

The Self

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As seen in the last issue, what “selfish” means depends strongly upon what you mean by “self”. I will not here try to correct all the wrong ideas of what the Self is, but rather give an indication of what I think the right view is. There are, as you well are aware, many different conceptions of what “self” means. A general line of division between these conceptions I have found very well illustrated in Wilber, Engler and Brown’s book on the psychology of meditation¹: To different stages of cognitive development belongs different self-structures and, not the least, -images. The highest stage, called the Ultimate stage, is described as “the reality, condition, or suchness of all levels.” If you draw the stage diagram on a paper, the Ultimate Self is in relation to the other “selves” as the paper in relation to the elements of the diagram drawn on it. Improper selfishness, then, might be viewed as the mistaking of the image for the real thing.

So, there is a very important division between the underlying Self, and the various self-images. This division is found more or less explicitly in a variety of sources. Pirsig, in his famous best-seller, denounces the ego, but embraces the Self in his praise of arete as “duty towards Self.”² The philosopher Nietzsche writes that “The Self is always listening and seeking: it compares, subdues, conquers, destroys. It rules and is also the Ego’s ruler. Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, stands a mighty commander, an unknown sage—he is called Self.”, and also, a little above this, “[the Self] does not say ‘I’ but performs ‘I’.”³

In⁴ it is concluded that though all who experience the Ultimate stage do essentially the same, the experience and understanding of it depends on the prior interpretation. The Buddhist experience an egoless state, while the theistic meditators experience [being one with] their god. Who is having this unifying experience? The same guy, essentially, who has everyday experience. Fichte⁵ asks of his audience, “Gentlemen, think of the wall,” and proceeds “Gentlemen, think of him who thought the wall.” In this way he gets an infinite chain, as “whenever we try to objectify ourselves, make ourselves into objects of consciousness, there always remains an I or ego which transcends objectification and is itself the condition of the unity of consciousness,” as Copleston describes.

¹ Wilber, Engler, Brown: “Transformations of Consciousness”

² Robert Pirsig: “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance”

³ Friedrich Nietzsche: “Zarathustra”, on the Despisers of the Body.

⁴ Wilber, Engler, Brown: “Transformations of Consciousness”

⁵ Copleston, Vol VII, p. 40

Now, whether we shall side with the meditators who claim to experience this I, or with Fichte who says we cannot, is of little importance here. What is important, is that the I, this ground and condition indeed exists, and that it is the ground of the empirical ego or egos.

I want to take a closer look at this I—the Self.

So far, the Self may be seen on as something just lying in the background, a kind of ultimate observer. But Fichte's question can also be asked of action, "Who is lifting your arm when you lift your arm?" Like it was clear in the first case that it was not the image of the Self—the ego—that was aware, but the Self itself, it is equally obvious that it is not the image of the Will that lifts the arm—but the Will itself. To understand this better, try to will the coke bottle in front of you to lift. Won't do. Now, "will" your arm up in the same way that you willed the coke bottle. Won't do either. Still, lifting the arm is easy. (See also⁶)

Proceeding like above, we can find a well of parts of the underlying Self. But they are all one. The Self that sees the stick is the same Self that throws a rock at it. How else would it hit? I have found it useful to single out three of them, which I will call the Experiencing Self, the Creative Self and the Teleological Self.

Stirner⁷ speaks of "the vanishing point of the ego", and of the "creative nothing". He has "built his case on nothing". This latter is the one that reveals what he intends. For surely, he has built his cause on—himself. But in the way of Fichte, the Self is not a thing, but the basis for speaking of things. To be a thing is to be an object for some subject and, as Fichte showed, the subject cannot properly be an object. So, Stirner's "creative nothing" is him Self.

In contrast to Fichte, however, Stirner emphasizes the finite here-and-now individual Self, not the abstract Ego: "Fichte's ego too is the same essence outside me, for every one is ego; and, if only this ego has rights, then it is "the ego", it is not I. But I am not an ego along with other egos, but the sole ego: I am unique. Hence my wants too are unique, and my deeds; in short everthing about me is unique."

