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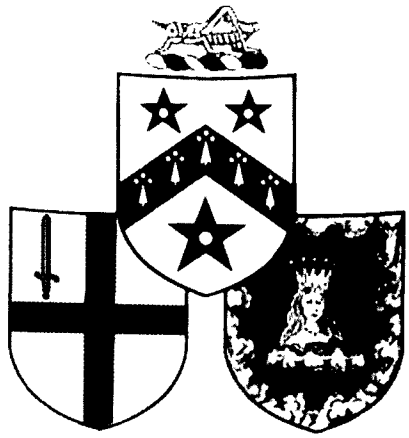

MIND, MORALS AND THE ORIGIN OF OUR IDEAS

Lecture 1

DO WE HAVE A TRUE SELF?

by

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MIND, MORALS AND THE ORIGINS OF OUR IDEAS:

DO WE HAVE A TRUE SELF?

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I am honoured not only at being invited to be the Gresham Professor of Rhetoric , but also because this is the first time in over 400 years that the Gresham Chair of Rhetoric has been devoted to Philosophy. Philosophy and Rhetoric have had various relations over the centuries. Plato in the 4th century BC was opposed to Rhetoric, but his pupil Aristotle wrote a treatise about how Rhetoric should be conducted. In the time of imperial Rome, Rhetoric was the popular subject studied by the sons of the middle-class who wanted to get on in the world. Philosophy was a minority subject to which one might progress after studying Rhetoric. I should like to tell you of one ancient university where the archaeologist's spade has, I believe, brought to light the relations between Rhetoric and Philosophy.

Apamea was the site of this ancient university. It is located in a beautiful valley in Syria, and it is where, around 300 AD, the philosopher Iamblichus taught Philosophy. The archaeologists have unearthed a mosaic showing Socrates teaching his colleagues. We know the mosaic is of Socrates, because the name "Socrates" is written in the mosaic. Next to this mosaic was found another, showing a lady taking off her clothes. The archaeologists interpreted this as also advertising the Philosophy school. It showed, they suggested, Philosophy removing the robe of the body in order to reveal the soul. But, when they asked me to comment, it did not look to me like the soul that the comely lady was revealing. Moreover she was labelled not "Philosophy" , but "Cassiopeia", and she was being crowned, while the sea-God Poseidon stood beside her. Other figures in the mosaic were labelled "Persuasion " and "Judgment ". It became clear to me that this was the mosaic not of the Philosophy Department, but of the Rhetoric Department. Students of Rhetoric used to be trained by telling them to take a story from mythology and argue that the verdict in the story should have gone the other way. In the original story Cassiopeia was not crowned, but was disqualified in the beauty contest by Poseidon, who was angry that she had challenged his sea nymphs. Here in the mosaic, however, Poseidon was standing happily beside her, while Judgment and Persuasion were approving her coronation. This was evidently the mosaic of the Rhetoric Department, and the message was, "If you come to us you will learn Persuasion and be able to show that any verdict should be reversed."

It seems to me appropriate that Rhetoric and Philosophy had rooms next door to each other, and were studied and taught to some extent by the same people in 300 AD.

In this inaugural lecture I want to talk about the self. I should like to know how many of you feel that you have a self, or a true self? This is taken for granted in Continental Philosophy, but in the kind of Philosophy done in the English-speaking countries, Analytic Philosophy, it is very widely doubted. I think this is because the conceptions of self employed in the 17th and 18th centuries were so thin that people have felt they were valueless. Descartes was certain of one thing: "I exist". But he could not be certain that a Frenchman existed, educated at La Flèche and called Descartes. In order to retain certainty, he had to keep his conception of "I" very thin. It might have no history at all, for all he could know, but exist only long enough to entertain the thought, "I exist". John Locke thought of the self as tied together by memory alone. It is not surprising that when Hume looked inwards, he claimed to find only individual perceptions and no self in addition. After him, Kant thought we must decide how it is right to act by reference to what a rational being would do, not a German, nor a man or a woman -that would introduce bias- but just a rational being. Again the concept is very thin.

