

Comparative Analysis of The Philosophy of Self-Awareness in Eastern and Western Literature

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Abstract

The idea of “self” has always been central to philosophy. It is the starting point for understanding human thought, feelings, and actions. The “I” determines who we are, how we think, and how we relate to others and the world around us. This study examines the philosophy of self from Eastern and Western perspectives. While many Western philosophers view the self as an individual and rational being, Eastern thinkers often view it as part of a larger whole, that is, a spiritual, natural, or divine force. Therefore, this article compares these two traditions through key figures from the West, such as Descartes, Kant, Emerson, and Frankl, and from the East, such as Jalaluddin Rumi, Alisher Navoi, Abu Hamid Ghazzali, Abu Bakr Razi, and Buddhist thinkers, using a comparative and explanatory approach to scientific research, analyzing philosophical texts and literary expressions that describe the self, motivation, and human purpose. The findings show that while Eastern and Western traditions differ in their descriptions of the self, their purpose is the same: to understand human existence and to find meaning.

Keywords: Self, philosophy, being, spirituality, consciousness, motivation, “I”, East, West.

Introduction

The question “Who am I?” has occupied human thought for thousands of years. This is perhaps one of the most fundamental inquiries in philosophy, a concept that lies at the heart of all other questions about existence, knowledge, morality, and purpose. Every human being, at some point in life, in the stage of the self is confronted with this mystery. It is interested in what it really means to exist and what gives life its meaning and direction. The philosophy of self-awareness seeks to answer this eternal question by studying what it means to be a conscious, reflective, and moral being. It studies how people understand themselves, how they change over experience and time, and how they relate to each other within the framework of the “person-world” relationship.

In philosophy, the “self” is not just a physical body or a rational mind, but it is the center of consciousness, thought, feeling, and will. It is the part of human existence that perceives, chooses, remembers, hopes, and seeks meaning. Philosophers have long wondered whether the self is something unchanging and permanent—static or dynamic—ever-changing? Is it independent of the world or dependent on it. This debate has served to shape and develop moral systems, religious doctrines, and even modern psychology.

The concept of self-awareness varies greatly across cultures and eras. In Western philosophy, self-awareness is often described as autonomous, rational, and creative—thinking, doing, and meaning-making. René Descartes’ famous statement “Cogito, ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) perfectly encapsulates the intellectual and individualistic spirit [1.]. Eastern philosophy, by contrast, often sees the self as interconnected. In spiritual traditions such as Sufism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, the self is not separate from others, nature, or the divine, but rather part of a larger cosmic whole. True knowledge of self comes not through isolation, but through connection and harmony.

This thesis examines these two main approaches: individualistic Western philosophy and collectivist Eastern philosophy. It aims to understand how different civilizations interpret the same universal experience of being human and how these interpretations affect our sense of purpose, motivation, and moral life.

Historical development of self-consciousness

The philosophical study of self-awareness has led to the emergence and development of new civilizations over many centuries. In ancient Greece, thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle laid the foundation for Western self-reflection. For example, Socrates, who called on his followers to “know themselves” by stating that “a person who wants to change others must first change himself” [2.], emphasized that self-knowledge is the beginning of wisdom and virtue.

Plato considered the soul to be the most important aspect of human nature - eternal, rational, and directed towards truth and goodness. Plato was right in this regard when he said: “Wealth and poverty. The one leads to luxury, laziness, heresy, the other, besides innovations, to baseness and vices.” [3] For him, knowledge of the self was inseparable from moral perfection. Aristotle took a more practical view, emphasizing self-awareness through action and relationships - individuality is formed not in isolation, but in how one lives in society. For example, Aristotle: “...morality is an integral part of politics. Generosity is a quality between extravagance and stinginess, avarice. Modesty is a quality between shamelessness and timidity.” [4.]

The modern era has changed this classical understanding. Rene Descartes revolutionized Western philosophy by asserting that thought itself guarantees existence: “I think, therefore I am.” For Descartes, “I” is a clear, stable, rational mind, separate from the physical world was capable of independent thought. However, its dualism - the separation of mind and body - raised new questions about whether it is truly possible to separate the self from the material world.

