

Ancient Philosophy of the Self

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Ancient Philosophy of the Self

 Springer

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The editors

Contents

Acknowledgements	v
Contributors	ix
Introduction	1
Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola	
Part I Approaches to Self and Person in Antiquity	
1 Graeco-Roman Varieties of Self	13
Richard Sorabji	
2 The Ancient Self: Issues and Approaches	35
Christopher Gill	
3 Assumptions of Normativity: Two Ancient Approaches to Agency	57
Miira Tuominen	
Part II From Plato to Plotinus	
4 Socratic Authority	77
Raphael Woolf	
5 Protean Socrates: Mythical Figures in the <i>Euthydemus</i>	109
Mary Margaret McCabe	
6 Aristotle on the Individuality of Self	125
Juha Sihvola	
7 What Kind of Self Can a Greek Sceptic Have?	139
Richard Bett	

8 Inwardness and Infinity of Selfhood: From Plotinus to Augustine	155
Pauliina Remes	
Part III Christian and Islamic Themes	
9 Philosophy of the Self in the Apostle Paul	179
Troels Engberg-Pedersen	
10 Two Kinds of Subjectivity in Augustine's <i>Confessions</i>: Memory and Identity, and the Integrated Self.	195
Gerard J.P. O'Daly	
11 The Self as Enemy, the Self as Divine: A Crossroads in the Development of Islamic Anthropology	205
Taneli Kukkonen	
12 Locating the Self Within the Soul – Thirteenth-Century Discussions	225
Mikko Yrjönsuuri	
Bibliography	243
Name Index	255
Subject Index	259
Index Locorum	263

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Introduction

Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola

In the course of history, philosophers have given an impressive variety of answers to the question, “What is self?” Some of them have even argued that there is no such thing at all. This volume explores the various ways in which selfhood was approached and conceptualised in antiquity. How did the ancients understand what it is that I am, fundamentally, as an acting and affected subject, interpreting the world around me, being distinct from others like and unlike me? The authors highlight the attempts in ancient philosophical sources to grasp the evasive character of the specifically human presence in the world. They also describe how the ancient philosophers understood human agents as capable of causing changes and being affected in and by the world. Attention will be paid to the various ways in which the ancients conceived of human beings as subjects of reasoning and action, as well as responsible individuals in the moral sphere and in their relations to other people. The themes of persistence, identity, self-examination and self-improvement recur in many of these essays.

The articles of the collection combine systematic and historical approaches to ancient sources that range from Socrates to Plotinus and Augustine. Some contributions offer us broad overviews of the philosophical landscape around the problem of selfhood and outline innovative generalizations about the ancient approach to the topic, while others focus on particular philosophical problems, thinkers and schools. The volume also explores the influence of ancient philosophy on Western and Islamic philosophy in the medieval era.

There are two basic lines of interpretation in terms of which we can try to understand the ancient philosophy of self. On the one hand, we can argue that the ancient reflections around the topic express the insights of different philosophical approaches as to what is fundamentally one and the same philosophical problem about one and the same self. When the ancient philosophers were offering different answers to questions such as, what in the human being merits the name of self, what is the fundamental truth about human nature, what defines the fundamental identity of an individual, what is the relation between what we value as our ideal goals of life and what we actually are, they, so this view supposes, were nonetheless talking about the very same thing. On the other hand, we could think that there is no unambiguous problem of the self to which there are different answers, depending upon the philosophical vocabularies that the ancient philosophers happen to use. On the contrary,

according to this line of interpretation, the ancient philosophers reflect on a wide variety of different problems. If the latter view were accepted, one could wonder whether there is, after all, such a thing as the ancient philosophy of self, if related inquiries break down into philosophical problems and dilemmas that are concerned with incomparable and incommensurable issues. For example, one may ask whether there is any common ground shared by discussions about human bodily identity, in which the determinacy and permanence of an embodied being is problematized, and by questions about rational agency, whereby the theoretical foundations behind the idea of human beings as subjects of rational judgements and purposive plans comes to the forefront.

Philosophy of self could also be understood in a new way, if we approach it from the idea that selfhood is not a single thing but a many-dimensional phenomenon. If this is accepted, we can neither explain selfhood within a single branch of philosophy nor give an unambiguous and clear-cut definition of what a self is. An example of the many-dimensional approach is Jerrold Seigel's recent book *The Idea of the Self* in which three dimensions of self are distinguished: the bodily or material, the relational; and the reflective.¹ Our material needs, drives and temperaments are distinguished from our cultural and interpersonal conditioning, such as shared values, and finally attention is paid to our capacity for examining and restructuring ourselves and our lives. Selfhood is located in the continuous dialectic between these aspects.

The many-dimensional approach, although it has been developed outside the field of studies in ancient philosophy, may be helpful for understanding the ancient discussions, which were themselves widely dispersed in the field of philosophy without assuming that the self could be subsumed under a single, clearly structured definition. The scheme does not, however, directly lend itself to application in ancient philosophy. The interpretation of self that it yields, in any case, does not correspond well with some of the central features in the teleological and eudaimonistic framework of ancient philosophy. For example, the idea that the human striving towards a flourishing life regulates the interplay between the material, cultural and reflective aspects of the self is not so easily captured by a merely classificatory framework. As such, the significance of the many-dimensional approach lies not so much in its success in explaining particular doctrines of ancient philosophy, but in the methodological possibilities it opens. It shows that the contributions of this volume do not need to be taken as merely alternative ways of approaching the philosophical problem of selfhood. At least some suggestions that are made here could work together towards a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon that is essentially multifaceted. It seems that some of the authors in this volume have in fact approached their topic in a many-dimensional way, as they explore a cluster of separate philosophical problems, the solutions of which are together intended to provide a more comprehensive conception of the notion of self.

¹Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self. Thought and Experience in Western Europe Since the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005.