Leading philosophers who have denied there is such a thing as self in the 20th century include Wittgenstein, Elizabeth Anscombe, Tony Kenny, Derek Parfit and Daniel Dennett. Kenny has suggested that the idea is the product of a grammatical mistake. We talk of my house and myself, so we assume the self is as much a thing as the house. But I think this cannot be the reason. English has been used for Philosophy only in the last few centuries. For far longer Philosophy was done in Greek or Latin and there have been many other languages. The supposed grammatical mistake would not arise in these languages, and yet philosophers from Plato on have been trying to articulate ideas of self. They have not had a word like the English word "self", but have used a variety of pronouns and other expressions. To speak very roughly, when I talk of self, I am speaking of a locus of what is important in me, but since different things are important for different purposes, many different things can be identified with the self.

The sceptics ask whether everything could not be put without mention of selfhood, by talking about persons or humans or aspects of them, or by using the reflexive "myself!. But we shall see that on the contrary people want to say more than this, for example sometimes to pick out an aspect and say of it "this is me."

The self is not necessarily the same as the soul or the mind. Sometimes it is taken to include the body as well, sometimes to include only some part of the soul or mind. What counts as self varies according to different purposes. But even for a single purpose the conception of self can vary. It can vary, we shall see, even within a single sentence, because sometimes we talk of a self acting on a self, and there may be different kinds of self referred to in each part of the sentence.

Daniel Dennett has argued that because different biographies can be written about the same person, it follows that the idea of a self is a fiction, even though it may be a useful and explanatory fiction. But I do not think this follows. Every biography might be true, or every biography false. We have to judge case by case.

I am encouraged in my view that there is such a thing as the self or selves by modern studies in the psychological development of infants. I am thinking of the work of such people as Ulrich Neisser and D.N Stern. Neisser has distinguished five concepts of self. I shall not mention them all, but for a start, the infant has to see things as looming in relation to its bodily self, so that it can avoid them. It takes massive co-ordination to correlate the changing messages about the progress of an approaching ball, the commands to manoeuvre out of its way and the messages about progress in that manoeuvring. Only a highly co-ordinated physical being can manage this, even if it does not need a full concept of self in order to assess the movements of the ball in relation to itself. It is important that within 2 months it sees things as moving in relation to itself. It does not, like a mere voyeur, see the world as so many photographs. By 15 weeks, it sees things as within its grasp or out of reach and this must contribute to a sense of agency.

Another kind of self is the interpersonal self. Within minutes, the new-born infant is imitating gestures. Before 9 months, it can play games of shared attention. After 9 months, it can see itself as the target of another's attention. I have seen a grandchild, interested by a novel sound, look at me before deciding how to react and giving rein to his pleasure only after seeing my approval. Developmental psychologists have suggested that this is important not merely for there being a self, but for the infant acquiring a sense of self.

Eventually, to skip some of Neisser's stages, we form an autobiographical concept of self, the conceptual self. The five concepts do not correspond to five different selves. Rather, one is added to another. Husserl describes the process as one of sedimentation.

With the encouragement of modern Psychology, I now turn to some of the ancient views of self, and I shall start with Plato's conception of the true self and the question whether it retains individuality. Plato wrote a dialogue which is not much read nowadays because for a time it was thought not to be by Plato. This is no longer the prevalent view and in any case the dialogue is full of interest. At First Alcibiades 133C, Plato suggests that the true self is the intellect. On one interpretation (though there are others), Plato warns at 130D that we need to talk not about each individual self (*auto hekaston*), but about the self itself (*auto to auto*). If this interpretation is right, Plato actually warns us not to think of the true self as something individual.

Plato also introduces the phrase "the inner man". In *Republic* Book Nine, he describes a human being as containing within three parts: an inner man, a lion and a many-headed beast, corresponding to the three parts of the soul, rational, aggressive and appetitive. Because the rational part is described as a man, people took Plato to be saying that reason is the true self. His talk of "the inner man" is thought to have influenced St Paul and many other writers both pagan and Christian.

