



From the immune self to moral agency Comments⁴⁵

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Editorial abstract

Author comments on the changes in the philosophy of immunology that have occurred since the publication of his book *The Immune Self: Theory or Metaphor?*, as well as on the dangers, misunderstandings and expectations in this area. Finally, he presents his account of moral agency in the context of his own works discussing this question.

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From *The Immune Self* to...?

What has changed in the Author's approach and in the contemporary philosophy of immunology since *The Immune Self: Theory or Metaphor?*

The views I expressed almost 20 years ago have not significantly changed. I still believe that the self-metaphor governs the practice and theoretical orientation of most practicing immunologists, but the neat boundaries of "self" and "other" continue to be broken and replaced by a spectrum of functions based on a gradation of immune responses that do not neatly fit the self-other division. When the centrality of self/non-self discrimination is contested, much controversy ensues. In a special issue of *Seminars in Immunology* in 2000 the issues were well-aired. While some detractors generously called for a pluralistic approach, and others regarded the crisis over the "self" as overblown, most would agree that immune selfhood is increasingly a polymorphous and ill-defined construct. Contemporary transplantation biology and autoimmunity studies have demonstrated phenomena that fail to allow faithful adherence to a strict dichotomy of self/non-self discrimination, and as new models are emerging, the immune self's grounding appears unsteady and thus increasingly elusive as the putative nexus of immunology's doctrines.

⁴⁵ Editor of the Comments: Witold Wachowski.

My thinking in terms of the organism per se has developed to a growing appreciation of how the host's internal ecology confers an ever-evolving identity. In a fascinating inversion of our body mythology, we find that an individual's immune system itself is in part created by the resident microbiome. (For example, in vertebrates, the gut-associated lymphoid tissue becomes specified and organized by bacterial symbionts, and the immune system does not function properly and its repertoire is significantly reduced if the symbiotic microbes are not residing within the gut.) Simply, the immune system is constructed in concert with "foreign" elements. So while the defensive role of immunity is clearly prominent in the medical and agricultural contexts, that point of view must be balanced with how the individual organism participates in a community of others that contribute to its welfare. From this ecological vantage, there can be no circumscribed, self-defined entity that is designated – the self.

So when one refers to the greater ecology of the immune system – the larger context that includes both internal and external universes sensed and acted upon – the borders must remain open to allow free exchange between the host and its environment. On this understanding, the immune system is endowed with a high degree of communicative abilities for sensing both the environment (in the form of pathogens, allergens, toxins, etc.), but also, and just as importantly, allowing the free exchange of even a larger universe of substances and organisms to be engaged for the organism's benefit. In short, the immune system possesses cognitive functions for the on-going negotiation of various interactions between the host and its environment. To remain restricted within an analysis that already assumes only a defensive posture limits understanding how animals live in exchange with others. Accordingly, by describing that interactive economy, immunology becomes an important member of the ecological sciences. That ecological sensibility has been the focus of my more recent writings, which are summarized in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*⁴⁶.

The dangers and the misunderstandings

Are there any dangers threatening the philosophy of immunology and, generally, the philosophy of science? Are the questions concerning immunity still underestimated?

Are there still some misunderstandings in this area?

If we look at the "big picture," immunology is adjusting to the twin demands of increasing molecular elucidation, on the one hand, and an ecological sensibility, on the other. In both contexts, the "self" has slipped into an archaic formulation. I have already discussed the ecological dimension above, and, from the molecularists' perspective, atomic delineations have outstripped explanations of immune regulation so that no molecular signature of selfhood suffices to explain the complex interactions of immunocytes, their regulatory products, and the targets of

⁴⁶ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/biology-self/>

their actions. Reactivity has become the functional definition of immune identity. Accordingly, self/non-self discrimination recedes as a governing principle when immunity is appreciated as both outer-directed against the deleterious, and inner-directed in an on-going communicative system of internal homeostasis. From this dual perspective, immune function falls on a continuum of reactivity, where the character of the immune object is determined by the *context* in which it appears, not by its character as “foreign” per se. More simplistic models have too often obscured this cardinal lesson.

Two misunderstandings have caught my attention.

