RESEARCH PAPER ON THE TRUE NATURE OF THE SELF

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Abstract. The focus on this paper will be on "Self as the cause of Individuation". What I can contribute to this subject arises solely from my experiences as a Christian contemplative. Elsewhere I have written extensively about the true nature of the self, among other the books "The Path to No-Self", and "The Experience of No-Self", (State University of New York Press). However, in the interest of making this paper more comprehensible for readers with no prior knowledge of my work, I would begin with a statement of its major premise and conclusion, and leave the rest of the paper to provide its minor premises or middle terms. This syllogistic set-up is not intended to prove anything, but is simply a way to understand this paper in the light of its premise and conclusion.

PREFACE

This paper is written at the request of Dr. Nini Praetorius, Docent Professor, University of Copenhagen. It is written as a contribution to her research project entitled: “A new approach to the studies of Self, its development, function and relation to consciousness”. The questions posed are “whether or not self has any real existence, i.e, is there something of substance being referred to by the notions of “Self”, “I”, and “me”, or is the self a mere narrative construction, a cognitive representation, or is self a linguistic artefact, or a neurological induced illusion?”.

Since I have already written and spoken rather extensively on the true nature of the self the focus of this paper will be on “Self as the cause of individuation”. What I can contribute to this subject, however, is not academic, but arises solely from my experience as a Christian contemplative – i.e., a life centered on God. Apart from this particular context, I find the subject of “self” of no particular interest. While this background may narrow the scope of this paper, yet, apart from what I have already written (of “self”), what follows is about all I can add to it.

INTRODUCTION

If this paper were intended for those already acquainted with my books, I could have made short work of it. The difficulty, however, is writing for those without this particular background. With no time to repeat what I have already gone over, some people may find this paper difficult reading. Questions are bound to arise that have

1 http://www.spiritualteachers.org/bernadette_roberts.htm
2 See both my books What Is Self? and DVD “A Passage Through Self”. Chapters on self can also be found in my book Essays on the Christian Spiritual Journey. My first two books (The Experience of No-Self and The Path to No-Self) were not concerned with the true nature of self. The first book solely recounts the conundrum of living without the experience of self and the mystery of the true nature of “what” remains beyond all self – a question of far greater importance to man than the true nature of self. Ss to “what” lies beyond all self, this is the subject of my most recent book, The Real Christ.
already been addressed, gone over at length, but which cannot be repeated here. Realizing this problem, I decided that in the interest of making this paper more comprehensible, I would begin with a statement of its major premise and conclusion, and leave the rest of the paper to provide its minor premises or middle terms. This syllogistic set-up is not intended to prove anything, but is simply a way to understand this paper in the light of its premise and conclusion. So, here, then, is our thesis statement:

Premise: “Self is the cause of individuation”
Conclusion: “Without Self there is no individuation”.

Individuation

As used in this paper, the term “individuation” is to be understood in its philosophical sense and not its more contemporary Jungian sense. Where psychology takes man’s experience of individuality for granted, philosophy questions the cause of this experience – i.e., how man’s knows and experiences his own individual “I am”, “I exist”, “I think”. Without the experience of his own being the entire philosophical question of “being” would never have arisen in the first place. So the source or cause of individuation is first and foremost man experiencing himself as a distinct individual being.

From a philosophical perspective, the problem of “self” can be put this way: based on the theory that man (human nature) is a composite of matter and form (soul), it is difficult to explain how either prime matter (which is the same in all physical things), or substantial form (which is the same in all members of the same species) could be the cause or principle of individuation (individuality). Since neither matter or form (soul) is the cause of “individuation”, then neither matter or form is the cause of man experiencing himself as an individual being. The question, then, is “What” is it that causes man’s one universal human nature to be individuated into a plethora of individual persons or selves?

