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**The Self: Lost and Found**

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**ABSTRACT**

Can we have experiences without a “self” that’s having them? Is my “self” something private and interior, unknowable to anybody else? How is that inner self related to my body, to other people, to the world? Questions like these can lead down a seemingly endless philosophical maze, yet psychologically important issues around identity, personhood, and ethical responsibility may hinge on how we consciously or unconsciously answer them. The books under review explore a range of ways of engaging these issues, from the Cartesian tradition in Western philosophy contrasted first with Buddhist psychology and then onto contemporary phenomenology to arrive at a pragmatic understanding of personhood grounded in intersubjectivity and relationality.

*Losing Ourselves*, by Jay Garfield ([Citation2022](https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/J3QCZYFSEGH5VFQPFUNC/full?target=10.1080/07351690.2025.2480018))

*Self, No Self: Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions*, by Mark Siderits, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi (2013)

It has been suggested that the whole problem of the self is nothing more than a grammatical mistake regarding the proper use of the first-person pronoun (Kenny, [Citation1988](https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/J3QCZYFSEGH5VFQPFUNC/full?target=10.1080/07351690.2025.2480018)). When we say, “I’m thinking” we should no more expect to find an “I” that’s doing the thinking, than we would expect to find the “It” in “It’s raining.” It’s just feature of our grammar, not a *thing* to be defined or discovered. If you’re satisfied with that explanation, you should count yourself a lucky man – you’ve just bypassed centuries of philosophical and religious disputation, confusion, and outright nonsense.

Most of us, however, cannot resist going down the rabbit hole.

To begin with, we are the inheritors of a long tradition, or simply the habit, of talking about the self as something I *have*, something that is *inside*, something that is the *source* of my thoughts and feelings, and the *agent* behind my actions. And within our traditions, both East and West, there is often a conflation of talk of the *self* with talk of the *soul*. Soul talk over the centuries has served the purpose of imagining a separate substance, a mental or spiritual *something* that is *ontologically distinct* from the physical body. To say the soul is ontologically distinct from the body is to say that it is not made out of the same stuff our body is made out of. Now, because the stuff the body is made out of is the only stuff anyone anywhere has ever actually seen, touched, or otherwise sensed, saying just what different kind of stuff the self or soul is made out of might seem a difficult question. But it has the very important advantage of potentially not being subject to the ordinary physical forces that act on the body causing such things as injury, illness, old age, and death. If the soul is immaterial, of a different substance than the body, then it perhaps can live on, separate from the body after death. Now, it’s very likely that you, as a scientifically minded modern person, don’t hold any such religious belief. But, nonetheless, we are the inheritors of a way of talking about the self that owes more than we usually like to think to ways about talking about the soul.

In the Western philosophical tradition, we can identify this with the legacy of Rene Descartes (1596–1650) who with his *cogito ergo sum* encapsulated the picture that who I *really* am is an *inner thinking subject* for whom my body is an external, potentially separate *vehicle* for my mind. We continue to hear echoes of this perspective in contemporary arguments about the relation of the mind to the brain, in analogies that suggest the mind is like the software to the brain’s hardware, and even that our mental software might be what’s been called *substrate independent* and thus capable of being “uploaded” into a computer to transfer to another body when this one becomes obsolescent.

Jay Garfield confronts this legacy of dualism by bringing to bear the long tradition of Buddhist philosophy on the nature of the self. And this possibility of substrate independence is one of the thought experiments he suggests, lest we think of the problem of the self as something confined to abstract philosophical or religious debates. Imagine he suggests that you are in Olympic champion Usain Bolt’s body. Imagine what it feels like to run the 100 yard dash in 9.6 seconds. Most of us, he suggests, could go along with this fantasy, believing it’s possible to imagine what it would be like for *me* to be *inside* Bolt’s body and know what it feels like. Then, Garfield suggests, imagine what it’s like to have Stephen Hawking’s mind – to be a mathematical genius. Maybe that’s harder to imagine, but it brings us face to face with what is in fact a logical impossibility. It is not that the problem is *difficult*, rather it is *nonsense*. But it is the particular brand of nonsense, Garfield claims, that pervades our commonsense view of the self.

