

THE SELF CONCEPT IN CONTEXT OF A HOLISTIC- ORGANISMIC THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS¹

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Experimental and theoretical interest has recently returned with renewed strength to the concept of the self in contrast with the lack of such interest during the past thirty years. Much of this change is directly associated with activities in psychotherapy. Other aspects of the trend are associated with the persistent emphasis by many personality theorists on person-type concepts with some influence from the movement of existentialism. One result that seems clear is the growing dissatisfaction of an increasing number of psychologists with the theoretical models and paradigms of the "empty organism."

The trend suggested here is compatible with the writer's theory (8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13) of consciousness as a regulatory function in behavior. In the development of such a theory a search for an appropriate basic concept or model of the living organism was inescapable. The basic concept which finally seemed adequate was that of the semi-autonomous system (11). The psychological perspectives and implications derived from this concept are necessarily in sharp contrast to those derived from the traditional basic model of the robot or automaton. The semi-autonomous system not only allows but takes for granted the dynamically limited, but none the less real, self-regulatory and self-directing capacities of living organisms.

The contrast in the basic concepts of psychological subject matter is directly associated with contrasting approaches to methodology. The central point is simple and obvious: As long as a methodological philosophy borrowed from the physical sciences is allowed to act as an end rather than as means, psychology necessarily finds itself with an automaton as a basic concept of subject matter. When methodology is restored to its more appropriate role of means, it ceases—as it should—to dictate the nature of the subject matter of the science. The psychological theorist, therefore, achieves an enlarged area of freedom to conceptualize about the basic nature of his subject matter

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and to devise experiments designed to test hypotheses about his conceptualization. Flexibility of interacting influences between concepts of subject matter and the means of studying that subject matter is restored by this approach.

The demands of a monolithic methodology, cast into roles of both means and end, have produced unfortunate degrees of restriction and inappropriate interpretation at times. One example may be taken from Wylie (27) who is frequently concerned about the internal inconsistency of self-concept theory and the low degree of predictability of behavior from measures of the self concept. She states that "empirical improvements in predictiveness should be the test of the worth of any suggestion about broadening self-concept theory" (p. 321).

This writer cannot agree with the Wylie criterion of "worth." Since most of psychological theory implies the automaton model, the methods by which increases in accuracy of prediction would be obtained would lead immediately back to the automaton concept. A favored method in this frame of reference for increasing the dependability of prediction of an organism's behavior is to reduce the "degrees of freedom" or number of alternatives open to the responding individual during the experimental period. It follows, then, that the greater the degrees of restriction under which behavioral data are taken, the greater the probability that the results will be unrepresentative of the organism when behavior occurs in a less restricted set of conditions. Hence, the threatening probability now arises that the greater the accuracy of predictability the less significant the variable is in terms of general behavior. It becomes possible, therefore, to design neat, esthetic experiments on the self concept—or any other aspect of behavior—without the results having much significance. That this procedure occurs with undesirable frequency is not primarily the fault of individual researchers, but rather of general or group emphasis upon a crippling orthodoxy in methodological philosophy.

To insist on ever-increasing accuracies of predictability may very well lead to a search for an organism that conforms to preconceived notions or stereotypes. It is, therefore, of grave importance to identify the basic concept one has of the organism or, at least, the concept implied by one's methodological approaches. Without doing this, the researcher takes the risk of coercing his subject matter into responses that tend to confirm his preconceptions.

There is probably no aspect of psychological research that de-

mands this care more than studies of the self. Yet it must be observed that few studies on the self have given much attention to basic concepts of the subject matter of psychology.

Within the frame of reference just outlined the concept of a self assumes both necessary and basic importance to psychology. Furthermore, it should satisfy at least the following criteria: (a) It must be derived from and be consistent with the basic concept or model one holds for the living organism. It must be consistent with the general concept of a semi-autonomous system. (b) It must be compatible with the phylogenetic principle of continuity. (c) The age-old riddle of how a self can be both subject and object should have a solution. (d) The concept should invite continuing experimental exploration. (e) The concept must be a product of and, therefore, be compatible with the essentials of a holistic approach. Each of the foregoing points has its place in the concept of self outlined in this paper. Brief reference to each is necessary to show that place.

