

# CONCEPT OF SELF AND SELF IDENTITY

IN CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

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Dr. Absar Ahmad has done an able research work 'Concept of Self and Self-Identity in the Contemporary Philosophy' which has been published by the Iqbal Academy, Pakistan Lahore.

The problem of self is very old and important. Dr. Absar Ahmad supports the Cartesian dualism of mind and body and treats self as a mental substance. He surveys and critically examines three important trends in contemporary philosophy which define self in different terms opposed to that of his.

The analytical and behaviouristic trend was activated by Ryle's classic work 'The Concept of Mind' which was extremely anti-Cartesian. Descartes' concept of mind was understood as the 'ghost in the machine.' Ryle tried to reduce mind to body behavioural terms. Dr. Absar has criticized Ryle at length and has said that mind cannot be understood as bits of bodily behaviour. He also examined the claims of the Identity Theorists which identify mind with brain or the central nervous system. In his opinion all this attempt is futile.

Hume's serialist or bundle view of the self and self as a logical construction have been examined and a case has been presented for self as a substantial subject of all mental experiences. In this connection, the

nature of memory and self-knowledge has also been examined, where a persistent and identified self is presupposed in all mental experiences.

The theory of self as a person has also been examined and the views of Ryle, Ayer, Wittgenstein and Strawson have been examined. This view has also been rejected.

An attempt has been made to interpret Iqbal's conception of the self along the Cartesian lines and inner or deeper self has been called the ego in Iqbal which is the same as the substantial self of Dr. Absar.

I have to make some comments in this connection.

1) I agree to most of what Dr. Absar said in his book, but I have a feeling that with his dualism he is moving to the extreme end of reading mind totally away from and independent of body, whereas all the others (serialists, identity theorists, analysts, linguists) are moving to the one end of reading mind into bodily states. Throughout the book Dr. Absar pleads that self or mind is distinct from body but this does not imply that mind is logically independent of body. Alongwith dependence, distinctness can also be maintained.

When we talk of self, it is understood in human terms as a human self. A human self cannot be understood without reference to a body (a bodiless self and its immortality are different questions) I agree to what Dr. Absar says in criticism on identity theorists and the like-minded ones, but I would also not agree to his substantial self which is totally divorced from *body*.

2) Of particular interest to me are his discussions on 'I' and self as a person. To say that I is the substantial self which is conscious of mental states, it is not clear what that 'I' is? (Descartes called it a 'thinking thing' and Hume looked for it and did not find it).

3) Dr. Absar says, "I' has a concrete referential force in self-intuition... Our knowledge of our own self-identity and mental states is in truth a non-linguistic or pre-linguistic one..." (pp. 313-314), but this self-identity is purely empty without any content. It is only the public

language and interaction with other beings that fills the self with content. As Kant related concepts with percepts, self needs to be related with other selves and the public language.

4) In my opinion self as a person is a better theory than the rest of all. (Here I agree with Strawson but have some differences with him as well). The concept of a person is better than that of the self. It is neither empty, nor elusive like the self. Others call me a person, and I call them 'person'. One as a self is known to oneself but one as a person is known to others. In ordinary life we refer to a person, talk to him, talk about him (in his presence or absence), talk about real or imaginary persons, etc. Thus a person is a *bio-social entity of mental and physical* characteristics which is manifested in his *actions*. It is also important to note that when a person dies, his acts do *not* die with him (here is a sense of immortality which refers to this world). Acts belong to a person, but not to the mind or body. He rather *uses* mind and body for his acts. 'I' cannot be replaced by 'my body' or 'my mind'. Let us see whether we can make substitution in the following examples:

a) I think, I imagine,  
I remember

My Mind cannot be  
substituted for I.

b) I sit, I stand, I walk

'My body' cannot be  
substituted for I, because the  
body is used by me for a certain act.

c) I try, I assert, I fail

No substitution for either mind or  
body is possible for I

Thus self as a person is a bio-social unity of mental and physical characteristics manifested in his actions.

In the end I congratulate Dr. Absar Ahmad for his able, painstaking and critical study and the Iqbal Academy of Pakistan for publishing it for the benefits of students, teachers and those interested in philosophy.