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# I Am a Lot of Things: A Pluralistic Account of the Self

**Abstract:** When I say that I am a lot of things, I mean it literally and metaphysically speaking. The Self, or so I shall argue, is a plurality (notwithstanding the fact that ordinary language takes “the Self” to be a singular term – but, after all, language is only language). It is not a substance or a substratum, and it is not a collection or a bundle. The view I wish to advocate for is a kind of reductionism, in line with some – but not all – broadly Humean ideas. In short, I will defend the view there are the experiences and mental states we have, and that’s it: no additional substances, and no bundles. This does not mean, however, that there is no Self – the Self simply is the experiences. I will try to articulate and defend this view by showing that it can accommodate what I take to be the three main desiderata for any theory of the Self to satisfy: first, that the Self is the subject of experience (a subject of mental states, in general); second, that there is a unity to the Self in the sense that our (conscious, phenomenal) experience is at least partly continuous or ‘stream-like’; and third, that we do not die when we go to sleep or when we otherwise don’t have any (conscious, phenomenal) experiences.

**Keywords:** Self, eliminativism, subject of experience

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## Introduction

When I say that I am a lot of things, I mean it literally and metaphysically speaking. The Self, or so I shall argue, is a plurality (notwithstanding the fact that ordinary language takes “the Self” to be a singular term – but, after all, language is only language). It is not a substance or a substratum, and it is not a collection or a bundle.<sup>1</sup> The view I wish to advocate for is a kind of reductionism,

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<sup>1</sup> When it comes to arguing about the Self from a metaphysical point of view, philosophers traditionally tend to form two allegedly opposing camps. On the one side, there are the friends of a very broadly Cartesian conception of the Self as being a substance or substratum (various versions of this type of view include Descartes (1984), Reid (1785), Gallie (1936), and Lowe (1996)). On the other side lies a more or less united alliance of friends of various kinds

in line with some – but not all – broadly Humean ideas.<sup>2</sup> In short, I will defend the view there are the experiences and mental states we have, and *that's it*: no additional substances, and no bundles. This does not mean, however, that there is no Self – the Self simply *is the experiences*.

I will try to articulate and defend this view by showing that it can accommodate what I take to be the three main desiderata for any theory of the Self to satisfy: first, that the Self is the subject of experience (a subject of mental states, in general); second, that there is a unity to the Self in the sense that our (conscious, phenomenal) experience is at least partly continuous or “stream-like”; and third, that we do not die when we go to sleep or when we otherwise don't have any (conscious, phenomenal) experiences. Let's see how this works.

## Eliminativism

The kind of reductionism about the Self I wish to put forward resembles in many places metaphysical eliminativism about ordinary material objects, so I first suggest to make a short detour and consider what metaphysical eliminativism amounts to and why, contrary to what it may look like at a first glance, it actually is *not* a very revisionary nor counter-intuitive view. This is important: a theory about ordinary objects – the objects of our perception and everyday experience – should account in a proper manner for this everyday experience of the world. Even more importantly, a theory of the Self – that is, the most intimate and central thing there is to ourselves in our everyday experience – should not ask us to be too revisionary about the way we see ourselves to be.

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reductionism of this substance, either in the form of some type of a broadly Humean bundle theory (such as Hume (1978), and recently Dainton (2008, 2012)), or – more radically – in the form of an eliminativist theory (see for instance Johnston (2010) and Olson (1998)). In Benovsky (2008, 2009), my business was to show that, in general, bundle theories and substratum theories are in fact not very different from each other, and that, in particular, when it comes to the Self, it makes little difference to choose one camp or the other. I will not press this issue here; rather, in this article, I will try to say something positive about the metaphysics of the Self, and instead of doing *meta*-metaphysics, I will try to articulate what I take to be the correct “first-order” view.

<sup>2</sup> There are some similarities – but only some – between my view and Parfit's (1971, 1984) reductionism, as well as Galen Strawson's (1997, 1999) Pearl View (a view which itself comes structurally close to the Stage View about persistence through time and personal identity (see Sider (2000, 2001) and Varzi (2003))), and – as far as I am able to tell – the Buddhist view of the Self. Of course, there are also obvious important dissimilarities.