Whichever interpretative line we follow, it is clear that we shall easily find numerous interesting arguments around the theme of selfhood in ancient philosophy. Among the answers offered, we find some that look familiar to us and seem to correspond with our own intuitions, whereas some ancient reflections might look strange and implausible. Even the arguments in this latter group, can, however, be philosophically interesting from our contemporary perspective, since their strangeness may lead us to challenge our own tacit assumptions and intuitions. Some of the essays refer to differences between ancient and modern thinking, but in the final essays of this volume it is also shown that the ancient discussion of selfhood had an interesting afterlife in medieval and Arabic philosophy. It is instructive to see which elements in the ancient tradition its immediate followers regarded as worthy of being preserved and further developed in their own reflections.

It should also be asked whether there is such a thing as the ancient approach to the topic of selfhood, in distinction to the philosophies of self during the other periods in the history of philosophy. Behind the wide variety of viewpoints to the topic, there indeed seem to be some basic assumptions that at least most ancient philosophers share. First, in ancient philosophy the problem of self was usually discussed in terms of metaphysics and ontology with an aim to locate the self among the basic entities of reality. So the Platonists put a lot of effort into arguing that each of us is fundamentally the soul alone, not the body or the composite of body and soul (see especially *Alcibiades* I, 129–130), whereas the Aristotelians denied this and advocated the composite as the most likely candidate for what the human subject is (see especially *DA* I 4, 408b11–15).

Second, although the acquisition of truth is of paramount concern for ancient philosophical schools, the notion of self is not construed as a domain of epistemological certainty, as the Cartesians later claimed.² Rather, in antiquity selfhood has to be traced in the junctures of metaphysics, philosophical psychology and ethics. Third, at least until Plotinus and Augustine, selves are primarily understood as being constituent parts of an objective world and having capacities that, at least ideally, enable them to conceive of this world just as it objectively exists. The ancient philosophers had very little if any interest in the private and subjective aspects of human experience.³ Fourth, conceptions about the good, happiness, and flourishing create a space between every-day existence and normatively regulative ideal existence. For human beings, the latter coincides with the use and well-being of our rational or intellectual nature. The problems of self were thus approached

²Myles Burnyeat, “Idealism and Greek Philosophy. What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed”, *Philosophical Review* 90(1982), 3–40.

³See Stephen Everson, “The Objective Appearance of Pyrrhonism”, in Stephen Everson (ed.), *Psychology. Companions to Ancient Thought* 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, 121–147; Gail Fine, “Subjectivity, Ancient and Modern”, in Jon Miller and Brad Inwood (eds.), *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2003, 192–231; as well as Amber Carpenter’s and Pauliina Remes’s contributions in Sara Heinämaa, Vili Lähteenmäki and Pauliina Remes (eds.), *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2007.

within the overall teleological framework typical of ancient philosophy.⁴ Fifth, the very strong assumptions concerning the natural sociability of human beings, so prominent in Plato's and Aristotle's ethical and political arguments, also influenced the way in which the themes around selfhood were conceived.

Before outlining each individual contribution, let us briefly reflect on those critical voices who have doubted the applicability of the notion of self to ancient philosophy. These criticisms can be schematically divided into three groups. First, some philosophers have claimed that there is no need to distinguish such entities as selves as ontologically or even conceptually distinct from human beings, persons or souls.⁵ Second, it may also be argued that there are no terms corresponding to the notion of self in ancient philosophy, and therefore there is nothing to study. A third group of critics consists of those who hold that the doctrinal differences between ancient philosophy and the more recent discussions of selfhood are so great that they are no longer talking about one and the same concept or entity.⁶

To the members of the first group we can say that even if there were no selves in reality, it would be important to study why earlier philosophers assumed that such things existed, just as it might be useful to study theological beliefs even if we did not believe that God exists. Moreover, the 20th century attempts to discard the notion of self have not been widely accepted. On the contrary, the concept of self

⁴Several scholars have pointed out that this feature of ancient selfhood renders a conception of selfhood in antiquity which is constructed or achieved rather than simply given. It is also called an "honorary" conception of selfhood – something that is striven for, and that can be had in different degrees. Cf. Mary Margaret McCabe, *Plato's Individuals*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1994, ch. 6; Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press 1998, esp. p. 4; A.A. Long, "Ancient Philosophy's Hardest Question: What to Make of Oneself?", *Representations* 74(2001), 19–36; Lloyd P. Gerson, *Knowing Persons. A Study in Plato*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003, esp. at 11.

⁵Anthony Kenny treats "self" as a grammatical mistake, A.J.P. Kenny, *The Self*, The Aquinas Lecture, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI: Wisconsin 1988; Elisabeth Anscombe claims the "I" does not refer into anything; see her "The First Person", in Samuel Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language*, Wolfson College lectures, Oxford: Clarendon 1975, 45–65. Kathleen V. Wilkes argues that "self", "consciousness" and "mind" are all terms without which it is possible to cope, and indeed to cope better, and that especially the concept of 'person' with its connotations of different human capacities and especially the capacity to change in time is much more useful. K.V. Wilkes, "Know Thyself", in Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Shear (eds.), *Models of the Self*, Thorverton: Imprint Academic 1999, 25–38; cf. Eric T. Olson, "There is No Problem of the Self", in Gallagher and Shear 1999, 49–61.

⁶Although Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989) does not conceive his task as a refutation that there is such a thing as the notion of self in antiquity, he does emphasise the differences between ancient and, say, Cartesian approaches. The lack of the centrality of inwardness as well the commitment to a pre-existing rational order, in which the agent knows and loves, sharply distinguish ancient thinking from that of the modern.

has recently become a fashionable topic within both psychology and philosophy.⁷ The value of the anti-self challenge lies, rather, in its insistence that there might be deep background assumptions behind certain conceptions of selfhood, inherited from our philosophical tradition, that should not be accepted at face value.

