1. Introduction

1.1. The Age of the Self

On the Oprah Winfrey show, whenever something has not gone right for her guests (all of whom, by the way, seem to live in a world where it never rains, but pours), the hostess tells them they must be lacking in *self-esteem*. A much-read self-help manual asserts that *self-disesteem* lies at the bottom of all conceivable personal and social ills, ranging from excessive masturbation to serial killings. When the life of the socialite and 'it girl', Paris Hilton – famously famous for being famous – hit a moral low and media high with her probation violation in 2007, flaming debates raged on Weblogs addressing the kind of *self-concept* she projected. 'Hedonistic', with 95,000 entries, was a narrow winner over 'postmodern', with 85,700 entries, for the 'Hiltonistic' self-concept. In the wake of the decision of Mohammed Sidique Khan and his three friends to pack a rucksack full of explosives and destroy the lives of 52 innocent people on the London underground, whole conferences were devoted to the issue of the irreconcilable multicultural *self-images* that had torn asunder the rational selves of these four men. According to the analysis of eminent German Professor of Culture and Pedagogy, Thomas Ziehe (virtually unknown in the Anglo-Saxon world, unfortunately), subjectivisation of the self is the major characteristic of today's young in the West. 'That is how I see it' has become a dead end: a no-go area for educators. When the students' 'inner light', their incontrovertible *self-view*, is turned on, the once invincibly shining aura of the school fades into oblivion.

As can be seen from those examples – derived from diverse contexts, popular, semi-academic and academic, most of which I have occasion to revisit later – the potential range of illustrative examples is huge.

They all tell us the same story, however, about the age in which we live: the age of a self that has become apotheosised and some would say bloated beyond good sense. Indeed, if there is one value that seems beyond reproach in modernity, it is that of the self and the terms that cluster around it, such as self-esteem, self-love and self-confidence. It is not clear, however, that all those who invoke the self really know what they are talking about – or, even if they do, that they are all talking about the same concept. *What is this thing called 'self', then, and what is its actual philosophical, psychological and educational significance?* Moreover, if we know what the self is, will that change our view of morality, of ourselves as human beings or of how we would like to bring up our children? Those, simply put, are some of the basic questions that I raise and try to answer in this book.

I still remember the day when I started to think about the nature of selfhood. I was an undergraduate, and wanted to appear bright and clever to my professor by asking how one could measure one's own level of self-respect. He retorted without a pause: 'Make a list of the things you would never do for all the tea in China. The longer the list, the more self-respect you have.' Perhaps because I was reading Plato's *Symposium* at the time, my mind immediately turned to Socrates. Now, there was a man with a long list of will-not-dos! Consider the place where the intoxicated Alcibiades tries to describe the singularity of Socrates' character. He likens him to the popular Silenus statues: ugly on the outside, but once cracked open, found to contain images of gods. Even a feeble report of Socrates' words strikes one with awe and admiration, Alcibiades muses, and that is only a thin shadow of the experience of being in his presence. It is no wonder that thinkers as different in time and philosophical persuasion as Aristotle and Nietzsche have both described Socrates as the best and most blessedly happy human being one could ever aspire to be. Socrates' wisdom is, of course, one thing: his love of the examined life and the cultured mind. What intrigued me more as a young student – and still does – were his virtues of character: his warmth of feeling, his steadfastness of purpose, fortitude, temperance and prudence, as well as his modesty-mitigated pride, humour and equanimity. Socrates was a man at one with himself, yet one with hidden depths that he – in his ready admittance of his own ignorance – realised that he could scarcely fathom. I recall thinking at the time that any proper theory of selfhood and self-respect would have to account not only for our exteriors and self-beliefs, but also for the interiors and emotional depths that make someone like Socrates the person

he really is. This is not a book about Socrates, but some of my disillusionment with what I describe below as the 'dominant self-paradigm' of late can be understood against the backdrop of my old revelation that any decent self-theory would have to satisfy this 'Socratic condition'.

Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented outpouring of writings about the self and its oscillations. These writings have been initiated by academics from various quarters – psychological, philosophical, sociological, educational and sub-camps within those quarters – and have been brought to bear on diverse issues. I engage with many of those writings in what follows for purposes of commendation or confrontation. In general, I believe that in order to reach out to the perplexities of the matter at hand, we need to provide as many windows as possible on existing *self research* (a term used in this book to denote research on the self rather than research on myself). To further that ambition, I proceed by forays into various areas of debate about the self, reaching out – as I explain later – across established disciplinary boundaries. Seeking convergence in an existing bedlam of divergence has its perils. The success of this study rests in large measure on how well it helps its readers to join all the sundry dots.

It may be difficult to pinpoint anything singular in the prodigious plurality of discursive traditions generated by recent self research. Academics from diverse domains tend to be more concerned with rushing off in their own homemade directions than with interacting constructively with one another. Nevertheless, if one tries to trace some general patterns of convergence, what seems to have been gradually evolving is a 'dominant' *cognitive, constructivist self-paradigm*. One must be careful about terminology: 'Cognitive' should be understood narrowly here to denote 'cold' self-processes that exclude the affective – as distinct, for example, from the use of 'cognitive' in such locutions as 'cognitive theories of emotion', in which the cognitive is also typically meant to embrace 'hot' sentiments. This narrow understanding of 'cognitive' explains, among other things, how some moral psychologists have come to debate whether it is the cognitive construction of moral selfhood *or* the availability of moral emotions that bridges the gap between moral knowledge and moral action. Similarly, by 'constructivist' I am referring not to a plausible if somewhat trite didactic constructivism (according to which education is most effective when it connects to the learner's existing knowledge structures), but rather to a form of anti-realist epistemological constructivism.

In this book, I try to offer an 'alternative' *self-paradigm* which, while remaining 'cognitive' on a broader understanding of the term, will essentially be *emotion-based* and *realist* (in a sense of 'realist' that unfolds in Chapter 2). For example, the true Socrates was not a mere self-construction of intellectualist beliefs, but a full-blooded person with strong and profound emotions. And his selfhood, in so far as it was accessible to him, was also accessible to others – perhaps, in some respects, even more so. On this 'alternative' paradigm, persons possess 'actual full selves' and emotions are central to those selves: their creation and sustenance. More specifically, what I hope to demonstrate is *how emotions are implicated in selfhood in all its manifestations and at all levels of engagement*. Each of the following chapters, with the exception of the methodological interlude in Chapter 3, constitutes a variation on this single theme. My aim is to let the contours of the 'alternative' paradigm emerge inductively in the course of my discussion, rather than presenting it fully at the outset and arguing for it deductively thereafter. I conclude in Section 10.5, however, by connecting the various strands of my argument. Notably, as I have on previous occasions aired similar suggestions under the banner of Aristotelianism (Kristjánsson, 2002, 2006, 2007), I might have been tempted to call the alternative paradigm 'Aristotelian'. I refrain for reasons of methodological parsimony, however, as I explain later. Nevertheless, the 'alternative' paradigm remains tantalisingly Aristotelian in spirit, if not in letter (see Section 1.3).

The ancients had an intense interest in the first-person 'Me' and its epistemological and ontological ramifications, but it was not until Enlightenment times that the modern notion of selfhood became prominent (see Seigel, 2005; Martin & Barresi, 2006; and Sorabji, 2006, for detailed histories of self-theories; cf. Reddy's useful meta-history, 2009). At the end of the nineteenth century, this interest rubbed off on the precursors of modern psychology, most notably William James (1890). Interest in the self, as in other 'internal constructs', fell on evil days in psychological circles during the heyday of behaviourism. In his 1953–54 Gifford Lectures, the astute Scottish philosopher John Macmurray rued the 'crisis of the personal': the then currently grave insensitiveness to the inner aspects of life (1958). Macmurray's worries were largely misplaced, however, as interest in the self was rekindled with redoubled force in the 1960s (though perhaps not entirely to Macmurray's liking), with the advent of humanistic psychology, which was all about 'finding' and 'actualising' one's true self. Since then, and spurred on even

further by the tenets of contemporary 'positive psychology', the self has become the object of unremitting academic – and public – attention. The 'inward turn' (Taylor, 1989) shows no signs of abating: in academia, the media or in everyday dinner talk.

