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The Uncomfortable Self

Emily Dickinson's Reflections on Consciousness

Charlotte Kupsh

During the mid-nineteenth century, as waves of religious devotion swept across New England, Emily Dickinson was intent on finding her own answers to imposing philosophical and spiritual questions. Many of Dickinson's poems focus on questions of the self—what it is, and what its connections are to the soul, the body, other people, and itself. In typical Dickinson fashion, her poems explore the topic from many angles, and this diversity of approaches means that continued study of Dickinson's treatment of the self is both useful and warranted. Dickinson scholars have focused on the self as it is manifested in a variety of contexts, including with regard to religion, consciousness, and immortality.

Dickinson and her poetry were doubtlessly influenced by the religious practices of her Protestant Massachusetts upbringing. While Dickinson never publicly affirmed her faith, the religious context of her time is reflected heavily in her poetry. Linda Freedman, a scholar of nineteenth-century literature at University College London, considers Dickinson's poetry as the work of a poet fascinated with the "structures of faith" rather than as evidence of a staunch belief in or aversion to religion (2). Freedman advocates understanding the poems as a mechanism through which Dickinson works out philosophical and theological questions (2). Religion gave Dickinson a "vocabulary" for investigating these complex

issues, but it did not dictate her views completely (2). Still, many scholars, including Freedman, Christopher E. G. Benfey, and Shira Wolosky, identify religious embodiment as a key theme in Dickinson's work. The theological problem of Christ's embodiment through incarnation was of great significance to Puritans and Calvinists in Dickinson's time (Freedman 22). Christ's human incarnation, or the "Word made flesh," was foundational to Calvinism, but this idea also inherently created a gap between concepts of the absolute and the relative—the "thing-in-itself and the image of the thing, the Word and the flesh" (22). This gap refers to the disparity between the way religious concepts were represented in the teachings of faith and the way in which those concepts were actually experienced. Calvinists were preoccupied with the problem of how to square the subjective nature of lived experience with a spiritual, inherently unknowable world. Many of Dickinson's poems reflect a similar tension between subjective experience and unknowable aspects of faith; they oscillate between the corporeal and the metaphysical (27). This tension was likely influenced by the theological conflicts of the time. Similarly, Dickinson's poetry can also be interpreted as reflecting the Calvinist focus on the hypostatic union, or the duality of God and man, embodied in the incarnated Christ (28). The hypostatic union is the mystical union of Christ's physical body and Christ's nature as the Holy Spirit—as God in human form—and was essential to the Calvinist understanding of Christ's divine nature. Freedman and Wolosky point out that Dickinson's poetry, too, grapples with the fundamental divide between spirit and flesh, the outer/inner and mortal/immortal selves of man. Wolosky cites "I am afraid to own a Body—" as evidence that Dickinson was "profoundly torn" throughout her work about the metaphysical hierarchy of body and soul (132).

Dickinson's focus on the divide between body and soul sometimes extends to examinations of the physical body itself, as Benfey points out. He argues that Dickinson's focus on the physical expressions of the body after death—such as her "fascination" with death masks—shows the poet was greatly concerned about the conflict between rational anatomy and unknowable faith (96). Benfey reads "The Body grows without" as showing how the body houses the soul and physically reflects its expressions, thereby making it difficult to imagine the two as able to exist separately (96). Further, Dickinson's frequent focus on the biblical resurrection of Christ might

provide additional evidence that the separation of body and mind was a significant issue to the poet (99). Dickinson's discomfort over the idea of the self is also shown, Benfey argues, in her frequent attention to the questions of how the boundaries of the body divide a person from others and how the emotions and minds of others are unknowable (84). If one cannot truly understand others, how can one understand the self?

For Wolosky, though, poems about embodiment address more than the connection between body and soul—the poems are also ways in which Dickinson grapples with her own identity. Wolosky identifies four perspectives from which Dickinson explores identity and embodiment: a poet who is embodied by her own words; a woman who struggles to maintain her identity in a time when women's bodies are owned by men; an American whose personhood is validated by ownership of property; a faithful believer, who must distinguish between bodily autonomy and submission to God (135). These four tensions complicate the relationship between body and soul, allowing for a struggle that is rooted in religious conflict but explored in religious *and* secular ways.