So we see Stirner rejects the positivistic idea of viewing himself from a 3rd person vantage point. He is not "ego", the image of himself. For one can have an image of anyone. But ones own Self is experienced from the 1st person point of view, and one is oneself the only one who can experience oneself from there. Again quoting Stirner: "They say of God: 'Names name thee not.' That holds good of me: No—concept—expresses me; they are only names."

The history of philosophy can be simplified as follows: We have gone from a focus on experienced reality, to experienced self, and from that on to that which contains both—the Experiencing Self. Stirner, as a student of Hegel, must have seen this, and, as he states, this history is also **my** history. The dialectic process is taken back into its owner. I am not any longer viewing myself as a moment in the dialectical self-unfolding of the Absolute, but as he who learns and thinks these thoughts, and—take the advantage of them.

The philosophical process did not stop at the Experiencing Self, with which an empiricist would be content. A reaction came, asking what elements of experience were constituted by the subject himself. The observer was no longer seen as a passive observer, but as an active participant contributing his own elements into experience. Thus we can say that the awareness of the creative role of the intellect was properly emerging. We had the Creative Self. This was idea was taken very far by Stirners teachers—into German idealism.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche: "Zarathustra", on the Despisers of the Body.

⁷ Max Stirner: "The Ego & His Own"

Stirners main thesis is that of the individual as the ground not only of observation and creation, but of evaluation. This thesis is given a short presentation as a 0th chapter in *The Ego and His Own*: “All things are Nothing to Me.” No outer force is to determine ones cause, ones evaluation. With a convincing rhetoric, Stirner makes room for the case that he himself is the evaluator, the one whose cause is to be acted for.

Stirners main dialectical triad is then this, that we go from mere experience to action [thought], and as a solution to the strain between these go to valuation and interest, self-interest. This is a recurring theme in his book, and the structure of the argument is presented in the first chapter, very appropriately named “A human Life”.

The triad, as I have understood and interpreted it, is this:

The Experiencing Self: This is, so to say, the beacon that enlightens the empirical world, which makes it possible qua empirical world. With knowledge of oneself only as experiencing, one is stuck with things, and all ones activity is centered around things, as Stirner says. One is a Materialist. In history, both the personal and the philosophical one, the Empirical Self is seen as a passive observer on whom the world is imprinted, all until we come to the antithesis of this view:

The Creative Self: We discover our own more active role in experience, our own contribution of elements/form to our experience, as shown by the [Kantian inspired] experiments of the early Gestalt psychologists. With this knowledge, attention goes to thought itself, and, we become intellectual and spiritual young men. Our quest goes for that in which we can pry Spirit, and we become—Idealists.

The Teleological Self: There is a [dialectical] strain between the two views and aspects of the Self above, a conflict that can only, as Stirner says, be resolved by a third party, which is the synthesis. We begin to ask: Why do I focus on this, and not on that, in experience? Why do I create this and not that? For whom am I doing my creation, my thinking? I find the answer to the above questions in what I will call the Teleological Self. The Teleological Self is he [or rather—I] for whom all things done by me are done, the commander who is the measure of all activity. Any value, any selection, and thereby any focus and any creation, owes its existence to the Teleological Self. In the Teleological Self we find the grounding of our “why?”.

The dilemma between Materialism and Idealism is resolved in Selfishness. Not do I go for the material for its sake, nor do I let the cause of any ideal invade me and make its cause mine. I take both, but as tools and things to be disposed of at—my pleasure. In this fashion the dialectics is buried. For it is only alive in the world of ideas, which I have taken back into myself.

This was an attempt to convey some thoughts on the Self. If anyone feels tempted to pick up this thread, expand on it or negate it, you are welcome. It will be a pleasure.

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