

The Moral Self

Presentation to the Pinner
Philosophy Group
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Health is a state of complete
physical, mental and social well-
being and not merely the
absence of disease or infirmity

(World Health Organisation)

Health Harmonious whole



**Intra and inter-personal
relationships**



FEAR

Interactions give rise to physiological responses

The Moral Self

What we do matters because our actions affect the health of others and the actions of others affect our own health

Life-style choices influence health

“I need to learn to understand where others have, or are seeking to, put their **faith**; and **how to live well** with their **choices**, as well as my own.” (Patrick Dixon)

The idea of 'living well' is more than the idea of existing. It suggests that merely existing is somehow inadequate.

I = a decision-maker

Is 'I' inter-changeable with 'self'?



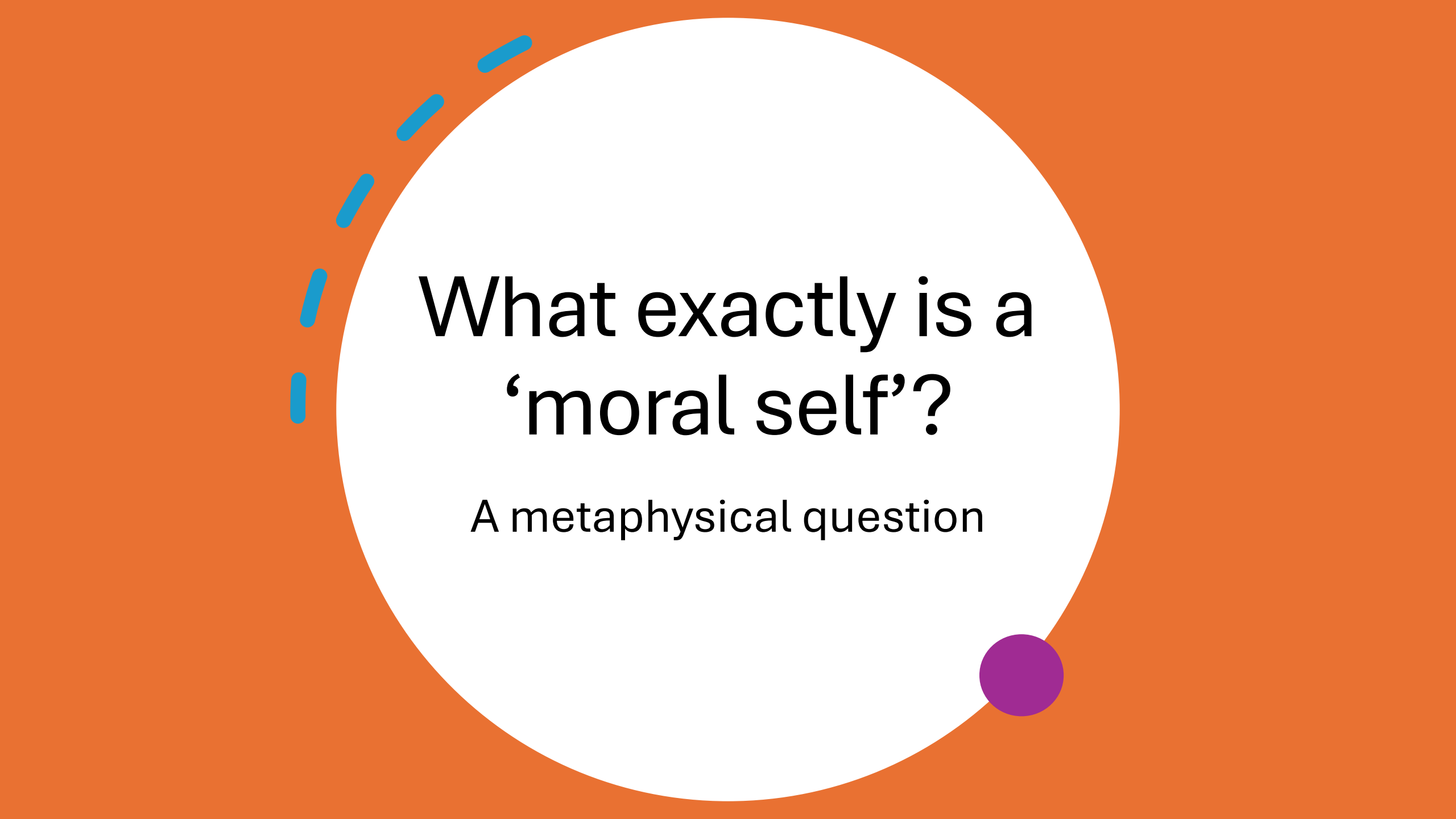
The 'I' constructing a world-view

- Coherentism
 - a raft of interlocking beliefs
 - Problem – subjective biases: failing to incorporate belief which do not fit the theory
- Foundationalism
 - Build up from a foundational belief
 - Problem – what guarantees the truth of the foundational belief
- Holism
 - Account for all available facts. “The truth, the whole Truth and nothing but the Truth”
 - Problem – discovery of new information, or of misinformation or disinformation
 - Needs constant revision

