

## Self

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### Synonyms

Identity, self-awareness

### Main Text

The concept 'self' has shifting meanings as a result of it originating in religious ideas about the soul, being heavily philosophised during the Renaissance, and most recently being the topic of scientific research. The dominant contemporary definition is that self is the thoughts and images people have about themselves. Such a definition opens up the self to empirical research by asking people, in various ways, what they think about themselves. However, the self was not always conceived of as an empirical phenomenon.

The concept of the 'self' grew out of religious thinking about the soul. Early thought experiments by Avicenna and Descartes tried to demonstrate that the thinking mind exists independently of all things material, and thus that it belongs to the immaterial realm of the soul. Descartes was particularly influential in arguing for an ontological dualism between material and immaterial realms. In practice this dualism was as much political as ontological. Specifically, it served the diplomatic function of legitimising the sphere of science on the one hand and the sphere of religion on the other. While this dualism was a coup for science, in that it consolidated the domain of science as all things material, it created a problem for empirical research on the self because the self was seen to inhere in the immaterial realm.

Hume was one of the first to try to bring the self within the domain of empirical research. He argued against conceiving of the self as a spiritual or religious concept. "Man," Hume wrote, "is a bundle or collection of different perceptions" (Hume, 1740, I, IV, vi). Thus, the self, according to Hume, is little more than the ongoing stream of thoughts, perceptions, and memory images as they are experienced. What Hume did was to take the self out of the immaterial realm of the soul, and plant it firmly within experience – thus opening it up to introspective analysis. This situating of the self within phenomenological experience provided an essential platform for subsequent theorists and researchers who could then investigate, by introspection, the experience of self.

With the separation of psychology out of philosophy in the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, came an even more determined effort to bring the self within the purview of scientific analysis. Central to this effort was William James (1890). James furthered the conceptualisation of the self as an empirical thing, open to scientific analysis. Using

introspection, James developed a model of the self which still provides the foundation for much contemporary scientific research on the self.

According to James, there are different levels of the empirical experience of self. At the most basic level there is what he called the material self. This concerns the things that we can call 'mine' – including our bodies, clothes, families, homes, cars, possessions and accessories. The second level is the social self and includes the ideas and images that other people and groups have concerning us – including our parents, children, friends, colleagues and society at large. The third level James somewhat confusingly called the spiritual self. The term spiritual reflects the religious heritage of the concept, but as James uses the term, it pertains to nothing spiritual. This third level includes our faculties of mind and habits that we identify with – our will, our memory, determination, attention, moral convictions, piety, guilt, anxieties and so on. Accordingly, it might be more appropriate to refer to this as the psychological self.

Today there is a large and diverse scientific literature which elaborates James' outline and proceeds to examine the various thoughts and images that people have regarding themselves. Using a disparate set of terms researchers examine people's self-concepts, self-representations, self-images, self-narratives, social identifications and identities (e.g., Howarth, 2002). One important finding to emerge across this research emphasizes the social nature of self. Although people are not very good at judging what other people actually think about them, there is a close connection between what people think about themselves and what they think other people think about them.

James added subtlety to the three layers of the empirical self by pointing out that each layer contains past, present and future images. In support of this idea, research has since shown that people have a range of 'possible selves' which can be central to people's sense of self even if they are not currently living out those possible selves (Markus, 1986). James emphasized that the existence of different possible selves in the past, present and future makes possible a range of tensions within the self. This aspect of James' thinking has been developed in research on discrepancies between these images. For example, a discrepancy between someone's self image in the present and their ideal future self image should lead to motivation to change. Alternatively, a discrepancy between their self image in the present and their ideal self image could lead to depression or anxiety (Higgins, 1987).

James was acutely aware of the religious and philosophic heritage of the concept of self. Accordingly, he devotes considerable analysis to the question: Is there anything beyond the material and social images of the self in the past, present and future? Is there something 'behind' these images which bind them together and which create our phenomenological experience? In short, is there anything approximating a soul?

Using introspection James finds no evidence for anything beyond the phenomenological act of thinking and introspecting. Moreover, from the point of view of science, he argues that there is no benefit in postulating a 'thinking substance' behind the thinking in order to explain the thinking. However, he does acknowledge, under the influence of Kant, that

every thought about an object presupposes a thinking subject, and thus that there is by definition an aspect of people's selves that is beyond the content of the thoughts they have about themselves. James proposes to call everything which the self thinks about the self 'me' and withholds the term 'I' for that aspect of the self which does, or rather is, the thinking.

