Contents

About the Editors ix
Contributions xi
Table of Contents xii
Chapters 1-186
Index 387
Martijn van Zomeren

Martijn van Zomeren is Professor of Cultural and Political Psychology of Social Relationships at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He received his Ph.D. cum laude from the University of Amsterdam in 2006, received various dissertation awards, early career awards, and grants, and is an international expert on collective action, activism, and social change. The main theme in his work is the importance of theoretical integration in the various fields that he has contributed to, as reflected in his 2016 book, published by Cambridge University Press, entitled From Self to Social Relationships: An Essentially Relational Perspective on Social Motivation.

John F. (Jack) Dovidio

John F. (Jack) Dovidio, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Delaware in 1977, is currently Carl Iver Hovland Professor of Psychology and Public Health, as well as Dean of Academic Affairs of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, at Yale University. His research interests are in stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination; social power and nonverbal communication; and altruism and helping. His scholarship focuses on understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations and ways to reduce intergroup bias and conflict.
Gian Adero
Department of Psychology
The University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS, USA

Roy R. Basmeister
Department of Psychology
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL, USA

Jan Cleerut
Institute of Psychology
University of Zurich
Zurich, Switzerland

Department of Psychology
Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw
Warsaw, Poland

James H. M. Cornewell
Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership
United States Military Academy
West Point, NY, USA

John E. Dowdell
Department of Psychology
Yale University
New Haven, CT, USA

Naomi Ellemers
Department of Social, Health, and Organizational Psychology
Utrecht University
Utrecht, the Netherlands

Sara Estrada-Vilalta
Department of Psychology
The University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS, USA

Reinald Fischer
Centre for Applied Cross-Cultural Research
Victoria University of Wellington
Wellington, New Zealand

Interacting Minds Centre
Aarhus University
Aarhus, Denmark

Kenneth J. Gergen
Department of Psychology
Swarthmore College
Swarthmore, PA, USA

Jorge Giner-Sorolla
School of Psychology
University of Kent
Kent, England, UK

William G. Gualano
Department of Psychological Sciences
Purdue University
West Lafayette, IN, USA

Aiden P. Gregg
Centre for Research on Self and Identity
University of Southampton
Southampton, England, UK

E. Toby Higgins
Department of Psychology
Columbia University
New York, NY, USA

Lies J. Hogerzeil
Department of Clinical Psychology
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Hans Jagerman
Faculty of Behavioral and Movement Sciences
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
SECTION 3  •  Cultural Embeddedness

   Yoshie Kashiwagi

17. Promoting Change Through Political Participation: About
   Political Actors, Movements, and Networks  207
   Bert Klandermans

18. Values and the Human Being  219
   Jan Civický and Shalom H. Schwartz

19. The Relational Essence of Cultural Psychology: Decolonizing Love and
   (Well-) Being  233
   Glenn Adams, Sana Elsadek-Viliana, and Tijger Korty

20. Human Essence: Toward a Relational Reconstruction  247
   Kenneth J. Gergen

   Co-Evolution Perspective  255
   Ronald Fischer

Conclusion

22. Human Essence in Conclusion: Why Psychology Needs a Bigger Picture
   and Some Suggestions on How to Get There  275
   Margijn van Zomeren and John F. Darwall

Index  287
such, the volume offers a unique view on social psychology, as well as on human nature and existence more generally.

We gratefully acknowledge all the assistance that we have received in creating this book. Oxford University Press has provided invaluable guidance and support at every stage of the project. We appreciate the encouragement, support, and patience that our spouses, Marjorie and Linda, have displayed; their support was invaluable at every stage of the project. We also acknowledge the support of Luzia Hau, who searched hard to find a fitting illustration of the human essence for the front cover of this book. In addition, we are indebted to our colleagues and our students for challenging us to address issues—such as, What is the human essence?—that transcend the specific research questions that typically occupy us. Their insights, reflections, and, sometimes, challenges stimulated us to ask this question, one that is unusually broad in social psychology but is among the most important and influential questions to address.

We also acknowledge the financial support we have received from several funding agencies during the time we have worked on this volume and for supporting the work that created the foundation for this project: for Martijn van Zomeren: NWO VENI Grant: 451-09-009; for John Deci: NIH/NIHES 2RO1HL085631-06, NIH/DHHS R01DA029988, and NSF 1310757.