Buddhist philosophy has a long history of engaging with this particular problem, and Garfield wants to bring it out of departments of Eastern Religion and into dialogue with Western philosophy. Particularly, he offers the work of the Indian philosopher Chandrakirti (c. 600–c. 650) as a counterpart to that of David Hume (1711–1776), each presenting a skeptical argument against the existence of the self as commonly perceived. Chandrakirti, however, is a representative of orthodox Buddhism; Hume for his trouble was labeled by his contemporaries “The Great Infidel” (Graham, [Citation2005](https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/J3QCZYFSEGH5VFQPFUNC/full?target=10.1080/07351690.2025.2480018)). Candrakirti was arguing against the then prevalent Hindu view “that to be a sentient being was to be an *atman”* variously translated into English as *self* or *soul* (Garfield p. 2). “It is characterized as unitary, as the witness of all that we perceive, as the agent of our actions, as the enjoyer of our aesthetic experience. It is … always the subject, never the object. It is that which persists through life despite changes in the body and mind, and which persists beyond death and in transmigration” (p. 3). It’s existence was considered necessary to explain sensory integration (assembling sensations of color, shape, smell into a rose), of memory (that I am identical to the self I am remembering as having lunch yesterday) and moral responsibility (I am identical to the agent of last month’s actions).

Buddhist philosophy offered a number of compelling analogies to counteract the intuitive, but to them delusional assumption that *I* am a persistent internal substance existing independently of my body and mind. Take the example of a chariot. It is made of wheels, axles, poles, etc. Any one of these parts could break and be replaced, so it is not identical to any of its material parts. It is not merely the sum of its parts because a heap of unassembled parts would not be chariot. But also there is no single way the parts have to be made, whether in terms of their size, material, or arrangement, in order for them to function as a chariot. “Chariot-ness” cannot be located *in* the chariot itself but rather is a *conventional* description for an object that broadly looks a certain (but not specific) way and serves a general function. What we want to see here is that what a chariot is “not a singular entity that is either identical to or distinct from its parts” (p. 10). It also turns out you can’t say what a chariot is without reference to a whole lot of other things, including riders and horses, not to mention the social functions and distinctions that differentiate a chariot from a cart.

Where Garfield is going with this argument is a replacement of the language of *selves* with an alternate language of *persons*. Persons are embodied social beings. Who and what they are is only describable relationally, not privately or introspectively. When Winnicott ([Citation1965](https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/J3QCZYFSEGH5VFQPFUNC/full?target=10.1080/07351690.2025.2480018)) claimed, “there is no such thing as an infant,” he was simply giving a vivid example of what Buddhists would say is true of every “thing.” There are no separate things; you can’t be yourself by yourself. Identity and personhood are relationally constituted.

So, perhaps somewhat anti-climactically, when Garfield denies the existence of the self, he is not denying the existence of persons. This goes a long way to dispelling the clouds of mysticism that typically surround Westerners ideas of “no self.” Rather than being dissolved in a state of oceanic oneness, no-self has a more mundane meaning that can be applied equally to Chandrakirti’s chariot as to me. Neither of us has a permanent, inner essence. Both of us exist and are defined by our place in a nexus of causal, social, and cultural relations. Now for me to *experience* myself in this way may be quite unsettling or transformative. Not only wilI I have to give up the consolations of an afterlife, but I will have to acknowledge a greater degree of dependence and vulnerability than my usual stances of self-sufficiency, independence, or self-control allow for. Further, my *identity*, whether racial, gendered, or cultural, will no longer be seen as something inner, fixed, and unchanging, but as co-constructed within a complex matrix of influences, biological, relational, and historical. Much of what I imagined to be *me* will be up for grabs in more ways than one.

But the problem of the self is not resolved simply by replacing “self” with “person.” There remains the problem of subjectivity, what it *feels like* to be *me*, even after I’m convinced that there’s in fact no “me” *inside*. I am reminded of a perhaps apocryphal story about Wittgenstein, who is said to have asked a colleague “Why is it that people persisted for so long in thinking that the sun revolved around the earth?” Not knowing how to reply, the colleague muttered something like, “But that’s just how *it looks.”* To which Wittgenstein replied, “But how would it look if the earth revolved around the sun?” Now, since the earth does revolve around the sun it would look exactly the same way, but we nonetheless persist in interpreting the motion of the sun across the sky as the sun doing the revolving rather the earth rotating, which is happening so slowly we don’t feel it. Now maybe there’s a physicist out there for whom the reality of the situation is so ingrained and second nature that he no longer “sees” the sun “moving.” But Garfield is like a man who can’t tolerate anyone using the word “sunset.” He has to jump in and accuse you of being a latent Ptolemaic. And anyone who lets slip a reference to their “self” must be denounced as a closet Cartesian.

