

The Native Self Versus the Myth of the Autonomous Being

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It is extremely difficult to say with accuracy exactly what a “native self” is. There are a great many reasons for this, but perhaps the primary one is that there is little, if any, agreement as to what actually constitutes the self of any person. I have long been interested in defining the self because I have long argued that understanding the self and what the self is, is absolutely critical to any aspect of philosophy. For example, at the very least it informs (if not defines) the following areas in philosophy; ethics – (who is the agent that acts and upon whom does she act?), epistemology – (who or what is it that has, seeks, and gains knowledge), ontology and metaphysics in terms of what I am and how am I situated in reality, and I cannot leave out philosophy of mind and cognitive science, particularly where there is an effort to understand consciousness and its behavior. Ultimately, I assert that the question of self is germane to every aspect of philosophical endeavor, so if some notion of what a native self is could be established, that would certainly help to understand Native philosophy and maybe that would help us in other ways as well.

In addition to the centrality of the self to philosophical inquiry, there is a dynamic reciprocal – or dare I say circular? – relationship that exists between a defined self and the very philosophy that will be espoused by that particular notion of selfhood. Now, it’s likely that this claim requires a bit more explanation. I shall do that and use as examples some of the history of Western notions of the self in order to explain what I mean. The standard version of selfhood in the Western tradition is that of a self envisioned as an independent entity that is housed in the body somehow. It is often equated with the idea of a soul, and when it is, that means that the self is not only independent of the body somehow, but it is also self-sufficient (if you’ll excuse the pun), and eternal. How did Westerners get to this remarkable idea?

First, in an effort to explain the cycle of life and death, Plato suggested that the soul might possibly be eternal. He did this in what philosophers nowadays label a myth.¹ So, that idea has been around, arguably, since the beginning of Western philosophy as we know it. Probably it was floated in some form or another by the pre-Socratic thinkers, but it doesn’t really matter whether it is original to Plato or not, Plato goes back far enough for our purposes.

¹ Plato’s dialogue the *Phaedo* is the most commonly cited source for this myth.

Plato's student, Aristotle rejected such notions of the self. For him, the soul was "just" *anime*. Anime was whatever it was that made you alive and when you died, it just sort of left, maybe something akin to evaporation. At any rate, the soul did not exist after death, and therefore, it certainly did not constitute the basis for an eternal self. Both Plato and Aristotle were seeking answers to questions that seemed and were important, but whichever view one chose to adopt would not matter all that much in terms of being a Greek person at that time. That is to say, as long as no one accused you of heresy, but that's another story.²

If we fast-forward to the emergence and explosive growth of Christianity and then to the subsequent Western thinkers of the middle ages, we see the philosophy of the Ancients take on a different kind of significance. Most of the philosophers of the middle ages, most notably figures such as Thomas Aquinas, wanted to base the teaching of Christ and the Bible on a rational basis. They wanted to provide rational, coherent arguments that supported the truth they believed to be in God and Christianity.

Aristotle's notion of self would not work for them. So, those parts of Aristotle's thought that dealt with what a self might be, how a self could be defined were ignored. However, they were able to adapt some of his metaphysical work to suit their purposes. Plato's suggestion that the soul might be eternal, on the other hand, was perfectly aligned with what the medieval philosophers wanted to argue about the true nature of the soul and hence the self. So, early on, there is a framework for the western self that is borrowed from Plato.

If we jump ahead another few hundred years, we come to Rene Descartes, who many view as a father of modern Western philosophy. Descartes essentially took Plato's idea of soul and pushed it to its logical limits. In explicating his "cogito," Descartes asserted that not only was the soul in the body and yet somehow detachable, it was actually made of different stuff. The body was material, but the soul was not. Matter, such as the human body, was destructible. The soul was indestructible and therefore, eternal. Finally, and this is where Descartes differs significantly from Plato, the soul retains its identity, even after death.