1. It is doubtful if any self concept worth the name is finally compatible, appropriate or necessary in a thoroughgoing mechanistic system that begins or ends with the automaton model. On the other hand, the general basic concept of the semi-autonomous system provides for both phylogenetic and ontogenetic perspective in the development of a self concept. The basic observation which initiates this broad frame of reference is that, as the living organism—an open system of energy—enters into energy transactions with surroundings, it manages on the basis of its own potentialities to maintain a high degree of identity and, therefore, wins some degrees of independence from the energy patterns of its immediate habitat (11). Thus, there is some degree of self-maintenance, self-regulation and self-direction. Methodological approaches that do not take these potentialities into account run grave risks of obtaining results that are finally unrepresentative of the organism and would then be to that extent misleading.

2. The phylogenetic principles of continuity would lead to the assumption that biological backgrounds of the human being make substantial contributions to the self. Typically, self theorists assume the self to be so distinctly a human product that earlier evolutionary achievements have little relevance to the self. However, the kinship of all life makes this narrow assumption untenable.

3. The riddle of how a self can be both subject and object should have a solution within the pattern of conceptualization of the self

rather than from a methodological side-stepping or disregard of the issue. As will be seen later, the solution of this problem occupies a position of central importance.

4. This criterion is inescapable. The concept of self and the basic concept of the subject matter of psychology are so mutually dependent that the kind of research done in one area will necessarily influence and determine the kind of research done in the other. It is not to be assumed that the concepts of semi-autonomous, self-regulating, self-determining are to be used as explanatory principles, but rather as frames of reference for the development of methodology which provides maximum opportunity for potentialities of the organism to appear and become expressed without the processes of observation introducing misleading distortions in the behavioral expressions.

5. The holistic approach needs both a clarified basic concept of the organism and an adequate self concept. The relationship between these two concepts requires continuing exploration for its potentialities in lending coherence and perspective to psychological research and associated results. Currently, psychology is rich in facts but poor in perspective; therefore, the so-called facts have less meaningful relevance to problems of behavior than they might have. Note, for example, the apparent kaleidoscopic succession of topics, chapters and arrays of "facts" in *Psychology: a Study of a Science* (16). With its many authors, its volumes often seem to be another set of collected articles without any consistent integrating perspective. When such a series is done again, it could be hoped that American psychology will have achieved a more meaningful degree of integration. But the holistic integration indicated can be accomplished only with the perspectives derived from sustained attention to implications of basic concepts of subject matter and the associated concept of self.

A PHYLOGENIC BASIS FOR THE SELF

The principle of continuity is particularly useful in a broad, comprehensive attempt to understand the self aspect of the human individual. It can be shown that the human self stands in great debt to the sub-human orders and that in building a self the human being starts not "from scratch" but from rich and relevant biological resources.

If one will assemble a representative number of definitions of the

self, one will find in them at least four fundamental, common characteristics: (*a*) organization, i.e. some kind of patterned interrelationship of parts and functions, at least assumed or implied; (*b*) unity and consistency, with Lecky (17) making consistency the basic characteristic of the self concept; (*c*) identity, which is associated with being unique and individualized, uniqueness having been stressed notably by Adler (1); (*d*) executive function, which point re-opens the issue at which psychology is in deep conflict, namely, the kind of basic model from which theory and experiment originate. Those whose basic concept of the organism is in agreement with a semi-autonomous system will see the self as having some capacity to originate, direct or execute activities as this characteristic implies. Those whose basic concept is that of a robot or automaton will have relatively little time or use for a self concept and will tend to contribute relatively few definitions. Definitions of self originating in the S-R areas of psychology are not likely to include the executive function, but this omission does not necessarily invalidate the potentiality.

Re-examination of these four common features of self concepts reveals that man has no monopoly on them. While the self is not assumed to be a relevant concept for orders of animals lower than man, still the most common manifestations of self functions are features of the generalized behavior of the major portion of lower animals. Consider each of these facets in turn.