E. Thomas Finan argues that a separate theme in Dickinson's poetry is a fascination with consciousness and its limits. While Calvinists struggled with the mystery of the hypostatic union, writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Noah Webster were focusing on a more secular duality: the duality of the self and consciousness. Consciousness here means the way that humans interpret the world and "typify and describe the self" (Finan 24). The ever-present nature of consciousness, Finan explains, means that humans have no direct knowledge of the world—only knowledge gleaned by perceiving the world through the lens of their own perspective. Emerson drew from French sensationalists to describe how consciousness always "mediates" human interaction; consciousness helps people relate to themselves and others, but at the same time, it also limits because it locks one into constant subjectivity (25). Philosophers and writers of the time also explored the "instabilities" of consciousness—the ways in which people push at the limits of their subjective minds (34). To Emerson, the very act of thinking about one's subjectivity challenges the idea that consciousness is truly fixed and inescapable (Finan 34). Finan provides close readings of half a dozen Dickinson poems, including "The Soul unto itself," to support the argument that Dickinson was deeply interested in consciousness and its limits. Finan

points out that Dickinson would have had ample opportunity to read and listen to the ideas of Emerson and his contemporaries, either in the numerous periodicals her family subscribed to, such as the *Atlantic Monthly*, or from guests in their home, as her father's friends included many professors of philosophy (26). Leading philosophical questions of the time likely influenced Dickinson in the same way as religious issues.

It is this more secular attention to the self, its limits, and its relationship to body and soul that constitutes the focus of this paper. Because of Dickinson's religious environment and the close parallels between the hypostatic union and the poetic focus on the body and soul connection, it is valuable to keep Dickinson's religious background in mind during analysis. However, while much has been written on the influence of religion on her poetry, less has been said about the influence of the strain of philosophical thought prevalent in her time. Through a close reading of four of her poems ("I am afraid to own a Body—;" "The Body grows without;" "I cannot see my soul but know 'tis there;" and "The Soul unto itself"), this paper will explore Dickinson's treatment of the self and the ways in which she addresses philosophical issues of her time: the physical location of the self, one's relationship to the self, and the connection between self, mind, and body. Dickinson approaches the subject from many angles, writing from positions of division, suspicion, curiosity, ambiguity, and even awe at all that can be contained in a single person. However, one idea prevails throughout Dickinson's work: the speaker's constant iteration of discomfort with the idea of the self.

The poems in this paper were selected based on their varying approaches to the topic of the self. The first poem, "I am afraid to own a Body—," provides a broad look at the basic fear of the duality inherent in human life: having a body and soul. The second poem, "The Body grows without," has a slightly narrower focus, working to define the roles of body and spirit by describing their physical situations. The third poem, "I cannot see my soul, but know 'tis there," also seeks to define the role of the soul through physical situation, but this poem moves to the interior, focusing on the relationship between soul and self rather than soul and body. Finally, the fourth poem, "The Soul unto itself," provides the narrowest approach to the topic, focusing on one soul that is internally divided. Thus, this analysis moves from a broad, exterior look at the subject to a gradually narrowing focus with each subsequent poem.

Dickinson's discomfort toward the idea of the self is shown perhaps most obviously in the first poem, "I am afraid to own a Body—." The poem takes a wide approach to the subject of the self, examining the fear of owning a body and a soul through the lexicon of physical ownership:

I am afraid to own a Body—
 I am afraid to own a Soul—
 Profound—precarious Property—
 Possession, not optional—

Double Estate, entailed at pleasure
 Upon an unsuspecting Heir—
 Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
 And God, for a Frontier. (472)