This philosophy meshes perfectly with the Christian view of what it means to be human. Human beings are not of this earth. The self is other worldly, it actually belongs elsewhere. What makes us human is something that is other than the earth and leaves the earth when freed from its material prison, the body. So, for the last 400 years or so, western thought has, by and large, accepted this view of the soul, or self.

As a result, the last 400 plus years of western philosophical development has been based on this understanding of the self. This is what I meant by the reciprocal, or circular relationship between a theory of self and philosophy. A philosophical doctrine defines the self and once that self is largely accepted as correct, further philosophical thought is

² My reference here is to Socrates having been sentenced to death after having been charged with crimes that ultimately boil down to "heresy."

developed upon that notion of self. Hence the self becomes the foundation for all philosophical thought moving forward.

Given this western view of selfhood in which people are deemed superior to the earth and thus, more important than it, attitudes towards the environment are arranged as divisions of types. There are humans above all and then everything else in various orders, but all below us. Environmental theory based on this traditional western model of the self; at best have an ethical duty only to manage the earth and other beings on it, properly. In this view, humans are the masters who judge how things ought to be in the world and act to create that vision. In her critique of what she says some call a “post-Christian” world, V. F. Cordova writes, “The Earth is not perfect, whole, or complete; it is in need of transformation. Only humans, like God, are capable of doing this” (145). This proper management, or transformation, is defined as what is best for people, not the earth and its other inhabitants writ large. A person’s behavior on this earth is viewed as temporary because the earth is just a short stop on a journey to the true destination. Real existence begins after death. This is not the self’s true home, it’s more like a motel room, and is likely to be treated as such.³

So, after this very brief and abridged journey through the history of western thought, primarily as it pertains to the notion of selfhood, I hope I have offered at least of glimpse of how the idea of what a self is, is initially developed as a philosophical concept. However, once that concept of self becomes the primary understanding of what a self is, that theory goes on to affect the development of subsequent ideas in philosophy. Now, the question is, what if the West got it wrong? Obviously, since I have been saying Western notion of self, that must mean that there are other, non-western ideas of selfhood out there, and of course there are.

In fact, even within the western philosophical tradition, non-traditional ideas of the self have emerged recently. At present, and perhaps for the last fifty years or so, I would say that on the fringes of western philosophy there have been those who have advocated for the consideration of non-western modes of thought. Within the western school itself there are the American pragmatists, Feminists, and Existentialists, just to name a few. From outside of the tradition there are people like D.T. Suzuki, who was one of the first to try and introduce Buddhist thought on a large scale to western thinkers. While not “officially” outside the western tradition, Cordova and others such as Vine Deloria, Jr. sought to do the same for Native thought.

Non-western philosophies tend to share at least one thing in common. They have a different notion of what a self is. As I have argued, that changes everything, philosophically speaking. Most Buddhists actually subscribe to a doctrine identified as *anatman*, or “no-self,” which pretty much speaks for itself (sorry for the pun again, it’s just so hard to resist). Although, in truth while such a notion ought to be self-evident, for

³ I think this analogy hold up fairly well. There are people who treat motel rooms quite well. They make the bed, pick up the towels, and put garbage in its place. However, there are many people who, since it does not belong to them, treat motel rooms horribly. The Western view of the Earth and people’s relationship to it provokes similar responses. Some will care for the earth, but many will not.

western thinkers⁴ it just sounds non-sensical. The idea is that while it seems to us that we experience a self much in the way western philosophers argue that it exists, in point of fact, we are wrong. There isn't anything substantial there, nor is there any *thing*, that is not a substance and yet somehow eternal in the sense that Descartes maintains that there is. According to Buddhist doctrine, what is there, is a great many complex relations, with the world, with others, etc., that may feel substantial and may feel as if they separate our selves from the world and our bodies, but that feeling is simply factually wrong.

Unfortunately, while I don't have time to go into Pragmatist or Feminist notions of selfhood to any significant degree here, let it suffice to say that most thinkers in those schools of thought also reject the idea of an absolute, isolated, independent, autonomous self that is distinct from, and outlasts its body. They reject any theory of self that sees the self as both independent from and superior to its body and the world in which that body exists. Like Buddhism, these non-traditional schools of thought value relations as much as traditional western thought values discreet, individual, isolatable entities.

