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Review article

An organizing model for recent cognitive science work on the self



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ABSTRACT

An organizing model of ‘the self’ emerges from applying various kinds of brain injury to recent cognitive science and philosophical work on ‘the self’. This model unifies various contents and mechanisms central to current notions of the self. The article then highlights several criteria and aspects of this notion of self. Qualities of the right type and level of psychological significance delineate ‘the self’ as an organizing concept useful for recent philosophical work and cognitive science research.

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1. Self ≠ Person

Cases of brain injury applied to recent work in cognitive science immediately show a philosophically relevant distinction between what ‘the self’ is, on the one hand, and what ‘the person’ is, on the other hand. Self and person are often run together in work on these topics. However, good reason can be, and has been, provided to separate the use of these terms (Hope, 1994; Leary & Tangney, 2003; Pucetti, 1977). Philosophy of personal identity has adopted the term ‘person’ for a numeric notion that does not admit of degrees. There are no half persons. Near universal agreement exists, for example, that traumatic brain injuries, short of those inducing irreversible coma or death, do not result in the loss of a person or the creation of a new person. Medical examiners and cognitive scientists alike want the medical history of *that* patient and not one non-identical but highly similar. Persons, in this numeric sense, do not change numerically once they have acquired a traumatic brain injury.

The emerging consensus is that the notion of “self” is a psychological notion distinct from the above notion of “person”. For example, self-research is not a study of the whole person (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Alterations of self are not alterations of the number of people. This is, in part, specifically because a person’s self *can* undergo quite dramatic change in traumatic brain injuries. This can happen if we define ‘self’ in terms of certain significant psychological contents and mechanisms. Current cognitive science and philosophical literature on the self focuses, in part, on certain traumatic brain injuries for just this reason (Klein & Gangi, 2010). Self is treated as certain kinds of significant psychological qualities of a person but not as the numeric identity of that person. When considered in this light, one of these qualities can, and often does, alter in traumatic brain injury while the person remains numerically the same.

2. Self as significant psychological qualitative properties of a person

The self can be defined in terms of certain significant psychological contents of a person at a time. Arguably, people have various properties that are more or less significant. For example, loss of a little finger seems less significant compared to loss of both hands. The set of qualities associated with self in current cognitive science and philosophy are not every significant qualitative property, or change of those properties, a person can undergo. Loss of body parts, like losing a finger or even both hands, is not of much concern to modern researchers involved in self-studies. The psychological effects of such physical changes are the concern of these researchers.

In this way, self is emerging as a set of *significant psychological qualities* that a person possesses. The self is a psychological (and neural) construct (Klein & Gangi, 2010; Leary & Tangney, 2003) and is composed of both significant psychological contents (e.g. thoughts like ‘I exist’) and significant psychological mechanisms (e.g. abilities for self-reflection). Changes in such significant psychological qualities often invoke odd sounding statements like ‘Gage is no longer Gage’ or ‘you should have a funeral for [the man] you married because [the man] coming home from the hospital is not the same person’ (Damasio, 1994; Restak, 2001; Zimmerman, 2005, respectively). A person who merely undergoes significant *physical* changes does not evoke these kinds of responses. Only dramatic psychological changes evoke such statements. Although such statements seem to suggest a change in numeric personal identity, there is a clear sense in which these patients *are* the same person numerically. Family members are not encouraged to take home complete strangers. Doctors still what the medical history of that patient or numerically identical person. The patients with significant psychological qualitative changes have simply gone through such dramatic qualitative alteration that it requires a new attitude toward the patient and their psychology. We can identify self with this class of significant psychological qualities.

Of the set of overall qualities of a person, not all such qualities are the focus of modern cognitive science research on the self. For example, as we saw above, significant *physical* change that does not result in brain damage is not the focus of modern cognitive science or philosophical studies of the self. Think of the young British woman who had acid viciously thrown in her face (Piper, 2011). In terms of the initial significant physical change she underwent, her self was unchanged. Initially, doctors kept her unaware of the extent of the physical changes she had undergone by keeping reflective surfaces away from her. This initial qualitative change of her *physiology* does not make up any part of modern study of self. As such, merely physical changes are not included in the model below.

Clearly, though, the trauma of coming to *know* the extent of the damage caused by this devastating physical injury would result in psychological changes that do interest modern philosophers and cognitive scientists studying the self. Katie Piper is a good case to illustrate these changes as well. Upon first coming to know the extent of the damage she wished to die. She is now spearheading burn victim rehabilitation. Even if some type of embodied feedback from facial muscles and skin constitutes the full range of mental *content*, the *physical* change alone does not constitute part of the self. It may have later effects on psychological content or mechanisms that make up the self but these types of physical changes alone do not constitute changes to the self.

Further, self is the *significant* part of a person’s psychology not the total psychology of the person (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Psychologists studying the self are not thereby required to study every field of psychology. All psychological theories, embodied pictures and non-embodied pictures alike, have to recognize the distinction in a person’s *psychology* that occurs when they finally know about their physical damage. When Katie finally saw a mirror her self changed. Current work on the self in cognitive science and philosophy aligns with the idea that the self is identical with only certain psychological properties of a person, those properties that are both psychological and *significant*. Someone denying there is a ‘self’ still

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