The criticism of the second group is relatively easy to refute. Although there is no direct equivalent of ‘self’ in Greek or Latin, terms such as *autos* (‘same’, emphatic ‘himself’) and the reflexive *heautos* (‘himself’) often come quite close.⁸ Aristotle’s description of a friend as ‘another self’, *allos autos*, is a paradigmatic example (*EN IX*, 4.1166a32; 1169b7). Plotinus’ question of who ‘we’ (*hēmeis*) are is a reflective turn towards an exploration on the nature of the inquirer, and involves distinguishing this study from the study of the soul (Plotinus, *Enn.* I.1 [13]; VI.4 [14] 16).⁹ It is also evident that *anthrōpos* (‘human being’) is frequently used in contexts in which it does not denote species membership but something closer to ‘self’ or ‘person’ (e.g. Plato, *Republic IX*, 589a–b). So it seems that, at least at the terminological level, the distance between the ancients and ourselves is not unbridgeable.

The members in the last group of critics, often specialists in early modern philosophy, provide, by far, the most serious challenge. They claim that the conceptual transformation has altered the philosophical landscape beyond recognition, even if there might be some superficial resemblances, e.g., at the level of terminology. It is true that Descartes used the notion of self in such a different role from that of Plato that it can be reasonably questioned whether they were talking about the same thing. Yet, the most exciting studies in the history of philosophy are often those concerned with just these kinds of transformations. They first attempt to explicate the kinds of conceptual, terminological and doctrinal similarities and differences there are between the explored historical periods or between the historical context and our own time, and then ask how the continuities and discontinuities could be explained.¹⁰ The contributions of this volume take part in this fruitful and continuing dialogue on the development of the notion of self and the theories of selfhood in the history of philosophy.

* * *

The volume begins with a central debate concerning the outlook of ancient thinking about self and person as a whole, begun in Christopher Gill’s works *Personality in*

⁷E.g. Ulric Neisser, *The Perceived Self. Ecological and Interpersonal Sources of Self-Knowledge. Emory Symposia in Cognition 5*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993; Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Shear (eds.), *Models of the Self*, Thorverson: Imprint Academic 1999. Antonio R. Damasio has brought the discussion of self also to neuroscience: *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, New York: Harcourt Brace 1999.

⁸Richard Sorabji, *Self. Ancient and Modern Insights About Individuality, Life and Death*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006, 32.

⁹E.g. Gwenaëlle Aubry, “Introduction. Structure et thèmes de la traité”, in *Plotin. Traité 53*. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf 2004, 15–61, esp. at 23.

¹⁰E.g. Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self. An Intellectual History of Personal Identity*, New York: Columbia University Press 2006.

Greek Epic, Tragedy and Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996) and *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006) as well as Richard Sorabji's study *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006). In the articles collected here, these scholars elaborate and expand this ongoing dialogue. In "Greco-Roman Varieties of Self" (Chapter 1), Richard Sorabji expounds his view that human beings could not cope in the world unless they saw it in terms of the *me* and *me again*, and that ancient philosophers did show an interest in the individual person, and in the individual seeing itself in terms of *me*. Sorabji further shows that ancient philosophy exhibits a large variety of discussions on selfhood, and gives 16 examples. What is often involved is privileging one aspect of humanity as the self, that is, choosing a locus of importance within the whole *anthrōpos*. Against the common assumption, Sorabji argues that the aspect chosen as the self in antiquity is seldom the soul – it can be the body or an aspect of the soul, its reason or will. In response to Christopher Gill's classification of subjective-individual and objective-participant ideas of personality, Sorabji suggests that none of the categories of subjective, individual, objective and participant discounts any other, and that they would, rather, seem to appear in different combinations. Further, he claims that subjective and individual presuppose the objective and participatory, and that in later antiquity, there is an increasing interest in *me*-ness, self-awareness and individuality.

Sorabji underlines the importance of individuality in, among other things, the Stoic theory of four *personae*. For Stoics moral decision making, he claims, presupposes an understanding of one's individual character and position in the world. In his "The Ancient Self: Issues and Approaches" (Chapter 2), Christopher Gill takes this approach to overemphasise individuality at the expense of the ancient philosophers' core focus, which he sees in terms of searching for objective ethical norms. He interprets the same passages with the intent of contextualising them within an ancient ethical agenda, and arrives at a notion of selfhood which is not primarily individual or subjective, but rather objective-participant. For example, the Stoic individual *persona* is, indeed, something that has to be taken into account in moral decision making and in the quest for self-improvement, but the aim is to make it consistent with the first *persona*, universal reason. The distinctive qualities of persons need to be taken into account in the moral development, but our shared rationality and ethical humanity are – or should be – the overriding aspect of who we are. Gill argues also that Epictetus' discussions on *prohairesis* convey an essentially ethical point, that of developments towards complete virtue and happiness, rather than a claim about personal identity. Rather than conveying a new interest in individuality or subjectivity, these discussions should be understood as expressing an objective-participant conception of personhood. Gill puts forward a conception he has called "the structured self". This conception combines psychological and psychophysical holism and naturalism with radical ethical claims that have their roots in Socratic thinking, and that underline the importance of rationality and coherence.

A predominantly ethical approach is exemplified by Miira Tuominen's article "Assumptions of Normativity: Two Ancient Approaches to Agency" (Chapter 3) in which the author discusses descriptive and normative criteria for moral agency in Plato and the Stoic Epictetus. Tuominen shows that for Plato, descriptive and normative criteria coincide to the extent that in failing to be a good and effective moral agent, one may fail as an agent *tout court*, although some minimal notion of agency applies to all sane human beings since they are nonetheless held responsible for their actions. In Epictetus, everyone is an effective agent in the sense of being capable of using impressions, of exercising prohairesis power, but sages attain extreme efficacy in reaching their goals of action. Even though normative standards of rationality apply specifically to an ideal agent, even elementary rationality involves at least some conceptions about normative notions. In general, ancient discussions on agency differ from contemporary ones in the attitudes taken towards objective moral standards. For both Plato and the Stoics, there are truths about goodness and these truths are embedded in human reason.