Metaphysical eliminativism of the kind I have in mind says that there are no tables, no trees, no computers, and no apples.<sup>3</sup> But this does not mean, luckily for us, that we cannot put a computer on a table to write a philosophy article while eating an apple fallen from a nearby tree. Indeed, even if metaphysical eliminativists claim that there are no such objects, they also claim that *we do not need them*, since there are other things that can play their role, namely, atoms arranged tablewise, computerwise, treewise, or applewise. “Atoms” are not taken here to mean the atoms we learn about in a high-school’s physics class, or by reading Democritus; rather what one has in mind is something like “the fundamental components of metaphysical reality whatever these turn out to be” (fundamental particles, superstrings, properties,...). Let us stick to “atoms”, for brevity. Not only can we put atoms arranged computerwise on atoms arranged tablewise, but we also can talk about them by using words like “table” or “computer” – that is, even if there are no tables, table-talk is OK. One way to put this is to say that “table” is, contrary to linguistic appearances, a plural term referring to a plurality of atoms rather than to a collection of them, similarly to, say, “The crew of the USS Enterprise” – a singular expression that refers to a plurality (rather than to a single entity composed of the crew’s members).

One might worry that there is something contradictory about this way of putting things, since on the one hand, metaphysical eliminativists want to say that it is false that apples exist, while on the other hand they admit the truth of statements such as “This apple is red”. There seem to be two incompatible existential claims. But the tension is here only apparent. The sentence “There are no apples” is true when it is a sentence uttered in *Ontologese* (the metaphysician’s ontologically committing language), but this is compatible with the sentence “This apple is red” being true since this latter sentence is uttered in ordinary English. In *Ontologese*, it is true that there are atoms arranged applewise in my hand (that is, in “atoms arranged my-hand-wise”), and this is all that is required for the ordinary English’s sentence “This apple is red” to be true. There simply is a *convention* in ordinary English that whenever there are atoms arranged applewise, it is true in ordinary English (but not in *Ontologese*) that there is an apple – *Ontologese* being, of course, the more fundamental and ontologically committing language.

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<sup>3</sup> Merricks (2001) is an excellent example and elaborate defence of such a view. Various – and different – variants of such a type of view include, *inter alia*, Van Inwagen (1990), Heller (1990), and Unger (1979). Heller (2008) is a very good place to look for a recent detailed discussion of an eliminativist-like relationship between tables and fundamental components arranged tablewise.

Thus, neither our everyday actions nor our linguistic practices are violated by the claims metaphysical eliminativists make. And neither is our perceptual phenomenal experience. It is true that we have visual phenomenal experiences *as of* tables and *as of* apples around us, but again, we do not need to postulate the existence of tables and apples to account for that – atoms arranged tablewise and applewise can perfectly well fit the bill. Indeed, our visual experience is simply neutral with respect to this issue: our experience would be exactly the same whether there were tables and apples in front of us, or whether there were atoms arranged tablewise and applewise (in short, atoms arranged tablewise reflect light in the very same way tables do, and so the light that hits our retina would be exactly the same in both cases).<sup>4</sup>

To sum up, the best argument in favour of metaphysical eliminativism about ordinary material objects is that we just don't need them. We need to be able to sit at tables and to eat apples, but we don't need tables and apples for that. We need to be able to sell and buy them, but that's OK too. We need to account for our visual (and other) experiences as of tables and apples, but we don't need tables and apples for that either. We need to talk about them, but that works as well. Atoms arranged tablewise and applewise can do all these jobs perfectly well, and there is no need to postulate the further existence of tables and apples as *sui generis* objects. Furthermore, we don't need them in metaphysics either – indeed, one of the main motivations for metaphysical eliminativism lies in the fact that it efficiently and elegantly solves many philosophical puzzle cases, for instance, concerning vagueness, persistence through time, and material constitution (statues and lumps) – but, this is a debate for another day.

## Eliminativism and the Self

The detour is finished, and I hope it will prove to be a useful one. Indeed, the idea I wish to elaborate in this article is simple: similarly (but not exactly) as metaphysical eliminativism says that instead of there being tables, there are atoms arranged tablewise, I think that it is true that instead of there being a Self in the form of a substance or a bundle, there “only” are *experiences arranged Self-wise*. This view about the Self neither entails nor forces one to endorse metaphysical eliminativism, but it can take advantage of one or two of the lessons we learned from it.

