**The Inescapable Self**

Berkeley notoriously claimed that, while we have no *idea* of the self, we nevertheless have a *notion* of the self as a spiritual substance.[[1]](#footnote-1) Hume and modern scholars of British empiricism have ridiculed Berkeley for this factitious, *ad hoc* device, claiming that Berkeley was vainly attempting to evade the critique of his commitment to spiritual substance implicit in his attack on Locke’s transcendent material substance. Hume, of course, did not stint to apply the same arguments to Berkeley’s notion of spiritual substance that Berkeley applied to Locke’s notion of material substance, with the same result. Terms like “spirit,” “self,” and “soul,” Hume concludes, are meaningless because they are not traceable to any ideas originating from sense impressions.[[2]](#footnote-2) That Berkeley is defenseless in the face of this criticism is still the generally received opinion among philosophers. With few exceptions, Hume’s objection is regarded as a crushing refutation of Berkeley’s metaphysics of minds and ideas and the natural prelude to Hume’s fully consistent empiricism that dispenses with substance altogether and reduces all aspects of mind to ideas and relations between ideas.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hume, of course, rejects the very notion of the self as something over and above said ideas and their relations. In a famous passage, which I will discuss at length below, he reports that nothing imaginable/conceivable corresponds to the term “self”. No mental image or element of such an image comes to mind when Hume utters the word “self” internally, no mental content comes into view when I turn the introspective beam inward to take stock of my mental inventory. In accordance with hard but sound empiricist principle of meaning that the meaning of a term is the idea from which it is derived and which in turn rests on an impression of sense, Hume concludes that the term “self” is meaningless. Instead, he offers us an account of the self according to which what we *call* the self is nothing but the aggregate of associated ideas that constitutes a distinct stream of consciousness. The self, then, is reduced to a series of self-existent, intrinsically conscious sense-data, held together by relations of association, neither having nor needing any principle outside themselves in order to exist or interact. Hume is thus resolved to explain all mental phenomena on these principles, arriving at a kind of reductive psychological atomism; the self he rejects as an illusion. Although Hume later reconsidered his reasons for rejecting the self, he denied that the difficulties that he had discovered were sufficient to call that view itself into question, instead choosing to exercise the “skeptic’s privilege” of pleading ignorance concerning such an abstruse question.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Hume blinked. Had he examined the notion of the self in more detail – thereby tacitly admitting that he perfectly well knew that there was such a thing and that he was one such – he might have come to recognize how fundamentally wrongheaded his reductionist psychology is. In a true exposition of the self, which I hope to present in this paper, I intend to show what everyone, including Hume, knows about the self. Having done this, I will show that Hume’s discussion of the self constitutes a performative self-refutation of his own reductionist account of the self. This, in turn, will show that Hume’s account of the self is too limited to account for everything we know about the self. I also hope to clear up some misconceptions about the nature of the self, and thus certain popular misunderstandings concerning then nature of our knowledge of the self.

**What is the Self?** By “self” here I mean “a self-conscious, rational subject,” what Descartes called a *res cogitans*.[[5]](#footnote-5) To be a self is, first, to be conscious, i.e. possess awareness in its active exercise, not merely as a capacity. Awareness is thus act, both in the sense that it is something real or actual, as opposed to merely potential, and in the sense that it is the actualization or realization of a potency as what Aristotle calls *second act*.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, not every conscious being is a self – non-human animals, for example, who are conscious but are not conscious selves. Thus, mere consciousness by itself is not sufficient for selfhood. To be a self requires, second, that one also possess self-awareness, i.e. for one to be conscious in such a way that the *fact* that one is conscious is given along with, or *disclosed*, along with one’s merely being conscious, i.e. awareness of the sort we share with other sentient creatures who are not selves.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is due to this feature of the sort of awareness that human beings (at any rate) naturally possess that we are able to distinguish consciousness, which is endurant/ongoing, from its contents, which come and go, succeeding each other with dizzying rapidity. Further, to say that the self is given or disclosed in this way in and by the form of consciousness enjoyed by human beings is to say that it is a permanent feature of that form of consciousness, not the product of some special “reflex act” on our parts, as many philosophers have claimed.[[8]](#footnote-8) Although we do not often attend to awareness-as-such as an element of our conscious life, it remains, like the fact of our own existence, something that we can advert to at will whenever we like, simply by directing our attention to it. Further, since only a rational being is capable of the intellectual apprehension of facts *as such*, only rational beings can be occurrently self-conscious.