In his article "Socratic Authority" (Chapter 4), Raphael Woolf argues that there is a fundamental asymmetry between self-questioning and the questioning of others, between first- and third-person authority. Diametrically opposite to Descartes, Plato conceives of third-person authority, of examining and interpreting the contents of other minds as something fairly unproblematic, something everyone can in principle accomplish, whereas first-person authority, the idea of the privileged view a subject has to his or her own mental states, does not carry any special weight for him. Similarly, ascribing beliefs to oneself has no special privilege: because beliefs are considered to be not just those surface opinions that the person claims to have but also the veiled ones that entail his openly uttered beliefs, the success of both self-ascription and other-ascription rely on a scrutiny of the beliefs involved, of their logical relations and entailments. This gives rise to what Woolf calls the problem of distance: since self-examination calls for distancing oneself from the fixity of our beliefs, even, and perhaps particularly, from those that constitute our identity, examined life may amount to living without a self.

One critical question about selfhood concerns the relationship between ontological and epistemological claims. What, if any, is the connection between the dilemmas about the stability and persistence of our nature and questions about beliefs and knowledge? In "Protean Socrates: Mythical Figures in the *Euthydemus*" (Chapter 5) Mary Margaret McCabe argues that the two major themes of *Euthydemus* constitute the metaphysical question of what it is for someone to persist through change and the epistemological question of what it is to be able to tell the truth. In a methodologically interesting approach, McCabe shows that the significant philosophical purport of the dialogue, i.e., the postulates about persistence, change and personal identity, are explicit only in the mythical figures of Proteus, Marsyas and Cronos presented in the dialogue. The figures embody a complex discussion about persistence and truth. Persistence and systematic wisdom are interconnected, and both are embedded in the discussion of the desire to be a good and happy man, with a firm state of mind and character. Through the figures Plato argues for a particular

state of the soul, systematic wisdom, and against a merely episodic condition propounded by the Sophists.

In his article “Aristotle on the Individuality of Self” (Chapter 6) Juha Sihvola explores the place of individuality in the Aristotelian hylomorphic framework. He argues that although Aristotle was in many ways much more interested than Plato in the particular contingencies human beings undergo in their lives, the expressions of an individual aspect of self are not presented as a central source of value. The restricted attention to the individual self is explained against the background of hylomorphic categories Aristotle applied in his metaphysics and philosophical psychology, both based on a strong explanatory priority of the formal and structural. Aristotle recognizes that each human soul has a distinctively individual career and life-history as far as it animates a particular body in a particular environment, but what remains philosophically most interesting in being this kind of human being is the aspect of human life that expresses universal human nature.

Richard Bett’s article on “What Kind of Self Can a Greek Sceptic Have?” (Chapter 7) returns to the issue of the relation between an ontological aspect of selfhood and beliefs. He highlights the idea that for personal identity and selfhood, important are characteristics that have some degree of stability, that is, personal dispositions and tendencies. There is thus no need to postulate something other than an idea in which human beings would persist as unchangeable over time, nor anything rigidly identical over time. The problem with Scepticism is whether we are allowed to attribute even this weaker notion of personal continuity to the proponents of this school. Bett shows that the question depends upon a much debated issue concerning the extent of a sceptic’s withdrawal from belief. If the sceptic really has no beliefs at all – beyond those that consist in a mere registering of current experience – then his mental life would seem to be drastically restricted. And if the sceptic has no core commitments, if he cannot identify even with the sceptical procedure, has he any core at all?

For Plato, as Woolf boldly claims earlier in the volume, minds present no special problem over bodies. In “Inwardness and Infinity of Selfhood: From Plotinus to Augustine” (Chapter 8), Pauliina Remes studies later developments within Platonism. Plotinus combines the Stoic methodology of an inward turn and the examination of one’s appearances to the Neoplatonic understanding of the existence of metaphysical layers and entities within the human mind, thus making the inward turn crucial for knowledge acquisition. Remes argues that in Plotinus this involves the emergence of the idea of privacy of every-day discursive reasoning. What is objective is universal, ontological truth which remains normatively regulative and desirable. Remes relocates, further, the significance of Augustine’s *Confessions* to the Western conception of selfhood. Whereas within the topic of inwardness Augustine contributes relatively modestly to the Stoic and Neoplatonic heritage, his true legacy is in making the self temporal, changing and of infinite possibilities.

Studies on ancient conceptions of selfhood have had relatively little to say about Christian thinkers before Augustine. “Philosophy of the Self in the Apostle Paul” (Chapter 9) by Troels Engberg-Pedersen inquires into selfhood in Paul, discriminating

two concepts of self: an abstract concept that underlies change and is the source of second-order reflection (resembling the Kantian conception), as well as a “filled I”, an identity that varies according to the act of interpretation with which it is filled (closer to a hermeneutic conception). The changing “I” in Paul can be either distinctly self-oriented and egotistical or, in the post-conversion situation, concerned primarily with others. The latter, spiritual “I” is stripped of any ethical significance of the “I” perspective: ideally, the self has no role in setting up the proper goals of action. Engberg-Pedersen’s study shows how, in Christian thought, other-concern challenges the primacy in ancient philosophy of ethical discussions that are mainly self-directed, like the preoccupation with self-control or the becoming a unified and effective agent.

