



Bleau, R., and Janssen-Lauret, F. (2015) Ontological Commitment to the Self as a non-Physical entity in Contemporary Psychology. Toward a Science of Consciousness (TSC) Conference, Helsinki, Finland, 9-13 June 2015.

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Deposited on: 03 June 2015

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Ontological Commitment to the Self as a non-physical entity in Contemporary Psychology (#PhysicalismIsFalse)

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2.

Some neuroscientists and philosophers claim the Self is an “illusion”

Although some neuroscientists and philosophers want to claim that the Self is an illusion of sorts, e.g. Hood (2012), *The Self Illusion*, and Baggini (2013), *The Ego Trick*; this claim seems to us to be manifestly false. Both these books are entertaining to read, however they make claims about the Self which appear unmerited. Baggini, p 263, says “*The Ego Trick is not to persuade us that we exist when we do not, but to make us believe we are more substantial and enduring than we really are.*” Hood, loc 124, Kindle Edition says, “*In the same way that we can see a square at the centre of the arrangement in Figure 1, it is an illusion created by the surrounding elements. Take the context away, and the square disappears. In the same way, the self is an illusion created by our brain.*”

There doesn't seem good reason to believe that we are not “substantial” (Baggini, Philosopher) nor that the self is “an illusion created by our brain.” (Hood, Neuroscientist).

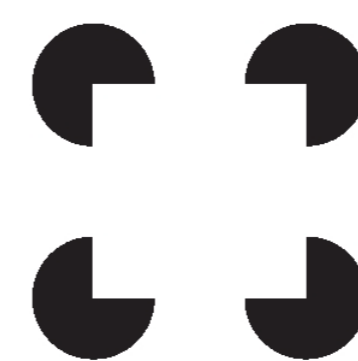
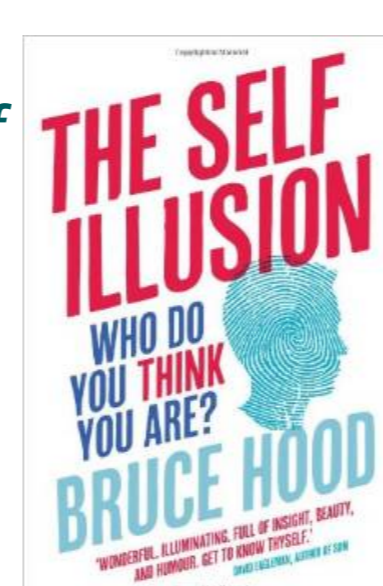
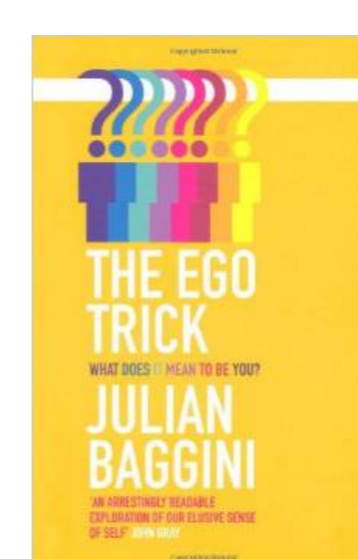


Figure 1: An illusory square we experience that isn't really there

1.

The majority of analytical philosophers are Physicalists

Bourget & Chalmers (2014) have reported that, of a contemporary representative sample of analytical philosophers they surveyed in late 2009 (N=931), 56.5% endorsed a commitment to Physicalism (and 27.1% Non Physicalism; 16.4% Other).

Physicalism is the thesis that everything is physical, or somehow “supervenies” on the physical. Supervenience refers to a type of relation said to exist between properties at different levels. The claim of Physicalists is that mental properties purportedly “reduce” ultimately to physical properties and one way of describing this relation is to refer to it as supervenience.

In this Poster Sketch we reflect on the sociological fact that this majority endorsement of Physicalism by contemporary philosophers is out of kilter with the implicit ontological commitments of contemporary psychologists and propose this fact alone may be reason for philosophers to have pause to reconsider their “majority” commitment to Physicalism. Albeit that the terms **mind** and **soul** are largely taken to be co-referential since Descartes; here, we focus on Self.



3.

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 proscribes 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-person 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**.

4.

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 (Klein, *et al*, 2003), and attitude surveys use first-personal self-reports as their primary kind of evidence (Sirken, *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).

6.

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: a/ its rejection of the behaviourist paradigm, and inclusion of first personal methods and b/ advances in the theory and empirical practice of Developmental and Social Psychology. **#PhysicalismIsFalse**.

5.

Developmental Psychology

Most developmental psychologists make either implicit or explicit use of the term Self to refer to the self, and do so often in relation to the other. We claim that these very well respected scientists, such as John Bowlby, 1988 (*A Secure Base: parent-child attachment and healthy human development*) and Fonagy, *et al* 2005 (*Affect regulation, mentalization and the development of Self*), make indispensable use of Self in their empirical work (albeit that they may refer interchangeably to Self and Sense of Self). It is not clear that talk of Self is to be explained away by showing that the putative entity is a mere façon de parler, or that its referent is brain/body/cluster of physical properties.

Social Psychology

Social psychology as a sub-discipline of Psychology is replete with theories which utilise Self, and some well-known examples are Self-Regulation theory (Baumeister, *et al*, 1994) and Social Identity theory (Haslam, 2014, Landmark Article, *British Journal of Social Psychology*). These theories make indispensable use of Self, it is quite evident. The authors vary in terms of their explicit metaphysical commitments, and we speculate that this is because they may differ in their need to ponder the implicit ontological claims of their theories and empirical practice.

7.

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