The notion of self as I am using it here is associated with a singular way in which we use the personal pronoun “I” to refer to oneself as a conscious subject. Kant called this the “I” that accompanies all my representations. The “I” in this case the self-conscious subject, which is not a content of consciousness, but rather that which *has* those contents of consciousness as part of the stream of consciousness passing through the intentional field of awareness that constitutes consciousness of the basic sort we share with non-rational creatures. We thus apprehend it as something in addition to what we ordinarily classify as contents of consciousness: sensations, perceptions, memories, thoughts, and so on. It is the “I” in this sense that is given along with or disclosed in ordinary human consciousness, though not typically adverted to in everyday experience, as a simple, endurant subject exercising an (on its part) undifferentiated act of awareness/attention. However, there are extraordinary circumstances in which the I that accompanies all our representations *does* come into the center of experience, not as a content of consciousness but precisely as the conscious subject to which a particular predicate applies. She loves *me*, *I* am the one who embarrassed the entire company by telling that inappropriate joke, *I* and not *you* am afflicted with an incurable, fatal illness, and so on. In these cases, replacing the personal pronoun with a proper name does not convey the full significance of the propositions, which is in no way “cashable” from the third-person point of view.

Moreover, this “I” or self is *incorrigibly* given to me in consciousness through my apprehension of the distinction between what I am aware of and my awareness of it as a conscious subject. Although this fact is not given to me prior to experience of the contents of consciousness, once given, I apprehend my subjectivity with extrinsic certainty, so long as I am capable of any thought at all. Even an amnesiac is a self, in the sense of a self-conscious, rational subject and capable of distinguishing between himself and the contents of his stream of consciousness, even though he does not know who he is. In the same way, Avicenna’s flying man, whose consciousness is, for a time, miraculously deprived of all sensuous contents and is thus perceptually “empty”, is and knows himself to be a self-conscious rational subject despite that fact merely in contemplating that very fact in being aware that his consciousness is currently devoid of any perceptual content.[[9]](#footnote-9) Even if awareness of the self is not normally possible apart from the presence of some content – at the very least, reflective thought – it is clearly there independently of, and thus neither identical with nor reducible to, any particular content. I thus know that I am a self-conscious rational subject, i.e., a self, simply through being one, as a fact given along with experience as I actually live it every waking moment; this is a direct consequence of the kind of consciousness I possess by nature. Beyond this, there is really nothing more that can or needs to be said here, though I won’t let that stop me from trying!

**The Self as Subject** Since the self in this sense is the *thing* that *has* the contents of consciousness as its modes, it is not itself (and could not be) one of the contents of consciousness and thus does not appear in the intentional field of consciousness as one of those contents. The self, then, is always a subject and never an object for itself. It is something given along with the intentional field of awareness as one of its Kantian *formal* features without appearing in that field *as such* or by being represented there by any of the contents of that field. In this way, the self functions in consciousness in a manner similar to that assigned by Kant to space and time. When Kant claims that we do not perceive space and time, he is perhaps best understood as claiming that, unlike the phenomenal objects and events that are organized and ordered in phenomenal space and time, space and time themselves are not represented there as distinguishable contents. Rather, Kant calls them *forms* of intuition, and supposes that they are disclosed, i.e. *given along with* those objects and events. Although Kant regards space and time as *a priori* – in his special sense which means given prior to and as necessary for the possibility of experience as we actually live it – he should not be thought to hold that space and time are present in consciousness prior to the reception of phenomenal objects or events. Indeed, he seems to hold to the contrary that space and time are merely virtual, existing prior to the appearance of phenomenal objects and events in consciousness as mere structural capacities for experience. Even so, once the phenomenal world is actually constituted within consciousness, it becomes possible for us to distinguish space and time as forms of intuition from the objects and events that are organized and ordered in space and time, by the use of non-precisive abstraction.[[10]](#footnote-10) We are thereby able to arrive at the *concepts* of space and time *as such*, despite their being inseparable in experience from the phenomena they organize and order. More than this, *once* we have these concepts, it becomes possible for us to use precisive abstraction to *imagine* empty space and empty time and explore their mathematical properties, even though these are not, and never could be objects of (perceptual) experience for us. However, since whatever we do experience can only be apprehended by us through its appearance in space and time, what we know to be true about space and time through mathematical investigation as forms of intuition must inevitably contribute to the structure and organization of phenomena in experience. Due to this, we are thereby able to arrive at *a priori* synthetic truths about the phenomenal (if not the noumenal) world. For Kant, there can be no question of space and time as forms of intuition representing noumenal space and time; further, they are the only space and time we can coherently conceive.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In a similar way, we can arrive at the notion of consciousness *as such*, i.e. awareness-as-activity as given/disclosed within and by experience, by means of the same sort of two-stage abstractive process, as follows. We apprehend the fact that we are conscious by non-precisively distinguishing, from within consciousness itself, between our awareness, on the one hand, and that of which we are aware of on the other. Having done this, we are thereby able to arrive at the concept of consciousness *as such*, i.e. of consciousness as *awareness-as-such*. Since this operation initially involves a non-precisive abstraction that simply highlights different elements of conscious experience, we can accomplish it within consciousness itself. Indeed, to apprehend the fact that one is conscious – grounded in the ability to distinguish, by non-precisive abstraction from within consciousness itself between one’s being aware and that of which one is aware (= the contents of consciousness, properly so called) – *is* already the apprehension of the self as subject. However, this apprehension does not become clear and distinct until we further distinguish, through precisive abstraction, between awareness-as-such and the contents of consciousness and identify the self-as-subject with the former.

