

# I Am an Abstraction, Therefore I Am

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine a new variant of the well-known idea that the self is an abstract object. I propose a simple model of the self as a property of temporal slices of a body's history. I argue that this model, when combined with even a modest realism with regard to properties, implies that the self has many of the chief features traditionally attributed to selves. I conclude that this model allows one to reconcile the full reality of the self with even the most deflationary materialistic theories of consciousness.

## 1. Is Bob's Self a Property?

Of all philosophical positions on the nature of mind, behaviorism is the most dismissive of the reality of the self. Some non-behavioristic versions of materialism also lead toward skepticism about the self, although this cannot be said of materialism in general. But even if behaviorism or some extreme form of materialism turned out to be right, there still would be something that has many of the characteristics normally attributed to the self. This "something" is neither a physical object nor a Cartesian spirit. Instead, it is a *property*.

Consider the history of a person, whom we shall call Bob. Specifically, consider the set of all of the temporal slices in the history of Bob's body, from birth to death. (To define this set, one need not assume -- contrary to special relativity -- that there is a unique way to slice up the history. One also need not assume that the slices are instantaneous, or that the slices have the same temporal thickness.) All of these slices have a property in common: the property of being temporal slices of the history of Bob's body. For brevity, we will call a slice having this property a "B-slice."

One can ask about what makes a given temporal slice a B-slice. One's answer will depend upon one's position on the problem of personal identity (see [Hirsch, chs. 6-10]). Someone might even argue that it is only linguistic convention that makes a given slice a B-slice. (For one take on this possibility, see [Hirsch, ch. 10]). But regardless of what makes a given slice a B-slice, we can safely assume that there are B-slices. This is the case whether the correct philosophy of mind is behaviorism, materialism, or something else entirely (such as property dualism). In any of these cases, one can define B-slices and a property of being a B-slice. For brevity's sake, let us call this property B.

The property B is something that all B-slices, and only B-slices, have in common. It is something that is connected in an obvious way (instantiation) with all of the temporal slices in Bob's life history. Speaking loosely, we could even say that B is "in" all of the

temporal slices in Bob's life history. (We can say this if we let the word "in" have the same informal meaning that it has when we say that a cannonball has a lot of weight *in* it, or that there is a lot of red *in* a sunset. In these instances, "in" indicates instantiation of a property.)

If someone were to claim that the self is not something physical (such as a brain) and that there is no nonphysical substantial self either, then they might want to argue that the entity B is all that the moments of Bob's life really have in common. In this case, it seems natural (though daring) to ask whether B could be Bob's self. At first sight, this identification seems utterly implausible. I will now try to dispel this implausibility.

## 2. The Self as an Abstract Object

The intuition that a property is not the kind of item that could be a self is perhaps the main obstacle in the way of seriously asking whether B might be a self. But the feeling that B is "only a property," and hence inevitably not a self, may be quite misleading.

The idea that the self is an abstract object is not at all new. It is a well-established idea, with proponents as diverse as Plato [Plato, 79-80] and Dennett [Dennett 2, especially ch. 13]. (For a comparison of these two views and remarks on their ontological implications, see [Sharlow].) The accuracy of the feeling that a property could not be a self depends upon which view of the ontology of abstract objects is correct. If realism with respect to properties is true, then B is a real entity -- as real as a brain, or as real as Descartes believed mental substances to be, though perhaps belonging to a different ontological category from either brains or mental substances. If nominalism with respect to properties is true, then one cannot say that B is Bob's self without implicitly saying that Bob's self does not exist.

The debate over the ontological status of abstract objects is an old controversy with an extensive literature. (For an entry point, see [Armstrong].) I will not try to enter this debate here. Instead, I will suppose, just for the sake of argument, that properties are real

abstract objects -- not necessarily full-blown Platonic universals, but real and not merely convenient fictions. Then the property B is a real entity, albeit an abstract one. Once we assume that B is an entity and not merely a figure of speech, then the view that B is a self becomes less incredible.

The identification of the real entity B with Bob's self might be rather plausible if B had all of the characteristic features of the self as traditionally conceived. However, we might be able to identify B with Bob's self even if B lacks some of these features. We can consider this move if we are willing to admit the possibility that a self does not have all of the properties that people traditionally expect selves to have. (No present-day philosopher of mind will find this possibility novel.)

In this paper, I will temporarily ignore the possibility that the self is an extremely complex abstract object, such as Dennett's "Center of Narrative Gravity" [Dennett 2, p. 410 and ch. 13]. Instead, I will examine a simpler hypothesis: that Bob's self is the abstract object B. B is not the only abstract object that Bob's self might be. Ultimately, we might want to abandon B as a candidate for the self, and use a more complex abstract object (like Dennett's) instead. But for the time being, we will start with a simple model and see how it fares.