In conclusion, understanding what makes us human is critical for the study of human behavior, institutions, and policy. How we answer the question about what is the human essence not only determines our scholarly agenda but also shapes our personal perspectives on others, our relationships with them, and the decisions we make in our daily life. These assumptions influence how we view the past and the ways we choose to navigate the future. This volume provides diverse scholarly perspectives on the human essence in ways that will thus benefit students, scholars, and those who simply value important insights for understanding who we are in our very core.
Chapter 5

Essential Self-Evaluation Motives: Caring About Who We Are

Aiden P. Gregg and Constantine Sedikides

Abstract

This chapter argues that people care deeply about who they are: that is, their evaluation of their own self as a whole matters greatly to them, one way or another. These evaluations reflect the impact of various self-evaluation motives or self-motives. Much human psychology addresses the interplay of these self-motives, and whether and how they are motivates or clash. The chapter considers humans’ two most fundamental motivations, which are important elements of the human essence: self-assessment and self-enhancement. The chapter suggests that “the essence of being human is caring about who one is and wishing for it to be some desirable way, but at the same time having the conclusions one wants to draw constrained by rationality.”

Key Words: motivation, rationality, self, self-enhancement, self-assessment, self-evaluation, self-motives, human essence

Mediocrity so far so gracious in its fate,
No shape so true, no truth of both accounts;
And for myself makes one’s own words do define,
As all other in all words unanswerable.
But when my glass shows me myself indeed
Bare of all emblems, with naked integrity,
Mists own self-knowledge, quite conscious I feel,
Self so self-loving, bare simplicity.
—William Shakespeare, Sonnet 62 (Stanza 2, 3)

Human essence is, perhaps ironically, multifaceted. Here, we highlight a facet pertaining to a set of emergent desires that each human being exhibits in virtue of being self-conscious. In brief, people care deeply about who they are; that is, their evaluation of their own self as a whole matters greatly to them, one way or another. These evaluations reflect the impact of various self-evaluation motives (or self-motives for short). Much human psychology revolves around the interplay of these self-motives, and whether and how they harmonize or clash.

To explain why such self-motives are central to human essence, we begin by laying some necessary groundwork. First, we argue that the self is real. Next, we outline a set of cognitive powers, unique to humans, which together make this self what it is. With this groundwork in place, we proceed to our main discussion of two key self-motives, which operate to facilitate and bias self-knowledge, respectively. We end by considering some additional self-motives.

The Reality of Self

Self-motives, by definition, involve the self. Clarifying the nature of the self,
therefore, should clarify the nature of self-motives. Also, the self rests in self-consciousness (Klein, 2013, Strawson, 1997). Every normal human being, if, perhaps, it is a self; yet it is difficult to say what this means, because, unlike other objects of scientific scrutiny, the self cannot be pinned down.

The term self is slippery (Leary, 2003): it overlaps with several related terms of equivalent vagueness (identity, consciousness, soul) and supplements other terms as a reductive prefix (self-concept, self-esteem, self-control). The term also has many different and deniable meanings, both currently and historically (Marrin & Barassi, 2008). For example, self can refer to an enduring persona (Locke, 1690/1775), a metaphysical subject (James, 1890/1950), a life narrative (McAdams, 2001), a system of representations in memory (Kihlstrom, Beer, & Klein, 2003), whatever the "I" indicates (Dennett, 1992), whatever someone identifies with (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001), the face someone presents to the world (Leary, 1995), or an underlying authenticity to be discovered (Lenton, Slabu, Bruder, & Sedikides, 2014). Accordingly, the thrust of conceptual chaos looms.

Theorists have generally responded to this conundrum in three ways. Some have picked their own narrow preferred definition and stuck with it (Kihlstrom, Beer, & Klein, 2003). This has the merit of rigor but sacrifices coverage (Gregg, Hart, Sedikides, & Kuntschitz, 2008), threatening to oversimplify the self. Others have tried to define the self as a field of enquiry, outlining what is key psychological components or underlying dispositions should be (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). This has the merit of inclusiveness but dodges the hard question of what the self is. Finally, still others have argued more radically that the self does not exist (Metzinger, 2003; Swann & Buhmann, 2012), for if it did, it would be amenable to scientific definition and standard methods of enquiry. On this view, the self is but a subjective illusion, which, although functional for an organism entertaining it, is ultimately a delusion. A superior account of the phenomena involved, perhaps neural or computational in character, should be substituted. This would have deflationary implications: self-motives would not be about anything. People evaluating the self would be evaluating a fiction, a non-entity.

