

## A philosophical study of the self: An overview

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### Abstract

Self is commonly understood as 'ego', 'consciousness', 'soul', 'identity', 'person' etc. Like 'self', identity is the concept that connects the individual and the social and is also fluid and shaped through past and present, but unlike identity it does not refer to membership of any trajectory like community. Being nearer to the terms 'ego' and 'consciousness' as a psychological make-up, 'self' is a reflexive project. Philosophers had defined subjectivity in terms of reason, human spirit or the simple act of perception. The Ancient philosophers namely Descartes, Rousseau, Kant and modern philosophers namely David Hume, Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Lacan have tried to study self and have given their viewpoints.

**Keywords:** Self, Subjectivity, identity, Consciousness.

### Introduction

Although 'self' has been the axis of all philosophical and theological reflections, the term 'self' is difficult to be defined. This is perhaps the reason that all philosophers in all times have tried to interpret according to their own ways. Even one philosopher used different words for 'self' as synonyms. Locke is inexact in his use of the terms " 'person', 'self', 'soul', 'man' and 'thinking things' " (Atkins 30). Commonly used terms for the self are 'identity' 'ego', 'consciousness', 'person' and 'soul' etc. Like self, identity is the concept that "connects the individual and the social" (Segura 17) and is also fluid and shaped through past and present, but unlike identity it does not refer to membership of any trajectory like community. Being nearer to the terms 'ego' and 'consciousness' as a psychological makeup, 'self' is a "reflexive project" (Tucker 205) which is closely linked to the question of agency and subjectivity. That is why philosophers do not remain much concerned to define 'self' as an episteme as it is to investigate it as a process.

'Consciousness' is an ambiguous term that may refer to a faculty, an intrinsic property as against a state of sleep or comatose, a relational property as to a concrete object, or just a thought. Yet the phenomenology of 'self' is fundamental to consciousness. It "is the sense of self constituted by body part ownership and action ownership of agency" (Head 494) that led Gallagher to attribute it a non-observative perspective. The sense of doer ship or the sense of individual existence compels man to believe that he must fight in the world for his existence even though unaware and unconscious of its true nature. From the very beginning, Freud was trying to define the term 'ego'. First, he used it to refer to the conscious personality or the individual 'self'. But later on he conceived it as a mental regulatory agency, "For Freud initially, the idea of "ego" referred only to what was conscious; he soon came to realize, however, that the 'ego' put up its own existence against the repressed material becoming conscious" (qtd. in Quindoz 205). He developed the idea of ego as a result of identificatory processes showing how it mediated between id and superego. It has been observed that "the ego is the actual seat of anxiety"

(209) Freud defined 'ego' in the light of three layers of the mind—Id, Ego and Superego. The term 'ego' is often associated with mind and sense of time and seems concerned with future existence instead of knowing its own 'self' and the present. Ego has been defined in Encyclopedia Britanica as, "in psychoanalytic theory, that portion of the human personality which is experienced as the "self" or "I" and is in contact with the external world through perception" ("Ego: Philosophy and Psychology"). The spiritual goal of many traditions has been invariably to know the 'self' and overcome ego. Hence 'self' comes closest to 'consciousnesses'.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Descartes (1596-1650), a French philosopher and mathematician, who is also known as the father of modern philosophy, gave the idea of "self" which takes the central place in the western philosophical tradition. Descartes merely stipulates that mind is the property that distinguishes beings from other entities. He mainly focuses on the autonomy of the Ist person i.e. 'I'. Descartes writes: "'I am'" precisely taken refers only to a 'conscious' being; that is a Mind, a soul (animus), an intellect, a reason- words whose meaning did not previously know. I am a real being and really exist; but what sort of being? As I said, a conscious being" (69). In this context, when Descartes refers to consciousness, he seems to mean a general awareness of the world, rather than merely logical or rational thought. He is of the opinion that factors such as gender, race, social status and upbringing are irrelevant to capture the idea of 'self'. However this kind of perspective seems to have crucial consequences for the centuries to come. Descartes is of the opinion that being able to think is itself a proof of existence. He believes that our perception is forced upon us rather than we perceive space through our minds directly. Vincent Descombes has pointed out:

