

The self: reflective, relational, and embodied

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Introduction

One of the great challenges to thinkers across the ages has been defining the nature of self. The notion of self has intrigued theoreticians from many disciplines with each seeking a deeper understanding of its structure and function. The subject of self is extensive and it is beyond the scope of this paper to review the full range of commentary. However, I intend in this short exploration to draw attention to three key features of the self and how they are essential to well-being. My claim is that among the many aspects of the self there are three distinct features which need to be appreciated if we are to apprehend its fundamental nature: *reflectivity*, *relationality*, and *embodiment*.

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge some paradigmatic issues. Commentators view self differently depending on their disciplinary foci and philosophical assumptions. For empirical scientists, self has often been little more than a way of describing the collective aspects of a biological organism. From a neuroscientific perspective, self either does not exist at all ([Damasio, 1999](#)), that is, it is regarded as an illusion created by neural activity, or it exists as a form of metacoordination of sensory data, or what Ramachandran ([2004](#)) refers to as “metarepresentation” of layers of sensory data. For philosophers, self is usually equated to mind and as such is viewed as being more than the sum of brain activity. That is, the mind is understood as existing in relationship to the brain but not confined to it. At best, the mind and the broader notion of self have been considered by science as uncomfortable anomalies properly relegated to non-scientific exploration. However, both scientists and philosophers have continued to raise questions concerning the nature of self. Is self simply an expression of electrical and chemical signals? Is self or consciousness more than the sum of these electrical and chemical components? What of emotions and their role in mentation and self awareness? While some of these questions may be beyond empirical measurement, we now know much more about the brain-mind relationship and how it forms a sense of self.

The following discussion provides an understanding of the self, based particularly on the psychodynamic theories of Winnicott, Kohut, and Meares, the developmental insights from Piaget ([1959](#)) and Flavell, Green, and Flavell ([1993](#)), and the memory research of

Vandekerckhove and Panksepp (2009), Tulving (2002) and others. The final section draws on the work of chemist and philosopher Polanyi (1975) as a means of integrating the various elements of the discussion.

The anoetic self

Before progressing it is important that I provide at least an initial definition for the term “self”. By self I mean the totality of preconscious, unconscious and conscious dimensions of being which also necessarily include physical, emotional, and mental features of humanness. Self is often denoted as consciousness or awareness but the above definition expands the notion of self to include aspects of the self that are outside conscious awareness. This definition includes aspects of being that influence awareness but which do not necessarily ever emerge into consciousness. Two examples of this are the “preconscious biological precedent” or proto self, (Damasio, 1999), and implicit or recognition memory (Roediger & McDermott, 1993; Schacter, 1987). Damasio uses the term “preconscious biological precedent” to identify an essentially unconscious body-based foundation or blueprint of the self. He explains his view by stating “The proto self is a collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the physical structure of the organism in its dimensions” (Damasio, 1999, p. 154). The existence of such a proto self is outside of conscious awareness. Implicit or recognition memory has been demonstrated to be an aspect of the memory system that also functions independently of conscious awareness. It provides recall and knowledge of things without the individual being aware of acquiring that memory or knowledge. Collectively these forms of awareness are called anoetic consciousness, that is, “other than knowing”. Vandekerckhove and Panksepp (2009) define anoetic consciousness as “...automized and unexperienced perceptual-sensory and procedural information-processing, as well as raw experiences such as affective feelings” (p. 1022). Anoetic awareness can be regarded as a continuous flow of primary process experience. It is this flow of primary data and affective experience which forms the basic foundations of a core sense of self (Panksepp, 2009; Zeman, 2001).

Memory and the reflective self

An increasingly extensive understanding of the self has been provided by neuroscience, particularly over the past twenty years. Research on the physiology of brain function, and on the mechanisms of different memory systems has been particularly exciting as it has expanded our knowledge of how the brain-mind operates. These new understandings have complemented our existing knowledge in the field of mental health and psychotherapy. An understanding of the self is central to mental health practice especially within psychotherapy. At a basic level, mental health issues can be defined as problems of living. Central to understanding and resolving or at least managing problems of living is an individual’s capacity to reflect upon his/her own sense of self. Neuropsychology has provided increasingly more powerful explanatory models of how self awareness develops. To map this development it is helpful to take note of the views of the philosopher/psychologist William James. James (1892) regarded the self as being “duplex” in nature. By this he meant that the self is made up of two poles, one, *awareness* and the other, *experience*. Inner life in his view was a constant movement between these

two poles, which he called “a stream of consciousness”. Meissner (2008) similarly, described consciousness as being bimodal. He gives the example of visual perception, where on the one hand I am aware of seeing an object while on the other hand, I am aware of seeing. The first aspect is a form of perceptual consciousness while the second is apperceptive self-consciousness.

