

# Introspecting the Self in Flux

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## Abstract

Religious studies are devoted to research on religious beliefs, behaviors, and institutions. It describes, compares, interprets, and explains religion, emphasizing systematic, historical, and cross-cultural perspectives.

Religious views on the self vary widely across religions, sects, and faiths. The self is a complex and core subject in many forms of religion and spirituality. The self is also commonly considered as the ego—the learned and the self, which is sometimes called the True Self. In Hinduism, the self or the Atma is not an individual but a representation of the transcendent god Brahm.

*Buddhism* sees attachment to self as an illusion that serves as the main cause of suffering and unhappiness. Traditional *Christian* beliefs consider *self-love* and *self-acceptance* as the epitome of religious and social development. Socrates and the Christian intellectual tradition have consistently affirmed that *self-knowledge*—seeking the truth about ourselves and *self-improvement*—maintains efforts to cultivate our strengths, overcome our weaknesses, and realize our potential.

Religious studies have contributed to the self's search for ultimate meaning through independent comprehension of the sacred. It has greatly affected *identity formation* through *anxiety and interrogation*. The scientific revolution and changing social, moral, political, and economic conditions have shaken man's faith in the authority of religion and the church and the established order, thus reemphasizing *the transformative process of the self*. *Freud's emphasis* on the power of the unconscious to affect conduct has significantly influenced religious psychology and the comprehension of the *self in flux*.

The ability of human beings to look back on themselves as both subjects and objects in the universe raises questions about who we are and the nature of our own importance. In modern times the belief about the self is in flux and has undergone a *radical transition* and *metamorphosis*, emphasizing cognitive and aesthetic development originating from the *religious nexus*.

**Keywords:** Religious studies, self-love, self-acceptance, self-knowledge, self-improvement, identity formation, anxiety and interrogation, self in flux, radical transition, metamorphosis, and religious nexus.

## INTROSPECTING THE *SELF IN FLUX*

### OBJECTIVE

- To discuss the self, as depicted in religions.
- To discuss introspecting the self and concerns about identity.
- To identify issues for introspection of the self in flux.
- To discuss the religious interpretation of the self.
- To present the interconnectedness among various faiths in discussions on the self.

- To discuss the transformative process of the self through agent flux.

## INTRODUCTION

**“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.”—Heraclitus**

Change is eternal. Be it time, space, or matter; ancient, medieval, or modern; physical, intellectual, or social. Since the dawn of civilization, the self has evolved from transformative processes induced by society, religion, philosophy, and psychology. The growing social and cultural needs have resulted in the formulation of cultural and ethical norms, which subsequently fostered religious practices and beliefs. The powers of the natural world and cosmological phenomena played a crucial role in shaping theosophical traditions and customs. With changes in socio-economic trends, cultural and religious practices also changed, resulting in the transformation of the self through eternal flux.

Increasing economic and social prosperity has always demanded new roles for the self in the social sphere. The self is always in search of new identities at both physical and metaphysical levels. It has helped in the transformation of man's search for his new self. Only the cultivation of minds has brought about lasting changes in society. Through the public use of reason, new ideas have been put forward and critiqued, thereby making intellectual progress. The enlightenment has been highly influential in emphasizing the importance of intellectual freedom in understanding the self.

In primitive cultures, the self was in religious fetters. The aim of early religions was the emancipation of the self from worldly chains. Salvation was the ultimate objective of life. This is well speculated in Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions. The duality of the concept of the celestial being and *earthly self* did not encourage radical changes. Religious studies have ushered in the self's search for ultimate meaning through independent comprehension of the sacred. It has greatly rendered in *identity formation* through *anxiety and interrogation*.

The Enlightenment was an intellectual coming of age in which humankind liberated itself from the chains of ignorance. The purpose of the Age of *Enlightenment* was to challenge the paternalistic authority of conservative society, monarchic government, and religion. Human ignorance is self-imposed. Many people cling to the authority of religion because of intellectual laziness. If we could educate all the members of society to judge on the basis of reason instead of dogma, people could be transformed into free-thinking individuals, which would bring an end to despotism and oppression. The *Buddhist and Upanishadic practices* of reasoning and enlightenment liberated the self from religious shackles.

The birth and rise of rationalism occurred alongside several important historical events and discoveries that ushered in the modern world. These include the decrease in Vedic rituals, decay of the medieval church system, separation of religion and state in many countries as a result of oppression, discovery of the New World through navigation using a magnetic compass, the speed and span of conquest made possible by gunpowder and guns, and the implementation of scientific methods.