The poem's unique positioning of the speaker as an owner of the body and soul shows Dickinson's struggle to understand the relationship between body, self, and soul. If the speaker is "afraid" to own a body and a soul, which part of ownership is he or she afraid of? Is it mortality? And what *part* of the self is afraid of the ownership—can the self be afraid of owning its own soul? Further, the idea of owning a soul suggests that there is some self that exists outside the soul—a self that is capable of fearing the prospect of owning the soul. The theme of fear and discomfort with the body and soul duality is maintained throughout the poem, but it is complicated by a lexicon of possession: to "own," a "property," a "possession," a "Double Estate," "entailed," an "Heir," a "Duke." This vocabulary is typically based on physical commodities that can be purchased, passed on, and inherited, which contrasts the metaphysical subject of one's relationship to the body and soul. With this language, Dickinson seems to attempt to ground a difficult abstract concept in everyday language based in physical ownership. If such an abstract idea can be harnessed in easily understandable terms, perhaps the uncomfortable subject can become easier to grasp.

Dickinson's focus on bodily ownership is indicative of the poet's engagement with controversial political issues of her time. For a female poet in Dickinson's time, physical ownership of the body would have been a radical notion. Women could retain legal ownership over themselves primarily by refusing to marry; however, for an unmarried woman, staking

claim to oneself rather than entrusting oneself to God through religious devotion was an even more radical statement. Ownership of any property at all, let alone the self, was a largely unfamiliar concept for nineteenth-century women. When considering the role gender plays in the poem, it is important to note that Dickinson refers to a “*Duke in a moment of Deathlessness,*” not a duchess. This male-oriented language might simply be a product of the time—a duke was more likely to inherit property, so the male word makes more sense for the context of the poem. On the other hand, perhaps the point is that men *did* typically own property, not women, and it was only by assuming traditionally male traits—for example, male attitudes and male entitlement—that a woman could take possession of herself. Equally important to consider is that the poem is dated 1865, the year slavery was abolished in the United States, bringing an entirely new awareness of the ownership of the body to freed slaves and white citizens alike. What did it mean to own one’s body? Dickinson’s marital status, the preponderance of waves of religious devotion, and the influx of newly-freed slaves were likely all at work to make the poet acutely aware of the ambiguity of bodily possession.

The language of ownership and the emphasis on possession of body and soul draws attention to the fact that this duality is an inheritance rather than a choice. Everyone is an “unsuspecting heir” of the body and spirit. To own one’s body and soul can be a sign of liberation, but there are also inherent constraints; no one has control over *which* body or soul to possess—or, for that matter, for how long. All *must* accept their lot in life (“*Duke in a moment of Deathlessness*”) and their inevitable death (“*And God, for a Frontier*”). The ending to the poem suggests that owning a body and soul means that God, and therefore death, is always in one’s future. Could this be the implication of inheritance that Dickinson is most “afraid” of? Perhaps the “*Double Estate*” is owning a body and soul while simultaneously knowing that the adventure always ends in death. Somewhat uniquely, the grammar at the end of the poem is relatively straightforward. In many Dickinson poems, words or phrases seem to have been omitted from the last stanza, but “*I am afraid to own a Body—*” ends clearly and without much room for speculation, perhaps suggesting that to be conscious of the duality of body and soul is an unavoidable aspect of being human.

Dickinson takes a slightly narrower look at the topic of the self in the second poem, “The Body grows without—,” a poem that defines both the body and spirit by physically situating them:

The Body grows without—
 The more convenient way—
 That if the Spirit—like to hide
 Its Temple stands, always,

Ajar—secure—inviting—
 It never did betray
 The Soul that asked its shelter
 In solemn honesty (176)

The poem starts with the assertion that “The Body grows without—/The more convenient way.” The body is portrayed as a physical dwelling place for the spirit, suggesting that the two are separate entities and introducing the possibility of a divided body and spirit. The body provides protection for the soul “that asked its shelter” and might “like to hide.” The spirit is physically located, then, in the body. At first glance, the opening phrasing of this poem might seem to suggest that this arrangement of body and soul in a person occurs only by chance—because it is more *convenient*, easier, simpler. On one hand, this blasé word choice could be an attempt to feign disinterest in a complex, overwhelming topic. On the other hand, perhaps Dickinson means that the spirit is literally inaccessible on its own, that to understand the spirit, one must go through the body; it is literally more *convenient* to access the spirit via the body. Dickinson’s word choice plays a key role in how the reader perceives the speaker’s perspective on the connection between body and soul. Dickinson addresses a topic that modern neuroscientists still debate—what physical elements separate the body and the mind, and to what extent is it possible for one to exist without the other?