Given there is but one common human nature and not many human natures, different kinds of human nature, or even a particular human nature – “What is common to all is proper to none” – the question is how to get from one universal human nature to every man being his own incommunicable self or person? In some respects, this question harks back to the ancient Greeks pondering how the “one” could be many or the many be “one”. As a proverbial question, however, it is one for which no answer has ever proved satisfactory. Thus, for example, Plato thought matter was responsible for individuating man’s universal soul into many individuals. Aristotle, on the other hand, thought it was the soul that individuated matter – because, he said, it is the essence of man’s common soul to be one. For Aristotle then, it is the soul in-forming matter that is the cause of individuation – i.e., many individual “ones”. Of course there were other views as well – the Stoics, Plotinus, etc.

Simply put, my answer to this proverbial question is this: Self is the cause of individuating man’s common universal human nature into many individual selves or persons. Human differences are not due to man’s common human nature, but to that
particular property of human nature man experiences as “self” – as “I am”, “I exist”, “I am myself and no other”. Self, then, is responsible for the experience or being a discrete entity, a unique individual person. Without self, man would not experience himself as an individual or person, nor as a being – a “who” or “I am”. This means that man’s common universal human nature is void of all these experiences, void of any experience that could be called or defined as “self”. In short, man’s one common, universal human nature, is void of any self.

Self IS self-awareness

As a mere word, “self” is simply the expression of everyman’s experience of existence – “I exist”, “I am”, Self-awareness is not something man was taught or figured out – indeed within the first year of life infants give signs of being aware of themselves – rather, self is first and foremost everyman’s awareness of his own existence. (For those who get hung up on mere words, sign-language expresses the same thing). The reason most people take self-awareness for granted, is because, as an “experience”, they have never been without it! (In truth, one never knows what he has until it is gone!) Thus when people refer to their “selves”, the usual reference is to their whole being, their very existence and not to their idea in their heads, to some bodily organism, or to a disembodied soul. It is because man’s awareness of his own existence is an autonomous “given”, he takes “self” as everything it means to exist. So unless otherwise specified, all “self” words refer to man’s entire being, more especially, to himself as a discrete individual entity or person.

All self-words, then – “me, myself and I” – are simply expressions of man experiencing his individual existence as the independent owner, agent or steward of his own being. He is aware that his thoughts, desires, judgments, feelings and acts are his own and not someone else’s. Self, then, is autonomous self-awareness responsible for everyone being his own unique “person” – person defined as one in possession of himself, or maybe, one who is “self possessed”. Since it is self-awareness that individuates man’s universal human nature, we define “self” (what it means and “what” it is) as self-awareness. As an objective study, self-awareness is called “consciousness”, the singular nature of which is awareness of oneself – one’s own being, own existence. Thus “self-awareness” and “consciousness” are synonymous terms for “self”, for without consciousness or self-awareness, man would have no experience of “self”. There is no self beyond consciousness or any consciousness beyond self. There is also no such “thing” as “the unconscious” or “unconscious self”. What is called “unconscious” is merely a term for what one either does not know or is not aware of, in which case, it has no reality for anyone. As for different “levels” of consciousness, they are all self.3

Perhaps, it is not for nothing the Greek term for “soul” was “psyche”. Though the psyche or soul was defined as “life”, today, however, psyche is just another term for consciousness or “self-awareness”, which is not, however, “life” defined as a “soul”.

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3 Obviously my use of the term “individuation” is not Carl Jung’s use of the term. His was a dual notion of self as the conscious ego (“I am”) and an unconscious “true self”. What he called “individuation” was integrating the conscious and unconscious, a kind of “self-realization” that constituted an authentic or holistic selfhood. We could say this was his idea of a “whole undivided person”.

Keep in mind, man’s nature is a composition of matter-plant-animal-and-human life. It is because human nature includes the life of all beings that the ancients regarded man as a “microcosm” of the macroscopic (universe). What is unique about the human soul, however, is self-awareness or consciousness. Yet, as a function of the human soul, self is not, however, man’s real or true life. If this function (self or self-awareness) were to cease functioning, nothing would be more obvious than that the physical body has a life of its own – with no one running the show, not one even in the body – we call this “vegetative life”. So too, sensory or animal life is not human life – plants and animals have no human “psyche”, this is solely a human prerogative.

