

The Socially Constructed Self Still Does not Make Sense

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Selfless: The Social Creation of “You.” Brian Lowery. New York: Harper Collins, 2023, 272 pages, \$29.99 hardcover.

Brian Lowery, a social psychologist and Professor at Stanford Business School, has written a new book in which he argues that the self, the “I” with which we each identify, is constituted of interactions with other people and groups of people. He claims that there is no individual essence left over without our relationships to friends, family, nations, communities, races, genders, cultures, and so on. Many writers have already made similar arguments for socially constituted selves. The view goes back at least to the teachings of Confucius and of Aristotle. Lowery does not form any new deductive arguments, as a philosopher might attempt. Instead he sprinkles brief versions of standard arguments within a tapestry of purportedly relevant empirical findings. Citing studies (some of which fail to replicate) is where Lowery brings his social psychology background to bear on the issue. His is a somewhat inductive approach. Though some of the psychology experiments mentioned in the book are interesting, they do not directly imply a socially constituted self. And the bits of deductive argumentation do not quite work either. The same arguments do not even work in their more complete forms, which have been elaborated by others. In this critical notice, I will show the flaws in Lowery’s arguments, as well as in their more robust versions from Charles Taylor and Kenneth Gergen.

Long before Taylor, Gergen, and Lowery, Aristotle argued that a man has no existence except through a state society. He reasoned that just as a hand can only have the qualities of a hand in the context of what it can do as a part of a body, a man can only be a man in the context of society. Aristotle (350 B.C.E./2017)

claimed that to be human, a man must have virtue, and that virtue derives only from society, in that a man can only act virtuously in relation to society. Therefore a man is fundamentally inseparable from society.

This Aristotelian view became less compelling after Saint Augustine in the fourth century, and René Descartes in the seventeenth century argued that one can always be certain of his own existence, regardless of whether society exists in reality or only in illusion (Augustine, 386/1910, pp. 51-52; Descartes, 1637/2006, p. 28). Augustine and Descartes revealed a major disanalogy between an individual man and a disembodied hand: interiority. In this view, it is the ability to consciously think that defines an individual self as something separable from other individuals and groups. In the time between Descartes and the present, many theorists have argued that the self is fundamentally inextricable from social context, and that there is nothing left of the self without that social context. Lowery is the latest to take up the same project, though he does not mention most of his predecessors. I'll briefly enumerate some of them because my main critique in this paper could be applied to nearly all of them.

In the early nineteenth century, Hegel reasoned that self-consciousness can not exist without being differentiated in relation to others, meaning that others are indispensable to one's own existence (1807/1964, p. 222; Berenson, 1982, pp. 84-85). Marx inherited Hegel's notion of social existence, but he incorporated it into his theory of material, rather than mental existence (Santilli, 1973, p. 82). Conscious experience, according to Marx, "only arises from the need and necessity of relationships with other men and is thus from the very beginning a social product and will remain so as long as men exist." (1845/1967, pp. 421-422). Similarly, George Herbert Mead (1934) argued that an individual can only have a self by means of what a social group reflects back to him. His friend, John Dewey also had a similar view: he conceptualized the mind as constituted by communities, and not individual subjectivity (1934/1985, pp. 267-268; see also Hildebrand, 2023, § 2.7).

Figures like Dewey worked with one foot in philosophy and the other in psychology, but this became rare by the second half of the twentieth century. The enterprise of generating new ways to say that there is no individual self split into two semi-insulated communities: philosophy and social psychology. In the social psychology circle, Kenneth Gergen is preeminent, though many others have also contributed in the past several decades. Gergen (1997, 2011) provides succinct yet thorough overviews of the project and its contributors in social psychology. But more importantly, in a 2009 book, Gergen forms a particular argument that, as he sees it, undergirds the entire edifice of social psychology's elaborations on the social self (p. xxiv). In order to fully eliminate the individual self, rather than to just describe how the self is affected by others, Gergen applies Wittgenstein's ideas on language, apparently unaware that the same thing had been done in the philosophy camp fourteen years prior.

