

# What Is The Self?

Blithering Genius

2019 August 13

## Contents

<b>1 The Self-As-Object</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 The Self-As-Subject</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>3 The Hard Problem Of Consciousness</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>4 Identity</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>5 The Self, Change, And Death</b>	<b>3</b>

---

“What am I?” is a deep philosophical question. It can be rephrased as “What is the self?”.

## 1 The Self-As-Object

First, let's think about it in terms of objective reality: physics, biology, and psychology. What is the self-as-object?

Physically, you are an object, but a different kind of object than a rock. A rock is a collection of atoms that are stuck together. At any moment in time the body is a collection of atoms, but atoms are always flowing in and out of the body. The form of the body is stable, but its constituent matter is always changing. In that way, the body is more like a stream than a rock.

The form of the body is maintained by circular processes, including the chemical cycles inside cells, the flow of the blood, the beating of the heart and the rhythmic firing of neurons. Life exists because the processes of life perpetuate themselves. Life is circular. It consists of feedback loops. But life is also a flow. Energy from the sun flows through the biosphere and powers the cycles of life. Energy and matter flow through your body. The body is a machine that extracts resources from its environment and uses those resources to maintain its form, grow, and reproduce.

Biologically, you are a reproducing machine. The natural purpose of the body is to reproduce, because its form was generated by evolution. The bodies that exist today are the ones whose ancestors reproduced. You inherited your form and its implicit purpose from your ancestors. The coherence of your body is due to the cells having a common reproductive interest. They work together toward the common purpose of reproduction.

You began life as a zygote that was formed by a sperm fertilizing an egg. Your body grew from that initial cell. The cells of your body are descendants (by mitosis) of that original zygote. That zygote contained one of the things that is most essential to you: your DNA. Your DNA determines a lot about you: appearance, physical abilities, personality and intelligence. Two people descended from the same zygote (identical twins) are very similar. So, one answer to “What am I?” is “My DNA”.

Psychologically, you are an information processor. Your senses collect information from the environment and send it to your brain. The brain then processes that information to extract knowledge and generate behavior. The generation of behavior involves emotions, knowledge, and the current data of the senses. The brain receives input from the senses and sends information to the muscles and a few glands. Behavior consists of muscle twitches and glandular secretions. For example, the complex behavior of eating a cheeseburger involves a lot of coordinated muscle twitches and the secretion of saliva and other digestive juices. Playing the piano involves a lot of synchronized muscle twitches based on the visual data of a musical score. Your brain is a very complex organ for generating timed muscle twitches and glandular secretions, and that’s all it is. It has no magical or transcendent purpose or abilities. The function of your brain is to generate behavior, and the function of behavior is to make you reproduce.

Consciousness is the mental process that integrates the total activity of the brain into a coherent whole. It generates and maintains a model of what you are doing. That model is used to generate high level behaviors. Our subjective experiences (feelings, thoughts and choices) seem to correspond to this high level mental process, but it’s difficult to say because we can’t observe subjective experiences from an outside perspective. We can only experience them in the moment and remember them afterward.

Consciousness is limited. Most of the brain’s information processing is subconscious. For example, you aren’t aware of the way your brain integrates the visual images from two eyes into a single scene, or how your eyes are constantly moving around and taking little snapshots (saccades). When you look around, you experience a mental representation of your environment, not the processing that creates that representation. When you walk or run, you choose to go one direction or another, but you don’t consciously choose which muscles to twitch. The muscle twitches just happen. This suggests that consciousness “resides” only in part of the brain.

## **2 The Self-As-Subject**

Now, what is the self-as-subject?

Subjectively, you are an experiencer and a doer. You are a conduit through which a stream of causality/information flows. You sense, feel, think and act.

Very little can be said about the self-as-subject, because the self-as-subject is always present to itself. You can’t get outside yourself, so you have no way of experiencing any condition other than that of being yourself. We naturally distinguish between ourselves and the external world, but that is an objective distinction. If you look at a tree you experience an idea of the tree, not the tree itself. The idea of the tree is a mental construct that your brain uses to understand sensory experience and guide action. If you are walking through a park and see a tree in your path, your brain will use the idea of the tree to generate the behavior of walking around it. You believe that there is a tree “out there”, and that is a perfectly natural and reasonable belief, but what you experience is inside yourself – inside your subjectivity.

“I think therefore I am” shows that the subject is undeniable and inescapable. “I am not thinking” is a paradox, and so is “I do not exist”. This is a profound insight into the human condition, but it doesn’t tell us much about the subject. I cannot deny that I exist, but what am I? I am that which thinks, feels and acts — but what is that?

We can theorize about the subject as an information processing machine, but then we are thinking about the subject as an object. We can theorize that a certain experience corresponds to a certain kind of information being processed, but that objective model does not contain the experience itself. The feeling of wind on your face is not contained in a description of sensory receptors in the skin being stimulated by air molecules hitting the skin, sending that information to the brain, and causing certain neurons to fire in the cerebral cortex. Just as the idea of the tree is not the tree itself, a theory of conscious experience is not conscious experience itself.

### **3 The Hard Problem Of Consciousness**

That brings me to the hard problem of consciousness, which is the (unanswerable) question of why it feels like this to be a certain kind of information processing machine. Or why is there any feeling at all? Why can’t the machine just do its business without the subject staring out of its eyes? I don’t think we can answer the question, but we can identify ways that it can’t be answered. For example, we can’t answer it by positing some unobservable substance or entity (spirit or soul) that has the properties of subjectivity. That would just be positing an extension of objectivity, and an empirically vacuous one to boot. It would be a dodge, not an answer.

Causality ties subject and object together. Will and awareness are causality. Will is causality flowing out of the self, and awareness is causality flowing in. You are a little machine that does things. Through that machine flows a tiny part of the causality/energy/information of the cosmos. Subjectivity is your perspective as that machine. Your experiences and actions are causality viewed from that perspective.

### **4 Identity**

Identity is another aspect of the self. Identity is the continuity of the self over time and its distinctiveness from others. You are you, not somebody else, and you are the same person today as you were yesterday. Identity comes from the stability and continuity of the self. You don’t change that much over time, and you can be identified by your stable characteristics. You have an identity (or multiple identities) to others, and you have an identity to yourself.

### **5 The Self, Change, And Death**

You are not static or permanent, but you change slowly and your past is linked to your future. Your DNA stays mostly the same during your life, although it degrades slowly as the years pass. The form of your body changes as you grow up and age, but in a predictable way. The processes of the body (such as the cycle of your beating heart) continue throughout your life. Your personality traits and intelligence stay mostly the same, although you do accumulate knowledge and memories. The relative stability and continuity of your form allows others to know you, and it allows you to know yourself.

As you age, you slowly lose yourself. Memories are forgotten. The body and brain start to lose their genetically determined forms. DNA breaks down. Cancer evolves within the body as cells lose their shared information and shared purpose. Death is the ultimate fate of the self.

And yet, in a way you will never die. Your subjectivity will eventually cease to exist, but only from someone else's perspective. Your subjectivity is a totality to you. You have no perspective outside it, and thus you cannot die from your perspective. You will never be in the position to say "I no longer exist".