Needless to say, if “self” was not man’s immediate awareness of his own existence, there would never be an inquiry into “what” self is. So given that self-awareness is everyman’s experience, the concern is not “that” self-awareness exist, rather, the concern is “what is it that every human being knows and experiences as his self? For most people the simple answer is “I experience myself as a human being – because that’s ‘what’ I am”! To be one’s own self, then, is to know and experience one’s self as a human being. The usual reference to “self”, then, is the experience of being a discrete individual human being. Indeed, it is because in common parlance “self” is reference to an individual human being, we get the view that “self is a being”. As a function of the human soul, however, self is not an individual being.

**Self is the major Faculty (function of the human soul)**

To understand how self-awareness works, it is important to know the difference between “reflexive” and “reflective”. The soul’s function of self-awareness is autonomously reflexive, it is only with deliberate reflection man becomes aware of its autonomy. So while man autonomously “knows himself”, he does not know he knows himself until he deliberately reflects on himself to realize he is always aware of himself – even when he is not aware of this! Needless to say, since man never created himself (or even asked to exist), he has no control over self-awareness, nor can he ever get rid of it – even if he waned to. (To be without any self-awareness scares most people. Since they regard “self” as a reference to their entire being, they think that without self-awareness they would cease to exist!)

The term “reflexive” obviously indicates a function, thus the soul’s function of self-awareness is like a contraction or a bending on itself to know itself as object-to-itself. A bad analogy might be seeing one’s reflection in a mirror – “bad” because an immaterial soul is imageless. The point, however is that **self-awareness is a function**,...
and as such it is the major faculty (or function) of the human soul.⁶ No man could live a normal life on earth if he lacked this autonomous reflexive function, indeed, without it, there could be no development of the intellect and will – those other faculties (functions) of the soul. The ability to use the intellect and will totally depends on a user – a self-aware being. Without self or self-awareness “who” or “what” would run the show? – that’s the real question! Life with self-awareness is obvious, but life without self-awareness is literal unthinkable.

For anything to function there are two requirements: 1. there has to be some mechanism in place, and 2. there has to be some fuel to run it. Given the fuel, this mechanism is the mind’s ability to bend on itself, know itself – know “I exist”. In general, people regard this “mechanism” to be in their heads, minds or physical brains – witness people who try to “silence” their mind or stop thinking altogether. What most do not know, however, is that the fuel that runs the reflexive mechanism comes directly from the center of their being – physically experienced, at least, just below the navel. Although people are not really aware of this connection, they might notice that when centered in themselves, the mind’s “thinking” is greatly reduced. This is why, to find God, many people look to the still center of their being; yet, without self-awareness they could not do this because there would be no “center” or “within” – none! Anyone who can look within has a self he can look into. Without reflexive self-awareness, however, there is no one to look into and nothing to look into. (It is somewhat facetious that people look within themselves to find their “true self” when self is the one looking in!) No question, self-awareness (“I exist”) creates a circumference of individuality that like every enclosed circumference, has a center. Without self-awareness there would be neither circumference (individuality) nor “center” – no one to look within himself or experience any interior life at all.

The reflexive “function” (self-awareness), however, is never under man’s control, he cannot turn it off or on, he has no say or power over it – not ever. The “fuel” that generates this mechanism (self-awareness) belongs to no man. Just as man never created himself he can never get rid of himself.⁷ Thus every man – for better or worse – creates his own unique person (“who” he becomes, even though he did not create or bring himself into existence).

Self as Person

In early Christianity, “person” was defined as a “property” of human nature. Person was

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⁶ Some theologians held that the nature of the soul was nothing more than its functions. But if these functions ceased, then man would be out of a soul – lose his sole. Without self-awareness, however, “who” would be out of a soul? No one!