We would like to push back against such hyper-skepticism about self—which possibly proceeds from the frustration felt by empiricists that the self cannot be conveniently reduced to synapses for laboratory study or to algorithms for computational modelling. Rather, the self is an entity that resists reduction and must be dealt with on its own terms. Three arguments—two philosophical, and one pragmatic—support this conclusion.

First, the bare facts of phenomenology make it impossible to deny that self—subject who experiences and apprehends the world—has a unique vantage point on that world. In the absence of selves, however, there could be no such vantage points: the objective world would be undifferentiated (Talisse, 2004). Moreover, without the key distinction between self and non-self, other individual distinctions would vanish too, because they arise only relative to the self. Others have tried to define the self as a field of enquiry, outlining what is key psychological components or underlying dispositions should be (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). This has the merit of inclusiveness but dodges the hard question of what the self is. Finally, still others have argued more radically that the self does not exist (Metzinger, 2003; Swann & Buhmann, 2012), for if it did, it would be amenable to scientific definition and standard methods of enquiry. On this view, the self is but a subjective illusion, which, although functional for an organism entertaining it, is ultimately a delusion. A superior account of the phenomena involved, perhaps neural or computational in character, should be substituted. This would have deflationary implications: self-motives would not be about anything. People evaluating the self would be evaluating a fiction, a non-entity.

We would like to push back against such hyper-skepticism about self—which possibly proceeds from the frustration felt by empiricists that the self cannot be conveniently reduced to synapses for laboratory study or to algorithms for computational modelling. Rather, the self is an entity that resists reduction and must be dealt with on its own terms. Three arguments—two philosophical, and one pragmatic—support this conclusion.

First, the bare facts of phenomenology make it impossible to deny that each self—subject who experiences and apprehends the world—has a unique vantage point on that world. In the absence of selves, however, there could be no such vantage points: the objective world would be undifferentiated (Talisse, 2004). Moreover, without the key distinction between self and non-self, other individual distinctions would vanish too, because they arise only relative to the self. Others have tried to define the self as a field of enquiry, outlining what is key psychological components or underlying dispositions should be (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). This has the merit of inclusiveness but dodges the hard question of what the self is. Finally, still others have argued more radically that the self does not exist (Metzinger, 2003; Swann & Buhmann, 2012), for if it did, it would be amenable to scientific definition and standard methods of enquiry. On this view, the self is but a subjective illusion, which, although functional for an organism entertaining it, is ultimately a delusion. A superior account of the phenomena involved, perhaps neural or computational in character, should be substituted. This would have deflationary implications: self-motives would not be about anything. People evaluating the self would be evaluating a fiction, a non-entity.

We would like to push back against such hyper-skepticism about self—which possibly proceeds from the frustration felt by empiricists that the self cannot be conveniently reduced to synapses for laboratory study or to algorithms for computational modelling. Rather, theself is an entity that resists reduction and must be dealt with on its own terms. Three arguments—two philosophical, and one pragmatic—support this conclusion.

First, the bare facts of phenomenology make it impossible to deny that each self—subject who experiences and apprehends the world—has a unique vantage point on that world. In the absence of selves, however, there could be no such vantage points: the objective world would be undifferentiated (Talisse, 2004). Moreover, without the key distinction between self and non-self, other individual distinctions would vanish too, because they arise only relative to the self. Others have tried to define the self as a field of enquiry, outlining what is key psychological components or underlying dispositions should be (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). This has the merit of inclusiveness but dodges the hard question of what the self is. Finally, still others have argued more radically that the self does not exist (Metzinger, 2003; Swann & Buhmann, 2012), for if it did, it would be amenable to scientific definition and standard methods of enquiry. On this view, the self is but a subjective illusion, which, although functional for an organism entertaining it, is ultimately a delusion. A superior account of the phenomena involved, perhaps neural or computational in character, should be substituted. This would have deflationary implications: self-motives would not be about anything. People evaluating the self would be evaluating a fiction, a non-entity.

We would like to push back against such hyper-skepticism about self—which possibly proceeds from the frustration felt by empiricists that the self cannot be conveniently reduced to synapses for laboratory study or to algorithms for computational modelling. Rather, the self is an entity that resists reduction and must be dealt with on its own terms. Three arguments—two philosophical, and one pragmatic—support this conclusion.