Nevertheless, our having distinguished non-precisively between awareness and that of which we are aware in experience makes possible and facilitates our subsequent, imaginative apprehension, through precisive abstraction, of consciousness *as such*, i.e. *awareness-as-such* as distinct from the *contents* of consciousness. We can thus use precisive abstraction in order to imaginatively apprehend and investigate consciousness independently of its relation to its contents. Whatever features we discover to belong to consciousness so considered (i.e. as awareness-as-such) will be features possessed by consciousness over and above those contributed to it by its contents and the relations between them and will thus be irreducible to them. Consciousness will also reveal the intrinsic features of awareness-as-such by the manner in which phenomena appear within the intentional field of awareness beyond what they themselves contribute to it (as mere contents of consciousness) by means of their intrinsic features.

**From the Empirical to the Substantial Self** At the same time, to isolate awareness-as-such considered in contrast to its contents is not yet to give a complete account of the self. Although, in apprehending awareness-as-such we also apprehend the self as subject, there is clearly more to the self than what we apprehend in consciousness itself simply as pure awareness-as-such. Intuitively, the self is more than just pure awareness; rather, it is that which *has* or *exercises* awareness-as-such. To conceive of awareness-as-such as somehow *ownerless*, as awareness without a subject to be aware of, in, and by means of it, is analogous to the notion of existence without an existent – and just as meaningless. The self, then, has to be something more than just the intentional field of awareness considered as such. That something more is the substantial self that becomes an empirical self through becoming a conscious subject in such a field. However, our apprehension of the self in this further, substantial sense stops well short of an apprehension of the essence or nature of the self considered as that which becomes a self-conscious rational subject. Since awareness-as-such is not conceivable apart from some substance in which to ground it, we must infer that the self is also a substance. However, it does not follow that this substantial self is transparent to itself, so that its nature or essence *qua* substance is available to introspection.

