THE SELF AND THERAPY

Historical Prelude

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *The Self and Therapy* by Jerome D. Levin Ph.D.

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For the ancient Hindus, the Atman was the Brahma: the Self Immanent was the Self Transcendent. For modern man, the very existence of a self has become problematic. From the 17th century on, there has been a powerful conflict between those who think that the self is either an illusion or a "grammatical fiction" and those who think that the self is our one indubitable datum, our only certainty. In our own time, the logical positivists view the self as a "meaningless" concept, while the phenomenologists view the self as the "ground" of any possible experience. Historically, it has been the empiricists who have cast doubt on the substantiality of the self, while the rationalists have affirmed its centrality in human experience. Clearly there is a problem—indeed a mystery—here. Philosophers, theologians, psychologists, and just plain folks have struggled to define and elucidate the nature of the self. It is a topic that intrigues people. The self to which we think we are so close eludes definition and, indeed, becomes more elusive as we attempt to grasp it. It has certainly eluded the long progression of philosophers and psychologists. The empiricists and the rationalists of the 17^{th} and 18^{th} centuries were succeeded by the German idealists of the 19th century and the existentialists of the 20^{th} century, all of whom had much to say about the self, but none of whom came up with entirely satisfying answers to its dilemmas. Contemporary psychoanalytic theorists are no less intrigued by the self and no more in agreement as to its nature. Which theory comes closest to the truth? What is this self that is so elusive? Is it an illusion? An organizing principle? A synthesis? Something experienced? Something substantive? Something that unfolds? Something that paradoxically develops only in relationship with others? Whatever the ontological status of the self may be, we do have a sense of self. How do we develop this sense? Can this process misfire? Is there a pathology of the self? If so, can anything be done to ameliorate that pathology? This book is an attempt to answer these questions.

Our experience of ourselves is paradoxical. We experience our selves as coherent and fragmented, as the same and as different, as ongoing and as disparate, as known and as unknown, as mundane and as esoteric. An adequate theory must be able to account for continuity as well as discontinuity, both of which are intrinsic to our experience of self. The same is true for the other antinomies of the self experience. Is there a theory that does so? I don't think that there is. What about the unconscious? How does this

primarily 20th-century notion impact on the various accounts of the self and its vicissitudes? Why the contemporary obsession with narcissism? We have never been so preoccupied with self as we are during a time when the very existence of a self is called into question by so many. Depersonalization is no longer so much a psychiatric diagnosis as it is a normative experience and a theoretical stance. The problematic nature of the self has become a central concern of the contemporary mind.

This book traces the history of the concept of the self from the philosophical controversies of the 17th century to the psychoanalytic controversies of the present day. This historical approach permits the explication of the major ways self has been accounted for or dismissed as illusionary. Along the way it attempts to give some tentative answers to the baffling questions left unanswered by both the philosophical and the psychological traditions. After exposition and criticism comes integration. I hope to cull what is valid in the competing philosophical, psychological, and psychoanalytic analyses of the self and integrate them into a view of the self that is both developmental and relational.

The theorists of self themselves had selves, and the history and experiences of those selves are not without relevance to the theorists' conceptualizations of self. Neither are their cultural and historical situations—what has been called the *existential context*. Accordingly, I shall have something to say about their lives as well as their theories.

In the course of our discussion, we are going to encounter a number of terms that refer to the self or aspects of it. They have not been used in any uniform or consistent way in either the philosophical or the psychological traditions, and that inconsistency further confuses an already confusing subject matter. These terms and the concepts they denote are *self, mind, consciousness, identity, personality,* and *self-concept*. I could give my own definitions now, but that would be to prejudge the very issue, the nature of the self, that for the present must remain indeterminate and continue to remain so until we have understood the very different ways in which self has been understood by our various authors. Suffice it to say that I do not wish to define *self* as either a bodily or a mental phenomenon, as either awareness or unconscious process, as either the sense of who we are or the relatively enduring traits we call personality, nor yet as the description we give of who we are. That is, I do not wish to prejudge to what extent self is, or is not, mind, body, both, consciousness, identity, personality, or self-concept. Definitions are prescriptive as well as descriptive. They are decisions—decisions I do not wish to make at this point.

To do so would be to beg the question. Rather, I will try to clarify how, and to what extent, each of our authors understands self in relation to the related concepts just enumerated and defines them in the context of their specific use. But it is well for you, the reader, to keep in mind this inherent confusion and to ask yourself at a given point whether self is appearing in the guise of mind, of consciousness, of body, of identity, or of personality and to ask, "Is this theorist able to justify his decision as to the nature of self?"