The “stream of consciousness” referred to by James is not automatically present in early development. According to Flavell, Green, and Flavell (1993), this duplex or bimodal self does not appear until around age four. The arrival of the duplex self interestingly corresponds to what Tulving (1983, 2002) has termed episodic memory. Episodic memory is the capacity to remember past events and the related internal experiences and to reflect upon these events and experiences. The capacity for reflection is a central feature of self-awareness and thus a unifying force in the construction of the self. As Meares (1995) states, “...memory, or at least a certain kind of memory, unifies the multitudinous atoms of experienced data past and present, that make up the flow of the inner life” (p. 543).

One of the defining features of episodic memory is that it is more than a collection of facts or remembered occurrences. It has a personal dimension wherein a memory is experienced as being “my memory” or “my experience”. James (1890) described this type of memory as consisting of “warmth and intimacy” (p. 650). According to Meares (1995), little attention was paid to James’ recognition of personal memory until Tulving (1983) proposed that there exist two types of autobiographical memory; semantic and episodic. Semantic memory, also known as noetic (i.e., knowing) consciousness, is a system which captures facts about the world in a fairly impersonal manner. This system primarily records present-moment facts although it also stores factual details of one’s history. As Vandekerckhove and Panksepp (2009) explain, “The semantic memory system is the memory system that organizes universal factual knowledge that every child assimilates from living in the world” (p. 1024). It provides the information for a descriptive account of past events. It is episodic memory, also known as autonotic consciousness, that combines those descriptive accounts into a personal, experiential, and reflective sense of the events. Episodic memories are characteristically more emotional, complex, and subtle in nature than semantic memories.

Episodic memory and the relational self

Meares (1998) asserts that the self as circumscribed by the emergence of episodic memory, is triadic in nature. The self in the Jamesian sense, is dyadic in that it is composed of the self of the inner life and the self in relationship with others. To help distinguish between these two aspects, Meares refers to the “me” that relates to the world as identity (i.e. “I”) and the “me” of the inner life as the “self”. The third dimension of self is the interplay between the self as I and the self of the inner life, and their joint relating to otherness. These dimensions of the self can be distinguished, in part, by the language they use. By eighteen months, the child has developed two languages, the one of the proto inner life and the one he or she uses to communicate with others. The language used to relate to others has the beginning of syntax and logical structure. The language of

the emerging inner life does not reflect normal speech as it is personal, non-linear and associative. Around the age of four a further development occurs which seems to combine these two forms of speech in a loose manner.

Meares (1998) argues that we first see this third language form when the child is in a type of play which has both an inner-world and outer-world focus. This outer world relating begins with the manipulation of objects such as toys. The style of the proto inner world dialogue is maintained whilst relating to these outer world objects of play, however, the quality of this inner-world dialogue now develops further. It maintains its non-linear nature but with it the individual now experiences a sense of personal pleasure associated with the imaginative manipulation of such objects. These toys have become the child's creations, they now have personal meaning. The world for the first time is able to be personally reconstructed.

A fascinating feature of this playful manipulation of the world is its context. The newly developed inner dialogue which focuses on a creative organisation of the objects of play only appears to emerge in the presence of a securely attached other (Meares, 1998; Piaget, 1926). Interestingly, the child does not distinguish clearly between the self and primary other while in this state of reverie. It appears that for episodic memory to emerge a transitional self/object is needed (Kohut, 1971, 1977). The other, usually a parent, by virtue of the provision of secure attachment provides a safe space for reverie to begin and does so in the child's world by acting as an extension of the self. Piaget (1926) recognised this state of inner self/other relationship as a "life of union". The stream of consciousness referred to by James emerges out of a state of playful reverie which is made possible not only by developmental gains in memory but by the presence of a securely attached other. As Meares (1998) expresses it "This activity is triadic. The scene of symbolic play arises in a metaphoric space between the person who plays and a quasi-illusory other" (p. 879).

