In Philosophy, there have been numerous approaches to define the distinctive qualities of the self. The History of Western Philosophy stands as a witness to the fact that we have an array of diverse philosophical views on the self starting from that of the ancient Greek period to the contemporary times. A few ways in which the self is denoted in Philosophy are: self as a substance; self as an illusion; self in the context of self-knowledge; self as an activity; self as a bundle of perceptions; self as a narrative centre of gravity and so on. There are several other views on the notion of the self but these examples are sufficient enough to illustrate the fact that even though we are closest to our own self like nothing else, yet, there is no unanimity of opinion regarding its nature. The debate on the self in the History of Western Philosophy exactly mirrors that. There has been no one answer to what the self is all about and even at present we are engulfed by many intriguing questions regarding it: What is the nature of the entity called self? What constitutes the self – is it consciousness or body or both? What is consciousness and how is it related to the self? What is the relationship between the self and the body? Is there any relation between consciousness and the body? Do I have a soul that is not physical or do I have a soul that is housed in the body? Is it possible that I do not have a body at all i.e. have a disembodied existence? All these questions, if examined properly will reveal that they are all actually several expressions of the historical philosophical problem commonly called the mind-body problem. It is basically asking whether ‘the self is a physical or a non-physical entity or an amalgamation of the two?’ So, in order to know the self we need to survey the mind-body problem, its solutions and development.

To understand ‘self, consciousness and the body’, I have analytically surveyed the prominent philosopher’s speculations across the ages whose views have an impact on the area of my study. The aim of this expository task has been to understand the concept of the self by understanding consciousness and the body. The main motive of this study is directed at identifying the most rational view that truly represents the nature of the self. While analysing the problem I have discovered that the debate on
the self – whether it is a material or an immaterial entity or a combination of the two –
commences with the greatest vigor from the time of the heir to the Platonic tradition,
namely the Cartesian conception of human beings as two one-sided things, a mind and
a body. Despite the huge debate on the perennial mind-body problem as mirrored in
the History of Western Philosophy, we still have not reached a conclusive end. Even
after repeated attempts we have not been able to decide on the true nature of the self.

Most of the philosophers from the time of the Greek period to that of the
modern age with a few exceptions have conceded to the mind being a subjective
entity tied up with the body. For some, the knot is a loose one whereas for others it is
deply entwined. The mind according to Plato, Descartes, and Locke does not have a
necessary connection with the body. But Aristotle, Spinoza, and Leibniz were
exceptions as they somehow or the other approved of some kind of unification of the
mind and the body. Each had given their own reason for accepting the unity of the
mind and the body which have been thoroughly discussed in the thesis. Hume and
Kant talked more about the techniques that the mind employs in the process of
understanding. In the contemporary times, the terminology and the way we address
the mind-body problem has changed. Now we talk of the mind mostly as
consciousness and the body in terms of the brain. The age old question about how to
justify the reconciliation of the mind and the body has changed to the problem of
grasping how to give an account of the production of the non-physical i.e. mental
subjective conscious experiences from a physical lump of grey matter. The
contemporary philosophers of mind have been majorly concerned with the realm of
consciousness. Dennett, Searle, McGinn, Chalmers and so on have tried their best to
explain or explain away consciousness. Whatever be the form of the question the
substance of it remains the same – how do we explain the union of the physical and
the mental in the self. I have tried to analyse the problem of reconciling the conscious
experiences with the body by using the Wittgensteinien advice of taking the whole
picture into consideration. What seems to be advisable is to leave the Cartesian
shadow lands and seek out the Aristotelian sunlight, where one can see so much
better. The need is to adopt the Aristotelian notion of totality i.e. human beings as
ensouled creatures. The conceptions of division that has been rooted in the Platonic
and Cartesian tradition should be repudiated.

One of the best ways to connect both i.e. the mind and the body is to take the
total picture into consideration rather than focusing on just a part of it. What is of
utmost importance in such a situation is to step back and consider human beings quite
differently – not as loose combinations of two incompatible parts but as a complex
whole with many aspects that have to be thought about in different ways. Being conscious is not, as Descartes thought, a queer extra kind of stuff in the world. It is just one of the things that we do. Consciousness and the body belong to the same self or person. They are entwined together in a complex way in the self. The cobbler’s mind needs the cobbler’s body. The unit should not be an abstracted body or brain but the whole living person. It is only to a living human being that we can ascribe certain things like thoughts, sensations, blindness, deafness, sight and so on. The point is that we must attribute consciousness not to a part but to the whole of the human being.

