

The Concept of Self in Eastern and Western Philosophy

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Abstract

The problem of the self currently remains unsolved. In the literature, there are many correlated concepts, such as: self-consciousness, consciousness, self, personal identity and other. Eastern and Western concepts of the self are diametrically opposite. Sigmund Freud, for example, introduced the structural model of the psychic apparatus, part of which is the ego, which, however, does not completely cover the concept of self. David Hume, from a philosophical perspective, conceived the self as an illusion – only contents of consciousness are present, which are not constant, but changeable; for Hume, the only thing that exists is the theater of consciousness. Georg Hegel argued that when the self thinks about itself, it has to include itself in this thought, but this represents a paradox. Immanuel Kant viewed the self as a thing-in-itself or a *noumenon*. Eastern philosophy unequivocally argues that the self is an illusory fiction and that it does not exist in reality. It is evident that there exists a pluralism with respect to the existence of the self, as well as that some Western authors have similar views to the Eastern concept of the self (e. g. Hume). In the current article, the most notable concepts of the self in the Eastern and the Western philosophy will be discussed and a conceptual-linguistic analysis of the notion of self and its correlated notions will be performed. Subsequently, it will be shown how a linguistic confusion influences the search for the material substrate of the self in the fields of neuroscience and neuropsychology.

Keywords: self, Eastern philosophy, Western philosophy, nirvana, mystical experience, neuroscience.

1. Introduction

The notions “consciousness”, “self-consciousness”, “personal identity” (personality) and “self” overlap to a particular extent, but there exist specific differences. The views in Western and Eastern philosophy are diametrically opposite. In the West, there exists a multitude of definitions of the “self”, whereas in the East the predominant view is that the self is rather an illusion.

Taking this into consideration, the issue of the status of the human self requires a new linguistic-philosophical analysis in the light of both contemporary science and philosophy. Today, in neurosciences and neuropsychology the material substrate of the self is sought in the face of the brain. Nonetheless, the use of unclear notions is a linguistic confusion that undermines this process.

On the one hand, in Western philosophy many philosophers and psychologists have advanced conceptions of the self, such as René Descartes, John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Johann Fichte, Georg Hegel, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, William James, Karen Horny, Erich Fromm, Burrhus Skinner and other (Bachvarov, Draganov & Stoev, 1978; Mosig, 2006; Zhu & Han, 2008). In a closer temporal perspective, Daniel Dennett conceived of the self as a homunculus, Patricia Churchland in the light of eliminative materialism denies the existence of the self, whereas Charles Taylor, Marya Chechtmann and Hilde Nelson introduced the narrative theory of self and personal identity (see Sturm, 2007; Renz, 2017; Berčić, 2017; Dimkov, 2019a). On the other hand, in Eastern philosophy, the most well-known conceptions of the self are represented by the views of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism (Ho, 1995; Mosig, 2006).

- In both contemporary psychology and philosophy, the factual existence of the human self remains unproved to date.
- Western philosophy acknowledges the existence of a human self (with some exceptions).
- Eastern philosophy firmly denies the existence of a human self (with some exceptions).
- Contemporary neuroscientific and neuropsychological research attempts to locate and identify the human self in the brain.
- The lack of clear philosophical and linguistic conception of the research for the material substrate of the self in the brain.

2. Etymologico-philosophical analysis of the notion of “self” in Western philosophy

The notion of “self” has a derivative connotation from, perhaps, the most famous thought of the French scientist and philosopher René Descartes (XVII century) – “Cogito, ergo sum” – which introduced the dualism of soul (mind) and body (Dekart, 1978). Descartes identifies consciousness with thinking (Ivanov, 1985: 16). The laic notion of “soul” is considered identical with the philosophical notion of “self”. In fact, this connotation comes from the Judeo-Christian religion (Mosig, 2006: 39; Zhu & Han, 2008: 1800). In former epochs of human history, the soul was associated with the so-called animism (Ivanov, 1985: 15). The scientific notion of “soul” is defined as “immediate experience” or “the constitutive part of the self, remaining after the exclusion of the body (Krechmer, 1996: 5-6; translation P.R.D.). The self or the soul, in turn, is the “act of experience”, contrasted with the “content of experience” (world or matter) (Krechmer, 1996: 7; see Deikman, 1982).