First, the bare facts of phenomenology make it impossible to deny that each self—subject who experiences and apprehends the world—has a unique vantage point on that world. In the absence of selves, however, there could be no such vantage points: the objective world would be undifferentiated (Talisse, 2004). Moreover, without the key distinction between self and non-self, other individual distinctions would vanish too, because they arise only relative to the self. Others have tried to define the self as a field of enquiry, outlining what is key psychological components or underlying dispositions should be (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). This has the merit of inclusiveness but dodges the hard question of what the self is. Finally, still others have argued more radically that the self does not exist (Metzinger, 2003; Swann & Buhmann, 2012), for if it did, it would be amenable to scientific definition and standard methods of enquiry. On this view, the self is but a subjective illusion, which, although functional for an organism entertaining it, is ultimately a delusion. A superior account of the phenomena involved, perhaps neural or computational in character, should be substituted. This would have deflationary implications: self-motives would not be about anything. People evaluating the self would be evaluating a fiction, a non-entity.

We would like to push back against such hyper-skepticism about self—which possibly proceeds from the frustration felt by empiricists that the self cannot be conveniently reduced to synapses for laboratory study or to algorithms for computational modelling. Rather, the self is an entity that resists reduction and must be dealt with on its own terms. Three arguments—two philosophical, and one pragmatic—support this conclusion.

First, the bare facts of phenomenology make it impossible to deny that each self—subject who experiences and apprehends the world—has a unique vantage point on that world. In the absence of selves, however, there could be no such vantage points: the objective world would be undifferentiated (Talisse, 2004). Moreover, without the key distinction between self and non-self, other individual distinctions would vanish too, because they arise only relative to the self. Others have tried to define the self as a field of enquiry, outlining what is key psychological components or underlying dispositions should be (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). This has the merit of inclusiveness but dodges the hard question of what the self is. Finally, still others have argued more radically that the self does not exist (Metzinger, 2003; Swann & Buhmann, 2012), for if it did, it would be amenable to scientific definition and standard methods of enquiry. On this view, the self is but a subjective illusion, which, although functional for an organism entertaining it, is ultimately a delusion. A superior account of the phenomena involved, perhaps neural or computational in character, should be substituted. This would have deflationary implications: self-motives would not be about anything. People evaluating the self would be evaluating a fiction, a non-entity.

We would like to push back against such hyper-skepticism about self—which possibly proceeds from the frustration felt by empiricists that the self cannot be conveniently reduced to synapses for laboratory study or to algorithms for computational modelling. Rather, the self is an entity that resists reduction and must be dealt with on its own terms. Three arguments—two philosophical, and one pragmatic—support this conclusion.

First, the bare facts of phenomenology make it impossible to deny that each self—subject who experiences and apprehends the world—has a unique vantage point on that world. In the absence of selves, however, there could be no such vantage points: the objective world would be undifferentiated (Talisse, 2004). Moreover, without the key distinction between self and non-self, other individual distinctions would vanish too, because they arise only relative to the self. Others have tried to define the self as a field of enquiry, outlining what is key psychological components or underlying dispositions should be (Sedikides & Gregg, 2003). This has the merit of inclusiveness but dodges the hard question of what the self is. Finally, still others have argued more radically that the self does not exist (Metzinger, 2003; Swann & Buhmann, 2012), for if it did, it would be amenable to scientific definition and standard methods of enquiry. On this view, the self is but a subjective illusion, which, although functional for an organism entertaining it, is ultimately a delusion. A superior account of the phenomena involved, perhaps neural or computational in character, should be substituted. This would have deflationary implications: self-motives would not be about anything. People evaluating the self would be evaluating a fiction, a non-entity.
them the ability to process and order sets of propositions, rather than merely responding mechanically to the promptings of immediate stimuli. Using language, humans may assert or deny those propositions, and conditionally, based on criteria. A third attribute of the human mind—also isomorphically present in symbolic systems—is reflexivity or recursion (Corballis, 2011). Humans can ponder, not only propositions, but also the act of pondering itself; and then they can convey this explicitly (for example, in this very sentence).

