
Copyright © 2013 The Author

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/76184/

Deposited on: 21 March 2014
An alternative theory of mental causation: invoking EJ Lowe’s (Self-Body) Substance Dualism to account for intentional action

IE: Do “you” exist? And can “you” act by thinking?

by Dr Renée Bleau, C. Psychol.

School of Education, College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow, 11 Elton Street, Glasgow G3 6HE
http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/istb/reneebleau

The prevailing view about the Self held by many different types of academics: “You” don’t exist.

Many neuroscientists currently claim that there is no such ‘thing’ as the Self. For example, Bruce Hood, neuroscientist and experimental psychologist, in his recent highly acclaimed book, The Self Illusion (2012) writes, ‘(...) we see ourselves in a mirror. This is who we are – yet brain science shows that this sense of our self is an illusion. We all certainly experience some form of self but what we experience is a powerful deception generated by our brains for our own benefit.’

Many analytical philosophers of mind also agree with this idea that the self does not exist, for example, Derek Parfit. Parfit argues that “We are not separately existing entities, apart from our brains and bodies. Our existence just involves the existence of our brains and bodies.” (p 194, Parfit 1984).

Many scientists eschew the idea of the self too. For example, Peter Atkins in his recent book On Being (2011) states clearly, p 89 “The brain is the centre of the production of the sense of self, of the conscious determination to survive, and great acts of creativity, all of which components we term, for ease of discourse, the ‘human spirit’. But that is all I see: the human spirit is a portmanteau word for that package of intentions and achievements: there is no substance beyond the verbal packaging”.

Why this obsession with the physical? Well, since the time of René Descartes, there has been a quest to come up with a theory that meets the objections that are levelled at Mind-Body Dualism. Cartesian Mind-Body Dualism is the view that the mind is an immaterial and body is a material thing. There is no mind-body interaction; this is one of the most common philosophical and scientist objections. Descartes’ claim that the mind is different from the body and there are few who would defend a Cartesian dualist theory nowadays.

Why does this matter for psychologists? Well, if we are wrong about the mind-body relationship then this means that psychologists have often been wrong about the way we think and behave – and this has ramifications for the way psychology is conducted. Psychology is widely regarded as the “most successful science” as far as giving us knowledge about the world. But how do psychologists account for the way we think and act? How do we make sense of our own mental states? How do we account for the way we act?

Lowe’s straight-forward argument for the truth of his Self-Body Substance Dualism which is deductively valid (which means, to use the philosophical jargon, that if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true).

Premise 1: I am the subject of all and only my own mental states
Premise 2: Neither my body as a whole nor any part of it (such as my brain) could be multiply realized by brain states.
Conclusion: I am not identical with my body or any part of it. That is, I am an entity which is distinct from my body, which is another entity.

The philosophical doctrine relied on here is known as the Indiscernibility of Identicals (Leibniz), formally:

\[ \forall x \forall y [x \neq y \Rightarrow \forall F (F(x) \neq F(y))] \]

This intuitive sense of self is an effortless and fundamental experience. But it is not more than an elaborate illusion!

Some background first: Why are the views expressed in sections 2 and 3 expressed in such a confident manner and by such eminent individuals? The reason I think is because they reflect a world view which many traditional scientists and philosophers adopt to: Physicalism. Roughly, this is the view that everything that there is, is physical, or can be reduced to the physical. Physics is widely regarded as the “most successful science” as far as giving us knowledge about the world. But how do mental states such as thoughts and desires – how can they fit into the physical world? It used to be thought that mental states literally were just physical (=brain) states, however, this was soon concluded to be an untenable theory (because if you see a squid in pain, you see a person in pain, you imagine that you must have something of the same sort of qualitative experience, and yet their brain physiology is different, therefore mental state = brain state). However, now the ‘name of the game’ for most philosophers of mind, is to try to work out how mental states either supervene on or are multiply realized by brain states. (Supervenience and Multiple Realization are philosophical terms, but basically they refer, in this context, to the nature of relationship between mental states and brain states). Most of them want to come up with an account where the thought that is all that exists in the world is physical stuff, because this will be a straightforwardly scientific account, which will seem like the right answer.

Lowe’s account it looks like this (using Barak Obama as the example ‘subject’):

Depicted by the brain below). What is involved in the case of arm-waving? On one hand, it is the mental decision to wave (obviously involving neural events and other bodily events – depicted by the brain below). What is involved in the case of arm-waving? On Lowe’s account it looks like this (using Barak Obama as the example subject):

Lindsay for their comments and feedback on the text.

Thanks are also due to Professor Fraser MacBride, Dr Frederique Janssen-lauret and Dr Chris Lindsay for their comments and feedback on the text.