, 148, 150,  
 190, 237, 247, 278–280, 284, 301,  
 308–317, 337–344, 345, 375  
 Family 3, 8, 9, 40, 41, 81, 87, 100, 104,  
 108, 110, 127, 136, 149, 159, 160,  
 183, 235, 253, 255, 256, 258, 260,  
 272–337, 343–345, 353, 372, 376  
 Finite/finitude 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 21, 28,  
 32, 62, 64, 65, 72, 88, 91, 95, 104,  
 108, 109, 139–141, 143, 146, 148,  
 151, 152, 170, 174, 176, 199, 217,  
 239–250, 254, 267, 307, 330, 341,  
 385, 393, 396–398  
 God 2, 12, 17–19, 24, 28, 33, 34, 45, 63–  
 66, 72–73, 77–83, 86, 89, 104, 114–  
 116, 118, 122, 124, 141, 145–151,  
 163, 177, 178, 183, 185–188, 190,  
 199, 237, 241, 245–248, 267–272,  
 275–280, 282–284, 286, 288, 299,  
 301–312, 314–331, 333–344, 346,  
 347, 351, 362, 378, 381, 382, 385,  
 387, 388, 390, 391, 393, 394, 396,  
 398  
 Grammar 1–3, 72, 88, 182, 267, 284,  
 287  
 Group 1–3, 6–9, 23, 24, 30, 32, 34–44,  
 47, 50, 51, 53, 58–62, 71, 79, 81, 90,  
 91, 101, 103, 107, 108, 127, 128, 133,

- 136, 137, 155, 156, 158, 173, 177,  
178, 188–198, 202, 205, 206, 211,  
218–220, 224–237, 253–259, 262–  
264, 273–275, 278, 280–286, 291,  
292, 296, 298, 300, 302, 303, 310,  
331–334, 338, 339, 343, 345–347,  
355, 357, 371, 377
- Human/humanity 10, 11, 16–18, 22–27,  
32, 38, 63, 75–83, 85–89, 94–96, 99,  
101–108, 111–118, 120–122, 128–  
130, 137–139, 141, 149, 150, 152–  
155, 164, 167, 168, 170–175, 185,  
188, 205–209, 214, 223, 224, 238–  
242, 248, 250, 255, 262, 263, 266,  
272, 280–283, 285, 289, 290–296,  
303, 311, 315, 324, 334, 335, 338,  
339, 345–348, 350, 353–355, 358,  
363, 367, 375, 379, 396–398
- Humane/humaneness 78, 83, 85–88, 94,  
100, 102, 109, 112, 113, 117, 118,  
121, 139, 168, 169, 173, 183–188,  
204, 205, 207, 208, 212, 213, 219,  
225, 242, 243, 263, 285, 289, 295,  
296, 346, 348, 351, 394, 395, 397,  
398
- Idea 3, 8, 11, 17–20, 37, 38, 44, 45, 52–  
55, 57, 58, 61, 63–65, 76, 77, 79–83,  
85, 86, 88–91, 93, 94, 98, 102, 103,  
105–109, 111–118, 122, 129, 133,  
137–139, 145, 146, 150, 151, 157–  
160, 163, 180, 183, 186, 192, 195,  
196, 200–202, 211, 212, 214, 221,  
224, 227, 234, 239, 240, 246, 249,  
250, 260, 261, 266, 269, 271, 288,  
289, 293, 295–299, 310, 315, 318,  
322, 324, 325, 331, 333–337, 342–  
345, 372, 374, 381, 383, 394
- Ideal 3, 18, 19, 57, 61, 63–65, 77, 79–83,  
85, 86, 89, 91, 93, 94, 98, 102–105,  
107, 108, 111–118, 121, 138, 146,  
163, 177, 190, 191, 199, 208, 224,  
239, 250, 266, 296, 298, 310, 315,  
324–329, 374
- Identity 2, 8, 9, 15, 18, 24–26, 30–44,  
47, 48, 50, 51, 60–62, 77–79, 87, 93,  
96, 99, 108, 127, 135–137, 146, 153,  
