The Origin of Self-Consciousness

The adjective self-conscious is defined as “aware of oneself or one’s own being, actions, or thoughts.”¹ In his book, The Gifts of the Jews, author Thomas Cahill suggests that

. . . it is with David that the interior journey begins. A sense of the self is notably absent in all ancient literature. I, as we commonly use it today to mean one’s interior self, is seldom in evidence before the humanist autobiographies of the early modern period . . . [but] the Psalms [of David] are filled with I’s: the I of repentance, the I of anger and vengeance, the I of self-pity and self-doubt, the I of despair, the I of delight, the I of ecstasy.²

God and Self-Consciousness

However, Cahill and other scholars have not grasped the relationship between this self-consciousness and the fact that several hundred years earlier God had appeared to Moses in the desert of Sinai and had spoken to him out of the burning bush, saying, “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14). In Hebrew, God spoke to Moses and said, “‘eheyeh ‘asher ‘eheyeh.”³ The word ‘eheyeh (hayah) is a verb with three meanings — “to be,” “to become” and “to effect.” The word ‘asher has multiple meanings such as “so that,” “for” and “whom.”⁴ God might well have told Moses that he would be/become/effect for whom he would be/become/effect. This reference to Moses of God’s own self-consciousness therefore implied that self-consciousness only exists in relation to “others.” Thus, there is no “self” apart from “others.”

Furthermore, “Godself” is the ultimate source of all other “selves.” Human self-consciousness, therefore, is a gift from God to humanity. Let us then celebrate his gift, accept his gift, share his gift, and return his gift to him with thanksgiving.
Jesus Christ and the “Self”

This understanding of the “self” was profoundly confirmed by God’s incarnation as Jesus Christ. On repeated occasions in his ministry, Jesus referred to himself as “I AM.” For example:

. . . I AM the door of the sheep. — John 10:7, emphasis supplied.

I AM the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. — John 10:11, emphasis supplied.

. . . I AM the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live . . . — John 11:25, emphasis supplied.

. . . I AM the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. — John 14:6, emphasis supplied.

Conclusion

Again, self-consciousness is the gift of God to humanity. Furthermore, since “the gift of God is eternal life,” human self-consciousness is likewise eternal (Romans 6:23).

Endnotes

1. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.