Before I proceed, some conceptual clarifications and caveats are in order. The term 'self' is ambiguous in a number of ways (see, e.g., Velleman, 2006, chap. 1), often run together promiscuously in the self-literature. When I talk about *self* in what follows, I shall, unless otherwise stated, be referring broadly to what I call the 'commonsense view of the self' (spelled out in Chapter 2) as *the set of a person's core commitments, traits, aspirations and ideals*: the characteristics that are most central to him or her. By *self-concept* I mean, in turn, *the set of a person's self-conceptions or beliefs about his or her self*. Not all reflexive uses of that ubiquitous prefix 'self-' identify features of the commonsense self. 'Self-mutilation', for instance, refers to the self as body; 'self-love' means love of one's own person as a whole, not merely of one's self as part of oneself (so, usually, does the term 'self-improvement'); 'self-fulfilment' points to the self as an ideal to be completed; and 'self-sameness' refers to the features (physical, mental or both) that sustain numerical identity. Even if the commonsense view succeeded in distinguishing all those uses systematically from its own use of 'self', current literature is teeming with various approaches to and perspectives on that very self: moral, empirical, phenomenological and transcendental. Perhaps there are many commonsense views of the self, or perhaps there are even multiple commonsense selves. Allow me to assume that such is not the case, however. As Jon Elster (1986) has argued convincingly, the notion of multiple selves is deeply problematic, barring rare pathological cases of so-called multiple personalities. We are better off by abiding – initially at least – to Owen Flanagan's 'one-self-to-a-customer' rule (1996, p. 65), anchored in James's notion of a 'self of selves' (1890) – although James had something more fundamental in mind there than the commonsense notion of selfhood, namely the active element in all self-consciousness.

What concerns me most as a moral philosopher is the 'moral self': the self as the subject of moral agency and the object of moral evaluation. I do not consider the discursive tradition on moral selves (see, e.g., Chazan, 1998) to be *sui generis*, but merely one of the avenues to approach what the commonsense view calls 'one's self': that self as seen from a particular (namely the moral) point of view. David Jopling's cleverly orchestrated metaphor of the self as a city is helpful

here (1997, pp. 258–59). What matters is that the self constitutes but a single city, viewable from different perspectives. I take that assumption as my starting point. Unless otherwise noted, I also assume that the self-accounts canvassed in the following chapters are about the same self, this single 'city' – different conceptions of the same concept, if you like – and hence competing. Whether or not the self is more similar to a centrally organised modern city or a rambling medieval one is a question that remains to be answered. Another question is whether the city of the self is a mere cognitive construction or if it has an objectively existing self-city as its referent; in other words, if *self* is the same as *self-concept*. The first of those questions neatly evokes what is at issue between so-called moral dispositionists and situationists, a debate that I enter in Chapter 6. The second question, however, which forms the bone of contention between self-realists and anti-self-realists, is addressed in Chapter 2.

Limiting my focus to the commonsense view of the self and adhering to the rule of one *such* self per customer does not mean that I dismiss other possible uses and meanings of the word 'self' as misplaced. There are perfectly respectable discourses, for instance, among metaphysicians and neuroscientists about the composition of a person's numerical identity in time and space. A distinction made by Ricoeur (1992) between *idem* as personal identity or self-sameness in the metaphysical sense and *ipse* as identity in the psychological sense may aid us here. *Idem* is given in response to the question of *what I am* as a self; *ipse* is given in response to the question of *who I am*. I admit to having no doubt that *ipse* requires *idem*: that the type of selfhood under discussion in this book is parasitic upon one's selfhood as a fundamental entity in a metaphysical sense (see, e.g., Gunnarsson, 2002). This latter type of self-identity inevitably appears at some points in the following, but I try to eschew it as far as possible and remain – for reasons explained later – deliberately agnostic as to its nature. I take no stand here, for instance, on the question of mind–body dualism versus monism. I do share Charles Taylor's belief that to possess a self (in the everyday *ipse* sense), beings must possess enough 'depth and complexity' (1989, p. 32) to count as full-blown persons – a condition generally satisfied by human beings but not by (other) animals, not even perhaps by the Great Apes. Whether or not the possession of a self requires the possession of a 'soul' in the metaphysical sense is a question I am happy to be able to bypass here. I also circumvent discussions of what phenomenologists call 'the experiential core self of phenomenal consciousness' (see, e.g.,

Zahavi, 2007). I do accept that self-concept requires phenomenal awareness of self. But self-awareness is not only awareness of one's 'self' in the everyday sense but also of various other aspects of oneself, such as one's personality, outward appearance and bodily functions. It should be stressed once again that it is the everyday 'moral' self and our conceptions of that self that are of interest to me in this study.