As the child continues to develop, the newly acquired dialogue of engagement with the outer world becomes internalised. The child is now able to reflect internally about the nature of the world and to reorganise and construct his or her own meaning of self and life. A mature adult form of this inner-life dialogue allows for a type of external expression. The non-linear quality of the inner world speech is maintained in part but with allowances for the need to communicate to the outer world. This style of language is best seen in poetry and metaphorical speech. When an individual is able, in the presence of another, to explore and express narrative accounts that have the quality of emotional warmth and imaginative, metaphorical musings he or she is combining this more inner world non-linear style of language with the linear language of the self of identity (or I) (Hobson, 1989). Healthy individuals have the capacity to move between these language forms in a continuous flow.

The self and psychological assault

If episodic memory emerges in the context of secure attachment, what happens when attachment is confused or disrupted? As described earlier, it is proposed that self is made up of many layers of knowledge and functioning some of which are outside the level of

ordinary awareness. Quite apart from episodic and semantic memory other memory systems exist. Tulving (1993) for example, identifies five types of memory seeing them as existing in layered or modular form. These memory systems are (1) episodic, (2) semantic, (3) procedural, (4) perceptual representation, and (5) short-term memory. Procedural memory and perceptual representation are examples of memory-based knowledge held outside of conscious awareness, that is, anoetic consciousness. This capacity for knowing without a personal reflective awareness of how one knows or even remembers coming to know, emerges gradually in the child's development. Before the emergence of episodic memory at around age four, the child already has a wealth of anoetic and noetic knowledge on which to draw. The interesting feature here though is that the child already has knowledge which informs the self before the self as a stream of consciousness (autonoetic consciousness) has fully emerged. When aspects of this anoetic and noetic knowledge are negative or self-deprecatory they have the potential to erupt into the stream of consciousness and disrupt episodic memory functioning. Hence, it is possible that a pejorative set of self information may reside in the more primal memory systems, that is, in anoetic and noetic consciousness, and exist as a form of a *priori* "givens".

Disruption to the stream of consciousness and the resulting loss of reverie and positive affect causes a loss in episodic memory function at that point in time. When insults to self through criticism and shaming occur at any point along the developmental continuum, episodic memory is lost as attention is redirected towards negative affect states. Winnicott (1960) referred to such incursions as "impingements" and regarded them as a form of "annihilation of personal being" (p. 47). Such insults to the self, according to Meares (1995), are not accessible in episodic memory but in earlier modules of the memory system, especially noetic memory.

According to Jackson (1931-1932) when in trauma, the brain-mind system protects itself by retreating back down the developmental hierarchy of functioning so that, for example, the last memory system to emerge is the first to be lost. When trauma as impingement occurs, the only accessible information is stored in semantic memory (Meares, 1995). The episodes of impingement are outside of reflective awareness as the memory system (episodic) which recorded the episodes cannot be accessed, and hence the details are only recognisable as facts. The memory of events in these circumstances takes on a non-reflective quality and exists as a form of self-evident script or chronicle.

The fact that episodic memory remains "off line" means that the individual is largely defined or contained by the script of preconscious/unconscious knowledge. By virtue of the loss of reflective functioning provided by episodic memory, this *a priori* knowledge establishes a largely unassailable sense of self. In other words, the individual's script defines the person. Without the benefit of episodic memory, there is no mechanism by which the person can reflect upon the veracity of the script and challenge this version of reality. This entrapment of the self in the confines of the script exists in varying degrees of severity. Those with developed personality disorders are most affected by the loss of reflective functioning. Others with higher order functioning can maintain some reflective

capacity. For them the sense of self remains reasonably stable until they are flooded by overwhelming affect triggered by cues of earlier trauma, effectively shutting down episodic memory associated with the trauma.

Recovering the reflective self

The impingements referred to by Winnicott (1960) are an assault on episodic memory, for they break up the sense of self and the capacity of the individual to participate in positive reverie, which is the stream of consciousness. All that remains is the malignant script of self-deprecation. For a healthy sense of self to re-emerge, a return of episodic memory is required, or as Tulving (2001, 2002) and others (Vandekerckhove & Panksepp, 2009) have expressed it, a recovery of auto-noetic consciousness. Clues to such a recovery of episodic memory or auto-noesis are provided by the knowledge we have of how it emerges in normal human development. For healthy recovery, three key prerequisites are necessary: (1) the presence of a securely attached other to act as a form of self/object, (2) a capacity in the individual to be aware of and to tolerate both pleasurable and uncomfortable affective and somatic states, and (3) the emergence of a state of play or reverie. Psychotherapy provides one of the best opportunities for the creation of such conditions.