For a more thorough and credible way of talking about subjectivity without veering into the ditch of Cartesian dualism, we must turn to the contemporary phenomenologists, and the heirs of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. Each, in ways too complex to do more than allude to here, developed models of the embodied person embedded in a world of language and social relations. For instance, according to Dan Zahavi (Siderits et al., [Citation2013](https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/J3QCZYFSEGH5VFQPFUNC/full?target=10.1080/07351690.2025.2480018)) the shift in focus from a *subject* of experience to the inherent *subjectivity* of experience does not entail that subjectivity be ontological confined to a private, inner world of the isolated mind. In other words, it does not “entail a strict division between self and world” (p. 69). It is perfectly compatible with, for instance, the Heideggerian view that “self-experience is the self experience of a world-immersed self” (p. 69). One does not need a separate inner subject/self to construct versions of self-experience that are “ecological, experiential, dialogical, narrative, relational, embodied and socially constructed” (p. 67).

The phenomenological heirs of Husserl all note that consciousness is inherently *intentional*; all conscious experience includes an object of experience. As Garfield himself notes, “Our subjectivity is not independent of [our] construction of a world of objects of awareness. Our subjectivity is not a blank screen or clear mirror waiting for objects to impinge. It is not bare awareness or pure subjectivity, waiting for an object to turn up” (p. 32). Where the phenomenologists go further is to assert that consciousness also comes intrinsically stamped both with *me-ness* and temporality. Though we conventionally speak of the self as the owner of experiences, from a phenomenological point of view, we would instead say that the “ubiquitous dimension of first person givenness” is itself a feature of consciousness and “in this view the self is defined as the very subjectivity of experience, and is not taken to be something that exists independently of, or in separation from, the experiential flow” (Zahavi, p. 60).

Further, “to account for the diachronic unity of consciousness there is … no need for an appeal to some undivided, invariable, unchanging trans-temporal entity.” Phenomenologists like Husserl have claimed that time-consciousness is an intrinsic dimension of consciousness, such that mine-ness encompasses the experience I’m having now with the ones I had, whether a few minutes or a few years ago. When I recall an experience from my past, I don’t just recall what happened, I recall it’s happening *to me.*

Evan Thompson (Siderits et al., [Citation2013](https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/J3QCZYFSEGH5VFQPFUNC/full?target=10.1080/07351690.2025.2480018)) writes “from a phenomenological perspective there is no need to suppose that ‘I’ or ‘me’ corresponds to an enduring entity with an existence separate or somehow distinct from the stream of body-mind events … To use an Indian turn of phrase, we could say the stream is fundamentally I-making” (p. 173). And Zahavi concludes, ”The continuity provided by the stream of consciousness, the unity provided by shared first-person givenness, is sufficient for the kind of experiential self-identity that I am eager to preserve. If you don’t find that sufficient, I think you are looking for the wrong kind of identity” (p. 176).

Taken together, these basic qualities of consciousness: intentionality, subjectivity, and temporality, constitute the framework for what Zahavi and Thompson have called a “minimal self.”

Thus, rather than positing an unchanging inner self that is the possessor of experience – creating the seemingly unanswerable question as to whether I am the same self that I was as a child – one recognizes that I am an *embodied person* who is constituted by the vicissitudes of relational and physical changes that have taken place over time. I am the same person in some senses but not others. A 10-year old is not a 70-year old, and a school boy is not a doctor. Yet the one has grown and changed into the other.

For Garfield, the self is not what we ordinarily think it is, and *no self* is what we already are without knowing it. For Zahavi, Thompson et al., self talk is just one way we talk about subjective experience, and the better we understand it, the more harmless it becomes. After all, I can still enjoy the sunset.

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**Additional information**

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