

SELF AS KNOWN

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Self as Known (Me)

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1. Core Definition

The **Self as Known**, often referred to by its classical designation, the **Me** (or the **Empirical Self**), represents the objective dimension of human consciousness--the self that can be analyzed, described, and evaluated. It is the facet of the human psyche that becomes the object of introspection, reflection, and contemplation. Unlike the instantaneous process of knowing (the subject), the self as known is the product or result of that knowing process, constituting the sum total of everything a person can call their own. This comprehensive structure includes tangible possessions, relational identities, and abstract spiritual qualities, effectively defining the individual's accumulated identity and history.

This objective self is fundamentally shaped by experience and social interaction. When an individual engages in self-contemplation, they are constructing a narrative about who they are, drawing upon memories, societal feedback, and internal evaluations. The content of the **Self as Known** is therefore dynamic, constantly being updated and reorganized as the individual navigates new environments and relationships. It is the repository of self-knowledge, containing all the descriptive labels, roles, beliefs, and attitudes that define the individual's subjective reality, making it the central organizing principle for their personality and behavior patterns in the external world.

Crucially, the **Self as Known** functions as a cognitive framework, often termed the **self-concept**, which helps predict and manage future interactions. This structure is not merely a passive collection of traits; it actively filters and interprets incoming information, leading to selective attention that reinforces existing self-perceptions. For instance, if an element of the **Self as Known** is "I am a competent writer," the individual will pay more attention to success feedback regarding writing and disregard criticism or failure, thereby maintaining the stability of the known self. This mechanism ensures psychological consistency and continuity, vital for functioning effectively within complex social systems.

The definition provided in the source material--that the self is "identified through contemplation"--perfectly encapsulates the function of the **Me**. Contemplation is the active process of turning attention inward, transforming the fleeting, subjective experience into a stable, identifiable object. Without this process of objectification, the self would remain a pure, unformed stream of consciousness, inaccessible to description or self-management. Thus, the known self is the internalized image or construct that allows for both self-reflection and communication of identity to others, bridging the gap between internal experience and external presentation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The formal psychological distinction between the subjective and objective aspects of the self originates with the work of American philosopher and psychologist **William James** in his seminal 1890 text, *The Principles of Psychology*. James introduced the duality of the **Self as Knower** (the I or pure ego) and the **Self as Known** (the **Me** or empirical self). This framework provided the necessary conceptual tools for moving the study of the self from abstract philosophical speculation into empirical psychological investigation, forming the bedrock of modern self-theory.

Before James, the self was often treated as a singular, indivisible entity, primarily discussed in terms of the soul or the transcendental ego. James recognized that introspection reveals two distinct phenomena: the immediate, conscious awareness that does the perceiving (the "I") and the structured content that is perceived (the "Me"). He defined the **Me** as everything a person regards as their own, stating that the empirical self is "the sum total of all that he can call his." This definition was revolutionary because it incorporated non-mental elements, such as material possessions and social status, directly into the psychological structure of the self.

James's formulation allowed later researchers, such as George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, to expand upon the social dimension of the **Self as Known**. Cooley's "looking-glass self" theory articulated how the **Me** develops through perceiving how others view us, incorporating perceived judgments into the self-concept. Mead further developed this idea by distinguishing between the impulsive, subjective **I** and the socialized, objectified **Me**, which arises from internalizing the attitudes of the community (the "generalized other"). This history demonstrates a consistent evolution from James's internal object of contemplation to the socially constructed self used in sociological psychology.

The longevity and centrality of the **I/Me** distinction highlight its foundational importance. While contemporary models of self-hood are vastly more complex, incorporating ideas like self-schema, possible selves, and working self-concept, nearly all modern conceptualizations ultimately trace their lineage back to James's initial separation of the self into the actively experiencing subject and the passively cataloged object. The historical context confirms that the **Self as Known** is not merely an abstract philosophical term but the essential structural content upon which all theories of personality and identity are built.

3. Key Components of the Empirical Self

William James meticulously structured the **Self as Known** (the **Me**) into three primary components, moving outward from the most intimate to the most expansive: the Material Me, the Social Me, and the Spiritual Me. These components represent the different realms in which the individual anchors their sense of identity and value. The **Material Me** encompasses the body, clothing, family, home,

and property--all the tangible possessions and immediate kin that an individual claims ownership over. Damage or threat to these material extensions of the self is experienced as a personal psychological threat, demonstrating their integration into the known self.