155, 157, 158, 177, 184, 189–192,  
196–198, 200, 202, 205, 206, 216,  
220–224, 227–237, 250, 253, 257,  
258, 271, 272, 285, 291, 296, 302,  
306, 316, 319, 320, 331–334, 341–  
343, 346, 347, 360, 361, 382, 384,  
393, 396
- *idem*-identity 30–34, 41, 43, 62, 77,  
79, 136, 257, 331, 332, 334, 341–343,  
346, 393
  - *ipse*-identity 30–35, 41, 43, 62, 77,  
79, 136, 137, 257, 331–334, 341–343,  
346, 393, 396
  - identity politics 39, 40, 43, 44, 47,  
48, 50, 60–62, 157, 189, 200, 206,  
216, 228–233
- Indexical/indexicality 67–69, 73
- Individual/individuality 2, 7–10, 15–26,  
32, 36–41, 43, 44, 49, 50, 52, 60, 61,  
71, 74, 75, 79–81, 85, 86, 88–90, 97,  
100, 104, 107, 108, 111, 113–116,  
118, 127–129, 132, 134, 135, 137,  
151, 153, 155, 158, 171, 175–177,  
185, 189–191, 194–200, 202, 219,  
221, 225, 228, 230, 232–234, 237,  
238, 241, 250, 253–256, 262, 276–  
279, 285, 287–299, 303, 307–314,  
316–318, 320, 321, 324, 328, 331–  
334, 337–343, 346, 347, 354, 356,  
358, 360–363, 366, 367, 369, 379,  
381, 387, 391
- individualism 8–10, 232, 233, 237,  
291, 296, 331, 354, 387
- Islam 44, 81, 222, 224, 230, 231, 299,  
309–316, 331, 338–343, 345
- Israel 55–59, 60, 136, 177, 194, 279,  
300–304, 335, 336
- Judaism 81, 95, 177, 235, 280, 288, 299,  
300, 303, 304, 331, 334–336, 345,  
346, 387
- Jew/Jewish 56, 57, 95, 136, 177, 276,  
280, 299, 300–304, 307, 312, 335,  
336
- justice 4, 32, 49–51, 57, 61, 86, 87, 91,  
98, 101, 104, 108, 109, 115, 124, 150,  
151, 158–160, 169, 191, 198–202,  
204–218, 221, 225, 226, 233–237,

- 247, 249, 250, 258, 276, 296, 297,  
343, 352, 357, 358, 384, 390, 393
- historical 201, 204–206, 208, 210,  
212, 213, 217
- intergenerational 201, 211–213, 217
- Language 2–4, 12, 16, 22, 35, 42, 43,  
45–48, 54, 61, 66, 71, 74, 88, 91, 92,  
100, 103, 156, 157, 162, 178, 202,  
208, 209, 219–222, 254, 257, 258,  
281, 282, 284, 287, 288, 312, 343,  
352, 356, 365, 375, 376, 381, 382,  
385
- Latter-day Saints 288, 316, 318, 319,  
321, 331, 343–346
- Logic 3, 9, 66, 86, 114, 161, 182, 186,  
210, 221, 288, 338
- Mind 3, 8, 11–13, 26–30, 37, 66, 89, 91–  
96, 105, 151, 156, 165, 197, 221, 226,  
294, 310, 328, 348–351
- Mode 10–12, 22, 26, 28, 32, 62, 71, 141,  
166, 173, 182, 185, 187, 188, 190,  
241, 242, 245, 263, 268, 285, 307,  
308, 334, 379, 380, 394, 396
- Moral/morality 17, 20, 35, 38, 43–45,  
47, 48, 51–56, 58, 59, 61, 80, 87, 91,  
96, 107, 117, 118, 122–130, 132, 133,  
135, 136, 140, 142, 146, 147, 149–  
153, 158, 162, 164, 170–180, 182–  
185, 190, 193–196, 204–208, 210–  
213, 217, 219, 238, 149, 257, 259,  