Baruch Spinoza conceived of thinking as self-consciousness of nature (Ivanov, 1985: 17). Gottfried Leibniz used the notion of “apperception” as a connotation of “self-consciousness” (Ivanov, 1985: 16-17). David Hume thought of the mind as a theatrical stage, composed of a flow of continuous, but inconstant perceptions, which vary all the time. According to Hume, “identity” is solely a quality, which we attribute to an object, including the self, but due to the inconstancy of our perception, the self is a fiction (Hume, 1738/2003: 179-188; see Giles, 1993). Immanuel Kant in the XVIII century adopted the view of the soul as a “transcendental ego” or a “synthetic unity of consciousness” (Kant, 1781/1967). For Kant, the self, as such, is a *noumenon* (a Ding-an-sich) and not a phenomenon. Georg Hegel viewed consciousness as spirit (Ivanov, 1985: 17). He asserted that when the self thinks about itself, it has to include itself in the thought, which, according to him, represents a paradox (Hegel, 1832/2010: 691).

The notion of “transcendental ego” has been elaborated further in the works of Edmund Husserl (Gradinarov, 1996). Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, introduced the term “Dasein” to annotate the self and the term “care” to define the “ontological a priori structure of man” (Needleman, 1963: 17, 22).

Later, in the 20th century, the father of psychoanalysis, the Austrian neuroanatomist and neurologist Sigmund Freud introduced his famous structural model of the psychic apparatus – id, ego and superego, in which the ego or the self takes the middle position and thus becomes a symbol of personal identity (Freud, 1923/1961). The word “ego” comes from Latin and corresponds to the pronoun “I”. Exactly after the introduction of Freud’s model, at least in post-socialist Bulgaria, the notion of “self” is written with a capital letter.

Arthur Deikman speaks of a transcendental element, the so-called “observing self” in contrast to the “objective self”, which can be cognized, but not seen, nor localized (Deikman, 1982: 95). According to Deikman, the awareness or the “observing self” is primal, whereas its contents or intentionality are secondary.

Of big importance is the difference of the following notions to be elucidated: “consciousness”, “self-consciousness”, “self” and “personal identity”. On the one hand, the notions of “consciousness”, “soul” and “self” can be identified as identical. On the other hand, self-consciousness emerges when the attention of the self is directed towards itself. Furthermore, the attention of the self towards experiential objects should be identified with the self as such – the self is both the observing subject, which, however, has its own personal history. As far as it concerns the notion of “personal identity” – it represents the sum total of experiences and their derivatives (thoughts, values, et cetera), which are related to the self and are positioned in an interpretative system, which is constantly enriched by each new experience.

A detailed exposition of the different views on the notion of “self” in Western philosophy can be found in the following table.

Table 1. Basic conceptions of the self in Western philosophy (adapted from: Bachvarov, Draganov & Stoev, 1978: 16-17; Sturm, 2007; Dimkov, 2015, 2019a)

Author/Philosophical School	Conception of the self
René Descartes (Rationalism)	The “self” represents something, which belongs to the thinking substance as an intuitive beginning of rational cognition, emphasizing its independence.
Solipsism	Solipsism represents the viewpoint of the isolated individual and contemplation (idealistic view).
Fichte, German classical philosophy	The “self” is a substance, the absolute creative beginning, which implies not only itself, but also everything that exists as is “not-self”.
Hegel/German classical philosophy	The social essence of the human self-positioned as an estranged force, standing above concrete individuals, thus representing a world reason [absolute spirit].
Henri Bergson/Irrationalism	This view represents the self-confidence of the individual in the bourgeois society, which encounters the negation of the self.
Freud/Psychoanalysis and Metapsychology	Freud conceived of the self as a submersion of the ego in the id (the kingdom of the blind instincts) and a distorted perception of the individual of his societal essence as a result of the control exerted on it by the enraged “super-ego”.
Dialectical materialism	The real battle of man for an accreditation is conceived as a creator of societal relations and the societal norms of life. The biggest and freest expression in each individual as an active subject of his human self becomes possible in the conditions of the all-

