

Survey of the Metaphysics of Self

Throughout history humans have searched for answers about our world, our existence and our selves. Cultures build mythologies, religions and philosophies to explain the things the science of the time cannot. Usually, when science and technology advance sufficiently, the theories of researchers and scientists replace those of religion and superstition. One question, however, has been asked since ancient times and today remains a topic of great curiosity. That is the question of self: who are we? What is the self? Today, modern science searches for answers to these questions inside the biochemistry of the brain yet still cannot find the entirety of what they search for. There still remain gaps that science cannot explain and perhaps never will be able to. It is in these gaps that Metaphysics finds its home. The term self refers to no physical object or part of the body; it is an abstract concept created by the human mind. The only proper way to define an intangible like this is through metaphysics. Though it is difficult, if not impossible, to say which metaphysical theory is correct it is clear that the question of self cannot be answered fully in non-metaphysical terms. Therefore, let us examine how metaphysical concepts of self have developed over time looking specifically to Aquinas in the middle ages, Descartes in the modern era and Camus and Gallagher in contemporary thought.

Some of the earliest theories of self can be found in ancient Greek philosophy. Plato postulated a three-part soul similar to the Freudian theory of Id, Ego and Superego. Aristotle believed that we were creatures of reason and virtue and based his metaphysics on theories of substance and movement. Over time these theories evolved and changed and new theories were formulated all to answer the same question of self. As technology developed human beings still sought to answer those fundamental questions of self even though science couldn't help them.

During the middle ages, philosophers studied these ancient theories and adapted them to fit Christian values. Modern philosophers developed new theories attempting to answer the same questions in the context of a new era. Contemporary philosophers also develop new theories as time and society at large changes, but also looks back at previous theories to see how they may still apply in current times. It is important to look at these philosophers and their theories in chronological order to clearly see where the evolution took place, what types of ideas were replaced when society no longer needed them and which elements may adapted to the times but always remain a constant part of philosophical thought.

One of the most influential philosophers of the middle ages was Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas was a Catholic priest who lived from 1225-1274. He studied the ancient Greek philosophers and wrote a great deal on Aristotle in particular. Aquinas' theories, while influenced by ancient Greece, were primarily based in Christian ideas and values. In his 1965 book, *Aquinas on Being and Essence*, Joseph Bobik, a contemporary philosopher, translates Aquinas' *On Being and Essence* and also attempts to interpret and explicate. Aquinas begins his work, and thus so does Bobik, with the declaration that, "being and essence are what is first conceived by the intellect" (Bobik, 2). Bobik goes on to explain that from infancy, prior to learning of language, one begins to understand the concept and functions that will later be referred to by the word being. In other words, the first thing a child becomes cognizant of is itself and other things that exist around it. The reason Aquinas groups being and essence together here is because of two different ways in which being can be conceived; being with and without essence. Being with essence refers to things which can be sensed; people and objects, whereas being without essence refers to more abstract ideas such as blindness. The being that is first conceived by intellect is of sensible things, being with essence (Bobik, 4-5). What this means is

that being accounts of only the existence of an object whereas essence describes the intrinsic qualities the object possesses, what it truly is, in an abstracted sense.

Aquinas defines the difficult to describe thing we call self as the intelligences and human souls. He does not attempt to give a proof of their existence but rather assumes it as part of his Christian ideals. He describes these pieces of the self as being immaterial, completely lacking matter both in form and object. The human soul is without matter because its function is to understand the essences of things (Bobik, 144). The soul here is considered to have no physical matter because it is indivisible, which matter held in common with corporeal things must be, and because the nature of its function is to receive absolutely, meaning it too must be an absolute form without matter (Bobik, 140-144). The object of its function must also be without matter for us to consider the soul completely immaterial. While the essences the soul understands may have physical matter, for example a body, no particular object is required for understanding to take place; the difference here is between the abstract understanding of what a body is as opposed to *this* or *that* body in particular (Bobik, 144). This distinction is important to understanding why science cannot fully define the self; self refers to this abstract understanding of what we are, outside the confines our physical form, and thus cannot be grasped through the studies of the physical body.

