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The search for the self in the age of the brain

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Although the assertion that we all have “self” may seem indisputable, ideas about what the self is have actually evolved and changed radically since the middle ages when the words self and spirit were interchangeable. In this paper, I track the various versions of the self since Descartes’ attempt to bridge the anatomical and the religious, touching on psychoanalytic approaches and more recent cognitive models. All of these, as useful as they are, are shorthand explanations for self experience; and yet there is no part of the brain where you can find the “self.” Instead, there are neurological pathways connecting perception, memory and imagination. Consciousness is whatever we’re associating to at the moment, and self experience is just one class of those associations. The experience of having a self is actually the continuity of a brain associating to experience and relating those new experiences to memory. Considered in this light, it’s not I think therefore I am, it’s I associate therefore I am. This associative model of consciousness can be used to explain social-constructivist and interpersonal models of the self, as well as new ways of understanding identity, psychopathology, and creativity.

Biography

Harry G Segal has completed his graduation with a BA and MA in English Literature from Columbia (1990). He has received his PhD in English Literature from Yale University and second Doctorate in Clinical Psychology from the University of Michigan in 1990. He has completed his Post-doctoral Fellowship in the Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan Medical School, and joined the Faculty at Cornell in 1998. His work has focused on the clinical assessment of narrative and, more recently, models of the self. His publications include empirical studies on adolescent suicidality and depression, borderline personality disorder, and theoretical work on the creative process in fiction.

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