Dickinson’s choice of language in this poem also introduces the possibility of betrayal and conveys that the nature of the spirit involves aspects of danger and uncertainty. At first, the poem seems to suggest a kind of bodily loyalty toward the spirit by providing it with shelter, but in the second stanza, the reader learns that it is possible for the body to “betray” the soul. The body *can* provide shelter, but perhaps it can also refuse. In the final line of the poem,

Dickinson considered using the word “timid” instead of “solemn,” which suggests heightened peril; the spirit is timid by nature, perhaps because it has learned to be afraid. If the spirit is accustomed to hiding because it has reason to be afraid, it seems possible to damage or injure the spirit—otherwise, it would have no reason to seek shelter. The poem further suggests that the shelter of the body is imperfect; the body is a “Temple,” but one that paradoxically stands “ajar—secure—inviting.” While Dickinson sometimes uses dashes to provide alternate words that further illustrate the topic described, in this case, the use of dashes seems to suggest multiple, competing interpretations of the shelter provided by the body. “Ajar” might be a neutral word by definition, but not when used to describe a hiding place that is also meant to be “secure.” A door that is secure should not be left ajar; the concepts are directly at odds with one another. Then, Dickinson introduces a third word: “inviting.” It seems impossible that a shelter might simultaneously be inviting, secure, and ajar, which suggests an instability of the body as a shelter and, by extension, perpetual insecurity for the spirit. As she does in “I am afraid to own a Body—,” Dickinson frames the concept of the body and soul in “The Body grows without—,” with a sense of timidity and fear. “I am afraid to own a Body—” is about a fear of both body and soul, while in “The Body grows without—,” the sense of fear belongs to the spirit alone. Despite their diverging focuses, though, it is notable that both poems convey discomfort inherent in the duality; no matter how the duality is situated, it is always paired with anxiety.

While the second poem, “The Body grows without—,” seems to situate the body as a home for the soul, the poem “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there—” situates the *soul* as a home for the self:

I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there—
 Nor ever saw his house, nor furniture—
 Who has invited me with him to dwell;
 But a confiding guest, consult as well,
 What raiment honor him the most,
 That I be adequately dressed—
 For he insures to none
 Lest men specifical adorn—
 Procuring him perpetual drest
 By dating it a sudden feast. (709)

The speaker says the soul has “invited me with him to dwell,” implying a sense of shelter. The speaker goes on to describe his or her desire to be properly attired in order to honor or please the soul. This structure introduces a new duality. If the soul has invited “me” to stay, “me” must be an entity separate from the soul, such as the self. Whereas other poems address the physical distinction between body and soul, in this poem, the clear delineation between the soul and the self suggests a metaphysical duality: a division of self and soul. While this duality might at first seem too granular, the relationship between the soul and itself can also be described as one’s “inner voice” or as “reasoning with oneself,” phrases that are still common more than one hundred years after Dickinson’s death. The duality of self is a relationship that is continually questioned and explored, which bespeaks the universality of Dickinson’s poetry.

In “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” Dickinson again uses the image of a shelter or a home to convey a sense of unease. The speaker has been invited “with him to dwell,” but has never seen “his house, nor furniture”—or, in fact, the host himself. Nonetheless, the speaker is preoccupied with honoring the unseen host, wondering what “raiment honor him the most” and how to ensure that the speaker is “adequately dressed.” The soul, it seems, is a grand figure who must be impressed. The line “for he insures to none” is grammatically tricky to unravel, but seems to suggest that there is a danger that the soul might evict the self if he is not paid the appropriate honor. The poem feels like an examination of a power structure where the host *expects* to be honored, and not doing so has consequences. Overall, the tone of the poem conveys a clear sense of intimidation.