'I think, therefore I am', the 'I' he described was not limited to Rene Descartes. Although he does not simply leave his own selfhood behind, this philosophical formulation claims to describe a faculty of reflection that links human interiority together everywhere. (qtd. in Mansfield 3)

Since Descartes's concept is immaterial, unrelated/unaffected by body and physical experience, 'I' even if thinking, observant 'self' lacks agency to participate in the world.

John Locke (1632-1704), an English philosopher and physician, regarded as one of the most influential of enlightened thinkers, gives his theory of mind which is often cited as the origin of modern conception of 'identity' and 'self'. He is the first to define 'self' as continuity of consciousness. He claims that the mind is a blank slate. He maintains that we are born without innate ideas and that knowledge is instead determined only by experience derived from sense perception. He defines "self" as:

that conscious thinking thing [whatever substances, made up of whether spiritual or material or compounded, it matters not] which is sensible conscious of pleasure and pain, capable of happiness and misery, and is considered for itself as for that consciousness extends. (Locke "Of Identity and Diversity")

Locke is of the opinion that two different things cannot have begun at the same time and place. It, therefore, indicates a basis for the first application of the idea of identity in terms of location as the beginning in time and space.

David Hume on the contrary (1711-1776), one of the most influential French philosophers of modern period, claims that the notion of 'identity' is one we apply to something that persists, in an invariable way, over time. He maintains that there are connections between different objects in succession that have a close relation to each other and we assume that as identity. He observes that perceptions make up human experiences and they are either impressions or the ideas. In the "Appendix" of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume writes:

We only feel a connection or a determination of the thought, to pass from one object to the other. It follows, therefore, that the thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions that compose a mind; the ideas of them are felt to be connected together. (qtd. in Waxman 488)

Hume impresses upon us that 'self' is the object of pride and humility. These two things are closely connected with 'self'. We feel elated by pride and dejected with humility. If 'self' does not enter into our consideration, there is no room for pride and humility. According to Hume it seems logically impossible to feel proud and not attend to oneself. So these passions are positive and negative evaluation of 'self'. In short, for Hume, 'self' is actually a composite of mind and body.

Both Locke and David Hume refuted Descartes. While Locke linked identity to same consciousness through memory in spite of psychological transitivity, Hume refuted metaphysical self though at the same time he "confess [es], I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" (qtd. in Atkins 44). Hume acknowledged the role of perception in knowing the 'self' and propounded the theory of 'self' as "the bundle of perceptions that comprise a single mind (45) and that 'self' is merely a fiction' that we construct from the illusion of identity in consciousness generated by imagination (46). Atkins has concluded that "I", as thinking being (soul), is substance and the soul is conscious and therefore it is a person. However 'I' is not a 'substance' because it cannot be represented and that it is a thinking being which is countered with an argument that only a soul thinks.

Another thinker, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), whose work is the fruition of the new emphasis on the 'self' as the ground of human existence in the world, emphasizes in his

*Confessions* (1781) the uniqueness and autonomy, the absolute governing freedom of individual. He writes:

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, experience. It can be seen this from its opening: once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different... (qtd. in Mansfield 16)

Here Rousseau makes it quite clear that every individual has his own characteristics that make him different from others. According to Rousseau's model, the individual is self-contained and complete, but society presses it from the outside, frustrating its dreams and restricting its ability to express itself.