1.2. 'Bracketing' the Author

Textbooks on qualitative research methods, especially those inspired by phenomenology, typically ask researchers to 'bracket' (set aside, suspend or hold in abeyance) all their personal suppositions (knowledge, history, culture, experiences, values and orientations) concerning the research topic, in order to concentrate on the pure phenomena at hand. Now, one only needs a modicum of Popperian philosophy of science, Wittgensteinian-inspired linguistics or, for that matter, of ordinary common sense to realise that such disengagement from one's suppositions is neither advantageous nor possible. The idea of the completely detached research stance is a mere illusion. On the other hand, if 'bracketing' is understood in a more restrictive sense to mean self-consciously trying to identify and articulate one's suppositions at the outset, such an endeavour may indeed be helpful for both researchers and their readers. The readers can then decide to bracket those suppositions 'in' or 'out' as they like. I sometimes think of philosopher-writers as qualitative researchers with only themselves as interlocutors, and in this section I attempt to articulate some of the points of departure of the 'internal conversation' in which this study engages.

I have already noted that the perspective on the self that interests me most is a moral perspective. This is not a mere idiosyncratic interest, however. Given the wide-ranging socio-moral implications that both philosophers and social scientists have been tempted to elicit from their respective self-accounts, one could argue that the most natural provinces of self research are in moral philosophy on the one hand and moral psychology (broadly construed as the empirical study of moral development, beliefs, emotions and behaviours) on the other. I have more to say about that in Chapter 3. I never try to hide the fact that I am a philosopher – that fact steers the focus of my inquiry in various places throughout this book. As a philosopher, I am deeply curious about the nature of the self, for instance: Is it an objectively identifiable entity or 'all in the mind'? It is no coincidence that following on the heels of this

introductory chapter is an extensive treatment of self-realism versus anti-self-realism. Some practically minded psychologists might not find such a chapter worthwhile. I could argue in turn that they *should* find it worthwhile, but I refrain from doing so. I am who I am, and Chapter 2 is simply there.

Let me elaborate a bit more on my presuppositions as a moral philosopher and how they influence my choice of topics. Throughout the history of moral philosophy, most of its best-known practitioners have occupied positions antithetical to moral relativism. With a number of significant exceptions and caveats which need not be rehearsed here, one could go as far as to say that the history of moral philosophy is the history of an ongoing battle against such relativism in its various forms and guises – ranging from the man-is-the-measure-of-all-things doctrine of the Sophists to early twentieth century anthropologically inspired cultural relativism, late twentieth century power-focused post-structuralist discourse and the ever-present moral subjectivism of first-year undergraduates. Nor is there an end in sight; this battle seems to be a never-to-be-completed Sysiphian task.

The majority of moral philosophers are against moral relativism, but it is more difficult to give a collective characterisation of what exactly they are for. Technical terms such as 'moral objectivism', 'moral absolutism' and 'moral realism' all contain historical-cum-theoretical baggage that some moral anti-relativists would not want to carry. The fact that a common denominator of anti-relativism is difficult to determine is not surprising, given that its advocates hail from otherwise divergent moral camps. In their midst are, for instance, Kantians, virtue ethicists, utilitarians, followers of various religious moral doctrines, moral conservatives and moral cosmopolitans of unspecified provenance. Nevertheless, for simplicity's sake I posit that the opposite of moral relativism can serviceably be termed *moral objectivism*, a position that requires me to provide the latter term with a somewhat permissive understanding. On such an understanding, moral objectivism incorporates four general beliefs which I share: the *ontological* belief that moral properties exist independent of any particular (non-interhuman) preferences, perspectives or points of view; the *epistemological* belief that human beings can become acquainted with and understand those properties in a way that is independent of any particular (non-interhuman) preferences, perspectives or points of view; the *psychological* belief that human beings are capable of forming intentions to honour those properties and, with time, that they will acquire stable and robust dispositions to do so; and

the *moral* belief that the honouring of the relevant moral properties constitutes a necessary condition of the rightness of an action. This characterisation leaves ample room for conflict among the various camps of anti-relativistic thinkers. It is, after all, only meant to capture what unites them under one specific description.