Chiefly because of the speaker’s use of the male pronoun, some critics have suggested that the poem shows Dickinson reflecting on the idea of marriage. Scholars like William Valentine Kelly point to the male pronoun, the concept of being invited to dwell with him, the clear power differential, and the mention of a “sudden feast” as evidence for this argument. Kelly suggests that Dickinson’s poetry frequently reveals how her “imagination lives through the transition from girl to wife” (247) and that in this poem, her “raiment” refers to “the wedding garment” (271). However, this argument is not entirely supported elsewhere in the poem. Lines such as “lest *men* specificial adorn” (emphasis mine) work against this theory; men would not have been trying to “adorn” themselves for a wedding to an unseen, *male* soul. In addition, the poem is believed to have been sent to Dickinson’s

cousins, Frances and Louisa Norcross, who later made a name for themselves in intellectual and political circles that included Ralph Waldo Emerson (Emily Dickinson Museum). While this information does not independently disprove the idea that the poem is about marriage, it seems more likely that Dickinson would have been writing to her cousins about a more philosophical issue than an imagined marriage. It seems that the unseen male is the host to multiple guests or “selves”—similar to the way Christians think of God as the “host” of all souls on earth. A religious interpretation, though, raises further questions about the nature of this God, like why the speaker would refer to God as “my soul.” This framing also contributes to the metaphysical duality; it suggests that humans have both a personal self and a spiritual self that is related to God.

The form of this third poem is slightly different from the first and second poems discussed in this paper, particularly in its use of capitalization and dashes. In some Dickinson poems, almost every line contains or ends in a dash, and subjects are frequently capitalized. However, in the third poem, capitalization occurs only at the beginning of lines, and dashes are significantly less prevalent, occurring only at the end of four lines. Overall, these differences in form make the poem flow more quickly than others (such as “The Body grows without—”) and suggests that at the time the poem was written, the poet had a firmer focus on this topic.

No matter how the duality is framed, the second poem, “The Body grows without—,” and the third poem, “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” can be read as two approaches to defining and situating the self. In “The Body grows without—,” the body charitably provides shelter for the spirit, which seems to be the same thing as the soul. The spirit is subordinate to the body, which *allows* the spirit to hide within it. In “I cannot see my soul, but know ‘tis there,” the *soul* is the charitable provider of a home, offering it to a “me” figure that can be likened to the self. This soul might be a human representation of a religious spirit, or it might represent a divided inner self. These repeated and varied attempts to locate the self and define it in contrast to the soul, body, and spirit show that Dickinson devoted considerable attention to working out the meaning of the self. As in the first poem, “I am afraid to own a Body—,” both contrasting poems share an inherent sense of fear or intimidation in their perceptions of the soul and the self.

Dickinson continues to explore the ideas of division between self and soul and the fear inherent in duality in the fourth poem, "The Soul unto itself." The poem takes the narrowest approach to defining the self by describing a soul that is internally divided:

The Soul unto itself
 Is an imperial friend—
 Or the most agonizing Spy—
 An enemy—could send—
 Secure against its own—
 No treason it can fear—
 Itself—its Sovereign—Of itself
 The Soul should stand in Awe— (264)

As in the third poem, "I cannot see my soul, but know 'tis there," the duality in "The Soul unto itself" is not between body and soul, but rather between the soul and itself, again suggesting a metaphysical duality. The focus of "The Soul unto itself" is how one's relationship with oneself can be either beneficial or detrimental, depending on how "secure against its own" the soul is. The relationship between the soul and itself can provide either "an imperial friend" or "the most agonizing Spy—/An Enemy—could send." Unlike "I cannot see my soul, but know 'tis there," however, there is no distance between the soul and the speaker—instead, the duality is between two halves, both equally capable of sabotage.