Aristotle's basic idea of contextual existence had a little renaissance in the 1980s and 1990s as a reaction against John Rawls' theory of justice. Political philosophers such as Charles Taylor disputed Rawls' assumption that the principal task of government is to secure and distribute liberties and resources to individuals (Bell, 2022). This movement against individualism in the upper reaches of Anglo-American academia became known as communitarianism. There were several other main figures in the movement including Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer. But it was Charles Taylor who formed the primary argument for fundamental inseparability of self and community. His line of thinking makes an assault on Augustine's and Descartes' individualized thought by invoking Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language (Taylor, 1995).

To readers who are not apt to doubt the existence of the individual self, most of the social psychology literature, including Lowery's 2023 book, can be read as a collection of descriptions of how the self is affected by others. But a self affected by others can still be an individual self. There needs to be a further argument for those who want to conclude that there is no individual self. Taylor and Gergen both found that argument. There are pieces in Lowery's book that can be taken together as reaching halfway to the argument. So in addition to critiquing the specific things written by Lowery, I'll critique the further argument. This way, I'll be critiquing what I see as the best version of Lowery's book that could have been written, and the general enterprise of individual self eliminativism.

Lowery's Case for a Socially Constituted Self

First let's see how Lowery presents his formulation. He describes an experiment performed by Margaret Shih and colleagues, in which they primed Asian women to think of themselves either as Asians or as women, before having them take a math test. According to Shih, those who were primed to think of their Asianness scored higher on the test than those who were primed to think of their womanhood (Shih et al., 1999). Lowery's takeaway is that the way you relate to others shapes your self, and is your self. "When people thought about themselves as Asian American or as women, their relationships with others shifted and their test performance changed — a tangible result. And that is a *literal* change in their selves. The self *is* what others reflect back to us" (p. 7). Note that in this particular passage, Lowery makes a logical jump from: 1. The self is causally *affected* by relationships, to 2. The self *is* just relationships. Readers might want and expect a section of the book to clearly argue that 2 follows from 1, but the book has no such section. However, a partial argument can be reconstructed by the reader. Though not framed as the key link between 1 and 2, Lowery makes the point that experiencing our existence depends not just on raw sensory input, but on interpretation of the input as objects which have meaning, and we get that meaning from society. For example, to experience a rose is to experience

the feelings and categories that society associates with roses (p. 39). Plausibly, there is no mental existence without meaningful concepts, and concepts get their meaning from society. But this is only a partial argument because it still has not proven that being *affected* by society is the same as *being* society. The meaningful concepts which facilitate your experiential existence are plausibly *from* society; their causal origin depended on society. But right now, the concepts are in *your* head. Where they came from is not the same as what they are.

The central and recurring flaw in Lowery's argument is that he conflates causal influences on the self with the self itself. Just because one thing is influenced by another does not mean the things are metaphysically inseparable. A secondary flaw is that not all of the studies referenced by Lowery are of high quality. The stereotype effect reported by Shih et al. does not reliably replicate, and is likely not a real effect for most Asian women (Moon and Roeder, 2014; Warne, 2022). But we already know without needing any particular psychology experiments that we're affected by the people and communities around us. But if being affected by some entity necessarily ties your identity to that entity, that proves far too much. I was affected by a squirrel that ran in front of my car this morning. Does this mean my self is inseparable from the squirrel? There doesn't seem to be any principle in Lowery's book that would rule this out. It would seem I am now not just a social-self, but a social-squirrel-self. And so the unconventional entities which compose your self explode in number and kind. Countless things change you in unexpected ways, and even define you. For most humans, being bipedal is one of many defining characteristics. Some even take it as an identity: "I'm a runner." "I'm a hiker." But walking is necessarily done in relation to something else. One by definition can't walk without walking on the ground. So now the dirt is inseparable from the self. If this conclusion is to be avoided, then merely being affected or standing in some relation to an entity can not make that entity fundamentally indistinguishable from the self.

So is that the end for Lowery's main point? Not quite. He gestures toward the social meanings of the concepts through which we experience existence. Though incomplete, that is the beginning of an argument which fills in the basic logical gap between the causal influences on the self and the self itself. However, the argument needs to be developed one step beyond what's in Lowery's book. The complete argument, developed by Taylor and later by Gergen, will be described here. That way, I can critique this most rigorous version of Lowery's main point. Lowery's example of experiencing a rose is a good place to begin sketching the full argument. A rose can't be experienced without invoking in some way ideas about what a rose is. It's a flower, a symbol of love, an organism, a product, etc. It's not experienced as meaningless streams of red and green photons. The rose is always experienced *as* something. As what? That depends on meaning. Experience seems to be inseparable from meaning, and meanings can plausibly be said to come to us from other people and society. I didn't decide that certain patterns of red and

green photons symbolize love. Nor for that matter did I decide what love is. So an experiencing thinking being would seem to be inseparable from societal meanings. Lowery gets this far.

