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Self-Perception: The Question of the Wandering “I”

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Abstract:

People talk indiscriminately in and about the first person singular subject, namely the “I”. The very fact of being is indistinguishable only through singling out the individualities of the subject. And yet, while this is very true, we must also understand that there had been differences in the connotations of the subject. The most common understanding about the subject, had always a linkage with the cultural and epochal heritage as it is true with all the words. These connotations stand in relation of the subject to the world around, especially with its cultural imprint. In this article the author intends to shed light into the process of evolution which the subject, the first person singular, has undertaken down the centuries.

Keywords: Subject, Singular, Ego, Connotations, Language, Culture.

Introduction

Hiking through the brightest and slyest colours of the social media one cannot but bounce onto the concept of identity of the self, created and promoted over the net. The *self*hook-ups and the *groupi* make-overs do impact the thinking pattern of the current generation. Purportedly telecasted images often betray not only non-authentic self of the individual concerned but also the complexities well seated within. It is here that we need to identify how and how far the images customized over the social media correspond to the real self.

In this article I intend to reflect upon the identity demonstrated and lived by the individuals especially over the webcast. But in order to do this the theoretical frame work would require that we look into history to find out how far the search for oneself, of the identity, had been at the heart of the reflections of individuals down the centuries.

Greek word for *I* is ἐγώ (Ego) most often used as ἐγώ εἰμι (Ego Eimi = I am / I exist) as it is the Greek equivalent for the verb to be in the first person singular. This immediately gives impressions

of meanings ranging from psychology to other disciplines. While in Latin the same would mean *Ego Sum*. The sense of *I* which transcend all cultures would impress us also with the Sanskrit word for I - अहं(Aham).

The very word, though in different languages does carry a heavy weightage has been under fire for the misinterpretations it had encased through the centuries. In fact, the meaning of the word and concept had been a wandering *persona* through the annals of history. And so now we look into some of the salient historic moments where the *I* kept wandering.

The Wandering ‘I’ - a historical reprisal

One of the prettiest findings that we can make on the identity of the self is exactly the meaning of the word connoted down the various historical periods of literature. Various literary traditions have responded diversely to this one call. That is why we need to relocate the various meanings of the ‘*I*’ through different streams of thought.

There was a time in the western world when the Church had predominance over all spheres of knowledge and hence whatever the Church pronounced were considered *sacro sanctum*. In the Indian traditions the sages and the rishis were the seat of wisdom. They did influence the knowhow of people and often with the help of religious elements and myths they handed down the known truth. In the non-availability of alternatives these became doctrines and credentials for any knowledge. At this knot the identity of the self could be stated as this: *I = I who believe*. That is to say, I am what I can believe. If I do not concede to believe then there is a lacuna in my identity and my cultural merge.

This is also because the societal life of people revolved basically around the secular and religious spheres. Either one of the two were embraced by most of the people. In either the case, the conclusion would amount ultimately to an act of faith, either in science and reason or in religion and God.

From there emerged, after many years of submissive reflection, a Cartesian (Baker Gordon and Katherine J. Morris, 18-19, 112-124) outlook where the meaning of *I* would be traced from the classical ‘*cogito ergo sum*’ - I think therefore I am. In this case *I = I who think*. Descartes did reflect upon the individual to designate the position of the individual in the company of the other. It would only be inopportune to bring here all the Cartesian nuances for two reasons. Primarily because the Cartesian knowledge baggage is there at the open forum and any scholar would know the elementary philosophical base of the same. Secondly because our aim here is not to prove how of Descartes is worth the trouble of a serious pursuit today. And moreover, there is an overabundance of philosophical resources available to explain Descartes, Hegel, and all those stall walks of the philosophical arena.

But here the identity and a cultural mileage were seriously looked upon basing on how far the individual could think philosophically and move towards the abstract thinking.



With the spring of the Romantic season a reawakening of the entire living of a society was seen. Like a resurrection the society tuned in towards higher gears of progress. A new found vitality was thrust upon all spheres of a communal living and the literature indeed spoke of many colours and events under the sun, always having the individual at a personal level. The cultural heritage did impact also upon letters. During the tenure of the Romantics the sentimentality and emotivity of the individual had such a prominence that all over the emphasis was on emotions. So then roughly taken it, we could say that it would amount to the *I* as an *I who feel*.

The new found vitality of emotions and a new thrust on the nature helped the society to identify the self of the individual as someone who feels with and for the nature, where it is not more an abstract reality, but a hard flesh and blood reality.

For the Existentialists it was more on a plain forum. It was more into the integral physical existence. And then the identity was vividly auto explanatory. Here the individual finds himself being 'thrown into existence' and the mere fact of being around itself was part of the identity. The sensorial relevance of the presence did suffice for the explanation. A clean sweep into subjectivity and parting ways with objective knowledge and truth led them to reflect upon more self-made stories and absurdities. It can then be even called the *I* of *I who make myself*.

Taking a giant leap we move on to today. And here the identity of the individual is being verified from the perspective of perception. The identity changes from person to person, from one viewpoint to another. Even the 'mirror image' of Jacques Lacan and others would then pose back the same question we have raised. What is the identity of the individual?

Michael Foucault had the perception of the 'subject', the individual, as one found in the society, often subjugated. At different levels of subjugation the individual would find himself giving a different meaning to the existence. It is commendable till it reaches to the point of self-subjugation for a higher purpose and to a higher power, what we can even call God. From our current stand point even that is possible as there are people who commit their entire lives, not only for scientific purposes but also social uplifting and service to God.