The historical roots of Western ideas about self-awareness can be traced back to the philosophical schools of ancient Greece, where philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle established the idea of personal identity and moral consciousness. Socrates's saying “Know yourself” invited people to engage in introspection as a path to wisdom. For him, self-knowledge was both an intellectual and moral act, since not knowing oneself was a moral and spiritual error.

Plato advanced this view by dividing man into body and soul, emphasizing that the soul is the true essence of man - eternal, rational and striving for the realm of ideas. For Plato, the journey of the soul is the remembering of truth and the purification of the body from distractions. Aristotle, on the other hand, took a more practical position, grounding the self in action and purpose. He saw the self as realized not only in thought, but also in virtuous activity within society. The good life (eudaimonia) is achieved when one acts in accordance with reason and fulfills one's natural potential.

The modern face of the West

With the rise of modern philosophy, attention was focused on self-awareness and rational clarity. René Descartes provided the most influential formulation of the modern self in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. His statement "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am") became the foundation of Western subjectivity. Descartes defined the thinking self as the basis of all knowledge - an immaterial, rational subject that exists independently of the external world [5.]. However, later thinkers were skeptical of this fixed and dualistic concept. John Locke saw personal identity as a matter of memory rather than substance, and the continuity of consciousness. David Hume went further and claimed that the self was nothing more than a "set of sensations" with no permanent essence. This skeptical view undermined the Cartesian belief that the self was not absolute but dynamic and structured [6.]. Immanuel Kant reinterpreted this debate by distinguishing between the empirical "I" (the self we experience) and the transcendental "I" (the state of being possible for experience). Kant argued that although we cannot directly perceive the self as an object, it is the organizing principle that unifies experience and allows for moral reasoning. This brought with it a moral dimension: to be human means to be a rational, moral agent capable of freedom and responsibility [7.]. The 19th and 20th centuries further developed this idea. Friedrich Nietzsche saw self not as something given, but as something to be created. For him, self is realized through overcoming external values and asserting one's will. In this regard, his statement that "Before one can rule the world, one must learn to rule oneself" [8.] is noteworthy. Jean-Paul Sartre proposed in existentialism that people are "destined to be free" - there is no predetermined nature or essence, and that each person must therefore invent themselves through their own choices. Later, Viktor Frankl expanded on this existentialist premise, arguing that the deepest drive in human life is not pleasure (as Freud proposed) or power (as Adler proposed), but meaning. His human search for meaning suggests that even in the midst of suffering, a person retains his or her worth through purpose and moral choice [9.]. In all of these thinkers, the West itself appears as an autonomous, reflective, and creative being—a being that determines its own essence through thought, action, and moral responsibility. Later philosophers challenged Descartes's view. David Hume argued that the "I" is not a permanent substance but a constantly changing collection of sensations that are retained only in memory and imagination. Immanuel Kant, on the other hand, argues that the self, although not recognizable as an object, serves as the subject that organizes all experience—a necessary condition for thought and moral responsibility. Friedrich Nietzsche went even further, rejecting the idea of a fixed essence altogether; he saw the self as something created through will, struggle, and interpretation. In the 20th century, Jean-Paul Sartre developed this existentialist concept, describing the self not as

something we possess but as something we continually construct through choice. To be, in Sartre's sense, is to determine oneself through action.

Problems of understanding spiritual selfhood in eastern philosophy

In eastern philosophy, the self can be seen not as immutable or separate, but as spiritual, connected, and fluid. The focus is not on defining who we are, but on understanding what connects us to all of existence.

In Buddhism, the doctrine of anatta (no-self) denies the existence of permanent identity. Everything, including the self, is permanent and interconnected. The self is a temporary composition of the body, senses, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. The illusion of a separate "I" is the root of attachment and suffering. Freedom (nirvana) is achieved through detachment, mindfulness, and compassion, which destroy this illusion and reveal the unity of all beings.