But at this point, the argument still depends on the erroneous assumption that causal dependency implies non-individuated existence. So far, there is no reason to rule out the possibility that the meaningful concepts in your mind are causally derived from society, but now exist in *your* individual mind. If you can be changed by interactions with elements of the world that are not you (such as squirrels), then why would it not be the case that you could interact with meanings from society, which shape your internal meanings, but are not literally identical to your internal meanings? For the argument from socially constructed meanings to be complete, it needs a further step: an argument that meanings *can not be* individualized. This is what Taylor and Gergen tried to derive from Wittgenstein.

Taylor's and Gergen's More Complete Argument for a Socially Constituted Self

Taylor begins forming his communitarian ontology in an influential essay titled "Atomism," in which he points out that "the free individual or autonomous moral agent can only achieve and maintain his identity in a certain type of culture" (1985, p. 205). This claim on its own is fairly innocuous. Of course society causally influences the things that we become. But Taylor asserts that the role of society in developing individuals is not merely causal (1985, p. 209). He does not justify this assertion in "Atomism." Instead, he merely states this claim, framing it as "open[ing] up questions about the nature of the subject and the conditions of human agency" (1985, p. 210). Taylor's best enunciation of his view of the relationship between the individual and the collective came later in an essay called "Irreducibly Social Goods," in which he explains why he believes that what we value in individuals is in principle inseparable from society, not merely caused by society. It is in this essay that Taylor takes the argument beyond the point where Aristotle and Lowery stop: he argues that meanings can not be individualized.

Taylor writes, "Thoughts exist as it were in a dimension of meaning and require a background of available meanings in order to be the thoughts that they are" (1995, p. 131). He goes on to say that the background of meaning is a sort of language, and that the locus of the language is in a "linguistic community," not in individuals (1995, p. 131). This "language" of meaning is not merely some particular named language of words and punctuation like the English language. But it is a language in the sense that within it, concepts and sensations relate to each other in a meaningful coherent way. In consonance, Gergen writes:

The question emerges as to whether it is possible to eliminate entirely the "thinker behind the words." Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) provides the groundwork for such a venture In the same way that one cannot achieve

intelligibility by using a word of his own creation, one's actions will not make sense if they do not borrow from a cultural tradition. (Gergen, 2011, pp. 646–647)

Since meaning requires a sort of language, Taylor's strategy is to invoke an interpretation of Wittgenstein that supposedly rules out individual meaning (thus individual thought) by ruling out the intelligibility of a "private language" (1995, p. 133). The claim is that a private language is impossible because the user of the language would be unable to establish meanings for its signs without reference to some external meaning (Candlish and Wrisley, 2014, §1). That is, the private linguist would have no criterion to determine whether her belief about the definition of her symbol is correct.

This raises interesting questions about the nature and limits of language itself. But it does not imply what Taylor wants it to imply. One reason it fails is that the same problem is present in the actual act of using any ordinary public language. In a public language, all meaning ostensibly originates in the world external to the thinker (in the social world). In Taylor's formulation, this external background of meaning provides a criterion for determining whether belief about the definition of a symbol is correct. But in actual language use, a speaker's beliefs about the correctness of definitions of symbols can only reference her *internalizations of the external meaning*. Only those internalizations are available as criteria for determining whether belief about the definition of a symbol is correct in the actual act of speaking or thinking in any public language.

Wittgenstein demonstrates the problem of determining correctness like this: "[In a private language] whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'" (1953/1967, §258). In Taylor's and Gergen's readings, this disintegration of rightness purportedly makes private language unintelligible and thus impossible. The argument seems to be that a legitimate language holds meaning; without the capacity for rightness, a language can have no meaning; and since a private language apparently can not have rightness, it can not have meaning, and can not be a language at all.

