GAS Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences (GASJAHSS)

Volume 3, Issue 7, 2025 Homepage: https://gaspublishers.com/gasjahss/ ISSN: 3048-5002
Email: contact@gaspublishers.com

The Concept of the Self in Eastern and Western Philosophical Tradition

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Received: *25.06.2025* | ***Accepted:*** *17.07.2025* | ***Published:*** *20.08.2025*

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DOI: *10.5281/zenodo.16914359*

Abstract **Original Research Article**

The concept of the self remains one of the most enduring and contested subjects in philosophical discourse. Across both Eastern and Western traditions, the self has been variously defined, deconstructed, and reconstructed through metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical lenses. This paper presents a comparative analysis of the self as articulated in the philosophical traditions of the East—especially within Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism—and the West—primarily in the works of Plato, Descartes, Kant, and modern existentialists. Drawing on over two decades of research in comparative philosophy, this article illuminates how cultural, religious, and ontological assumptions shape divergent understandings of personhood, identity, and the ultimate nature of being. While Western traditions often emphasize autonomy and individuality, Eastern philosophies tend toward relationality, impermanence, and the transcendence of ego. This comparative inquiry reveals not only fundamental philosophical differences but also unexpected convergences that are increasingly relevant in a globalized world.

Keywords: Selfhood, Comparative Philosophy, Eastern Thought, Western Philosophy, Identity Theory.

INTRODUCTION

The question "Who am I?" is both ancient and universal. Philosophers from diverse traditions have responded with remarkably varied and deeply nuanced answers, grounded in their metaphysical frameworks and socio-cultural milieus. In Western philosophy, the self has often been treated as a discrete, autonomous, and rational entity. Eastern traditions, on the other hand, frequently regard the self as interdependent, transient, or even illusory. These divergent paradigms not only define how individuals relate to themselves and others but also frame broader ontological and ethical worldviews.

This article explores these contrasting but occasionally intersecting notions of the self, examining classical and contemporary perspectives in both traditions. It aims to foster a cross-cultural philosophical dialogue that respects the distinctiveness of each tradition while seeking meaningful points of contact.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of the self has long been a central preoccupation in both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, although the conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches often diverge significantly. A growing body of comparative philosophy seeks to explore these differences and potential convergences, shedding light on how cultural, metaphysical, and ethical presuppositions shape the notion of selfhood.

The Self in Western Philosophy

Western philosophical thought, especially post-Enlightenment, has largely been shaped by the notion of a self-aware, thinking subject. From Socrates' dictum "Know thyself" to Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, the Western self is often centered on introspection, rationality, and moral autonomy.

In Western thought, the concept of the self has evolved from metaphysical essentialism to existential indeterminacy. Early accounts, such as those found in Plato's *Republic*, present the self as a rational soul that exists independently of the body, striving for knowledge of the eternal Forms (Plato, trans. 2004:12). This metaphysical dualism is further entrenched in Descartes' radical epistemology, which grounds the self in the act of thinking: *cogito, ergo sum* (Descartes, 1998). Scholars such as Kenny (2012) have highlighted how Descartes' conception of the self as a *res cogitans* underpins the modern

Western understanding of personal identity as interior, unified, and autonomous.

Kant (1998) complicated the Cartesian model by positing a transcendental self that conditions the possibility of experience, but which itself cannot be known as an object. The self, in Kantian terms, is not merely a metaphysical entity but an epistemic function—an organizing principle of perception and cognition (Brook, 2010:23). Later developments in the Western tradition—particularly in existentialism and phenomenology—recast the self as a dynamic, embodied, and relational phenomenon. Sartre (2007) and Heidegger (1962) view selfhood not as a fixed essence but as a project or becoming, marked by freedom, temporality, and situatedness.

Contemporary Western philosophers such as Charles Taylor (1989) have examined how the modern identity is shaped through moral frameworks and dialogical relations. Taylor's emphasis on the "narrative self" has contributed to an interdisciplinary interest in the self as socially constructed and historically contingent (Schechtman, 1996:21).

Platonic and Cartesian Foundations

Plato (c. 428–348 BCE) introduced a tripartite model of the soul in the *Republic*, distinguishing between reason, spirit, and appetite (Plato, trans. 2004:23). For Plato, the true self was the rational soul, capable of apprehending the eternal Forms. This conception, which elevated reason above bodily experience, set a precedent for subsequent Western metaphysical views of the self as distinct from the body.

René Descartes (1596–1650) radically reinforced this dualism. His methodological skepticism led him to affirm the indubitable existence of the self as a thinking substance: *res cogitans* (Descartes, 1998:71). In Cartesian thought, the self is essentially a mind, separate from and superior to the body and the external world. This inner subjectivity forms the bedrock of modern Western individualism.