Aquinas further argues that the human soul is also incorruptible. Aquinas describes corruption as the separation of a thing from its substantial form and suggests two methods of corruption; an object can be corrupted in itself or by accident (Bobik, 151). To be corrupted by accident is for a thing to go out of existence, in the context of substantial change, because of something else going out of existence. This cannot lead to the corruption of the human soul because, as was previously illustrated, it exists independently of matter, therefore nothing else

going out of existence can cause the soul to go out of existence (Bobik, 152). For something to be corrupted in itself it must go out of existence, in the context of substantial change, without dependence on any external object. This corruption cannot occur in the human soul because the human soul cannot be divided since it is immaterial. Since it cannot be divided its substantial form is itself and is thus impervious to corruption as defined by Aquinas (Bobik, 152).

It is important to note that Aquinas does not make the claim that the human soul is immortal. While we understand immortality to be the inability of something to go out of existence, which it appears to have been shown that the soul cannot, Aquinas does not, according to Bobik, declare that the soul cannot go out of existence absolutely. The claim Aquinas made for the incorruptibility of the soul demonstrates that it cannot go out of existence within the context of change. This assessment allows for the possibility that the soul may go out of existence in some other way unrelated to change and is as such not immortal (Bobik, 153). The absence of an argument for the immortality of the soul seems strange given that Aquinas' philosophy tended to align with his religious beliefs.

Given Aquinas' assertions it is clear what he perceived to be the self. For Aquinas and most of medieval philosophy the essence of the self was the human soul. According to Bobik's interpretation of Aquinas the soul is the means by which we sense the world and ourselves, it is what first allows us to understand the concept of being. It is also the faculty through which we perceive the essences of other things, which is necessary to abstract thought and reason. It is clearly, for Aquinas, that which allows human beings to do all the things that separates us from the other creatures. The soul is also immaterial and incorruptible, which would make it impossible to find through scientific methods, but it is not immortal. The conception of the self or, as Aquinas refers to it, soul as immaterial and incorruptible exemplify why metaphysics, as

opposed to science, is the proper method for understanding it. Science deals in tangibles; material things which can be studied, dissected and known through perceptive experience. Aquinas understood that the thing we refer to by self is not our physical bodies but to the abstract concept of how our personal experiences and thought form who we are. The next philosopher to be examined, Descartes, explores how personal experience makes us who we are and how that separates us from the physical world.

The modern philosopher Rene Descartes' theories of self are among the most famous and well known though they are no longer widely accepted. Descartes' most famous and often quoted idea about the self is referred to as the cogito, short for *cogito ergo sum* or I think therefore I am. He reaches this conclusion and assesses it and its implications in 1637's *Discourse on Method* and 1641's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. *Discourse on Method* contains a great deal of autobiographical facts about Descartes; his life is intrinsically connected to his method of learning which he hopes to share through this work. Though Descartes was well educated he eventually gave up on learning through schools and books and sought to learn through travel and his own faculties of reason instead.

Descartes established four rules of reasoning that were key to his method and helped to lead him to the cogito. The first was to accept nothing as true unless it was evident in order to prevent hasty conclusions. The second was to divide problems into the largest possible number of smaller parts so that these parts could be analyzed more simply than the whole. The third was to begin with the simplest objects and slowly move toward more difficult ones. The fourth and final rule was to constantly review the progress that had been made in order to ensure that nothing was left out (Descartes, 11).

Descartes then begins his meditations and search for what is unquestionably true; he summarizes these meditations and conclusions in *Discourse on Method*, and goes into detail about his reasoning and argument in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He starts his search by taking anything that is at all doubtful to be false. This includes sensory knowledge, because senses can be deceived, demonstrative reasoning, since people can make errors in reasoning, and he eventually includes any thought that ever entered his mind to be illusions in a dream (Descartes, 18 & 63). It is this extreme form of skepticism that leads Descartes to the cogito. He attempts to view every idea as false without exception but cannot do so without noticing that he, who is thinking about this and attempting to think of everything as false, must in fact be something. This is what leads him to the conclusion that the first and most fundamental truth, without which no other thought is possible, is I think therefore I am (Descartes, 18 & 64).