1. All living protoplasm, including the plants, has some degree of organization. The organizational aspect of the self is then as old as life itself and hardly something new or special. Obviously, the organization achieved by or in a self is continuous with the biological sub-strata of the organism itself. Organization of the self is not something imposed on the organism by some special power or capacity of the human being which is discontinuous with phylogenetic history. As the human being develops an organized self, he is contributing a bit of superstructure to a biological foundation that he fortunately finds at hand.

2. The unity of the self is, in a similar way, a characteristic of living organisms at all levels. In some animals the unity is tenuous, as in the sponge, but unity, integration and consistency are common protoplasmic achievements that parallel protoplasmic capacities to differentiate and yet to retain integration. In the achievement of a unified self the human being again has the help of his phylogenetic

heritage. The unity aspect of living organisms is not uniquely human.

3. Identity, which is based on the uniqueness of individuals, is, of course, an important characteristic of self; but, again, the human being must share such a trait with cousins of lower animal orders. The human observer, confronted with a group of animals all of the same species, may feel that here individuality has been lost. On further acquaintance, however, he begins easily to identify a few individuals. Members of the group, themselves, seem never to make mistakes on mates or on each others' identities. Thus, again, while the human being may build his own self features in the directions that enhance his own uniqueness and identity, the task has already had large contributions from his phylogenetic background.

4. Executive functions have traditionally been associated with the ego concept (2, 6, 15). Since organisms of the lower animal species have not been accorded, in theory, an ego, they have neither been seen as having executive capacities. Yet, the issue is essentially one of definition and degree. The present approach defines executive function as the capacity for some degree of self-initiated activity. On this, man has no monopoly although he may be more highly endowed for self-directed activity than his relatives of lower orders.

In an earlier paper (11), it has been pointed out that an essential characteristic of living protoplasm is its potentiality to maintain some degree of independence from the energy patterns of immediate surroundings. The degree of independence implies also a degree of self-directed activity. It is, therefore, important to see that the self-directed activities of human beings are not something new in the animal series but rather an extension and development of a cluster of characteristics common to living protoplasm. Because tradition has emphasized the dilemma of either complete freedom or rigid determinism, it is necessary to point out a third major alternative. Complete freedom and rigid determinism can be seen as fictitious poles of a continuum. This continuum is realistic only in its mid-range where it is defined as degree of independence or freedom and can also be defined operationally as the number of alternatives the individual sees as open to him at any given choice point (3, p. 85). The concept is similar to Lewin's "life space" (18). The executive function characteristic of protoplasm is, of course, directly related to and grows out of the concept of degree of independence.

The executive functions of self, or a self-system, are, like the three preceding characteristics, the super-structure which man erects on a foundation he has in common with all other animals. But man, unlike other animals, has greater capacities for choosing lines of behavior which he recognizes as contributing to his own current and future degrees of freedom in managing his affairs. Insight and foresight not only add range, consistency and potency to executive functions but contribute to the growth of a sense of being an individual.

THE SELF AND REFLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

The basic capacity of man for building the superstructure we call the self on the four common phylogenetic potentialities described, is the evolved capacity for reflective consciousness. Earlier papers (12, 13) have identified this aspect of total conscious function as functional Level III and have assumed it to be a relatively late arrival in the evolutionary development. Briefly, for purposes of context, Level I is seen as a generalized affect that pervades the organism and is essential to maintaining unity of internal function and direction of integrated activity toward a stimulus object. All later developments of consciousness grow out of this early, primitive and relatively undifferentiated tissue affect capacity. When sense modalities become multiple, both the basis and the necessity for an integrative act of the organism exist to unify the informational input. Functional Level II is then in progress and can be called situational consciousness. To see the integrative and regulatory potentialities of these two levels both for animals with multiple sense modalities and for many of our own actions is to have a frame of reference that provides many new insights.