Plato's pupil Aristotle mentions Plato's view that the true self is intellect a number of times, for example in his *Ethics* , Book 10 , chapter seven. But I believe he does not endorse it because he does not think that there will ever be a time after death when Socrates can be all intellect without having to eat. In chapter eight , Aristotle concludes that human happiness has to include a social as well as an intellectual element.

600 years after Plato and Aristotle around 250 AD, Plotinus, whom we regard as the founder of Neoplatonism, wrestled with Plato's concept of the true self as intellect. The self as conceived by Plotinus has been described as a moving spotlight of consciousness. There is more than one self for Plotinus. The characteristic one is our faculty of step by step reasoning. But there is a lower self concerned with the body and a higher self, the intellect of the soul, which continuously contemplates the world of Platonic Forms, although we are seldom conscious of that self. Plotinus is a philosopher of the unconscious. Moreover he says that we, whoever we are, can direct the middle self so that it becomes the higher or lower one. Thus the person can act on the self and make it become a different self. Already there is a plurality of selves and he suggests that there further intermediate ones that we can try to live up to in turn.

Plotinus is worried what would make us all distinct from each other after death, if we succeed in becoming disembodied intellects contemplating the Platonic Forms, for our intellects would then all have the same thought content - the world of Forms. How then would we retain our individuality? Plotinus' best answer is an analogy. He compares a theorem which is distinct from the other theorems in a science , but which cannot be fully understood without taking into into account its relation to all the other propositions in the system. The theorem remains distinct, however, because one item in the system can be more prominent (*protetaktai*) than another. Some philosophers are more satisfied than others with analogies. I confess that I am not entirely satisfied, but at least Plotinus is wrestling with the problem of individuality. Moreover he supplies the background to one of the great controversies of the Middle Ages.

Plotinus says , and a later Greek philosopher of the fourth century AD, Themistius, repeats, that the problem of distinctness is even harder for intellects than for souls. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas read a translation of Themistius and was satisfied that he nonetheless allowed that there will be after a death a plurality of distinct human intellects. Thomas regarded the intellectual part of the human soul as the immortal part and he was able to use Themistius' view in the great controversy against the Islamic philosopher Averroes. Averroes denied human individual immortality, on the ground that intellects are all one and not distinct individuals. What I am saying is that this famous controversy on the individuality of the human intellect did not arise out of the blue in the 13th century. The seeds of the problem were sown by Plato 1600 years earlier: Plotinus struggled with it and we can see how the opposite opinions of Themistius and Averroes might both be argued for, because it is not clear right off how the intellect, as true self, can remain an individual.

My first example of an ancient concept of self, Plato's intellect as true self, has taken us over a period of 1600 years. But my other examples are almost all drawn from the first centuries BC and AD, a time of intellectual ferment in ideas.

The Stoics held the humane view that justice is owed to all mankind, slaves and foreigners included. They argued that such an attitude is natural on the basis of the natural attachment to itself of the new born animal or infant. It is natural to extend this attachment to one's dear ones. Parents extend it to children, and it would be natural, which is not say that it is easy, to extend it to all mankind. In this theory, the new born animal or infant is attached to its bodily self. But over time its constitution changes. At age 14, on this Stoic view, the human becomes rational and has a new constitution. So Seneca in the first century AD asks in his Letter 121 whether the attachment is to the transient constitution or to the lifelong self. He replies that it is to the lifelong self. A little later in the first century, another Stoic, Hierocles, distinguishes the self that feels attachment from the self to which it is attached. The self that feels attachment (*hekastos , autos tis*) is the mind (*dianoia*) and it is envisaged as being the sizeless centre point of a set of concentric circles. The body for which attachment is felt is seen as the first circle outside this point. So here we have a clear statement of the idea that the body belongs to the external world. The next circles out beyond the body represent one's closest relatives , one's friends , one's fellow citizens , and foreigners. Hierocles' point is that one should draw the circles inwards, extending the attachment one feels for one's body to relatives, that for relatives to friends, that for friends to fellow-citizens and that for fellow-citizens to foreigners.