This brings us to the crux of this paper, which is, at least to try to begin to fashion a coherent account of what Native American thought makes of the self. I am going to borrow heavily from Cordova's work here as she has done ground breaking work in explaining the Native American self, already. She writes,

In the Western context of "human nature" there is thought to be a dualistic nature, that is, that the person consists of a mind and a body. This is not as complicated as the view held of humans in a Native American context. It has been explained that the "world" (everything that is) is essentially the manifestation of one single thing (149).

Immediately, it is evident from Cordova's claim that the simplistic Western conception of self as something separate from the body must be jettisoned when describing the Native notion of self. However, Cordova asserts that this is just a first step. Not only is the dualistic notion of self vs. body rejected outright, but at the same time it is necessary that *everything* be included into the self somehow, nothing is to be excluded. Like the notion of no-self in Buddhism, this idea is difficult for Western thought to handle.

How is this possible? How can the self be inclusive rather than exclusive? Cordova explains,

Thus, being human, in a Native American perspective requires having a "enlarged sense of self"...The self, in other words, does not suffer a dilution or eradication as is so feared in the Western world of individuality, but instead, an "enlargement" of the sense of what one is. (Cordova 150)

⁴ I say this because there has long been difficulty in finding any material thing that we can identify as a self. Objectively speaking, Descartes' idea of a non-substantial entity should have been a harder pill to swallow for philosophers. It would have been just that if the premises of Christianity hadn't been taken as a given at the time.

The eradication, or dilution that Cordova references above applies to a couple of different aspects of Western thought, I believe. First, in the context of Cordova's discussion she is discussing the development of human beings in terms of child rearing specifically, and social interactions more generally. Individualism in Western thought is typically opposed to being part of a group. If you give yourself up to the group, you must lose autonomy (unless you are the leader in which case you do not give yourself up to the group – they follow you). In Western thought, you can't assert your individualism and meld with the group at the same time. Cordova is rejecting that notion. According to her, you don't lose autonomy in so doing, rather you, your self that is to say, becomes greater, not lesser as a result of being a part of a group.

I think that it is also possible to extend this line of thought to the consequences of death. A great many Westerners love the idea of an eternal life after death that the Cartesian notion of soul or self promises, because the alternative view presented by modern Western scientific thought, that is, that there is quite literally nothing after life other than a decaying body, is a terrifying idea for a person who understands herself as an individual autonomous entity. However, if one were to adopt the Native view that the self is ever expanding, then one could conceive of death as the ultimate expansion of the self rather than its annihilation.

Cordova goes on to explain an important point in that, as far as Native thought is concerned, there is no wrong or right way to be human. The ways of being human, or the particular manifestations of selfhood, will vary according to place. Place plays a critical and essential role in Native American philosophy. Given the idea of a self that is inclusive and expansive rather than exclusive and isolated, it seems only natural to conclude that the place in which you find yourself actively defines your *self*. This is an example of the point that I have been pushing throughout this paper, whatever notion of self a philosophy adopts changes that philosophy immensely. With regard to selfhood in Western thought, place is an afterthought at best (I have some obligation to care for it), and irrelevant at worst (I am more important than this place, I can do with it what I choose). In Native thought place takes precedence, I am the place and the place is me. In this view, which is more important?

So a Native theory of self places great emphasis on place with respect to determining what kind of self a person has. Another component that is extremely important in the development of the self is the group. A brief pause is needed here to clarify an idea that I just snuck into the last sentence. It is fairly clear from Cordova's work that a Native American self is developed. She writes,

Humans are born "humanoid," that is, with the capacity to become "fully human" through the exercise of all their faculties. This includes not only "intelligence" but also the emotional component of being human: for example, guilt which calls us to rectify what is wrong, and sympathy and empathy, which call to us to be aware of the other as someone like one's self (Cordova 152).