I do *not* want to claim that the Self does not exist (so, this is a reductionist but *not* an eliminativist view). But I want to claim something close: there are the

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<sup>4</sup> See Merricks (2001, 8–9) for this claim, and Benovsky (forthcoming) for a detailed discussion of this issue.

experiences (in general, mental states) we have, and nothing more. *The Self is the experiences*. It is a plurality (like the crew of the USS Enterprise, and like a table or an apple if metaphysical eliminativism is true). It is not a bundle or a collection of the experiences – that would be a single entity, additional to there being the experiences – and it is not a bearer of the experiences, whatever such a bearer may be. It does not supervene on the experiences, it is not derived from them, and it does not exist in any second-hand ontologically derivative sense. *It is them*. Linguistically speaking, “I” and “Self” and “me” are all plural terms (like “the crew of the USS Enterprise”, and like “table” or “apple” if metaphysical eliminativism is true). Thus, being arranged Self-wise is not the same thing as being bundled together in order to make up a Self which is a bundle. The latter requires, metaphysically speaking, the existence of a bundling relation (often called “compresence” or “co-personality” or something similar) and it makes the Self to be a single entity. Experiences arranged Self-wise are ontologically less demanding. The idea is this: there are experiences, they happen to be arranged in such-and-such a way, and – here I am!

I hope that by now it is clear enough what the view I wish to put forward looks like. I hope it also sounds *prima facie* plausible and not as counter-intuitive as it could seem to be at a first glance, thanks to the comparison with metaphysical eliminativism. The core argument in favour of metaphysical eliminativism (which I sketched but did not provide) was that atoms arranged tablewise can do all the (theoretical and commonsensical) work we want tables to do. Here the idea is similar: experiences arranged Self-wise can stand for anything we (thought we) need a Self for. In the remainder of this article, I shall argue for this view by showing that it can accommodate the three desiderata mentioned at the end of the section “Introduction”.

## The subject of experience

The first thing any theory of the Self has to account for is the idea that the Self is the *subject of experience*. There are many possible problems here; in what follows I will be interested in two inter-related metaphysical issues. We can start with a problem often raised against the bundle theory of the Self (and against the bundle theory in general), but which could also arise against my pluralistic view.

Here is what Olson (2007, 139–40) takes to be “the most forceful objection to the bundle view”: “[...] There may be such things as bundles of thoughts, but it is a metaphysical or logical blunder to suppose that such things are the subjects of the thoughts that compose them. [...] *A particular thought is one thing; the being that has or thinks it, if anything does, is another*” (my italics).

A different way to put the problem can be found in Barry Dainton's work. Dainton himself defends a kind of a bundle theory (and he defends it against the kind of objections Olson has in mind in Dainton (2008a, 342) as we shall see below), but he raises a worry which is very close, albeit different, and which applies to any view that would identify the Self with experience(s), even if Dainton himself does not have a pluralistic view in mind when putting forward this objection: "[...] there is the claim that we are identical with particular episodes of experience. This runs counter to our ordinary conception of ourselves as *things which have experiences*" (Dainton 2012, 185).

As I understand these concerns, one of the main worries here is that we want to say that we are "things which *have* experiences" rather than "things which *are* experiences".

One version of this worry exhibits a problem that applies to all forms of bundle theories across the board, and that would apply to my pluralistic view of the Self as well. Indeed, it is a classical problem for any bundle theory, even for a bundle theory about ordinary material objects, and it is not specific to the debate about the Self: if a table is a bundle of properties, it is not something that *has* properties, rather, it is something that *contains* properties as constituents – and that's weird, the objector says.

But, to a classical problem there is a classical – and good – solution (or at least, an answer). The situation is this: when considering the bundle theory (about ordinary objects or about the Self), what the objector objects is precisely what the defender wants to say, namely that "having is containing". In the bundle-theoretic view, for a table to be rectangular *is* for it to contain rectangularity as a constituent of the bundle which it is. The bundle theorist simply provides an *analysis* of "having" in terms of "containing", and if someone objects that these are not the same thing, well, this is merely the paradox of analysis: one gives an account of X in terms of something else than X – so, yes, the explanans is something different than the explanandum.