	encompassing (total) development of the personality.
Patricia Churchland/Eliminative Materialism	The self is thought as a <i>sensus communis</i> or a product of folk psychology and, as such, it does not exist in reality.
Daniel Dennett/Cognitive Science	The self is conceived as a homunculus or “a little man” that controls the performance on the theater of consciousness.
Marya Schechtman & Hilde Nelson/Narrative theories for the constitution of self	The self is constructed through an incessant process of interpretation of the whole experiential richness of the individual, which is arranged in a chronological way. Some parts of this experiential richness can be more constitutive for the self in comparison to others.
Social Constructivism	A reductionist view, according to which the self is constructed on the basis of the social interactions among people.
Alain Morin/Inner Speech	The phenomenon of “inner speech” is conceived as constitutive for the self-due to the fact that it represents a delimiter of the inner and the outer world of man.

3. The concept of self in Eastern philosophy

In Eastern philosophy, the most well-known conceptions of the self are represented by the views of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Hinduism (Ho, 1995; Mosig, 2006).

Confucianism. The concept of self, according to Confucianism, is related to the social aspect of human existence. The self is conceived as a “relational self” – “one which is intensely aware of the social presence of other human beings” (Ho, 1995: 117). In this way, the individual self is dependent on all other selves. The self is thus an obedient self, which follows the appeals of social requirements, rather than its own needs and desires. The ideal self, according to this doctrine, can be achieved through a harmonization of one’s everyday communication with other individuals in society at large (Ho, 1995: 118).

Taoism. Taoism accentuates the falsehood of language, way before the philosophy of linguistic analysis and the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida. The so-called “Tao”, the essence of life and the universe, or the Way, cannot be described by human language. That is why paradoxes, contradictions, anecdotes, metaphors and aphorisms are used. Tao is ineffable. According to the doctrine of Taoism, “the self is but one of the countless manifestations of the Tao. It is an extension of the cosmos” (Ho, 1995: 120). Taoism, in its idiosyncratic style of exposition, describes the self in the following way: “The perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no achievement; the true sage has no name” (*Ibid.*). The ideal of Taoism, therefore, is the achievement of a lack of self or “selflessness”.

Buddhism. Buddha advised that one should abstain from dealing with metaphysics, because this activity is futile (Radhakrishnan, 1996: 236-261). Nonetheless, Buddhism argues that the self as such does not exist, that it is an illusion – “The self does not exist apart from the states of consciousness [...] [It] represents incessant series of transient psychological states – this is everything, which we subsume under the term ‘self’” (Radhakrishnan, 1996: 219-220; accent in the original; cf. Hume, 1738/2003: 179-188; see Giles, 1993); there is no god, nor matter, neither is there a phenomenal world. Thus, the doctrine of “no-self” or “no-soul” emerged (Ho, 1995: 121; see Giles, 1993). No-self is achieved through a self-negation in the state of nirvana, which is a “state of absolute, eternal quiescence-a transcendent state of supreme equanimity beyond the comprehension of ordinary people unawaken from the illusion of selfhood” (Ho, 1995: 121). The

schools of Mahayana define this state not as nirvana, but rather as “emptiness” (Ho, 1995: 122). Nirvana, in turn, is a very close state to what is called mystical experience (Dimkov, 2015, 2017, 2019c). Mystical experience is defined as follows (Gellman, 2014, italics P.R.D.; Dimkov, 2017: 315-316):

A. Broad use: A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.

B. Narrow use: A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual *unitive* experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense-perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection.