Thus, in a sense, Kant was right and Descartes was wrong. Descartes supposed that, since consciousness is essential to personhood, that it is also essential to the substance that is a self. This is an error; that which becomes conscious, and thus a self-conscious subject, may be so only accidentally or incidentally.[[12]](#footnote-12) At the same time, Descartes was right and Kant was wrong. There is not another, noumenal self, operating independently of consciousness, possessing a distinct consciousness of its own inaccessible to us and of which the empirical self is a mere appearance or representation to “inner sense.”[[13]](#footnote-13) There is only one self, the empirical self that each one of us is; whatever it is that becomes conscious and thus a self-conscious subject does so in and as an empirical self/consciousness, not through possessing some noumenal consciousness behind or beyond that which we actually live. At the same time, that thing which becomes conscious is something existing prior to and independently of consciousness. It is thus, in that sense, a noumenal being – a thing-in-itself – transcending consciousness in such a way that it is not even represented there as that which becomes conscious, even when it is conscious. This substantial self is thus known, as Aquinas says, only through its acts by means of its effects in consciousness, and therefore is for us only comprehended as a theoretical posit.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Contributions of the Substantial Self to Consciousness** For Locke, substance was literally *substans*, that which “stands under” and the sole function of which is to provide the principle of unity for collections of sense-qualities through being that in which they inhere. Berkeley incessantly attacked this notion of substance – which he identified with Locke’s material substance – as something inert, immobile, unconceiving, and inconceivable. His primary objection to this notion of substance was not that it transcended sense experience and was therefore unknowable, but rather that material substance, as characterized by its proponents, was purely passive, lacking any active powers. Instead, Locke’s material substance is capable only of being moved by external forces themselves already in motion. Berkeley thus joins a long line of philosophers, both before and since his time, who have identified substance with the exercise of an *activity* intrinsic to it and thus as a source of existence and change through its own immanent operation. This is the kind of substantiality Berkeley attributes to spirit, one that makes all the difference between the useless, inconceivable material substance posited by Locke as a substratum for secondary qualities and the active spiritual substances (the soul and God) Berkeley posits in his own theory. Since spirit is an active substance, and not merely passive and inert, it *is* knowable through its activity in and on consciousness as displayed in those features possessed by it that we cannot plausibly account for by reference to the contents of consciousness, and the relations between them, alone.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Kant is a good, if unwitting, guide to some of these. First among these are space and time as features of consciousness, which we have already discussed. The intentional field of consciousness, in which the contents of consciousness appear, is uniform and homogenous – a *continuum*, Kant calls it, indefinite in extension and thus neither finite nor infinite. Further, space and time have intrinsic mathematical properties, ones that they possess independently of their contents, though those properties are revealed to us only by reflection on those contents as we encounter them in experience. The spatial and temporal relations between those contents considered in themselves, however, are merely external and accidental to them, as Locke and Hume insist. They are thus insufficient to constitute space and time as these are revealed to us in experience, even as mere forms of intuition existing only in consciousness. Space and time are thus *a priori* (i.e., innate structures of consciousness), the pre-conscious contribution of the operation of the substantial self which, like consciousness itself, is the actualization of a potency in that substance. We are thus rationally justified in positing that substantial self as a necessary condition for the possibility of experience as we actually live it in and through consciousness.[[16]](#footnote-16)

A second way in which the substantial self affects consciousness is through the activity of *synthesis* by means of which the intentional field of consciousness is constituted as what Kant calls a manifold of sensuous intuition. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume are at one in their insistence that the contents of consciousness are mental images as opposed to external material things. Hume, for his part, insists that the “atoms” of conscious awareness are simple ideas – shapes, colors, smells, tastes, textures, and so on. Being both simple and basic, Hume contends that they must be regarded as “original existences” incapable of further explanation or cause. Kant seems to follow Hume in thinking that these simple sense qualities are the fundamental elements of consciousness and the sole contribution of noumena to conscious experience, one given in such a way as to provide no information about their causal source other than its bare existence as a theoretical posit. Hume then proposes to construct the complex contents of the intentional field of consciousness using his three principles of association: resemblance, contiguity, and regular, repeated succession in time (“cause and effect”). Kant, however, maintains that these principles alone are insufficient to account for our experience as we actually live it in and through consciousness, for among the following reasons.

First, we experience the phenomenal contents of consciousness as a *manifold*, i.e. a single whole composed of disparate but intimately related parts or elements, as what Kant calls the *phenomenal world*. Further, that we should experience phenomenal contents in this way is a necessary condition for unity of consciousness. If there were no structure or order to experience, if periods of time or areas of space were to be completely discontinuous, or run backwards, repeat themselves, or switch properties willy-nilly, we would be unable to make sense of what we experience, and experience itself would make no sense to us. Conscious experience would be no more coherent or intelligible than a dream or an acid trip. Hume has no way of showing, and does even attempt to show, that his principles of association are capable of insuring, or even being very likely to produce, let alone sustain as a going concern, the phenomenal world that we actually live in and through consciousness. Kant proposes his own system of categories as necessary conditions for the possibility of such a manifold, and of his schematized categories as principles of synthesis in the imagination responsible for the creation of mental images in consciousness. With these in place, we are guaranteed that, given that we have experience at all, experience will constitute a manifold and consciousness will be unified so far forth. The very existence of a phenomenal world in consciousness, then, supposes the operation of a substantial self that constructs it from its atomic constituents through some pre-conscious process. Whether or not we agree with Kant’s particular account of these principles of construction, his central point stands. The contents of consciousness and the relations between them are insufficient to account for the existence of a phenomenal world existing as a manifold of sensuous intuition.