The author that developed the Cartesian (followers of Descartes/relating to Descartes) perspective in the most appealing way is Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who was recognized by his contemporaries as one of the seminal philosophers of modern times and indeed as one of the great philosophers of all the time. Kant takes up the three Paralogisms. According to the first, 'I' is a thinking thing (soul). Since we do not have intuitions of the soul, 'I' as soul cannot be represented. Secondly, soul is simple and not a knowledge claim because it is neither an analytical presentation, nor a synthetic one (qtd. in Atkins 49). Thirdly 'I' as a consciousness of identity endures over time because 'I' accompanies each of the person's thoughts at any time, giving 'I' and 'consciousness' an impression of temporal unity. According to him, each person is an autonomous being capable of envisaging courses of action that transcends any ecological relationships namely customs, upbringing, gender, race, social status, emotional situation etc. This concept of the autonomy of the 'self' plays a central role in the formulation of human rights according to which each and every human being is entitled to such rights precisely because (s)he is an autonomous agent.

'Self' for Kant is something real yet it is neither appearance nor a thing in itself; it has some third status. Appearances for Kant arise in time and space where these are respectively forms of outer and inner attending (intuition). Melnick explains the "third status" by identifying the 'self' with intellectual action that does not arise in the progression of attending but accompanies and unifies inner attending and is therefore temporal (vii). He further maintains that the distinction between 'self' or the 'subject' and its thought is a distinction wholly within intellectual action.

According to Kant every experience has 'a prior structure' that arises not from things as they are independently of the mind, but from the mind itself. Human mind/knowledge does not conform to objects rather they conform to knowledge of them. Thus human mind is a necessary condition of knowledge, which attributes human a subjectivity. 'I' is no more seen as a thing; 'self' is not a fiction but "a part of structure of consciousness" (qtd. in Atkins 38). Kantian perspectives, though declined in several different versions over the past two centuries, constitute one of the strongest and most interesting theoretical cores attributing a central role to the 'self'. Kant also maintains that there are two kinds of consciousness of 'self': consciousness of oneself and one's psychological states

in inner sense and consciousness of oneself and one's states via performing acts of apperception. The former is termed as empirical self-consciousness and the latter is termed as transcendental apperception. The sources of these two kinds of consciousness are very different. The source of empirical self-consciousness is what Kant called inner sense. On the contrary some noted authors of this area feel that 'self' is dynamic, an entity which is constantly in the making. Selfing is a more proper term to express such an entity.

On the other hand, Kant impresses upon us that human beings experience only appearances, not things in themselves; and that space and time are only subjective forms of human intuition that would not subsist in them if one were to abstract from all subjective conditions of human intuition. Kant names it as "transcendental idealism" (qtd. in Ziccardi). He says that all our intuition is nothing. It is the representation of appearance that matters. The things that we intuit are not in themselves as they appear to us. If we remove our own subject or the senses in general, all relations of objects in space and time would disappear, for appearances cannot exist in themselves. Kant talks about those features of mind that constituted lap making self-consciousness a pre-condition of the making of an experiential subject and since 'I' is the 'same consciousness' experienced over different period of time, 'I' as the subject is the unifying factor. Hence mind has the potential to unify one's experience under one subsisting subject. Man's identity, observed Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), is threatened by the metaphysical systems in which his nature is irrevocably fixed. Kierkegaard discovers the real identity of man in his 'inner self' which is the 'true self'. To him, subjectivity is truth and reality. Hence, it is this inner self, which constitutes the real identity of a man. Identity is the projection of the subjective self-person; it depends on how he pictures himself, and his endeavors for the acquisition and formation of this self-image through a quest for identity.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a 20<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher has also given his concept regarding self /subjectivity in response to the works of various philosophers. In his book, *Being and Time* (1926) Heidegger wrote:

In the course of this history certain distinctive domains of Being have come into view and have served as the primary guides for ego cogito subsequent problematics: the [I think] of Descartes, the subject, the 'I', reason, spirit, person. But these all remain uninterrogated as to their Being and its structure, in accordance with the thorough going way in which the question of being has been neglected. (qtd. in Mansfield 22)

Philosophers had defined subjectivity in terms of reason, human spirit or the simple act of perception. These various subjectivities selected some arbitrary feature of human experience and chose it as the key or lodestone to all. This was highly artificial and selective to Heidegger. His project, therefore, was to define our place in the world not in terms of some artificial construct, but in terms of the most fundamental aspect of life i.e being itself. There could be nothing more fundamental than the fact that 'we are'. Any other determination of the basic structures of human life must come after that. Therefore, it is to 'Being' that our attention should be addressed.

Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger incorporate in their pursuit of knowledge the pre-concepts of understanding ourselves, our way of being (Yagi 61). There is, therefore, a marked shift from reason/knowledge to reason/existence. Kierkegaard

described 'self' as "a relation which relates to itself" (qtd. in Thulstrup 56) and that "a human being is not yet a self" (56) till he/she qualifies as a 'self'. Body is the synthesis of psyche and body and the third dimension of spirit is to qualify human beings as a 'self'. The addition of spirit can be negative as in innocence but is empowering when done by degree of reflection (Yagi 64). It is because human understanding of 'being' remains obscure and is taken for granted as indefinable or universal. The question, therefore, who I am? Is more than a mere question. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of Being (65), a stage which Heidegger calls "Dasein" (qtd. in Hornsby "What Heidegger means by Being-in-the-World"). In this way Heidegger's conception of 'self' gives a deep insight to investigate the fundamental manner in which human beings relates to the work and himself that attributes it an individuality. Kierkegaard posits that our knowledge of 'self' is subjective, finite and temporal. He says, "Who I am and neglected existence, which became the main focus of Heidegger's philosophical argument of self because the condition that account for lap are contingent, finite and temporal" (qtd. in Yagi 60). While the concept of 'self' of Kierkegaard fails to grasp the possibilities, Heidegger's 'Dasein' conceptualizes a Being as opened up to the world with possibilities through it'self'. Subjectivity goes beyond in the concept of Dasein for it exists "as an entity which has to be as it is and as it can be" (qtd. in Yagi 71)

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) has also attempted to substantiate the formation of 'self'. His ultimate and most influential conclusion is that the unconscious is structured like a language. Lacan also describes the development of subjectivity as the result of the intrusion of something external into the ideal space of the pre-oedipal subject. In his work, the Freudian intuition becomes a complete theory of signification. In Lacanian theory, the critical stage for the development of subjectivity is called the 'mirror-stage' and it occurs usually between the ages of six and eighteen months. Prior to the mirror-stage, the child has no sense of itself as a separate entity. There is no understanding of the limits of the individual body, nor that there is necessarily anything external to it. The many surfaces that the child touches – the mother's skin, clothing, carpet-re real felt to be part of a continuous, uninterrupted, limitless being, so amorphous and open-ended that it cannot be compared to anything as located, specific and defined as selfhood. At this pre-oedipal stage there is no subjectivity. An aspect of this undefined state is that the child has no sense of the co-ordination of its limbs. In the same way that no surface with which the child comes into contact is felt to be necessarily alien to it, outside of the 'self', the child does not experience its body as its own, with a fixed perimeter and working as a unified system. In Lacan's words, "the mirror stage... manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of fantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (qtd. in Mansfield 42).

Ancient philosophers embody enlightenment and romantic ideals. For these thinkers, the 'self' is a singularity, a unity which is a prime and real. It exists throughout time. It does not change in any meaningful way; a person may undergo a change in personality, changes in opinions on this or that issue, but essentially, they have the same soul and 'self' for the duration of their lives. This, of course, gives rise to a certain way of looking at political engagement. Human rights,

property, and freedom are all to be traditionally thought in terms of this Kantian formulation of the 'self'. They are, according to natural law and Enlightenment thinkers innate and intrinsic to human existence. Freedom is something which can be possessed, which can be fought for, and which can be lost. In this way, resistance is considered as something which strives to ensure the maintenance of that which is guaranteed as rightfully belonging to the subject.

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