CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
My thesis is basically an attempt to understand the nature of the self. The question "who or what am I?" is a perennial question in philosophy. But the answer seems to have successfully eluded the philosophers in all the ages. The self is something closest to us, indeed it is identical with ourselves. And yet philosophers have found it difficult to say what sort of thing it is.

In the post Wittgensteinian era the problem of the nature of self and the connected problem of personal identity has been discussed with renewed vigour and subtlety. My thesis is limited to contemporary literature available on the subject in Analytical philosophy. In the analytical approach three sorts of questions are distinguished in this connection:

(I) What is the concept of the self or what sort of thing the self is?

(II) What is the criterion of the identity of the self? and

(III) Does the concept of the self pick out an actual entity in reality?

Of these the third question is of factual type. As such it is not for the philosophers to answer. It may
be that the concept of the self does not, in fact, pick out anything in reality. That is, it may be like some other important concepts, for example, of 'free will' and 'pure sponteneity' which have no fulfilment in life. Nevertheless, it is a concept which we have, which we apply to ourselves, and which is supposed to signify what is essential about ourselves. It therefore, deserves serious philosophical reflection which includes answering the first two questions mentioned above.

The concept of the self signifies or stands for the subject of mental phenomena. We are familiar with mental phenomena of a diverse variety: sensation, perception, desire, emotion and volition. In case of human beings the mental states corresponding to these categories of mental phenomena seem to occur in relation to particular individuals constituting their respective minds. Thus we talk of mental states as belonging to an individual person. In this way the mental states display a special kind of unity, known as the unity of mind, belonging to each individual person separately. The self is thus characterised as the subject of mental phenomena, i.e. the thing which has the mental states unified in the mind. The self as a subject seems to own its mental states
in a way somewhat different than the way in which it owns its body. The body can be seen as 'external' to the self in the sense that we can distance ourselves from it and look at it from the outside as it were in a way almost as we look at other things in the external world. As we know Descartes in his Methodic Doubt did distance himself from his body to arrive at what he thought was his essential self. But can we distance ourselves from our mental states in the same way? It seems hard to imagine so. Apart from the fact that mental states are in constant flux and we cannot hold one and look at it in the 'now', the mental states are things which we go through, we suffer or enjoy and identify with. I cannot, for example, distance myself from my pain in a way in which I can distance myself from my toe which I can even cut off and throw away. The self seems to be 'mingled' with consciousness in a way in which it is not with the body. Yet we would be wrong to identify the self with the Mind (as Descartes tried to do). The self is seen as the subject of the mental state constituting the mind. We speak of ourselves as having mind not being the mind. Moreover, we can imagine ourselves undergoing radical change in our minds (in our beliefs and sentiments etc.) and even losing it
completely. A mindless-self is not inconceivable.

Ordinarily, we use the word 'self' and 'person' interchangably. Each individual person is an individual self. But in case of radical change in the individual's mind, as stipulated above, a radical change in personality follows which makes us say that the person has changed. For example, we can say that Buddha was a different person after enlightenment. Or if my friend having undergone a thorough brain-washing is converted to communism displaying totally altered sentiment, I would say that he is not the same person now. But in these examples we would not say that the self has changed. This shows that in some of its uses the concept of the self and the concept of the person may not be treated equivalent. The reason is that the concept of a person is amenable to both a quantitative and a qualitative analyses. The qualitative change refers to mental characteristic responsible for a personality and therefore affects the use of the concept of 'person'. However, for the most part the self is identical with person. And that is how it is treated in my thesis.