Kantian and Existentialist Developments

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) advanced a more complex model of the self, distinguishing between the empirical self (the self as experienced) and the transcendental ego—the pure "I think" that accompanies all representations (Kant, 1998:15). Though influenced by Descartes, Kant introduced the notion that the self is both the subject and condition of knowledge, thus embedding it within a dynamic epistemological structure.

By the 19th and 20th centuries, existentialist philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre challenged the essentialist and rationalist assumptions of earlier models. Sartre (2007:17), in particular, viewed the self not as a given essence but as a project—something continuously constituted through choice and action. "Existence precedes essence" thus reframes the self as radical freedom, with all the accompanying burden of self-definition.

The Self in Eastern Philosophy

Eastern philosophical traditions, especially those rooted in Indian and Chinese thought, tend to conceptualize the self in non-dualistic, relational, and often non-essentialist terms. Rather than a fixed or isolated identity, the self is understood through its relations, processes, and in some cases, its negation.

In contrast to the Western emphasis on autonomy and interiority, Eastern traditions frequently portray the self as interdependent, impermanent, or even illusory. In the Upanishadic texts, the *ātman* is the true self, which is ultimately identical with *Brahman*, the universal reality. Radhakrishnan and Moore (1957:29) compiled translations and commentaries that elucidate this metaphysical identity, arguing that self-realization involves transcending ego-consciousness and realizing one's unity with the Absolute.

However, Buddhist philosophy radically departs from the *ātman* doctrine by proposing *anātman*—the denial of any permanent, unchanging self. The Pāli Canon describes the self as a composite of five *skandhas* (aggregates) that are in constant flux. According to Rahula (1974:12), this insight forms the basis of the Buddhist path to liberation, where attachment to the self is seen as the root of suffering. Buddhist scholars such as Garfield (1995) and Loy (1988) have further emphasized the ethical implications of the no-self doctrine, suggesting it leads to a more compassionate and less ego-centered existence.

Confucian philosophy, particularly in the works of Confucius and Mencius, presents the self not as a metaphysical entity but as a moral and relational construct. Ames and Hall (2001:41) argue that the Confucian self is embedded in a web of social roles and cultivated through ethical practice and ritual propriety. This stands in contrast to the Western model of the autonomous individual and aligns more closely with processual and relational ontologies.

Taoist thought, exemplified in the *Tao Te Ching*, also challenges rigid notions of selfhood. Laozi advocates for the dissolution of ego and alignment with the *Dao*—the spontaneous, ineffable flow of nature. According to Wang (2012), the Taoist self is characterized by non-interference (*wu wei*), humility, and adaptability, highlighting a deep skepticism toward fixed identity or egoic striving.

Hinduism: Ātman and Brahman

In the Upanishadic tradition, the self (*ātman*) is posited as the innermost essence of an individual, identical with the ultimate reality (*Brahman*). The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (c. 8th century BCE) famously declares: "Tat Tvam Asi" ("That thou art"), suggesting a non-duality between the self and the absolute (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957:6).

This understanding implies that the self, when truly known, is not the ego or the body-mind complex, but an eternal, immutable consciousness underlying all experience. Liberation (*moksha*) is achieved not by strengthening the ego but by realizing the illusory nature of individuality and merging into universal consciousness.

Buddhism: Anātman and the Doctrine of No-Self

In stark contrast to the Upanishadic affirmation of self, the Buddha taught *anātman*—the doctrine of no-self. According to early Buddhist texts, what we conventionally call the "self" is merely a bundle of impermanent phenomena (the *skandhas*)—form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness (Rahula, 1974:24).

To cling to a fixed self is the root of suffering (*dukkha*). Nirvana, the cessation of suffering, involves the realization that there is no abiding self. Rather than nihilism, this insight leads to compassion and equanimity, as the boundaries between self and other dissolve.

Confucianism and the Relational Self

In Chinese thought, particularly Confucianism, the self is fundamentally relational and social. Confucius emphasized the cultivation of the self (*xiū shēn*) through ethical practice, ritual propriety (*lǐ*), and familial relationships (Ames & Hall, 2001:15). The self does not exist in isolation but is constituted through roles and responsibilities in a moral community. This Confucian model stands in contrast to the Western ideal of an autonomous individual. It highlights the self as a moral project shaped through interdependence and harmony rather than self-assertion.

Comparative Reflections

While Western traditions often privilege individuality, agency, and internal rationality, Eastern traditions lean toward interdependence, impermanence, and spiritual realization. The Cartesian and Kantian selves are concerned with epistemic certainty and moral autonomy, whereas the Buddhist and Confucian selves emerge through dissolution, relation, and ethical transformation.