Having just said that I do not wish to define *self* at this point, I find that nevertheless I must define it to the extent that we know what we are talking about. This is paradoxical, but then so is the self.

The self is the ego, the subject, the I, or the me, as opposed to the object, or totality of objects—the *not me*. *Self* means "same" in Anglo-Saxon (Old English). So *self* carries with it the notion of identity, of meaning the selfsame. It is also the *I*, the personal pronoun, in Old Gothic, the ancestor of Anglo-Saxon. Thus, etymologically *self* comes from both the personal pronoun, *I*—I exist, I do this and that—and from the etymological root meaning "the same"—it is the same I who does this, who did that. All that sounds unproblematic, but this is far from the case.

As I have said, the self is elusive. Now you see it, now you don't. What is this slippery something we are trying to grasp? Is it a psychosomatic existence? Is it a verbal representation? Is it an organizing principle around which experience accretes? Is it substantial—indeed, the most substantive thing there is? Is it a kaleidoscope, a "mere" stream of thought and feeling? Does it evolve? Is it static? Is it something that unfolds? Is it an illusion? Is it a cybernetic program? Is it an act of synthesizing, or that which is synthesized? What is the ontological status of the self, and what is its phenomenal reality? Over the course of human history these questions have been pondered and answered in myriad ways. Charles Taylor (1989) and Julian Jaynes (1976) believe that not only the concept of the self but the self itself has evolved and changed over historical time, and this may be so.

For the ancients, the self was eternal, but for us the very existence of the self is in doubt, and this doubt constitutes a deep narcissistic wound, an affront to our pride that diminishes our self-esteem. When the ancient Hindus said the Atman was the Brahman, the Self Immanent was the Self Transcendent, they were adumbrating a notion of a self as the ground of reality, a ground that is both within and without us. The self within is that part of us that is beyond the reach of time. This is a notion

found in many cultures. The self in this sense is something like what is usually denoted the soul. For the Hindu sages, the task of man is clearing the delirium of desire and aversion so that this self, in its pure essence, can be experienced. This self is equated with a void, with Nirvana, with the eternal and transcendent in the universe; it is the Divine within, not in a personal sense but in a transpersonal one. Taoism and Buddhism have similar beliefs. The Biblical concept of the self is rather different. It is more personal. When God, speaking from the burning bush, says, "I Am who I Am," He is asserting personal identity, personhood being a more Western notion. The Hebrew notion of the soul always carries with it overtones of individuality. This notion differs importantly from the Eastern notion of self as something to be achieved or at least gotten in contact with. The self in Eastern traditions is that which must be uncovered by letting go, by nonaction, by detachment. Only then does the self within coalesce with self without, the identity of the self immanent with the self transcendent become manifest. This is paradoxical in two senses: separation leads to union, and inaction brings about profound change. There are similar ideas in the Western tradition, but the emphasis is rather different.

Western civilization is said to be the product of the interaction of two cultures, the Hebraic and the Hellenistic. The ancient Greeks invented philosophy and science as we know them. At first they were exclusively concerned with giving an account of the cosmos, with "natural philosophy"—what we would call *cosmology* or *physics.* Socrates changed that when he made the investigation of man and his inner life the central philosophical task. Without using the word *self,* Socrates exemplified and delineated the search for it through introspection and dialectic—through the interpersonal pursuit of truth. Thus, Socrates' implicit notion of the self is relational; the self is discovered in the process of discourse and dialogue with others. He also contributed the idea of a Daemon—an inner force that goads and drives—as a constituent of self. Socrates also elucidated, with unequaled sensitivity, the idea of cosmic alienation —of man not being completely or fully at home on this earth. Echoing the oracle at Delphi, Socrates defined the central task of the philosopher, and indeed of each of us, as self-knowledge. "Know yourself," said the oracle, an injunction echoed in Socrates' judgment that "the unexamined life is not worth living." Implicit in this is the notion that there is a complexity and mystery about the self, that the self is a largely unexplained continent, the rivers, fields, and mountains of which are unknown to us. The idea is that there is an unconscious component of the self that can only become conscious through "therapy," the therapy of philosophical dialogue.