Another philosopher of the first century AD was the Platonist, Plutarch. In his treatise *On Tranquillity* , he says that for our own tranquillity we should use our memory to weave the story of our life. Otherwise we shall be like the people in the so-called "growing argument" who have no continuous self. The various versions of the "growing argument" maintained that that a new creature is produced every time that growth occurs. We shall also be like the man portrayed in Hades as plaiting a rope. As he plaits it, he throws it over his shoulder and does not notice that a donkey is eating it up as fast as he plaits it. We must weave into the picture the bad parts as well as the good in our life. A tapestry requires dark spots as well as bright ones. But we must not wallow in the bad parts like the beetles in the place called "death to beetles".

What Plutarch seems to be describing here is a self that does not pre-exist, but that we can create by the process of autobiographical weaving. But there are difficulties. One question is: who does the weaving, if there are the only discontinuous selves? Daniel Dennett faces a similar difficulty for his view that there is no unitary self. The brain, in his view, is like an ant heap in which each individual ant does its own job. This gives the appearance that the ant heap is a unitary organism, but in fact there are only the individual ants. In the human case, stories can be told which give a fictitious unity to the person. The question Dennett faces is: who tells the stories, if there are only individual ants or modules? But Dennett is unembarrassed. He replies that any module can tell any bit of the story and a fictitiously unifying story emerges. In the same way, Plutarch would be free to say that any of the discontinuous selves can tell any bit of the story although the resulting story, unlike Dennett's, creates a real unity. But in the end, despite his reference to the discontinuous selves of the "growing argument", Plutarch draws back. He seems to think of the memories that are woven as genuine memories which presuppose a continuous self. Moreover, in the end he says that it is the life, not the self, that is woven.

A different light on Plutarch's belief in the importance of memory is shed by the late Russian neuropsychiatrist S Y Luria. In *Man With A Shattered World*, Luria describes a patient who lost his memory through a bullet in the brain during the Second World War. The patient devoted the rest of his life to trying to remember who he was and recorded his efforts in a diary. It could take him a whole day to write the next word, because he could only identify words by a process of trial and error. None the less, Luria comments that he found what really shattered personality in his patients was not loss of memory, but loss of the ability to pursue a forward looking project. The man with the shattered world was intensely devoted to the project of recollection and retained a very strong identity.

Another philosopher of the first century AD was the Stoic Epictetus. Epictetus had been a slave and had had his leg broken while he was a slave. In his *Discourses* 1. 1. 23, Epictetus imagines a conversation with a tyrant. "I will put you in chains." Epictetus replies, "My leg you can put in chains, but my will (*prohairesis*) you cannot put in chains." The implication is that Epictetus is his will. Once again the idea is that this is a self which can be created by acting upon the self. We know how Epictetus trained his students to create a self like this. He describes how he sends them out at dawn round the streets and then interrogates them on what they saw. "I saw a man grieving over his lost child," reports one. "Is death under the control of the will?", asks Epictetus. If not, it is not something that in the end matters, he says. Another student reports, "I saw a consul". "Is consulship under the control of the will?", asks Epictetus. If not, it is not something that matters. It is through practising thoughts like this that Epictetus creates a self which does not include his leg, but only his will and what is under the control of his will, roughly speaking his character and rationality. This is the inviolable self which the tyrant cannot control.

I had the pleasure of inviting to London an American war hero who actually carried out some of Epictetus' exercises in prisoner of war camp in Vietnam. He had a lot in common with Epictetus , because his leg was broken when the Vietnamese fired on his parachute as he dropped from his crashing plane. He underwent 19 occasions of physical torture, and the torturers exploited the fact that his leg was broken and giving him pain. It was very interesting to see how some of Epictetus' exercises could actually work in practice.

Epictetus has another concept of the self as conscience. He is referring to this when he says, "God entrusted you to yourself". Once again here the two references to *you* correspond to two selves.

The fear of death motivates a large variety of concepts of self. There is the everlasting self of Plato's *Phaedo* and that of Christianity. Socrates is made to say in Plato's *Phaedo*, "you can bury me, if you can catch me". What he means is that he himself is his soul, not his body, and his soul will continue for ever. Around 300 BC, Epicurus offers the opposite consolation in the face of death. We are dispersible, just a bunch of atoms, and so need not fear or punishment after death. 550 years later, in the third century AD, Plotinus offers a different response to death again. It is a mistake to wish to prolong one's life, because the truly happy life, that of the intellect, is outside of time altogether, and does not admit of being shorter or longer, 1.5.7-9.