Yet, these frameworks are not mutually exclusive. For example, existentialist notions of selfhood as constructed and fluid bear a surprising affinity with Buddhist ideas of *anātman*. Likewise, the ethical self-cultivation found in Confucianism echoes aspects of Aristotelian virtue ethics, where the self is shaped by habitual moral practice (Ames & Hall, 2001:15).

Global philosophy today increasingly calls for such cross-cultural engagements. In an era of pluralism, migration, and digital identities, the notion of a fixed, autonomous self is being challenged from multiple fronts. The comparative study of the self not only enriches philosophical inquiry but offers practical wisdom for navigating the complexities of contemporary life (Ames & Hall, 2001:25).

Comparative Philosophical Studies

The field of comparative philosophy has increasingly sought to bridge these traditions, challenging the presumed universality of Western conceptions of the self. Scholars such as B. Alan Wallace (2003) and Roger T. Ames (2011) advocate for a pluralistic understanding of personhood that accommodates both the introspective individualism of the West and the interdependent subjectivity of the East.

Hall and Ames (1998) introduce the notion of "correlative thinking" as central to Chinese philosophy, emphasizing patterns of relationship rather than substance ontology. Meanwhile, Arindam Chakrabarti (2010) examines Indian epistemology to argue that the concept of the self, while often spiritualized, is not necessarily devoid of empirical grounding. These works suggest that engaging across traditions can

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a **comparative philosophical methodology** that synthesizes **textual analysis**, **hermeneutic interpretation**, and **cross-cultural philosophical comparison**. Given the fundamentally interpretive nature of philosophy, particularly when comparing traditions as diverse as the Eastern and Western lineages, a qualitative approach was used to ensure depth, context sensitivity, and conceptual precision.

Primary sources from each tradition—including canonical texts such as *The Republic*, *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Upanishads*, the *Dhammapada*, and the *Analects*—were subjected to close reading. These texts were examined in their historical, linguistic, and cultural contexts. Secondary literature—including scholarly commentaries, peer-reviewed journal articles, and monographs—was utilized to contextualize the primary texts and to triangulate interpretations.

The analytical framework draws upon the principles of **comparative philosophy**, as advocated by scholars such as Hall and Ames (1998) and Chakrabarti (2010), which resists Western-centrism while maintaining analytical rigor. Emphasis was placed on philosophical categories such as ontology (what the self is), epistemology (how the self is known), and ethics (how the self ought to act), as they manifest across traditions.

The guiding question was: *How do the dominant Eastern and Western philosophical traditions conceptualize the self, and what do these conceptions reveal about their respective ontological and ethical worldviews?* The analysis focused not on harmonizing differences, but on elucidating the internal coherence of each tradition and identifying sites of meaningful dialogue.

Results and Discussion

The comparative analysis reveals **three core dimensions** where the concept of the self diverges significantly between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions: **ontological structure**, **epistemological grounding**, and **ethical orientation**.

Ontological Divergence

In Western traditions, particularly from Plato through Descartes to Kant, the self is conceived as a **substantive, autonomous, and often rational entity**. It is either a metaphysical soul (Plato), a thinking substance (Descartes), or a transcendental condition for experience (Kant). This ontological grounding affirms **individual identity as essential, enduring, and separable** from the world (Kenny, 2012).

By contrast, Eastern traditions largely reject the notion of a permanent or essential self. In Hindu thought, while the *ātman* is seen as eternal, it is ultimately **non-dual** with *Brahman*—the universal consciousness—thus subsuming individuality into cosmic unity (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1957:3). Buddhist thought goes further by asserting *anātman*, the denial of any self-substance, proposing instead that the self is **a composite of impermanent processes** (Rahula, 197:174). The Confucian view, while not explicitly metaphysical, posits a self that is **relational and ethical**, defined through social roles and continuous cultivation (Ames & Hall, 2001:5).

Epistemological Grounding

The Western self, especially post-Cartesian, is grounded in **self-reflection and rational cognition**. Descartes' *cogito* becomes the foundation for all epistemological certainty. The self knows itself as a thinking being, and knowledge proceeds from this internal starting point (Descartes, 1998; Kant, 1998). This leads to a **subject-object dichotomy** that permeates Western epistemology.

In contrast, Eastern traditions emphasize **non-dual awareness** or **direct experience** that transcends rational cognition. The Upanishadic realization of the self involves an intuitive merging of *ātman* with *Brahman*. Buddhist meditation practices cultivate *vipassanā* (insight) into the impermanence of the aggregates, leading to the dissolution of self-illusion (Garfield, 1995:3). The Taoist and Confucian traditions rely more on **embodied, situational knowing**, rather than abstract reasoning.