More than this, Kant notes that we routinely distinguish between subjective and objective in experience, explaining some features of the phenomenal world by reference to facts about the subject that experiences it and others by reference to facts about the objects represented by the contents of consciousness, of which we take those contents to be the appearances. Thus, we take some changing, temporally ordered series of conscious experiences to be different views of one, unchanging object whereas we take others to be a series of temporally ordered events. My serial inspection of the outside of a house represents an example of the first, whereas my observation of a ship travelling down river represents the second. Were we not able to make this distinction, we could not classify experiential episodes as regular sequences of events as distinct from merely subjective sequences of views of a single, unchanging thing. However, there are no certain marks in experience (if we limit ourselves to the contents of consciousness as such) to distinguish these two, as Hume himself admits without quite grasping its implications. Indeed, on Hume’s own principles, we have no reason to believe or expect that there should even be able to *recognize* repeated, regular sequences in experience *as such*, let alone for such sequences to be capable of producing habits of expectation that are routinely gratified in experience. As we travel down the road, objects appear to travel by us at a great rate of speed while we remain stationary, yet it is we, not them, that actually move. As I walk down the long hallway toward the front door every morning, I observe the same items in the same temporal sequence, fully anticipating what I will see, the order in which I will see them, and find those anticipations uniformly gratified. Yet I have no tendency to posit any causal connection between any of these events or to regard the sequence as a causal one, despite the fact that it conforms to the conditions postulated by Hume’s regularity theory of causation.

The difference between sequences of these kinds, though given along with experience, is not explicable in terms of experiential contents themselves considered as such. In this case, we can perhaps do no better than to suppose, with Kant, that what is given along with the contents of experience in the case of those sequences we classify as *causal* is an apprehension that the events composing them occur in accordance with a rule strictly dictating the order of their occurrence. Further, rather than being immanent in experience, this rule or law takes the form of an external imposition on those contents. On this view, the objectivity of such sequences is solely a consequence of their subsumption under a casual law, which explains why we cannot “see” causal connections. The imposition of this law on experience is, in turn, to be explained in terms of the pre-conscious operation of the substantial self that produces the manifold of sensuous intuition in accordance with the category of cause and effect. This pre-conscious operation constitutes that sequence as a series of causally related events rather than as merely successive states of/occurring in experience. Once again, the substantial self shows itself to be present *in* consciousness by means of its effects on its contents without being present *to* consciousness as an object represented by any of its contents.

Having gleaned what we can from Kant, let us move on. We may note, for example, that identically one and the same mental content (the complex idea of a red ball, say) may either be either a percept, a memory, something imagined, dreamed, or an hallucination. In principle, the contents of each of these distinct mental states could be numerically the same, or at least qualitatively indistinguishable in each appearance in consciousness. In that case, what state I am in is neither constituted by, nor explicable by reference to, any facts about that particular content. Hume, of course, wants to claim precisely this, insisting that impressions, for example, are distinguished from ideas by means of their “force,” “vivacity,” and so on. However, there are at least two obvious problems with this proposal. First, it is simply false to the phenomenological facts. Impressions are *not* always more lively than ideas – memories, dreams, hallucinations, even images produced by the willful imagination can be as clear, distinct, and compelling as percepts. Nevertheless, we are generally in no doubt as to how to classify particular mental contents with regard to their type and could not even accomplish this much unless we were able to classify these contents independently of our awareness of these sorts of properties, as we shall see.