Throughout the poem, Dickinson's lexicon brings an unsettling feeling to the relationship between the soul and itself. Words and phrases like "imperial friend," "Spy," "Enemy," "Secure," "treason," and "Sovereign" call to mind statehood and espionage. The poem is believed to have been written in the summer of 1863, at the height of the Civil War. It is likely that this poem was influenced by Dickinson's experience of witnessing the war, particularly because Dickinson sent the poem to her friend, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who at the time was a soldier for the Union Army. Dickinson's attempt to work out the relationship of the soul to itself through the lexicon of war might have especially resonated with Higginson, while also reflecting that Dickinson's own mind was divided between philosophical issues of the self and political issues of the war.

By posing the self as divided, Dickinson may be working through the implications of self-reflection and personal subjectivity. As suggested by the vocabulary of espionage, the soul's relationship to itself is fraught with doubt, mistrust, and once again, fear—only this time, the soul's greatest fear is itself. It is only when the soul becomes "Secure against its own" that "no treason it can fear," but how can one be secure against one's own mind? This phrasing questions the extent to which the soul can be trusted. Further, if the soul is divided and is at risk of self-sabotage, how reliable are one's own perceptions? This calls to mind Emerson's idea of subjectivity—that everything is seen through the subjective lens of consciousness. Consciousness is an "imperial friend" in that it mediates one's perceptions, but it also limits the self from true objectivity. Knowledge of one's own subjectivity might indeed make one feel like consciousness is "the most agonizing Spy—/ An Enemy—could send." Critically examining one's subjectivity creates a kind of double surveillance—the self is studying the self. The awareness of constant scrutiny from within might indeed be "agonizing."

Although the first stanza introduces the idea of a divided and untrustworthy relationship to the self, the end of the poem takes a positive turn. Rather than fear of treason, the last lines posit that the soul "should stand in Awe" of itself. There are several ways to interpret this awe. As Dickinson points out in another of her poems, "No Rack can torture me," the freedom of the soul gives one a sense of "Liberty." Whatever befalls one in the physical world can be borne by the soul, which remains unaffected. In the last poem, "The Soul unto itself," Dickinson might be repeating this sentiment—the power of the soul lies in its ability to keep company with only itself. A second interpretation might concern the actual function of the self or soul. One's ability to reason, to perceive, to think, and to have agency over one's life independent of others ("Itself—its Sovereign—Of itself") can be powerful and awe-inspiring, too.

"The Soul unto itself," is unique in the group of poems studied in this paper in its examination of the internal relationship between the soul and itself rather than between soul and body or the distance between the soul and the self. Unlike the first poem, "I am afraid to own a Body—," and the second poem, "The Body grows without," this poem does not attempt to situate the self. Instead, the lens has moved closer, examining the way in which the soul defines and relates to itself. And unlike the third poem, "I cannot see my soul but know 'tis there," this poem does not situate the self

outside of the soul, but rather sees the soul as divided, “unto itself.” Another unique aspect of “A Soul unto itself” is that it ends on a positive note—the idea of standing in awe of *oneself*, rather than in fear or intimidation. However, despite the differences in content, the poem’s references to distrust, fear, and discomfort with the self are consistent with Dickinson’s other poems on the subject. The narrow focus of “The Soul unto itself” highlights a central question underlying all four poems: what does it mean to be a self? Dickinson’s answer is complex: being a self means being divided and sometimes distrustful of that division, but it also means standing in awe of what is contained in one person.

These poems represent a sample of Dickinson’s varying approaches to the topic of the self. Driven, perhaps, by curiosity and a desire to define the ambiguous philosophical and religious lines between the mind, body, soul, and self, Dickinson attempts to understand the self by exploring it from many angles. Her approaches range from examining the idea of ownership to exploring the interior division of the self. Across approaches, though, the poems are unified in their emphasis on discomfort, which is conveyed via fear, timidity, and power struggles. No matter how Dickinson frames the subject, she cannot entirely escape from its uncomfortable nature. Throughout her life, the poet returns to the subject—reflecting, perhaps, that near-universal human desire to make sense of the unknown.

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