The kind of pluralistic view about the Self I wish to advocate for is both open to, but also immune to the same kind of worries, in a very similar way. In short, it says that "Barry has an experience E" is to be analysed as "experience E is one of the experiences among the plurality of experiences arranged Barry-wise".

But maybe this was only the easy part of the worry. Maybe what objections such as Olson's and Dainton's have in mind is something a bit different. Maybe the objection is bolder and more straightforward: "It's simply wrong to say that experiences can *exist* in the first place without being *had* by something – this just is what being an experience means! Experiences cannot 'float free', they must be had." Speaking about the Humean view, here is a way Lowe (1996, 8, 25–6) puts it:

The deepest problem with this sort of view is that the entities out of which it attempts to construct the self – psychological states and processes – are themselves quite generally not individuable and identifiable independently of the selves that are their subjects, so that fatal circularity dooms the project. [...] [I]ndividual mental states are necessarily states of *persons*: they are necessarily “owned” – necessarily have a *subject*.

Put in this way, the objection is that experiences cannot “float free” in the sense that they are not *independent* entities – there must be a subject that has them. Such an objection can be raised against the bundle theory of the Self, but it arises perhaps even more stringently against my pluralistic view, since according to this view there are not even the bundles to play the role of the subject. In a general form, it arises also against any bundle theory, even a bundle theory about ordinary material objects, as Armstrong (1997, 99) argues:

There is a fundamental difficulty with all bundle theories. It is that properties and relations, whether universals or particulars, seem not suitable to be the ultimate constituents of reality. If they are the ultimate constituents, then, it appears, completely different (non-overlapping) properties and relations will be “distinct existences” in Hume’s sense of the phrase: *entities logically capable of independent existence*. But are properties and relations really capable of independent existence? Can a certain determinate mass, for instance, whether the universal of that mass or the trope mass of this particular body, exist in logical independence of anything else? It hardly seems so. The case against the possibility of independent existence for relations seems even stronger.

How to reply to such a worry? On one side of the debate we have the claim that properties (in the case of a general bundle theory) or experiences and psychological states (in the case of a bundle theory or a pluralistic theory about the Self) cannot exist without a substratum or a subject to ontologically support them. On the other side we have the claim that they can. On behalf of the bundle theory about the Self, Dainton (2008a, 342, 347–8) claims that it is the bundling (“the unity criterion” in his way of putting things) that provides the desired substantiality. But even if such a response were adequate, it would not be of much help when it comes to the pluralistic view of the Self since there is no bundling in this case.

But why does the worry have some force in the first place? The worry claims that experiences are not substantial enough to exist without there being any ontologically independent subject that has them – experiences are said not to be ontologically independent enough. But why? Experiences are presumably produced by brains of conscious beings, and in this sense they do *not* “float free”. Why would they not be “ontologically independent enough”? Galen Strawson (1997, 427) makes an interesting comparison with physics:

“But if there is a process, there must be something – an object or substance – in which it goes on. If something happens, there must be something to which it happens, something

which is not just the happening itself.” This expresses our ordinary understanding of things, but physicists are increasingly content with the view that physical reality is itself a kind of pure process – even if it remains hard to know exactly what this idea amounts to. The view that there is some ultimate stuff to which things happen has increasingly ceded to the idea that the existence of anything worthy of the name “ultimate stuff” consists in the existence of fields of energy – consists, in other words, in the existence of a kind of pure process which is not usefully thought of as something which is happening to a thing distinct from it.

Indeed, there does not seem to be anything really implausible in the idea that the ultimate stuff of which reality is made is *not* object-like in a traditional substantialist sense. The claim that entities such as experiences are not “independent enough” just seems to me to exhibit a prejudice against the ontological status of experiences. Hawthorne and Cover (1998, §2) call such an attitude an “incredulous stare”, when they speak about the worry as applied to the bundle theory:

Perhaps some philosophers will claim to find it just self-evident that universals are had by something. We don’t have much to say to such philosophers. We do note, however, that the polemic against the bundle theory has rarely taken the form “It is simply self-evident that anything quality-like is directly or indirectly predicated of something that isn’t like a quality [...]”. If opponents of [...] the Bundle Theory wish to retreat to this form of an incredulous stare, so be it.

