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THE ORIGIN OF THE «SELF»: FROM ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY TO THE BIRTH OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE

The question of the origin of the «self» – the inner subject that is aware of itself – remains insufficiently explored, especially from the perspective of historical development.

As early as antiquity, philosophers raised questions about the nature of thought, self-knowledge, and inner reflection. In Christian philosophy, the focus shifts toward spiritual self-understanding. The Renaissance proclaims the dignity and freedom of the individual, capable of shaping himself independently. For the first time, the human being becomes aware of himself as an autonomous subject. In the Early Modern Period, the idea of the «self» emerges as the foundation of knowledge.

Thus, the idea of the «self» was shaped over centuries – in philosophy, religion, and eventually psychological science – as a key category of human experience.

Key words: «self», soul, human being, self-consciousness, person.

Світозара БІГУНОВА

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ПОХОДЖЕННЯ «Я»: ВІД АНТИЧНОЇ ФІЛОСОФІЇ ДО ЗАРОДЖЕННЯ ПСИХОЛОГІЧНОЇ НАУКИ

Питання про походження «Я» – внутрішнього суб'єкта, що усвідомлює самого себе – залишається недостатньо дослідженим, особливо з точки зору його історичного становлення. У сучасній психології «Я» сприймається як щось самоочевидне: як центр свідомості, осягнення й переживань. Проте шлях до такого розуміння був тривалим і складним, охоплюючи філософські, релігійні й культурні форми самопізнання.

Вже в античності філософи ставили питання про природу мислення, самосвідомості та внутрішньої рефлексії. У християнській філософії акцент зміщується на духовне самопізнання. Августин бачить «Я» як простір зустрічі з Богом, а середньовічні мислителі розвивають ідею внутрішньої душі як образу Божого, унікального й безкінечного за потенціалом. Людина мислиться як істота, здатна в собі самій знайти істину. Епоха Відродження проголошує гідність і свободу людини, здатної формувати себе самостійно. З'являється нове бачення особистості як автономного суб'єкта, що має власну цінність і внутрішню глибину. Людина більше не просто відображення Божого порядку, а активний співтворець світу. У епохи Просвітництва і Романтизму «Я» стає основою знання. Локк пов'язує особистість із пам'яттю й безперервністю свідомості, Юм критикує ідею постійного суб'єкта, вважаючи його звичним узагальненням мінливих вражень, Кант вводить поняття трансцендентального суб'єкта. Фіхте й Шеллінг розглядають «Я» як творчу силу, що формує як внутрішній, так і зовнішній світ. Шопенгауер у свою чергу висуває модель, де суб'єктом керує не розум, а сліпа воля, що визначає нашу поведінку.

Таким чином, ідея «Я» не виникла раптово – вона розвивалась протягом століть: від античної метафізики до філософії Нового часу, від духовного самопізнання до психології особистості. Це складна, багатовимірна концепція, яка формувалась у діалозі між досвідом, думкою та культурною традицією.

Ключові слова: «Я», душа, людина, самосвідомість, особистість.

FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

The question of the origin of the «self» – the inner subject who is aware of itself – remains one of the least thoroughly studied, especially in terms of its historical formation. Modern psychology treats the concept of the self as something self-evident: the core of personality, the centre of self-awareness and experience. However, the path to this understanding was long and complex. The history of the idea of the self began long before psychology emerged as a science, passing through philosophical, religious, and cultural forms of human self-understanding.

Understanding the historical origins of the concept of the «self» is essential for grasping how human identity, autonomy, and subjectivity have been shaped across time. Without this perspective, we risk treating the «self» as a fixed or universal construct, overlooking its philosophical, cultural, and psychological complexity. By uncovering how different eras conceived of the «self» – from a rational soul or moral subject to a psychological core – we can better understand contemporary theories of personality, consciousness, and mental life. This exploration not only deepens our insight into human nature but also enriches the foundations of psychological and philosophical inquiry today.

Thus, the **aim of our study** is to analyse the development of ideas about the notion of the «self» from ancient times to the 19th century.