⁷ The idea self can get rid of itself is an oxymoron – as if the created soul could un-create itself. The idea of “getting rid of self” goes no further than getting rid of the soul’s self-centeredness (ego) that people want out of the way so God can be the true center of their being – true center of themselves, that is. Nobody wants to get rid of their self-awareness because without it “who” could ever be aware of God or a “divine Center”? No one! The early father’s saying “Man is created Theocentric” is only true so long as man has a center. Without self-awareness there is no center, no circumference, no within or without, no awareness of self – or God.
Not the essence of human nature (essence defined as “what” something is), rather, person is a property of human nature – “property” meaning ownership. So “what” every human being owns is his own human nature, is responsible for his own thinking, own behaviours – desires, pursuits, etc. In other words, he is master of himself, the agent governing his own existence – in short, he is his own person, his own incommunicable self that can never be “another”. So while “essence” defines human nature or “what” all human beings share in common, “person” solely defines “who” and individual or particular human being is. Human nature (what a man is), then, is a “universal”, while person is a singular or “particular” (who someone is). Thus Socrates, Plato and Aristotle are of the same identical human nature, but were not the same self or person. So if the property of human nature is to be one’s own self (a unique person), the common essence of human nature, however, is not “self” – is not an individual person nor any particular being. What makes for differentiation, then, is self or person and not human nature. “What” man is, then, is a universal, whereas “who” a man is, is a particular individual person or self. Given that “person” and “self” both answer the question of “who” a particular individual is, they are not synonymous terms. Where there no persons or self, then who would ever think of asking “Who”? No “one”! It is because self is always a reference to a particular individual that the question “Who” arises. The idea human language is based on no communicable human experience is absurd. All language is the expression of some experience.

What is responsible, then, for the differentiation or individuation of man’s common human nature is the property of human nature man knows and experiences as self or person. Thus, to know the true cause of individuation is simply to “know thyself”. Obvious, self is not the essence of man’s human nature, rather, self is the property of human nature responsible for the individuation or differentiation of man’s one common human nature.

**Individual vs. Individuation**

For just about everyone, “individual” refers to a material, physical entity. Even Aristotle defined “individual” as a “numerical one”. As he saw it, human nature was a composite or union of a material body and an immaterial soul – the soul being the life of the body. For him, reference to “individual” (or “individuality”) is always to something material or physical – quantitative, that is. But if one can count heads (individuals), one cannot count human natures – human nature is not quantitative. (By definition, no universal is “quantitative”). Interestingly, since Aristotle (unlike Plato) held there was not “soul” without body, he granted neither body or soul any eternal life.  

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8 Tertullian (165-220) is credited with the definition of "person" as a property. Both philosophically and theologically, however, all "properties" of human nature are said to be accidental to its essence or true nature. Thus an accidence (Latin) has no independent and self-sufficient existence, but exists only in another being, substance or in another accident. As opposed to "substance", accidents may change, disappear, or be added, while "substance" remains the same. Thus the “faculties” of the human soul are regarded as the “proper” accident of the human soul – meaning, that even if they ceased to function, there would be no change in the essence (or substance) of human nature.

9 For Aristotle, the only thing eternal in man was his contemplative faculty – “that” in man that would eternally "contemplate the 'One'". Based on the ancient definition of human nature as a composite of body-soul-spirit, this contemplative faculty would be man’s spirit – not his soul.
Since everything that exists is a material individual “something” – atom, molecule, seed, plant, animal or human being – to be an “individual” means to be some discrete material entity, and hence, some sensory object. As pointed out, however, material individuality cannot account for being an incommunicable human person; if it did, then every material “thing” (atom or molecule) would be its own independent “person” or “self” – for which there is no evidence. To account for a human “person” or “self” requires something more than being an individual physical body. Keep in mind, given time, all material bodies become a heap of undifferentiated ashes – “dust” the Bible calls them. Since no material body can account for self-awareness or consciousness, then no material individual body constitutes a person or self. In short, physical (material, quantitative) individuality does not account for “individuation”. Self is no individual material being or entity.