Descartes finds it possible to imagine himself as having no body or being in no physical place but it was not possible to imagine himself as non-existent. He believed that his ability to doubt all other things and think about the truth in this way undoubtedly meant that he existed. Only if he were to stop thinking all together would it be possible to believe that he didn't actually exist (Descartes, 18-19). This is the most important idea in Descartes theory of self and it tells us two fundamental things about the self. First, the self is a thinking substance; the primary function of the self is thought and the self may in fact be imagined to be made up of one's thoughts. Here we see that the conception of self as the intelligences present in Aquinas has been passed through, with little alteration, onto the modern era, as well as the view of the self as being immaterial and separate from the body. The second is that as long as one thinks one exists and the self only ceases to exist when it ceases to think. It is these two principles that lead to the development of Cartesian dualism. Since the self, or what may be referred to as the mind or soul,

is not dependent on any material thing or place it follows that it is separate from the body and can exist without the body (Descartes, 19). Descartes furthers this distinction as he describes the laws of nature and asserts that the functions of the human body can all be explained by these laws of nature with the exception of reasoning and speech. The ability to speak and use language is what Descartes believes to be uniquely human and he also believes it is the result and evidence of a rational soul. He states that this soul is deeply connected to the body, allowing the body to move in conjunction with thought and enabling the mind to have imaginations, but is in fact immortal and lives on after the body dies (Descartes, 31-33 & 66-69).

It is clear that many of the ideas Descartes emphasizes about the self can be found in other forms throughout history. The mind-body separation known as Cartesian Dualism is not unique to Descartes. As previously reviewed, Aquinas also believed the soul or mind to be a non-material thing which was complete in and of itself and not dependant on any matter such as the body. Aquinas also believed, as did Descartes, that the death of the body did not necessarily result in the death of the soul or mind, or self; although where Descartes asserted that the soul is immortal, Aquinas did not. They also both believed that the essence of human reasoning was in the mind or soul. Just as with Aquinas, Descartes declaration that the soul is separate from the material body, and in fact separate from all things in the world which can be subject to doubt, makes it something impossible to find through scientific means. Though Descartes' philosophy was not entirely based in his religion, as was Aquinas', the over tones of Christian values are still evident with the work. The connection of theology and philosophy is one that has survived from ancient Greece and remained prevalent throughout the modern era. While the connection between these two fields of though remains today, it became more common, with the onset of the contemporary era as a multi-religion global culture began to exist, to separate philosophy from

religion. This lack of religion is one stark difference that is immediately notable between the previous philosophies of Aquinas and Descartes and the next philosopher, Camus.

One of the most notable subsets of contemporary philosophy is Existentialism and one of the most well known philosophers of this style is Albert Camus. The work that can be described as the essential statement of his philosophy is 1955's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. This extended essay centers on Camus' ideas about absurdity and life. He believes that life itself is absurd; there is no reason or greater purpose to anything. In great contrast to Aquinas and Descartes, Camus not only removes all religious thought from his philosophy but also refutes the existence of god. Here is where we find the first evidence of extraneous content added into the metaphysics of self by the norms of society at the time that as norms changes becomes unnecessary and is dismissed.

Camus begins his discussion of absurdity by questioning why, having realized the inherent absurdity of life, one shouldn't commit suicide. It is important to note that he does not want to address suicide as a social phenomenon and writes, "on the contrary, we are concerned here, at the outset, with the relationship between individual thought and suicide." (Camus, 4). He admits that suicide is both a possible and seemingly logical answer to the absurdity of the world but does not think it is the best answer. Instead, Camus contends, it is better to continue living the absurd life, performing the absurd actions therein, with the full understanding that it is absurd and without meaning and doing so without the hope for something different. Camus believes life will be lived better when it is understood to have no meaning and that the conscious revolt of the human mind against the absurd is what gives life value (Camus, 53-55).

