

# EXPLORING THE CONCEPT OF 'SELF': A CRITICAL STUDY

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**ABSTRACT:** The Concept of 'Self' has been perceived and conceived differently by different school of thoughts both east and west. All the philosophers and intellectuals have interpreted the 'Self' in their own way they have observed and experienced it. In the west the word 'Self' is used in three different senses. First, it is used in the sense of the permanent spiritual principle of unity underlying thinking, feeling and willing-This spiritual substance is called the Mine, soul or self. Secondly, It is used in the sense of an aggregate of Mental states without any underlying principle of unity among them.

**Plato and Aristotle:** Whenever we peep through the window of history in past pertaining to philosophical issues, we are bound to discuss the Greek philosophers first. Since Greece was the intellectual breeding ground of philosophy. The two intellectual giants in this field are no other that Plato and Aristotle.

**Decartes:** Decartes is a great dualist. His concept of 'Self' has direct bearing on the existentialist philosophy. He propounded his own theory known no-Cogito ergo sum, I think therefore, I exist.

**Locke's view of the self:-** Locke borrowed his concept of 'self' from Decartes. According to his also, the soul is a substance which has experiences.

**Berkeley's view of self:-**Berkeley also conceptualized the self in the some sense as an spiritual substance as Decarte and Locke. He does not consider if as an idea.

**Kant's theory of the Noumeanal Self:-**This is the third school of thought pertaining to the philosophy of self. Kant hardly requires any other introduction due to his reputed position in the world of philosophy. His is a different theory propounded on the concept or self.

**Hegel's The Ideas of view of the self:-**Like Kant, Hegel also puts the pervious theorist and theories on the anvil rejects them outrightly with his thought. According to him the self is neither can abstract noumenal principle or unity, beyond and alone mental phenomena, nor an aggregates of mental states or phenomena but a concrete spiritual principle or unity in plurality.

## Keywords:-

The Concept of Self

Thanking and feeling and willing;

Noumenal theory of Self;

Vedanta on Self;

Cogito ergo sum, I think therefore, I exist;

Stream of consciousness;

Self-Consciousness;

Materialist Theories of Self;

Dialectical Materialism;

Monads are ultimate The Geeta, Brahm Sutra and Upnishad;

I have recently written a paper on the Vedanta and during that period I came across so many authentic scriptures regarding that. Some of them are still lying in front of me on my writing table i.e., Brahm sutra of Vadraya Vedvyas, yog Vashisth by the great saint Vashisth, The Geeta, Vrihadaranyak Upnished, Kya mai Hindu hu? By Edi, Vishnathan, Ishadi Nau Upnished and many more. I tried my level best to know and discover something about, the concept of 'self' or the 'Aatma'. The dichotomy in my mind is about the nomenclature of the concept whether, 'the self' of the west and 'The Aatam' of the East one and the same or they are different in their connotation and denotation. So far as my knowledge and belief goes there are two different concepts having their origin in two different backgrounds hence they should be treated differently at the concept level also although sometimes we use these two words in the place of each other but of the deeper level there is great difference and this is the issue which brought me to write a separate paper on this topic. The man has been trying to discover the mystery behind the origin of the universe and the men of letters from the field of philosophy and science both have contributed a lot but the puzzle is still lying in front of us asking for a proper solution of the question. By the way I was going through 'Meno' yesterday, a reputed work by Plato. It's in a dialogue form. He has raised a basic question regarding the concept of word called Virtue and also about whether it should be obtained or attained. The discourse of such a type which also gives birth to a large number of pedagogical dilemmas which we confront in our day to day life. The dialogue goes between Meno and Socrates. He is contemporary of Socrates. Meno is curious to know about the concept of virtue so he puts his question in front of Socrates. The dialogue goes as under:

