



Disentangling the self. A naturalistic approach to narrative self-construction



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ABSTRACT

In this article we explore the implications of a definition of self-consciousness as a process, by which we mean the self-representing of a multilevel system (the human organism). This sets the stage for a developmental story about how a narrative identity is progressively constructed from body awareness, which becomes bodily self-awareness between 18 and 24 months of age. The final outcome is an approach to narrative self-construction which, drawing on findings in developmental, dynamic, social and personality psychology, aims to distance itself from the hermeneutical and eliminativist forms of narrativism.

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In this paper, we argue that self-consciousness should be understood as a *process*. In particular, we propose that self-consciousness be thought of as the process of constructing a cognitively demanding form of self (the “narrative self”) out of neurocognitive and psychosocial components.

The approach underlying our proposal can be described as *naturalistic* and *bottom-up*. By “naturalistic” we mean that the approach has to be empirically grounded. In particular, it must not take idealistically for granted the existence of a self-conscious self as the ground of all mental life, as happens in certain philosophical and psychological accounts. By “bottom up” we mean that we start with what is simpler, more primitive, less structured, to reach what is complex, more structured, phylogenetically and ontogenetically later. However, as will be clarified later, we do not believe that it is possible to account for “higher” forms of self-consciousness without taking into account the influence of *social* interaction processes. In short, our claim is that self-consciousness—a phenomenon that has been traditionally seen as primary, simple, given—turns out to be a complex neurocognitive and psychosocial construction. It develops from automatic and pre-reflective

processing of representations of objects (object-consciousness), through awareness and then self-awareness of the body, up to introspective self-awareness and then narrative identity.

In recent years, an empirically informed account of the precursors of self-consciousness has been much cultivated in theoretical psychology. Most approaches, however, still assume a *minimal* form of self-consciousness as the basis of cognitively more advanced forms; they construe this minimal self-consciousness as a “pre-reflective self-consciousness,” a tacit, non-intellectual sense of self that makes every conscious state a first-person phenomenal state (e.g., Gallagher & Zahavi, 2015; Prebble, Addis, & Tippett, 2013). We have argued elsewhere, however, that this is an empirically void construct, the artifact of a *top-down* approach to self-consciousness in which the philosopher’s self-experience is (anti-naturalistically) taken as explanatory, instead of the phenomenon to be explained (Marraffa & Paternoster, in press). Against this regressive tendency, our approach is built around a clear-cut distinction between object-consciousness and self-consciousness. This allows bodily and psychological forms of self-consciousness to be seen as the result of a process of self-objectivation which requires conscious (but not self-conscious) representational activity.

In this framework, the most minimal form of self-consciousness is *bodily* self-consciousness, the capacity to construct an analogical and imaginal representation of one’s own body as an entire object,

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simultaneously taking this representation as a subject; i.e., as an active source of the representation of itself. Bodily self-consciousness, it will be argued, is needed as a foundation for narrative identity. Thus we propose an account of narrative identity that parts company with those accounts that pay little attention to the role of the body in the narrative self-concept, or go to the extreme of stating that the narrative self is abstract and hence not embodied (see Atkins, 2008; Brandon, 2014; Mackenzie, 2008, 2009).

On the other hand, our account rejects the hypothesis that the embodiment of the narrative self is provided by pre-reflective self-consciousness, here understood as a primitive, proprioceptive form of self-consciousness already in place from birth (e.g., Gallagher & Meltzoff, 1996; Rochat, 2012). This hypothesis, which could be characterized as a sort of inflated version of the bottom-up approach—inflated to the point that any self-conscious function rests on bodily representations—, is far from being empirically supported. Rather, it appears to be based on disputable *a priori* philosophical assumptions.

Consciousness of the body as one's own body is necessary in order to construct self-consciousness as psychological self-awareness and then narrative identity. Psychological self-description hinges on physical self-description, evolving from it through an interplay of mentalizing capacities, autobiographical memory, and socio-communicative skills modulated by cultural variables. Merely because the narrative self is neurocognitively and socially constructed, we are not prohibited from pursuing a *robust* view of it. In *eliminative* versions of narrativism, made popular mainly by Dennett (1991, 2005; see also Metzinger, 2003), the self simply does not exist: there is nothing but a confabulatory narrative elaborated by our brains to make sense of the chaotic flow of experience and make social relations more effective. We are proposing a naturalistic form of narrativism that radically dissents from any attempt to eliminate the self. Constructing and protecting an identity that is “valid” as far as possible—we will argue on a *psychodynamic* basis—is a foundation of the intrapersonal and interpersonal balances of human organism, and thus, of psychological well-being and mental health.