But the disintegration of rightness applies equally well to public language. Or at least it applies to any actual usage event of a public language. When I think or speak in English, I use words in a way that, to the best of my ability, match the way the words are used by most English users. But the only thing to which I can actually associate a word as I use it is *my impression* of the way the word is used by most English users. So is my usage of the word correct? At the moment of usage (in the actual act of thinking or speaking), whatever is going to seem right to me is right, because my usage of the word can only be checked against my impression of how the word is to be used. After the fact, I may learn that most English speakers use the word in a very different way, at which point I may say that I misused the word. But this correction still relies on my internal impression of the external world, just like my original belief about the meaning of the word. If the correction

happened three seconds ago, how could I reference it except through my own memory? In the act of thinking in the present, whatever definition seems right to me is right. There is no other standard by which I could possibly judge rightness.

Here is another way to see the problem in Taylor's Wittgensteinian language argument. Suppose again that I misuse an English word, and later I am corrected by the public. This correction, which happens after my misuse of a word, can not reach back in time to change the nature of my thoughts and speech in the time when those thoughts and speech actually exist. That is, the correction is not relevant in my actual act of thinking or speaking, which occurred before the correction. If I were never corrected, I may continue my entire life thinking in an English that maybe no one else in the world would understand. Would that make all of my thoughts nonsense? Would it make my thoughts impossible? Could I not live life and solve real problems in my accidentally private English? And do I not have an accidentally private English right now? It is almost certain that my impressions of the common uses of some words are wrong. I do not know which of my impressions of word use are wrong. If I knew, I would not have those wrong impressions anymore. So every time I think or speak in English, whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that means that here, in an ostensibly public language, we can't talk about "right." In Taylor's and Gergen's readings of Wittgenstein, this same disintegration of rightness is supposed to make private languages unintelligible and thus impossible. So it should just as well make public languages unintelligible and thus impossible. But Taylor, Gergen, and I agree that public languages are not impossible. And that would mean that Wittgenstein's disintegration of rightness does not actually make any language, public or private, impossible. Wittgenstein's disintegration of rightness may tell us something about the nature or limits of language. But if we agree that language exists at all, then it must not imply the nonexistence of any language, since it applies equally well to all languages, public or private. Thus Taylor's and Gergen's invocations of Wittgenstein do not show that there can be no private language.

Since the argument fails, individualized meaning and thought are still possible. But I want to show not only that individualized meaning is possible, but that it is the way things really are. To do that, I'll use a thought experiment.

A Thought Experiment

Consider one solitary person isolated in a closed room. It is true that this person has a history in society, and that her history has shaped who she is and what she thinks. But we should distinguish between what caused a thing and the thing itself. So even if we assume that all of the notions in this person's mind came in some way from society, and have been copied into her mind with high fidelity, we are still left with a thinking being who is now removed from her prior causes. At this moment, there is no communication between society and that individual.

She has thoughts, which have meanings. Since her mind has been produced by society, it may seem that the meanings are societal meanings. But even if all of her definitions and ideas came from society, the precise combination of definitions and ideas which she has and which she lacks is slightly different from that of anyone else in the society. (She may know slightly more about board games and artisan bookbinding than anyone else, and completely lack knowledge of Eastern European geography.) The uniqueness of even a mind which has been straightforwardly filled with notions from society will lead to the production of meanings which are shared by no one.

People may be driven by deterministic causes, yet are highly unpredictable in many dimensions of thought and behavior. A small initial difference between the thoughts of two minds can quickly lead to large differences as thoughts progressively build on each other over time. Given a little time, our isolated subject in the room will have an original thought with content and valence which differ slightly from that of any thought previously conceived in her society. The isolated thinker names the novel thought S_0 (people actually can name new experiences, since language is not impossible). Now the thinker forms more new thoughts which are intelligible only in reference to S_0 , which is a private concept, since it is shared by no one.