It was Michael Bakhtin who insisted upon presenting the individual in relationship with the other. For him it was the other which gave meaning to the existence of the individual. Only in relation could we verify the existence of the individual and hence the *I* would mean *I in relationship*. It was a gradual transition from reflecting upon oneself to a reflection of the self in relation. Concepts of 'addressivity', 'answerability' and that of inter-subjectivity are notions which were developed looking at the world outside, the phenomenon was there to be addressed. Every statement said do base itself on the previous statements so also every form of art. And that is just the same case also horizontally, every expression is with the consideration of someone else around.

While this is the case with the concept of identity, I think we need to reaffirm the theoretical framework posing in place how the identity can be delineated and verified. It is true that each stream of philosophy and each literary epoch would have a different and often modified version of

interpretation for the individual designated by the first person singular – the ‘I’. By giving just a foretaste of what this varied connotations might refer to, I have made too brisk a walk through a few pages of history, leaving space for higher and deeper reflection. But now, as for today, the meaning and the significance of this ‘I’ has got a still varied connotation.

Discovery of the real self today

When we come to the new generation social visibility as signs of expressions of the self of the individual we have new data over the web to be verified. People, especially the tech savvy, do interface with the current concept of identity with of the self. Here it moves to altogether a different pattern which we shall discuss a bit later.

The question of the real self, had been the pursuit for many decades, especially of the twentieth century thinkers. How can we understand the real self and how far that which is demonstrated in public form part of the real self. In order to understand we can recall the Johari Window, authored by Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham in 1955 and the Onion model knowing the individual and of Transactional analysis.

Through Johari Window we realize that there are sides and shades of our life which are known to us and others, which are unknown to us and others, as that are known to us but unknown to others as also are known to others and unknown to others. From the playing arena to forming facades and to realizing blind spots we must know that there is also the unknown area of our life. This means that the real identity of a person can be known only very slowly and after serious considerations.

The Onion model would enlighten us to decipher the real individual from our facades. Here words and behavior form part of the most external layer of the individual. Feelings fall under the next layer, attitudes still at the interior and only slowly we discover the core of the individual. Which means, in order to understand the real self, we need to decode and converge information from the verbal and non-verbal behavioral pattern of the individual well braced within multiple levels of identity demonstrations.

Through the help of transactional analysis, a system developed by Eric Berne in the 1950s, we can better understand the idea of the self being developed in people. The behavior, as demonstrated by the individual, would share light on who that person is deep within. Though it is not our concern and most often cannot be even of a claim on accuracy, we can still conclude on the particularity of the individual basing on these data.

This is well said and done so that we realize that our claims to comprehend the wandering *self* or the *I* cannot be really understood in its entirety. Yet care-fronting the new generation expressions over the social media and web squares, we can decipher the claim of the current generation on the identity of the self.



The Self of the Social Media

There are two sides of expression of the self over the social media.

The first type fall under the category of thinking. In this category there is the *I* as thought by me, and there is the *I* as thought by others. This includes a variety of possibilities of which there are friends, acquaintances, unknown people, respected and venerated individuals, loving and concerned persons, hated and betrayed individuals etc. Here in order that others might think better of me, I present myself on the net. Here is what is what we speak of as fake representations as identities.

The second type is that of presentation. The real *I* as I have realized might not be presented as the real self but I fake an identity and present myself to be someone different. This is to declare to the onlooker that 'however I may be I am being available to you like this'. The profile pictures and the photos shared do fall under this category. There are people posing their real pictures as profile picture frames and there are those who keep other pictures hiding their real face as profile. This hiding process does involve either a running away from the real self or a sacrificing of the real image so that an affiliation for a cause or a person does do the profile impact.

The second method is more optional and there could be genuine reasons for the same. It is here that we have people with social causes uploading such imagery and people paying homage to others putting their photo as a symbol of sympathy or allegiance.

Then there is the possibility of people hiding their images for security concerns, which is indeed a precarious scenario now. People 'kidnap' people on the net and push those images into anti-social and terror plots. That could be one of the reasons that people are advised not to jet their real images on a volatile net surface.

The faked identity, on its behalf, would pour light to the fact of a discrepancy within the individual; a discrepancy between the said and the being, between what said at one time and at another, between what is expressed to one in an occasion and to another in a different situation. The faked identity representation could very well be the outward expressions of the in word 'non-presentability' often realized by the individuals. The faked identity is also a re-vindication of a desired image at least virtually yet publically and denying the core of the individual in a public forum.



Illustration: indebted to Facebook uploads for these images, scripted originally in Malayalam.

The above figures copied from one of the chain messages from Face Book do give some clarity into the matter.

Conclusion

In the small article above we have seen how the concept of *I*, which is the first person singular as a subject, has taken different shades of meaning through the centuries. The fortune of the subject which took diversified accentuation through typical usages in varied contexts.

What we are speaking here is about the synchronicity, a term which we can see even in the book on the “Authenticity of Living” by Herman Aafink. It is the capacity of mankind to travel with



time and to give contextualized interpretations even to the sense of identity. We have seen how in history the notion of the self takes new shades of connotations and how each of these still remain prevalent for the need of the time.

Nevertheless we still need to affirm that the first person singular, through the ages, remained as the subject even for an objective study of the self, and always got interpreted in relation to the social panorama. And we confirm our preliminary idea that the concept of the self, the 'I' has been wandering like a nomad giving the context to live by and the social situation to interpret itself.

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