A fourth response to death is found in a Buddhist text written in the language of Pali initially in the second century BC. The *Questions of Milinda* purports to be a discussion between a Buddhist monk and a Greek King of Bactria. The Buddhist presents to King Menander (to use of the Greek form of his name) the Buddhist idea that there is no continuous self. So distress at the future cessation of our self is misguided. Moreover, since there is no continuous self, we should feel as much concern for the people we call "other" as we do for our supposed future self. Did this idea reach the Greek or Roman philosophers ? I have found it in two thinkers, now familiar, of the first century AD, Seneca and Plutarch. Why should we fear death, they ask, when we have died so many deaths already? But they do not seem to have integrated the Buddhist idea into their systems. We have already seen that Seneca believes that there is a continuous self which lasts through the whole of one's life and that Plutarch believes we have genuine memories of our former self. The Buddhist idea has, however, been independently reinvented by an English philosopher Derek Parfit, in his book *Reasons and Persons*. Parfit thinks we would be happier in the face of death and more moral towards our fellow human beings, if we switched our concern from a supposed future self identical with our present self and directed it instead to all those people who have suitable psychological connections with the present transient self.

The Buddhist idea of discontinuous selves was known to the Islamic philosopher Avicenna around 1100 AD. An eager pupil came up to him and said, "Master, Master, there are only momentary selves." Avicenna did not answer. "Master, Master, why don't you answer?" said the student. "I will only answer the one who asked the question," said Avicenna

My last example of an ancient concept of self comes again from the Stoics starting in the first century BC. We learn of their theory of four personae from Cicero's treatise *On Duties*, 1. 107 - 115. When you are considering how you ought to act, you should take into account not only your nature as a rational human being, but also your particular endowments positions and choices. For example, when Julius Caesar won the civil war, it was right for Cato to commit suicide, even though it would not have been right for anyone else in the same circumstances. It was right for Cato to take into account his peculiar austerity, the choices he personally had made and what he stood for. This advice on how to act is the very opposite of Kant's which is so much more familiar to us. Kant tells us we should act in the way that a rational being would act. But rationality is only the first of the Stoics' four personae. I have already mentioned that Kant's conception of the moral agent as rational being is a very thin one. The Stoic concept, by contrast, is very thick, and includes the history of the individual. Moreover, the Stoic idea challenges the Kantian theory of universalisability. On the Kantian view, if it is right to do something, it would be right for anybody else to do that thing in the same circumstances. This is precisely what the Stoics deny. Of course, if there were anybody with exactly the same history as Cato, it would be right for them in the same circumstances to commit suicide. But the Stoic view makes a point which in modern times has been made by Peter Winch, that there is in fact nobody else exactly like Cato. And so it does not tell us anything informative to say that if there had been another exactly like him, that other person too would have had to commit suicide. The late Stoics are making moral decisions turn on the particularities of the individual. The Stoic Epictetus in the first century AD gives another example at *Discourses* 1.2. 25 – 9. For a philosopher it is better to have his head cut off then his beard. For the beard was in those days the badge of the philosopher, one of his personae. Being a philosopher then involved more commitment than it does now.

I have tried to illustrate the rich variety of concepts of self available in antiquity. But were these concepts useful? I think the concept of personae for deciding on conduct is useful. The idea of a woven self would be useful in those cases were it could promote tranquillity, even though the idea of an inviolable self might only be useful in the extreme circumstances of the prison camp. The idea of an everlasting self is not so much useful as, in my view desirable, if only it were true. Do these concepts of self in fact correspond to reality? I think the personae are real, and a woven self or an inviolable self can be *made* to come into existence. But where the ancients struggled with pronouns, do we have to use the concept of self? Or could we not rather talk of persons, or humans, or of aspects of them? I think that would miss the point. Epictetus is not saying to the tyrant that he cannot chain the person or the human: - of course he can. Nor is he making the obvious point that there is an aspect that cannot be chained. He wants to add that that aspect is his actual self. Similarly with the everlasting self, what some people hope for is not merely that some human or other, or that some aspect of a human, will be everlasting, but that that human or aspect will be *themselves,* and perhaps even regardless of whether it has human, rather than angelic, form. Similarly with the woven person: what they want to weave and make tranquil is not some person or other, or aspect of a person, but *themselves*.

