The Self: Perspectives from East and West

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As I see it, the evolution of the human self is one of nature's very finest accomplishments. I use the term self to refer 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. And because of the self we can consciously and purposefully control our own behavior with some future goal in mind.

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 conscious self can give a species an important survival advantage, especially when the species is trying to adapt to an environment that is rapidly changing.

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 is dependent upon the self since to plan we must be able to imagine ourselves at some time in the future, and imagine what we need to do in order to achieve a particular goal. The self also allows us to imagine working with others on complex plans for the future. Animals without a self can't do this, so they can only respond to their environment on a moment to moment basis.

Self awareness also allows us to infer things about the behavior and mental lives of others. Right at the time when children develop full self awareness, which is usually about 18 to 24 months of age, they also develop the ability to take other people's perspectives. Being able to take the perspective of the other then makes possible empathy, compassion, and altruistic behavior.

So the self, and especially the human self, was an incredibly important evolutionary development. Despite the disadvantages of the human self which I'll mention 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 it not been, it's doubtful our evolutionary ancestors would have developed the ability to self reflect.

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 the same lifestyle, and no one learned of alternative lifestyles since alternatives didn't exist. No one had very 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 eventually 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, the situation was getting critical. 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 most people, already by this point in history, were living in a state of mild or not-so-mild discontent.

This discontent spawned, not uncommonly, a good bit of rather ugly human behavior, but it also spawned 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. 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 as a system for counteracting the detrimental personal and social effects of self-awareness and egoism. Virtually all religions agree that the self can create significant problems for the individual and for society since the self tends to encourage selfish behavior and thus social conflict, and self-preoccupation distracts people from a spiritual path and interferes with spiritual insight and transformation. Indeed, a high percentage of human misery derives directly or indirectly from the influence of the self.

So what are some of the darker aspects of the self? Well, once we have a self we have a strong interest in evaluating ourselves positively because a negative self evaluation becomes painful and depressing. So we try to convince ourselves that we're just fine – in fact, better than most. Research shows that, on any particular human trait, from seventy to eighty percent of people evaluate themselves as above average. This can blind us to our own shortcomings and lead to serious errors as we make important life choices.

Since we frequently encounter others who have exceeded our own abilities and accomplishments, maintaining a favorable self concept is often a struggle. This can make us vulnerable to periods of self doubt and depression, and we may spend long and unproductive periods beating up on ourselves. Concern about our own adequacy can also lead to sexual dysfunction, social anxiety, stage fright and choking under pressure, and we may try to escape from the pain of self doubt through alcohol and drug

abuse. A shaky self concept can lead to ceaseless defensiveness and self-promotion, and we may respond angrily or even violently to others who threaten our vulnerable self concept.

On the other hand, if someone seems to like us, we tend to like them because they make us feel better about ourselves. Many romances ensue because someone seems to see us as attractive and sexy, and we then mistake for love the good feelings we get from our temporarily improved self evaluation. This, of course, is not a firm foundation for a lasting relationship, and insecurity about the self can provide rich soil for the growth of jealousy and distrust.

In order to feel good about ourselves, we are generally motivated to think of the groups we are a part of as being superior to other groups since member-ship in a superior group then reflects back positively upon ourselves. This can lead to an overly strong identification with the in-group combined with prejudice and discrimination against, and even hatred toward, the out-group.

Although self awareness and self-talk can be very useful, often times we become too self-preoccupied. We ruminate about things in unproductive ways. We endlessly rehash something that took place in the past to no good effect, and we excessively worry about imaginary threats. When so much of our inner dialogue is unnecessary and unproductive, it becomes problematic not only because we needlessly create a great deal of our own misery, but also because this excessive self-talk distracts us from attending to life in the external world. When we are caught up in the world inside our own head, we are not able to live fully in the world outside. We can't be spontaneous, fully present in the moment, and fully engaged in our activities. Because of all this unproductive self-talk, we are often only half engaged in what we are doing, and thus, in a sense, only half alive.

A final problem I'll mention is anxiety about that will happen when we die. For most people, the loss at the point of death of their own self-awareness, their own consciousness, is the loss they find most difficult to accept. Loss of their physical body is, for most, easier to contemplate then permanent loss of awareness. It can cause so much anxiety that most religions respond by providing assurances that somehow awareness or consciousness will continue after the death of the body.

So what is this thing that can provide such benefit and yet at the same time often bring such misery? What is the self? Well, 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.

Furthermore, when we refer to the *mind* we are referring to brain processes from our own subjective perspective. It is not merely that mind processes are correlated with, or dependent upon, brain processes. From the perspective of modern neuroscience, mind processes *are* brain processes.

Contemporary neuroscientific perspectives on the self are best reflected in the writings of Antonio Damasio who is a professor of neuroscience and the director of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California. Damasio has received a great many academic awards, and is widely recognized and respected among his colleagues as being at the forefront of the neuroscientific study of consciousness and the self.

