

Self Continuity

Individual and Collective Perspectives

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“Know Thyself!” ... But What, How, and Why?

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The admonition to know the self is perennial, cutting across eras and cultures. In the history of Western philosophy, from its Greek roots, self-knowledge is often considered the panacea for wisdom, the light toward an honest and happy life, the universal recipe for truth and redemption. Redemption by self-knowledge is a common credo that cuts across generations. The other day, I saw “Know thyself” tattooed in ancient Greek letters on the right forefoot of one of my undergraduate students. But what is it all about?

Western philosophy evolved around self-preoccupation, around the goal of controlling and knowing the self. It is said that the entrance of the temple of Apollo at Delphi was ornamented with the written admonition: “Nothing to excess” (*meden agan*) and “know thyself” (*gnothi seauton*). Plato recounts that for Socrates there was no more important philosophical endeavor than the pursuit of self-knowledge, particularly its limits. Socratic wisdom rests on the awareness of one’s own ignorance, the necessary counterpart of self-knowledge, and probably also the easiest to grasp.

The promise and power of self-knowledge permeates ancient myths. In literature, classic tragedies enact the power of knowing one’s own identity. In this respect, *Oedipus King* by Sophocles (494–406 b.c.) is emblematic, expressing at its core the horror of mistaken identity. It is a tragedy that still captures our imagination some 25 centuries later, used by Freud as a central metaphor to account for the vicissitudes of the human psyche.

The theme of *Oedipus* revolves around the power of discovering who we are in relation to others. As the story goes, *Oedipus* realizes that he mistook his parents for lover and rival, sleeping with his mother and killing his father. Most meaningful and probably what makes the story so memorable and compelling to our imagination is *Oedipus*’s gory response to the horror of his discovery. He gouges his eyes out, a powerful gesture by which, out of pain and despair, he denies himself the facing of truth. It can be said that Sophocles’ tragedy and the theme of *Oedipus*,

in general, emphasizes the imperative necessity of self-knowledge, in particular of knowing who we are in *relation to others*, as life unfolds.

Assuming that knowing the self is an imperative necessity, the question remains as to what can be known and needs to be known? The admonition to “know thyself” implies that there is something to be known and learned about. But what is it and where does it come from? Furthermore, how does one acquire self-knowledge and why?

In this commentary, I first lay a general philosophical landscape to consider the *what, how, and why* questions of self-knowledge. I then briefly present tentative answers to these three questions, drawing support from the collection of chapters assembled in this edited volume on self continuity.

PHILOSOPHICAL LANDSCAPE (TWO POLARIZED AXES IN THE CONSTRUAL OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE)

In the history of modern philosophy and in particular since the Cogito of Descartes (“I think therefore I am” dictum), there has been an ongoing debate regarding the ontological nature and origins of self-knowledge. This debate can be schematized as polarized along two ideological axes: the *real versus illusory* nature of the self and the *internalist versus externalist* origins of the self. I present briefly these two axes in turn to set the context of my discussion.

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1739/1928), father of the empiricist tradition in the philosophy of mind, proposes that if such a thing as a “self” exists, it exists as an illusion, not as a real entity. When introspecting in search of the self, Hume claims that he finds nothing but fleeting feelings and perceptions, no object per se. He concludes that what we tend to consider as self are in fact just sensory and perceptual impressions, not a real or core thing. It might exist, but if it exists it is not as real as a rock or a chair that can be thrown or sit upon, it is fleeting and impressionistic, a representational construction of the mind. Opposite are the views held by Descartes, but also by John Locke and later by Immanuel Kant, all asserting that the self is a tangible and knowable “thing.”

Descartes (1641/1953), in his metaphysical meditations, identifies a first person that thinks and therefore is a conscious, identifiable entity rising above the physical realities of the body. For him, the person exists as a stable conscious entity. It is a thing that can be observed and captured, reflected upon as in his meditations. Descartes’ idealism is in exact opposition to Hume’s skeptical view on the self as knowable, and therefore as an existing object. British philosopher John Locke, whose life overlapped with Descartes’, shared the view that the self is a knowable entity, not just an illusion. As an illustration, below is an excerpt of John Locke’s writing on identity and diversity taken from his opus, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1634/1985):

[W]e must consider what person stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does

only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving that he does perceive. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is to himself that which he calls self; it not being considered, in this case, whether the same self be continued in the same or diverse substances. For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be that he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things: in this alone consists personal identity, i.e., the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done. (Section 9 of the chapter "Of Identity and Diversity")

As for Descartes, in Locke's view the self is a stable object of thought, hence of consciousness. It is a thing that one can reflect upon and conceive as a notion that exists beyond the here and now of perceptual experience. The self is real as it can be represented as a knowable, invariant entity that we project in thought, backward and forward in time.

