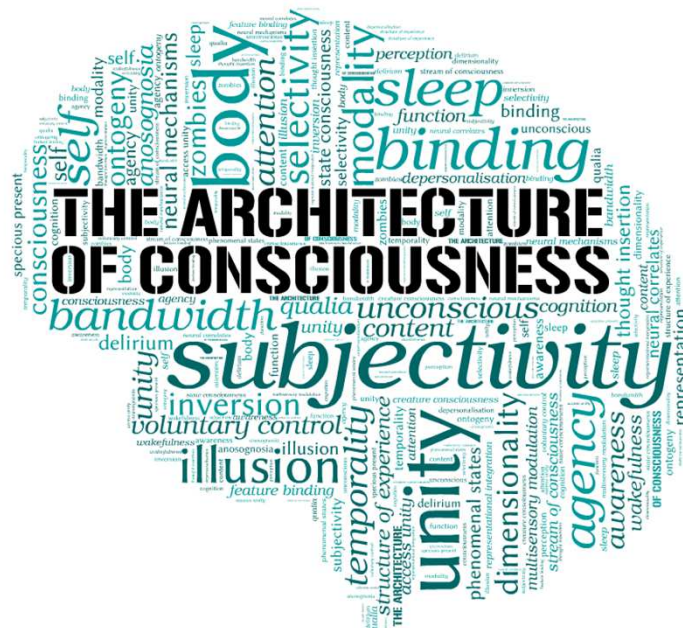


Is the Virtual Self Theory Coherent?

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OVERVIEW

- 1. The Case for Virtual Self Theory**
- 2. The Incoherence of the Virtual Self Theory**
- 3. An Alternative Model of the Self**
- 4. Objections and Replies**



1. THE CASE FOR VIRTUAL SELF THEORY

1.1 The Virtual Self

What does the term 'self' mean?

- Our use of the term 'self' is a mess!
- Our *core* concept is that the self is the *bearer of mental properties*:



SELF

=

- The thinker of thoughts
- The perceiver of perceivings
- The feeler of feelings
- The agent of actions
- *Representer of representations*

1.1 The Virtual Self

SELF

vs. NO-SELF

- Selves exist!
- And we are not radically wrong about their nature



Descartes



Locke



Kant

- Selves do not exist!
- Our beliefs about selves are radically inaccurate



Hume



Buddha

1.1 The Virtual Self

Virtual Self Theory (VST)

- VST is a contemporary no-self theory that regards selves as merely virtual entities

‘Experiences do indeed have ‘owners’ or ‘bearers’, but the owner of an experience is nothing ‘over and above’ a virtual object...’

Bayne 2012, p.290



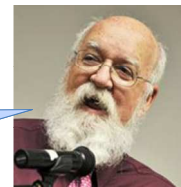
‘... no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self. All that ever existed were conscious self-models...’ Metzinger, 2003, S1.1

1.1 The Virtual Self

Virtual Self Theory (VST)

- Virtual objects are *merely intentional* entities
- They aren’t *strictly* real, but may be real in some *looser* sense
- The virtual self serves important psychological functions

‘...a self -- your own real self, for instance -- is rather like a fictional character...’ Dennett 1986



‘Why did we evolve the self illusion? Like every other illusion our brain generates, it serves a useful purpose. If you think about the “I” and the “me” that we usually refer to as the self, it provides a focal point to hang experiences together both in the immediate here and now, as well as to join those events over a lifetime.’ Hood, 2012 p.290

1.2 Why Think the Self is Virtual?

The Schematic Case for VST

1. When we represent the self, there is an entity we represent as having a certain set of properties
2. No real entity has that set of properties
3. If the entity we represent is not real, it is merely intentional
4. Therefore, when we represent the self the entity we represent is merely intentional (i.e. virtual)

1.2 Why Think the Self is Virtual?

We represent the self as...	But the reality is...
...an immaterial entity.	...creatures are exclusively material things.
...the single bearer of all our experiences across time.	...no part of us endures through our lifetime.
...distinct from our sub-personal mental processes.	...there is no 'self module' distinct from other processes.
...located in a particular place (specifically 'point zero').	...there's no place where it all 'comes together'.

1.2 Why Think the Self is Virtual?

We represent the self as...	But the reality is...
...an entity with free will able to make undetermined choices.	...our choices are predetermined.
...an entity whose choices determine our actions.	...actions are set in motion independently of our choices.
...an entity with an essential personality.	...we change with context and are capable of anything!
...having the history reported in your autobiographical memory.	...memory is subject to huge distortions and systematic bias.



2. THE INCOHERENCE OF VIRTUAL SELF THEORY

2. THE INCOHERENCE OF VST

- If VST is true, the self is analogous to the object of a **perceptual hallucination**:
 - We *represent* something to be present but in reality there's *no such entity*

'Each human being would be a victim of a continuous hallucination, but a hallucination on the subject end of experience, the hallucination of the center.'

Johnston 2010, p. 164 (quoted Dainton 2012, p. 182)



- But the analogy with perceptual hallucination reveals a deep problem for VST...

2. THE INCOHERENCE OF VST

- Perceptual *representations* of daggers can exist in the *absence* of a real dagger
 - i.e. our representation is real but its object is not
- Analogously, if VST is true then *representations* of the self exist in the *absence* of a real self
 - i.e. self-representations are real but the self is not
- The problem is that selves are not just the object of self-representations. They are also the *subject*.
 - i.e. self-representations are real but *self-representers* are not!