The concept of a moral self

- Not only an abstract idea in philosophy
- It has real world implications for how we interact with others and how we understand our self
- Rests on the premises that:
 - we are not only abstract thinkers.
 - our words and actions make a difference
 - we can reflect on and evaluate our actions and words and the actions and words of others
 - we can modify our behaviour

- General consensus that the self plays a role in moral functioning
- Over the past 30 years, theoretical and empirical research has produced a plethora of constructs related to the moral self, each grounded in diverse theoretical assumptions
- Lack of clarity about the nature and functioning of the moral self




What exactly is a 'moral self'?

A metaphysical question



According to the American Psychological Association:

- The moral self influences how individuals respond to ethical dilemmas.
- Understanding the complexities of the moral self can lead to personal growth and to a more ethical society.



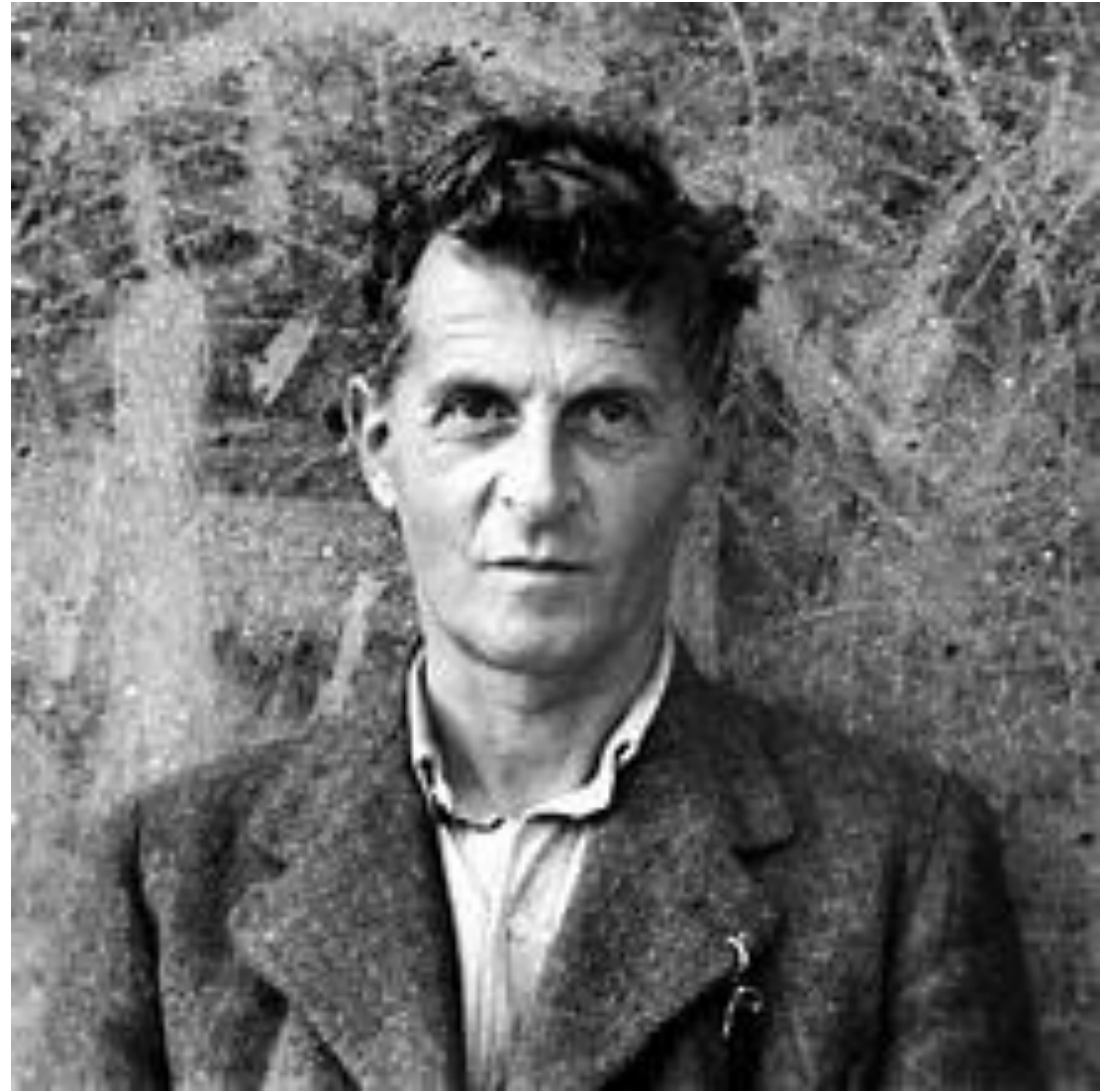
How can we know
what a moral self is?