A defender of Taylor's and Gergen's views may want to say that S_0 is only intelligible in reference to the societal background of meaning, and thus the meanings of the isolated thinker's new thoughts are all still inseparable from social meaning. To answer that objection, I'll use a twist in the story to illustrate the difference between the prior cause of a person and the person herself. Our solitary thinker remains a few hours in her thoughts, then exits her isolation bunker. She finds that every other human in the world had been killed by a meteor one second after she had entered isolation. Throughout the duration of her isolation, there was no society. There was no group-based background of meaning, since there was no group.¹ Even though we stipulated that the isolated person's mind came *from* society, it clearly was not inseparable from society. Her thoughts had meaning in the isolation bunker. Finding out that no society existed during those thoughts does not retroactively remove all meaning from the thoughts. Since her thoughts and their meanings would have been the same whether all other humans were alive or dead, the meaning must be individualized, not inherently social.

So individual meaning is possible, but does it require such contrived extreme circumstances as that? No; notice that in the seconds after closing the bunker door, in the moment when unbeknownst to the survivor, all other people are

¹Lowery claims that people still exist in some sense after their physical deaths and the oblivion of their conscious experiences, so he may want to object that society is not really wiped out with the vast majority of people, so long as its features are still efficacious in the lone conscious physical survivor. But by this standard, the dinosaurs would also still exist, as they would still affect the mind of the lone survivor. This is simply not what "exist" means.

eradicated, her ability to form meaningful thoughts is wholly unaffected. So her ability to think never fundamentally depended on other people or society at all. This thought experiment reveals the distinction between a thing's prior causes and the thing itself. Though it is empirically true that your internal locus of meaning has been shaped by the actions of people around you (roughly referred to as culture or society), this is a mere causal contingency. Your existence and current state is also causally dependent on innumerable other things such as squirrels and the tidal forces of the moon. Squirrels affect your behaviors and thoughts. Tidal forces determined which locales could be port cities, which set up the field of play for economic activity that formed nations, which formed you. Taylor, Gergen, and Lowery would not be tempted to identify you with squirrels and the moon, so we must all agree that the causal forces which are so necessary for explaining why a person is the way she is are usually quite separable from the self of that person. Since a surviving person would be able to think and speak in meaningful ways after all others had been wiped out, all of those other people hold the same relation to the survivor as do squirrels and the moon: they are causal forces which are necessary for explaining why the survivor is the way that she is, but they are separable from the survivor herself.

Freedom

Besides Lowery's central claim about the supposed social construction of the self, he also argues that because selves are socially constituted, humans can never really be free from each other, and thus should not pursue freedom as a political goal. He points out that in normal life, there is always someone stopping you from doing some things. By "stopping you" he means interacting with you in any way whatsoever. "Whether I explicitly stop you from doing a thing or induce you to do a thing, I've reduced your freedom. There are fewer options after you encounter me than there were before Sometimes a person's mere presence creates obligation — think of parents whose freedom is drastically curtailed by the arrival of their helpless little newborns" (pp. 67–68). No matter what interactions you have with other people, they come with constraints. If you have one interaction, you have to miss out on having a different interaction. And the interaction will change you, at which point you won't be free to not have been changed.

But nothing about this is necessarily social, nor does it rule out freedom as a coherent goal. If I were on an island alone, I could eat a coconut. But my interaction with the coconut constrains me for the time from going fishing, and it changes me into a coconut eater. This is the same kind of constraint that Lowery attributes to the social world, but it is really just a result of the irreversibility of time; there's nothing social about my interactions with coconuts on a deserted island. And the ubiquity of constraints on my behavior does not make freedom an incoherent goal. I have never been free to fly like Superman, but if I find myself

unfree to walk around or to go skydiving, then I can coherently pursue *more* freedom, while never expecting to attain *absolute* freedom. Strangely, Lowery argues that since constraints are ubiquitous in the social world, we can never be absolutely free, and so more freedom is not a coherent goal.

Lowery also claims that freedom is incoherent because we each have “different selves,” which have different ideas of the best thing to do (p. 70). As an example, he says that as a son, he might think that prioritizing his safety is right because that’s what his mother wants; but as a man, he might think that standing up for himself is right, even if it’s dangerous. Rather than “different selves,” these could be called different aspects or different dimensions of the self. When deciding what to do, we can take multiple dimensions of the self into account. We might decide some dimensions are more important than others, or we might optimize across multiple dimensions simultaneously. Mathematically, this would be known as multi-objective optimization, Pareto optimization, vector optimization, or multiattribute optimization. I do not expect people to actually make these formal calculations. I bring them up just to show that there are logical ways of optimizing across multiple dimensions. There’s nothing incoherent about seeking to maximize the freedom of the whole self, with multiple aspects of the self considered.