Our agenda is as follows. We begin with William James' distinction between I and Me, arguing that the “I-self” designates the very objectifying process that produces the Me-self; it denotes the subject's self-representing, where “subject” refers to a system encompassing mechanisms that interact across social, individual, and subpersonal levels. Within the framework we appropriated from James we try to tell a viable story as to how the “narrative self” is constructed after the onset of bodily self-awareness. Drawing on findings from developmental, dynamic, social and personality psychology, our account of narrative self-construction aims to distance itself from both the hermeneutical and eliminativist forms of narrativism. The article concludes with a psychodynamic conception of psychological self-awareness, which defines it as the self-representing of a multilevel system, and a description of identity that establishes a teleology focused on self-defense.

1. The I as the making of the Me

For Prebble et al. (2013), a pre-reflective self-awareness is the key to understanding the Jamesian notion of the I, or subjective self (as opposed to the Me, or objective self). We will now argue, that this reading of James' notion rests on a serious misunderstanding of his theory of the duplex self.

In his seminal chapter on the “consciousness of self” James (1950, vol. I, chap. 10) begins with noticing that both the common man and the spiritualist philosopher are spontaneously led to suppose that in phenomenological space there is an innermost center, the dynamic center of initiative and free will (“the *active*

element in all consciousness”) denoted by the pronoun “I” (p. 297). James calls it “pure Ego,” noting that philosophers' interpretations of it lie along a spectrum from claiming that it is “a simple active substance, the soul,” which is metaphysical guarantee of the presence of the self to the world, to the Humean view that “it is nothing but a fiction, the imaginary being denoted by the pronoun I” (p. 298). In this dispute James is all for Hume and against the spiritualists.² And, like Hume, James vainly strives to get a glimpse of his ego in the stream of consciousness. Let us follow him as he argues for what Jervis (2011) calls “the theory of the evanescence of the ego.”

If I say, “I kick the ball,” the pronoun “I” refers to myself as an agent organism, taken as a whole and opposed to an external object. The ball is a *completely* external object; but sometimes I (as a global agent subject) can also consider an object that is not totally outside, such as a foot (that is part of my being but nevertheless “down there”), or a hand, or even something else that is more “here” (or “less there”) than the foot is, for instance, my eyes or my head, which are *almost* part of the intimacy of the ego. In these cases I keep on detaching and differentiating my ego, as a primary psychic subject, from all these other things, which are objects for the ego. Up to this point, therefore, I am still rather certain of what my ego is. But then, like anyone, I realize that I am also able to consider as objects things that are much more “inner,” namely, the global image of my body, a sensation, a smell, a dream, a thought, a mood like anxiety or euphoria. I realize then that there is no way to stop this “hemorrhage” of my ego: in introspectively probing my mind, I keep on taking as an object anything it contains, thus detaching it from myself. But the ego, as wellspring of the whole process, can never be found. In the end, James says, the ego ends up being a pure grammatical trick, a sort of dimensionless point—or, more unsettlingly, the “wavering and unstable phantom” evoked by Schopenhauer in a famous passage (1969, vol. 1, p. 278n.). The ego is therefore something evanescent; it (the agent and observing self) is an abstract and depthless subjectivity. Ultimately, this subjectivity is a convention; it cannot be located anywhere. The subject, taken to its limit, does not exist.

However, after the pure ego has disappeared, James grounds the existential feeling of presence in the subject's experiencing itself as the *empirical self* (the Me-self). This is the way one presents oneself to oneself, thus objectifying oneself in the introspective consciousness of oneself. This self-presentation is a description of identity, which famously comes in three forms of reflexive experience: the material, social, and spiritual selves.

We interpret James, then, as arguing that the I-self is a process of objectifying, which produces the Me-self. The I-self is not “a metaphysical entity that stands outside our stream of consciousness as the subject of our experiences.” It is not even an implicit, pre-reflective self-awareness, “understood as an integral feature of our conscious experience of the world,” as Prebble et al. (2013, p. 821) claim, following Legrand (2007) and Zahavi (2005). The I-self is rather a *process*, the self-representing of a system encompassing mechanisms that interact across social, individual or personal, and subpersonal levels of organization (see Herschbach, 2012; Synofzik, Vosgerau, & Newen, 2008; Thagard, 2014).

One implication is that there cannot be a “subjective sense of self” (not even a “brute” first-personal experience) without a “content of self”: our “conscious, phenomenological experience of selfhood” is our feeling of being here as being here *in a certain way*, according to a mental representation “comprising all the things

² “It is to the imperishable glory of Hume and Herbart and their successors to have taken so much of the meaning of personal identity out of the clouds and made of the self an empirical and verifiable thing” (1890, p. 336).

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