261–266, 274, 275, 280, 285, 296,  
298, 299, 312–315, 321, 332, 333,  
343, 344, 352, 353, 356–358, 361,  
362, 364, 365, 368, 369, 372, 373,  
387
- Mormons 316, 319–322, 344–346
- Mother Earth 361–367, 372–380, 386
- Muslim 36, 49, 192, 231, 299, 309–314,  
338–343, 346
- Nature 10, 12, 22, 26, 29, 33, 37, 64, 73–  
75, 85–91, 93, 95–102, 106, 109–111,  
118, 120, 124–129, 132, 138, 142,  
150, 151, 166, 175, 180, 181, 192,  
195, 209, 210, 218, 219, 257, 261,  
268, 270, 276, 285, 287, 311, 312,  
315, 316, 323, 349–358, 360–368,  
372, 374–376, 378, 380–385
- Ontology 7–10, 21, 65, 221, 351, 355–  
357, 382
- Orientation 1, 5, 6, 19, 20, 24, 34, 35,  
43, 52, 54, 62, 64, 69–71, 80–83, 88–  
91, 100, 114, 116–118, 126, 127,  
136–138, 150, 178, 182–184, 191,  
195, 196, 206, 217, 218, 234, 263,  
266, 267, 280, 281, 285, 286, 312,  
332, 338–340, 347, 391, 393, 394,  
398
- Parliament of things 380–387, 390
- Particular/particularity 4–7, 10, 11, 15,  
16, 18–21, 24–27, 29, 31, 32, 37, 38,  
51, 52, 55, 65, 71, 74, 79, 82, 87, 89,  
93, 96, 97, 100, 113–115, 123, 127,  
128, 159, 164–166, 170, 175, 177,  
178, 182–185, 188, 193, 195, 196,  
205, 211, 218–220, 231, 245, 254,  
257, 260, 261, 264, 267, 273, 275,  
277–282, 286, 296, 303, 306, 314,  
334, 337–339, 342, 346, 355, 366,  
380
- Passivity 12, 23, 27, 28, 32, 64, 73, 79,  
93, 108, 109, 115, 188, 243–250, 283,  
337, 350, 396–398
- Person 1, 3–5, 11, 15, 17, 21–27, 30–34,  
36, 47–49, 54, 62, 70, 71, 74, 75, 78,  
86, 89, 101, 109, 112, 115, 120, 124–  
130, 141, 142, 146, 149, 151, 154,  
156, 159, 161–164, 167–169, 172,  
173, 175–180, 183, 184, 186, 187,  
189, 196–198, 202, 203, 207, 214,  
239, 241, 245, 257–266, 270, 271,  
278–280, 282, 285, 289–299, 308,  
318, 326, 331–334, 337, 338–343,  
346, 347, 358–363, 367, 369, 375,  
391, 396–398
- legal person 125, 359–361, 367–371,  
380
- Plurality 8, 9, 68, 103, 191, 254–256,  
266, 303, 348
- Possibility 5, 8, 10, 11, 16, 17, 23, 26–  
28, 33, 34, 44, 59, 61, 64, 66, 71–74,  
76, 77, 79, 80, 82, 86, 88, 89, 93, 113,

- 115, 117, 123, 137, 143, 146, 147,  
150, 151, 169, 170, 172–174, 179,  
190, 191, 197, 199, 212, 242–247,  
259, 264, 265, 267, 269–272, 304,  
309, 344, 348–351, 378, 384, 387,  
391, 393, 395, 397
- Racism 44, 46, 48, 50, 54, 55, 59, 60,  
103, 104, 108, 135, 138, 152–158,  
198, 200, 209, 214, 215, 219, 225,  
228–231, 234, 258, 327, 371
- Religion/religious 20, 34, 40, 42, 45, 51,  
59, 60, 80–82, 85, 87, 93, 98, 102,  
105, 110, 111, 113, 117, 118, 129,  
130, 136, 137, 147, 148, 155, 174,  
175, 177–187, 189–191, 195–198,  
200, 218, 222, 224, 235, 237, 256,  