Plato, whose Socrates depicted in his *Dialogues* is the Socrates we know, further developed the notion of the self as soul, but made an important new contribution. He was the first to describe the self as conflictual, as being constituted by what Freud called "agencies of the mind." Plato, like Freud, described a tripartite model of the self in his dialogue *Phadeus* (1961a) using the metaphor of the chariot driver trying to control two spirited steeds. The chariot driver represents reason and control, a function akin to that of Freud's ego; one steed represents appetite and is a close relative of Freud's id, while the other steed represents ambition (i.e., the pursuit of narcissistic gratification). The second horse is also to be understood as the "spirited" part of the self. There is no parallel to Freud's superego in Plato's model. The chariot driver is in perpetual need of establishing control over his horses. Self here is split and in constant conflict between opposing forces and tendencies.

Plato, in a manner akin to yet different from the Hindu sages, also saw the chariot driver as the rational part of the psyche (soul or self), which is the unchanging part of self that is potentially in contact with that which is eternal. In the *Republic* (1961b) and elsewhere, he identified that part of self that is permanent with a certain kind of knowing, a knowing through the mind rather than through the senses. So cognition of a special sort, and the import of that cognition, comes to characterize the self, a self that is trapped in "the prison house of the body." So far we have seen self as the transpersonal Self potentially having identity with the ultimately real; the self as personhood; the self as a mystery, as largely an unknown whose nature must be discovered through introspection; and finally the self as divided within itself, characterized by dynamic tension between its constituents.

The Stoics introduced the notion of nonattachment into Western thought. They equated the self with the *Logos,* the eternal pattern embedded in the universe and within us. For the Stoics, who were much concerned with the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," the concept that nothing could injure the good man was reassuring. It gave them some solace from the pain of this life. They saw suicide as the ultimate freedom; man could always free himself by refusing to play. Death anxiety was strong and conscious in the Stoics, whose view of the self and its ultimate freedom was a way of dealing with that anxiety. The Roman poet Lucretius wrote a long meditation on death and the reasons for not fearing it. He attacked superstition and the notion of an afterlife in his scientific-philosophical poem *On The Nature of Things* (Lucretius, 1951). In contradistinction to those Eastern and Western philosophers who believe that the self is in some way eternal, the enduring part of us that can bond with that which endures out

there, Lucretius is a naturalist who accepts the composite nature of the self, viewing it as being composed, as is everything else, of atoms in patterns: with the dissolution of the patterns comes the dissolution of the self. The atomistic metaphysics (partly borrowed from Epictetus) in *On the Nature of Things* is the first materialistic epiphenomenal account of the self in the Western tradition. That is, the self is seen as a manifestation of matter in motion. There is a whistling-in-the-dark aspect to Lucretius's reiterated belief that death anxiety is irrational and without foundation, but there is something enduring in his view that science—rational knowledge—can dispel fear and lead to its mastery.

With St. Augustine, the fourth-century Christian philosopher, the self becomes self-consciously problematical. For the first time, the questions "What is the self?" and "What am I?" are asked in the context of a psychological autobiography. Augustine's *Confessions* (1961) constitutes the foundation of the Western introspective autobiography. In it he clearly recognized the power of childhood experience in the shaping of personality and identity; the uniqueness and loneliness, indeed the estrangement, of the self; the epigenetic nature of the self; and the role of unconscious ideation and affect, which are, for the first time in the Western tradition, explicitly discussed. In addition, Augustine has a keen sense of the incompleteness of the self, of the need for relatedness, which, in his case, is predominantly relatedness to God. "I am not at one complete until I am one with Thee," says Augustine (1961, p. 11), projecting the preverbal urge for symbiotic union with the mother onto the cosmos (whatever the ontological status of God, that is the dynamic of Augustine's longing). Augustine also makes the self central insofar as he has the notion of cognition as the basis of personal identity. He anticipates Descartes's "I think, therefore I am" but doesn't develop it. Nevertheless, he recognizes that his own very existence is problematic and must be established.

In the interval between the end of the classical era and the beginning of modernity in the 17th century, there was a defocusing on the self and much more emphasis on man's relationships within a hierarchy, with man as a link in the "great chain of being." Man is seen as fitting into a notch, fulfilling a preordained role in structures social, economic, political, ecclesiastical, and cosmic. The Renaissance and Reformation changed that, and the role of the individual self again came to the forefront of Western thought. Indeed, modem philosophy starts with the self, albeit construed as solipsistic cogitator.