When the therapeutic dialogue turns to the content of the script or narrative of the malignant impingements stored in noetic memory systems, the client usually experiences a sense of being blocked or confused. In these instances the individual is perplexed that there is any possibility of examining the validity of these negative scripts because they exist as *a priori* givens. However, when reflectivity returns in the form of metaphoric reverie, the client is potentially able to begin examining these “facts” from within a reflective, auto-noetic base and thereby start to reformulate the meaning of the narrative in terms of a personal meaning system which incorporates positive affect as well as facts. This capacity to explore personal meaning enables the individual to identify “my story” rather than the unassailable “facts”.

In engendering the three key prerequisites of recovery mentioned above, three essential therapeutic tasks must be engaged. The first is the establishment of a trusting relationship through which the self/object transition can be explored. The second task is the development of the capacity to focus on “felt sense” (Gendlin, 1981, 1997). Focusing on felt sense is the ability to pay attention to one’s own feelings and somatic state especially when approaching problematic or trigger topics associated with malignant impingements. This is important as the re-emergence of episodic memory is dependent on the individual’s capacity to stay present to their affective and somatic experience in the moment, without dissociating from the emerging memories and feeling states. The third therapeutic task is the therapist’s development of awareness of the language of metaphor and imagination as expressed by the client in therapy. It is particularly critical that the therapist become aware of such a language form as this awareness enables the therapist to encourage the client to stay immersed in the beginnings of auto-noetic consciousness.

The embodied self

As outlined above, the self has both reflective and relational qualities. These qualities are not cognitive abstractions or propositional notions but aspects of felt experience. That is, self is a direct and immediate experience of self and other. The self as defined at the outset of this paper is an amalgam of knowledge based in both conscious awareness and unconscious awareness or put differently, anoetic, noetic, and autonoeitic consciousness. The aspects of consciousness which are outside of ordinary awareness form an essential foundation of episodic memory or autonoesis ([Vandekerckhove & Panksepp, 2009](#)). Without the foundation stones of all memory systems in place, episodic capacity cannot emerge. As human beings we gain reflective awareness when we are able to incorporate all dimensions of awareness whether conscious or not. It could be said that a full expression of self is a form of embodiment, wherein knowledge of one's whole being is personalised and becomes "my story".

This view of knowledge and ultimately the nature of the self finds strong support from chemist and philosopher Michael Polanyi. Polanyi ([1975](#)) was noted for his view that *all knowing is personal knowing*; he argued that all knowing involved tacit awareness. By this he meant that when attending to a topic, object, or experience, we attend from the internalised particulars of our existing knowledge (personal experience, formal learning, etc.) to the topic at hand and in so doing integrate the particulars into a unified focus. In attending to a focal target we are not aware of the subsidiary particulars of our existing knowledge. For example, when looking through a pair of glasses towards an object of attention, we are not aware of the two lenses through which we view the object. Equally if we attend to the lenses, that is, the subsidiary particulars, we lose awareness of the original object of attention. Polanyi referred to this relationship as a *from-to relation*. Tacit knowing incorporates three components: the subsidiary particulars, the focal target, and the knower who integrates the former two aspects into a meaningful whole. When attending to an object from the subsidiary particulars we rely on that which is already an aspect of the self. In this sense it could be said that the person gains meaning of an object by first interiorising it. Polanyi referred to this process of interiorising meaning as indwelling.

Knowledge as indwelling sits well with an explanation of self as being reflective and relational, and based in a sophisticated brain-mind system of complementary memory systems. The self in this view is necessarily embodied and relies on the capacities of the whole organism. However, the self, in order to fully emerge requires more than its own organismic properties. The nervous system with its wealth of sensory data and its modularised memory systems provides the apparatus for the emergence of the self but not the presence of the self. By conceptualising the self as a form of indwelling, Polanyi, like James, recognises it as being dualistic in nature. As Polanyi ([1969](#)) expresses it, "... the nervous system has this duality, that it *accounts* for mental experiences, but it does *not actually have these experiences* (p. 202). To know something then in Polanyian terms is to know by indwelling the mechanisms of the body, in order to attend from the subsidiary particulars of our collective experience to the focal target. This knowing is

much more than a discursive externalising of details. Although such externalising is often necessary for communication, the atomising process of externalisation restricts the integrating experience provided by the embodied self.