The idea common to Strawson, Hawthorne and Cover, and my pluralistic view is this: to be ontologically independent enough in order to play the role of a fundamental constituent of reality (or of a Self), an entity does not have to be an object-like substance. Properties (for general bundle theorists) or experiences (for bundle theorists or pluralists about the Self) are ontologically strong enough to exist without the need for a bearer – this seems to me even clearer in the case of experiences than in the general case of properties, since as I already mentioned experiences are the results of brain activity of conscious beings, and so they do not “float free”. Experiences (and mental states in general) can satisfy the requirement for independence well enough to play the role of constituents of the Self – there just is no argument that would *show* that they cannot, apart from somewhat ontologically prejudiced protests.

## Unity and continuity

The second desideratum I shall consider now which a theory of the Self should satisfy concerns the diachronic unity and continuity there seems to be to our



experiences. Indeed, phenomenologically speaking, I think it is correct to say that our experience appears to us as being at least partly continuous and somehow “stream-like”. *Prima facie*, this may sound like a problem for my pluralistic view, since – the objector could say – it claims that I am a plurality of “disconnected” experiences, in the sense that they are not united in a bundle or by an underlying substance: there just is a disunited series of singular experiences, without continuity. The task for the pluralistic view is now to show where the unity and continuity that we experience comes from.

A kind – the relevant one, as I shall argue – of these and similar worries have been largely debated in the history of philosophy<sup>5</sup> and even more so since James’ famous discussion of the “specious present”:

A succession of feelings, in and of itself, is not a feeling of succession. And since, to our successive feelings, a feeling of their own succession is added, that must be treated as an additional fact requiring its own special elucidation [...]. [T]he prototype of all conceived times is the specious present, the short duration of which we are immediately and incessantly sensible. (James 1890, 629)

The idea is this: think of the apple falling from a nearby tree, and think about how you experience its fall – its movement. Your experience is continuous and smooth, you experience *movement*, you do *not* have a succession of static isolated experiences of the apple being at various points of its fall. In order to provide a phenomenologically adequate understanding of such a continuous experience, James and many others<sup>6</sup> introduced the notion of a “specious present”, that is, a non-zero temporal duration which, in our experience, our mind embraces “at once”. This notion is indeed very useful to understand the phenomenology of our experience of continuity, such as the apple’s movement, and it has given rise to a hot debate between (i) *extensionalists*<sup>7</sup> who claim that the specious present is temporally extended and that our experience is composed of short but temporally extended overlapping experiences featuring temporally extended and temporally ordered content unified into a single experiential episode which appears to us “at once” as present, and (ii) *retentionalists*<sup>8</sup> who argue that the specious present is not temporally extended but rather instantaneous, although it has temporally extended content, because at any point the experience of a falling apple has as components of its content states

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<sup>5</sup> John Locke held an interesting view on this issue; see Benovsky (2012) for a detailed discussion.

<sup>6</sup> See *inter alia* Kant (1781), James (1890), Husserl (1964), Broad (1923), Foster (1982, 1992), Dainton (2000, 2003), Hoerl (2009), and Phillips (2011).

<sup>7</sup> See Dainton (2000, 2003, 2008b, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> See Husserl (1964).

of the apple at the previous instants all of which are given to us in the one single instantaneous experience together.

In one way or the other, the important thing for our discussion now is that somehow (a) our experiences such as the one of the falling apple are experiences as of movement and continuity, and (b) they sort of smoothly flow one into the next. (a) and (b) are what we need to account for, when we talk about the unity and continuity of our experiences. Of course, some will have in mind something stronger when they speak about diachronic continuity and unity of the Self – something like a unity over the whole life of a person – and thus it might seem that my desideratum is not strong and demanding enough. But here, I join with Hume: phenomenologically speaking, there is nothing like such a lifelong unity we experience, we only ever experience the kind of continuity and unity mentioned under (a) and (b) above, and nothing more. This is then what a theory of the Self *needs* to account for. To insist that a theory of the Self should provide an account of a lifelong-lasting element of unity of the totality of our life experiences would amount to presuppose that any theory of the Self must be a non-pluralistic one, which I take to be both phenomenologically unjustified and dialectically question-begging.