PRESENTATION OF THE MAIN MATERIAL

In antiquity, the notion of the «self» as used in modern philosophy and psychology did not yet exist, but this period saw the emergence of key categories from which the idea of self-consciousness would later evolve. Nevertheless, the first attempts to describe the human being as a thinking reflecting entity – distinct from the natural world, capable of self-knowledge and inner analysis – can be seen there.

Heraclitus of Ephesus was one of the first to focus on the changing nature of reality. His famous statement that «no one ever steps into the same river twice» reflects not only a metaphysical idea of the flux of being but also a deep intuition of the instability of subjective experience. Moreover, he introduced the concept of the Logos – a universal rational principle that pervades all existence and, according to him, is present in humans as well [11; 12]. Thus, Heraclitus formulated an important idea: one can comprehend

the world only by turning to reason within oneself, implying a form of inner reflection.

Parmenides, a philosopher of the Eleatic school, developed an opposing view – that of the unchanging and unified nature of being. In his fragment «Thinking and Being are the same», he expresses a fundamental ontological thesis: thought and being are inseparable [11; 12]. This implies that existence itself is bound up with awareness, and thinking is not just a tool but an essential expression of being. This idea laid the groundwork for later philosophical reflections on the identity and self-sameness of the subject.

Socrates, whose philosophy has come down to us mainly through the dialogues of Plato, was the first to clearly assert that self-knowledge is the primary aim of philosophy. The inscription at the Delphic temple – «Know thyself» – became the motto of his intellectual pursuit. For Socrates, knowing one's own soul, its virtues and aspirations, was more important than any external knowledge [12; 19]. He developed the method of dialogue («maieutics»), through which the interlocutor is guided to uncover knowledge from within. This can be viewed as an early form of introspective method and a precursor to the formation of the idea of an inner «self».

In Plato's philosophy, the concept of the soul takes on a clear and defined shape. In dialogues such as the 'Phaedo', 'Phaedrus' and 'Symposium', he describes the soul as an immortal, incorporeal substance capable of self-reflection and striving for knowledge of the Forms – immaterial, perfect entities. Plato introduces the concept of anamnesis – the soul's recollection of its divine origin. This is a key point: for Plato, knowledge is not acquisition but remembrance of what the soul already knew before embodiment [16; 17; 18]. Thus, the inner nature of the subject is deeper than any sensory reality, laying the foundation for the idea of a stable, spiritual «self».

Aristotle, Plato's student, proposed a more naturalistic and systematic concept of the soul in his treatise 'De Anima' ('On the Soul'). He defined the soul as the form of a living body – the organizational principle that makes matter into a living being. In humans, the soul includes reason, which is capable of thinking, abstraction, and self-understanding [1; 6]. Although Aristotle does not speak directly of the «self» as a reflective structure, his concept of the active intellect, which is capable of thinking itself, lays a foundation for the understanding of self-consciousness as the ability to be an object of one's own thought.

The philosophy of the Stoics (Zeno, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius) develops the idea of an inner moral core in humans. The Stoics introduce the concept of the «hegemonikon» – the rational governing centre of the soul, which is the source of judgment, decision-making, and virtue. This inner

principle is autonomous from the external world and is responsible for the moral integrity of the individual. In the letters and meditations of Marcus Aurelius, vivid examples of a practical philosophy of the «inner self», capable of self-discipline, analysis of actions and seeking harmony with nature can be seen [6; 14].

Thus, in antiquity, we find the first steps toward conceptualizing self-consciousness and identity. Even though the modern term «self» had not yet been formulated, philosophers were already asking essential questions: What makes a person who he is? What constitutes inner unity? What is the nature of reason and self-understanding? These questions formed the foundation for future philosophical and psychological thought about the subject and its identity.