Second, and more importantly, there is simply no necessary or explanatory connection between different degrees of “force” or “vivacity” accompanying different mental states considered as types and their being the types they are. It is purely a contingent matter of fact that, e.g., percepts strike us with more “force” and “vivacity” than memory images typically do. Therefore, even if “force” and “vivacity” provide a criterion for distinguishing percepts from other mental contents in most cases, it is insufficient to constitute percepts *as such*, as opposed to memories, hallucinations, dream-images or willful products of the imagination. Only if I am already able to distinguish percepts from memories, dream-images, hallucinations, or products of willful imagination can I notice that certain features intrinsic to the contents as such generally accompany contents of that type. Indeed, were this not so, I could not classify the contents of consciousness according to type in the first place, and thus would not be able to notice these accidental correspondences. My ability to distinguish different types of mental state (perception, memories, dreams, hallucinations, willful imaginings, etc) from one another, then, belongs not to what, following Kant, we can call the *matter* of consciousness (i.e. its contents) but instead to its *form*. Thus, just as space and time are given along with consciousness of the contents of consciousness, and thus *in* consciousness, without being present *to* consciousness as a representational content capable of becoming an object of conscious awareness, so too are individual mental states as non-voluntary *operations* over those contents. That a given content is a perception, as opposed to a memory, a dream, an hallucination, or an image willfully produced by the imagination is a consequence of the mental state containing that content rather than any feature of the content itself. It thus bids fair to be another contribution to consciousness of the pre-conscious operation of the substantial self that produces, not merely the manifold of sensuous intuition in space and time, along with the order and organization of its contents, but also operates over those contents, constituting and presenting them according to their types. For us as self-conscious rational subjects, our awareness of these states is a basic, given fact of consciousness – a Humean “original existence” neither needing nor being capable of further analysis within consciousness itself.

To this point, I have characterized the substantial self as present in consciousness only in its effects, noting the various features of consciousness neither reducible to nor explicable in terms of the contents of consciousness and the relations between them. However, the substantial self, though initially a theoretical posit made by reference to its effects on, and thus in, consciousness, is clearly and obviously present in consciousness in another way, one that has been staring us in the face all along. The substantial self is also present in consciousness as the empirical self, as that which is occurrently aware of the products of its own pre-conscious operations in conscious experience. The substantial self, that which becomes conscious in the intentional field of awareness produced by its pre-conscious activity, is as a result also that which is conscious in that intentional field of awareness and *to which* its contents appear as the matter of its mental states. This, of course, is precisely the empirical self, i.e. the individual, self-conscious rational subject in second act or *res cogitans*. Again, the substantial self as I have characterized it is not a noumenal self that wholly transcends consciousness and about which we can know nothing. The substantial self is the empirical self, and is not merely present in consciousness but immanently and ubiquitously present there through its simple, uniform, and (on its side) undifferentiated act of awareness/attention. At the same time, the substantial self, *qua* substance, is more than simply the intentional field of consciousness, with its forms of intuition, contents, and various kinds of mental states. The substantial self includes the empirical self but is not exhausted by it: *qua* substance, the self exists as a thing-in-itself despite its being the case that it is only as the empirical self that it actually, as opposed to merely potentially, a self and so self-aware. In the same way, the empirical self thus knows its own nature *qua* substantial self only indirectly, as something to be discursively comprehended as a theoretical entity rather than something intuitively apprehended as or by means of a mental content that represents it as an object in consciousness. Nevertheless, because of its pre-conscious synthetic and constitutive activity, the substantial self affects itself *qua* conscious, empirical self and can be thus indirectly apprehended by itself *qua* empirical self by means of its effects in consciousness as their transcendental cause or principle. Since the substantial self is so by means of its pre-conscious operations over the inputs that are thereby constituted as contents of consciousness, it is a substance in the active, rather than merely passive, sense. It is thus no mere passive substratum as Locke imagined material substance to be. To the contrary, the substantial self exercises an immanent activity by means of which it becomes an empirical self and thus qualifies to be a Berkeleyan spiritual substance so far forth.