How then to reply to the questions raised by (a) and (b)? The short answer is: it is our brain that does the job. Let me elaborate. As John Locke nicely explained,<sup>9</sup> and as contemporary research in cognitive science keeps backing up by more and more experiments in the field of experimental psychology,<sup>10</sup> our perceptual abilities are limited in an interestingly relevant way. When we look at a movement such as the fall of the apple, all is fine: we have an experience as of a continuous movement. But this is not always the case. For instance, when perceiving a movement that is too slow (think of the hour hand on your watch), our perception is *not* one as of movement, since the movement is just too slow to be registered by us as a movement (we can see that the hour hand *has moved* when we compare its position at some time and at a later time, but that's an entirely different thing). Things are similar when we perceive a movement that is too fast – typical experimental examples include the case of a dot on a computer screen moving quickly along a circular path. In such a case, as before, we do *not* perceive it as moving, rather we have a perception as of a circle, simply because the movement of the dot is too quick. Indeed, the simple fact, already noticed by Locke, is that we are built in such a way that our perceptual system has lower and upper limits beyond which we are not capable of perceiving movement as

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<sup>9</sup> Locke (1975, Book II, especially Chap. 14).

<sup>10</sup> For philosophical discussions of these, see Scholl (2007) and Paul (2010), Benovsky (forthcoming).

movement. It is only in cases where a movement happens at an appropriate speed (like the apple's fall) that we have an experience as of movement. This just is the way we (that is, our brains) are built.

But how exactly does it happen that we have an experience as of a continuous movement, when we have one? As we have just seen, this has nothing to do with there *being* (happening) a movement in the world in front of us. Indeed, on the one hand, we have seen two types of cases where we do not experience movement as movement, and on the other hand, we have all seen a movie, and so we have all had an experience as of movement when there is none – when looking at a series of static images projected at the speed of 24 images per second, we have an experience as of movement, instead of having a series of experiences of static images (or an experience of a series of static images). And again, as before, this is something which is entirely due to the way our brains are made. Paul (2010) focuses on this aspect of our experience of movement, called “apparent motion”, where we have an experience as of movement when there is none. Typical experiments include cases like a dot on a computer screen which is shown on the left side of the screen and then quickly enough on the right side of the screen: in such a situation, we have an experience of the dot moving from left to right, while in reality nothing has moved since we were actually shown two different dots. But, given the limits of our perceptual capacities, we experience this “illusion”, like in the case of cinema, independently of there *being* a genuine movement in front of us or not, and independently of us *knowing* whether there is a movement in front of us or not – the appearance of movement persists even when we know that it is illusory.

The important additional claim that Paul (2010, 16) rightly argues for is that it is *before* we have any conscious experience that our perceptual system – our retina, optic nerve, brain, etc. – on a neurological but not on a phenomenal level, interprets the successive inputs it gets from the world in such a way as to produce a phenomenal experience as of movement. Dainton (2008b, §5) also endorses this claim: “[our brains] try to work out a single, coherent version of events on the basis of the fragmentary and (at times) conflicting data available to them. Only this ‘final draft’, as it were, reaches consciousness”. This is an important last step, because what we then learn, as a cumulative effect of the considerations discussed in this section, is that the continuity and unity we experience (the kind we really have a phenomenal experience of, that is, the kind mentioned under (a) and (b) above) is something which is entirely, and contingently, due to the way our brains are built. Our brains get sensory inputs from the world, they interpret them in various ways, and produce conscious phenomenal experiences which are such that they embrace (very short)

temporally extended intervals “at once” (this is the specious present intuition), and such that they are (or can be) experiences as of, say, continuous movement (independently of whether there is movement or not).

In short, the two claims I wish to put forward are these: first, the only kind of continuity and experiential unity we genuinely experience are of the kind specious present theorists have in mind (anything more is simply not part of our phenomenal experience, as Hume taught us), and second, we don’t need a Self in the sense of a substance or a bundle for *that* – our brains and the (overlapping) experiences they produce are quite enough to do the job.