**Meno:** Can you tell me Socrates – is virtue something that can be taught? or does it come by practices? or it neither teaching nor practices that-gives it to a man but natural attitude or something also? The dialogue goes a long way and ultimately Socrates says, - At any rate if you put your question to any of our people, they will all alike laugh and say- "you must think I am singularly fortunate to know whether virtue can be taught or how it is acquired. The fact is that far from knowing whether it can be taught, I have no idea what virtue itself is. That is my own case. I share the poverty of my fellow-country men in this respect, and confess to my shame that I have no knowledge about virtue at all. And how can I know

the property of something when I don't even know what it is ? Do you suppose that somebody entirely ignorant who Meno is could say whether he is handsome and rich and well-born or the reverse ? is that possible, do you thing ?

Page-97 Greek Philosophy : Thales to Aristotle.

I have cited the above quote to express my ignorance about the concept of 'The Self' or 'The Aatma' both in a Socratic style but the issue here is to resolve it in a Methodical and rational way. Socrates was a great philosopher, and he was competent enough to throw the issues of others tackle and through a long debate and discussion he used to prove his own viewpoint. I am helpless on that front and hence turning to the issue of conceptualization of 'The Self' and Aatma separately one by one as under: -

### **The Concept of Self:-**

The Concept of 'Self' has been perceived and conceived differently by different school of thoughts both accidental and oriental. All the philosophers and intellectuals have interpreted the 'Self' in their own way they have observed and experienced it. In the west the word 'Self' is used in three different senses. First, it is used in the sense of the permanent spiritual principle of unity underlying thinking, feeling and willing. This spiritual substance is called the Mine, soul or self. Secondly, It is used in the sense of an aggregate of Mental states without any underlying principle of unity among them. The mind is series of mental process. Thirdly, it is used in the sense of concrete spiritual unity, which is not above and beyond the mental phenomena. Viz thinking, feeling and willing but realizes itself in them, without losing its unity and identity in them. Thus, according to the first view, the self is an abstract unity; according to the second an abstract plurality and according to third, a concrete unity its plurality. It will be discussed in details as three school of thoughts pertaining to the concept of self namely noumenal view of self, the empirical concept of self and idealistic view of self. The thinkers who have devoted their time and mind deliberating over this concept are as under:-

### **Plato and Aristotle:-**

Whenever we peep through the window history in past pertaining to philosophical issues, we are bound to discuss the Greek philosophers first. Since Greece was the intellectual breeding ground of philosophy. The two intellectual giants in this field are no other than Plato and Aristotle. They conceived the soul or self as a spiritual substance. According to Plato the soul is a mental or spiritual substance which expresses itself in three fundamental types of experiences viz, thinking, feeling and willing. Feeling and willing are the baser functions of the soul which it owns its connections with the body. Thinking is the essential function of the soul. It is the immortal part of the soul.

The soul is self-moved. It is the primary source. The human soul emanates from the word-soul. When it is born, it has reminiscence of faint recollection of the world of ideas. The transcendental world of ideas is the home and destiny of the soul. It is indestructible. The soul is prior to the body. The body is secondary

and governed by the soul. Plato recognized the pre-existence and immortality of the soul. The soul has individuality, personality and immortality. He believes in the dualism of the eternal world of ideas and the sensible world of shadows. Here he goes with-“Brahm Satyam Jagadmithya”. The most popular vedantic postulate propounded by Aadi guru Shankaracharya. He believe in the concept that the individuals are born and perish but soul is immortal.

According to Aristotle, the soul is the form (entelechy) of the body which is its matter. The soul is the form, purpose and perfection of the body. The soul is the organization of the body. The soul is non bodily or spiritual principle of the body, but it is not identical with the bodily organizational. The soul is vital principle of any organization, the collection of its powers and process. Aristotle does not believe in the Plato’s transcendental world of ideas.