The three layers of the empirical self, and all the self images in the past, present and future, are all part of the 'me' – they are self descriptions. They cannot include the active, thinking, describing subject – the 'I' component. Each thought about 'me' and each act of self-regulation, presupposes an 'I' which is the subject of the thought or act. If the concept self were reduced to only the 'me' – to self description – then the self would be inert, and inactive. Before a child has a self-narrative or self-concept, and thus before she has a 'me,' the child is still an active agent in the world: the 'I' is active. As time passes, the baby becomes a child and develops self-descriptions, and each movement of self-awareness, each emergent self-conception puts, as it were, clothes on the naked 'I' of action. First there is action, then there emerges an image of oneself acting, and then, those images begin to mediate action. But the self images always lag behind the active component. According to James, one can never fully know oneself: the 'I' of each action and thought exceeds previous self description thus making the self fundamentally open unto the future.

Recently, these ideas have led to research on the dialogical dynamics of the self (e.g., Aveling & Gillespie, 2008). The self is conceived not only to be a system of self-images, or self-regulatory tensions between those images, but also to be a system within which there are I-positions which shape the stream of self-images but which are not themselves within that stream. The I-positions are not self-representations: rather they are the positions from which people represent themselves. For example, someone who thinks that they are very wealthy, and prides themselves on their wealth, has, one could argue, internalized and cultivated a consumerist and materialistic I-position from which they are evaluating themselves. Alternatively, someone with a disability who stigmatizes themselves have, arguably, internalized a negative view of others and that has become an I-position within their self. It is the position from which they stigmatize themselves. I-positions are often socially constituted through the internalization of the perspectives and discourses of others. Research has examined the contradictory tensions both between I-positions and between I-positions and self-images (Gillespie, 2007).

Self, when conceptualized in common sense terms, seems to refer to something inside the person, an individual, idiosyncratic, even solipsistic thing – but it is not.

As James recognized, and further research has productively elaborated – the self is deeply social. Considering first the 'me,' it is social in four ways: First, each 'me' image is a self observation and on an equivalent footing to the observations we make about other people. In this sense self-images are attributions and acts of social perception. Second, our various me images are significantly influenced by what we think other people think about us. Third, how we think about ourselves and other people is influenced by the societal roles occupied. Fourth, each culture provides a range of collectively created and historical images, some idealized and others scorned. In this way each of us constructs our own

self-images out of the cultural templates and narrative tropes that we are offered within our cultural milieu. Turning now to the 'I' it is social in a different sense: It is a set of socialized practices, tendencies, impulses and habits. These habits of thought often correspond to the thoughts of others, and as such, when we adopt an I-position we are in fact often taking the perspective of others.

If the self is social rather than spiritual, that opens it to change. We should expect that as society changes, so people's selves will change. New self-images and new I-positions should become available, and new values link them together creating new ideal self images, and thus new impulses for self-regulation. But it is important to emphasize that people are not the passive objects of societal and cultural change. Rather, they are agents within the change process.

To study this self-constitutive process, Foucault (1988) introduced the concept of technologies of the self. Technologies of the self are means which we use to act upon our selves. Religions, much of psychology, and many cultural practices can be thought of as social technologies aimed at re-constituting selves. For example, Buddhism offers meditations and practices for breaking down the attachments and desires of the self. Consumerism, on the other hand, promises retail therapy through cultivating and satisfying people's attachments to products. Both are technologies of the self, and clearly they constitute very different selves. The list of technologies of the self is long: Each therapeutic practice, many religious practices, many institutional regulatory practices, and many common sense strategies of self-control are part of the processes through which selves re-constitute themselves. Contemporary societies are characterised by a proliferation of possible selves, and even contradictory self ideals, combined with a wide range of techniques for cultivating the desired self image. Today, Gergen (1991) argues, we are becoming 'post-modern selves' – swimming in a sea of media images and communication technologies, which enable us to cultivate and live out many disparate aspects of our selves. This tradition of research is distinctive, in that the self is not something to be discovered and described, rather it is something that is made and re-made.

Our concepts of the self have changed as the concept has moved from the domain of religion, through philosophy, to the domain of science. But, it is not only our concepts of the self that have changed. Each conceptualization of the self entails different self-constitutive practices, feeding into our educational activities, socialization practices, and personal techniques of self regulation. Each time and place cultivates its own ideal self images for people to strive toward, and broader developments within society, such as the creation of new institutions and new technologies, open up new domains within which selves can be performed and cultivated.

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