Know thyself

The saying is usually attributed to Socrates (c. 470-399BC) and is the subject of on-going philosophical debate. It raises questions about:

- what is meant, implied, or suggested by 'know' and 'self'?
- what (if anything) is the essential nature of 'self'? What distinguishes the 'self' from the 'moral self'?
- why attempt to know thyself?

“Philosophy is a battle
against the bewitchment of
our intelligence by means of
language” (Wittgenstein,
Philosophical Investigations
109)



1889-1951

The Hard Problem of Philosophy

When doing philosophy, the use of words is inevitable.

Most words are ambiguous

No consensus on precisely what the word 'self' *means* when we talk of self

How can we understand each other unless we first agree on our understanding of the words we are using?

How can we understand? Methods of Philosophy

- Conceptual clarification to identify and remove confusing, ambiguous, and conflated terminology
- Discover and identify facts which have been ignored or 'theorized' away
- Expose theoretical assumptions
- Consider other interpretations
- Expose narrow-minded dogmatic thinking



Philosophy removes blinkers!

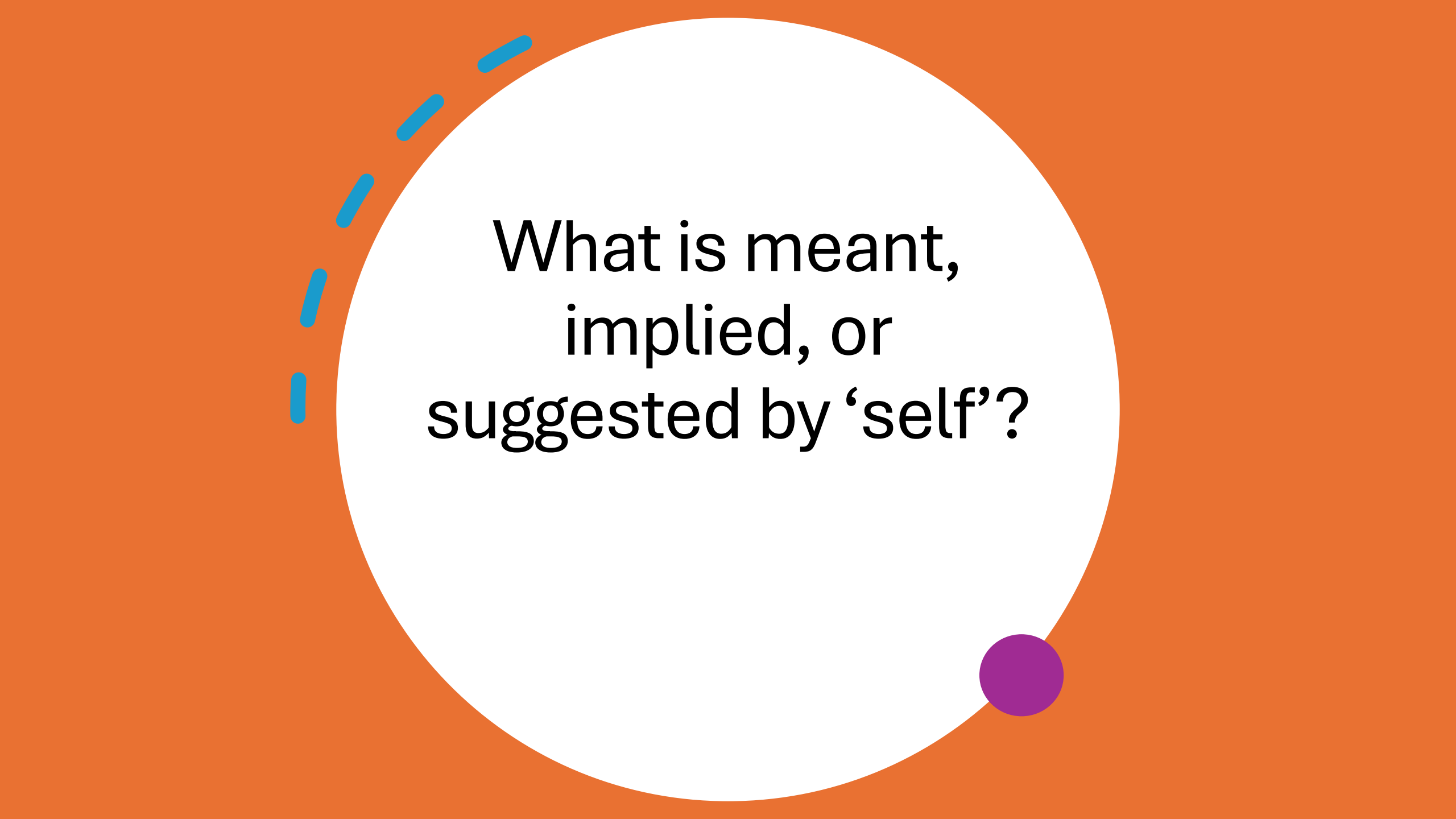


Much has been said and written
about 'self'.

Let us not be bewitched by words
and, thereby, persuaded into
believing that self *is* something
that it is not!

Let us not be bewitched by 'self'!





What is meant,
implied, or
suggested by 'self'?

Etymology of 'Self'

- From etymologyworld.com; accessed 5/10/2025):

The word "self" has its roots in the Proto-Indo-European root *swe-, which means **"to breathe."**

- From etymonline.com (accessed 5/10/2025)

The earliest known use of the English term 'self' is in the 9th Century, where it meant 'one's own person or identity'.

As a noun from c. 1200 as "the person or thing previously specified;" early 14c. as "a person in relation to that same person."

The meaning of 'self' has expanded over time to include concepts like the 'inner self' and **personal identity**.



Denotation

versus

Connotation

Oxford Dictionary of English:

Self (noun) a person's essential being that distinguishes them from others, especially considered as the **object of introspection** or reflexive action

One way of understanding 'object' is 'something that can be seen' or 'a thing comparable with a material or physical object'

Alternatively: an imaginary thing (eg unicorn)

Introspection is not a synonym of 'looking'.



Example 1 of language bewitching

- Thyself is NOT myself (and *vice versa*)
- Suggests that what is mine is not yours
- Suggests that 'self' is a *property* cf. my/your house, my/your spouse, my/your car
- Suggests self is distinct and separable from my body or your body.

Example 2 of language bewitching

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our *self* ... For my part, when I enter intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat, or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch *myself* at any time without a perception and can never observe but the perception (David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*)