Damasio argues that the self evolved in steps, beginning with the *protoself*, then the *core self*, and finally the *autobiographical self*. The core self depends upon, and is built upon, the protoself, and the same can be said of the autobiographical self in relation to the core self.

Let's begin with the *protoself*. 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 a critical element in the self process -- what Damasio calls primordial feeling. This is a wordless affirmation that one is alive. It is 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, is 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.

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 seen, felt, or heard, it may be an event internal to the body such as a pain in the back that captures attention, or it may be 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 resulting in the object being given more or less attention. As this occurs, two processes are going on at the same time. One process has to do with a set of images that relate to the characteristics of the object, and which assigns the object a quality somewhere along the continuum of pleasure to pain. The other process, which happens simultaneously, is the creation of 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 will recognize that it is the one that will take 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's unencumbered with 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. It needn't be nearly as complex and developed as the human brain, but the brain must have 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.

While the core self is focused exclusively on the present moment, once we have developed an *autobiographical self* we have an image of our self that extends 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, while others are 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 strongly 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, and if we are really absorbed in what we're 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've been living. For people who are excessively self-preoccupied, their core and autobiographical selves are often more active in their consciousness than would be desirable.

The creation of an autobiographical self is dependent on a very complex brain with a cerebral cortex, which is 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, and 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, thus resulting in what we now experience as our own rich subjectivity with its well-defined protagonist.

Although humans are in a class by themselves in terms of the richness of their autobiographical selves, this is not to say that other mammals are incapable of developing at least a rudimentary autobiographical self. Damasio believes that apes, marine mammals, elephants, wolves, cats and dogs have not only core selves and consciousness but also autobiographical selves.

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.

So how do religions respond to the self? Well, all religions try to strengthen the desirable aspects of the self and, especially, reduce the undesirable aspects. 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 an unfavorable rebirth. The question of whether the

positive consequences of religion outweigh the negative I am happy to leave to your own individual judgments.

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. 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 lack of thingness, unchangeability, or permanence. The first of these approaches, meditation, can be quickly explained, but the second approach will take just a little longer.

As I've mentioned, we 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 given a great deal of 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 that is 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, unchangeability, or permanence, so let me say a little about these teachings of the Buddha.

The term "Buddha" is an honorary title that means "the awakened one." No one knows for sure when Siddhartha Gautama, the person we know as the Buddha, actually lived, but a good guess is about 563 to 483 BCE. He was born in what is now southern Nepal, and he gained enlightenment and taught in what is now northeastern India.

Nothing the Buddha taught was written down at the time, either by the Buddha himself or by others. It wasn't until the first century Common Era, almost 500 years after his death, that people started writing down what they thought he had said. As a result of this long period of purely oral transmission, there developed, as I am sure you can imagine, substantial disagreement among Buddhists regarding what he actually taught. However, all Buddhists agree that the doctrine of *anatman* was a central, core teaching of the Buddha.

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. It's difficult to define *atman*, but it can be seen as a pure, unchanging, uncontaminated essence of who we are. *Atman* has its own intrinsic nature and does not depend on anything else since it is not subject to the normal laws of cause and effect. According to Hindu philosophy, when we die it is our *atman* that is reincarnated into a new life.

With his enlightenment, it is claimed the Buddha awakened to the reality that no such thing as *atman* exists. In fact, it's claimed the Buddha argued that nothing in the universe has an unchanging essence because everything in the universe 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 that one processive reality, and everything is a part of the all inclusive web of causation.

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 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 neuro-scientists would agree. For Damasio, the protoself, core self, and autobio-graphical 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.

As Buddhism evolved over the centuries, most branches of the religion incorporated the idea, stemming from Vedic Brahmanism, of reincarnation. There is substantial disagreement about what, if anything, the Buddha himself may have taught about reincarnation, but once reincarnation is accepted a Buddhist must then answer the question of what it is that is

reincarnated. This led to some interesting theological gymnastics, and to the creation of some concepts that seem inconsistent with the Buddha's original teachings on *anatman*.

But despite turning concepts such as Buddha nature, consciousness, higher self, or very-subtle-mind into entities suspiciously resembling *atman*, the concept of *anatman* continues to be of great importance in Buddhism. From all Buddhist perspectives, if you want to gain enlightenment it is absolutely essential that you free yourself from attachment to the self. Self-grasping is seen as perhaps the most fundamental of all spiritual errors.

The self is real as a process created by the brain, but it is not real in the way most of us think it is, and trying to cling to a false, reified image of this insubstantial brain process will never lead to human satisfaction and inner peace. This is true no matter how successful we are by society's standards. We respond to our inner dissatisfaction by believing that if only we had this or that we would be happy. But when we attain whatever this or that is, be it more money, a better job, a better marriage partner, better looks through plastic surgery, or whatever it is, we will discover that the inner dissatisfaction remains. The Buddha taught 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 processive reality of the universe, we falsely separate ourselves, and this encourages a sense of existential aloneness. This sense of separation, then, underlies a great deal of destructive behavior such as harming the environment and 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 want 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.

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