In Indian philosophy, the concept of atman - the inner "I" - occupies a central place. Atman is eternal, pure, and identical with Brahman, the universal essence of man. Human ignorance (avidya) obscures this truth, which makes us leads us to see ourselves as separate. Through meditation, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice, people can come to understand that their true selves and the divine are one. This understanding means liberation from the cycle of rebirth, or moksha, and the unification of the individual consciousness with the universal human being [10].

In Sufism, a branch of Islamic mysticism, the journey of the self is described as a path of purification and love. Poets and philosophers such as Jalaluddin Rumi and Alisher Navoi saw the self as a traveler seeking to meet the Divine. Rumi's concept of fana (annihilation of the self) means the destruction of the self and illusion, allowing the soul to unite with God. In this regard, J. Rumi says: "The body is filled with the pleasure of the people, and the heart is filled with the pleasure of the Truth, and the soul is filled with the soul" [11.]. Alisher Navoi's moral and poetic works also emphasize that self-awareness occurs through service, truth, and moral education.

Both describe love as the ultimate motivation that transforms the self from selfishness to spiritual unity.

In Taoism, self-awareness is achieved by living in harmony with the natural flow of existence. The Taoist does not control or struggle with himself, but simply moves with the rhythms of life, demonstrating the harmony between human will and the natural world.

Among these traditions, the East itself is not a sovereign being, but a process of spiritual becoming - a movement from ignorance to consciousness, from separation to unity. Motivation does not arise from ambition or competition, but from loyalty, compassion, and love of truth.

Western perspectives: problems of autonomous and creative self-awareness Western philosophy usually begins with the idea of the self as the independent center of consciousness and reason. Since Descartes, the West itself has been the origin of knowledge, morality, and freedom.

For Kant, moral freedom defines selfhood. Man acts freely, not by external forces or desires, but by acting in accordance with a moral law that is derived from reason. This idea produces a moral person who achieves value through responsibility and moral autonomy.

Ralph Waldo Emerson expanded this idea with his doctrine of self-reliance, which fused rationality with intuition. He encouraged people to trust their inner voice and to resist conformity. For Emerson, self-reliance was not selfishness but a belief in the divine existence of the individual.

His language—imperative, rhythmic, and confident—was designed to inspire spiritual courage and creative independence.

In the 20th century, Viktor Frankl introduced the existential and psychological dimension. As a Holocaust survivor, he observed that even in the face of extreme suffering, people retained the freedom to choose their own response. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, he wrote, "Those who have a 'why' for living can give a reason for almost any 'how'." His philosophy of logotherapy placed meaning at the center of human existence: motivation comes not from pleasure or power, but from purpose. Frankl himself is deeply moral and interpretive - he transforms suffering into understanding and despair into action.

Thus, Western thought portrays the self as a rational, moral, and creative being - a being who shapes the world through will, reason, and choice.

Comparative reflection

Eastern and Western traditions, when considered together, reveal two complementary aspects of human identity. Eastern The West seeks harmony, unity, and transcendence, losing the boundaries of the ego. The West itself seeks independence, freedom, and self-expression, defining identity through reason and choice. These two perspectives may seem contradictory, but they both respond to the same human aspiration - to understand and fulfill the meaning of existence.

Even language reflects these differences. Eastern texts often use poetic, circular, and symbolic images - light, fire, water, and journeys - to describe spiritual ascension. Western texts use direct, analytical, and rigorous language to express individuality and moral considerations. However, both reveal the power of words to shape the experience of being human.

Ultimately, the philosophy of self-awareness shows that self-awareness is not only an intellectual quest, but also a moral and emotional journey. Whether through meditation or contemplation, surrender or self-determination, humans share a common fundamental desire to know who they are and why they exist. Thus, the self becomes both a question and an answer: a constant invitation to discovery.