The **Social Me** refers to the recognition a person gets from others. James argued that a person has as many social selves as there are distinct individuals or groups who recognize them and hold an image of them in their minds. This means the self presented to one's family differs from the self presented to colleagues, and both are authentic parts of the overall **Self as Known**. This component underscores the highly relational nature of identity, emphasizing that the known self is not constructed in a vacuum but is continuously negotiated and validated through interaction. The desire for social acceptance and honor is often driven by the need to maintain and strengthen these numerous social selves.

The **Spiritual Me** is considered the inner core of the **Self as Known**, encompassing subjective inner being, psychological faculties, moral consciousness, and personal values. It is the seat of reflection and the source of self-evaluation. This component includes a person's perceived abilities, temperament, and ethical framework. While the Material and Social Mes are observable or relational, the Spiritual Me is only accessible through deep introspection and is often regarded as the truest and most stable element of the individual's identity. It represents the active cognitive process of self-awareness and contemplation that identifies the self in the first place.

These three components are organized hierarchically in terms of subjective importance, though this hierarchy varies greatly among individuals. For some, the Social Me (status and reputation) might dominate, while for others, the Spiritual Me (personal integrity and values) holds paramount importance. Nevertheless, the interplay among these facets demonstrates the complexity of the **Self as Known**, which is not a single, monolithic construct but a layered system reflecting the individual's interactions with their environment, society, and internal thoughts.

4. Relationship to Self as Knower (The "I")

The primary way to understand the **Self as Known** is through its fundamental contrast with the **Self as Knower**, or the **I**. If the **Me** is the object--the empirical content of identity--the **I** is the subject--the pure, active agency of consciousness. The **I** is the subjective self that experiences, thinks, and decides; it is the ephemeral stream of consciousness or the continuous sense of personal identity that persists across time, even as the content of the **Me** changes. It is often described as the actor, while the **Me** is the acted-upon, or the narrator versus the narrative.

This relationship is critical for psychological functioning, as the **I** operates upon the content of the **Me**. The **Self as Knower** is responsible for processes such as self-awareness, self-monitoring, and self-regulation. When an individual attempts to improve their behavior, the **I** observes the current state of the **Me** (e.g., "I know I am a disorganized person") and initiates a plan to change

that known state. Without the stable content provided by the **Me**, the **I** would lack any material upon which to operate, resulting in a fractured or meaningless experience of identity.

Conversely, the **Self as Known** relies on the continuous activity of the **I** for its existence and coherence. The **Me** is not static; it is constantly being compiled and maintained by the **I's** synthesizing and retrospective functions. Every time the **I** remembers a past event, it integrates that memory into the narrative structure of the **Me**, ensuring a sense of continuity. Disruptions to this relationship, such as severe memory loss or certain dissociative states, can lead to profound identity confusion, demonstrating the necessary interdependence between the subject (knower) and the object (known).

In essence, the distinction separates experience from structure. The **I** is the living experience of the present moment--the immediate feeling of "being." The **Me** is the accumulated structure of the past, organized into a comprehensible identity system. James viewed the **I** as a transient thought, the "passing thought which claims the whole past self as its own," while the **Me** is the complex structure that this passing thought claims. This dynamic feedback loop ensures that the human self is both stable enough for social recognition and flexible enough for adaptation and growth.

5. Operationalization in Modern Psychology

In contemporary psychology, the concept of the **Self as Known** is primarily operationalized through the construct of the **Self-Concept**. The self-concept is the cognitive generalization and evaluation of oneself, often measured through descriptive questionnaires and inventories that assess traits, abilities, and values. Researchers utilize this measurable construct to study various psychological phenomena, including self-esteem (the affective evaluation of the known self), self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to execute behaviors based on the known self's capabilities), and self-discrepancy theory (the misalignment between the actual known self and ideal or ought selves).