Functional Level III, which has had enormous development in man, is basically characterized by two associated abilities. (*a*) Awareness that one is aware. One can distance oneself from an experience, either past or ongoing, critically examine it, confer one's blessing thereon or attempt to redirect or to stop the affair. Thereby the capacity for both positive and negative feedback has been greatly increased in man in contrast to the animal groups. (*b*) To delay action in spite of pressure of stimulation and predispositions to act. At the human level, action can be interrupted or withheld from a situation and then released at some later time when conditions seem appropriate; such delay may last indefinitely. These twin functions basically enable man for all the intellectual and problem solving ad-

vantages he has over his lower animal relatives. Remove either one or both of these capacities and man ceases to be human-like in his behavior.

The human self is seen, then, as a superstructure or even as an extrapolation of a vast biological heritage. To build a particular self ontogenetically, one needs the human level capacities of (*a*) the reflective review of the situation and one's role in the stream of events, and (*b*) the delay of action.

A FEW SELECTED PROBLEMS

Dual Role of the Self

Among the problems mentioned earlier in this paper that should be soluble within the frame of reference presented is that of the dual role of self, as both subject and object, knower and known, and subject and agent, this last being a distinction made by Macmurray (19). It is an old problem, and many pages of print have been devoted to it. At times it seems to be a puzzle without a solution, but it seldom fails to challenge the philosophical mind. As D. H. Parker (24) has stated the problem, "Our supposition that we could find the self at all may be declared false. How, it is often said, can I find myself; how can the subject become its own object?" (p. 6). There have also been attempts to cut through the puzzle and solve it with a degree of dogmatism. J. S. Moore (22) argued that the self must not be seen merely as an object among objects but that its distinctive character as self was in its role as subject. G. H. Mead (21) insisted that the self has as its most fundamental character that of being an object to itself. The version of Knight Dunlap (14) was that "Experience, consciousness, or whatever we may call the 'knowing' which James calls 'the most mysterious thing in the world,' is quite clearly a polarized affair. At one end it refers logically to that which is known; at the other, to that which knows" (p. 67).

The modern experimental approach to the self is characterized by Wylie (27). She finds that "self concept" has become identified with self as the object, and her book is concerned with that view. Thus, the subject-object problem has been solved in a way, through avoidance.

Ego and self have been used to identify the two phases of the self. Murphy (23) and Symonds (26) saw the "I" and the "me" as the subjective and objective aspects of self, and proposed to continue the

traditional distinction by using the "ego" to refer to the knower and determining aspects of self, and the "self" to refer to the objective aspects or recipient part of self (cf. 2; also 6).

Such theories of the self tend to be less integrative than is desirable and at times run serious risk of inventing a replacement for the old soul concept. It is doubtful that there is a need for an agent like the "ego" in addition to the person himself to initiate, direct or execute one's own activities. These are characteristics of protoplasmic organisms without any special ego agent. The dual role of self is played by the capacity of reflective consciousness to know and to recognize its own act of knowing, to be object of its own knowing and, as object, to know that it is object; to initiate an activity and, if necessary, to check and recheck on the course of the activity; and even to check and recheck on the checking process itself. Constant shuttling from one role to the other is a part of the self-regulatory function of human reflective consciousness. But the point of prime importance is that the human self, as the superstructure referred to earlier, is a product of this flexible dual role of reflective consciousness. *Thus, the dual role is not a philosophical puzzle but a dynamic necessity in the formation of the human self.* Without the dual role and its flexibility for frequent and even momentary shifts the human being would be without the basic equipment to build a self superstructure on the givens furnished by his biological heritage.

Determinants of the Self

The theoretical development to this point now enables one to deal more appropriately with the classes of determinants traditionally utilized in attempting to describe the development of the self. Typically, it has been assumed that the self, or personality, or the individual, were conceptualized products that could be adequately accounted for on the bases of two complex interrelated classifications of casual factors, namely, heredity and environment. Typically, also, it seems to have been assumed in deterministic fashion that the individual was a kind of naive, passive recipient of the effects from these two great classes of determinants.

The present theory rejects this approach as an oversimplification and provides a systematic basis for a point of view partly implied and partly verbalized by such writers as Adler (1, 5), Maslow (20), Allport (4), Rogers (25), and Coleman (7). This point of view implies a third set of determinants growing directly out of the self-determin-

ing and self-regulating capacities of the individual. The assumption is, therefore, that at all levels of development the individual is more than simply reactive; he is active and, to varying degrees depending upon the stage of development and circumstances, contributes to the shaping of himself. This set of determinants is probably best described, at present, in terms of the individual's creative adaptation of environmental facilities to his perceived needs in conjunction with the creative management of one's perceived potentialities in order to move toward both immediate and long-term goals.