Conclusion

1. The philosophy of self-awareness combines two universal human aspirations: the need to belong and the need to be free. The Eastern path teaches connection with the divine, compassion, and unity; the Western path emphasizes freedom, creativity, and spiritual responsibility. When these perspectives are combined, they form a more complete picture of humanity. The self is not a part of the individual or the whole, but both. Thus, self-awareness is not only the foundation of philosophy but also the essence of a meaningful and ethical life. The search for oneself is, ultimately, the search for meaning.
2. The fundamental difference between Eastern and Western views is in how they define the relationship between themselves and the world. The East sees itself as a larger sees itself as part of a whole, where peace comes through harmony and surrender. The West sees itself as separate and independent, finding meaning through freedom and moral effort.
3. However, these perspectives are not contradictory but complementary. The East itself teaches humility, compassion, and balance, reminding us of our interconnectedness. The West itself teaches strength, courage, and responsibility, and reminds us of our creative power. Together, they

offer a holistic view of human life: the need to belong and to be free; the desire for peace and the desire for progress.

4. Eastern and Western philosophies, when considered together, offer two complementary dimensions of self. The Eastern perspective teaches unity, compassion, and solidarity; it dissolves the ego in the recognition of unity. The Western perspective emphasizes individuality, freedom, and moral creativity; affirms the power of personal will and choice. Although different in method, both traditions respond to the same human need - to understand existence and find meaning within it.

5. Indeed, the self is both individual and universal, independent and interconnected. The modern world increasingly demands this synthesis: a balance of responsibility with freedom and individuality with connection. The one who understands both points of view does not divide himself, but becomes whole - capable of thinking, loving and transcending.

6. Even the language of each tradition reflects its worldview. Eastern texts are poetic, circular and symbolic, often using metaphors of light, fire and water to express change and enlightenment. Western texts are linear, logical and rigid, expressing individuality, progress and rational structure. Therefore, linguistic form is not accidental - it reflects a philosophical direction.

7. However, both traditions have a common goal: to answer the eternal question of meaning. Meditation or contemplation, surrender or Whether through self-affirmation or not, all people strive to understand their place in the cosmos.

8. Self-exploration shows that people are united by a common desire - the desire to understand who they are and why they exist. In Eastern philosophy, the self finds peace in connection with nature, others, and the divine. In Western philosophy, the self finds meaning in freedom and moral choice. Neither is alone; together they form a balanced picture of human existence.

9. The self is both individual and universal, finite and infinite. It is the silent witness of thought and the active creator of purpose. Therefore, understanding the self is not only a philosophical question, but also a moral and existential exercise. By knowing ourselves, we learn to act wisely, to love deeply, and to live meaningfully.

10. The philosophy of self reveals that human existence is not simply biological, but deeply moral, emotional, and spiritual. In different cultures, the search for self has always been a search for meaning. In the East, this meaning is discovered through connection with the divine, with others, and with nature. In the West, it is created through thought, freedom, and moral action. Together, these perspectives form a complete picture of human life: belonging and freedom, thinking and loving, acting and surrendering.

11. Ultimately, self-awareness is not just a philosophical exercise, but a human necessity. It is through self-knowledge that people find peace, purpose, and moral direction. As Rumi wrote: "The universe is not outside you, look within, and what you desire is already there." Thus, "I" is both a journey and a destination—a mirror in which the mysteries of existence are reflected.

12. The philosophy of self asks the question "Who am I?" - the search for meaning that unites Eastern and Western thought, despite their different perspectives. In Western philosophy, from Socrates and Descartes to Emerson and Frankl, the self-conscious, autonomous, and creative - of thought, freedom, and moral sees the self as a being who determines existence through choice. Eastern philosophy, however, views the self as relational and spiritual, emphasizing harmony, compassion, and unity with the divine or natural order. Traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism,

Sufism, and Taoism describe self-awareness as the dissolution of the ego and the awakening of inner peace through love and balance.

13. From a linguistic perspective, Western texts favor clear, concise, and logical language to express independence, while Eastern writings use symbolic, rhythmic, and metaphorical imagery to evoke connection and transformation. Despite these contrasts, both traditions share a common goal: to understand human existence and find purpose. Together they reveal the self as both independent and connected, both thinker and seeker - this shows that the journey of self-knowledge is the basis of a meaningful and ethical life.

Ultimately, the question "Who am I?" arises. more than a curiosity, that is, it becomes the basis of a moral, compassionate and purposeful life. The journey to answer it unites all humanity in the eternal pursuit of truth across cultures and centuries.

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