

## Concept of the Self

The concept of a **'person'** is a complete active being which meets certain criteria, of organisation and critical awareness. The problem of 'personal identity' (in philosophy) is how we should decide whether a person remains the same, despite gradual changes in beliefs, emotions and motivation. We might simply respond that they *don't* remain the same person, given how much they change, but this creates legal problems, and doesn't fit our normal concept of remembering what I once did, and planning for what I am going to do. In ordinary talk we refer to 'myself', but we don't usually assert that we possess, or are constituted by, something called 'my **Self**'. Philosophers, however, do focus on that concept, because it represents something which can remain fixed while the person undergoes change, and something which can unite an infant to an elderly person in a single life story. Students of language are also curious about the reference of **the word 'I'**. I can visit Paris next year even if I have a leg amputated beforehand, so 'I' doesn't seem to include my legs. The idea that 'I' refers to the Self, or the essence of a person, seems to fit what we mean, and so the concept of the Self explains many otherwise puzzling phenomena.

We can ponder the nature of the Self by observing other people, or by introspecting our own minds, and resulting conclusions seem rather different. The external view makes the Self seem like a social role, while introspection suggests a focal point for decisions and experience. These are sometimes presented as rival theories, but it is better to try to fit the two accounts together. Looking at a person **externally**, we might say 'we were at school together forty years ago', referring to the core features that are preserved in a life story. We also notice behaviour such as hypocrisy and lying, indicating a hidden self behind the behaviour. We talk a lot about a person's character, but we tend to think of that as a set of properties, bound together by a uniting self. Sociologists and psychologists emphasise the social character of the self, which adapts to different contexts, and can be radically affected by good or bad social relationships. Seen from outside, language is of major importance for the self, as its main mode of expression (and two selves can relate to one another in long telephone calls). Above all, we discern a self in others by watching them in action (rather than when they perceive), as they desire, hesitate, choose and reflect, and we read the self in facial expressions. We may similarly think that a large animal has a self, but its actions suggest a narrower range of reflection and choice.

Looking at the self **internally**, some thinkers have denied that any such thing is to be found, as the mind looks like a flickering jungle of transient events (leading to the **'bundle'** view of the self). In reply we might say that introspecting the self is like a dog chasing its own tail; instead of thinking about the target of the chase, we should attend to what is doing the chasing. We are less conscious of a self when we are engaged in action, but more aware when we reflect on things. If we look at the sun, then we can also observe (from higher level thought) that there is an observer involved. When we make long-term plans and commitments, we see that part of us must remain steady through the bundle of fluctuating mental events. If we work through a proof, part of our minds must focus on it and hold the ideas together (even if we are conscious of birds singing outside). We feel ownership of our own histories, and the sense of self may be strongest in the control needed to guide our own futures.

A defence of the existence of the self comes from writers about **moral experience**. In our inner lives we feel a sense of moral responsibility, and a sense of rightness and wrongness in actions. We experience responsibility in ourselves as shame, guilt, remorse or pride, and see responsibility in others when we praise or blame them. These attitudes are sometimes directed at a person, and sometimes at an action. None of these attitudes seem to make sense without a sense of self, in ourselves and others. In a criminal attack we don't blame the attacker's hands, but the source of the action by the hands. We feel shame at something we have done (even from many years ago), because it was we who did it. It is even suggested that the nature of the self is the cause of our moral feelings and behaviour. When ethical discussion focuses on character the concept of a self or person seem a bit too thin, but when morality concerns right and wrong action then the existence the self may be a necessary presupposition.

We can introspect, or observe the behaviour of others, but we must also attend to the findings of modern **neuroscience**. There does not appear to be a specific brain structure which contains the Self. Bodily awareness is basic to what brains do, even in very simple animals, and so we all hold a sort of 'map' of ourselves, which may play a key role in forming our sense of self. But thinking is also highly co-ordinated and focused, and any tentative flow-diagram of thought must exhibit major junction points, popularly referred to as the 'self' or 'the will'. Experts are divided over the physical existence of such things, so it may be too early to say.

Even if we accept the self, we may doubt whether a specific **part** of the mind can be demarcated for the role. The more we attend to our inner life and drop the presuppositions of ordinary talk, the more complex and indeterminate the mind seems. We may find that rather than being in charge of our decisions and thoughts, they just happen to us, and that our conscious life is just the tip of an iceberg. In that case we may have to think of the **whole** mind, sub-conscious and all, as the self, and give up the idea of a neat little essence being in charge. There is also the problem that even if we are convinced of a distinct Self, we may be unsure whether that very thing persists from day to day and year to year. You may feel shame at a past action, but also think that you would never do such a thing now, so that it seems like being ashamed of what someone else has done. Metaphysicians sometimes switch to a 'four-dimensional' view of the self, as a set of stages or time-slices, which thus have a much looser union than a fixed self could bestow. We may not even *want* to be 'identical' to our past selves, as long as we feel some continuity with them.

**Denial** (or dislike) of the Self has been common in eastern philosophical traditions, and is preferred by many western thinkers who want to free our image of humanity from the shackles of rigid tradition. A deliberate attempt to reduce our sense of Self may appear as admirable humility, and also more in keeping with the tangled complexities of the brain. But it is still hard to give up reference to the self as a way of talking, and we can't help simplifying ourselves down to some minimal entity to which our histories, interests, language and preferences are attached.