The Self: Perspectives from East and West

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Evolution of the Self

The evolution of the human self is one of nature's very finest accomplishments. As used here, the term "self" refers to the mental processes that allow people, and a few other species, to think about themselves. It is only because we possess a self that we can form images of what we are like, evaluate ourselves, and talk to ourselves in our own minds.

Of course, most organisms successfully maintain life without the aid of a self. They do so automatically and instinctively, without deliberation or conscious planning. And even for those life forms with a self, much of life management still remains automatic. But the evolution of a self can give a species an important survival advantage, especially when the species is trying to adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

It's impossible to imagine complex human societies and cultures without the human ability to lay out complex plans and successfully implement them, and this human ability depends upon the self; to plan, we must be able both to imagine ourselves at some time in the future and to imagine what we will need to do in order to achieve a particular goal. Self-awareness also allows us to infer things about the behavior and mental lives of others, which makes empathy, compassion, and altruistic behavior possible (Leary 5-12).

So the self, and especially the human self, was a crucially important evolutionary development. Despite the disadvantages of the human self (which will be discussed shortly), it's safe to say that, overall, having a self was beneficial to our prehistoric ancestors in their struggle to survive and reproduce. Had the ability to self reflect not been advantageous, it's doubtful our evolutionary ancestors would have developed it.

For the overwhelming majority of our species' history, people lived in very simple societies made up of small roving bands of hunters and gatherers. Everyone in such societies lived essentially the same lifestyle. No one had many personal possessions since, without pack animals, they couldn't carry much with them as they moved from place to place. Back then, in such simple societies, the self may have been closer to an unqualified benefit.

As complex, faster changing societies with class structures and wealth accumulation emerged, the self retained its beneficial aspects, but at the same time the disadvantages of the self became much more pronounced. Already, by the first millennium BCE, and especially in urban areas, people could see a wide array of possibilities for themselves, and most would come to desire possessions, lifestyles, or identities they did not have. So by this point in history, most people were already living in a state of mild or not-so-mild discontent (Armstrong 10-15).

This discontent encouraged not only a good bit of rather ugly human behavior, but also a great development in philosophy and religion to address how this discontent and

bad behavior might be reduced, and how we might live a good life and create good societies. This is the period, from about 800 to about 200 BCE, that the philosopher Karl Jaspers referred to as the axial age (Jaspers 98). This was the time of Plato, Isaiah, Zoroaster, Confucius, the Buddha, and the unnamed sages who wrote the *Upanishads*, and this was the period, it can be argued, when the foundations of philosophy and religion were laid in both the East and the West.

Religion can be seen, at least in part, as a system for counteracting the detrimental personal and social effects of self-awareness and egoism. Virtually all religions agree that the self tends to encourage selfish behavior and thus social conflict, and that self-preoccupation distracts people from a spiritual path, thus interfering with spiritual insight and transformation. Indeed, a high percentage of human misery derives directly or indirectly from the influence of the self (Leary 53-145).

The Self is a Brain Process

What is this "self" that can provide such benefit and yet at the same time often bring such misery? From the perspective of modern neuroscience, our self is not a "thing" at all but rather a process, and it is not, in any way, independent of our brain. We don't have a ghost, or a little person, in our head. Rather, the self is a brain process that emerges from other less complex brain processes.

Leading neuroscientist Antonio Damsio argues that the self evolved in stages over millions of years, beginning with the protoself, followed by the core self, and finally the autobiographical self, with each subsequent stage building upon and incorporating the former (Damasio 180-81).

The *protoself* does not alone create consciousness or subjectivity, but it is a building block of both. The protoself is primarily created by the brain stem, which is the oldest part of the brain, having evolved hundreds of millions of years ago. The protoself provides what Damasio calls primordial feeling. This is a wordless affirmation that one is alive, a feeling that one's own body exists independently of any object with which it interacts.

This primordial feeling, which occurs automatically whenever the healthy brain is in an awake state, provides the basis of all other feelings caused by interactions between the organism and objects in its internal and external environment. All feelings of emotion are complex variations that build upon this primordial feeling (Damasio 190-193).

Assuming the organism with a protoself has sufficient processing power in its brain, the *core self process* is created anytime the organism encounters an object. This object may be a thing or an event external to the body that is perceived by the senses, an event internal to the body such as a pain in the back that captures attention, or a memory of a past thing or event.

When the organism confronts the object through its senses or its memory, primordial feeling is transformed into a feeling of recognizing the object as existing, and the object will be given a certain salience that determines how much attention it will be

given. As this occurs, two processes are going on at the same time. One process compiles a set of images related to the characteristics of the object and assigns the object a quality somewhere along the continuum of pleasure to pain. The other process, which happens simultaneously, creates a subjective perspective on the object in which the object is recognized as something being perceived by the organism. And, as a part of this second process, the organism recognizes that it will itself be the agent that takes any necessary action toward the object. In other words, when the core self process is operative, we have the creation of conscious subjectivity. We have the creation, by the organism, of itself as a protagonist.