For Camus absurdity is the natural result of human existence in the world. The feeling of the absurd is the feeling of being alien in one's own environment. This occurs because it is the

nature of human consciousness to ask why and to search for reasons, meaning and answers. We look to the world that surrounds us to discover these answers but find none because they don't exist; the answer cannot be found through experience. (Camus, 28). The image Camus gives us of the curious consciousness being left unfulfilled by the outside world translates perfectly to the assertion and the self cannot be understood through science. Here the self is referred to as human consciousness, the nature of which is inquisitive, again connecting back to the conception of self as intellect, thought and mind. The material world around us is in no way equipped to give us the answers we search for and it is clear here that Camus is not referring to questions of physical nature that science addresses readily. As he speaks about the things the consciousness searches for he mentions meaning and purpose in life, two concepts closely associated with our everyday conceptions of the self.

Absurdity isn't found in the existence of human beings or in the world but instead comes from the simultaneous existence of both and their confrontation. The ensuing struggle between human consciousness and the world create the feeling of the absurd which teaches us the truth of our existence; that there is no meaning, no greater purpose, and no reasons. Camus believes that the best way to live is by knowing this truth, accepting it, abandoning hope and acting as the absurd hero. The quintessential absurd hero for Camus is Sisyphus. Sisyphus was punished by the gods and condemned to push a large rock up a hill only to watch it roll back down once he reached the top repeatedly for eternity (Camus, 119-120). Despite this activity being pointless Sisyphus continues to do it anyway. He never begins pushing the rock thinking, with hope, that this time he might succeed and Camus imagines that when he is at the top watching the rock fall back to the bottom he is actually happy rather than feeling despair or sorry for himself (Camus, 123). This is what makes Sisyphus the absurd hero. Camus believes that the answer to the

absurdity of the world is to abandon hope and accept the inherent meaninglessness of life but to continue to live anyway.

Many ideas about the self can be extracted from Camus' ideas about absurdity. While others, such as Aquinas and Descartes, refer to the self as the mind or the soul Camus does not; instead he refers to human consciousness. For Camus this consciousness also stands in opposition to the world and the meeting of the two is what causes absurdity. Camus also tells us that the nature of this consciousness is to search for answers, reasons and meaning, though it can never actually find them. This idea of the nature of consciousness can be related both to Aquinas and Descartes. The search for reasons and meaning is similar to Aquinas theory that the soul is what senses the world and understands being and essences. Camus would of course disagree in that he does not believe we actually understand, only that we sense the world and look for answers in it. Descartes' idea that the self is a thinking substance is also similar to Camus' assertion that the consciousness searches for answers; the search for answers and human curiosity can be easily illustrated as we constantly question, experiment and reason, in other words, as we think. Unlike both Descartes and Aquinas, however, Camus does not draw a distinction between the consciousness and the body. He does not discuss where this consciousness is contained or what it is made up of, only that it exists in disjunction with the world. This means that it may be some non-material thing as Descartes and Aquinas argue, that it may reside in the brain as neuroscience insists, or that it may be elsewhere; the question of where is not considered pertinent to Camus' discussion. What is important to mention is that Camus' theory does not permit a scientific answer to the question of self either. Based on Camus' observations it is clear that the consciousness will look to the world to find this answer as it does all others, science is of course a way of looking to the world for answers, but by Camus' logic

will not find the answer but will instead only find absurdity. The consciousness is unfulfilled by the outside world because the physical world is not equipped to answer abstract question, the self cannot be understood through science. Again, Camus is not referring to questions of physical nature that science addresses readily. He speaks about the things the consciousness searches for as being meaning and purpose. These two concepts are readily connected with our conceptions of the self and further demonstrate that it is a metaphysical construct and must be treated as such to be understood. Indeed, in all the centuries that human beings have pondered this question we still have no definitive answers, only ambiguity and contradictions, which together may be called absurd.

