

The apes, dogs or
ants have a self?



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

Perhaps you think it is a narrative, like the stories you tell others about yourself. Or maybe you see it as a myth, and too slippery a concept to discuss cogently. In more abstract terms, some see it as a sort of indexical 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 Democritean atom, philosophy has long ago exhausted its explanatory ability over “ the self”. If so, we would gladly defer to science. Certainly the sciences have a great deal to say about the nature of consciousness. What could philosophy do except ask imponderable questions, like whether apes, dogs or ants have a self? We will venture that science has not definitively explained how something susceptible to constant change can retain a unique identity. Identity is an intractable source of problems and paradoxes in all the sciences. We are not ready to take lessons on the metaphysics of self from science in its current state (Hall 2010).

For instance, there are more than a dozen interpretations of quantum mechanics (de la Peña, et al. 2015). Surely there is room for philosophy to bring some coherence. It has been said that 98 percent of the atoms in the human body are replaced yearly (Aebersold 1949). Like the ship of Theseus, we intuitively accept that after all planks are replaced the vessel remains the same. The self is that vessel. The passage of time and nature of physical

change implies that no single essence, whether physical or mental remains unique. Even our perception of “ self” changes with time as we age.

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

We will reject physicalism and borrow from Thomas Nagel’s famous phrase: “ There is something it is like to be a bat” (Nagel 1974). If so, then surely, there is something it is like to be me. There is a “ thisness” to the self, and this is true at any given moment in time. Thus, there is an array of experiences that fall within the gravitational pull of the self. Hume argued that there was simply no glue to hold these disparate experiences together other than custom and habit (Hume 2003). This bundle theory of self is an inadequate container of experiences. As with any other object, there must be something to bind things together. We argue that haecceity is the metaphysical glue.

We propose then, the “ haecceity theory” of self. This is a realist theory of the self 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 with the self.

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

Neither can “the self” inhabit Chalmers’ zombies (Chalmers 1996). And too, “the self” implies the existence of free will. The self must be able to direct its own thoughts, if not its own actions. We know also, empirically, that most properties of the self are not accidental. They persist throughout life. At every snapshot in life we feel like one distinct person.

Unless afflicted 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 self is like a metaphorical container we pour memories into.

And out of this we get coherent identities despite the different physical and psychological renderings. We call that “container” “the self”. In the narrative theory of self, memory becomes indispensable to a coherent identity. The perception of remote instances, of the seemingly distinct persons is bound by the impression of memory. But given how critical memory is to self, what do we make of the present or the future self? Are we “selfless” in the present moment? People report feeling a loss of self-awareness during moments 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

there is “ something that it is like to be a bat”, surely there is something it is like to be me –at any given moment.

I am more than the material composition of my body. I am also more than the subjective narrative. I am the narrator and the protagonist in this story. I am at once the actor and the spectator in the Cartesian theater.

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

Identity is monadic (atomistic) and structural (relative). This is true of abstract and concrete entities. Out of the 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 existence requires “ containers of being”, the self is the container into which we pour identities, those changing descriptions we hold of ourselves. The objects of our world are like receptacles identities. This is where universals take hold of particulars.

When it comes to the problem of identity, what is true for protons 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 through mathematics. Perhaps set theory could help us make sense of identities. David Lewis has taken this direction more broadly in metaphysics (Lewis 1991). Here then is where philosophy brings coherence by treating identity in terms of universals and particulars.

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

Objects could not identify each other as distinct individuals uniting to form a higher order. Without the ontological hardness of identity, existence itself would bleed out of the world like a dissolving organism. Life and its evolution would be impossible. The “self” is a lifelong trajectory. It is a metaphysical container of sorts. Our identities are objects moving through space and time, carried forward 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 view the entire trajectory. But that too is an illusion, for the scene is constantly changing. The container of self is porous. Existence is an infinite array of particulars and universals. These join in 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 the currency of existence, haecceities are the different denominations.

We attribute 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, each with their own haecceity. In the universal currency of haecceity, the denomination of 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, like chapters in one book. The self is bound together by one story and one fate. And this book too has its own haecceity, a “ thisness” not shared with all the other books ever written. There is haecceity in being, whether of concrete or abstract objects, be they protons, persons or possible worlds.