At this stage, the process is pre-verbal. The organism is not thinking with words, and consciousness is perceived as a flow of images to which the organism directs more or less attention. The organism recognizes its own existence and may have a very complex set of emotions that create complex feelings, but the organism will not have a mental story about itself. Furthermore, the core self is all about the here and now. It is unencumbered by thoughts about the past or concerns about the future.

The creation of the core self process, and thus consciousness, requires a brain of at least moderate complexity with at least a primitive cerebrum as well as structures that facilitate communication between the brain stem and the cerebrum. No one knows for sure, but Damasio believes reptiles may have a core self; birds probably have it as well, as do, almost certainly, all mammals (Damasio 26, 201-208).

Once we have developed an *autobiographical self*, we are no longer limited to the core self's exclusive focus on the present moment, and can extend our image of the self to memories of our past and anticipations regarding our future. This autobiographical self is based on our memories of our life experiences, including remembered dreams, fantasies, and plans for the future.

Our autobiographical self will never, of course, be complete or totally accurate. As we remember events in our lives, we inevitably reassess and rearrange those events. Some events are given new emotional weight, others forgotten. We may even confuse events we wish had happened with those that actually happened. So, as the years pass, our own history is subtly rewritten in our mind. Furthermore, we can invent fears and concerns that then become a part of our memory structure, and we can develop beliefs about our abilities or personal characteristics that may be inaccurate. Almost all of this process of creating and recreating our autobiographical self is done at the subconscious level.

Never is our entire autobiographical self in our conscious mind at any one time. Rather, we rely on a collection of key episodes depending on the needs of the moment.

Our autobiographical self will be decisively influenced, indeed shaped and created, through our interactions with significant others in our life, and how we believe others view us. It will also be shaped by the values, beliefs, and social structures of the society in which we live.

When conscious, we are not always operating in autobiographical mode. When we need to attend to external stimuli, our autobiographical self may be largely

inoperative; if we are really absorbed in what we are doing, even our core self may retreat to the background. On the other hand, when we have a quiet moment with no external demands, our core and autobiographical selves will usually move further forward, and we may spend a moment reflecting on ourselves and on some aspect of the life we have been living.

The creation of an autobiographical self requires a very complex brain with a cerebral cortex, the sheet of neural tissue outermost to the cerebrum in the mammalian brain. The capacity to remember, to say nothing of the capacity to reason, depends substantially on the cerebral cortex. Humans, with their large brain with a surface area further expanded by the human brain's many wrinkles and folds, are blessed with a very large cerebral cortex, allowing for a highly developed autobiographical self. Once the human race developed language and culture, each human's autobiographical self could become even more complexly developed, resulting in what we now experience as our own rich subjectivity with its well-defined protagonist.

Although humans have particularly rich autobiographical selves, other mammals, including apes, marine mammals, elephants, wolves, cats and dogs almost certainly also have autobiographical selves (Damasio 26, 210-215).

These brain processes that create the self disappear each night when we are in a dreamless sleep, only to reappear when we awake. This is all possible because of the truly amazing characteristics of the living brain, as well as the amazing characteristics of cells called neurons.

The Response of Religions

How have religions responded to the opportunities and challenges presented by the human self? All religions try to strengthen the desirable aspects of the self and, especially, reduce the undesirable ones. These efforts by the world's religions can have very favorable influences on individuals and on societies. Of course, it must also be admitted that religions have frequently promoted out-group hostility with horribly tragic results, and they have exacerbated some anxieties of the self by threatening their errant followers with the wrath of angry gods, endless torture in hell, or a lowly rebirth. The question of whether the positive consequences of religion outweigh the negative we will gladly leave to the reader's own judgment.

When dealing with the problems created by the self, the approaches taken by the religions of the East and the West are similar. All religions, for example, emphasize the importance of following moral and ethical directives in order to reduce selfishness, and all religions address their followers' fears of death. However, Eastern religions have developed a couple of techniques or approaches that have received relatively little attention by the major religions of the West. The first of these is meditation, and the second is emphasis on the self's insubstantiality, mutability, and impermanence. The first of these approaches, meditation, can be quickly explained, but the second approach will take just a little longer.

People often engage in self-talk in unnecessary and unproductive ways. We ruminate about things to no good effect, and in the process we often make ourselves miserable, prevent ourselves from fully engaging with the world in a spontaneous and joyful way, and raise barriers to our own spiritual awakening. The major religions of the East, especially Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, have devoted much attention to meditative techniques to help us quiet this inner chatter. When our self-talk is quieted, we are better able to perceive spiritual insights and see the world in a way less contaminated by concepts, judgments, attachments, desires, and fears.