Personal identity

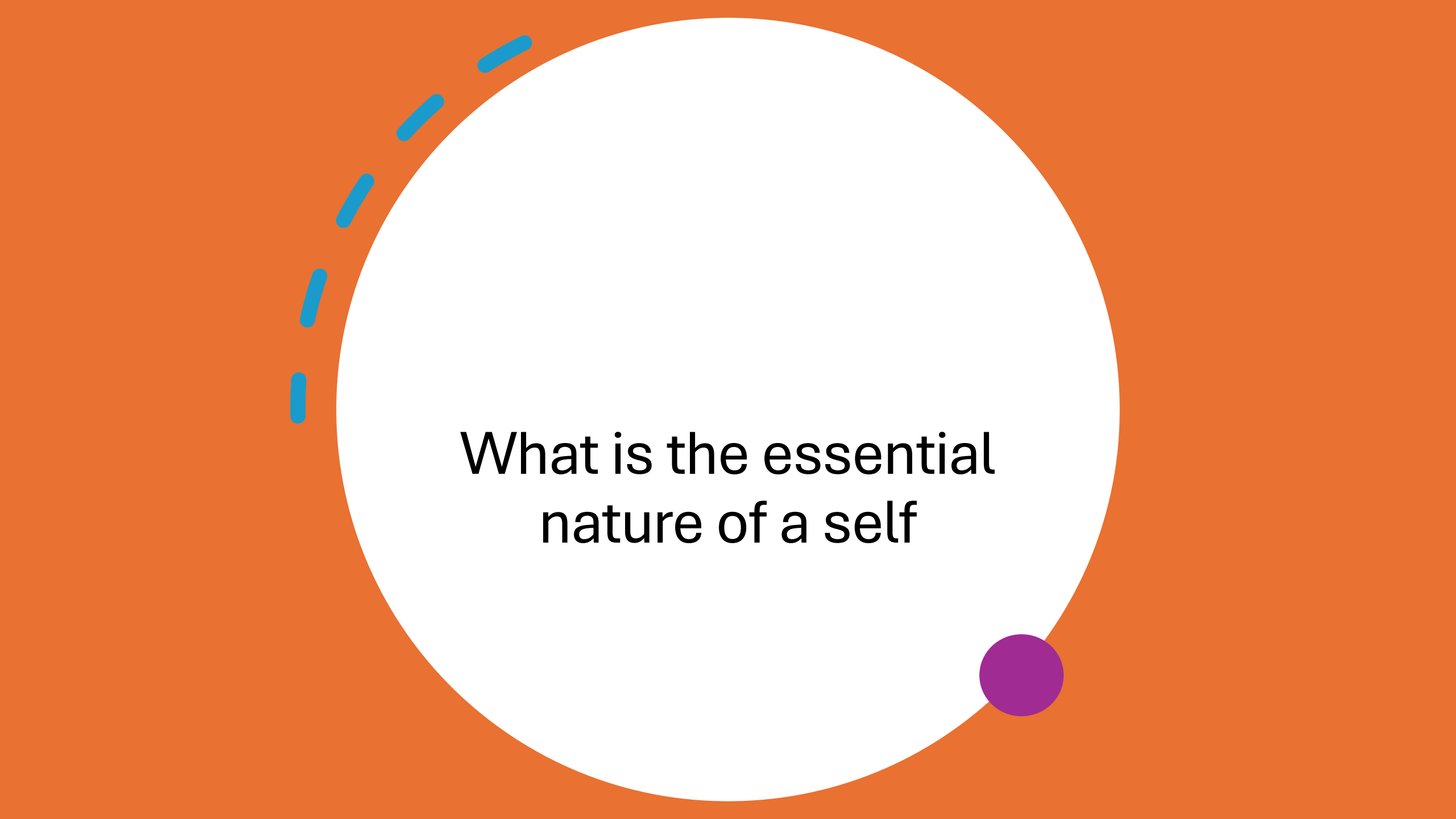


Self as breath

- The breath of Life.
- Is 'I' a synonym of 'breath'?
- I do more than just breathe! My breath doesn't make decisions
- Breath is necessary for the body to live.
