



1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Comer, Jacob (2012) "Finding the Consistent Self," *The Intellectual Standard*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/tis/vol1/iss1/6>

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October 2011

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Finding the Consistent Self

Jacob Comer

Individual identity is absurd in itself. It is excessively complex. Each one of us has our own, so identity is not uniform between people. In fact, we generally think that its purpose is to distinguish ourselves from others as well as from just being that guy or girl over there. Sometimes, our identity is tied to another person, object, circumstance, or idea. Sometimes, it is just a feeling, a presence. And as time passes, the item to which we think our identity is bound changes. Perhaps, as adults, we will all find that thing that is “me”, or so we often tell ourselves. Perhaps, you have never given it direct or sustained thought. Perhaps, you are like me and have experienced periods of certainty, each instantaneously shattered by moments of instability or insecurity. But I believe that most of us, regardless of whether or not we are currently searching for it, believe that a uniform, fundamental, unwavering, core something-or-other exists: our identity as an individual.

To accept that one is variable and conditional is near to accepting that this entity does not exist, and thinking that we do not exist violates all of our expectations at a fundamental level, which often leaves us confused, angry, or feeling hopeless, empty, or meaningless. To combat such emotions, we associate ourselves with various other entities, whether concrete or conceptual. Usually, we select items that link to one conceptual category or, at most, a couple categories. Such categories are generally associated with the following types of terms: physical, mental, spiritual, and experiential. These are all conceptual simplifications of human existence, but we use them for practical purposes related to communication, social structures, and knowledge.

Reaching a Definition

When we define ourselves by *physical* associations, we are usually relying on the appearance and function of tangible items to formulate ourselves into an expressible symbol. The assumption in this case is generally that an individual is his body, its components, and its functions. We witness this type of thinking when someone expresses that any given trait is genetically determined, implying that his traits, having a physical origin,

define him. The other types of self-identification are gradually less concrete and materialism-prone. But among them, the *mentally*-based associations are partially submerged in concrete entities, mainly the body.

For most of recorded human history, as the western world has interpreted it, the mind practically did not exist. It was the soul that guided our behavior, and the soul was, to some degree, separate from the body. Prior to Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century, these items, mind and soul, were interchangeable. No longer. Currently, one cannot reasonably assert that biology and the mind are not intertwined, and there is no room for the soul in the development or function of the body. In fact, knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and developmental processes has become essential in understanding the mind. It is clear that the mind and body function in unison: cross-communicating through hormones from endocrine structures in the brain and elsewhere in the thorax, maintaining homeostasis, and reacting to the external environment. Certainly, the mind mediates between our body and our environment, but it also arises from our body and influences our body as well; moreover, interdependent objects cannot be considered distinct. A severed head does not think past its expiration date, and an expired body is a mindless one. Therefore, we must consider these objects, body and mind, indistinct from each other.

When we speak of the spirit, as in any *spiritually*-based, self-entity association, this term is merely a synonym for “soul.” Therefore, we must assume that “spirit” has merely become an anachronism of “mind.” That doesn’t seem to be how we think about “soul” or “spirit,” though. Rather, we most often say something is spiritual when referring to an essence. Like the smoke that drifts off of burning incense, the spirit is not graspable. Like the smoke that drifts off of burning incense, the spirit holds the least number of properties that give us the sense that one is a particular version among a general theme, such as people. People are like incense in that they come in different versions, but vary in essence, in vague being—sensation. Also, like incense, the concept of the spirit is often utilized with the goal of comforting ourselves when the body and mind are contingent on the momentary environment, both external and internal.

I am fascinated by the idea of a rudimentary being and, therefore, the minimalistic approach that is evident in the concept of the soul. And I think we all are; thus, we search for a concise way to express who we are.

But to suggest that we are the spirit is to suggest that we are how we've qualified it, so we are just as intangible and rudimentary. All of our extraneous traits wouldn't be us. I couldn't even touch you. Such logic is negligent and divisive. We cannot only be our soul. We cannot only be our rudimentary, essential qualities. These qualities wouldn't exist, if not for their physical origin.