As for the second axis in the construal of self-knowledge, it traditionally polarized around the question of whether self-knowledge grows from within the individual or whether it grows from without. Does selfhood emerge from an experience that is primarily private or, on the contrary, from an experience that is primarily public? In other words, does it emerge from an inward process of self-reflection by the individual "à la Descartes," or from the relation of the individual to others in a process that is in essence social rather than individual?

The tendency to construe selfhood as situated within as opposed to without the individual appears to be relatively recent in Western history, as Charles Taylor demonstrates in his compelling work *Sources of the Self* (1989). He writes:

Our modern notion of the self is related to, one might say constituted by, a certain sense (or family of senses) of inwardness. ... we think of our thoughts, ideas, or feelings as being "within" us ... we think of our capacities or potentialities as "inner," awaiting the development which will manifest them or realize them in the public world. ... [S]trong as this partitioning of the world appears to us, as solid as this localization may seem, and anchored in the very nature of the human agent, it is in large part a feature of our world, the world of modern, Western people. (p. 111)

Taylor makes the point that inwardness is the privilege metaphor of the Western modern individual who finds his or her own existential bearing *within* rather than without him- or herself. This modern Western tendency to anchor selfhood within the individual rather than without is also reflected in theories that have dominated the field of developmental psychology, in particular theories on the ontogenetic origins of the self. How do children develop a sense of themselves, an entity they embody, but also that they eventually objectify and refer to, even-

tually able to conceptualize it in a narrative form, able of statements such as, "It is me in the mirror," "When I grow up I want to become a doctor and heal poor children."

Developmental theories on the origin of the self can be grossly divided along the internalist/externalist dimension. It can be said, for example, that cognitive theories of child development in the tradition of Piaget reduce self-development essentially to the growth of internal cognitive structures or logical tools that are progressively constructed by the child in interaction with objects and people in the environment. The self of the developing child is equated to these internal cognitive tools. In this perspective, internal logical tools define various levels of cognitive competencies in the child and become a primary object of study in the developing child. In addition to focusing primarily on what is growing inside the child, internalist theories of the developing self also tend to attribute mechanisms of this growth to processes that originate from within the child rather than from without. Such processes include the actions generated by the child that have the power of structuring and making sense of the environment; the child's cortical growth and the incremental involvement of orbitofrontal regions of brain in development, or the maturation of core representational structures as "modules" coming online at certain moments in development.

In these internalist theories, the environment plays a nonspecific role. In Piaget's theory, for example, it can be said that the environment plays a role of resistance to the structuring actions of the child, not a source of knowledge per se. These actions are generated from within the child, considered as the driving force of development.

Opposite to the internalist views on the self are those emphasizing a more externalist standpoint, not focusing simply on what changes *inside* the child but what changes in the *relationship* between the child and the environment, particularly the social environment. From this externalist theoretical standpoint, the origins of the self are brought outside of the individual as he or she meets the world with other individuals. Following the ideas articulated by George Herbert Mead, selfhood is at the intersection of the individual in relation to others. If there is a self, it is *triadic* in nature. It is at the intersection of multiple perspectives: the first-person perspective (the individual) and the third-person perspective (others). In this view, the concept of self originates in the meeting of these perspectives, not primarily in one or in the other. The triadic theory states that these views are inseparable in relation to self-concept. Without the individual there would be no self to be conceptualized. However, without *others* who surround and are external to the individual, there would be no reasons to conceptualize the self. Both are mutually defining of selfhood.

Following Mead (1934), the developing concept of self originates in the *triangulation* of first- and third-person perspectives. He writes for example, "The 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized 'me,' and then one reacts toward that as an 'I'" (Mead, 1934, p. 175). The cogito (I think therefore I am) of Descartes is transformed into a *cogitamus ergo sum* (*we* think therefore I am).

Within this philosophical landscape, the collection of chapters contained in this volume on self continuity express as a whole resounding agreements on the what, how, and why of self-knowledge. I review these agreements in turn.

