

The Story of You: How True Is It?

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Get a Grip on Your Selves

Are we one self? Or are we many selves? For quite a long time, the answer appeared obvious. We are, of course, one self. That's certainly how we experience ourselves, and we tend to have more confidence than may be warranted in our subjective personal experience. In one of her articles in *brainpickings*, Maria Popova writes:

We tend to float through life anchored by a firm conviction that the self is our sole constant companion.

But in recent decades, psychologists, philosophers, neuroscientists and people in many other fields have reached a different conclusion. Rather than being one self, we are actually many selves. That explains a few things, such as why we sometimes don't feel or act like ourselves and why other people sometimes tell us we don't seem like ourselves.

If you have ever been surprised by how you acted, or felt confused, conflicted, or uncertain about who you truly are, or realized how dramatically different you feel in different situations or in different moods, then you know that this thing we call the 'self' can have many different and often competing facets and states—and if you haven't had this experience, then you probably have not been paying too much attention! –Gregg Henriques, psychologist

But the concept of multiple selves also raises some big questions. Just who are these different selves? And why does knowing about them matter?

Let's check out the major players.

The Experiencing Self

The experiencing self is probably the most easily recognizable. Simply put, it's the part of us that is having an experience right now of physical or bodily sensations, of thoughts, and of feelings. According to neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, the experiencing self uses the body as its basic reference point.

You cannot have a conscious mind if you don't have the interaction between cerebral cortex and brain stem. You cannot have a conscious mind if you don't have the interaction between the brain stem and the body.

Since we have only one body, we experience ourselves as having only one self. The experiencing self not only relates to our personal experiences, it is also closely connected to our core drives, needs, and emotions.

The Autobiographical Self (a/k/a the Remembering Self)

Each of us has an inner narrator or inner interpreter who makes sense of our experiences and observations, decides which are important and what they mean, and weaves everything together into a unified whole. The inner narrator gives our lives a sense of continuity, the result of which is that our experiences feel sequential and (usually) logical rather than segmented and random.

If you tune in to your inner narrator, you may be able to catch it in the act of doing this, but it takes a little practice.

According to Daniel Kahneman, author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, there are some fundamental differences between the experiencing self and the remembering self.



The experiencing self...

- Lives in the present and knows the present. It's capable of re-living the past, but basically has only the present.
- Lives its life continuously, having moments of experience, one after the other.
- Considers that two weeks of pleasure are better than one week (time matters).

The remembering self...

- Keeps score and maintains the story of our life.
- Is a storyteller, connecting the dots, explaining and narrating our experiences after the fact.
- Considers that one week of pleasure is just as good as two weeks (time doesn't matter).

Furthermore, "The remembering self does more than remember and tell stories. It is actually the one that makes decisions" because "we actually don't choose between experiences, we choose between memories of experiences."

We can only experience whatever is happening *right now*. Once *right now* is over, what we just experienced becomes a memory. And our memories, which are notoriously inaccurate, play a major role in the story of us we believe in.

The Public Self or Persona

The public self is the image we present—or attempt to present—to others. However, we don't necessarily have just one public self. We likely present a different self to our closest and oldest

friends than we do to employers or co-workers. And we probably don't present an identical self to every single one of our friends.

In some cases, we may not even be aware of the image we're projecting to others. Here's a personal example offered by psychologist Gregg Henriques:

The other day I received a call on the heels of a conference presentation I offered, in which the caller invited me to be in charge of the membership of a particular organization. The caller, who interacted with me on several occasions during the conference but did not know me prior to the event, said, "We need someone in charge of membership like you who is gregarious and socially engaging." Later, when I told my wife about the way he characterized me, she laughed and said, "I thought you psychologists could read people. He obviously failed there!" My wife, who knows me very well, was basing this comment on the fact that in many social situations I tend to be fairly reserved, am hesitant to make 'small talk,' and am more likely to find myself in a corner rather than the center of attention. So, which is the "real me," gregarious or reserved?

Psychoanalyst and author Stephen Mitchell says our different selves "represent our ability to respond and adapt to different situations and different people." That means the more you know about them, the less likely you will be to be blindsided when one of them appears.

Our Past, Present, and Future Selves

One of the main premises of Daniel Gilbert's book *Stumbling on Happiness* is that we fail to recognize that our past self, our present self, and our future self are not the same self. He says we are afflicted with a condition called "presentism," which prevents us from understanding that the future and our future selves are not going to be the same as they are today. Presentism doesn't only confound our predictions of the future, it also colors our recollections of the past, sometimes significantly so.

It isn't too difficult to recognize the truth in what Gilbert says. Our past self has likely put at least a few things into motion that our present self is now unhappily forced to deal with. For example, why didn't our past self know our future self would want to quit smoking and that it would have such a hard time doing so? Likewise, our present self is already setting things into motion our future self may want absolutely nothing to do with. How certain are you that your future self will be as enamored with the reality of being retired in Costa Rica (or anywhere—or even retired, for that matter) as your present self now is with the idea of doing so?

Yale University professor and experimental philosopher Joshua Knobe has this to say about your future self:

Imagine what things are going to be like in 30 years [or even in 5 or 10 years]. In 30 years, there's going to be a person around who you might normally think of as you—but that person is actually going to be really, really different from you in a lot of ways. Chances are, a lot of the values you have, a lot of the emotions, a lot of the beliefs, a lot of the goals are not going to be shared by that person. So, in some sense you might think that

person is you, but is that person really you? That person is like you in certain respects, but...you might think that person is kind of not me anymore.

A Different Way to Think About Ourselves

Neuropsychologist Paul Broks says neuroscience shows there is no center in the brain “where things do all come together.” Instead of a control center, there are lots of different processes in the brain, most of them operating independently. Journalist and philosopher Julian Baggini, author of *The Ego Trick*, agrees that there isn’t actually a “you” at the center of all your experiences. He then asks, “what is there, then?” and answers:



Well, clearly there are memories, desires, intentions, sensations, and so forth. But what happens is these things exist, and they’re kind of all integrated, they’re overlapped, they’re connected in various different ways. They’re connecting partly, and perhaps even mainly, because they all belong to one body and one brain [see Damasio’s quote above]. But there’s also a narrative, a story we tell about ourselves, the experiences we have when we remember past things. We do things because of other things. So what we desire is partly a result of what we believe, and what we remember is also informing what we know. And so really, there are all these things, like beliefs, desires, sensations, experiences, they’re all related to each other, and that just is you. In some ways, it’s a small difference from the common-sense understanding. In some ways, it’s a massive one.

That massive difference, Baggini suggests, is the shift from thinking about ourselves as “the thing which has all the experiences of life” to thinking of ourselves as “simply that collection of all experiences in life.”

This is a model for understanding ourselves that he finds liberating and exciting, and so do I. It’s a model that allows for fluidity and expansion, for change and growth, rather than one that ties us down into a permanently fixed position. But it’s so different from the way we experience ourselves that it can be difficult to accept. We believe so strongly in the unified story of ourselves because it’s both compelling and comforting. As Baggini says:

There are limits to what we can achieve. There are limits to what we can make of ourselves. But nevertheless, we do have this capacity to, in a sense, shape ourselves. The true self, as it were then, is not something that is just there for you to discover. You don’t sort of look into your soul and find your true self. What you are partly doing, at least, is actually creating your true self.

Before we can more effectively shape or create ourselves, we have to loosen our grip on our belief in the story we currently have about ourselves.