Together, explicitness, articulateness, and reflectivity come together to enable the emergence of a coherent self at a single point in time: a synchronic self. At any moment, the mind of a conscious subject can turn back upon its origin, apprehend that it is the case, and explicitly represent itself as an abstract object bearing particular attributes. This is the foundation of the self-concept, rooted in semantic memory (Kihlstrom et al., 2003). From an evolutionary perspective, such symbolic capacities have been argued to confere advantages in the form of greater self-understanding (Sedikides & Knowsowski, 2000), especially if they co-evolved with perspective-taking capacities to understand the social dynamics of alliances and conflicts (Sedikides, Knowsowski, & Dunbar, 2006).

However, the space of selfishness is not confined to the here and now. A fourth feature of the human mind is the capacity to cognize, not merely the present, but the past and future too. That is, humans are capable of mental time travel, of moving themselves mentally through the past and future (Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). This temporal extension enables the emergence of a self over multiple points in time—a diachronic self continuously chronicled in a life-long narrative and supported by autobiographical knowledge (McAdams, 2001). This is also the beginning of a fully-fledged identity, extending beyond raw self-awareness, rooted in episodic memory. An extended identity is likely to have conferred additional evolutionary advantages (Skowronsiki & Sedikides, 2007), such as enabling recall of exactly when, in one's personal past, various events critical to one's survival and reproduction occurred, including the storage of food (facilitating adequate nutrition) or the taking of mates (facilitating paternity detection).

The restless self wanders still further. For all its metaphysical discreteness, it intersects content-wise with the social world (Baumeister, 1998). Humans naturally regard who they are as overlapping with individual peers and larger groups, meaning that their self-concept takes on an important interpersonal and collective dimension (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Indeed, the self exhibits an amazing flexibility in terms of the implied fifth cognitive capability: identification with entities beyond the physical organism that houses it. For example, human beings can even identify with things such as physical possessions (Sedikides, Gregg, Cisck, & Hart, 2007). A sixth cognitive capacity, complementing the two preceding, affords the self a near-unlimited range of operation: imagination. The human mind can represent, not only what is, but what could be (i.e., hypotheticals; Evans, 2007) or what could have been (i.e., counterfactuals; Rossel, 1997). Accordingly, human beings envisage not only their actual selves, but also possible selves (Oyserman & James, 2000). Moreover, they can engage in comparison between actual and possible selves, particularly when prompted by information about relevant others in their social milieu, which sets up moral and aspirational standards against which the self is routinely measured (Corcoran, Crusti, & Mussweiler, 2011).

Thus, the self is real, an essential part of human nature; and it can be characterized in terms of the six interactive cognitive capacities we have outlined. The next question is: What motivational implications follow? For they, too, by extension, would be part of the human essence.

The Self-Assessment Motive

Unsurprisingly, motives related to the acquisition of self-knowledge emerge. As people attempt to navigate their physical and social environment, with its complex mix of opportunities and risks, they pay for them to appreciate their actual strengths and weaknesses. For example, people who are higher in social status—in virtue of receiving greater respect or having more resources at their disposal—are likely to enjoy a competitive edge in conflicts with people lower in social status; accordingly, self-knowledge of status facilitates the adoption of that behavioral strategy liable to optimize the outcome of such conflicts, with greater assertiveness better suiting people higher in status, and greater acquiescence better suiting people lower in status (Mahadevan, Gregg, Sedikides, & De-Wha Andrews, 2016). In such cases, it would clearly be advantageous if people also desired to discover what their actual strengths and weaknesses were.

Accordingly, people exhibit a self-assessment motive—they seek to arrive at an accurate conception of who they are (Trope, 1986). Much empirical evidence for the motive exists. For example, presented with a choice of feedback about important abilities, people preferentially opt for the more informative type, including when it concerns failure as well as success (Trope, 1980), and especially when they were earlier made uncertain of themselves (Trope, 1982). Notice, moreover, how the self-assessment motive depends on the existence of the six cognitive “killer apps” considered earlier. The self-knowledge that people seek, to properly involve knowledge, must be articulated explicitly, and to involve the self, it must also be reflexive in nature. Moreover, people will seek such self-knowledge over the course of their personal histories, and with reference to the social groups with which they are identified; and they will consider, not only their actual standing in each case, but also how they might stand or might have stood under alternative circumstances.

