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Ontological Commitment to the Self as a non-physical entity in Contemporary Psychology

(#PhysicalismIsFalse)

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The purpose of this presentation is three-fold:

1/ to demonstrate that by drawing on an extension of Quine’s Method of Ontological Commitment (Quine 1948) promulgated by Janssen-Lauret (2014) who has shown that Quine’s original approach is problematic in that it prescribes the use of first-personal methods, we can illuminate, albeit briefly, the Indispensability of the Self as an Explanatory Entity in Contemporary Psychology.

2/ to provide examples drawn from Developmental Psychology and Social Psychology (generally neglected areas of Psychology by analytical philosophers who tend to focus more on the empirical work of Cognitive Psychologists) which demonstrate the very frequent reference to the Self, clearly understood as the referent to the first-personal pronoun, ascribing to it uniquely psychological, social and interpersonal as well as physical properties.

3/ to point to the non-Physicalist, non-reductionist, indeed Substance Dualist conclusion that the referent of the first-personal pronoun “I” is indispensably used in Contemporary Psychology, and most explicitly in Developmental and Social Psychology, and thus should be best understood as a fully-fledged entity: a Self.

Quine’s theory of Ontological Commitment, extended to the First Person
We have previously offered the following in Tucson in relation to Quine’s Method of Ontological Commitment (Bleau & Janssen-Lauret, 2014): “Quine’s strictly third-personal methodology entails that he cannot countenance any use of introspective data in science, but scientists working in psychology and psychiatry have now mostly renounced this behaviouristic impulse and are open to non-behaviourist methodology (Miller 2003). Introspection yields first-personal beliefs about the subject’s own current mental states, usually by immediate privileged access. The science of psychology has a need for self-reports which are introspective in that sense, and for grammatical differentiation between self and other. For example, first-personal judgments are reliably remembered even by patients with severe Alzheimer’s (Wein, et al, 2003), and attitude surveys use first-personal self-reports as their primary kind of evidence (Sirkens, et al, 1999).”

Furthermore, we say that contra the majority of contemporary analytical philosophers who are committed to Physicalism (Bourget & Chalmers, 2014) and contra both Hood (2012) and Baggini (2013) given that we object to their implicit Physicalist question-begging discourse, we promise an a posteriori argument against physicalism, arguing that the use of first-personal methods employed in Contemporary Psychology cannot be subsumed under Physics in any principled way. (More detail is spelled out in Janssen-Lauret & Bleau, forthcoming: The Indispensable Self). We will argue from a naturalist stance for ontological commitment to an entity, which is not an Immortal Soul, but rather a Self, a thing in itself, which is a Psychological Substance (Bleau, 2012, 2013, after Lowe, 1996, 2008).

Concluding Remarks
How the so-called mental relates to the so-called physical, has long been a problem for philosophers of mind, and at this point in history they tend to favour the Physicalist position. We assert that with the ascendancy of neuroscience, the recent rise of behavioural economics and the supremacy of physics, the worry is that the individual, qua individual is lost. We are committed to arguing for the rightful ontological commitments of Contemporary Psychologists and are working on a much more detailed account (Janssen-Lauret & Bleau, forthcoming: The Indispensable Self).

We hope to provide pause for the 56.5% of the representative sample of contemporary philosophers who endorse Physicalism by drawing their attention to the ontological commitments of contemporary Developmental and Social Psychologists.

Using an extended version of Quine’s Method of Ontological Commitment we assert that current scientific research in Psychology is best understood as relying on the existence of selves, or agents, conceived as irreducibly non-physical substances in two distinct ways: at its rejection of the behavioural paradigm, and inclusion of first personal methods and in advances in the theory and empirical practice of Developmental and Social Psychology. #PhysicalismIsFalse.