Perception vs. Awareness

Just as it is an error to mistake material individuality for individuation (self or self-awareness), there follows the proverbial failure to differentiate between perception and awareness. Objects-of-perception are solely material sensory objects, whereas the sole object-of-awareness is self. Where the senses can only look outward, the human soul looks inward. For the philosophers, this was the major difference between animal and man, between a sensory soul and an human soul – “Know Thyself” was a human prerogative. Where the senses only perceive material objects in the environment, the major function of the human soul is to look inward – to know itself. For the soul to know itself, however, it has to be an object to itself, otherwise there would be no “subject” to know. Thus man only “knows himself” as “object-of-the-subject” or “subject-of-the-object” – same thing, subject is “I am”, object is “Myself”. It goes without saying, as and object-to-itself, the soul is not some sensory perceptual material object or image – indeed, the human soul admits of no sensory “objects” or images. (Where the imagination plays on sensory objects, the human soul is incapable of “perceiving” sensory objects or images). So keep in mind, “perception” belongs solely to the animal sensory soul (material objects), and not to the human soul (which is solely aware of itself).

Another mistake is to think that to look outward or inward is just a matter of choice – not so! Man only looks outward through the glasses of self-awareness. Though conscious of himself looking out, it is not consciousness that looks out; rather, it is solely the senses. Self-awareness and perception are two entirely different functions, different natures with totally different effects. The senses only perceive material objects while consciousness is solely aware of itself. People, however, regularly mistake “awareness” for “perception” – and vice versa. Because of this mistake, man has a penchant for projecting his self-awareness onto objects, animals, other people – even God. This is because he only knows “the other” according to how he knows himself. Yet neither animals, objects, nor God are self-aware beings, this is solely a human prerogative. So just as the senses are incapable of looking within (or inward), so too,

10 To think God is a self-aware being is to make God into man’s own self-image. As for being “aware” of God, if all awareness is self-awareness, then, strictly speaking, man can never be “aware” of God. Man
self-awareness (or “consciousness”) is incapable of looking out (or outward). We could give many examples of contemplatives making this mistake, one being the idea they (themselves) are really no different than a tree, a chair, or some sensory object – totally absurd! The point is that no physical, material individuality can account for individuation – i.e., the experience “I am”, “I exist”, “I think” etc.

**Effects of self-awareness**

Self-awareness is responsible for man’s experience of “life”, “being”, “soul”, “self”, “energy” and all his emotional or affective experiences. It is responsible for man’s “interior life” of being able to look within himself and experience a “spiritual” dimension beyond his sensory body. Self-awareness is man’s experience of having a center in himself, of his being a discrete individual person or entity, it is even his experience of oneness with God. There are many other subtle experiences due to self-awareness or self. In fact, without the awareness “I am”, “I exist”, man as we know him would not exist. As for the true essence of man’s universal human nature, this is “Universal Man”, Man, however, that no individual person or self could ever know so long as there is any self (self-awareness or consciousness) remaining. The true essence of man’s common universal human nature is known only to its Creator, and it is solely this “Universal Man” (and not any individual self or person) that is eternally one with its Creator. It is this “Oneness” of the unknowable essence of God and unknowable essence of Man that God revealed as everything in Christianity knows and calls “Christ”.

**Man as Spirit**

According to the ancients, to Paul, the early fathers and even “scripture”, man is a composite of body-soul-spirit. That the medieval theologians omitted the “human spirit! Is the major problem with their theologies.

Nothing so keeps man grounded to life on earth as the faculties of the soul – indeed, this is what they were created to do. Knowing this is why “spiritual adepts” tell us we must have no-mind, no-will (or desire) and no-self – why? Because they keep a man grounded, down to earth, keep him from soaring to God beyond himself. So ther is certainly more to man than these faculties of the human soul. Holding man to being solely a union of body and soul is totally off the mark. The spirit is man’s true “spiritual life”, his mystical dimension beyond the soul’s faculties. When the spirit is not God, it is the vehicle by which God is revealed to man, communicates to him, and by which man encounters God not only in himself, but in all creation. A spiritual man, then, is really a contemplative man, the spirit raising him beyond himself to a dimension of existence apart from all he knows as his “body-soul-and-self”. It is this mysterious spirit in man that longs for and is drawn up to “That” which alone can fulfil his entire
human nature – whatever that may be. He does not know “What” It is that draws him, he only knows “That” It is.