These are things that need to be learned, hence they are developed, hence the self is developed. In the traditional Western version of the self, one is born with a soul in tact and so one is born fully human. In fact, most opponents of legal abortion argue that a

fetus is a fully human deserving of all the legal rights of any other human long before it is born.

As Cordova goes on to say, the development of selfhood takes a while.

In many tribes the new being is not seen as fully human until he or she is five to eight years old (many official naming ceremonies take place at this time). It is at this age that a human being can discern the consequences of his actions on others. (Cordova 153)

A person is not born knowing right from wrong. That is learned over some time with help and guidance from others in the group. A person is not born understanding that others are like them and feel pain, anger, frustration, happiness, sadness, etc., in the same way that she does. No, these abilities take time to develop as does the self.

Obviously, the abilities that Cordova has referenced cannot develop in a vacuum. The self does not come into existence “in” the body at birth. Like many other abilities, the self must grow into being by being used. For example, infants are born with vision, but it does not work very well at first. It must be used in order for it to develop into its full potential and if it isn’t, the child will end up being functionally blind. A Native view of the development of the self is analogous. The imaginary child growing up without parents or a community will never develop a (human) self.

As Cordova points out,

The myth of the autonomous being has many other pitfalls with important consequences for the explanation of individual identity. To imagine that an individual is “self-made” or that he comes into the world with a ready-made identity requires a denial that the individual is modeled by the group. (Cordova 157)

She goes on to assert as proof of the above quotation what most of us easily accept, that an infant raised in a different culture than the one she was born into will adapt to that culture. There is no innate personal identity because the self is developed by the group and its place. What makes the self is both learned and absorbed from the group and its location(s).

There is one more aspect of the Native self that I have not directly referenced because in the Western version of self, it is built in the notion already. This aspect of self is time. While I did not draw attention to it per se, I did point out that in the Western theory of self, the self is typically immortal though at that point it, post-death (or also pre-birth for some) is referred to as the soul. Thus, in a way, it exists outside of, or beyond time even though before death the body and simultaneously the self experience time in the “regular” way. That “regular” way is that the self exists primarily in the present with knowledge of the past and expectation of the future.

What Cordova writes about with respect to time is quite fascinating. She suggests that

The Native American philosopher could have joined the ranks of the ancient Greeks and Romans: perhaps the Universe is infinite as well as is motion. Picture another “version” of time: imagine a spinning top, a child’s toy. In this case, however, it is a top spinning in perpetual motion. One cannot *go back* to a previous spin - it no longer exists. One cannot go into a *future* spin – it has *not yet* come into existence. Now imagine tops upon tops, vortices, if you will – so that there is no space between the spinning tops. And imagine also that all of the things on the top, in the top, have an effect on the spinning. (Cordova 174)

We are what is on top of these many spinning tops. Cordova goes on to assert that,

The legends of Native Americans that portray humans as cocreators of the spinning universe should be taken deadly seriously: Time and the Universe have everything to do with expectations of what it is to be a human being. I AM RESPONSIBLE. (Cordova 174)

She goes on to say that we create the future based on our actions in the present. If we create the future then we must have made the past as well. Even if we don’t realize, or refuse to realize that we create the future, in this view, we still bear responsibility for the past. This is an inescapable fact. It certainly would be interesting to apply this mode of thinking to the problem of climate change.

What a remarkable difference there is between the Native American version of self that has been outlined thus far and the traditional Western model of the same. The former requires us to take responsibility for our actions because they make a difference in this place, a place that defines us in the most intimate manner possible because it is our selfhood. The latter tells us not to worry too much about this place because we are only temporary interlopers here. This place does not define us, nor do we belong here.

I hope that I have managed not only to point out the importance of how we choose to define the self philosophically speaking, but I also hope that I have suggested at least a framework to begin understanding what constitutes a Native American notion of the self. It is important for so many reasons, but particularly at this point in time because at least acknowledging this way of understanding the self, if not adopting it outright, would go a long way to improving how we treat our place, ourselves, this earth.

Works Cited

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