There are many other issues which I have not touched. The differentiation of individuals is problematic not only in the extreme case I mentioned of disembodied intellects, but also in ordinary life. The ancients had much to say about this and also about the persistence of one and the same individual over time. That has been perhaps the most discussed issue in recent Analytic Philosophy. The Stoics discussed also with their opponents their belief that history will repeat itself exactly and this lecture will be given again many millions of years from now with the same people present, but no memory of having heard it before. Will the people really be the same, if the time is not the same? The issue was discussed chiefly in terms of whether the people's Aristotelian form could be the same after an interruption, a subject which Aristotle had initiated in Book 5 of his *Physics*.

Most Christians took a different tack in discussing their belief that we will be resurrected. It is some of the same *matter*, not the same *form*, that will be required if the very same people as are present here are to be resurrected. But the very brilliant theologian Origen in the third century AD insisted on a serious problem. We are part of a food chain. When we die, our bodies will turn into grass, which will be eaten by rabbits, and the rabbits will in turn be eaten by other humans. So how will there be enough flesh to go round for us all to be resurrected? He therefore preferred to suggest that we will be given new matter with the same form as before. The solution was clever, but unorthodox, and it raised the question why we would need organs with the same form in the very different circumstances of the resurrection.

A final and ramifying issue was the question of self-awareness. Is self-awareness even possible? It is thought to be problematic in modern Continental Philosophy, and paradoxes were raised for discussion already by Plato and Aristotle and later by the Sceptic Sextus. Also important was the question how to preserve the unity of the person. Would different faculties need to be aware of different kinds of mental activity? But if so, what would become of the unity of the person? The discussion, started by Plato and Aristotle, was strongly developed by the Neoplatonists. Can higher mental faculties be aware of the operations of lower ones? Or should we reject Aristotle's watertight compartmentalisation of faculties? Some Neoplatonists postulated a special faculty of self-awareness, the attentive faculty (*prosektikon*), but it remained to consider where to place it within Aristotle's compartmentalised scheme.

I shall dwell only on one aspect of the issue of self-awareness before I finish, because it will lead me back to the confirmation supplied by modern psychological studies.

The same dialogue of Plato from which I started, the *First Alcibiades,* says at 132 C-133 C that one can know oneself better by seeing one self reflected in another. This idea of knowing self through other influenced Aristotle in his *Ethics* , Book 9, chapter 9, and the work from the Aristotelian school, the *Magna Moralia,* Book 2, chapter 15. Both works conclude that the resulting self-knowledge is part of the value of friendship. The idea that one knows oneself through the other is widespread in modern Continental Philosophy , but has not been very much noticed in Analytic Philosophy.

Another example of knowing self through other is supplied by the Stoic Hierocles of the first century AD in his *Elements of Ethics* col. 3, lines 39 -45. Hierocles is discussing again the newborn animal's attachment to itself and he asks how the chicken knows that the large donkey close by is perfectly safe, whereas the small hawk in the far distance is very dangerous. As my colleague, Brad Inwood has pointed out, the chicken's knowledge of its own person depends on its knowledge of the other, in this example of the hawk, although it does not have to think of the hawk as possessing a mind.

These insights are again confirmed by modern Developmental Psychology. At six weeks, the infant sees its carer as responding to it. And we have already noticed the many other ways in which it sees the world in relational terms as relating to itself. Once again, the insights of antiquity are confirmed by modern science.

I have tried to bring out the richness, variety, and in some cases the value, of the ancient philosophical concepts of self. I believe that it does make sense to talk of a self, that it makes sense in more than one way, and that it would be impoverishing to follow Hume in attempting to discard all notion of self. I wonder how many of you now consider that you do have a self or selves.

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