

I AM; I EXIST

AN EXPLORATION OF WHAT THE SELF IS AND HOW IT IS CONSTITUTED

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Yvonne S. Egege
Philosophy Department
School of Humanities
Flinders University

'I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.'

Signed _____

Yvonne S. Egege, 2014

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THESIS SUMMARY

Since Descartes, there has been an ongoing debate about the self, both in terms of what it is and whether or not it can be said to exist. Descartes himself considered the self to be a real existent thing, albeit a non-physical immutable substance. For him, the self, the soul and the mind were the same thing, comprising both the essential, eternal kernel of our identity and the 'I' of thought. The problems surrounding the Cartesian self are well-known. While the existence of the mind is widely accepted, although its status as a distinct entity is also debated, positing the self as an existent thing is highly contentious. Very few physicalist theories treat the self as a distinct existing entity in its own right, instead treating it as either identical to personal identity or persons, or considering it as an emergent socio-cultural narrative.

In this thesis, I argue that it would be wrong to treat the self as identical to persons or personal identity or to reduce it to just the having of a self-narrative. I argue that the self can be considered an entity in its own right and that it would be as much an existent thing as, for example, a teaspoon or a leaf. I argue for this in the following way; I claim that the ontological grounds presented for *not* considering the self an existent concrete object can apply equally to any complex object or artefact. Similarly, the self is not unique in its lack of determinate identity conditions or in its sometimes indeterminate persistence conditions. I then set out conditions such that if any thing (such as the self) were to satisfy those conditions, it would have grounds to be considered a concrete entity or object. In the remainder of the thesis, I demonstrate that 1) there is a viable alternative to the Cartesian self and 2) it could satisfy the conditions for objecthood.

In support of my claim, I critique several well-known arguments against the reality of the self (such as Parfit, Schechtmann, Velleman, Dennett, and Metzinger) to point out their respective limitations in dealing with both the phenomenology of the self and/or current neurological findings. In particular, I want to demonstrate that the phenomenology of the self is not fully captured

by placing it under the rubric of personal identity or by reducing it to just a self-narrative. I draw on Strawson's phenomenological framework as support.

I go on to argue that our sense of self is not illusory and that neurological evidence argues against a purely psycho-social or narrative self concept. Based on a discussion of some well-documented neuro-pathologies, I argue that our sense of self is rooted in our physicality rather than our socio-linguistic concepts. This has important implications for A.I. and our understanding of mental health. Using Damasio's model and evidence drawn from the neurosciences, I demonstrate that the sense of self is produced by the concerted actions of various self-identifying and self-informing mechanisms in the body/brain whose concerted actions produce our self-phenomenology. I go on to claim that the complex interrelation of those self-identifying, self-organising and self-directing mechanisms could be enough to treat it as a single entity; this entity could legitimately be called a self, even if minimal. This self-system is primary and fundamental to perception. I conclude that it satisfies the conditions of concrete objecthood stipulated in the early part of the thesis. As such it can be said to exist and be considered as real as any complex concrete entity, such as a toaster or something like the visual system.