Gerald O’Daly’s “Two Kinds of Subjectivity in Augustine’s *Confessions*: Memory and Identity, and the Integrated Self” (Chapter 10) concentrates on two aspects of thinking regarding the Church Fathers: the role of memory in personal identity and the account of the self in relation to others. O’Daly shows that for Augustine, memory contributes to the formation of individual identity. This identity is something we preserve even in the afterlife. At the same time, Augustine’s theory of memory is situated within the framework of moral and religious self-scrutiny, which is dependent upon goals exterior to the “I” who engages in it. The self is discussed by Augustine in its relation to other human beings or to God. In this regard, human agency is hardly treated as unqualifiedly autonomous. Memory has God as its condition, and moral progress coincides with understanding our relation to the divine. The author explicates these linkages by a comparison of two accounts of friendships provided in the *Confessions*. In contrast to false friendship tainted with false sensibilities in the face of the friend’s death, Christian friendship involves objectification of grief, and thus encompasses help with overcoming self-absorption and integrating the self.

The volume concludes with the medieval developments of ancient themes. In “The Self as Enemy, the Self as Divine: A Crossroads in the Development of Islamic Anthropology” (Chapter 11), Taneli Kukkonen shows how the Arab philosopher al-Ghazâlî explicitly treats the essence of humanity as an underlying principle and co-ordinator of four different expressions or distinct features of existence. Neither heart, animating spirit, intellectual apprehension nor the deliberate pursuit of worldly happiness is strictly identical with the principle with which it is associated, but nonetheless all functions refer to features of our existence. Kukkonen follows the many-dimensional approach himself by discussing such questions that are relevant for selfhood as self-knowledge and self-identification, loss of self in Islamic mysticism, as well as the role of intellect and emotions in selfhood. He detects, among other things, Neoplatonic influences in the understanding of selfhood as bipolarised between reason and body, God and evil, and the connected idea that the object of care of the self and its ideal end is the rational and divine aspect of our being. Kukkonen also revisits the theme of the significance of outside evidence in determining one’s spiritual state.

In “Locating the Self Within the Soul: The Thirteenth-Century Discussions” (Chapter 12) Mikko Yrjönsuuri singles out two special areas in which the medieval

philosophers of the West interpreted and built upon ancient views. One is the soul-body relationship and the other is the topic of self-consciousness. Yrjönsuuri introduces the early medieval philosophy of the self, based largely on an Augustinian brand of the Neoplatonic-Stoic thinking, as well as the thirteenth century views of Thomas Aquinas, a relatively faithful Aristotelian thinker, and of Peter John Olivi, a radical innovator from the Franciscan camp with some Stoic leanings. Gradually, the understanding of human beings as both bodily and intellectual gives rise to questions about the unity of self. How does human multiplicity fall together into one self, and where is the centre of this self, if there is one? Peter John Olivi claims that there is a single unified centre of the self, a self-consciousness which appropriates every action of the person as its own. By emphasising individuality of human self-presence and the way in which we attend to our thoughts and volitions as our own and dependent on us, Olivi may go well beyond ancient philosopher's interest in reflexivity of mental states.¹¹

¹¹ The authors wish to thank Sara Heinämaa and Joonas Taipale for their comments on the earlier versions of the introduction.

Part I
Approaches to Self and Person in
Antiquity

Graeco-Roman Varieties of Self

Richard Sorabji

Some Recent Interpretations

In a recent book,¹ I argued for the idea that there is such a thing as the self. Part of what I meant by the self was the individual embodied owner of a body and of psychological states. I contrasted this conception with the idea that there is only an embodied stream of consciousness, without any *owner* of the consciousness. I rejected the claim that the only alternative to an embodied stream of consciousness would be some *disembodied* owner of consciousness, and I found the concept of disembodied ownership of consciousness problematic, even though I did not finally rule out the belief of some religions in an embodied human owner becoming disembodied.

So far, even the simplest animals might meet my description of the self as an embodied individual owner. But I added something else into my account of the self, that for the preservation of a human (or higher animal) way of life, it was necessary to view the world in terms of its relation to *me* and *me again*, not just in terms of its relation to a member or members of a stream. A self, I suggested, is an embodied individual owner who sees himself or herself as *me* and *me again*, and human or higher animal life would be impossible without this viewpoint.

So far, I have spoken only of the most basic metaphysics of what the self consists in. But every individual human develops a growing picture of itself, as male or female, son or daughter, American or Indian, baker or teacher, resourceful or victim of circumstances, public or private figure, subject to fate or past incarnations, or free. These pictures are not dictated by the metaphysical conception of self, which is too narrow to determine which pictures will be adopted. Nor are the pictures essential: they could be changed under pressure. But they are very important to a complete picture of selfhood, although they are typically studied separately nowadays by different philosophers. Among the most able recent studies, the metaphysics

¹ Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press 2006. My book benefited from the most helpful and perceptive comments of Christopher Gill, whom I take pleasure in thanking again.

has been treated by Derek Parfit, the pictures of self by Charles Taylor.² I celebrated both treatments, though entirely disagreeing with the stream-of-consciousness view of the first.

So far, these claims were not historical. I do not know how many ancients thought of the self as an embodied owner of a body and of psychological states. I think Aristotle did, and such a view has been ably defended in modern times by Peter Strawson in his *Individuals*,³ but there were other ancient philosophers who did not think that this was the right account.

As for the pictures which each individual builds into the self, many of them involve social relations. Not all do so. One may also see oneself in relation to God, to one's past and future incarnations, or as conqueror or victim of the purely physical world. But I do not think there could be humans who did not build social relations into their idea of self, such as son, teacher or American.

Christopher Gill has distinguished two approaches to selfhood, which he labels "objective-participant" and "subjective-individualist". The four terms in these two pairs could mean different things, but I am saying that any completed view of human selfhood will be participant, since it will include social relations among other things. And I further take it for granted that Greek thinkers accepted this. The surprising thing would be if the modern West had gone so far in the direction of thinking that any individual was free to do whatever they felt like at any time that they never saw the individual self in terms of any social relation, such as daughter, teacher or American.