### 3. Bob's Self and Descartes' Ego

Let us find out how closely the abstract object B resembles a self of a traditional sort. To do this, we will compare B to a typical dualistic conception of the self. We choose a dualistic conception for this purpose, not because we favor dualism, but because dualists tend to allow the self most of the traits that prephilosophical thinking ascribes to the self. Materialism, on the other hand, tends to truncate or deflate these traits. Let us now compare B to the non-material self postulated by Cartesian dualism -- that is, by Descartes' dualism in the *Meditations*, or by brands of dualism close to Descartes' own dualism.

(Before beginning this comparison, I must emphasize once again that I am using

Cartesian dualism only for the purpose just stated. I am *not* arguing in favor of Cartesian dualism. I mention this in case someone reads this paper carelessly and claims that I am defending Cartesian dualism. Such critics are hereby dismissed to make room for the serious critics.)

Cartesian dualism posits a self that is non-material, undetectable to the senses, weightless, and arguably also placeless in the sense that it has no spatial location other than (perhaps) that of its body. Compare this self to the abstract object B. The object B is non-material, undetectable to the senses, weightless, and arguably also placeless in the sense that it has no spatial location other than (perhaps) that of Bob's body. Thus, the abstract object B resembles, in some crucial respects, the self posited by dualism. The chief *prima facie* differences between B and the Cartesian self are:

- (1) The Cartesian self is involved in the causation of the subject's actions. B cannot play this causal role.
- (2) The Cartesian self is conscious. B is not conscious.
- (3) The Cartesian self is a "mental substance" -- an item somewhat analogous to a piece of physical stuff, but invisible, intangible, and lacking many of the other key properties of matter. A mental substance, thus conceived, seems to be a concrete object rather than an abstract object.
- (4) The relationship between B and slices of Bob's history is one of instantiation. The relationship between the Cartesian self and the slices of its body's history is a relationship quite different from instantiation.

We will now cast doubt upon these supposed differences.

*Difference 1: No causation?*

The most problematic feature of Cartesian dualism is the nonphysical self's causal influence on the brain. The epiphenomenalists, whatever we may think of them, have taught us that one can deny this causal influence without denying dualism. Without the causal influence, humans still could have selves distinct from their bodies. These selves might determine the identities of persons through time, and (as in epiphenomenalism) might even be involved in the having of conscious experiences. Thus, B's failure to cause any effects would not automatically count against B's being a self.

If the self were an abstract entity like B, then the self would not cause the subject's actions as a Cartesian ego would. However, the self still would have a strong bearing on the subject's life. The continued presence of the property B is a *necessary condition* for the continuation of Bob's existence. If B ceases to be exemplified, then Bob is dead. Of course, the absence of B does not *cause* Bob's death, nor does the presence of B cause any of Bob's vital functions. The absence of B simply *implies logically* that Bob is dead. This implication holds because B is a property that belongs only to slices that are slices of Bob's life history. Even if the abstract object B causes no effects, the presence of B still is a necessary condition for the existence of the person Bob.

It seems obvious that B cannot cause any events in Bob's brain, because all of those events are caused by other physical events and not by some property like B. However, there is a way in which B is involved in the causation of Bob's actions, even if Bob's actions can be explained entirely by physical causes. Armstrong once pointed out that "When things act causally, they act in virtue of their properties. The object depresses the scales in virtue of its mass[...]" [Armstrong, p. 28]. This is the case even though the movement of the scales is caused by interactions between atoms in the object and atoms in the scales. Thus, a property of a macroscopic object can be deeply involved in the causation of an event, even if that event is caused entirely by microphysical causes, and even if the macroscopic property does not actually cause the event. Something similar happens with B. For any action A, if A is an action of Bob's, then A is an action of Bob's

*in virtue of* the property B -- a property exemplified, not directly by A itself, but by slices of Bob's body's history. This follows from the fact that no action of Bob's can originate in a temporal slice of a human body unless that slice possesses B. If a slice does not possess B, then no physical event originating in that slice is an action of Bob's. A temporal slice of a human body can be the locus of an act of Bob's only by virtue of that slice's having the property B, together with whatever other properties are necessary to make that slice the locus of an action.

This conception of the causal role of B has connections with the concept of top-down causation in the philosophy of mind. I will not explore these connections further here.

*Difference 2: No consciousness?*

At first glance, it seems quite plausible to suppose that B cannot play any role in consciousness. Certainly B is not the seat of the physical processes which give rise to conscious experiences. That honor must go to Bob's brain. However, B plays a role in Bob's consciousness that is much like B's role in Bob's actions. The property B is not a cause of consciousness, but certainly the presence of B is a necessary condition for the existence of *Bob's* consciousness. If a slice of the history of Bob's body lacks B, then Bob is not conscious at the time of that slice. (Indeed, Bob is dead at that time.) Also, if a brain is conscious, then the consciousness of that brain is not *Bob's* consciousness unless the temporal slices of the history of the body containing that brain instantiate B. Slices that do not instantiate B are not slices of Bob's life at all. Hence the presence of B, though not necessary for the existence of consciousness as such, is necessary for the existence of Bob's consciousness. If Bob is to have a conscious life, then B is a necessary ingredient of that life -- even if B causes nothing and the brain is the seat of consciousness.