## Persistence

The third and last desideratum for a theory of the Self I will concentrate on now can be put as a worry about what happens to us when we find ourselves at times when we do not have any conscious phenomenal experiences, nor conscious thoughts; for instance, during a dreamless sleep. The objection is obvious: if the Self is the plurality of experiences we have (we are!), then the Self does not exist at the times when there are no experiences, and consequently the Self seems to be a temporally gappy (temporally scattered) thing – and so, then, are we. In short, there is the risk that we cease to exist while we sleep.

The link between our existence and our having of conscious experiences and thoughts is a traditionally strong one. Descartes (1984, II, 18) says: “I am, I exist – that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist.” John Locke seems to agree as well when he discusses his thesis that “consciousness makes personal identity” (Locke 1975, II.xxvii.10); he says:

[...] I grant that the soul, in a waking man, is never without thought, because it is the condition of being awake. But whether sleeping without dreaming be not an affection of the whole man, mind as well as body, may be worth a waking man’s consideration; it being hard to conceive that anything should think and not be conscious of it. [...] *[I]f we take wholly away all consciousness of our actions and sensations, especially of pleasure and pain, and the concernment that accompanies it, it will be hard to know wherein to place personal identity.* (Locke 1975, E.II.i.11. My italics.)

But can we really accept that we cease to exist in such situations? I think that not only we can, but also that such a claim is actually quite intuitively plausible and acceptable, and that it may even count as a motivation for the pluralistic view I have in mind. In a nutshell, the idea is that what matters is psychological and phenomenal diachronic continuity, and not metaphysical diachronic

continuity. That is, what matters is that our experiences are phenomenally continuous, even if they are temporally scattered.<sup>11</sup>

The criterion of temporal contiguity is a bad one in the first place, when it comes to arguing about diachronic continuity, i.e. the persistence and identity of any objects (conscious or not) through time. The philosophical literature on this subject abounds in exotic thought experiments where objects, or people, are teletransported or where they find themselves in time travel scenarios, to the effect of showing that a spatial and/or temporal *discontinuity* does not affect the identity of the object or person in question. In the case of time travel, for instance, if a person is instantly taken from 01.01.2013 to 01.01.2014, it is argued more often than not – correctly, I think – that she does not die. Time travel or teletransportation is not certain death, it's just a way of travelling. As long as psychological connectedness and continuity, causal connectedness and continuity, similarity, and other relevant psychological criteria are satisfied, the fact that there are spatial or temporal gaps does not prevent personal identity (the diachronic identity of the Self) to obtain. In the pluralistic view terms: the Self is the plurality of experiences arranged Self-wise, and it is not necessary that these experiences are always temporally contiguous and temporally overlapping in the metaphysical sense – what counts is that there must be some kind of phenomenal/experiential and/or otherwise psychological temporal continuity. Nobody needs metaphysical temporal contiguity and continuity, not even non-pluralists about the Self. Thus, yes, we cease to exist at times at which we have no experiences and no thoughts. This is no bad thing, and it accompanies the general view that we see ourselves as conscious and feeling beings – when the consciousness and feelings are gone, so are we. Neither is this a reason to be afraid to go to sleep at night: the desired phenomenal/experiential continuity is typically an effect of the brain's activity – and the brain does not cease to exist while we sleep, which explains why, for instance, we remember things from yesterday. On the other hand, if the Self were to be understood as being some kind of a substance, then its persistence through periods without thought and experience would require an account: what happens to it at such times? The

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**11** In Benovsky (2013, §5), I discuss a different but dialectically parallel case which concerns the debate about presentism and the specious present theory. Some claim that the two are contradictory since presentism claims that there exists only one instant – the present time – while specious present theorists such as extensionalists claim that our experience is temporally extended (thus, it requires more than one instant to exist). The idea I argue for here is that one needs to make a distinction between metaphysical temporal extension and phenomenal temporal extension. Extensionalists need the latter but not the former, and thus their view is entirely compatible with the truth of presentism – indeed, presentism and the specious present theory and entirely orthogonal and independent views, or so I argue.

pluralistic view of the Self I was arguing for in this article does not bear such burdens, it simply says that the Self is phenomenally and experientially continuous in the sense of §5, while it is metaphysically temporally gappy.

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