The sense of deep mystery surrounding physical basis of consciousness does not stem from factual ignorance but from conceptual entanglements and it can be erased by means of clarification of conceptual confusions. It might be that we already know the answer but has not been able to accept it due to some preconceived notions. In order to get rid of such notions we must clear the deeply embeded false dichotomies in our minds that subjective/objective, physical/mental and so on are irreconcilable. We must remind ourselves of some simple conceptual truths regarding their nature and location. The quest is not to make some path breaking discoveries. What is required is to clear off the debris of conceptual entanglements and misconceptions created by the dichotomies. What we have to do is to show that the physical basis of consciousness is not something abnormal and mysterious. We have to show that physical and mental items are in some way suitable to each other. There is no mystery involved in their being part of one whole.

The answer to the problem of reconciliation of the mind-body or consciousness-body is not something new or path breaking. The solution is hidden in a network of possibilities offered by various philosophers across ages as shown in the survey. For the organic unity of a being or self which has a body as well as consciousness we can fall back upon Aristotle. Spinoza and Leibniz also conceded to unity of mind and body. Although the metaphysical reasons Spinoza and Leibniz offered for the unity is not acceptable now and that even Aristotle’s view is also not without flaws, yet, the important point is that they somehow or the other accepted the two facets of reality as one. The contemporary philosophers of mind – Dennett, Searle, McGinn and Chalmers all agree about the biological origin of consciousness. This means that all of them accept the body as a necessary part of our conscious experiences and thus reduce the gap between the conscious and the unconscious i.e mental and the physical. So, the study of mind at present is moving in the right direction trying to locate the neural events necessary for conscious experiences. Of course, there is a difference in opinion regarding the plausibility of such a project or
the procedure for reaching an end. But what is important is that the body is counted as an essential part of the self along with consciousness. For the concept of self as a unity of consciousness we can take cue from Locke, McGinn and Searle. Kant can be credited to have prepared a blue-print about the way the mind works. His idea that the human mind comes loaded with certain features can be said to be a major advance in human thought. His belief that we can only know our own self only as it appears to us and can never know it as it is in itself due to our cognitive structure can be said to have paved the way for McGinn’s claim regarding ‘cognitive closure’. Dennet’s criticism of ‘cartesian theatre model’ and Chalmers’ claim that consciousness has both physical and non-physical aspects are noteworthy. Dennet’s observation that qualia are not something inexplicable as is generally claimed is significant in removing the mystery aspect of consciousness. According to him, the reason that makes us believe that qualia are inexplicable is that sometimes our descriptions do not meet the paradigm of descriptions we have set. He asserts that qualia can be explored with the right usage of language and there is nothing mysterious about it. But most of all, Searle must be credited for his efforts to clear misconceptions about the dichotomies—physical/mental, subjective/objective and so on which can be held responsible for standing as an obstacle in our accepting the simple truth that the mental and the physical can be a part of one whole and thus paved the right way to know ourselves.

Taking clue from the network of possibilities or solutions offered by philosophers across ages I would like to reiterate the commonsensical notion that in reality both kinds of continuities – continuity of conscious experiences and the body – seems to be inextricably entwined in the concept of the identity of the self. Continuity of the self over time is supposed to have both of them i.e. objective and subjective aspects. Neither bodiless psychological states nor a body without psychological states provides any grounding for the sense of identity that the self exhibits. Human beings exist in time and history. We cannot abstract their ‘consciousness’ and their ‘bodies’ from the complex and interactive world they live in. We are speaking of the holistic human self here, and we need a dynamic and systematic understanding of them, not one that can be captured in a still picture. The need is to adopt the perspective that instead of looking at it as a problem of separate entities that must be reconciled, we must look at consciousness and the body as a part of a dynamic system. Adopting such a viewpoint will play a significant part in deepening our understanding of the self.
The above mentioned ideas have been explored and analysed in the thesis in the following chapters:

1) Introduction.

2) Ancient Greek Philosopher’s Attempt to Unveil the Mystery of Self, Consciousness and the Body.


4) Some Contemporary Philosophical Viewpoints on: Self, Consciousness and the Body.

5) Recapitulating the Survey on: Self, Consciousness and the Body.

6) Analysis and Conclusion.