As regards the objective versus the subjective, my basic account of the self as the embodied owner of a body and of psychological states so far would be classified, if anything, as objective, since it has nothing very subjective about it. But I have added to that the idea of individuality, and the further idea of the individual seeing itself in terms of *me*. The latter could be said to import a subjective element, as also could the interest in self-awareness. This does not dictate whether philosophical accounts of selfhood will contain a subjective element. As to how far Greek thinkers recognised one, my account would be that increasingly from the end of the second century, BC Greek thinkers did get interested in the *me* aspect of selfhood and in self-awareness. I do not see them as approaching in this a modern or Cartesian interest in subjectivity. What Charles Taylor has called Descartes' "inward turn" may be foreshadowed in Plotinus and Augustine, but other ancient thinkers had quite other reasons for taking an increased interest in the *me* aspect and in self-awareness. Nor do I see the *me* aspect as providing any kind of core to the idea of self.

Do I agree or disagree with Christopher Gill's deployment of his pairs, "objective-participant" and "subjective-individualist"? He has used these pairs in two masterly books on the self in earlier and later ancient thought, from which I have learnt a

²Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon 1984; Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1989.

³Peter Strawson, *Individuals*, London: Methuen 1959.

very great deal. His comprehensive classification is based on the most extensive knowledge of texts and intellectual daring, and the result is of the greatest heuristic value. Each of the four headings is illuminating, and their combination into pairs forces everyone to learn new things as they discover whether they agree. Gill's interpretation in his books and the present chapter is that the subjective-individualist view of the self is either absent from Greek and Roman thought or present in such a weak form as to be negligible. Insofar as he thinks that it is absent, I should disagree, and some of the examples below, drawn from Greek and Roman thought, are meant to show why I disagree. But the idea that the view is so weak as to be negligible is more nuanced. In pursuing this line of thought, Gill allows that the ancient view of the self is not exclusively objective-participant and he allows what I also believe, that the individual aspect can be combined with a number of the others, not only with the subjective, but also with the objective. But his classification has led me to think that any of his four headings can be combined with any. In my own account, I believe I have combined the subjective with the objective in one story, and I believe some ancient texts combine these approaches. In fact, interest in *me*-ness and in self-awareness would not arise, unless there were such things as persons and higher animals which could be described in more objective terms.

This suggests to me that there may be certain priorities among the four terms. Giving an objective account does not commit one to noticing the subjective aspects, although without the subjective aspects, the word 'self' has less point and might be replaced by talk of the individual person. Any subjective account must at least presuppose that there is an objective one. Any attempt to include pictures of self must recognise the element of participation in society. Individuality can be discussed at a subjective or objective level, as Gill agrees. If one does not discuss the individual, the word 'self' may again have less point, except in connexion with the idea of the *true* self, which can be discussed in terms of humans as a type, as in Plato, as well as in terms of the individual, as in Homer and Epictetus. If these reflections are right, I would still find Gill's headings illuminating, but would not myself put them in pairs.

Gill does not agree with me that there was any shift in the thought of later antiquity towards a more subjective or individualist interest, and he supports his view by suggesting a certain exclusivity between the pairs. He allows that the presence of the objective-participative pair does not altogether exclude the subjective-individualist pair. But he speaks as if it can be used to discount it. At any rate, after urging, quite rightly, that Epictetus' case for an inviolable self presupposes a background of objective-participatory factors, he speaks as if this is an *alternative* and *better* than, or to be understood *rather* than, any subjective-individual interpretation. Similarly, in the discussion of *personae*, the presence of an objective-participant treatment of Regulus in another context is seen as somehow discounting the interest in the individual in the theory of *personae*. It discounts it, if not in the sense of showing it to be an illusion, at least by showing it to be in some other way negligible. But I am not persuaded by the view that the presence of one pair can exclude or in any way discount the presence of either of the other categories. The difference between us, then, is that I do not see any of these four categories as excluding or discounting

any other, and I actually expect the subjective and the individual to presuppose the objective and the participatory.

Although I believe that any of Gill's four categories can occur in *combination* with any other, it is not so easy for each to occur in *separation* from any other. At least subjectivity is less likely to be discussed in separation from individuality. Many of the texts discussed by Gill are about what it is to fall under the human *type*, rather than about the individual. To that extent, we have in the past focused on different texts. Texts that examine the human *type* and exclude the individual are less likely to discuss *me*-ness. They might still discuss other forms of subjectivity, such as self-awareness, or forms of subjectivity that I have not brought into the discussion, such as what it feels like to have a human form of consciousness.

When I say that interest increases in the individual and in *me*-ness and self-awareness in the later period, I do not deny that each period has accounts of each kind, so there is no more than an increase of interest. Moreover, objective accounts are still presupposed and participation in society remains as important as ever at least up to the time of Neoplatonism, when the 'civic' or social virtues are somewhat downgraded. But along with these presuppositions, I believe that discussions of the individual and of the subjective become more central than before.

I want now to survey some 16 accounts of the self from different periods of antiquity, so that we can better assess what kinds of account there are.⁴ Only some of the accounts are at all subjective. The variety is astonishing.

The Varieties of Self

The ancient philosophers often express their ideas of self just as we do, by the use of pronouns. They talk of 'I', 'we', 'each', the reflexive 'oneself' (*heautos*), or the emphatic 'himself' (*autos*), or (Plato, *Laws* 959b3) 'that which is each of us truly'. Where *autos* is used without an accompanying noun, it sometimes *demand*s to be translated by the English 'self', and *autos* is sometimes combined with *hekastos*, meaning *each self*. What is happening is that the self is being identified with an *aspect* of the human being.

In some cases, the self selected is something which has been deliberately fostered, rather than being there all ready for inspection in Hume's manner. Moreover the self selected varies not only according to different purposes and contexts of discussion. But even within a single sentence, there may be radically different aspects selected as self, because one aspect is often seen as working on another, where each is regarded as a self. This means that I cannot agree with any account which says that, for the ancient Greeks, self meant so and so, because the

⁴These 16 accounts are derived from chapter 2 of my book *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life and Death*.

notion can refer to different things in the same sentence. Often, but not always, what is picked out is viewed as a locus of importance, the importance differing with different purpose and context.