1) The first is specific to the way immunity has been co-opted by culture critics. Indeed, I am intrigued that the immunization idea has been applied to characterizing society. This approach was first used, at least in America, by Donna Haraway and Emily Martin, but the parallels they described between ways immunity was conceived by scientists and the seepage of those ideas into Western societies has more recently been radically extended by Sloterdijk, Esposito, Beck, Derrida and Baudrillard. In their writings, the self metaphor (appearing as immunization) *returns* into the socio-political lexicon to model social theory, namely by their assertion that immunisation has become the core dynamics of contemporary biosocieties. I find this circularity very interesting, albeit these commentators see no irony. They have bought the immunization paradigm wholesale and applied that construction to analyzing culture and to building a political theory, of sorts, one itself made up of analogues and metaphors from the very science that has carried those metaphors originally *from* that culture (in everyday psychology and philosophy) for its own purposes! In other words, both the immunologists and the social theorists are eating from the same trough, but, apparently, each is unaware that they share the same metaphor, albeit from two different perspectives. So, while I suggest we watch the metaphor play in different domains, these critics are playing the game with no perspective of how their own use of the digested metaphor of selfhood has returned.

Indeed, one must ask to what degree does the immunization idea describe some underlying, heretofore hidden understanding of the social, as opposed to simply applying a fecund metaphor to culture, where resonance or correspondence appeals to the reader? What differentiates this work from literature (as opposed to a more rigorous, empirically-based social theory)? In other words, is theoretical *insight* provided by the immunization idea applied to society? I think not, for I consider the effort in many ways intellectually facile and superficial when the metaphor is extended to everything – from religion and metaphysics to housing and cities – and thus becomes a universal solvent to dissolve all of human culture into one vat. This exercise is simplistic, radically reductionist, and ultimately pointless.

2) The other misunderstanding is much more general: When I ponder the entrenched notion of selfhood in immunology, I am reminded of an exchange I had with Stephen Weinberg, the Nobel laureate physicist, who asked me, “What has the philosophy of science ever done for science?!” to which I replied, “Not much. Philosophy of science is about philosophy. Science feeds for itself.” That was not quite a complete answer, but it sufficed for him.

The self, the embodiment and the morals

What is the connection between the immune self (or, generally, the bodily self) and the moral self?

I have argued, in line with Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self* 1989) that the self is a moral category, serving as the nexus of how we conceive the moral agent exercising values and ethical choices. That agent, of course, cannot be construed as an *entity*, aka, *the self*, but rather a focus upon which moral philosophers, politicians, jurists, and artists each might refract the person qua person. This modernist construction has suffered grievous blows over the past century to the point that we may wonder what, indeed, is such a self who has been effectively deconstructed by postmodern criticism.

Yet “self-ness” serves as the operative *function* of that which is mine, or identified as “me.” This adjectival approach then meets the imbroglio of the discarded certainty of the indubitable Cartesian *cogito* with an alternate, more “open” notion of personal identity. No longer a noun, selfhood has shifted its grammatical alliances to the verbs and adverbs, which may, under duress, serve as adjectives as well. Leaving the parameters of selfhood to a possessive identity function embraces the postmodern view of the self as having been decentered, and/or disenfranchised, from its modernist conceit, while at the same time allowing for a functional definition of *me* or *I*, i.e., that for which I take *responsibility*. This orientation does not gainsay the critique of individuality as a product of both manipulative social power (Foucault), unconscious opportunism (Freud) or distorted subject-object relations (Heidegger). It makes only a modest claim: The ‘me’ (or ‘I’) serves as the variable linguistic label of a *function* of possessive identity, which in the translation of Freud’s *das Ich* has been forever called (inaccurately) “the ego.”

And that which assumes responsibility also commits “itself” to personal freedom. Here we witness the slide of the epistemological knowing agent into its moral context. The Western precept of individuality and the freedom adjoining this self-image is not readily mortgaged, much less forsaken. Indeed, despite efforts to displace the modernist metaphysics of the Western mind, the basic precept of human autonomy is not easily dislodged. So the collective “error” of adhering to “the self” concept is in service to a larger agenda, namely to fortify a subjective commitment to individualized self-fulfillment, on the one hand, and personal responsibility, on the other hand. Rights and obligations held hand-in-hand. Assuming a moral posture in the face of contradictions is hardly a unique case in which putative objective

knowledge is employed to support an ideological, religious, or social belief. Simply, strict conceptual coherence has been forfeited for a mosaic of commitments, and perhaps both acknowledging and accepting that fragmentation is the key characteristic of our age.

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