- Does breath exist independently of my body?

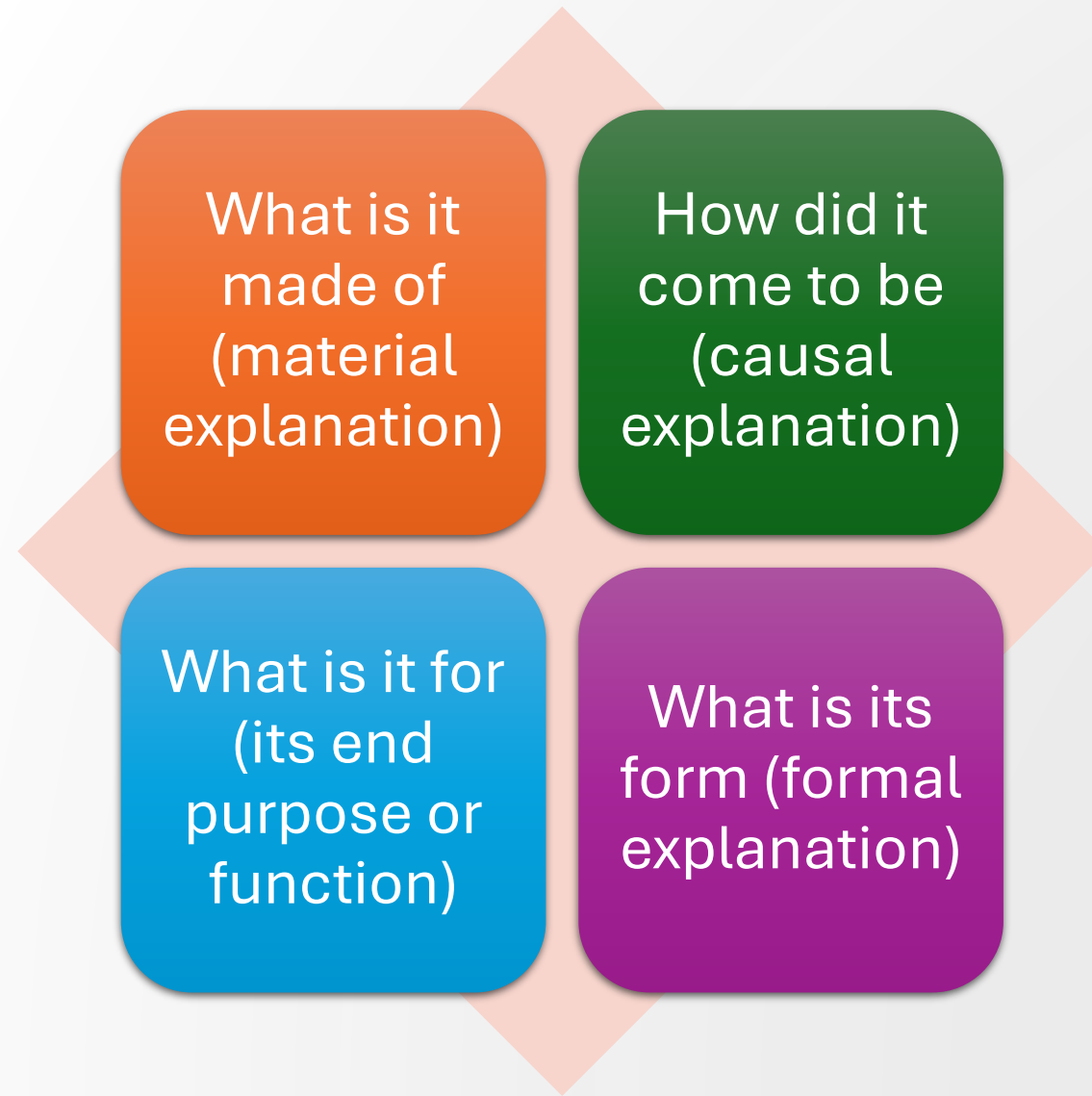
- We cannot know what ‘self’ or ‘moral self’ is merely by analysing words!
- Conceptual clarification is helpful but not sufficient.