This *spirit*, is not soul, not a self or a body, it is also not an “energy” or anything man thinks is a “spiritual” energy. It is because man’s “spirit” is non-experiential it is a mystery. Yet it is this mystery in man that contemplates (sees) and knows God, and is the medium that unites the infinite and finite in eternal life. Where the “eye of the soul” is solely on itself – i.e., “the eye with which I see God is the same “eye” which God sees me” – the eye of the spirit, on the other hand, is selfless – sees neither subject nor object (self or God). Man often wonders “what” it is in himself that sees, knows and unites him to god, he wonders because he knows it is not his mind, intellect, will-power or even his self. He only knows this mystery is “that” in him that is most akin to God. St. Paul explained that just as the soul has its own physical body, the spirit has its own spiritual body, and it is this spiritual body that matters, for this alone has eternal life with and in God.

**Conclusion**

The true nature of “self” is the major faculty (or function) of the human soul. As the awareness of his own existence, this function is responsible for individuating man’s common human nature into individual selves – every man knowing and experiencing “I am”, “I exist”. So the function of self-awareness or consciousness is to individuate man’s universal human nature into individual selves or persons, none are alike and all are different. So while “human nature” defines every human being, “person” defines “who” a particular individual is. Thus we could define “Self” as the state of being an individual person – “person” being what it means to be unique, incommunicable – different. While no man created human nature, it is how he uses the faculties he has been given that creates or determines the person he becomes – “who” he is.

Self, then, is obviously not a “being”, not just a “word” or cognitive construct, and certainly not an “illusion”, rather self is everyman’s experience “I exist” – simple as that. It is this self-awareness or consciousness (“I, me, myself”) that causes individuation – i.e., the simple awareness of one’s own existence, of being one’s own person. **Without this, man as we know him would not exist.** The importance of “self”, then, is that without it, this planet would be only fit for animals – sensory beings, that is.\(^\text{13}\)

There is really great mystery about “self” or man’s self-awareness. The real mystery is the true nature of “what” remains when it is gone – has ceased to function. With the cessation of self-awareness all the experiential effects it generated are gone in the blink of an eye. And what were these effects? They were the experience of “being”, of “life”, “soul”, energy”, “mind and will”, interiority (within-ness), the “affective system”, even the awareness of “being one with God” – all these experiences are suddenly blown out and gone forever! Now there is no center (God) and no circumference (self). In

\(^{13}\) As already pointed out, everything in existence is some individual material “thing”, and thus, it is solely an object of sensory perception. Material individuality, however, is not what individuates – matter alone cannot account for any experience of self or self-awareness – in fact, nothing man perceives is eternal. The question, of course, is if there is anything man is “aware of” that is eternal?!
truth, this “blow out” (or cessation) is the only death-experience man will ever experience – could ever have, in fact. So take away self-awareness with all its experiential effects and the real question becomes “what is the true nature of what remains beyond all self? This is the real mystery of man and the real question he needs to have answered. ¹⁴ No idea in the mind could ever come up with a satisfactory answer to this mystery, only God can reveal the true nature of “what” remains beyond all self and individuation. Since only the Creator knows the true essence of man’s common human nature, only God can reveal its eternal oneness with God. I have written a book about this revelation, its title being The Real Christ. ¹⁵

¹⁴ The reason I never had an interest in the truth nature of the self is because the simple awareness “I exist” is a human given – obvious, simple, undeniable. That this awareness (“I am”) is eternal, however, this is a whole different question and one man should really be concerned about!

¹⁵ Food for thought: Some time ago, listening to the quiz show Jeopardy, one of the questions was “What is the name of the German Psychiatrist who had a patient say to him, “Doctor, I have no self”? No one on the panel knew the answer – which turned out to be “Doctor Alzheimer”. For people who want to get rid of their “self” this, at least, is one way to go.