Moral objectivism, as here defined, is not only the *modus operandi* of much of what goes by the name of moral philosophy, it has also informed modern moral psychology: the empirical study of moral beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. The undisputed high priest of twentieth-century moral psychology, Lawrence Kohlberg – himself an avowed Kantian – saw it as one of the fundamental duties of moral psychology to combat moral relativism. Kohlberg's well-known stages of moral development were constructed in such a way as to make progress in this area synonymous with a gradual retreat from relativism (Kohlberg, 1981). Part of moral psychology's Kohlbergian legacy is the gap to be found between moral cognition and moral behaviour. In fact, only modest correlations have ever been recorded between Kohlbergian stages of moral reasoning and people's actual behaviours. Looming large in contemporary personality psychology is the suggestion that the construction or nonconstruction of a 'moral self' constitutes the central explanatory concept in moral functioning: the missing link between cognition and action. I explore that powerful idea in Chapter 4.

Social psychologists are famously sceptical of the conceptual repertoire of personality psychologists, especially with respect to 'static' human traits. According to the situationism proposed by some social psychologists, psychological experiments, such as the famous Milgram (1974) experiment, show that people's actions are irredeemably situation dependent. This charge has percolated down to philosophers (see, e.g., Doris, 2002) who have used it to attack virtue ethics, character education and other schools of thought in moral philosophy and moral education that assume the existence of robust dispositional states of character. Situationism – in its extreme forms at least – poses a threat to moral objectivism by rendering it infeasible in practice: If such situationism is true, the psychological belief underlying moral objectivism – that human beings are capable of forming stable and robust dispositions to honour moral properties – is undermined. Relativity creeps in, at the practical if not the theoretical level. It is no coincidence, therefore, that moral philosophers have expended considerable energy in recent years in countering situationism. Without moral character, there is no moral self. Hence, my extensive critique of situationism in Chapter 6.

Social psychology presents another challenge to moral objectivism that arguably poses an even greater threat than does moral situationism, by eating away its epistemological core. You say, the social psychologist would begin, that selfhood underlies moral agency. In that case, people's conceptions of themselves as moral agents determine how they chart the moral terrain and how they act and react with regard to it. But repeated empirical findings recorded by social scientists have shown that there are two general self-concepts abroad in the world: that of an interdependent (traditional, 'Eastern') self-culture and that of an independent (liberal, 'Western') self-culture. These self-concepts are conceptually and practically irreconcilable; combining them results in disorientation, rootlessness and anomie at best and complete self-loss or destructive violence at worst. Moral objectivism rests on the epistemological belief that human beings can become acquainted with and understand moral properties in a way that is independent of any particular (non-interhuman) perspectives. Research into the two conflicting self-concepts undermines this belief in so far as it shows that human beings inhabit two mutually impenetrable moral worlds. Has the moral relativism that generations of philosophers – aided, certainly, by contemporary moral psychology – have tried to throw out the front door now crept back in through the back door via social-scientific research into an interdependent versus an independent self-concept? This is the question that explains my interest in 'multicultural selves' and underlies the ponderings of Chapter 8 and parts of 9.

Next, to education: Most of my working life, I have been employed as a philosopher in faculties of educational studies, first at the University of Akureyri, then at the University of Iceland. This work has brought me into contact with a host of colleagues and students passionately interested in issues of young people's upbringing and schooling. I have been infected with their enthusiasm, a fact which explains my repeated references to the educational ramifications of self research in this study. They range from the role played by the construction of moral self-identity in Chapter 4, through the expected educational correlates of self-esteem in Chapter 5, to the culminating discussion of self-change and self-education in Chapter 10. I make this point here as an explanation rather than a justification. A justification would be superfluous because a considerable part of contemporary self research – especially research on self-esteem and self-confidence – has been animated by exactly the same concerns.