The self in the ancient philosophers is seldom identical with the soul. Often it is only one aspect of soul, its reason or will, for example, or a part of soul to be distinguished from the shade or ghost. In theories of reincarnation, the same soul may be successively borrowed by entirely different people, and so outlasts any one self. Sometimes the self is the body, or includes the body along with the whole person. Although the pronouns pick out only a thin self, the specifications of what the self consists in are thick, and this contrasts with some of the very thin conceptions of selfhood passed on to us by certain 17th and 18th writers on selfhood.

Only some of the examples to be given below involve discussion of the individual and of *me* and *I*. Socrates awaiting execution is represented in Plato's *Phaedo* (115c) as offering his friends the reassurance: *I* am not my body, but my rational soul. But whereas this discussion at 115c demands expression in terms of 'me', it is closely related to one in Plato *Republic* IX which is couched in terms not of me, but of what the inner *human* is (*anthrōpos*). The two discussions are so closely related that it would be artificial to confine oneself to the first of them. But I want to pass briefly in review a whole range of discussions.

1. We can start with Homer's *Odyssey*, or the possible interpolation at 11.601–603, where it is said of the dead Heracles that Odysseus is talking to his shade, but he himself (*autos*) is with the gods.

Then I spied the mighty Heracles [his shade, but he himself enjoys festivities with the immortal gods].

This led to many Platonist discussions of what his true self was.⁵

The next two writers in terms of date will be mentioned below, Epicharmus and Heraclitus, who come from the fifth century BC. Heraclitus' interest in the self is suggested by his saying that he went in search of himself and looked for the *logos* of the soul.⁶ I shall also cite both below for the denial of continuous selves. But I shall take next in the order of exposition Plato in the fourth century BC and subsequent Platonism.

2. Plato held that the true self is the reason or intellect (e.g. *Phaedo* 63b–c; 115c; *Ist Alcibiades* 133c4–6; *Republic* IX, 589a6–b6). This raises the worry whether the true self is sufficiently individual. Do we differ from each other in our reason in distinctive ways? On one interpretation, Plato is even conscious of a contrast between the true self and individuality at *Ist Alcibiades* (130d). In the passage already mentioned from *Phaedo*, Plato has Socrates remind the interlocutors that

⁵See Jean Pépin, "Héraclès et son reflet dans le néoplatonisme", in E.O. Bel (ed.), *Le Néoplatonisme*, Paris: Colloque du CNRS, Royaumont 1971, 167–192; Harold Cherniss, note c to Plutarch, *Mor. De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet* 944f, Loeb (vol. 12). Besides the Plutarch reference, see Plotinus IV.3 [27] 27.1–25; Proclus, in *R.* 1. 119,23–120,15.

⁶Heraclitus, *Fragments* 45; 101; 116 in Diels–Kranz.

he *is* his rational soul, and this time the rational soul in question is meant to be individual and is characterised in terms of ‘*me*’:

CR: How are we to bury you?

SOC: However you like, provided you can catch *me* and I do not escape you. (*Phaedo* 115c)

3. I doubt if Aristotle agreed with Plato that our true self was the intellect, in quite the way that Plato meant. Each of the four times he reports the doctrine, he reports it as something that is *thought*, rather than as something to which he is committed. He does not believe the doctrine of Plato’s *Phaedo*, that Socrates can survive after death. So he does not believe that there will be a time when a human can become a pure philosopher, instead of an embodied social being who has to *eat*. At the very least the human needs the social and practical intellect, along with the theoretical intellect. I think that he puts the case dialectically for Plato’s view of the true self as theoretical intellect in *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7, but then in the next chapter, X 8, puts his case for the human as embodied social being who always needs to eat, although the more he uses theoretical reason, the happier he is. This fits with his view in *On the Soul*, that it is as wrong to say that our soul pities or is angry as it is to say that it weaves or builds. It is the human (*anthrōpos*) who is angry, in virtue of having a soul.⁷ It fits too with Aristotle’s description of a friend as another self (*allos* or *heteros autos*). The pseudo-Aristotelian *Magna Moralia* also says ‘another I’ (*allos* or *heteros egō*).⁸

Finally, it fits with Aristotle connecting the human with practical reason, when in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI 2, speaking of practical policy decisions (*pro-haireseis*), he says, “such a source [of action] is the human”.

4. It was Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism six hundred years after Plato in the third century AD, who really wrestled with the problem of whether the Platonist self is sufficiently individual. He was torn between two concerns. One was that of thinking that we should not separate ourselves out from the timeless universal Intellect from which we derive, or we will lose our identity as much as those who do not know their father (V.1 [10] 1.1–17). The other concern was seeking to retain some separate individuality after all when we return to Intellect. It is only souls which do not attain that identification with intellect, but remain within time that can exercise memory, and Plotinus is anxious to show that they at least could still recognise each other through personality, even if they all received spherical bodies (IV.4 [28] 5.11–31). But what about the individuality of souls that do escape from time and achieve identification with the timeless Intellect? They can be accorded individuality only on the analogy with a theorem in mathematics, which has a certain uniqueness, but is intelligible only as part of a whole system.⁹

⁷ Arist. *DA* I 4, 408b5–11.

⁸ Arist. *EN* IX 4, 1166a32, 1169b7, 1170b6; “of one’s children” see *EN* VIII 12, 1161b28–9; *EE* VII 12, 1245a30; “pseudo-Aristotle” see *MM* II 15, 1213a13.

⁹ Plotinus IV.3 [27] 2.49–58; IV.9 [8] 5.7–26; VI.2 [43] 20.4–23.