Whatever exists in our location, the *experimental* variety of self-definition proposes that cumulative experiences determine who we are. It is implied then that experiences, if they are to accumulate, must be stored, retrieved, and built upon. What we're speaking of is long-term memory.

Surely, we do not remember everything, and that is because in order for information to enter our long-term memory, it must cycle through other facets of our memory, and each has a limited capacity. Our sensory memory stores all of the information coming from our sensory organs. The duration that sensory information can be stored varies considerably, such as with about 0.3 seconds for visual information and five to ten seconds for auditory information. But that is our unconscious. We do not actually know of these sensations until we pay attention to them. Once we pay attention to the sensation, or it barges into our attention by being more vivacious than other sensations, it is in our working memory. Working memory is, for all practical purposes, our consciousness. And we can attend to five to nine items, depending on the size of the data, functioning similarly to a computer's RAM.¹ We smoothly maintain this information in our working memory by rehearsing it repeatedly, thus leading to the technical and complicated term, "maintenance rehearsal." If we do not rehearse what we're attending to, it leaves our working memory about thirty seconds after we have attended to it (it is no surprise that people often forget what they are talking about or repeat themselves). Rehearsed information is then encoded into our long-term memory. Even during this whole process, information is being retrieved from the long-term memory into the working memory, thus affecting the storage capacity, frequency, and efficiency, as well as the interpretation of the information. As a result of our mind's limited capacity, our memories are mostly bits-and-pieces tacked on to pre-existing memories, leaving room for much ambiguity. Another flaw-causing agent is that old memories that are retrieved

1 Random-access memory.

are re-encoded into long-term memory to account for the context in which they were last remembered, slightly altering them, mostly where ambiguity exists.

Of course, memory is not just explicit things we can remember. We also have implicit memory, which includes various subconscious things like conditioned responses to stimuli and memories that guide us on procedures that we no longer “think” about, like walking. In other words, memories do account for a significant portion of our unconscious behavior as well.

Despite the flaws in memory, my major distaste for an experientially-based definition of one’s identity is actually that all of the processes required for memory are biologically originating and driven, yet a solely experiential theory about identity doesn’t usually give our physical nature the credit that is due. At the same time, purely physical theories of identity usually neglect that mental phenomena have cumulative processes that may alter our biology and behavior. So what we need is an interactive approach to understanding identity, and I think the best source lies in how we know that we exist as ourselves.

“I Think; Therefore, I Am.”

There is a little truth to the statement. Knowledge that we exist literally comes from the fact that we think. Or rather, the processes of knowing we exist and rudimentary thought are cross-wired. In fact, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, in a TED Talk, describes how the midbrain is responsible for forming both processes. The posterior half of the midbrain maps the internal body. This map lets it know whether or not we are deviating from our homeostasis. By definition, homeostasis never changes, since it is the balance that allows our body to function. In fact, if we deviate from our homeostasis, we become ill or die. The midbrain’s map of our homeostasis is the single map of information in our mind that is stationary. More interestingly, the anterior portion of the midbrain is wired to the cerebral cortex, where all of our memories, thoughts and the like are held. This means that all of our cognitive experiences—thoughts, memories, emotions—may feed into the anterior midbrain. And by association via proximity, the map of ourselves and the map of our knowledge and experiences of the internal and external world are linked. Because the anterior and pos-

terior midbrain sections are fused and, thereby, all of our experiences are continuously checked against our internal map, we always know how we relate to ourselves and our environment. The midbrain lets us know, as we are conscious in the prefrontal cortex, in the form of a feeling. We may not always be aware of this feeling, however, since our mind reacts primarily to changes in states, and you shouldn't be "feeling off" unless your homeostasis has changed—you are ill. Even so, that doesn't mean this emotion cannot be felt. I believe it is what meditation evokes; when nothing else is sensed or thought, it is equanimity. When something else is sensed or thought, it is identity.

While I cannot cognitively handle trying to process every individual component that makes "me" on every possible level of analysis, from the subatomic to the fusion of "me" and my cross-dependent environment, I feel that I exist. As far as biology is concerned, that is knowledge.