C. Alterations in affectivity (e.g. a feeling of blessedness and peace), perception (via a spiritual sense; subjective light) or awareness of something outside the five standard sensory modalities, acquisition or illumination with insightful and significant information (the noetic quality), unification of opposites (e.g. beyond good and evil), disappearance of the subject/object barrier and the time-space continuum, resulting in a unitive experience (with a deity, a principle or a higher reality), partial or full lack of phenomenal contents, objective character and indescribability.

Hinduism. Hinduism explains the self through a monistic philosophy (metaphysics). Like Buddhism, Hinduism views the essence of human life as consisting in suffering and asserts that this is caused by having a fallacious conception of the self: “The true self is permanent and unchanging, the non-true self is impermanent and changes continually” (Ho, 1995: 124). Hinduism in the face of Vedanta postulates an essence, which stands after the so-called transcendental unity of consciousness (Kant) or the “Self-as-Knower”, namely the non-changeable “Self-as-Witness” (Ho, 1995: 124). This kind of self is the true self, which cannot be described, but can be experienced (cf. the conception of the “Observing Self” of Deikman (Deikman, 1982)). The Upanishads discuss a zone of non-thought, in which the Self-as-Knower and the Self-as-Witness unite and enter into a trans-cognitive state, in which there is no place for any cognition (Ho, 1995: 125). This state is described also by other authors as e. g. a substantial matrix of consciousness (Dimkov), a mold of man (Castaneda), a trans-subjective self (Stace) and a field of consciousness (Formann) (Dimkov, 2015: 110-111; 2017: 317; 2019c: 71).

4. Neuroscientific research on the self

In the neurosciences and neuropsychology, researchers today are using the concept “self-referential processing” as a basis in the search of the material substrate of the self in the face of the brain. In the narrow sense, this concept denotes a processing of experiences related to the self. As potential brain candidates (substrates) of this kind of processing, researchers have identified the following brain areas and networks: the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the so-called default-mode network (DMN) (Dimkov, 2019b). Experiences related to this processing and the abovementioned brain regions are the following ones: spontaneous thinking, stimulus-independent thinking and mind-wandering, which use imagination and low-level thinking (Dimkov, 2019b). DMN and mPFC are also related to the loading of autobiographical memories in the working memory, anticipation of the future (especially in social situations) and the understanding of the perspectives of other people (Dimkov, 2019b). Nonetheless, self-referential processing, in fact, uses the memories of personal identity and, according to my research, this concept does not correspond to the concept of “self” as such (Dimkov, 2015, 2019b).

There are two more large-scale brain networks – the salience network (SN) and the central-executive network (CEN), which, when taken together, according to my research, correspond better to the functions of the self. SN represents a network of attention, which monitors the changes in the inner environment of the organism as well as in the outer environment (the external world), so that when a salient object is detected, attention is directed towards it and this network is responsible for the taking of an adequate decision for a behavioral response towards the salient object, in agreement with the value system of the individual itself. CEN, in turn, is also an attentional network (exclusively of attention towards the outer world and stores working memory). It is necessary to be noted that between CEN and DMN a functional antagonism exists, meaning that when one of the networks is active, the other is deactivated. SN regulates the switching between the other two networks – between the inner (imaginative) and the outer (perceptual) attention.

5. Conclusion

The conceptions of self in Eastern and Western philosophy are diametrically opposite (with small exceptions – the views of David Hume and the so-called eliminative materialism). According to Eastern philosophy, the self as an essence does not exist and this is due to our ignorance of the true nature of the world. According to Western philosophy, the self does exist, but the views on the topic are pluralistic. To date, there is no consensus about the existence of the self and what it actually represents. These obstacles, this linguistic confusion, undermine the research in neurosciences, in which the material substrate of the self is sought in the face of the brain, particular structures and networks. Currently, the research on the self is almost exclusively theoretical (linguistic and philosophical) and it is concerned with the definition of the term. Nonetheless, the functions of isolated brain structures and networks deliver empirical data, which could assist the theoretical research on the self, and vice versa. Finally, any research on the states of nirvana and mystical experiences can help with throwing a new light on the research of the self.

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