The views of the self, expressed variously by James (1892), Tulving (2001, 2004), Meares (1995, 1998, 2004), Vandekerckhove & Panksepp (2009), and Polanyi (1969, 1975) all highlight the importance of the flow of the stream of consciousness. As Meares recognised, when psychological impingements occur they break up the sense of self. Such assaults on the brain-mind system fracture the self system and reduce it to more rudimentary functioning. Polanyi would likely argue that in such attacks, indwelling, whilst not obliterated, is seriously disturbed. To illustrate this point he provides the example of practising a skill, like playing the piano. When we attend to the details of the skill we lose the fluency previously obtained. Polanyi explains this as a loss of interiorising or indwelling. As he expressed it, "The elements of a skill, which could be rapidly and successfully integrated, so long as they were interior to us, cannot be anything like as rapidly and successfully integrated once we are attending to them focally" (Polanyi, 1969, p. 200). To recapture the fluency of integration, a return to the stream of consciousness is required.

Conclusion

The above discussion highlights a number of features of the healthy self. The first is its freedom to be reflective. This is not a discursive, cognitive reflectivity but a whole body experience of being in touch with one's felt sense, an integration of being. Reflectivity in this context is a free movement between *awareness* and *experience*. Whilst relatively instantaneous, this joint movement must not be disturbed by stifling analysis of the interplay between these two poles. The healthy self is one which knows through an indwelt experience of things attended to, not an atomised analysis of them. This indwelling is the stream of consciousness. When the stream of consciousness is operational, reflectivity is possible.

The impingements referred to by Winnicott (1960) and Meares (1995) disturb the natural movement between awareness and experience and in so doing shut down reflective capacity, especially as it relates to the issues surrounding the impingements. The loss of episodic memory function seems to serve to reduce the experience of indwelling. The individual in trying to deal with the meaning of the impingements appears to move from a natural integration of subsidiary particulars to an attempt to explain the impingement by focusing instead on the subsidiaries (i.e. the details of awareness and self-experience) and in so doing loses a sense of integration. This loss is experienced as a loss of flow or reflective capacity, effectively shutting down an integration of meaning associated with the impingement. A return of flow or of indwelling is necessary if a sense of well-being is to be regained.

The second feature of the healthy self is that it is grounded in safe and secure relationships. As outlined earlier, the reflective self emerges when an individual is in a state of playful reverie while also experiencing secure attachment. The maintenance and

rediscovery of the reflective self similarly requires a stable and secure relational connection if it is to re-emerge. This has significant implications for health-care professionals and especially for psychotherapists. In particular, it highlights the importance of the therapeutic relationship as being one of the fundamental ingredients of therapeutic change (Bordin, 1994; Horvath, 2005). A professional relationship which focuses primarily on instrumental details of a presenting problem at the expense of relationship factors is not likely to provide the requisite environment for the emergence of playful reverie.

Safe and secure relationships provide opportunities for the triadic nature of episodic memory to emerge. When the individual is able to be aware of the me of his or her inner world and the I or outer-world self while staying present to the stream of consciousness, an adult form of play or reverie is made possible, and with it greater self-awareness. When full episodic or autobiographical memory is functioning, the individual is able to maintain a sense of “my story” evidenced by the capacity to move between language forms; an inner-world dialogue, an outer world dialogue of normal communication, and the combined communication of metaphoric, imaginative reverie whilst relating to another.

The final characteristic of the healthy self is the embodied integration of the various aspects of the self. To be fully aware requires the use of all our faculties. We now know that each of our memory systems interrelate and in so doing, we are able to build an increasingly sophisticated awareness of our own existence in the world (Vandekerckhove & Panksepp, 2009). To be aware is to pay attention to anoetic, noetic and autonotic consciousness. This collective consciousness is best described as an integration of being or “embodiment”. To support individuals damaged by malignant experiences in the world, requires knowledge of how the various aspects of self arise and function. Our growing understanding of the nature and structure of the self has great potential to support individuals in their growth towards more whole and integrated selves.

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