The self as subject is best apprehended in the first-person perspective, i.e., directly and immediately
in self-consciousness. It is the referent of 'I' (and also of course of other personal pronouns). This is to avoid thinking that the self is apprehended in introspection. Self-consciousness is not an exercise in introspecting. Self-consciousness signifies a non-cognitive awareness of the self. In other words, self-consciousness is not consciousness of an 'object' called 'the self'. So the self is not 'given' in the third-person perspective, though when we use the third-person pronouns we are referring to the same sort of thing as we do when we use the word 'I'. However, to be sure we must make a distinction between two kinds of subjects of mental states, since our first-person perspective implies that selves are necessarily self-conscious. But normally we treat all kinds of animals too as subjects of mental states. There is no doubt that all living creatures manifest some or other mental states in their behaviour. This entitles them to be treated as subjects. But we will hesitate to ascribe them self-consciousness. It will be extraordinary to ascribe self-consciousness to such lowly creatures as flies and moths for examples. The self-conscious subjects properly called selves display a special kind of unity. The unity of self of this kind of subject can adequately be grasped only from the inside, i.e., in self-consciousness. Without this unity the mind of a creature will display only a succession of mental
states since their causal relation with their body is not sufficient to explain the unity of mind. It is in self-consciousness that one unifies the past with the present and the various aspects of the present into an integrated field of consciousness. Since this unity of self is attained only in and through self-consciousness, we can safely conclude that the self is necessarily self-conscious, i.e., there is no self prior to self-consciousness. Moreover, the unity of self does not come in grades. It is an all-or-nothing matter — you either have a self or you don't.

The concept of a self is also to be distinguished from the concept of a human being. The latter is a concept of biology but the concept of self is a mental concept. It is because of the mentality of the 'self' concept that we can ascribe self to ourselves directly in self-consciousness. Moreover, unlike empirical concepts we don't have to wait on experience or fieldwork to tell us what a self is. We can know all that is to be known about the self by philosophical reflection about the concepts. As McGinn puts it: "An indication of this feature of the concept of self is this: If a creature understands the concept of self and this concept in fact
applies to that creature, then the creature must know this - selves necessarily know that they are selves; but it is perfectly possible for a creature to grasp the biological concept of a human being and for this concept to apply to that creature, yet the creature not know that this concept applies to it - human beings do not necessarily know that they are human beings".¹ So what sort of thing the referent of 'I' is?

Some philosophers have noted that the problem about the self is imaginary and the enquiry does not even take off the ground. This is so because they suggest that 'I' is not a referring expression in the first place. The use of this expression is meant simply to draw the attention of other people to the speaker. It is like the expression 'it' in the sentence "It is raining". The word 'it' does not refer to something which is supposed to be raining. There is no 'it' that is doing the raining. 'It is raining' simply means that raining is going on. If this point were correct the enquiry into the nature of the self will indeed have to be conducted differently or even suspended. But (fortunately) for

Philosophy of Mind this point does not seem to be correct. We can show this by the following example: The truth contained in "I am a student of N.E.H.U." can also be expressed by someone else's statement, "Shakuntala is a student of NEHU" or "she is a student of NEHU". These statements are interchangeable in respect of truth. And this interchangability seems to depend on the fact that in the three statements 'I', 'Shakuntala', and 'she' refer to the same entity. This shows that the referring role of personal pronouns is central to their use. We can therefore, bypass the objection made above and proceed the enquiry in the nature of the self with the question 'what sort of thing 'I' refers to?'

In contemporary discussion of the nature of the self we find that three types of theories emerge. In the first (I have called the Body Theory) the self is straightforwardly claimed to be the body. Thus the referent of the 'I' is a living organism endowed with mental attributes. In modern empiricist philosophy this theory hails from Thomas Hobbes. But recently it has been most vigorously defended by A.J. Ayer and later by Bernard Williams. Of course it is a materialist conception of the self and has many ancestors in philosophy.
The second type with its several variants constitutes larger part of the contemporary discussion on the subject. According to this doctrine (which I have called the Mind Theory), the self is to be understood in terms of mental relations of various kinds. In this theory the reference of 'I' is a mental construct created in certain ways from the mental states which we attribute to a given self. The earliest version of it is to be found in Locke who invokes the causal relation of mental state as exemplified by memory. Later, Hume refers to the 'inconceivable rapidity' with which 'perceptions' occur in a given mind to constitute a bundle of perception which is identified with the self. A more powerful variant on the theme is provided by Derek Parfit who invokes the relation of 'psychological connectedness' to explain construction of the self. And fourthly some philosophers have invoked the relations of 'belonging' to the same mind by the reference to sameness of brain, to explain the constitution of a given self. The third theory (The Substance Theory) maintains that the concept of the self is a primitive notion which cannot be explained in terms of anything else such as the Body Theory and the Mind Theory attempt. In this theory therefore self is treated as a simple substance which is distinct and ontologically separate
both from the body and the mind. Thus the self cannot be reduced to the mental states of which it is considered to be the subject. The notion of the self as a primitive concept has been discussed most profoundly by Strawson in his book 'Individual' as the concept of person. But unfortunately Strawson refuses to say what this concept refers to. In other words, it has not identified self with simple mental substance. Another philosopher who has upheld this theory is H.D. Lewis. More recently however, Colin McGinn has most forcefully argued for the third theory identifying the self with simple mental substance. In what follows I prepare to examine the central arguments of those theories and to judge how far they are successful in elucidating the nature of the self.