Furthermore, the **Self as Known** is central to the development and study of **self-schemas**, which are highly organized cognitive structures that guide the processing of self-relevant information. If an element of the known self is highly salient (e.g., "I am introverted"), a corresponding self-schema is formed that facilitates the rapid processing of information consistent with introversion and filters out information that is inconsistent. These schemas illustrate how the **Me** acts as an information filter, proving that the known self is not merely a description but an active, steering mechanism for perception and behavior.

Developmental psychology heavily relies on understanding the formation of the **Self as Known**. The achievement of self-recognition, typically observed around 18 to 24 months, marks the beginning of the clear development of the **Me**. This stage allows the child to distinguish themselves as a separate object in the world, enabling the capacity for introspection and self-evaluation.

Subsequent stages involve the internalization of social roles and moral standards, further solidifying the Social and Spiritual components of the known self throughout childhood and adolescence.

In clinical and counseling settings, the **Self as Known** is a primary target for intervention. Many psychological disorders, particularly personality disorders and major depressive disorder, involve a distorted or highly negative self-concept. Therapies such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) aim directly at restructuring the negative, inaccurate content of the **Me** by challenging core beliefs and maladaptive self-schemas. By modifying the way the self is known, clinicians facilitate changes in emotional and behavioral outcomes, underscoring the vital practical significance of this conceptual distinction in applied psychological practice.

6. Significance and Impact

The profound significance of the **Self as Known** lies in its function as the indispensable foundation for personal identity, social interaction, and psychological stability. Without a coherent, accessible structure for the self--the "Me"--the individual would be incapable of maintaining temporal continuity, planning future actions, or engaging in meaningful social relationships that require a stable, recognizable identity. This construct provides the necessary continuity that connects the individual's past experiences with their present reality, ensuring that the person who wakes up today feels like the same person who went to sleep last night.

In the social sphere, the **Self as Known** facilitates complex societal organization. Society relies on individuals possessing stable identities (Social Me) that adhere to predictable roles and norms. The known self dictates how an individual presents themselves (self-presentation), how they respond to external judgment, and how they define their moral and ethical boundaries (Spiritual Me). This structure is essential for negotiating status hierarchies, fulfilling communal responsibilities, and establishing the trust necessary for cooperative behavior, giving the known self immense sociological as well as psychological importance.

Furthermore, the value placed on the various components of the **Self as Known** drives fundamental human motivation. The striving for competence, the desire for status, and the pursuit of moral integrity are all rooted in the impulse to protect, enhance, and validate the contents of the **Me**. Threats to the known self, such as public failure or criticism, often trigger strong emotional responses because they challenge the structural integrity and value assigned to one's identity. Therefore, self-preservation is fundamentally linked to the preservation of a positive and stable **Self as Known**.

7. Debates and Criticisms

While foundational, the sharp demarcation between the **Self as Knower** (I) and the **Self as**

Known (Me) is not without criticism. Phenomenological and existential approaches often argue that the separation is artificial, suggesting that consciousness is an indivisible, unitary experience. Critics contend that the moment the "I" attempts to observe the "Me," the "I" itself transforms into another object of observation, creating an infinite regress of subjects and objects. They argue that self-awareness is immediate and holistic, resisting the tidy division into active process and static content.

A second major debate centers on the concept of the **Pure Ego**. James himself struggled to locate the "I," ultimately concluding it was the "passing thought," a concept often deemed too elusive and metaphysical by empirical psychologists. Critics from a neurological perspective suggest that the subjective experience of the "I" is an emergent property of the highly organized self-referential processing within the cerebral cortex, meaning the "knower" is inseparable from the neural structures that constitute the "known." Thus, the dichotomy may reflect a linguistic or conceptual convenience rather than a true psychological separation.

Moreover, modern ecological and narrative approaches emphasize the fluidity of the self, challenging the notion that the **Me** is a fixed collection of traits. Narrative psychologists emphasize that the self is continuously reconstructed through storytelling, implying the **Self as Known** is not a static list of characteristics but an evolving autobiography. Ecological theorists emphasize that the self is perceived directly in interaction with the environment (the **Ecological Self**), suggesting that much of the self is known immediately through perception rather than mediated through abstract contemplation, thereby complicating James's original model of introspection.

Further Reading

[Psychology of Self \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Philosophy of Mind \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Principles of Psychology \(Wikipedia entry on James's work\)](#)