### **Decartes, Locke & Berkeley:-**

Decartes is a great dualist. His concept of ‘Self’ has direct bearing on the existentialist philosophy. He propounded his own theory known as-Cogito ergo sum, I think therefore, I exist “To define this Jargon in simple terms he says that our existence depends upon our power of thinking. Those who can’t think, can’t exist. It means existence of the self is identical with its thinking or consciousness. The self exists as a thinking being. The self is never devoid of consciousness. The existence of soul is unquestionable. It is primary certainty. The identity of the ‘I’ or ‘Ego’ of Decartes is inseparably bound up with the feet of definite all of consciousness. Decartes says: “I am nothing more than the thing which thinks. It is in this precise sense that I may now call myself a mind, or self. Granted the I am something real, that I really exists; but what am I ? My answer has been given: a thinking being. Now what is a thing that thinks ? It is a thing that doubts, understand, conceives, affirms, denies, wills and refuses; also that imagines and perceives.”

Durant, the story of philosophy, page-73

**Locke’s view of the self:-** Locke borrowed his concept of ‘self’ from Decartes. According to his also, the soul is a substance which has experiences. It is the substance which thinks, feels and wills. We have, according to Locke; an intuitive certainty of the self; we have an immediate and irresistible conviction of the existence of our own selves. We have intuition of our own souls and mental substance. He regards the soul as a cogitative or thinking substances and matter as a non-cogitative or unthinking substance.

The next question which arisen in this context about how to know the self then ? Locke is of the view that-it has two sources of knowing it; The first is sensation and the second is reflection. The self does not possess innate ideas. All its ideas are derived from experiences. The soul-substance has some active faculties or powers; viz, perception, reflection, discernment, comparison, composition or combination and abstraction. The soul is born like an empty tablet (tabula rasa). Impressions are written upon it by experience. Locke does not deny some active powers to the soul.

**Berkeley's view of self:-** Berkeley also conceptualized the self in the some sense as an spiritual substance as Decarte and Locke. He does not consider if as an idea. He is of the opinion that idea is entirely different from spirit. Ideas are passive while spirits perceive ideas. They are entirely heterogeneous and cannot be identified with each other. The soul or spirit is an incorporeal or spiritual substances which can never be resolved into ideas. It can nana be identical with 'floating ideas'. In the spirit of Locke, Berkeley also maintains that we have a notion of our own souls. The spirit is a knower; it can never be known as an object or sensible thing, we cannot have idea of an spirit. Here on this point they are nearer to the Hindu philosophy of the soul or Aatma which is immortal. Berkeley say that we can only have a notion of it. By idea basically means sensuous knowledge and by notion he means rational intuition. Thus with Locke, Berkeley maintains, that we have an intuitive knowledge of own souls. According to him, besides ideas there is something which knows or perceives them, and exercise, divers operations as willing, imaging, remembering about them. He says, "this perceiving active being is when I call mind, spirit of self."

Page-234, Introduction to philosophy.

Thus the self, according to him, in the mental or spiritual substance that perceives, imagines, remembers, wills or acts in various ways. Berkeley emphasizes two function of the self i.e. Perceiving or willing or action.

David Hume's Theory of the empirical Self

This school of thought is of the opinion that self or mind or soul is an aggregate of series of mental states-the collection of sensation, feeling and desires-they also deny the unity principle. They say other in no co-ordinating link amongst them. According to them mind is but a series of impression and ideas without any connecting hand. Their approach tower the issue is more scientific and empirical and they try to show a rational view point in their way of dealing defining the concept of self. They visualise it on the basic of atomic theory. As the world in an aggregate of atoms connected together by gravitation, so the mind is also an aggregate of impressions and ideas connected together by the forces of association. Thus the empiricist deny the existence of an abiding substantial self behind the mental processes. They deny the sense of personal identity and explains it always as an illusion or a figment of the imagination. The Self thus, according to Dcarte, the chief propounder of empiricist theory is nothing more than a series of mental process. It is not a substance which has these mental bases. The laws of association combine the mental processes with one another.