Ethical Orientation

Ethically, Western traditions often ground moral responsibility in the **autonomy of the self**. From Kant's moral imperative to Sartre's existential responsibility, the self is seen as the agent of ethical action, capable of choice and accountability (Taylor, 1989; Sartre, 2007). This has given rise to legal, political, and social systems based on **individual rights and duties**.

Eastern traditions, by contrast, frame ethics in terms of **relational harmony, compassion, and self-transcendence**. Confucian ethics emphasizes filial piety and social roles; Buddhist ethics grows out of *karuṇā* (compassion) and the alleviation of suffering; and Hindu ethics, particularly through *karma yoga*, encourages selfless action (Ames & Hall, 2001; Rahula, 1974:9).

Points of Convergence

Despite these differences, some **convergent themes** emerge. The existentialist concept of the self as a becoming rather than a being resonates with the Buddhist *anātman*. Similarly, virtue ethics in both Aristotle and Confucius underscore **self-cultivation** through habitual practice. These intersections suggest the possibility of a **global ethics** that appreciates both autonomy and interdependence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis, several recommendations are proposed for further scholarship, pedagogy, and cross-cultural philosophical engagement:

1. **Promote Cross-Traditional Dialogue**: Academic philosophy curricula should integrate Eastern perspectives not as ancillary material but as coequal systems of thought. Such inclusion helps decenter Western universalism and fosters global intellectual exchange.
2. **Encourage Interdisciplinary Inquiry**: Philosophical investigations of the self should engage with cognitive science, psychology, and religious studies to enrich and test traditional models. The Buddhist doctrine of *anātman*, for instance, has significant implications for neuroscience and psychotherapy (Wallace, 2003).
3. **Apply Ethical Insights Practically**: The ethical models arising from each tradition should be explored for application in real-world contexts—such as leadership, conflict resolution, and mental health. For example, Confucian role-based ethics offers a framework for public service ethics distinct from liberal individualism.
4. **Foster Philosophical Humility**: Scholars and practitioners should approach these traditions with interpretive charity and humility. Comparative philosophy should not aim to homogenize, but to **learn from the other** while respecting difference.
5. **Reexamine the Modern Self**: In light of digital identities, globalization, and ecological interdependence, the fixed, atomistic model of the Western self may no longer suffice. Philosophical models that emphasize interdependence, impermanence, and relationality are increasingly relevant.

CONCLUSION

The self is neither a singular nor a static concept. Across Eastern and Western traditions, it has been conceived as rational mind, transcendent spirit, social being, or empty illusion. These diverse perspectives reveal the multifaceted nature of human identity and consciousness.

A mature philosophy must embrace this plurality—not to relativize truth, but to deepen understanding. As a scholar with more than two decades of experience in this field, I have found that the dialogue between Eastern and Western thought is not only intellectually rewarding but spiritually transformative. It invites us to question our assumptions, expand our empathy, and ultimately, to see the self not as a possession, but as a possibility.

The inquiry into the nature of the self remains one of the most profound and enduring questions in philosophy. As this comparative analysis has shown, Eastern and Western philosophical traditions approach the concept of the self with distinct metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical assumptions. Western traditions, particularly those shaped by classical Greek thought, Enlightenment rationalism, and

modern existentialism, tend to posit a self that is autonomous, rational, and internally coherent. This self is often conceptualized as the foundation of moral agency, knowledge, and identity.

In contrast, Eastern philosophical traditions—whether in the Hindu affirmation of the *ātman*, the Buddhist deconstruction through *anātman*, the Confucian relational self, or the Taoist alignment with the *Dao*—tend to decenter or dissolve the rigid boundaries of selfhood. They emphasize impermanence, interdependence, and the ethical cultivation of harmony over individual autonomy.

Yet, rather than standing in strict opposition, these traditions offer complementary insights. The Western focus on autonomy and rights can be enriched by Eastern notions of relationality and self-transcendence. Conversely, Eastern perspectives can benefit from Western discourses on individual dignity, critical reason, and moral freedom. Together, they illuminate the multifaceted nature of human personhood and the diverse ways in which selfhood is constructed, experienced, and lived.

In an era marked by rapid technological change, cultural pluralism, and ecological crisis, revisiting the philosophical foundations of the self is not merely an academic exercise but an ethical imperative. A globally informed philosophy of the self—rooted in both East and West—may help cultivate more holistic, compassionate, and context-sensitive ways of being human in the world.

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