

# **“I”**

## ***The final essay for the Philosophy of Mind Pathways Course***

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**To; Dr G Klempner**

Who am “I”? Or should it be what am I? The nature of the self has been examined critically over the years. Is it possible to defend the self from possible attacks on its existence? Consider, for instance, the famous quote from Hume’s “Treatise on Human Nature”;

*“For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat, cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception.”*

In this passage, Hume is casting doubt on the possibility of ever knowing the self, perhaps even suggesting that the self (as many would like to think of it) is a fiction. There is some argument as to whether Hume’s “myself” refers to the same thing as the Cartesian self, but the assertion of doubt is still striking. More recently, Wittgenstein queries what this “I” might be;

*“There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas.*

*Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be noted?*

*You say that this case is altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. But you do not really see the eye.*

*And from nothing in the field of sight can it be concluded that it is seen from an eye.”*

*Tractatus 5.631 – 5.633*

It is never easy to assume simple interpretations of Wittgenstein’s gnomic writings, but he appears to be dismissing the idea of mind as a simple monadic entity, and describing it as a creation of language. Mind, for him, is a composite entity.

Neuroscience has done most to give credence to the idea that the self is an illusion. If you look into the brain, you will certainly see inputs and outputs, cells networking together to deal with input, but nowhere will you discover neural activity organised into anything like a self. Many neuroscientists, and philosophers who regard neurological evidence as of primary importance therefore conclude that the self is an illusion.

Faced with this, we might ask several questions. Firstly, is it worth saving the concept of self

from the attacks upon it? Secondly, and arising from the first question, what is it that the self does? How does the concept of thinking about “I” help me? Thirdly, is there any evidence or proof for the existence of the self?

When I use the word “I” as anything other than a simple pronoun, what do I mean by it? Can we use this “I” on its own? When we look at the extension to “I” made by Descartes – “I am” – we seem to be saying something important about ourselves. “I am” suggests not only a declaration of our identity, but an exploration of it. “I think therefore I am” is the famous Cartesian proof of the existence of self. Our ability to introspect and be self-conscious could guarantee our existence, and from there we might expand outwards to discover what else is real. However, as we have seen from an exploration of various themes in the philosophy of mind, we are on very shaky ground when we try to make the self a separate essence from the world of physical things (including my own body). My right to say “I” might be well grounded in the ability to introspect, but if I believe in a mind-body duality, it could easily lead me to doubt the existence of others. If I have a right to say “I”, or “I am” in a meaningful way, then I would expect it to confirm that I am a conscious being, in particular, a self-conscious being, with agency and free will. If I wish to avoid Descartes’ error, then I might also need to add that this “I” is also embodied. We are according to Heidegger, “an I-thing with a body attached”. As such an embodied free self-conscious agent, I am able to relate to other minds, and recognise their claims to a similar status.

How is it that we feel entitled to say “I” or “I am”; to organise our world view so that material things and others seem to radiate out from us like the spokes on a wheel? Yet at the same time, this self-consciousness still allows me to recognise that others also have this very same feeling. We have now rejected Descartes view of a mind essence separate from the body, yet we still accept that mind is invisible under a microscope (unless we believe in complete reductionist ideas). Identity seems to be both discovered and asserted, and the assertion of the identity seems to make it true. “I am” seems to state an identity prior to us discovering it, and therefore it seems to us to be a truth which is necessary and a priori.

As we have seen much of the debate about the “I” has been either based on Cartesianism, or else on some kind of knee-jerk reaction against it. The concept of the self is so powerful within us that we seem to regard it as an entity in itself, something that has a definite existence, and which is a mysterious “something extra” to our corporeal existence. Perhaps we should take a tip from the passer-by, who, when asked how to get to a certain spot said “I wouldn’t start from here”. Perhaps we should do something other than start with a certain disembodied spirit, and then work outwards towards knowledge of everything else..

Many psychologists and philosophers believe that the self is constructed socially; that we

“spin” ourselves a self. (Dennett, “Consciousness Explained”). Animals create boundaries to separate their worlds and species from others. This is mostly a biological process. In addition, homo sapiens has developed language to enable us to represent ourselves to others and to ourselves. Perhaps the “I” is no more than part of our extended human phenotype. So maybe that will be the answer to the search for “I”; instead of a separate mind and body which interact in some mysterious way, we should look no further than the human phenotype, which has developed the self as a natural and useful aid to survival.. Through evolution, our natural consciousness has become “self” consciousness, thus distinguishing ourselves from non human animals. We should be careful to note here, that a philosopher with a reliable scientific background – R Tallis – counsels against placing too much stress on evolution. For Tallis, self consciousness is a natural feature of homo sapiens.

There is certainly something compelling about the self being part of a narrative spun by ourselves. Those who adhere to this view say we live our lives in a host of stories, which have connection with the stories of other people in various ways; so actually, our selves are really cross-sections of stories. The self is created by a vast web of stories, as is our relationship with reality. We understand and identify things by placing them in the stories we tell about them: just like selves, things do not really exist outside of stories.

These linguistic attempts to explain the self are mostly advocated by continental philosophers such as Ricoeur and Merleau-Ponty, but variants of them are also espoused by Dennett. We might note Dennett’s remark about the web of stories;

"Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, *is* their product, not their source."

However, we might ask, is the narrative self our actual self, or just a representation of it? It seems to somehow beg too many questions to regard the self as just a node in a network of symbols and signs

If we have decided that there is nothing left of the Cartesian self, and we wish to see something more permanent, less shifting than a narrative-constructed self, maybe we might consider Heidegger, and the concept of “Da-sein”. Although there is no equivalent English expression, da-sein roughly translates as “being in the world”. For Heidegger, the self is quite unlike the extensionless Cartesian subject viewing a world of extended physical things, of which it is not a part. Da sein is “that being whose being is an issue for itself”. Heidegger’s self is in and of the world. Unfortunately, it is unclear what da-sein actually is; an individual self, or some strange primordial entity of which we are a part. The “I-thing” which is part of us seems to be of little importance in Heidegger’s philosophy. The same might be said of the self in existentialist thought. The self is nothing; it is always “becoming”, at the whim of our own wish for freedom and our ability to see the world as it could be other than it is.

After having reviewed some possible origins of the self, in order to conclude, I am forced back on my own inner instincts as to what statements like “I” and “I am” mean for me..

The self certainly means that I exist, although, by way of recognising the problems of Cartesianism, I accept that this “I” is embodied.

The self places me at the centre of physical objects, events and other persons, who I recognise as “selves” in their own right.

For me, the self is necessary a priori, though I recognise that it might evolve and change, perhaps by such processes as envisaged in the narrative process.

I recognise that the self is also “worlded” in some way, although not as strongly as suggested by Heidegger.

I believe that the self causes me to have feelings that I am a free agent, with agency, free will and respect for other selves, and not the other way round as suggested by Existentialists.

Feeling any of the above things does not mean that I have clear and definite grounds in fact, for them.

Finally, I would like to remark that writing this paper has been something of an ordeal, causing me to review much of the seemingly obvious parts of the Philosophy of mind. Perhaps it is as suggested in course notes that;

“We believe less than we did before, and that means we know more.” GK 295.

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