Buddhism is the religion, or spiritual path, that has best developed the approach of emphasizing the self's lack of "thingness," its changeability and impermanence.[1] Although the various schools of Buddhism often disagree on exactly what the Buddha taught, all Buddhists agree that the doctrine of *anatman* was one of the Buddha's central, core teachings.

Anatman is a Sanskrit term usually translated as "no self." In Sanskrit, if one puts "a" or "an" in front of a word, it negates that word, so the doctrine of *anatman* is a negation of *atman* – a concept that was widely accepted, and still is, in the area of India where the Buddha taught.

The concept of *atman* was first developed in Vedic Brahmanism, the religious tradition out of which Hinduism emerged. Although *atman* is typically translated as "self," the concept is closer to, although not the same as, the Western concept of soul. *Atman* is difficult to define, but it can be seen as a pure, unchanging, uncontaminated essence of who we are. Not subject to the normal laws of cause and effect, *atman* has its own intrinsic nature and does not depend on anything else. When we die, according to Hindu philosophy, it is our *atman* that is reincarnated into a new life.

Upon the Buddha's enlightenment, he awakened to the reality that no such thing as *atman* exists. In fact, the Buddha argued that nothing in the universe has an unchanging essence because everything is constantly changing, and everything is an integral part of the causal web of the universe. Nothing has an eternal, independent, self-causing, essence or nature, and everything that exists does so by virtue of a perpetually changing web of causes and conditions which themselves were products of other causes and conditions.

From a Buddhist perspective, entities should be seen more as processes rather than as static, substantive things. Some processes, a thought for example, may last only an instant, while other processes, like the rock of Gibraltar, last much longer, but nothing is permanent or unchanging. The entire universe can be seen as one causal process, with entities being sub-processes within the whole. Reality is one, and everything that exists, including each one of us, is a process within the larger ongoing process of reality.

This perspective, which it seems the Buddha arrived at 2,500 years ago, is similar to process philosophy, which was developed in the West in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is also a perspective very compatible with modern scientific thinking.

Buddhism does not deny that we have consciousness, subjectivity, and the ability to make decisions and willfully direct our behavior. What Buddhism denies is a false

conception of the self; a conception that sees the self as unchanging and separate-unto-itself. Damasio and other modern neuroscientists would agree. For Damasio, the protoself, core self, and autobiographical self are all dynamic brain processes, and Damasio makes no reference to essences or to anything that is either unchanging or separate from the causal web. So the Buddha's perspective on the self is actually very compatible with modern neuroscience.

From a Buddhist perspective, if you want to gain enlightenment, you must free yourself from attachment to the self. Self-grasping is seen as perhaps the most fundamental of all errors. All branches of Buddhism agree that the root cause of human suffering is the mistake of trying to take refuge in that which is insubstantial and transient, and this includes, above all, the mistake of trying to take refuge in a false, reified, and isolated sense of self.

When we reify our self and treat it as a separate thing rather than a process that is one with the continuously unfolding reality of the universe, we falsely separate ourselves, and this encourages a sense of existential aloneness. This sense of separation, in turn, underlies destructive behavior such as harming the environment or harming other people. If, on the other hand, we recognize we are a process that is one with the universe, our sense of existential loneliness and estrangement drops away, and we understand that when we cause harm, we are harming ourselves.

If we, as a species, want to be happy and to promote peace – peace within ourselves, peace with others, and peace with our planet's habitat – it certainly will behoove us to recognize the true nature of the self and its genuine oneness with the universe.

Notes

[1] The following material on Buddhism is based on the author's lifetime study of the topic. However, these sources were helpful in focusing the author's thoughts in writing this portion of the paper: Seth Robert Segal (ed.), *Encountering Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003); Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, Dan Zahavi (eds.), *Self, No Self?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor, and Guy Claxton (eds), *The Psychology of Awakening* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 2000).

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*About the Author

Originally from California, Leland W. Robinson has long had an interest in the natural and social sciences as well as philosophy and religion. Leland served in both the Army Reserves and the Peace Corps (India, 1966-68), with the latter experience strengthening his interest in Hinduism and Buddhism. After his Peace Corps years, Leland earned an MA and Ph.D. in sociology from Northwestern University, and then began a 30-year career as a sociology professor at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. Leland greatly valued and enjoyed his role as a teacher, but also is pleased that during his ten years as Department Head he was able to help his department experience record growth in number of faculty, student enrollment, course offerings, scholarship, and outreach to the community. Now retired, Leland moved to Frederick, Maryland, in 2006.

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