2. THE INCOHERENCE OF VST

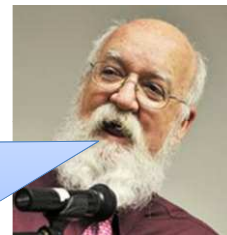
- VST is true if and only if:
 - A) The self does *not* exist
 - B) Mental representations of one's self *do* exist
- 1. If the self does not exist then nor do *states* of the self
- 2. All mental representations are states of one's self
- 3. Therefore, if the self does not exist then nor do mental representations of one's self
- 4. Therefore, if 'A' is true 'B' is false
- 5. Therefore, VST is false



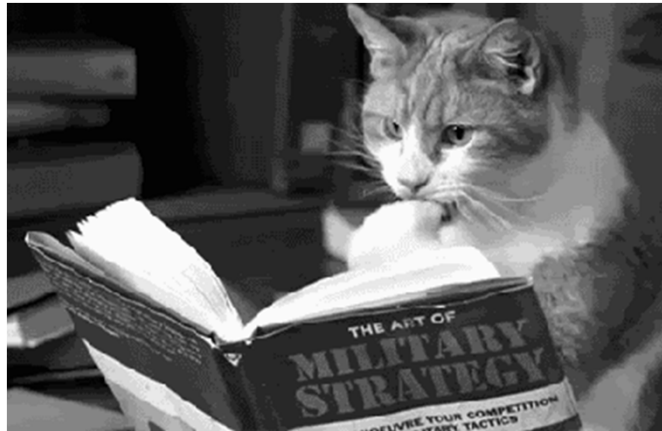
2. THE INCOHERENCE OF VST

'Now how can I make the claim that a self--your own real self, for instance--is rather like a fictional character? Aren't all fictional selves dependent for their very creation on the existence of real selves? It may seem so, but I will argue that this is an illusion.'

Dennett, 1986



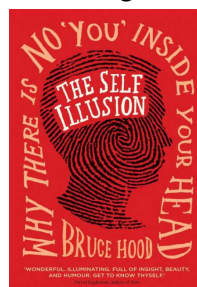
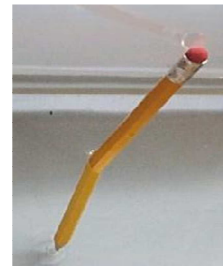
- Dennett says our self-narrative is generated by the brain, much like a 'novel-writing machine' might generate a fictional narrative
- **Reply:** But if the brain is the *bearer of self-representations*, why not say the brain = the self?
- **Counter:** but the things we attribute to the self can't all be attributed to the brain
- **Conclusion:** we need a different model of the self....



3. AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF THE SELF

3. AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

- VST says the appearance of the self is analogous to a perceptual *hallucination*
- I suggest it's more analogous to a perceptual *illusion*
- In perceptual illusion, the represented *object* really exists, but we misrepresent it as having some *property* it actually lacks



JARGON ALERT: this is a technical use of 'illusion'. Some use the term in a way that can encompass hallucinations too.

3. AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

The Illusion Model

- The self is more like my pencil than Macbeth's dagger!
- The self *does* exist...
- ...but we systematically *misrepresent* it.



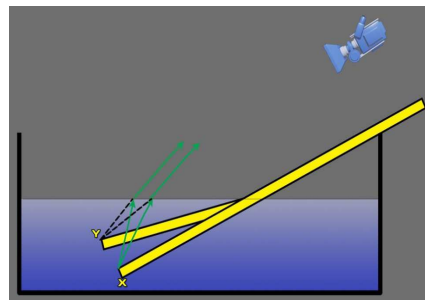
BLACKMORE

- The illusion model avoids the threat of incoherence faced by VST's hallucination model:
 - There's no incoherence in saying we systematically misrepresent ourselves
 - Since the self *exists*, it can be the bearer of self-(mis)representations

3. AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

The Illusion Model

- The illusion model can accommodate the data that motivated VST
- Just as objects in water systematically appear bent...
- ...so too the self systematically appears:
 - immaterial
 - enduring
 - singular
 - centrally located
 - capable of free choice
 - as the initiator of action
 - to have an essential character
 - to be as reported in memory



3. AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

Naïve Self

- There is a self
- It is much as it seems



Illusory Self

- There is a self
- Appearances of the self are often deceptive

- Thus the Naïve Self camp are right that selves exist
- But the No-Self camp is right that how selves seem is misleading

No-Self

- There is no self
- Any appearances of the self is thus deceptive



4. OBJECTIONS & REPLIES

4. OBJECTIONS & REPLIES

I) The Illusion Model is too generous to VST

- The case for VST is very weak, so there's no need for a compromise position
- **Reply:** at least some of the data holds water

II) The Illusion Model is too harsh on VST

- The accusation of incoherence doesn't go through
- **Reply:** more would need to be done to develop the incoherence argument, but it's a genuine threat

4. OBJECTIONS & REPLIES

III) The hallucination/illusion distinction is problematic

- For cases of gross misrepresentation, it's unclear whether they are hallucinations or illusions



- It might just be *indeterminate* whether there is a real self that we grossly misrepresent, or no self at all