WHAT THE SELF IS NOT

Regarding the question of what self-knowledge might be, it is easier to consider it by elimination of what it is *not*. All the chapters contained in the present volume agree that what we know of ourselves, at least at a conceptual or explicit as opposed to implicit level, is constructed in interaction with others. All convey the inescapable fact that self-knowledge is coconstructed in interaction with others (i.e., Fivush, Bohanek, & Duke, chapter 10; Bird & Reese), dropped within the context of community of minds (i.e., Nelson, chapter 2) or shared cultural values (i.e., Tafarodi, chapter 3). It cannot be construed merely as an object or "thing" to be discovered, like we would discover gold or a Holy Grail. If it is coconstructed in interaction with others, self-knowledge is not delimited and finite as the key to our person. We do not one day know who we are. Rather, we are constantly adjusting, in interaction with others and with the help of others, what we might be. The self is coconstructed in the sense that self-knowledge, at a conceptual level, which is of particular interest in this book, is revealed in mutual social exchanges. The book tells us that the self is ontologically an approximation that depends on others, not the absolute object of solipsist Cartesian meditations. It can be inferred from all of the chapters that the self is not a thing, a static thing. Rather, the basic idea permeating the book is that self-knowledge or group identity as it emerges over time is an elusive object of approximation that depends on one's (individual or group) relation and shared values with others, the context of one's interaction and history of interaction with others (i.e., Reicher, chapter 11; Iyer, Jetten, & Tsivrikos, chapter 14; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & Bobbio, chapter 13; Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, chapter 12).

The message here is that self-knowledge, whether it pertains to the personal or collective sense of identity, is not a static, not a predetermined and fixed entity one has to unveil like innate traits. Not a thing that is contained in the individual. As for the Socratic admonition to "Know thyself!", it should translate into "Know thyself with others!", Descartes' cogito into a resounding "*cogitamus ergo sum*" (we think therefore I am).

WHY THE INSATIABLE NEED FOR SELF-KNOWLEDGE?

The self is a human preoccupation, for better or for worse. Compared to all other animal species, we are unique in dwelling on who we are, relentless in our quest for our own personal identity (Rochat, 2007).

If self-knowledge is a basic constitutive element of the human psyche, it is not for solipsistic reasons or for the sole purpose of cognitive self-edification. Rather,

as indirectly conveyed by all the chapters of this book, one could say that it is ultimately for the basic purpose of getting closer, more intimate with one another. There is indeed a basic social need behind the human quest for self-knowledge, particularly if we assume, as it is suggested by all of the chapters of this book, that self-knowledge is coconstructed in interaction with others. But what guides this strong intuition?

I would say that to be human is to care about reputation. It is a major trait of our species and the question is why? Why are we so obsessed with who we are and what we project to the outside? Elsewhere, I tackled this question by arguing that the quest and control of self-knowledge, the origins of personal identity, hence the individual and collective representation of self continuity (theme of this book), all need to be considered in relation to the basic need to affiliate and to maintain reputation (Rochat, 2007).

The central role played by reputation, its maintenance and monitoring in human social affairs, derives from a social organization that is based on *reciprocal exchanges*, not just the coercion (brute force) and dominance hierarchy that prevail in other nonhuman social species, even close primate relatives.

The importance of reputation and its maintenance emerges from such reciprocal context where any social bid is to be returned, any favor paid back. Abiding more or less to the principle of reciprocity, individuals become accountable for the way they act toward others. Past actions determine current affiliation status or relative social respectability.

The care about reputation (i.e., what others perceive and represent of the self or the group, be it gang, political camp, or family) derives from such context. Individuals perceive themselves as well as are perceived by others in the historical perspective of past actions and the projection of future acts. The monitoring and maintenance of reputation become major mechanisms regulating the basic need to affiliate. My intuition is that our insatiable need for self-knowledge is the by-product of such mechanisms.

In the present book, Landau, Greenberg, and Solomon (chapter 7) propose another, alternative account as to *why* we, as a species, are so compelled to construe who we are. Based on Becker's (1973) ideas on the denial of death, these authors derive a theory by which the major motivational underpinning of our obsession with self-knowledge would come from the terror attached to the awareness of inescapable termination of the self (death). From this terrifying realization would arise the basic need to construct an enduring and meaningful existence. However, I would argue that it is not clear how typical the terror of death is across cultures and individuals. Some find comfort in particular religious belief systems, and other individuals in other cultures do not seem to be much phased by the idea of death to come. The same cannot be said regarding how we relate with others and the basic need to affiliate and maintain social proximity—the general account I propose. If we can exist whether we hold or do not hold terrifying thoughts regarding our unavoidable finitude, we certainly cannot exist without the proximity of others. Social dependence determines our survival as individuals from the outset, and self-knowledge is rooted in this dependence.

HOW DOES SELF-KNOWLEDGE COME ABOUT?