Yet the self-assessment motive is peculiar. To begin with, it involves the pursuit of objective knowledge about the self. Hence, it is satisfied when one’s thoughts map on to reality. Formally speaking, it has a mind-to-world direction of fit. They are satisfied when reality maps on to them— as when, for example, the delicious meal that one hungrily imagines finally arrives on one’s plate. Second, the self-assessment motive is often experienced, not as a felt deprivation and longing (as in our earlier example), but as a felt obligation and imposition. For, to be rational in assessing oneself (and indeed in assessing anything at all) is precisely not to believe whatever one wants, but rather to base one’s beliefs on defeasible external criteria, to which one’s judgment must defer (Gregg & Mahadevan, 2014). It is responsibility defined epistemically. For example, although many people would love to be labeled a “saint,” most would still dutifully refuse the label: they know that their peccadillos forbid it. The very ubiquity of rationality may often lead us to take it for granted. However, such rationality is phylogenetically unprecedented: its manifestation in human beings, including the self-assessment motive, is a distinctive part of human essence, and yet
another sign of how they differ from mere beast. Its psychological significance, moreover, resides in that it acts as a brake on the impact of other self-motives that would otherwise accelerate the biased construal of the self in some direction or other.

The Self-Enhancement Motive

Rationality does not always prevail—including when people assess themselves. In particular, a self-enhancement motive is inclined to assert itself (Seidelik & Gregg, 2008). This involves the desire to conclude (or avoid not concluding) that the self is valuable and significant and thereby entitled to a positive appraisal. Note that one might well expect that, as a result of the "killer apps" upgrade, the self would become the subject of evaluation. After all, the survival of any organism depends upon its capacity to distinguish a proper environment from a dangerous one. Humans, being the reflective object of their own contemplation, might explicitly judge themselves to be good or bad too, express that judgment verbally, and situate it with respect to their past or future selves, or various ideal ways they might be, or their social context. In short, it is unsurprising that people have some level of self-esteem (Seidelik & Gregg, 2005), contingent on some criteria. What remains to be explained, however, is people's desire for their self-esteem to become or to remain high—that is, to elevate or consolidate the value of their self, either through promoting it (self-aggrandizement) or protecting it (self-defense; Seidelik & Allice, 2012). The desire is all the more puzzling given the elusiveness of the self. People may not know exactly what the self is, but their own self had better be good.

What empirical evidence attests to the operation of self-enhancement, above and beyond honest introspection and the proclamations of philosophers? One testing line of evidence comes from investigating what type of questions people generally prefer to ask themselves. Across a series of experiments, Sedikides (1993) had participants, in a private and anonymous context, select a subset of questions from a larger set that they would be more likely to ask themselves. (Note how explicit, articulateness, and self-efficacy—the building blocks of the synchronous self—are again presupposed by this task.) Even when instructed to be objective, participants mostly opted for questions whose answers implied that they possessed positive traits, especially on dimensions that mattered most to them and that they were more familiar with, suggesting the predominance of the self-enhancement motive over the self-assessment motive (which, to reduce uncertainty, would have prioritized the selection of questions about less familiar traits). Moreover, when someone else was made the target of inquiry, the selection bias duly disappeared. Such biased scrutinizing of the feedback deck, to facilitate the drawing of favorable conclusions about the self, suggests that the self-enhancement motive has a regular world-to-mind direction of it, unlike the self-assessment motive.

Manifestations of the self-enhancement motive also involve the diachronic self. For example, people show signs of self-enhancement even across their temporally extended identity. In particular, they regard themselves, like fine wine, as getting better over time (Ross & Wilson, 2003), and they feel subjectively closer if they have positive than to negative events in the completed past or projected future (Wilson & Ross, 2001). But perhaps the most intuitively compelling prima facie sign of the self-enhancement motive involves others: the better-than-average effect (BTAE; Allice & Goverun, 2005). Most people tell that they possess commonplace positive characteristics in greater abundance than most of their peers. The percentages are often stark. In the United States, 90% of motorists think they drive better than 50% of those on the road (Swanson, 1981), 50% of academics think they teach better than 90% of their colleagues (Cross, 1977); and 25% of high-school students think they socialize better than 99% of young people (College Board, 1976–1977). Furthermore, the BTAE effect emerges despite apparent evidence to the contrary: prisoners consider themselves just as law-abiding as the "average community member." (Sedikides, Meek, Allice, & Taylor, 2014). Finally, even informing people that the BTAE exists (Fronin, Lin, & Ross, 2000), or paying them to provide accurate judgments (Williams & Gilovich, 2008), fails to eliminate the BTAE.