## Literature Review

The positive notion of liberty seeks to enhance opportunities for *personal autonomy*. “The fundamental sense of freedom is freedom from chains, imprisonment, and enslavement by others. The rest is extension of this sense, or else metaphor.” (Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*-1969)

In his masterpiece *'Being and Time'*, Martin Heidegger (1927) reinvented the term *'being there*, which denoted a specific human and *active consciousness* that was fully engaged in the world. Unlike rocks, plants, and animals, humans not only exist but also have a purpose that they define. This perception distinguishes humans from other beings. As *George Berkeley* has rightly said, *"To be is to be perceived."*

*Will*, or the drive for power, is the ultimate reality. In 1819 Arthur Schopenhauer, inspired by ancient Hindu *Upanishads and Buddhism*, perceived *will* to be behind everything that is biologically alive. The ethical duty of the self is to love and aid each other, since our achievements are worthy, but we also see that nothing lasts for long and death destroys each of us. For the *pessimist*, the godless cosmos is nothing but ceaseless unsatisfiable striving that may be eternal but never amounts to anything.

### Analysis

Individuals are influenced by the absence of constraints on their personal actions. This has resulted in the *emancipation of the self* from cultural and religious bondage. Positive liberty requires freedom from unnecessary religious and social constraints and regards personal autonomy or self-determination as essential to the realization of that freedom. This liberty influences the great transformative process or flux and vice versa.

The theories of positivism and the contributions of Enlightenment thinkers have resulted in a mixture of idealistic and realistic traits in the study of the self. For an idealist philosopher, the human mind is the fulcrum on which reality rests. Nothing exists unless we perceive, sense, or know it. Positivism has important implications for philosophical and religious thought. With its absolute insistence on empirical verification and the primacy of the sensed, positivism rejected the idea of a personal God, replacing it with a humanist perspective.

The only constant in personal identity is a continually renewed consciousness. Personal identity, or the self, depends on consciousness rather than on material substance or the soul. John Locke has argued that a person's consciousness of their present thoughts and actions is what conceives the self. Personal identity cannot be founded in substance because a person's body changes throughout their life, while the person remains the same. Due to the flux in the self, only an individual can know their own consciousness; others cannot judge that person because they can never know the person's consciousness. Transcendentalism has been compared with Eastern thought and traditions that seek to link actions, abilities, and perspectives to alter both the individual and the whole of existence. The individualistic belief system of transcendentalism has resulted in the transition of the self from social grip to personal freedom. Transcendental means independent of experience and idealism means dependent on the existence of ideas and the mind; the doctrine investigates the knowledge of objects that are "in me but not me."

The purity of the individual is achieved through identification with nature. The transcendentalism of Emerson consists of an open-minded experience of the natural world that goes beyond just being human to becoming an awareness of participation in existence, as expressed in maxim, "I am a part or particle of God." The appreciation of place is an appreciation of self, as the external and internal worlds are reflections of one another.

Religious humanism is a new philosophy that dispenses with God and puts humankind in charge of its own fate. It was man, with his free will, intelligence, and power, not God, who was solely responsible for the realization of his dreams and his destiny. As Aristotle rightly remarked "The ultimate value of li-

fe depends upon the power of contemplation.”

Various external factors influence the retrogressive transformation of the self. The pessimistic self finds life to consist of a doomed and ultimately meaningless striving for power. Contemporary atheists agree that the universe is meaningless and nothing good is eternal, yet they value life for its own sake, following scientific rationalists such as August Comte and Herbert Spencer in expecting endless biological and technological progress. The self is also subject to a subconscious impulse for self-destruction, the so-called death drive.

The self also undergoes an inferiority complex, that is, a psychological condition displayed through a lack of self-worth. Exaggerated sensitivity is an expression of the feeling of inferiority by the self. While undergoing this transition, inferiority complexes can remain dormant, and associated feelings can include resentment, depression, and aggressive or irritable behavior. Peer pressure coerces the self into conforming to the majority opinion and tends to affect those who harbor low levels of self-esteem. Dystopian societies have also led to the self in retrogressive transformative processes.

The archetypal self is a universally recognized prototype which serves as the cardinal unifying core of the psyche. It determines in becoming the perfect and complete self through the process of individuation. The collective unconscious is a fragment of our unconscious mind that is passed down to us as an inherited gift. Because they surface as recognizable patterns of behavior, archetypes can be studied to gain insights into the behavior of the self. The self, which is the center of our psyche, and other archetypes are all around us in literature, from the “ill-fated lovers” to the “brooding antihero” to the “villain” in different literary genres.