Considering that self-knowledge is an approximation that is coconstructed in social exchanges and rooted at a motivational level in the basic need to affiliate with others, the process by which it comes about is fundamentally *triadic*, as suggested by George Herbert Mead (1934) in his original theoretical formulation. The idea, once again, is that the representation or system of representations we hold of ourselves is the product of a triangulation of viewpoints, in particular viewpoints from the first- and from the second- or third-person perspectives. The first-person perspective is the perspective of the embodied self, the experience of being in this body acting and thinking in this world. It is the *I* as opposed to the conceptual or objectified *me* that William James distinguishes. The *me* is what one holds as his or her identity, what he or she knows of the self as an object, not only as an object of physical experience but also an object of contemplation and, more important, of social "re-presentation," in the theatrical sense of public self-presentation analyzed by Erwin Goffman (1959) years ago in his seminal book. The notion of *me* as self-knowledge is what one holds as he or she is projecting to the outside world, what one thinks or believes others perceive of him or her, whether weak, powerful, rich, poor, intelligent, lovable, or ugly. And this belief or value system about the self is obviously not fixed, constantly revised and adjusted in negotiation with others. It does not exist in itself but is ontologically and by definition *triadic*. It comes about as a product of the meeting of two viewpoints: the first- (subjective) person perspective with the second- (intimate *you*), or third- (more public *they* or collective *we*) person perspective. It is triadic because these viewpoints converge, "triangulating" to form the elusive concept of *me*. Figuratively speaking, the embodied *I* perspective, the *they*, *you*, or *we* perspective, and the concept of *me* form the three angles of a triangle representing conceptual self-knowledge.

In ontogeny, triadic self-knowledge is evident starting in the middle to end of the second year as children become competent speakers, show evidence of mirror self-recognition, and also begin to be explicit about possession. All these competencies that appear to coemerge in development are ontologically *triadic*. They are all rooted and defined by social exchanges. The child learns to speak in order to communicate with others about things in the world. The child recognizes in the mirror what others perceive of him or her. And when the child begins to say, "Mine!" it is to state that it is not yours. All these emerging competencies are rooted in and motivated by social exchanges. They are all triadic in nature, triadic in origin.

Interestingly, and as a case in point, self-conscious emotions emerge at around the same age (2 years). Placed in front of mirror with a mark on the face, the child often will not simply self-refer and remove the mark, but also show embarrassment, even blushing (see Rochat, 2003). In such secondary or self-conscious emotions, children demonstrate unambiguously that what they hold as representation of themselves (i.e., self-knowledge) factors the view of others. They begin to have others in mind in how they construe who they are. With secondary emotions such as embarrassment, pride, or contempt, the child further demonstrates the triadic nature of self-knowledge, a knowledge that is coconstructed with others, at the intersection of first-, second-, (intimate), and third- (public) person perspectives.

Self-knowledge emerges from such triangulation, a triangulation that is particularly evident by the time children become symbolic in their exchanges with others, in conventional language, but also via self-presentation, tendencies toward seductive (Machiavellic) calculation or the explicit assertiveness of possession.

CONCLUSIONS

In this commentary, and inspired by all the chapters assembled in this book on self continuity, I briefly revisited the ancient admonition to “know thyself!”, questioning what we need to know, why we should know it, and how we get access to it. Supported by the writings contained in this book, my answer to these questions is based on the fact that self-knowledge is primarily social. In relation to the philosophical debate regarding the ontological nature and origins of self-knowledge that I schematized as organized along the two ideological axes of *real versus illusory* nature of the self and the *internalist versus externalist* origins of the self, I conclude that self-knowledge is neither illusory in nature nor is it internal in origin.

However, if self-knowledge is not just an illusion, as suggested by David Hume, it is not static, not a thing to be discovered inside of us. Self-knowledge is first and foremost the product of an ongoing negotiation with others, the dynamic product of a triangulation of viewpoints turned toward the self from a first- (subjective), second- (intimate), or third- (public) person perspective. I suggested that this dynamic emerges early in ontogeny, particularly evident with the development of conventional language, the conceptual sense of self as expressed in mirror self-recognition, the explicit sense of possession manifested by the end of the second year, and the emergence of so-called secondary emotions such as embarrassment, guilt, or pride around 2 or 3 years of age. Ultimately, it is driven by our insatiable need to affiliate with others, to monitor our social proximity and intimacy with others that we depend on to survive.

The ancient admonition to “know thyself!” has to be understood within the context of this dynamic, the dynamic of our basic affiliation need. We understand why, 25 centuries later, such dictum continues to have resonance, still found tattooed as a reminder and a public commitment on the body of young people today. By knowing the self, we do understand first and foremost our place and situation in relation to others. This is indeed the crucial aspect of our psychological well-being from the outset and all through the lifespan.

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