But not to fast: just because the BTAE is consistent with the operation of a self-enhancement motive does not mean that it is the only possible explanation. Several non-motivational factors have been implicated. For example, tomparing the self to others, in a single question, involves comparing the (individual) self to a collective (group); yet there is a known cognitive bias for preferring individuals to collectives (Klie, 2002). Such confounding factors, however, do not entirely explain the BTAE (Sedikides & Allice, 2012). In particular, it persists, albeit to a reduced degree, even when the target to which the self is compared is individualized and/or precisely matched to the self (Allice, Windenburg-Heath, & Goverun, 2001). Moreover, some BTAE moderators defy purely cognitive explanation, such as the finding that, the more important the characteristics judged, the larger the BTAE observed (Brown, 2012). Hence, the BTAE cannot be well understood without invoking the self-enhancement motive. A similar story can be told about other prima facie signs of the self-enhancement motive, such as the perceiving (attributational) bias (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999)—the tendency to explain successes relatively more in terms of internal factors (e.g., ability, effort) and to explain failures relatively less in terms of external factors (e.g., luck, adverse circumstances).

Pertinently, the BTAE illustrates the potential for conflict between the motives to self-enhance and self-assess (Gregg, Sedikides, & Gebauer, 2011). Where reality provides insufficient leeway, the BTAE wax; where it does not, the BTAE wane.

For example, when a positive characteristic is more broadly defined (e.g., "outgoing") as opposed to narrowly defined (e.g., "shy/fiIy"), people are more likely to overestimate their standing on it (Dunning, Meyersohn, & Hofling, 1989). This is because the greater ambiguity of the former allows for a positively biased interpretation (i.e., the selective recruitment of self-relevant exemplars) that facilitates self-enhancement and impedes self-assessment. People do the same for positive traits that are less verifiable, such as moral traits (e.g., honesty), as opposed to those that are more verifiable, such as abilities (e.g., intelligence), this time because the criteria in terms of which they are assessed are themselves more or less amenable to positively biased interpretation, respectively (Van Lange & Sedikides, 1998).

The confrontation between egotism and evidence illustrated by the BTAE and other findings—which, too, is a pivotal point of human essence—is memorably captured in the chapter's opening quotation from Shakespeare. The protagonist in the poem conceivably contemplates the finness of his face—until, alas, he exemplifies it in the looking-glass, wherein his vanity compels him to shamelessly adopt its objective flaws. Indeed, to invent one of David
Hume’s (1738/1951, p. 415) famous aphorism, position (i.e., self-enhancement motive) is, at least partly, the slave of reason (i.e., the self-assessment motive). Cases where the slave escapes—such as narcissism—are still comparatively rare, although evidently on the rise (Twenge & Foster, 2008).

Readers should note that the evidence for the self-reported assessment motive is not confined to self-reported judgments; it is also apparent in basic workings of the mind. For example, the affection for self automatically transfers itself—Midas-like—to self-related stimuli, such that people prefer such things as their own theories over others’ theories (Gregg, Mahadevan, & Sedikides, 2016) and even letters in their own name over letters not in it (Horovitz, 2014), often without realizing it—effects arguably indicative of implicit self-esteem.

Indeed, when across a range of different indices, one compares people’s implicit esteem toward themselves to their implicit esteem toward their most favorite other, the self still comes out better (Gebauer, Gorbis, Hofmann, & Sedikides, 2012). Even unconsciously, people manifest a "better-than-everyone-else" effect.

**Additional Self-Motives**

We have focused on the dynamic interplay between two motives pertaining to the self: self-assessment and self-enhancement. To recap, the former aims at establishing the truth about the self whatever it is, whereas the latter aims at concluding that the self merits a positive appraisal. These motives, and the antagonism between them, are essential to human nature. Moreover, they can be intelligibly understood as the outgrowths of other essential features—six cognitive powers unique to the human mind.

Nonetheless, other self-motives have been alleged to exist, and empirical evidence of their existence has been furnished. Two stand out: self-improvement and self-verification (Sedikides & Strube, 1997). Both concern particularly to the diachronic self, and how it may or may not change over time. The former motive aims at ensuring that the underlying value of the self is increased going forward (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009), whereas the latter aims at ensuring that one’s current conception of self is maintained intact indefinitely (Swann, 2012). Clearly, both motives also pull in opposite directions: the former has to do with modifying the self and the latter with resisting such modification. Thus, we have another potential conflict on our hands.