In analytical philosophy the discussion of these theories centres round the questions of 'personal identity'. As it is generally put the questions of personal identity is about the persistance of the sameness of a person over a period of time. We normally take it that we have existed over a period of time from birth to the present as the same self inspite of several changes both in the body and the mind. So the question is what accounts for
retaining identity and allowing the changes to take place. The idea behind the approach is that if we can determine what changes can be allowed without changing the self then it will throw light on the nature of the self. This is because the nature of the changes permissible without changing identity depends upon the nature of the thing in question, in this case for nature of the self. This means, of course, that conceptually understanding of the self is prior to the understanding of personal identity. But methodologically the understanding of what constitutes the personal identity will take us to the essential core of selfhood since we would know what changes in a person are relevant or irrelevant to the persistence of the self.

The question of personal identity is answered by raising the question of the 'criteria' of identity. The meaning of criteria is somewhat ambiguous. It has two senses, an epistemological sense and a metaphysical sense. In the epistemological sense the criteria amounts to a 'way of telling' if a thing exists or a state of affair obtains. But in metaphysical sense to give the criteria is to specify what constitutes the thing or whatever is in question. For example, the identity of
a NEHU student may be determined always and only by the identity card he is supposed to carry. The identity card is the way of knowing that so and so is a student of philosophy department in NEHU. But 'being a student of philosophy' is not constituted by the identity card. In the same way ordinarily we are able to tell that the object in front of me is a person or self, if it is a living human body. But this may not constitute being a person, unless we assume that the way of telling what something is always coincides with what constitutes that thing. It is necessary not to conflate the two senses since in the present context the search for criteria requires us to determine what constitutes the same self and not how we infact tell when it is the same self.

The method which has generally been followed in recent philosophy to conduct the search is by applying what is known as 'survival test'. In this we imagine a person undergoing changes of various sorts, mentally and physically and intuitively judge if the same self persisted. If the answer is in the positive then irrespective of these changes the identity remains unaffected and this fact would tell us what is essential to the persistence of sameness of the self. Taking imaginary
cases has the advantage that we don't rely on the familiar ways of telling when the sameness obtains, and thus avoid conflation of the two senses mentioned above. With these explanations about the method of enquiry in mind we can now proceed to judge the three types of theories mentioned above.

But before taking up the three theories, there is a general discussion in chapter-II about what we understand by 'self' as referred to by the pronoun 'I'. This chapter also contains a discussion of the concept of criterion as to be understood in the discussion of the problem of personal identity.

The Chapters-III, IV and V of my thesis are about the three types of theories of the nature of the self also containing their evaluation. The first of the three theories, The Body Theory is discussed in chapter-III according to which identity of a person consists in the identity of his body. Chapter-IV is the Mind Theory along with its variants trying to provide a mentalistic criterion of personal identity. The last of the three theories is discussed in Chapter-V which is called the Substance Theory which tries to reveal the nature of the self without
giving us a criterion of personal identity as it believes that the concept of 'self' being primitive cannot be reduced to any other concept. In this the self is construed as a simple substance.

But we will see in the evaluation of the three theories that none of them are convincing enough to make us believe in them and have not managed to reveal the nature of self. Thus inspite of the effort of different Philosophers, the self has remained a mystery and yet whose existence we cannot deny. To borrow the words from Sartre, "the self is a mystery in broad day light".