



LOSING OUR SELVES? Education and the Self in Global Perspective

Online research lab series

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15:30-18:00 (CET)

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Education and the Self in Global Perspective

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Almost everyone believes that they have one, but almost no one could say what it is. The self as an experiential phenomenon in our individual and social lives and as an object of theoretical reflection and empirical research remains a mystery in many respects. Through the ages it has been interpreted and reinterpreted in highly different ways in philosophical, scientific, cultural and religious traditions across the globe. In so doing, the self figured as a kind of projection surface for the manifold ideas, theoretical frameworks and assumptions as well as fantasies and hopes that human beings as socially embedded self-interpreting animals (Charles Taylor) used to make sense of their lives. In some times and contexts the self was elevated to an exalted status as the locus of autonomous rational control or divine revelation, in others it was dethroned as an object of empirical research in increasingly fragmented and theoretically isolated scientific approaches and debates, criticized as a result of the effects of discourses of power or discarded as a powerful illusion.

If there is anything that we may learn from the global history of the concept of the self, it can be boiled down to essentially two insights: First, while human beings can today draw on a massively rich body of global traditions to make sense of their selves, there is currently no theoretical or empirical consensus on what constitutes a self (if selves exist in the first place) and also no integrated theory of the self that may hope to provide the basis for such a consensus. The more we know about different global traditions and their conceptions of the self as a result of processes of globalization, and the more philosophical and scientific research focusses on selves and its different aspects (self-development, self-concept, or even self-competence), the less clear it seems what we should make of the 'self'. There rarely have been more options on offer to interpret 'the self' or 'one's own self', but also rarely more options for confusion about what this may mean and entail. Second, as the self remains as elusive and opaque as ever, despite of (or because of?) the different ways to approach the self and the manifold questions we may ask about its phenomenal-experiential, ontological, social, political, educational as well as metaphysical and spiritual dimensions, arguably a majority of the population on this planet nevertheless seems to live with the assumption that they 'are' or 'have' selves (however they may concretely experience and interpret this idea).

Different conceptions of the self also operate as explicit aims or also more implicit background assumptions in educational practices and discourses around the world, where both in theory and practice the idea that education in some way should influence, shape and transform, but also to respect and recognize selves is seldom taken into question. This holds, for instance, for conceptions of the autonomous self, that should learn to consciously govern and determine itself, or conceptions of the authentic self, that defines the (developing) identity of children and young people. The diverse attempts to think about justifiable ways of treating children and young people as well as the different philosophical attempts to justify educational aims and their practical realization, are not always matched by equally sophisticated attempts to make theoretical sense of the object or subject of these endeavors.

What constitutes this strange 'thing' (which strictly speaking is not a thing and should not be treated as such), of which we assume that human beings carry it around with themselves and that we want to educate, when we want to change selves and their relation to their selves and the world? Shouldn't it make us pause and wonder concerning our interpretations of the educated self, when we take the difficulties and experiences of suffering into account of many human beings, that rather – as Foucault once put it – want to tear themselves away from themselves, instead of remaining a certain 'self'?

Similar questions arise with respect to the problem of how we could make sense of different conceptions of the individual self in relation to conceptions of a social or collective self. How should we think about the socially embedded and situated self? Is the self an essentially social construction and what would follow from this for an adequate understanding of the individual?

And shouldn't it make us somewhat skeptical when human beings want to kill each other around the globe, because of what they were taught to take as their (collective) selves? What good, if any, does the idea of such a self do in education and beyond? Is it not a clear indication of the limitations of the human mind and 'self'-consciousness that it has a tendency to reify and fetishize such a 'self' and even takes it as an aim of education that should be passed on via the generations of selves in the making ad infinitum? But to what extent is the self itself a product of education or is it rather a product of wider social and educational changes that 'selves' today tend to interpret themselves as such a product? Is there an educationally, socially and politically significant difference between the notion of the individual self and related (and sometimes identical) notions such as person, identity or a self-governing entity as the autonomous self? And what happens to the obsession of educators with changing and transforming selves, when we may come to the conclusion that the object of their aspirations does not exist at all and that we have been chasing an all too human educational fantasy? Should we perhaps hence rather abstain from interpreting 'the other' and each other as selves? And what would this imply for the way we conceive of our educational practices and institutions? Could we live without a 'self' in education and beyond, as many people around the world today can live without the belief in a god? But how would we conceive of our educational practices and expectations if we would educate a non-self? Since there is no non-controversial answer to these questions, one may wonder how we may resolve disagreements about the self and its nature between different global traditions in the Philosophy of Education and beyond? What may these traditions, e.g., drawing on African, Eastern, Western, Indigenous Philosophies of Education, may learn from each other in thinking about the problem of the self and different ways of understanding such a problem? What would real progress look like in thinking about the self in its different dimensions, drawing on the richness of the world's philosophical and educational traditions?

The guiding idea of this research lab (i.e. a short series of online research labs), which is part of the project Expanding Consciousness in Education – East, West, North and South. Towards a Global Philosophy of Education (GlobalPhilEd), is to establish a genuinely global practice of philosophy of education aiming at an actual collaborative engagement between the substantive positions developed in different traditions focusing on concrete philosophical problems. In doing so our aim is to practice global philosophy as a collaborative explorative enterprise that deals with concrete philosophical issues and concepts and to better understand the methodological (meta-)philosophical issues this involves. To make adequate philosophical sense of the self and its relationships to education, as the topic of the first series of online research labs, we thus want to draw on the best of what all the world's traditions have on offer and to make collaborative practical use of these traditions in order to better understand the self in its different forms.

Requirements for registration

This research lab will be structured as three sessions (each 2,5 hours long) that will encourage active participation of participants during sessions, as well as in collaboratively thinking about the self and its different dimensions from the perspective of different traditions of the Philosophy of Education. This collaborative philosophical initiative provides a unique opportunity to engage with international colleagues on one of the most interesting questions of the Global Philosophy of Education. The results of our discussion may – if participants are interested – be published in different forms and via different outlets, such as joint (i.e. by two or more participants) written journal papers (or paper proposals), blog texts, collective monographs or edited volumes.

As this is a collaborative effort, we request that you sign up only if you anticipate attending all three sessions and are able to engage with the project in between sessions.

In order to register please briefly indicate the specific research interests related to Philosophy of Education (or related fields) and share some general ideas that you have concerning the topic of the self and education. You will receive the texts as well as the zoom links after registration.

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Outline of the sessions

The first session comes with a recommendation to read two papers, which form a starting point and inspiration for our discussions, but – while having a focus on a specific set of traditions – should not be taken as limitations for the scope of traditions that can and should be taken into account in discussing the notion of the self in the three sessions. We have to start somewhere in our collaborative investigation concerning the self and education, but this does not imply that we would or could know where we end up. Thus, the idea is to have a genuinely open discussion about the self across different traditions.

Session 1: Introduction

8th of October 2025 | 15:30-18:00 (CET)

Barresi, John & Martin, Raymond (2011): History as Prologue: Western Theories of the Self. In: Gallagher, Shaun (ed.): The Oxford Handbook of the Self. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 33-56.

Metzinger, Thomas (2011): The No-Self Alternative. In: Gallagher, Shaun (ed.): The Oxford Handbook of the Self. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 279-296.

The dates for the second and the third session will be decided via doodle to ensure that as many participants as possible can join.