Hume is partly is agreement with Berkeley that is only on the his dictum *ess est percipi*-the existence of an entity consist in being perceived. It clearly means the existence has direct connection with perception. The things, which can't be perceived, don't exist at all. He applies the dictum to the Mind, self of spirit which is regarded is a permanent spirit substance which thinks, perceiver feels and wills. Hume denier perception of any such permanent spiritual substance form ideas or mental processer. The bench mark in Hume's empiricist theory can be put in his own words which reflects the summum bonum

of this school of thought also-“There are some Philosopher, says Hume, “Who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self, that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence, and so are certain, beyond the evidence of demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself. I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perception. When my perception are removed for any time, as by sound sleep so long am I insensible of myself and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could a neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate, after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect identity.....the mind is a kind of theatre, when several perception successively make their appearance, pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situation. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different. The comparison theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind.”

Treatist of Human nature, PP-237 (Quoted in Introduction to Philosophy)

Thus it can be clearly said that according to Hume, there is no permanent and abiding spiritual substance apart from a series of feeling and ideas. We can never perceive the so called permanent self or spirit is a figment of the imagination. Thus, the self, as propounded by Hume, is nothing but a series of mental processes. Concluding remarks he gives-“Men are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidly and are in perpetual flux and movement”.

William James, Ibid P-238

There is one more person whose name goes with this theory. It is no other the great philosopher and historian William James. He is very thorough in approach and very categorical in his conviction. He has interpreted empiricism in a different way. He regards the mind as a “stream of consciousness.” “The passing thought in the only thinker.” This implies consciousness instead of being a series of distinct states is continuum and flows on without interruption, without. Breaking up into discrete units as implied in the Humean conception of the self. Hume regards impressions and ideas as discrete and unconnected with each other, which are connected with one another by the laws of association. James on the other name, regards them as flowing into one another and forming a stream of consciousness. He recognizes the empirical self only, which as person calls by the name of me. But is difficult to draw a line of demarcation between what a person calls me and what he calls name. The same object is sometimes treated as a part of me, on other times as simply mine and than again as it a I had nothing to do with it at all. To quote him-“A Man’s self is the sum total of all that he can call his not only his body and his psychic power, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children his ancestor and his friends, his reputation and works, his land

and horses and yacht and bank accounts. All these things give him the same emotion. It they wax and proper he feels triumphant. If they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down.”

Ibid-P 240

James has given a very broad base to the concept of self. He puts it under three categories i.e. The material self, the soul self and the spiritual self. The quote cited above reflects all the three in very categorical way.

### **Kant's theory of the Noumenal Self:-**

This is the third school of thought pertaining to the philosophy of self. Kant hardly requires any other introduction due to his reputed position in the world of philosophy. His is a different theory propounded on the concept of self. The two theories which deal with spiritual substance /self and the second with empirical self self-have already been discussed in this article. The third theory which was propounded by Emanuel Kant. He has given a distinct expression to his theory of self known as 'Noumenal self'. It means the Transcendental Ego or self which is behind and beyond Mental phenomena-an abstract principle of unity which is unknown and unknowable-the knower being unable to know itself. It is purely an abstract analytical unity, which is above and beyond thinking feeling and willing transcending the plurality of mental states as the permanent and abiding background and support of all these mental phenomena. This is called the pure or transcendent self. Mental states are not the expression of the self, but its phenomenal appearance. The mental phenomena which are known constitute the empirical self or me. Kant holds that substance is a category of understanding. The self applies the category of substance to phenomena. It is the source of the categories. The categories are the synthetic principle by which the understanding can combine the discrete and unconnected impression given by sensibility. Therefore the category of substance cannot apply to the self which is not its source. The self cannot be regarded as the substance. It's a transcendental Ego or subject which can know things as object. It is the known or I. It can never be known. It can never be revisited its experience. It cannot be made the object of knowledge. I can't know I the subject, but only me or my experience subject self do not know. Only subject self I know. Transcendental Ego or I can't be known only empirical Ego or me can be known. To suppose that the self is spiritual substance is irrational and self-contradiction. Kant is critic of all the former theorists about whom I have already, discusses whether he is Plato, Aristotle, Hume or Descartes. Descartes argues, "I think therefore I exist. He means by the conclusion: "I exist as a substance i.e. a thinking substance" Kant refutes it and he give his argument. He says that there is fallacy in the arguments of Descartes. I think means: I am a logical subject of my thought. But from this Kant has no right to infer that I am a substance which thinks or that I am a metaphysical subject is quite different from a logical subject, Kant directly attacks by saying that Ego can never be made an object of knowledge. The known can never be known Hence Descartes argument is paralogism. It is not possible to prove that ego exists as a substance, it can't be proved that it is simple immaterial or immortal.

