

## Featured article

# The Self: Between Autonomy and Heteronomy

by Dr Mark Sultana



A number of significant streams in contemporary philosophy tend to want to explain away autonomous self-consciousness and has the propensity to claim that self-awareness is only possible if the self is considered as an object. That is, the self is somehow constructed; it is really heteronomous. This leaves us with a number of related questions. One question is whether one could properly speak of a self. That is, could one speak of an 'I' as distinct from speaking of a 'me'? Another question has to do with the possibility of self-consciousness. One needs to ask whether self-consciousness is completely dependent on one's relationships with others and on one's belonging to a linguistic community. That is, is consciousness prior to self-consciousness, or is self-consciousness – in the strong subjective sense – the primordial human capability?

I want to show that the many denials of self in the philosophical literature seem wrong. I also want to say something about the rich conception of the self in ancient philosophy and the way in which controversies over the self in ancient and mediaeval philosophy could help to illumine our contemporary notion of the self.

I commence by noting that we can consider two paradigmatic ways of conceiving of the self in modern and contemporary philosophy. One trend is to consider the self to be the principle of identity that stands apart from the stream of consciousness and which structures, and gives unity and coherence to this stream. A second way is to see the self as something evolving in being realised through one's projects. One is not a self; one is the result of self-interpretation. This view takes the self to be a construction. Here we seem to be torn between an infinitesimally thin autonomous self and a thick plastic heteronomous self with very little possible communication between the two. Two interrelated questions arise: one wants to ask whether the first conception of self as 'I' could not plausibly be 'thicker' and one also queries whether the second notion of the self (the 'me') does not call for an anchor in a thicker 'I' self.

I then try to show that the 'I' or self as indexical is irreplaceable to guide actions and to have beliefs. I further want to show that the 'I' is irreducible to the 'me': the first person is irreducible to the third person. I go on to say that the narrative self presupposes a subject or owner of beliefs and actions, psychological states, and bodily characteristics; that is, idem needs ipse to retain a concept of the self who possesses a meaningful identity.

My conclusion is that there is a real difference between our consciousness of an external object and our self-consciousness: the first personal 'givenness' of one's self-consciousness appears to be irreducible to a third person account of any kind. Of course, one's self-knowledge – which also has to do with one's being with others and with one's experience in the world – is intertwined with, and greatly enriches, one's self-awareness. That being said, I show that the self, as a subjectively experiential dimension, is an integrated part of consciousness itself: self-consciousness does not arise from a prior conceptual distinction between oneself and the world nor does it arise from a notional difference between oneself and other selves; it is already involved in the very possibility of such distinctions.

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***Dr Mark Sultana***

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