One can adapt our earlier argument about the indirect causal role of B to build a case for an indirect role of B in the production of Bob's consciousness. A particular brain is the seat of Bob's consciousness in virtue of the presence of B together with other properties -- in much the same way that (in Armstrong's example) an object is able to tip the scales in

virtue of the object's mass.

*Difference 3: No mental substance*

Normally, one tends to think of a Cartesian ego as a "mental substance" -- a thing that is like a material object in some respects, but is undetectable by the senses, weightless, and devoid of many other attributes of matter. One tends to think of the dualist's world-picture as containing two kinds of stuff: matter and mind-stuff. However, the example of property dualism teaches us that dualism does not actually require this familiar mental picture. Suppose that instead of thinking of the dualist's self as a hunk of mind-stuff, we think of it as just an *entity* -- a real, existing item, but not necessarily made of any kind of "stuff." Switching to this new mental picture will not destroy dualism; it will only strip dualism of a nonessential feature. Once we make this switch, we are left with a dualistic self that is weightless, immaterial, undetectable by the senses, and arguably placeless, but that should not be thought of as being made of any kind of stuff at all.

A dualistic self of this sort is dangerously close to being an abstract object. Once we make the move from a traditional Cartesian ego to a dualistic self of this kind, the contrast between the dualistic and the abstract-object conceptions of the self begins to fade. Both the dualist and the proponent of an abstract self believe in a self that is nonmaterial, weightless, undetectable by the senses, arguably placeless, and so forth. Where is the real difference between these two conceptions of the self?

*Difference 4: Instantiation, not influence*

Someone might object that B cannot be a self because B is only instantiated by slices of Bob's life, instead of being connected to those slices in some other, more substantial way. However, once we have abandoned the Cartesian concept of the self as the cause of actions and of consciousness, this distinction becomes much less important. If the self cannot causally influence the body, then the connection between self and body becomes

rather than anyhow. Quite possibly, instantiation could do the same ontological work as this connection.

#### 4. From Dualism to the Abstract Self

It appears that the abstract object B has most of the central features of the Cartesian self. The exceptions are the Cartesian self's direct causal roles in the production of actions and of experiences. What, if any, are the other *important* differences between the dualistic self and the abstract "self" B? Is there any *important* contrast between a dualistic self and an abstract self, once we stop thinking of the dualistic self as able to cause events?

At the risk of taking an overly speculative position, I would suggest that the answer to the preceding question is "no." It appears that any truly significant contrast between the abstract self and the dualistic self has been lost. The thesis that the self is an abstract object gives a version of the self that is practically the same as a truncated version of Descartes' immaterial ego. If we are willing to abandon the highly problematical causal characteristics of the Cartesian ego, then we find that the view that the self is an abstract object amounts to a moderate, post-Cartesian form of dualism.

This suggested view of the self can be regarded as materialistic, because it allows for a materialistic explanation of mind and requires nothing but physical objects and physical properties in its ontology. On the other hand, this view could fairly be regarded as dualistic, because it portrays personal existence as a phenomenon involving a linkage between a person's body and an immaterial entity. Hence this view is, in a sense, both materialistic and dualistic -- but without contradiction. One could call this view either "abstract object materialism" or "abstract object dualism" if one wanted. In a moment I will suggest a less committal name.

Central to this view is the doctrine that abstract objects are real -- that properties and similar items actually exist, and cannot be reduced entirely to figures of speech. Without this, this view of the self would collapse into a nihilism with regard to the self. Thus, the

new view depends upon ontological realism, although it certainly does not require a strong kind of ontological realism like Plato's. Because the view that the self is a really existing, non-fictional, abstract object is a special case of ontological realism, I would suggest the name "abstract-self realism" for this view.

This view may seem radical at first glance. Actually, it is no more radical than any other philosophical idea that depends upon the reality of abstract objects -- for example, Fregean semantics. The view that the self is an abstract object has extensive precedents in the philosophy of mind. As I mentioned earlier, thinkers as diverse as Plato and Dennett have either embraced it or come close to it. The view proposed here is merely a further development in this familiar direction.

In closing, I wish to suggest a variation on Descartes' famous dictum "I think, therefore I am." If the self is an abstract object and the right form of ontological realism is true, then each of us (including Bob) has the right to declare "I think, therefore I am an abstraction -- and therefore I am."

## References

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