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Essay

Why the Sole “True Self” Does Not Exist?

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Abstract

Here we present an essay questioning and arguing why the “true-self” does not exist. We introduce the concept of self-schema, nominative self “I,” empirical self “Me” and the self-social interactions. We discuss in detail the dynamical interplay between an individual's sense of self and their external social environment i.e., how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others, build relationships, and communicate for shaping one's social self or self-concept, helping effectively to navigate in the social world. We propose that there is no central controller and there are only dynamical processes which unfold to sustain us from moment to moment. We can understand the self as a constantly adapting and evolving the mental framework, shaped by our inner and outer worlds and is not solely inner in nature. We discuss the self as a collection of roles and performances enacted in different contexts by adopting multiple “masks” or “personas.” We also discuss how “ego” strives to find a balance between “id” and “superego.” The present essay is based on the works of some past famous psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers who have tried to address a common point - understanding of existence of “true-self.”

Keywords: self-schema; ego; Id; superego; self

All of us think that we know who we are, i.e., our “self.” Simply we feel that “self” is a sense of continuity across time allowing individuals to learn from their experience, making plans, and feel accountable for their actions giving a feeling of sense of purpose. It appears as if the “self” ties together yesterday, today, and tomorrow, i.e., today we know what we did yesterday and will know what we will do tomorrow. So, one can say that “self” is about creating a mental framework by reconstructing concepts and experiences in memory, shaping our expectations and interpretations of the world restricted by the cultural and social norms. This feeling of self is assisted by a mental framework termed as “schema” which was first introduced by a Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget in 1923 [1], inspired by a German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Later in 1932, Frederic Bartlett refined the schema theory [2] which is an idea of mental frameworks that relates to a structured way of organizing information about how we perceive, interpret, and remember information (recipe of combining experiences). Later, Hazel Markus introduced a term “self-schema” [3] in 1977 where, self-schemas are abstract ideas about objects, social, individuals, role, traits etc., recipes catalogued as index cards in the brain. For example, if we go to a restaurant, we activate our schemas about the process of ordering, how to eat, asking for a bill, keeping a tip and so on. So here it appears that when a self is placed in a different situation the appropriate self-schemas are activated accordingly. Let us analyse this aspect a little further. Self-knowledge is important for shaping our self-schemas which depend on both internal and external sources. The internal sources deal with introspection, analysing emotions and understanding personal values, whereas, the external sources deal with feedback from others, observing how others perceive you, and even information from materialistic tools and technology. Self-schemas are automatic because it is necessary for rapid decision-making, efficient behaviour, and achieving goals. This is achieved by making the knowledge readily accessible for understanding ourselves and the world by using the already available self-schema framework (recipe) without conscious deliberation. However, these schemas are not static unlike a fixed algorithm. These are constantly updated and refined based on new experiences and information. This

dynamic nature allows learning and adaptation. Self-schema also plays a role in habit formation by shaping our behaviour in ways that align with our self-perceptions. For instance, an individual who sees themselves as neat and tidy may develop habits related to personal hygiene with little conscious thoughts or effort. This self-schema affects one's approach towards life's goal such as "I'm a good" or "I'm clumsy" leading to positive or negative self-schema. These acts as a filter to process information about ourselves and the world to take any action by us accordingly. Through repeated experiences and interactions, certain beliefs about ourselves become reinforced. A positive self-schema like "I am good" will strengthen over time and negative experiences like "I'm clumsy" can solidify negative self-schema, which can be difficult to change or erase without a conscious effort. When a self-schema is well-established, we do not pause and deliberate about how we should feel or act in that situation, the individual's response will be automatically triggered by the appropriately activated schema. Sometimes schemas can become stereotypes, limiting thoughts and outdated beliefs. While self-schema focuses on internal mental representation, experience, and self-concept, it also focuses on how people (others) think or perceive about 'me.' Since self-schemas are based on an individual perception and hence may not always reflect objective reality, it is the individual's subjective feeling and hence not his or her true nature making it difficult to evaluate oneself. Thus, the collection of these index cards (self-schemas) cannot be termed as a "true-self." Schema is an important concept in psychotherapy developed by Jeffrey Young [4] to address chronic, persistent patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving, particularly those seen in personality disorders and other long-term conditions like chronic depression, anxiety, and eating disorders due to presence of maladaptive schemas. Schema therapies are becoming popular these days.

Now let us see whether we can find what is a "true-self" from another perspective. We believe that we have a self because we observe ourselves, i.e., we have a knower, the nominative self "I," which we have nominated as a subject of conscious experience, and as an agency having thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Another aspect is that the knower observes how the self is being perceived and think about, and it is referred to by the knower and others as the empirical self "Me" ("Knower being known" refers to knower as a subject and known as an object in a knowledge situation). According to William James [5], the empirical self is composed of three parts: (i) Material-Self: Includes everything material considered "mine," such as one's body, clothes, family, possessions, and even home; (ii) Social-Self: Encompasses how people perceive them and their roles within social groups, and (iii) Spiritual-Self: Represents a person's inner subjective core, including thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and the deepest sense of their own identity. In the spiritual-self, an individual truly or honestly identifies and follows their self with least disparity. In essence, the "I" is the subject that experiences, while the "me" is the object of that experience, i.e., I am observing me or I am thinking about me (self-observer). This indicates that "me" is dependent on society and if the society is taken away from "me" then "I" cannot exist alone. The "I" is the active, creative aspect of the self, while the "me" is the more passive, socialized aspect. The "I" and "me" are in constant interaction, shaping the individual's self and their actions. It is the "I" that decides how to act in each situation, considering the expectations of the "me", but, "I" also can act based on its own impulses and desires. When the "I" achieves its demands from "me," (like "me" saying to "I," "Okay go ahead do it") we experience pleasure (rewards), and when it is denied, we experience unpleasantness or tension (punishment). Thus, individuals must conform with societal norms to maximise the rewards. So, in this framework too, the concept of "true-self" fails.

