



# What is the Self?

## MIND, BODY & SELF

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The most essential distinction in relating to the world is between the self and what is separate from the self. When considering the distinction between self and other (other in this case meaning anything other than the self) I will try to demonstrate that only the other is observable, whereas the self is necessarily inaccessible. In order to reconcile an inaccessible notion of self with the experience of self-identity, I will argue that the construction of identity is best understood as an exercise of free will along existentialist lines.

My argument in this essay is as follows: First, that objects are recognized as being distinct and separate from the self because their existence is independent from the will. Thoughts are often considered more central to self-definition because they are dependent on the will; however, I suggest that thoughts are also separate from the self because thoughts can be viewed by the self. Observation is an interaction between two things: the thing being observed and the thing observing. It is impossible to view one's self because there can be no such interaction (i.e., no separation) if there is only one component, the component being the essence of the self. Therefore, the essence of one's own self is inaccessible. If the essence of one's self is inaccessible, then where does our notion of self-identity come from? In the second part of this essay, I suggest our notion of self-identity must then come from what is both not essential to the self (i.e., not necessarily part of the self) and within our scope of experience. This is parallel to the position the existentialists considered when recognizing that people are limited to human experience when making choices. If people are limited to what they can perceive, they have no appeal to anything beyond their own experience, such as god or nature.

According to existentialism, people choose all values and actions as an exercise of free will (acknowledged or unacknowledged). Similarly, I claim that people choose certain nonessential qualities of the self with which to identify. This creates our notion of self-identity even as the self is inaccessible. From this perspective, the self can be seen as an existential construct.

Although most people don't include external objects in their fundamental sense of self, thoughts are often considered internal. People distinguish the experience of physical objects (material) from the experience of thoughts in a number of ways. Physical objects are experienced through distinct sensory input, the content of which is beyond the control of the viewer. Thoughts, on the other hand, are not particularly distinct or always clear, and seem to be created by the will of the viewer. If, for instance, a person directly views a chair, he or she can interact with the chair (the interaction consists of the person as observer and the chair being observed). Since this interaction demands two mutually exclusive roles, the interaction requires two entities so that the chair and the individual cannot be one and the same. If someone is imagining a chair, however, not only might the specifics of the chair be unclear (in say, the dimensions, color, etc.), but also the chair's very existence might be in question, and is entirely dependent on that person's willingness to imagine it. Therefore, there can be an assumption that, since thoughts seem to be controlled by the will, they constitute part of the self.

However, the fact that thoughts can be perceived at all would seem to imply a degree of separation between the observed thoughts and the observer (self). To be able to perceive something implies a perspective from which to view it. When viewing a table, it would be absurd to think that the table was the self, because the fact that it is being viewed suggests that the

table is outside of the self. That is to say, when perceiving a given thought (e.g., "my favorite color is green"), the perceiver does so from outside of the thought. Similarly, in order to view a physical object (such as a car), the object must be considered from a point of reference other than the object itself (e.g., someone who is literally inside a car cannot determine anything about the car's qualities on the outside, because the point of view from outside the car is not accessible to the viewer).

Though it would be possible to extrapolate from past experiences what the view from other perspectives may be (e.g., the outside of the car), these assumptions are not substantive in the same way that observable matter is, because they are not based on immediate sensory input. Instead these assumptions are based merely on thoughts about sensory input. These thoughts are observable since the thoughts themselves are outside of the perspective.

In this way the object observed can be seen in context and described in comparison to its relationship with other observable phenomena. Further, there is a necessary distinction (constituting a relationship) between the material observed and the point of reference of the observer. That is why anything concerning the mind (or the body) that can be experienced must be non-essential to the self.

Further, an essential description of self cannot be derived through intermediaries, such as other people. While other people would have the requisite outside perspective, there would be no way to confirm that what other people were describing was in fact the point of reference and essential identity, because that point of reference is totally inaccessible. Any decision to assume one identity over another is arbitrary. For instance, a neurologist might locate the self qua self in the brain and a priest might say the self resides in the soul, but without access to the nature of the self, there is no way to confirm either position. In absolute terms, there can be no way to confirm a description of the self or evaluate the quality of indirect evidence describing the perspective.

Memory is often attributed special qualities in confirming a consistent identity. Memory seems to confirm that, while physically individuals seem inconsistent overtime (by physical changes through aging), they experience some sort of essentially consistent identity, or at least a consistent perspective. The timeline that memory provides offers a continuity of experience; if a person recalling their life is changed on many levels, they can claim to be

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### THE UNNUMBERED SONNET

*By Emily Rothenbucher, Grade 8  
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**When pondering minds do think things through,  
The more that's thought, the more's begot.  
But, that which in a second's dreamed,  
Is in a dream forgot.  
Falling, falling through the mist,  
Of memories of things past.  
I grasp a thought but now it's gone,  
Gone to its home at last.  
Pouring, flooding through one's head,  
Comes what's left of thy good soul.  
All these thoughts presumed for dead,  
Have together formed a whole.  
As fleeting thoughts do come and go,  
I rest content and watch them flow.**



## What is the Self?

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the same individual because their experience is continuous (i.e., the experience of a single perspective that we consider our self-identity is continuous, in contrast to things that change in relation to that perspective).

Memories, however, are just another type of experience, viewed from a separate perspective. Like other thoughts, memories cannot actually be verified as legitimate presentations of the self, and are often of questionable quality or conflicting content. Using memory as a basis on which to form an identity should be no less arbitrary than using material possessions or any other thought as a form of self-identity.

There can be no essential, necessary definition of the content of the self. Since people cannot experience anything beyond the human perspective, it makes no sense to try to appeal to authorities beyond one's own, such as a god or nature; this is acting in bad faith. With no outside restrictions, people are free to choose, and since they are free, they can be considered responsible for those choices. It is therefore incumbent on each individual to assign value, but this may be done only from one's own experiences, and one's experiences, as already discussed, are inessential to the self.

Therefore, the process of choosing qualities to identify with is necessary and essential; the qualities, values and experiences themselves are arbitrary and inessential. In the same way that value in experience has to be defined as an act of free will by the individual, the actual definition of the individual is not a given and must be defined. In order to create a distinctive self-identity, people define themselves by choosing to identify with things they can observe, like memory.

The most essential distinction in relating to the world is between what can be seen as the self and what is separate from the self. While things other than the self are observable, the self is merely implied. It can be said then, that an individual's definition of self can only be built by identifying with qualities or things that are not intrinsically identical to the individual's self.

If people did not decide to see certain things as identical to themselves, they would have no distinct or useful definition of self; just as if people did not decide to assign values and purpose to their experiences, their lives would have no useful meaning.

*Who made God?*

*Where did trees come from?*

*Why does the world exist?*

*What is the greatest question in the whole world?*

*Is life a black hole?*

*What is time?*

## THE SELF

*By Leigh Evron, Kindergarten  
Abraham Lincoln School, New York*

**You are the Self.  
You can do anything.  
The Self is important.  
The Self is good.  
The Self is kind.  
The Self tells the truth.  
The Self was never born.  
The Self is everything.  
The Self helps you.  
The Self loves you.  
The Self is God.  
The Self is love.  
The Self is perfect.  
The Self is the Lord.**

*What is the biggest moment ever in the whole world?*

*Why do people have brains?*

*What made Earth?*

*Is there magic?*

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