In the interests of theoretical integration, we suggest that the drives toward self-improvement and self-verification might be substantially understood in terms of the drives toward self-enhancement and self-assessment. For example, self-improvement can be understood as a type of acutely delayed self-enhancement: people seek accurate information about the self, just as in the self-assessment motive. The analogy would be with the process of seeking more happiness now so as to spend more happily later: in both cases, delaying gratification ultimately increases it. As for self-verification, several studies (Giesler, Josephs, & Swann, 1996) show that people with negative self-views are more inclined, when given the option, to opt for negative feedback consistent with their self-views rather than for positive feedback inconsistent with them, suggesting that the desire to self-verify overshadows the desire to self-enhance. However, another equally plausible interpretation is that people with negative self-views, in virtue of cattierly holding negative views of self, naturally infer that only feedback consistent with their negative self-views is epistemically credible and worthy of consideration (Gregg, 2009). If so, then the same imperative to be rational that underlies the self-assessment motive may also explain the patterns of choice attributed to the self-verification motive. One way to decide between these alternatives would be to ask people with negative self-views which feedback—positive or negative—they would prefer to be true. In particular, if people with negative self-views, who opted for negative over positive feedback, nonetheless maintained that they wanted the positive rather than the negative feedback to be true, it would suggest their feedback choice does not reflect their epistemic aspirations, but rather credibility constraints.

Several theorists have proposed additional, and partly overlapping, sets of motives relevant to self and identity. For example, Vignoles, Manzi, Ragali, Jemnolo, and Seghini (2008) explored the implications of six motives for the construction of possible selves: esteem, contingency, distinction, meaningfulness, efficiency, and relatedness—which must be satisfied in order for them to psychologically thrive. Finally, Swan and Boston (2010), in their review of the literature on the self, contend that people strive to attain goals that fall into the broad categories of agency, communitas, and coherence. All such motives might also be characterized in terms of the six cognitive "killer apps." However, their level of involvement would be likely to differ somewhat across motives. For example, the contingency motive is, like the self-improvement and self-verification motives, particularly reliant on the diachronic aspects of self, whereas the belonging/relatedness/communion motive could be satisfied by successful affiliation without relying too much on self-reflexivity, as is the case for human babies and non-human animals.

**Conclusion**

The human mind possesses unparalleled cognitive powers. These powers give rise to the self, which is real. This real self, in turn, becomes an object of mediation. People experience, self-directed desires to be somehow on the whole—most notably—to see their self as something valuable and significant, which merits a positive appraisal. But they also desire to know, and feel duty-bound to respect, the truth about themselves. Ultimately, part of the essence of being human is caring about who one is and wishing for it to be desirable in some way, but at the same time leaving the conclusion one wants to draw constrained by rationality.

**Note**

1. The term "killer app" is short for "killer application"—an adjective reserved for pieces of software that are, according to PC Magazine, "exceptionally useful or exciting. Killer apps are innovative and often represent the first of a new breed, and they are extremely successful." Drawing on the same analogy, but for different purposes, the biologist Niall Ferguson (2011) has argued that the contemporary phenomenon of the "killer app" in the context of the societal "killer apps"—competition, the scientific revolution, property rights, modern medicine, consumer society, and work ethic (http://www. naomichomsky.org/Essays/Essays/1917-Killer-App.html).

**Further Reading**


References


GREGG, SEDIKIDES


Wirkens, K. (1923/1974). Aristotelis Nikomachean Ethics, one of the most influential works in the Western canon (Axios, trans). 2005. In this seminal study of what it means for human beings to be successful and to live well, Aristotle begins with the subject of motivation. In a similar spirit, we argue that the human essence—what human life is at its core—is motivation. "Essence" is synonymous with the word "soul," and our exploration of the "human essence" can be understood as another way of asking about the motivational nature of the soul. Taking a psychological perspective is fitting, given that the word "psychology" is derived from the Greek word "psyche," which means soul.

The purpose of this chapter is to show that the ancient and classical view of the soul in philosophy closely resembles and shares many of the characteristics of contemporary motivation science, and that we might therefore be able to gain insights into the "human essence" by looking at the motivations that underlie our actions. For example, we argue that the human essence is the result of a series of motivational equivalent of this ancient perspective on the soul. We show that reflection concerning the soul in the Western world, and theoretical motivation science, we can gain insights into the "human essence."