258, 267, 272–281, 284, 287, 288,  
295, 298–304, 309–314, 316, 321,  
324, 325, 327, 329, 331, 333, 335–  
337, 339, 340, 342–347, 349, 358,  
362, 376–379, 385, 394–396
- Responsibility 26, 42, 51, 82, 83, 85, 91,  
96, 98, 106, 107, 109, 123, 124, 126,  
127, 129–140, 142, 143, 145, 148,  
151, 210–212, 217, 225, 233, 241,  
247, 249, 250, 257, 258, 260, 262–  
267, 282, 295–299, 302, 312, 314,  
317, 329, 331, 333, 337, 343, 353,  
357, 373, 374, 385, 388, 398
- Rhetoric 4–7, 43, 44, 58, 59, 258, 375,  
376
- Rights 25, 29, 34, 39–41, 44, 49–51, 57,  
59, 61, 85, 87, 91, 103, 104, 107, 108,  
124, 150, 152–155, 158–161, 166,  
169, 178, 180, 186, 190, 191, 197–  
199, 201–208, 214, 217, 218, 224–  
226, 228, 238, 250, 256, 261, 264,  
283, 299, 300, 311–314, 351, 352,  
359–372, 376, 378, 380, 383–387,  
390
- Right to be different 27, 29, 107, 153,  
228, 250, 278, 298, 343, 346, 347,  
396, 398
- Self 7, 8, 18, 19, 21–28, 30–35, 40–43,  
47, 48, 52–54, 58, 59, 60, 62, 64, 65,  
70, 71, 82, 85, 89, 91, 99, 101, 103,  
105, 107, 108, 116, 118, 119, 126–  
128, 130, 134, 138, 141, 142, 145,  
147, 148, 150–155, 157, 173, 177,  
181, 185, 190, 194, 196–199, 201,  
205, 211, 212, 216, 219, 223, 227–  
239, 241, 244, 245, 247, 249, 255,  
259, 261, 268, 282, 289, 292, 295–  
297, 300, 308, 326, 331, 334, 345,  
351, 366, 367, 378, 381, 390, 394–  
396
- Set 7, 9, 12, 15, 22, 86, 87, 89, 97, 105,  
166, 173, 177, 178, 182, 183–185,  
227, 244, 253, 254, 257, 267, 360,  
370
- Shoah 132–135, 137, 138, 139, 217
- Single/singularity 1, 7, 8, 15–24, 33, 35,  
62, 65, 67, 68, 70, 79, 100, 107, 113,  
152, 153, 175, 176, 183, 190, 205,  
216, 237, 241, 255, 275, 276, 282,  
303, 308, 311, 312, 337, 346, 348,  
366, 367, 373, 375, 378, 391
- Sosein 10, 34, 64, 241, 268, 272, 349–  
351
- Soul 26, 28, 114, 178, 187, 309, 311,  
318, 357
- Spirit 93, 160, 276, 283, 291, 305, 307,  
308, 316–323, 327, 330, 331, 341,  
346, 348–351, 358, 360
- Stereotype 35, 38
- Terrorism 55–60
- Transhumanism 99–105, 121, 122
- Trauma 209, 214, 215
- Trust 48, 62, 80, 148, 150, 207, 213,  
258–268, 270, 282, 288, 312  
– distrust 63, 259–266  
– mistrust 259, 260, 265
- Trust in God 267, 268, 270
- Ubuntu 23, 127, 129, 157, 214, 227, 262,  
288–299, 331–333, 344–346, 351–  
359, 372
- Unification Church 288, 322–331, 344–  
346
- Value 4, 16–18, 43, 44, 63, 65, 66, 68,  
80, 118, 126, 129, 148, 153, 170, 175,  
177, 179, 182, 191–196, 218, 234,



- 249, 250, 276, 290, 297, 315, 326,  
330, 353, 368, 371  
Vulnerability 43–45, 266  
Wassein 10, 34, 241, 268, 272, 350  
Wahrsein 241, 272, 351