How 'self' is conceptualised can have important implications for the classification and evaluation of behaviours



What is the essential
nature of a self

Aristotle – what is ...?



Aristotle's Hylomorphism

The form of a human is that which makes it a human being and capable of carrying out its **function**.

What is the function of a human being?

- None – I exist and that is all there is to it
- To reproduce
- To compete with others in the struggle for resources and mates
- To collaborate with others and, thereby, promote well-being for all
- To communicate
- To understand God (St Augustine)
- To understand myself and/or others
- To breathe and, thereby, contribute to carbon-oxygen exchange necessary for all life on Earth

What is the self's end purpose?

- To self-actualise?
 - to be what it is supposed to be
 - to be what I want to be (Sartre)
- To distinguish itself from others?

IF my essential function is to compete, what attributes are essential?

1) Physical superiority

And/or

2) Cunning (crafty, astute, calculating, sneaky, shrewd, scheming, Machiavellian, inventive, clever, resourceful)

If I am not physically superior, I might nonetheless outsmart you by:

- Convincing you that I am physically superior
- Recruiting the physical strength of others

Objections

Is the correct way to conceptualise Life as a game of winners and losers?

Is 'winning a game' synonymous with 'superiority'?

Some people behave *as if* they are superior to others!

Is the essential function of a human to communicate?