George Herbert Mead's theory (1934) [6] tried to understand a sense of self through the perspective of social interaction, particularly focusing on the stages of play and game by socializing via language for self-development. In the play stage the individual, like a child, engages in a pretend play, taking on the roles of others (e.g., playing as "teacher" or "doctor"). In the game stage the individual plays multiple roles with different relationships to each other, like playing as parents, job, child etc. at the same time. Mead too distinguished between the "I," the individual's spontaneous and uniqueness, and the "me," the socialized self, shaped by societal expectations and interactions. In essence, Mead's theory emphasizes that the self is not a pre-given entity but rather a social construct

that develops through interaction and the internalization (acceptation) of social roles and expectations, primarily through language and participating in plays and games other than biological impulses and needs. These interactions, through which individuals learn to internalize (accept) the attitudes and expectations of others (society) gives a feeling of being observed by the "generalized other" known as "societal-gaze" or the "gaze". Reacting to this gaze gives rise to the so-called "conscience" proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre (1943) [7] and Michel Foucault (1975) [8]. This ultimately leads to the emergence of a developed and self-aware individual even when they are not interacting and are alone, always adhering to rules and the expectations of generalized others (societal-gaze). The internalized expectation of being watched (under surveillance) can lead to self-discipline and conformity to social norms. An individual while successfully navigating the game stage allows the individual to develop a mature sense of self. These stages allow the individual to understand their own roles in relation to the broader social system by anticipating the reactions of others. The feeling of shame, guilt, arising from the need to comply with social expectations are closely related to the concept of conscience. Awareness of being observed can shift one's perception of oneself from being an active subject to a passive object giving rise in doubting the "true-self."

A "multiple self-concept" is another psychological idea that an individual's self-concept is not a single and unified entity but rather a collection of many distinct self-concepts, roles and identities that exist simultaneously and can be activated in different social contexts. This idea was proposed by Erving Goffman in his theory of the presentation of self which was outlined in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life," (1956, 1959) [9]. He suggested that individuals actively manage how they are being perceived by others in social interactions. An individual manages this by adopting different multiple "masks" or "personas" depending on the social setting and audience, like actors performing on a stage. Thus, Goffman's dramaturgical approach views social life as a series of performances where the individual strives to project desired impressions while navigating the complexities of social interaction. Goffman suggested that there is no fixed underlying "core self" that remains constant across all situations. Instead, the self is a collection of roles and performances enacted in different contexts. Thus, there is no such thing as a "true-self" according to him too.

This essay will not be complete without considering Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic theory (1923) [10]. Freud proposed that the human psyche is structured into three interacting agents: the "id," "ego," and "superego." These are theoretical constructs like other theories discussed here and he used these three agents to understand mental life. Mead's "I" can be compared to Freud's "id" (Latin word for "it"), which emphasises on spontaneous and uninhibited impulses. "id" is driven by the pleasure principle seeking immediate gratification of desires and needs. The "id" is entirely unconscious, however, the "I" is not necessarily unconscious or solely driven by biological drives unlike the "id." Mead's "Me" shares similarities with the "superego" in its representation of social and moral influences on the individual. The "Me" is the internalizing force influenced by societal norms that shapes the self, which is based on societal expectations like the superego's role in internalizing societal morals. Hence superego acts like a conscience that judges behaviour and strives for perfection in accordance with societal norms. The superego encompasses the conscious aspects. The "ego" in Freud's model acts as a mediator between the "id" which is impulsive and the "superego" which is the moral conscience influenced by society. Ego strives to find a balance between "id" and "superego," simultaneously satisfying the id's impulsiveness without violating the superego's moral conscience. This balancing act is crucial for having a healthy and sober personality. The presence of the id, ego, and superego indicates that there cannot be a single unified "true-self," because the personality is a dynamic interplay of these three distinct agencies often conflicting, and thus there is no singular entity known to be a "true-self."

Thus, in conclusion with the concept of self-schema (index cards), nominative self "I," empirical self "Me" along with taking into consideration social interactions which leads an individual to put on multiple masks indicates that a "sole true self does not arise." Our self-schemas which appear like the collection of index cards (schemas) hence cannot be termed as a "true-self." Social interactions play a huge role in shaping our self (nominative self "I"), leading "I" to constantly adjust "Me" in

response to real (outer) or imagined (inner) feedback based on social norms (continuous formation of a new empirical self - i.e. a new version of "Me"), leading to infinite regression of endless cycle of perception, interpretation, and adjustment. Thus, the sense of self develops not in isolation but through social interaction and is called as "looking-glass self," a concept proposed by a sociologist named Charles Horton Cooley (1902) [11]. Thus, "I" is always a step behind the ever-changing social reflection of the "me." Our discussion suggests that instead of a singular, unchanging "true self," we develop and adapt our self-concept based on our experiences, environment, and social interactions which are ever changing. The self is not a static entity but it is rather a continuous process of construction and reconstruction of our self-narrative. With each moment a different "self-state" is being presented. While we may have core values and beliefs which sometimes seem to remain static contributing to a sense of continuity. but our experiences and interactions lead to development of ever evolving "multiple-selves" (multiple-masks) that coexist and are integrated into our overall self-concept giving rise to a unified self. Therefore, considering the multifaceted nature of our self, due to the influences of social interactions, it challenges in defining and observing a single "true self." A statement like a "sole true self does not exist" holds considerable validity in the realm of psychology and theory of self. Thus, the present essay suggests to us that we can understand the self as a constantly evolving and adapting construct shaped by our inner and outer worlds and not solely inner in nature.

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