With the self being clearly labeled as immaterial by philosophers the cognitive sciences nonetheless pursue it. While some members of the scientific community insist that they will one day be able to clearly define the self in purely scientific terms, others realize that need for abstract thought to be entered into the equation and attempt to reconcile their theories with some current theories in the philosophy of mind. In January of 2000 the Journal, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, published an article by Shaun Gallagher titled, “Philosophical Conceptions of the Self: Implications for Cognitive Science.” The review sought to examine two popular, contemporary conceptions of self; minimal self and narrative self. The approach Gallagher describes from minimal self is a process of eliminating all unessential features of self and in doing so still being left with something we are willing to call self. This notion does not consider questions of self over time but instead focuses on the minimal self that is accessible to the immediate self-consciousness (Gallagher, 15). The narrative self is a conception of the self overtime and includes both memories of the past and intentions for the future. The narrative self is partially

constructed from the stories that we, and others, tell about ourselves. This conception is also known as the extended self (Gallagher, 15).

There are two aspects of minimal self-awareness; they are self-ownership, the sense that I am the one undergoing a given experience, and self-agency, the sense that I am the initiator of an action (Gallagher, 16). These aspects lead to what some believe to be the primary principle of minimal self which is the immunity principle. This principle assumes that when I use the pronoun ‘I’ it isn’t possible for me to make an error of misidentification; in other words, when I say ‘I’, I can’t be referring to anyone other than myself. This presents problems for cognitive scientists when mental illnesses are considered. Gallagher describes two approaches to solving this problem. The first considers if there is any aspect of self more primitive than the immunity principle. To find this some look to pre-linguistic non-conceptual first person content. An example of this is given in newborns, less than an hour old, who can imitate facial expressions. Gallagher describes how this relates to a concept of self by observing that, “for this to be possible the infant must be able to do three things: (1) distinguish between self and non-self; (2) locate and use certain parts of its own body proprioceptively, without vision; and (3) recognize that the face it sees is of the same kind as its own face (the infant will not imitate non-human objects).” (Gallagher, 17). It is possible to interpret this as a primitive self-consciousness from which to construct the minimal self. The second solution to the immunity principle problem is an introspective approach. This approach leads to the characterization of self as the subject of experience. This version of self is momentary, lasting only as long as any given experience does. A human being in these terms is a series of such selves going in and out of existence (Gallagher, 17-18).

Gallagher admits that while the minimal self does easily admit of cognitive science, and many neuroscientists look to this conception of self to coincide with their discoveries about the brain, it is also counter-intuitive, seeming to stand at odds with our common ideas of who we are. This is most notably because we think of ourselves as extended through time which the minimal self conception does not allow. For this we turn to the narrative self which uses language to construct stories which collectively become our selves (Gallagher, 19). In this view the self is not an actual thing but rather a theoretical construct consisting of the commonplace between all the stories. This conception fits well both with psychology and neuroscience. For psychology it fits with the role of language and narrative on self-concept. For neuroscience, some researchers believe that one of the functions of the left hemisphere is to create such narratives (Gallagher, 19). This may be related back to Camus, who views the self a consciousness, which may be defined as the stream of thoughts and experiences that encompass narrative self, and who also believes that the consciousness dies with the body, which makes sense if the consciousness, in the form of narratives, is housed inside a specific portion of the brain.