All life-forms communicate

There are numerous methods of communication

Communication of useful information: e.g. food sources, dangers

Humans sometimes disseminate misinformation or disinformation

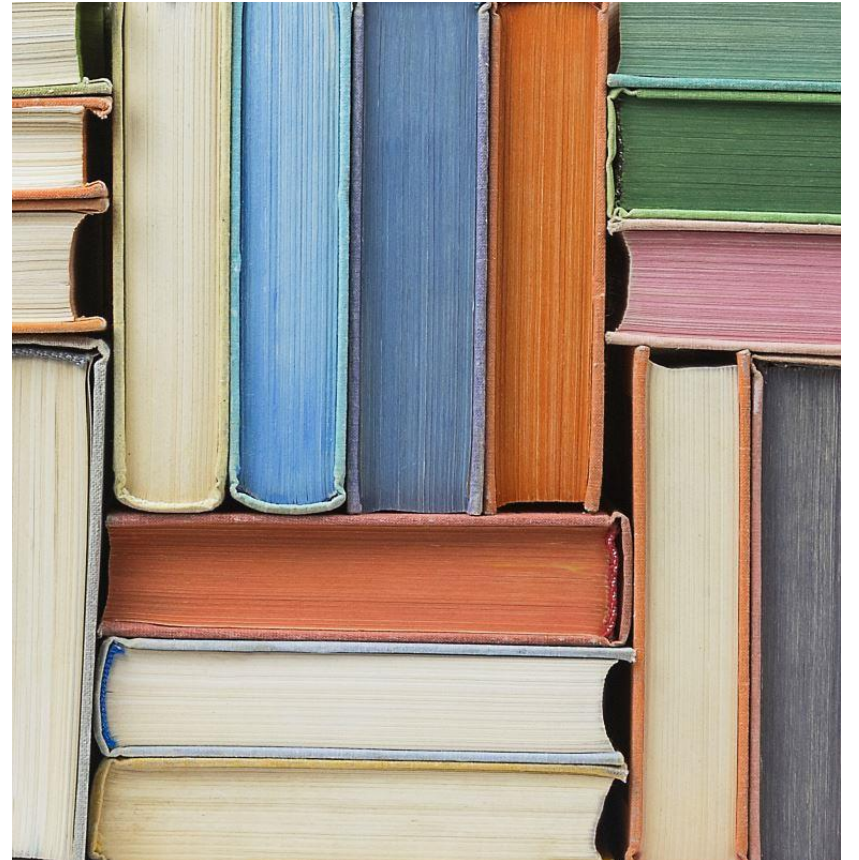
Humans are the only species to use written language which can be disseminated globally.

Humans are the only species with legal systems (written laws) enforced by violent (or threat of) force to control the behaviour of others

The Legal Self

The Legal self is subject to the written rules and regulations (laws) of a *particular* State at a *particular* point in time which are not freely chosen by any *particular* individual.

Legals laws are not universal (the same for everyone, in all places, at all times)



Plurality of perspectives on moral identity

How does the idea of 'moral self' cohere with the reality of the 'legal self'

- law-abiding
- fair and just
- loyal and dutiful
- self-sacrificing
- compassionate and helpful

Where do you put
your faith?

- In the laws of your particular land?
 - In God's commands?
 - In truth?
 - In reason?
-
- The problem of interpretation
 - The reality of ideological differences, inter-personal conflicts, wars
 - The reality of cases of false accusations and wrongful convictions
 - One person's reason is another's unreason!

Where then should I put my faith?

“To do philosophy is to examine one’s own temperament and at the same time to seek the truth” (Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*)



Know thyself

Plato's Tripartite 'Soul'

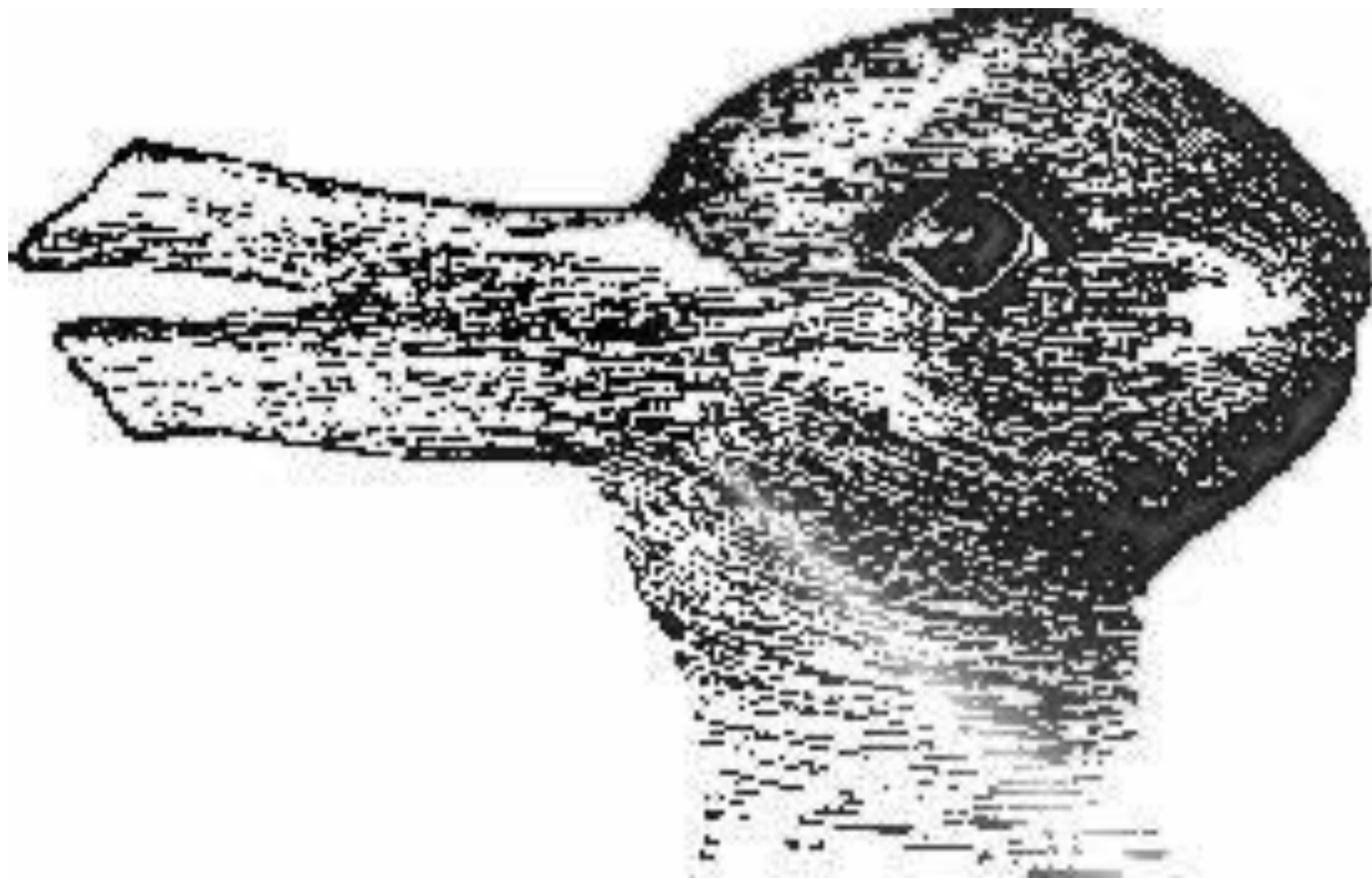
- Reason is the part of the soul that aims for truth
- Appetite is the part of the soul that functions to satisfy the body's basic needs
- Emotions – can be unruly and act contrary to reason's aim for the good and the true.

