

Akiko Frischhut

Université de Genève

## The “True Self” As A State Of Mind

### ABSTRACT

The idea that people have a certain character or personality is a well-known common sense intuition. Also familiar from everyday life is the idea of people finding or realizing their “true self”. While theories of character are much debated, the notion of the “true self” has not received much philosophical attention yet. What do we mean when we talk about the true self? What does the idea of realizing one’s true self refer to?

My aim is to propose and evaluate competing accounts for what it means to fully realize one’s true self.

To start with, any account of the true self must allow maintaining one’s personal identity through time without (ever) realizing one’s true self. This suggests that the true self is distinct from the *psychological self*, intuitively understood as the bearer of one’s psychological properties. There are, I argue, two plausible conceptions of what we could mean with ‘true self’ and what its realization requires.

According to the first, we are our true self when our essential character traits—roughly understood as bundles of dispositions including dispositions to form/have/being particularly receptive to certain values, beliefs, desires—are maximally manifested. According to the second, the realization of our true self requires maximal consistency between our character traits and our actions.

The first understanding can come apart from the second: for example, if it turned out that there are no essential character traits, then the second notion can be realized without the first. On the other hand, a maximal manifestation of our essential character traits might not result in a maximal consistency between all our traits and actions.

Both conceptions, I argue, lead into consequences incompatible with most of our common intuitions. This is problematic: if we can only understand the true self in a way that forces us to abandon the key ideas which the notion was meant to express in the first place, then we lose our grip on its meaning. Revisionary accounts are, of course, not unusual in philosophy and in many cases justified. In all those cases, however, the notion in question proves indispensable for our theories by playing an explanatory role. Such a role, I maintain, cannot be found for the notion of the true self. Although its ordinary usage might still have psychological use for us, we should keep in mind that there really is no such state as the true self and that it is very likely that from time to time, or from person to person, we may refer to very different things when we talk about the true self.