Gallagher presents two separate conceptions of self that are the easiest to combine with cognitive science. The idea of the minimal self is one that is not extended in time but rather only momentary and is the most basic things we consider to be a self. However this view contradicts some of our most common and basic ideas about self, mainly that self is extended over time to include memories and intentions. Since the self is an abstract construct our intuitions about it must be considered integral parts of what it is, since it is not material and thus not sensible our intuitions are the means by which we examine it. Though this view of self may allow a dialogue to open between philosophy and cognitive science its counter-intuitive nature seems cause a

problem, even for Gallagher. The narrative self conception is one that fits better with our common beliefs about ourselves and with other philosophical ideas about self as well as with current neuroscience. The narrative self supposes that self is constructed of the stories we tell and not the faculty by which we do so. This is where this theory most strongly diverges from Aquinas and Descartes. While the content of the mind is part of the self for both Aquinas and Descartes, the mind itself, which creates and stores the stories, is also an important part of self. In the narrative self conception described by Gallagher the brain is considered to be where the stories are created and stored but the brain is not the self. This conception also steers clear of Cartesian Dualism as well, meaning that the mind and body aren't considered two separate things. This leads to a paradox; the self is in the brain but the brain isn't the self but the self is not separate from the brain either. The confusion of that statement summarizes the confusion of modern cognitive science at large. The question of self remains one that is difficult to answer and though Gallagher attempted to combine the science with the philosophy clarity still eludes.

What is made clear by Gallagher's article is that philosophy not only still has a place in the search for self, but it is necessary to the search. Cognitive science cannot tell us what this elusive self is without reducing it to something that is counter-intuitive and not quite what we mean when we say self. Fitting philosophical theories into the confines of cognitive science leads us to further confusion rather than clarifying the plethora of ideas we have about the subject. It is obvious that a discussion of self must involve both the new understandings of science as well as the philosophical constructions but they cannot be forced to fit one another. Instead philosophy needs to fill in the gaps that are left by science. The two areas of thought must work parallel to one another to make a complete picture of the self. In this way Descartes was on the right track with dualism of mind and body. Treating the two as separate, the body being the subject of

science and the mind as the subject of philosophy, allows for science and philosophy to coexist, each explaining a part of the self without contradiction or confusion.

Many, though not all, in the scientific fields disagree with these judgments and question if philosophy is needed at all. They believe that, with time and some further technological advancements, they will be able to answer the question of self in entirely scientific terms without any further need for philosophy. However, those who insist on this are missing the very essence of the question. When we ask what the self is it is important to note that there is a thing we call consciousness which is most likely made possible by the biochemistry of the human brain. It is also important to note that this consciousness is affected by our environment and experiences as well as the ways in which we sense the outside world. How we create and store information, such as memories, thoughts and knowledge, in the brain is also a fundamental part of the self. However, all these things combined, even if we knew and understood them as clearly and accurately as possible, do not make the entirety of what we refer to as self. The evidence of this is in those things that we consistently refer to when attempting to answer the question. We refer to the mind or the soul in relation to consciousness. We allude to themes of reasoning and understanding, insatiable thirst for knowledge and how we are separated from the world around us and the other people around us. Science can explain to us how it is we come to have consciousness, and perhaps one day may be able to tell us how it is we have the faculty of reasoning but it won't explain the content of that reasoning nor is it likely to explain the thirst for knowledge. Science also can't tell us how we are separate from everything and everyone else in the sense that we mean when referring to self. The difference between two selves is not simply a matter of DNA, spatial positioning or material constitution. It is a deeper question of an

individual's experience and perception. The true questions of self cannot be answered by science.

To answer the question of self one must look to the philosophy and see what answers are repeatedly given. Through Aquinas, Descartes and Camus we can see what ideas have survived time and remain as the intrinsic parts of self. From the theories of these three philosophers, and the themes that are consistent among their works, it is clear that the self is the means by which we observe and interpret the world around us. The self is something that exists separate from the rest of the world. It is what allows us to think and to reason and urges us to ask questions and seek knowledge. Whether the self exists independent of the body or is some invisible part of it; whether it is immortal or dies with body; whether it is the source of order or of absurdity all remain open questions. What is certain is that philosophy, and specifically metaphysics, alone is in the position to answer such questions. Abstract ideas require abstract definitions and abstract thought. These are the marks of philosophical thought and the clear and proper place for questions of self to be addressed.

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