The degree to which the individual departs from the traditional image of the passive, naive recipient of the forces of heredity and environment depends upon the degree of liberation he achieves in his progress toward maturity (2), or in becoming a person (20, 25). Up to the present these creative adaptive efforts have been chiefly effective on what can be manipulated in the surrounding ecology and in the acquisition of skills, attitudes, frames of reference and systems of value. There are now repeated suggestions from the biological sciences that the heredity factors, hitherto only indirectly accessible, will also soon become more directly manipulable. Whether the latter achievement will contribute to man's benefit or harm remains to be seen.

The point which it is hoped will remain clear is that the self-shaping capacities of the human individual are derived from (*a*) the general phylogenetic semi-autonomous characteristics of living organisms, and (*b*) his more specialized capacities to utilize a reflective consciousness whereby he can so easily play both the roles of knower and known, subject and object, agent and recipient.

Definition of the Self

Someone may still ask how the writer would define or represent the self? The answer would depend less upon some independent inner segment or homunculus type of activity and more than is now typical upon organismic totality. Thus, the self can be thought of in the following way: a living organism equipped to be reflectively conscious of its own characteristics of structure and activities and of the experiences derived therefrom. Through this equipment the organism is enabled to build an increasingly consistent, unified and individualized set of correlative experiences that he refers to with the pronouns of "I" or "me." This is the self. It plays both the role of subject and the role of object; it is both the knower and the known. In the know-

ing role the reflectively conscious self may pass judgements upon the degree of adequacy of his own performance (the known), and by reactive election endorse or reject aspects of the performance. There can even emerge, through the reflective conscious capacity, a plan for progressive improvement consistent with current levels of aspiration. Often, however, the building of the self occurs more according to felt needs to achieve this or that, or to be only moderately consistent without attempting to move toward a greater degree of unity, uniqueness or self-consistency.

Thus, a complex set of correlated predispositions can be built which becomes more and more the "I" or "me" even though one started with what were primarily the structures and functions of one's own body. The later predispositions probably never become divorced completely from the base of reference provided by the lowly beginnings. However, the superstructure may become so specifically endorsed or selectively emphasized that body structure and function are of relative unimportance. Thus, to preserve the conceptualized "I" or "me" one may choose, as did Socrates, to die rather than desecrate by destructive inconsistencies the self superstructure with which one comes to be primarily identified.

To some it might seem that in the two immediately foregoing paragraphs there has been a drift from whole to part. To derive this conclusion would be misleading. The adoption of criteria, systems of value, frames of reference, or other kinds of guide lines with which one identifies himself and by which he accentuates his identity as a person, does not imply something less than totality of organismic function nor the establishment of some homunculus substitute to manage a remainder of an otherwise mechanical organism. The self superstructure to which reference has been made is still essentially the operation and behavior of a total organism, but the behavior may come to have qualities and characteristics that portray, in a complex social world, specialized kinds of self-consistency and uniqueness. Such self guidance, it has been emphasized, can occur only as product of a reflective consciousness (functional Level III) utilizing both the potentialities of the organism and aspects of the social heritage. The particular kind of consistency, uniqueness, "life style" that occurs, always represents in some degree the creative capacities of the particular person (1, 5). To the extent, therefore, that some ego psychologies emphasize a part function, the present approach would object and attempt to redirect attention to organismic totality.

Self Concept and Values

In a world where the products of science have become an increasing threat to the continued existence of that world, scientists have necessarily become increasingly value conscious. The inevitability of this reaction precludes the comfortable return to laboratories and projects in isolation from the social meaning of the projects. Nor can the scientist surrender completely his products to a society that may not yet be ready emotionally and ethically to utilize those results clearly for the common good. Anti-traditional though it be, the scientist is finding it necessary to play the role of citizen as well as the role of scientist with no break in the continuity.

