

# [The apes, dogs or ants have a self?](https://assignbuster.com/the-apes-dogs-or-ants-have-a-self/)

The philosophy of “ the self” appears intractable. It is fundamentallythe metaphysical problem of identity which runs deep in all disciplines. To besure, most of us have folk theories of the self, whether we can articulatethese or not.

Perhaps you think it is a narrative, like the stories you tellothers about yourself. Or maybe you see it as a myth, and too slippery aconcept to discuss cogently. In more abstract terms, some see it as a sort ofindexical like “ I”, “ you” and “ here”. Daniel Dennett has described it as a” convenient fiction” like “ the center of gravity” (Dennett 2005).

It may be that, like the Democriteanatom, philosophy has long ago exhausted its explanatory ability over “ the self”. If so, we would gladly defer to science. Certainly the sciences have a greatdeal to say about the nature of consciousness. What could philosophy do exceptask imponderable questions, like whether apes, dogs or ants have a self? Wewill venture that science has not definitively explained how something susceptibleto constant change can retain a unique identity. Identity is an intractablesource of problems and paradoxes in all the sciences. We are not ready to takelessons on the metaphysics of self from science in its current state (Hall 2010).

For instance, there are more than a dozeninterpretations of quantum mechanics (de la Peña, et al. 2015). Surely there is room for philosophy to bringsome coherence.   It has been said that 98 percent ofthe atoms in the human body are replaced yearly (Aebersold 1949). Like theship of Theseus, we intuitively accept that after all planks are replaced thevessel remains the same. The self is that vessel. The passage of time and natureof physical change implies that no single essence, whether physical or mental remainsunique. Even our perception of “ self” changes with time as we age.

In this paradigm, the self appears composed ofa long series of instances. It is like Heraclitus’ “ river of change”. The selfcan never step into the same river because both the river and the self arealways changing. What then binds the different instances of one’s existence? Isthe self a narrative, like a story we tell ourselves? Some philosophers rejectthe narrative theory, but it serves as a heuristic nonetheless.

We will rejectphysicalism and borrow from Thomas Nagel’s famous phrase: “ There is somethingit is like to be a bat” (Nagel 1974). If so, then surely, there is something itis like to be me. There is a “ thisness” to the self, and this is true atany given moment in time. Thus, there is an array of experiences that fallwithin the gravitational pull of the self. Hume argued that there was simply noglue to hold these disparate experiences together other than custom and habit (Hume 2003). This bundle theory of self is an inadequatecontainer of experiences. As with any other object, there must be something tobind things together. We argue that haecceity is the metaphysical glue.

Wepropose then, the “ haecceity theory” of self. This is a realist theory of theself as a universal, existing outside of space and time. It is the relational container of “ one-to-many” particulars that come in and out of existence as we pass through time.  However, there are also bundles of powers and properties that come withthe self.

It is a metaphysical package deal. With this haecceity comes” ownership”. We do not imagine “ the self” floating freely about –at least notin the material world. This is no different than the properties of quantumparticles. They must remain attached somehow to the particular entity.

Neithercan “ the self” inhabit Chalmers’ zombies (Chalmers 1996). And too, “ the self” implies the existenceof free will. The self must be able to direct its own thoughts, if not its ownactions. We know also, empirically, that most properties of the self are notaccidental. They persist throughout life. At every snapshot in life we feel like one distinct person.

Unlessafflicted by psychopathology we report one unique identity. Stated differently, we do not confuse the self for a neighbor, a friend, for a past version of ourselves. Something of essence remains “ constant” –a certain haecceity. The selfis like a metaphorical container we pour memories into.

And out of this we getcoherent identities despite the different physical and psychological renderings. We call that “ container” “ the self”. In the narrative theory of self, memory becomes indispensable to acoherent identity. The perception of remote instances, of the seemingly distinctpersonas is bound by the impression of memory. But given how critical memory isto self, what do we make of the present or the future self? Are we “ selfless” inthe present moment? People report feeling a loss of self-awareness duringmoments of love, musical enjoyment, or religious ecstasy. Furthermore, absent-mindedness(at its most severe spectrum, petit-mal seizures) is a similar state of being.  Is there then no “ self” in the present? If thereis “ something that it is like to be a bat”, surely there is something is itlike to be me –at any given moment.

I am more than the materialcomposition of my body. I am also more than the subjective narrative. I am thenarrator and the protagonist in this story. I am at once the actor and thespectator in the Cartesian theater.

Call that the “ cogito theory” of self. Descartesfamously argued that thinking is itself proof of being (Descartes 1996). Who can withstand persistent skepticismtoward the self? We arrive at a circularity: Thinking is proof of being, andbeing is proof of self. The problem of the self, is linked to the question of identity. Identityis a deep metaphysical question with broad implications about the nature ofself, time, concrete/abstract entities, actuality and being.

Identity is monadic (atomistic) andstructural (relative). This is true of abstract and concrete entities. Out ofthe existential vacuum we get protons, planets and persons. Philosophers refer to two distinct “ existential variables”, particulars and universals. According to Quine’s slogan, “ To be is to be the value of a variable” (Quine 1948). How then does identity get traction from mere variables? If existencerequires “ containers of being”, the self is the container into which we pouridentities, those changing descriptions we hold of ourselves. The objects ofour world are like receptacles identities. This is where universals take holdof particulars.

When it comes to the problem of identity, what is true forprotons is true for persons.  The problem of identity permeates physics, biology and all the science. The problem cannot be reduced. It can be greatly informed but not resolved throughmathematics. Perhaps set theory could help us make sense of identities. DavidLewis has taken this direction more broadly in metaphysics (Lewis 1991). Here then is where philosophy bringscoherence by treating identity in terms of universals and particulars.

We cantake these two things as variables. On their own, these variables are empty. Existence requires a match between particulars and universals. Yet, theirrepeated matching leaves universals unchanged and free to attach. The individualshowever, must have independence and uniqueness sufficient to ground existenceitself. Whether with protons, persons or planets, without haecceities (ofindividuals) and quiddities (of universals) to ground them both, insoluble properties would pour overindistinct objects. Properties could not blend with each other in rational, orderly ways.

Objects could not identify each other as distinct individualsuniting to form a higher order. Without the ontological hardness of identity, existenceitself would bleed out of the world like a dissolving organism. Life and itsevolution would be impossible. The “ self” is a lifelong trajectory. It is a metaphysical container ofsorts. Our identities are objects moving through space and time, carriedforward by their own inertia. They are always the subjective “ point of view”.

They are like the spotlight shining along the road. Occasionally we attempt to viewthe entire trajectory. But that too is an illusion, for the scene is constantlychanging. The container of self is porous.  Existence is an infinite array of particulars and universals. These joinin the assembly of objects and have alternating roles as “ the container” and” the contained”.  The matching of these “ existentialvariables” gives existence its haecceity or “ thisness”. If universals are thecurrency of existence, haecceities are the different denominations.

Weattribute uniqueness of being, a certain denomination to our changing selves. The boy is not the thirty year old, or the fifty year old, or the elderly man. Each of these identities (denominations) passes seamlessly into the other, eachwith their own haecceity. In the universal currency of haecceity, the denominationof the 12 year old boy is faithfully exchanged for that of the 60 year old man. But haecceities are also layered.

The self, shares one common identity, likechapters in one book. The self is bound together by one story and one fate. Andthis book too has its own haecceity, a “ thisness” not shared with all the otherbooks ever written. There is haecceity in being, whether of concrete or abstractobjects, be they protons, persons or possible worlds.