Plotinus believed we have a number of selves, and can identify ourselves with a higher or lower one. If we succeed in identifying ourselves with the timeless Intellect, which is one of the selves within, we shall have escaped to a life outside of time in which our obsession with *prolonging* life makes no sense (I.5 [36] 7.1–30).

Augustine, who was inspired by Plotinus, was also torn in his *Confessions* in two directions, between on the one hand love of his mother as an individual, and hopes that his unnamed dead friend will remember him,¹⁰ and on the other hand aspiration towards a heaven in which there is no genetic relationship and no memory.¹¹

5. In the next century, the philosopher-rhetorician Themistius repeats Plotinus' view that it is harder to differentiate intellects than souls (*On Aristotle's On the Soul* 104,14–23). Yet to the relief of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, he interprets Aristotle *On the Soul* III 5 as saying that there is a plurality of distinct human intellects illuminated by the one intellect (103,32–104,6). Thomas Aquinas quotes Themistius' view in his attack on the Islamic philosopher Averroes. Since it is the intellectual soul that Thomas Aquinas takes to be immortal, it is important that human intellect should be not only immortal, but also individually distinct. One type of human intellect, the “*active*” intellect, is treated differently by Themistius as a single intellect shared by all humans, and Philoponus and pseudo-Philoponus follow him by saying of the human *active* intellect that it is immortal and non-intermittent only through the unending succession of mortal thinkers and their thoughts.¹² Averroes went on to apply this denial of individual distinctness to *all* human intellect, which is why the Christian, Thomas Aquinas, had to oppose him. This famous “Averroist” controversy did not arise out of the blue in the 13th century. The seeds were sown in Plato, and the issue was brought to the fore by Plotinus, and reflected in the rival interpretations of Themistius and Averroes.
6. A number of the foregoing views about the self offer solace in the face of death, either, as in Plotinus, by making the happiest life exempt from time, or by offering immortality. But an opposite solace was offered by Epicurus who set up his school in Athens at the end of the same century in 307 BC. The soul is a bunch of material atoms, which will be dispersed at death, so there is no need to fear that we will be punished or otherwise suffer after death.¹³

Epicurus' expositor in Latin, Lucretius, in the first century BC, considered the possibility that despite the dispersal of our atoms, they might come together again in the infinity of time, so that we could be punished after all (3, 843–864). Lucretius thinks that the interruption of memory solves this, but whether by preventing it being *us* who suffer, or by making it a matter of no concern *despite* its being *us*, is hard to determine.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Conf.* 9.3; 9.10.

¹¹ Augustine, *Conf.* 9.13; *De vera religione* 46.88–89.

¹² Philoponus, in *de Intellectu* 52,23–29; 91,40–49 *CLCAG*, Verbeke; pseudo-Philoponus, *On Aristotle On the Soul* 3, 538,32–539,12.

¹³ Epicurus, *Sent.* 2: Lucretius 3.31–93; 830–1094.

7. The Stoics believed that I would return each time the universe repeats its history, though only Seneca regarded this as a solace. At the first mention in his letters, he suggests that our return might be seen as comforting, but later as the letters get more demanding, he offers only the solace that the preceding annihilation is shared by everything in the universe.¹⁴

On the standard view, the universe will repeat its history exactly, and its being I who return¹⁵ is guaranteed, despite the difference of time, by the recurrence of my supposedly unique and unshareable characteristic, whatever that may be.¹⁶ Variants on the view were that it would not be a same me, but a different me each time, or that it would not be me, but only someone indistinguishable from me.¹⁷

8. A different solace is the idea that there is no continuous self anyhow. Your infant self, and even your yesterday's self, are already dead, so why lament the last in a series of deaths, when there have been so many deaths already?

The idea that there is no continuous self was introduced early in the fifth century BC by the playwright Epicharmus, if the text is his, but only as a joke. The idea was that just as the number 7 is replaced when it grows to 8, so a person is replaced when he or she grows. This is used by Epicharmus' characters, to avoid responsibility for debts incurred and for retaliation against defaulting debtors. But philosophers are good at taking jokes seriously. The idea was used later by Platonists against the Stoic School under the name of the Growing Argument and answered with what I would call a Shrinking Argument, of which I have offered an interpretation elsewhere, by the Stoic Chrysippus in the third century BC.¹⁸ Philo, the Jewish philosopher of the first century AD, objected to a certain aspect of Chrysippus' Shrinking Argument that the survival of one person cannot depend solely on whether another person survives.¹⁹ This principle has been used in modern philosophy by Bernard Williams²⁰ and much discussed by others. It is not impossible that Chrysippus used it himself for an opposite purpose to Philo's. In the meantime, Aristotle had raised the problem about persistence through growth in a particular form (*GC* I 5, 321a18–22; b26–8; 322a28–33). If there is not to be a collision between incoming food and what receives it, the persisting receiver had better be form, not matter.

¹⁴ Seneca, *Ep.* 36,10–11.

¹⁵ Alexander, in *An. Pr.* 180,33–36; 181,25–32; Tatian, *Ad Gr.* ch. 5 (*SVF* 1.109).

¹⁶ Alexander, *loc.cit.*; Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.20.

¹⁷ Origen, *C. Cels.* 5.20; Simplicius, in *Phys.* 886,12–16.

¹⁸ Epicharmus in Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*) 3.12; Chrysippus against Platonist Academics in Plutarch, *Mor. Comm. not.* 1083a–c. Interpretations in David Sedley, "The Stoic Criterion of Identity", *Phronesis* 27(1982), 255–275; Richard Sorabji, *The Philosophy of the Commentators 200–600 AD: A Sourcebook* (vol. 3), *Logic and Metaphysics*, London: Cornell University Press 2004b, 6(h)(ix); see also Sorabji 2006, ch. 4.

¹⁹ Philo, *On the Eternity of the World* 48 (*SVF* 2.397).

²⁰ Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1973, ch. 4, discussed by Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon 1984, Part 3, note 47.