All clowns are masked and all personae
Flow from choices; sad and gay, wise,
Moody and humorous are chosen faces,
And yet not so! For all circumstances,
Given, like a tendency
To colds or like blond hair and wealth
Or war and peace or gifts from the ground,
Stick to us in time, surround us:
Socrates is mortal.

"All Clowns are Masked"
Delmore Schwartz, 1938

Anthropology has important contributions to make in extending the study of the self. An integrated and cumulative body of anthropological theory relevant to the self has yet to be realized. Nevertheless, it is possible to connect several lines of theory to suggest converging general orientations and research strategies bearing on the study of the self and related ideas. In addition, the ever-expanding comparative ethnographic record constitutes a valuable resource that can be exploited to examine the broader applicability or inapplicability of Western conceptions of the self--as well as to investigate, in their own right, self concepts that have developed independent of Western influence.

Anthropologists have historically displayed both an explicit and an implicit concern with the self and related concepts. [1] The late nineteenth-century British evolutionists focused primary attention on the idea of progress as it
was manifested in the cumulative accretions of generic cultural growth and in the orthogenic development of supposedly universal institutions. They anchored their theories in a conception of the human mind that operated under a self-evident, if not selfish, philosophy of utilitarianism and that adopted an appropriate logic of self-conscious "rational" choice. This self-fulfilling methodological individualism viewed the human actor as operating, to some extent, independently of social and cultural constraints. Contemporary reactions to aspects of British evolutionism arose in Germany and France.

Nascent German social science was strongly influenced by idealistic philosophy. Völkerpsychologie (as elaborated by Steinthal and Lazarus, Wundt, and others) stressed the existence of the group mind or collective identity, a construct based in part on biology but more decisively shaped by the cumulative effects of history and tradition. While developmentalism and transformation were parts of the overarching schemes, there was recognition of varying Volkgeisten (or ethé)—or to use Adolf Bastian's term, Völkergedenken, 'folk ideas'—produced by the different geographical situations (geographische Provincen) and historical experiences of human groups. [2] Methodological individualism, however, continued to prevail in the sense that group psychology was conceived of as an individual psychology writ large. Various cultural institutions were seen as differentially reflective of separate faculties of the individual mind. [3]

Wilhelm Wundt rejected the simple Lockean tabula rasa/cause-and-effect/stimulus-response psychology of British associationism. Conation, or will, was coordinate with cognition; affects formed an important part of his system; and processes of apperception could shape and transform sensory perception. The individual mind—and by extension, the collective mind—was capable of creative synthesis based upon particular past experiences, the momentary state of the apperceiving mind, and a whole host of other contingent factors. Cause and effect, stimulus and response, could not be understood without recourse to the intervening mediation of the apperceptive mass. The Boasian notion of cultural integration and the particularistic resynthesis of diffused culture traits are direct analogues of the apperceiving individual mind. [4]