Implications and Conclusion

In his conclusion, Lowery speculates about the motivations of those who disagree with his view. “If you live in comfort or enjoy significant social privileges, my arguments might be uncomfortable” (p. 225). Since motives are on the table for discussion, let’s examine some of Lowery’s own. Though not the direct topic of his book, Lowery advocates for enforced racial equity (Chow et al., 2021). But any action taken to advance equity requires a judgment about who has been advantaged and who has been disadvantaged. If we were concerned with equity between individuals, we might think that a professor at Stanford University, paid roughly \$300,000 per year, must have had some kind of advantage over a person who is currently homeless. If one is truly dedicated to equity, yet he benefits from great disparities in money and status between himself and others, then one straightforward recommendation might be that he would “sell his possessions and give to the poor” (Matthew 19:21). But fortunately for Brian Lowery, that is not what the contemporary establishment’s obsession with equity is about. By focusing on equity between races rather than between individuals, today’s savvy moralist need not trouble himself with too much personal skin in the game. Lowery advocates for the same tack taken by the five highest revenue corporations in the United States, the five wealthiest universities, the President of the United States, the Vice President of the United States, the Secretary of the Treasury, and the Secretary of State. None of these entities are concerned with equity between individuals; they are concerned with equity between

racess, as they state on their corporate websites and in their executive orders (Apple Inc., 2023; Astor, 2019; Biden, 2021; Blinken, 2021; Callahan, 2002; Castleberry, 2022; Driscoll, 2020; Harris and Yellen, 2022; Harvard Business School, 2023; Princeton University, 2023; Reif, 2020; Salovey and Argyris, 2021; UnitedHealth Group Inc., 2023; Walmart Inc., 2023).

Those of us who are slow to embrace this Walmart-approved morality might wonder, among other things: If we're supposed to want equity, why would we not prefer equity amongst individuals rather than races? What if Walmart doesn't really know what's best for us? That's where Lowery's socially constituted self view comes in: there aren't really any individuals, so the individual can't be the relevant unit of moral analysis; only groups such as races can deserve equity. Under the old moral ontology of individuals, it would have seemed hypocritical to preach equity while keeping a position of advantage for oneself. But in this new iteration of social moral ontology, one can hold great personal advantages while also being a heroic avatar of the downtrodden. In accordance with Walmart morality, such a person should receive still more promotions in status and income if he "represents" some disadvantaged group. It is irrelevant whether he as an individual is less deserving than some other individual, because individuals aren't really there anyway — or so Lowery attempts to argue.

Though it covers well-trodden philosophical ground, Lowery's book will appeal to readers who enjoy explorations in the space where psychology and philosophy meet. Throughout, Lowery mentions findings from social psychology — some obvious, some nonobvious, some true, some dubious. For my purpose of disputing the main point of Lowery's book, most of the psychological findings do not need to be disputed. What they all have in common is that they are mechanisms of cause and effect. Other people cause effects in you. My central point in this critical notice is that relations of cause and effect are not nearly sufficient to count as fundamental inseparability. So there's not much relevance to the facts that our postures are affected by other people's postures (p. 87), that our facial expressions are affected by our cultures (p. 14), and so on. There is no way such findings could ever add up to equal the metaphysical conclusion that there is nothing to the self but its social relations. The relevant philosophical arguments from Lowery also do not work, even in their more complete form from Taylor and Gergen. Since Lowery's book fails to effectively argue its central claim, it fails to justify the assumptions underlying Walmart morality. Those who care to have coherent reasons behind their moral zeal may instead want to consider moral systems based on individualism, as described by Frederick Douglass. He wrote regarding his escape from slavery in a published letter to his former slave master:

The morality of the act [of escaping], I dispose as follows: I am myself; you are yourself; we are two distinct persons, equal persons. What you are, I am. You are a man, and so am I. God created both, and made us separate beings. I am not by

nature bound to you, or you to me. Nature does not make your existence depend upon me, or mine to depend upon yours. (Douglass, 1848)

The idea of a fundamentally individualized self makes a lot more sense than the notion of a socially constituted self. It would take a lot more than what Brian Lowery's book has to offer to change that.

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