To establish a rational continuity between these two roles, heretofore sharply separated, requires essentially a more adequately conceptualized continuity between the sciences and the humanities. The science that should, most logically and appropriately, assume the lead in constructing the bridge between the humanities and the sciences is psychology. Furthermore, the rationale that the psychologist develops for such a move would and should be most appropriately derived from his concept of the self. Thus, the psychologist's concept of the self stands as a crucial issue, either enabling him to adopt this broadened role or hindering and paralyzing his moves in this new direction.

It is difficult to see how a concept of self derived from the robot or automaton model—if such there can be—can have effective integrating potentialities between science and the humanities. Problems of human value appear typically irrelevant and as pseudo- or illusory problems in the context of automatons. When, however, the self is seen as a product of and consistent with the concept of the semi-autonomous system, the whole perspective changes. Potentialities immediately appear for some degree of self-regulation, self-direction and even creative activity. The concepts of decision, degree of freedom, degree of responsibility, systems of value, personal worth, dignity and civil rights reappear as both relevant and meaningful. Solutions to the problems that arise in these contexts are partially to be found in scientific studies but also partially in that heritage of writings and knowledge known as the humanities. Given an appropriate self concept, the psychologist has his basic item of equipment for demonstrating the integrative use of both areas, i.e., the sciences and the humanities.

The Problem of a Basic Value

Axiological problems may be studied as naturalistic phenomena, or they may be approached as normative issues where judgments are finally expected in terms of some degree of relative adequacy for the needs of a group. For the second type of value problem, where guide lines are sought in the development of a value system, the concepts of the living organism and the self come again into focus. From basic concepts of organism and self, a basic value may be derived. For example, if it is assumed that the living organism is a semi-autonomous system of energy and, therefore, has some capacity, limited in various ways though it may be for self-regulation and self-management, then a basic value is derivable. This value is identified as *respect* and is defined as follows: *Basic respect is the recognition and constructive concern which one may have for whatever capacity a given individual (including oneself) has for self-regulation and self-determination.*

This value is offered as one which clearly seems to have potentialities for becoming the basic value from which other values and value systems may be derived for guiding social interaction. As a basic value "love is not enough," for love can be selfish, predatory and even destructive. When, however, love is tempered in the context of basic respect as defined above, only the positive qualities remain.

The basic value as defined has applications not only as broad as human society but extends to the role of man in his relationship to all life. A few selected areas will be mentioned where the basic value could have great constructive benefit, but elaboration must wait for later discussions. Applications could be made to the following aspects of human activity: (a) the relationships between teachers and students—education; (b) treatment procedures in mental hospitals; (c) rehabilitation methods in the so-called reformatories; (d) relations between parents and children; (e) personnel policies in business, industry and government; (f) the whole broad and turbulent dispute about civil rights; (g) finally, man could put into practice this basic value with regard to lower forms of life and by so doing discover a rewarding sense of acceptance and even kinship for life generally. The point that should remain clear is that basic concepts of the living organism and of the self become crucial points of departure for approaches to many fundamental human problems.

SUMMARY

A concept of the self has been offered in the context of a holistic-organismic theory of consciousness. Basic to this theory of the self is the concept of the living organism as a semi-autonomous system. Common to definitions of self are the characteristics of organization, unity, identity and executive function. But the human being has no monopoly on these characteristics, for they are all found in the functions of living protoplasm in some degree. The human self is, therefore, a superstructure which the individual gradually erects on the biological givens from phylogenetic history. The aspects of self which are distinctly human are all the products of the functional Level III of the writer's theory of consciousness. The two basic potentialities of this functional level which are necessary in self-building as well as for enabling civilized behavior are (a) the capacity to become reflectively conscious of a stream of events and one's role in them, i.e. to play a dual role of being both a knower and an object of being known, and (b) the capacity to delay action, in spite of pressures to act, while the review of roles and alternatives to action occurs. The concept of the self arrived at by this approach is found to satisfy several basic criteria one of which is the principle of continuity. Furthermore, the particular concept of self held by the psychologist is recognized as crucial both for the kinds of experimental approaches taken in the laboratory and also for the psychologist's role as citizen.

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