What is a reliable source of information?

What others say?

Our senses?

What do
you see?



The limits of experience

- Immediate experience provides no information about the number of facts in this room (eg, how many pens there are)
- There are a finite number of pens in this room even if none of us know how many there are. Even if we count the number of pens, we could mis-count.
- Humans are error-prone creatures
- What are the implications for human relationships?



The limits of experience

Sigmund Freud:

‘Transference’ projecting past relationship dynamics onto others.

‘Projection’: the attribution of one’s own unacceptable feelings, thoughts, or traits on to others.

What are the implications for human relationships?



Back to Wittgenstein

- Don't think, Look!
- Attend to the logic of language
- What is a word-user using language for?
 - Information
 - Misinformation
 - Disinformation



“All men are liable to error, and most men are in many points, by passion or interest, under temptation to it. If we could but see the **secret motives** that influenced the men of name and learning in the world, and the leaders of parties, we should not always find that it was the embracing of truth for its own sake that made them espouse the doctrines they owned and maintained.”

(John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: 335)

John Locke

**An Essay
Concerning
Human
Understanding**

Abridged and Edited by
Kenneth P. Winkler

A large orange circle with a thin white border, centered on a white background.

Why attempt to
know thyself?

To be true to myself

- To understand the hidden drivers of my behaviour
 - What am I afraid of and why
- To avoid being bewitched by language
- To be a fully functioning, healthy individual
- To live well

How to live well

- Regulate unruly emotions by focusing on and controlling your **breath**
- Accept what you cannot control:
 - External events, other people's behaviour, your reputation, your wealth
- Focus attention on what you can control
 - your thoughts, judgements, desires, actions, what you say,
- Take responsibility for your own decisions rather than transferring blame to others

How to live well

- Think for your self
 - do not be misled by others
 - do not blindly follow the example of others or blindly obey what others say
- Live in the here and now
 - You do not know what might happen next and your memories of the past might not be accurate or reliable
 - Savour this moment





How to live well

- Do your best in this moment now.
Perfection is an unattainable ideal!
- Be curious
- Learn from the challenges life throws at you
- Take care of your body



“Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
the wisdom to know the difference,
and the humility to know my limits.

Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardship as a pathway to peace”

Conclusion

- The moral-self is demonstrated by the choices an individual makes
- I = decision-maker
- Body = body: not the same as 'I'
- Self = breath
- The New Testament Greek word Pneuma is used for spirit or soul or breath. "God breathed the breath of life into man"

Thank you for listening and participating