The Renaissance spirit has shaped the self and its understanding of man. The Renaissance man or the rise of the ‘many-sided’ man, who was knowledgeable or adept at languages, natural history, and other scientific subjects while also involved in politics and the arts, has opened new horizons for the self and thus encouraged the flow between disciplines and promoted discussions on the transformative process of the self. The culture of individualism encourages creativity over conformity. Utopian socialism emphasizes ethical cooperation and equal opportunity as the route to maximal wellbeing and expects that all people will gladly join.

Social Darwinism, or the extension of Darwin’s theory of evolution to social and economic relations, has opened new horizons for the self in the search for a new identity in the ever-changing socio-economic and political scenarios of society. Autosuggestion is an instrument with which the self plays unconsciously throughout life. High-wire performers succeed mainly because their minds tell them that they can. Thus, autosuggestion has helped a great deal in the search for identity by displaying innate capacities and skills. The self’s response to external stimuli, social conditioning, or behaviorism makes a possible window to the mind. Cognitivism shapes the transformation of self. Our actions are a consequence of our thoughts.

The self in flux is influenced by crowd behavior, which involves a unity of collective identification, giving a sense of limitless power; second, the creation of sensitivity to emotional appeals due to that unity; and third, collective intelligence in the crowd dropping to that of the lowest common denominator. The self in the crowd is subject to collective hallucinations, suggestions originating from individuals in the crowd that are thoughtlessly and contagiously adopted throughout the whole. This gives rise to mental disorders as a result of distorted outlooks and perceptions that can be corrected if the self recognizes and corrects its errors in thinking. This is an important factor for introspection in the self

in flux. The journey of the self can be understood through the Id, Ego, and Superego in search of an identity within social and religious boundaries.

*Will* involves relationships and commitments derived from the pursuit of personal interests and the achievement of goals external to a person's more fundamental communal identity. The means and ends involved in "society" are formulated by self-interest expressed through public opinion and regulated through mutual legislation. As socio-economic development caused communities to grow, the tension between social engagement as an end in itself and social engagement as merely a means to ends external to that engagement grew.

Biblical psychological criticism is a field of study that applies psychological and psychoanalytical insight to the origins, authorship, content, translation, and interpretation of the Bible. It also aims to examine the history of the Bible's personal and cultural effects. It also inquires into the personal world of an individual and becomes relevant in their life.

As psychology evolved to mean more than the study of the soul, or psyche, and developed into a discipline that involved the study of the mind, so biblical psychological criticism also evolved with it, influenced by the work and writings of pioneering psychiatrists Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung on the conscious and unconscious activities of the soul. Freud's emphasis on the power of the unconscious to affect conduct has significantly influenced religious psychology and the comprehension of the *self in flux*.

All works of psychology promotes understanding of the self. The self is also in the process of Identity formation or the development of the distinct personality of an individual or the self. It can be regarded as a persisting personal continuity in a particular stage of life in which individual characteristics are possessed. This process defines individuals to others and themselves. Identity formation leads to a number of issues of personal identity and an identity where the individual has some sort of comprehension of themselves as a discrete and separate entity. This transformation may be through individuation whereby the undifferentiated individual tends to become unique, or undergoes stages through which differentiated facets of a person's life tend toward becoming a more indivisible whole

Buddhism sees attachment to self as an illusion that serves as the main cause of suffering and unhappiness. Traditional Christian beliefs consider self-love and self-acceptance as the epitome of religious and social development. Socrates and the Christian intellectual tradition have consistently affirmed that self-knowledge—seeking the truth about ourselves and self-improvement—maintains efforts to cultivate our strengths, overcome our weaknesses, and realize our potential.

Bodhisattva means "awakening-being" and refers to Buddhists who have dedicated themselves to helping all beings achieve enlightenment. This is motivated by bodhicitta, a universal sense of compassion for all beings that is awakened when one realizes enlightenment. Bodhisattavas practise an ethic that involves the "exchange of self and other" in which they place the welfare of other sentient beings above their own. This is the ultimate expression of anatman (no-self) since it eradicates the distinction between a person's own good and the good of other beings.

Mystical experience of a transcendent reality or state of consciousness is one in which an individual is aware of transcendent truth at a depth, or in a dimension, that is not experienced in typical consciousness. All personal religious experiences are linked to mystical experiences. It can be understood through the yoga practices for self-enrichment. Yoga involves training a person's mind through meditation and contemplation to overcome that which is disturbing and unsettling to it. Yogic

training prescribes disciplines that can be adopted in various aspects of life in order to achieve moksha (liberation). Moksha occurs when the individual is freed from their sense of self. It is claimed that union or integration of the self with the Supreme is the result of the subject restraining the fluctuations of their ego, controlling cognition, and finally annihilating the ego.