## Hegel's The Ideas of view of the self:-

Like Kant, Hegel also puts the pervious theorist and theories on the anvil rejects them outrightly with his thought. According to him the self is can abstract neither noumenal principle or unity, beyond and alone mental phenomena, nor an aggregates of mental states or phenomena but a concrete spiritual principle or unity in plurality. In other words, it is a single abiding subject manifesting itself in a plurality of states and activities and its and through them realizes and self-determining spirit. A spirit is essentially a self-conscious being expressed in a particular ways. Self-consciousness and self-determining are the characteristic feature of the self. It is a unity in difference. It is an organic whole of the mind and its states. This is the view of Hegel.

This view of the self gives an adequate explanation of self-consciousness and self-determining, memory and expectation personal identity. Unity and continuity of consciousness and the interpretation of sensation apart from the mental processes, which are unreal apart from the self. He regards the human self on a finite representation of God, or spiritual principle of eternal consciousness manifested in naturel "We mean by it" he says "a certain reproduction of itself on the part of the eternal self-conscious subject of the world-a reproduction itself to which it makes the process of animal like organic.

Ibrim-P.348, Materialist theories of the self.

A part from the theories discussed above there also other theories which consider atom or mater as the root of creation of self. Democritus the Greek materialist consider the soul to be composed of fine smoother, rounder atoms. "The German materialists considered thought as secretion of the brain, even as a bite is a secretion of the liver. Hacked considered the mind as a function of brain". P. 249.

Huxley considered the mind as an epiphenomenon of the brain. Mental process are merely occasioned by products of the physiological process of the brain. They merely accompany cerebral processes without influencing them. They can't regulate or modify cerebral processes.

Dialectical Materialism

The theory of dialectical materialism was popularised by Marxism and he is considered as the champion of historical materialism and dialectical materialism both. He is concerned with human individuals and their behaviour. He believes in the theory of mechanical evolution of matter which is dialectical movement. Evolution proceeds through conflicting forces: Thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis. Life evolves from matter and motion. Mind and consciousness evolution from life. His physical and historical environment determines the behaviour of an individual. Men evolved from the animals, animals evolved from the plants and plants evolved from in organic matter. The complies animals evolved from the simple animal. There is no fundamental difference between the behaviour of the animals and that of the human being. Dialectical materialism propounds that the behaviour of human being in determined by the made of producing the means to satisfy their basic needs. This theory is known as economic materialism. The

class war theory is by product of this theory materialism deals human being as an active force which changes the mode of production and ultimately decides his own position society and economically in the society. The self of dialectical material begins with matter and ends with class war. But it is very difficult to believe that man or self has not evolved from life rather it evolve from matter. The theory of thesis, anti-thesis and synthesis was put into question during the life time of marx himself and other school which criticises it and propounds its own theory saying that the human mind or self is a free agent which can mould the environment to his needs and ideals. Man is not simply an assembled of said relations. He is finite-infinite. He has an irrepressible urge to common with God or the infinite spirit and realizes his plans. He can never be satisfied with the provision of his vital needs and material requirement only.