With the transition to Christian philosophy, the emphasis shifts from the rational to the spiritual. In the works of the Church Fathers, such as Augustine of Hippo, the idea of self-awareness acquires a religious dimension. In his 'Confessions', Augustine presents the inner world of the subject as a space of encounter with God. His famous statement, «You were within me, but I was outside myself», speaks of the separation between a person and his true self, which is hidden in God [2; 4]. Here, self-awareness is not merely an act of thinking but a path to the Divine through inner reflection. God is not outside, but within the subject; therefore, the path to Him lies through immersion into the depths of one's own soul.

In the Middle Ages, this idea develops within the framework of Christian anthropology. Thomas Aquinas, drawing on Aristotle, argues that the soul is the form of the body, while also being immortal and rational. The concept of «person» (i.e. personality) becomes important and associates with uniqueness, free will, and moral responsibility. Medieval scholasticism sees the human being as a spiritual-corporeal unity, but pays special attention to inner subjectivity, will, and consciousness as a reflection of the image of God in man [3; 11].

Mystics like Meister Eckhart (Eckhart von Hochheim) and John of the Cross deepen the idea of the inner self as the «spark of the soul», through which union with the Absolute takes place. For Eckhart, the «ground of the soul» is the place where one becomes what one is in God [8]. Thus, medieval thought makes a significant contribution to the formation of the concept of selfhood as an inner, unique, and transcendent principle.

In this way, Antiquity and Christian medieval thought represent critical stages in the development of self-consciousness and identity. From rational Logos to spiritual introspection, from philosophical analysis of the soul to the religious practice of confession, the idea of an inner subject capable of reflection, memory, choice, and return to its source is formed.

These ideas laid the foundation for later philosophical and psychological concepts of the «self» as a central category of human experience.

The Renaissance period (14th-16th centuries) marked a radical transformation in the view of the human being. Interest in Antiquity – especially Platonism, Stoicism, and Aristotelianism – was revived, but in a new humanist key. The central discovery of the age was the human being as an autonomous subject endowed with dignity, free will, and creative capacities.

Marsilio Ficino, the translator of Plato and the head of the Florentine Platonic Academy, merged Neoplatonism with Christianity. In his philosophy, the soul is the central point of being, linking body and spirit. Through love and the inward striving for Beauty, the soul recollects its heavenly origin [11]. This idea develops the ancient understanding of identity as an internal longing for the eternal.

In turn, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola claimed that man has no fixed nature: God gave him the freedom to become what he chooses. Man may descend to the level of beasts or rise to the level of angels depending on his choices [15]. This clearly formulates, for the first time, the idea of the plasticity and self-determination of the ‘self’, which is shaped through freedom and thought.

Nicholas of Cusa, in his concept of ‘*docta ignorantia*’ («learned ignorance»), asserted that truth is ultimately unknowable, but that humans are capable of infinite self-transcendence in striving toward it. His idea of ‘*coincidentia oppositorum*’ («the coincidence of opposites») also applies to the understanding of the self: the «I» is the place where the finite and infinite meet [11]. Thus, Cusa views the subject as a dynamic, potential being, capable of infinite development through self-knowledge.

Although Leonardo da Vinci was not a philosopher in the strict sense, his works and notebooks (including the famous Vitruvian Man) express the Renaissance ideal: man is the measure of all things. He is conceived as the centre of the world, capable of grasping the laws of nature with his reason. This affirms the self not merely as a reflection of God, but as an active creator of meaning and order.

The transition to the Early Modern Period (17th-18th centuries) is marked by a radical shift: the subject becomes not merely a moral or spiritual centre but the very foundation of knowledge and thought, the «point of departure» for the philosophical and scientific worldview. It is here that the idea of the «I» is born as a conscious, self-identical, and autonomous principle, which underlies both inner experience and external knowledge.

René Descartes, through his methodical doubt, arrives at the famous «Cogito, ergo sum» («I think, therefore I am»). This assertion identifies the

«I» as immediately certain – something that cannot be doubted. Thought itself becomes proof of the subject's existence [5]. Thus, consciousness is placed for the first time at the centre of an entire philosophical system.