Life has no intrinsic meaning, each individual is free to assert and affirm his own meaning through his own actions. “Existence precedes essence” (Empedocles) meaning that life has no meaning until a person acts in a way that bestows meaning upon themselves. Existential nihilism reinforces the individualism and moral relativism that have become prevalent in modern culture.

If time and space are infinite, the chance is also infinite that the world will exist again exactly as it is. The universe goes through regular cycles of creation and destruction, and that fate determines whether the universe will infinitely repeat the same course within these cycles. Most religious and philosophical examples of the argument for “eternal return” also include the idea of fate. The experience of freedom and fate rooted in the idea of the eternal return. The idea is also the basis for several theories in physics about the cycles of the universe. The idea of an eternal return is also consistent with theoretical models of a “multiverse”, in which an infinite number of universes and dimensions exist at the same time.

The self is shaped by our social interactions and our physical environments. An individual's social interactions occur when they're in a specific society or culture. If these individuals grow up in a certain culture they're going to conform to societal norms and pressures to follow a specific standard that their culture believes in. This is why culture is important to study and explore when searching how the self evolves and changes. To conclude, western cultures are more self-absorbed in their own lives whereas eastern cultures are less self-absorbed because they cherish the collective. The self is dynamic and complex and it will change or conform to whatever social influence it is exposed to. The main reason why the self is constantly dynamic is because it always looks for reasons to not be harmed. The self in any culture looks out for its well being and will avoid as much threat as possible. This can be explained through the evolutionary psychology concept called survival of the fittest.

The philosophy of self seeks to describe essential qualities that constitute a person's uniqueness or essential being. There have been various approaches to defining these qualities. The self can be for an individual's thoughts and actions, or the substantial nature of a person which endures and unifies consciousness over time.

Spirituality is the self's search for "ultimate meaning" through an independent comprehension of the sacred. Another definition of spiritual identity is: "A persistent sense of self that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that are consonant with the individual's core values. Spiritual identity appears when the symbolic religious and spiritual value of a culture is found by individuals in the setting of their own life. There can be different types of spiritual self because it is determined by one's life and experiences.

“The acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook on life.” Before deciding whether Jung's view is compatible with the Christian perspective, we should acknowledge that the Christian perspective is not as simple as many people assume. We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The clear implications are that we already love ourselves and that self-love comes naturally, whereas loving others requires effort.

Self is synonymous with human being and person and has two dimensions— physical and metaphysical like intellect, emotion conscience, and will. Together, these dimensions produce behavior through words and deeds. When behavior is habitual, as Socrates noted, it defines one's character, and therefore can be

considered a quasi-dimension of self. “Buddhists argue that nothing is constant, everything changes through time, you have a constantly changing stream of consciousness, and from a neuroscience perspective, the brain and body is constantly in flux. There is nothing that corresponds to the sense that there’s an unchanging self”

With the development of artificial intelligence the identity of the self is shifting from inwardly conscientious self to an algorithmic oriented self. The continued exposure to the world of a virtual reality has resulted in the digital dysmorphia of the self. The dark and grave area of this unknown world is yet to explore to the common sphere of common men to understand what is undeciphered.

### Conclusion

The self-transformation process is an approach to the inner change necessary for resolving both the personal and the social problems of life. The process is not new. It is found in the age-old wisdom traditions all over the world, both ancient and modern. Research continues to affirm the validity of the principles of this approach.

In modern times the belief about the self is in flux and has undergone a radical transition and metamorphosis, emphasizing cognitive and aesthetic development originating from the religious nexus. The scientific revolution and changing social, moral, political, and economic conditions have shaken man’s faith in the authority of religion and the church and the established order, thus reemphasizing the transformative process of the self.

Eternal flux is a state in which there is always change and nothing remains the same. The first exposition of eternal flux is traditionally attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Everything is changing at every time. Theory of Forms is intended to locate the objects of knowledge in a changeless realm. The idea of the self in constant change recurs throughout the history of philosophy. The advancement in technology has added multifaceted layers to the expression of the active self. Moreover, the semi-virtual cognitive world of auto-generated artificial intelligence has opened new spheres to explore and know more of the dormant and regenerative self.

The flux through the nexus of religious and technological fusion has catalyzed in eternal journey of the self.

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