To sum up it can be safely said that the theory of 'self' has been perceived in all its dimensions from atom to spirit and from manual work to the world of God. Those who take it as thinking, feeling and willing are the original thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. According to Aristotle, sensibility of the soul is perishable, even its passive intellect which depends upon the body is mental, but its active intelligence alone is immortal. It is God, who is pure activity. Aristotle does not believe personal immortality. The soul's active reason becomes identical with God. Weber. Theory of Philosophy, p-182 (Quote)

Berkeley argues that the soul is one, simple, immaterial spirit and therefore immortal. Body is compound, divisible and therefore corruptible or perishable. The soul is incorporeal and incorruptible hence immortal. Berkeley deduces immortality from the simplicity, indivisibility and incorporeality of the soul, like Plato. But he regards God as the Greeter of soul, who can annihilate them if he likes. This concept is elaborated upon by Leibniz he holds that monads are ultimate. They are spiritual atoms. They can not act upon one another and can not be acted upon by one another. They develop from within by self-activity sometimes they are regarded as creation of God, and sometimes as sparks of God. They are eternal, and neither created nor destroyed. There is neither birth nor death. He deduces immortality from spirituality of the soul. The soul is government moved while the body is a system of subordinate minds.

There is one more thinker who also follows the same line. He is known as Martineau. He gives nearly the same argument for the immortality of the soul in a different tone and language. He says that death in its physiological aspect is simply a case of transformation of energy. On death, the body is decomposed into its elements and the vital forces of the organism are dissipated. But this force, according to the law of the conservation of energy, are not totally lost. Now the law of conservation of energy either excludes mental energy or includes it. If it applies to physical energy only, then the mind or soul is independent of matter and therefore may continue after death. His another argument is not very significant in this concept. He says that our intellect is limited by time and space. The development of intellect consists in gradually transcending the limits of time and space. As the mind gradually develops its powers of remembering the past anticipation the future, conceiving the distant and discerning the causes and relations of things beyond the reach of the senses, it gradually oversteps the boundary of time and space. So we may reasonably hope

that there is future life after death, where the intellect will completely transcend the limits of time and space and attain its full development. Martinean calls these indications 'Vaticination of intellects.'

The study of religion P. 285 (Quoted in Introduction to philosophy)

Hegel and neo Hegelians argue that every finite soul has its place and function in the world system. It can not completely fulfil its function in its finite embodied life on earth. So it must continue to exist after death, and fulfil its function in the world order.

But metaphysical arguments do not appeal to the modern philosophers Kant argues that immortality of the soul is a postulate of morality. Morality consists in overcoming the conflict between desire and duty, the conflict can be completed in one lifetime. So, there must be a future life which is the continuity with the present one.

James states the moral argument in a more rational way. The moral ideas are infinite. It could be realised in a finite time so life continues after death.

I will prefer to conclude this paper with authentic remarks from the Indian religion scriptures which have propounded all these theories long back. Sometimes it appears that the thinkers I have discussed in this paper particularly the spiritualists seem to have come across the Geeta, the Brahm sutra and Upanishads. The argument may be different but their tone and style of saying the thing in a very simple and rational way appeals to us. The theory of morality postulated by Kant goes with our theory of Karma of the Indian thought. In Vrihadarnayak Upanishad there is a separate chapter on the theory of soul the Aatma. It deals with the form of Aatma (Aatma ka swarup).

The great Vedic saint yagyavalkya asks the question- 'Aatma Kaun Hai?' Who is the Aatma? There is no requirement to explain the whole theory of the Indian view point here. I have chosen this is sufficient to prove that body and soul are two different connotations. Soul is different from body. It is an illusion that we see it in that sense. Yagyavalkya replies the way. Lord Krishna's narration in the Geeta. He says, "Aatma is that enlightened Purush who moves in this world and the other world. He believes intellectually, he thinks, desires, wills. Dreams and even transcends the body after death. So it goes with Plato's and Aristotle's theory of self which moves around thinking, feeling and willing.

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