For Descartes, the subject is primarily conscious thought, distinct from the extended world. Although this subject does not yet have deep psychological structure, the very act of affirming the «I» as the origin of experience and knowledge provides the basis for future philosophical and psychological models.

The English philosopher John Locke was the first to introduce the concept of «person» as consciousness continuing through time. In 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding', he argues that a person is not merely a substance, but a being aware of itself as the same in different moments. Identity, for Locke, is not a metaphysical soul but memory – that is, the ability to recognize oneself in the past [13]. This idea had a profound influence on later psychology, including associative theory and concepts of the self as narrative.

David Hume questioned the very idea of a stable «I»: observing himself, he found only a stream of perceptions and sensations, and nothing constant that could be called the self. He wrote: «When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other... I never can catch myself at any time without a perception» [9]. This challenges the metaphysical foundation of the subject and leads to understanding identity as a construct generated by habit and memory, not as a stable essence.

With the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the idea of the «I» becomes increasingly psychologised. The subject is no longer seen only as the bearer of reason but as a feeling, reflective, inwardly conflicted being immersed in experience and emotion.

Immanuel Kant introduces the key concept of the transcendental subject in philosophical anthropology. The «I think» must accompany all representations if they are to be mine. This «I» is not empirical but the logical-structural condition of experience. It is not contained within experience but makes it possible [10]. Here, the idea of apperception is affirmed as the consciousness's capacity to unify diverse experiences into a single point of identity.

German idealists view the «I» as an active force creating reality. Johann Gottlieb Fichte asserts that the «I posits itself» – that is, consciousness actively creates both itself and the world [7]. Friedrich Schelling creates the idea of the absolute subject, which reveals itself through nature and history in a creative act [20]. Romantic thinkers emphasize the inner duality and

depth of the person, introducing the concept of the unconscious as part of the subject.

Arthur Schopenhauer proposes an intuitive-psychological model of the subject, where the core of personality is not reason but will. This irrational, blind energy underlies all actions and experiences [21]. The subject in his philosophy is not a controlling «I» but a field of struggle between desire and suffering, influencing later psychoanalytic traditions.

Summing up everything mentioned above, a comparative table is proposed to demonstrate the development of the idea of the «self» across historical periods (see Table 1).

Table 1

Evolution of the Concept of the «Self» – from Antiquity to the 19th Century

Period	Key Thinkers	Concept of the Self / «I»	Characteristics / Psychological Relevance
Antiquity	Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus	The soul (psyche) as rational or divine; the self linked to reason or logos	Self as part of cosmic order; early introspection; dualism of body / soul
Early Christianity	Augustine	Inner self as a space of divine encounter	Self-awareness through reflection and confession; God within
Middle Ages	Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross	Person as rational and spiritual being; «spark of the soul»	Internal unity of body / soul; self mirrors God's image; deepening inner life
Renaissance	Pico della Mirandola, Ficino, Nicholas of Cusa, Leonardo da Vinci	Self as autonomous, creative, and free; human dignity	Rise of individualism; self as potential; rediscovery of human interiority
Early Modern	Descartes, Locke, Hume	Rational and conscious subject; memory as basis of identity	Birth of modern subject; first psychological notions of continuity and personal identity
Enlightenment & Romanticism	Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schopenhauer	Transcendental subject; will and emotion; unconscious	Psychology of inner conflict, reflection, unity of experience, and irrational forces

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, the idea of the «I» did not arise suddenly. It was shaped over centuries – from the metaphysical reflections of Antiquity and religious self-examination of the Middle Ages to the rational subject of the Modern Age and the empirical psychology of the 19th century. This history shows that the «self» is not only a psychological category but also a philosophical, cultural, and historical construct formed through an ongoing dialogue between inner experience and external thought. Understanding this evolution is essential for psychology, as it reveals that our current models of the «self» are deeply rooted in centuries of intellectual development. By examining these foundations, psychologists can better grasp the complexity of identity, self-awareness, and human subjectivity, avoiding reductionist views and enriching therapeutic and theoretical approaches. In this sense, the history of the «self» is not merely academic – it informs how mental life is understood today.

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