The Allegory of the Cave from Plato’s Republic,

challenges the assumption that we naturally know what reality is;
life of regular people is like life in a dark cave with shadows of things projected on the wall;
we do not see things as they really are, in color and in three dimensions;
the illusion is so strong that people would not believe those who tell them they are mistaken;
such prophets and teachers are considered crazy;
one can learn the true nature of reality only after having experienced it by leaving the cave;
once one has experienced the true nature of reality, there is no going back to the previous way of life;
one may choose to go back and educate the people but one cannot live as before
Different Ideas of “Self”

Nairn
The contemporary Western “self”

*Values of contemporary Western culture:*
democracy
self-reliance
individualism
autonomy
fascination for freedom

*Idea of freedom:*
freedom of choice
person’s choices should not be questioned or judged by others
the fact of making a choice makes it valid

*Individualism:*
freedom as a context for self-discovery, self-identification
my choices define who I am or want to be
self-determination: I have the freedom to become who I choose to be or continuously choose something different

*Democracy* is the extension of this power of choice (choice to elect your government)

*Autonomy:*
all are responsible for their own choices
“the right to be left alone”
Critique of such a shallow understanding of he self and alternative models

So, all search for the freedom or liberation for their self
but in the Western society are we successful?

Nairn

The downside:
too many choices lead to indifference and random choices because there is no basis for decision-making
lead to dissatisfaction anf lack of freedom as we can’t examine all choices
create an illusion of free and autonomous choice, while in fact we are not at all free but are controled by marketing, corporations, politicians, etc.
desire for autonomy leads to isolation and abandonment
relying upon oneselves in making choices leads to being stuck with the choices and ourselves, no one to turn to

Merton: read pp. 28-29

The Hindu tradition: *Upanishads*

An exercise that teaches what our true self (Atman) is. A number of practical experiences are offered:
Yourself in the mirror with or without nice clothes and makeup on: are you two different selves?
Yourself in a dream: is your self the same as your physical body?
Yourself in a dreamless state of sleep; this cannot be your true self as the self presupposes awareness; dreamless state also proves that reality is an illusion as there is a state where it is not experienced.

By means of gradually detaching yourself from various layers of reality, you experience your true self without physical limitations.

This true self is the universal or divine self (Brahman or Shiva, depending on the tradition) that is the same in all creatures.

This is the only true liberation; it leads to a peaceful state and a profound change in how you relate to others.
The Buddhist tradition: Walpola

The negative consequences of believing that you have a self, i.e., a permanent unchanging entity behind the changing reality:

This is a false belief, with no corresponding reality.

This false belief causes the thoughts and behavior of self-preservation and self-protection, which are the source of all evil: harmful thoughts of me, mine, selfish desire, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism etc.

Enlightenment and liberation is the destruction of this false belief.

The Buddhist idea of the self: Anatman or anatta

How do we prove there is no self and liberate ourselves?

The self cannot be the body because otherwise we could control our body and prevent it from being sick.

The self cannot be feelings, perceptions, activities, and even consciousness: because otherwise we could command and control all these abilities, order them not to be sick, or not to exist, etc.

The body is impermanent, unstable, and is the cause of unhappiness; how does it qualify to be my self? Why would I want it to be my self?

Thus one gradually learns to feel disgust for the body, feelings, perception, and consciousness, and is gradually repelled and thus freed from them (detachment).

By peeling away the sheaths of reality one realizes that there is no self but it is only an illusion. As a result, all the negatives coming from the self are jettisoned.