

Chapter 16, The Essence of Self

The religious conception

Medieval world-view

1. World:

- a) **ordered**, meaningful cosmos
- b) **created by God** and expressing his will
- c) everything has its **proper role** or purpose

2. Self:

- a) means playing your **proper role** in the larger order
- b) bringing yourself into **harmony** with this order

16th/17th cent scientific conception

1. World:

- a) stripped of any **inherent purpose** or significance
- b) no more than a **collection of material bodies**, mechanically interacting

2. Self:

- a) **not in terms of conforming to a larger order**
- b) **look within ourselves** for who we are, for purpose and meaning

Descartes

1. **Self** = no longer part of some larger meaningful order of nature

2. **Non-physical subject** of experience – distinct from the body and nature

3. **Human being** = 2 different substances – mind and body:

- a) I am **essentially my mind**, an immaterial substance
- b) The **body**, physical substance, **is not essential to who I am**

4. **Personal identity**:

Question: what makes a human being the same self?

Answer: D – what is essential is for me to have the same mind.

5. **Problems**:

- a) how can two such utterly different entities as mind and body **interact**?
- b) we can **never be sure that someone is the same person** we saw yesterday
– we can never observe they have the same mind

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Locke

1. Self:

- a) emphasizes **reason, consciousness and self-consciousness**
- b) A person has a sense of themselves + their **identity over time** as the same person

2. Personal identity is a matter of continuing consciousness:

- a) **Memory** is the criterion for personal identity: as far as I can remember being the same person, then I am that person
- b) **Selfhood is tied not to bodies but consciousness** e.g. If I have memories of a previous life I am that person even if our bodies are different

3. Problems:

- a) **Breaks in consciousness** – we forget things or during sleep – at these times it was not me who did these things
- b) **Moral implications** – L's a/c = if we do not remember doing something, we didn't do it, we're not responsible and cannot be judged or punished for it

Hume

1. **Bundle theory of the mind**: when we look into ourselves what we find is 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions'

2. Continuous selves – we believe this because we tend to ascribe sameness or identity to things without strictly speaking observing it = **fictional unity**

- a) Mind = **multiplicity of distinct perceptions** – we attribute identity to our minds because the mind comes to see these separate perceptions as related to each other
- b) To justify this – **we invent a uniting principle** – something that is unchanging throughout the successive changes but is not directly accessible to observation – we call this substance, soul or self

3. Problems:

- a) **Counterintuitive**
- b) **Vicious circle**:
 - in order to relate these perceptions in the first place we must have a continuing mind i.e. to explain personal identity we appeal to personal identity

Kant

1. Self – that organizes experience in terms of basic forms/categories ≠ **empirical self** – can't know it thro expce or science

2. = **Active self** – 'transcendental self'

- a) By organizing and unifying experience it makes knowledge possible
 - it **transcends sense experience**
- b) ≠ the contents of the mind (H) but **that which organizes experiences** into an intelligible whole

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3. = also the source of 'agency', of the will behind our actions = central to K's account of morality:

- a) Self determines what ought to be done, in accordance with principles it rationally formulates for itself
- b) It is only in so far as we are active rational subjects that we are moral agents – moral agents stand apart from the natural world, incl our own desires, feelings, inclinations and passions – we must act purely out of rational motivations

4. Freedom:

- a) Exclusion of all non-rational, natural influences + acting in accordance with our reason alone = means we are radically free
- b) The moral self is not determined by nature, but determines itself by rationally formulating its own moral laws – it is rationally self-determining, or autonomous

5. Problem = extremely abstract:

- a) Independent of desires, inclinations and feelings
- b) + of all social and historical circumstances and influences