The final point is this. As empirical self, the substantial self acquires further powers that it exercises as a conscious subject within consciousness itself, hence with full, intentional awareness. The substantial self, *qua* empirical self, thus reveals itself as not just the subject of its own mental states, but also the self-conscious principle of its own mental *acts*. The substantial self thus becomes, *qua* empirical self, a self-conscious agent capable of directing the course of its own mental life. In this way, it thereby becomes capable of explicitly rational thought and theoretical inquiry. The empirical self, then, is no mere passive spectator of the phenomenal world constituted by pre-conscious processes over which it has no control. As conscious subject, the self both *reacts* to what it experiences and also *acts*, first in relation to its own mental contents, then as well in relation to the intentional objects those contents represent them in consciousness. The empirical self is thus an *agent*, and thus active in the full and proper sense.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Just as qualitatively indistinguishable mental contents can serve as the matter of formally different mental states – perception, memory, imagination – so too can one and the same propositional content in thought serve as the matter for distinct propositional attitudes. Thus, one may know that Caesar is dead, or merely believe this, fear this, doubt this, hope this, wish this, entertain its possibility, fantasize about it, and so on. These mental acts are self-conscious, willful operations over propositional contents, voluntary inasmuch as we can resist or refuse assent to the spontaneous judgments that arise in the face of sense perception and other sources of information about the world. It is only because of this that theoretical inquiry – and thus rational thought and discourse – of the sort I am engaging in right now is even possible. In theoretical inquiry, I am active in regard to my own mental contents taken, not just as contents, but as representative of non-mental intentional objects constituted independently of my awareness of them. This concerns not just facts about “external” objects that transcend consciousness, but about myself *qua* thinking thing insofar as facts about myself (such as that I exist), though revealed to me in consciousness, are nevertheless not merely truths about appearances but instead objectively true about the world.

In the same way, when confronted with competing potential beliefs on theoretical topics or alternative possible actions, I exercise my agency in reflection, deliberation, and choice concerning what I will believe or do. I thus exercise my rational agency in gathering and examining the evidence, considering the pros and cons of each alternative, reasoning, and drawing a conclusion about what is likely to be true or best to be done under the circumstances. I thus experience myself, *qua* empirical self, as an agent. Finally, in full-blown intentional, purposive action the self as agent apprehends itself as *cause*, affecting first the self’s own body, a material thing, and through that influence acting as a cause in the world and producing effects there.[[18]](#footnote-18) Since only a substance can be a source of activity in this way, the existence of the substantial self is thus further confirmed through the apprehension of the agency exercised by the empirical self.

This, then, completes my phenomenological survey of our knowledge of the self as revealed in consciousness, not as present to consciousness in the form of a content that represents an object, but instead as self-conscious subject affected by and affecting consciousness in various ways, and through its own immanent conscious acts affecting the world. The substantial self is thus knowable, and known by us in reflection, by means of its effects in consciousness, consisting in all those features of consciousness that cannot be accounted for by reference to matter of consciousness, i.e. the contents of consciousness and the relations between them considered as such. Since it is known only by its effects, rather than, like the contents of consciousness, being directly apprehended, it can be overlooked or treated as merely a passive spectator of those contents. However, a closer look reveals that nearly everything that makes conscious experience possible is the product of the activity of the self, whether this is the pre-conscious activity of the substantial self as such or as exercised by that self as the occurrently conscious empirical self, the Cartesian *res cogitans*.

**Could the Self be an Illusion?** Why have so many philosophers rejected the existence of a substantial self and dismissed the empirical self as merely an illusion? Although questions of this kind are often merely rhetorical, in this case I think we have a clear and obvious answer.[[19]](#footnote-19) Philosophers have supposed that, if there is a self that can be investigated and talked about, then it must be an *object* of some kind that can be apprehended and viewed from point of view external to itself. Given the otherwise sound contention that in order for anything to be an object for us it must be represented in consciousness by a particular set of mental contents, our inability to identify the self with anything that *appears* in consciousness naturally leads many philosophers to suppose that there is no such thing. To reason like this, however, is similar to a man sitting in his armchair who, wondering whether he is at home, proposes to resolve the question by going outside and looking in the window. Having done so, and not having seen himself, he concludes that he must be elsewhere. This, of course, is palpable nonsense despite the fact that many philosophers have been prepared to reason in just this way.

The most notorious case of this sort of reasoning is found in Hume.[[20]](#footnote-20) In his famous chapter “Of Personal Identity” in the *Treatise*, Hume explicitly attacks the notion of the self I have presented in this paper. There is, he claims, no “spectator self” or Dennetian “homunculus” inhabiting the intentional field of awareness, no one who is aware of its contents. Although Dennett calls the traditional conception of consciousness the “Cartesian theater,” it is Hume, rather than Descartes, who first used the image of a theater to describe the stream of consciousness as a series of merely successive, externally related events jointly constituting the totality of one’s conscious life.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, he hastens to correct, this image has a fatal flaw insofar as it suggests that there is anyone actually watching the show. The theater is empty; there is no audience, and no one is home. He thus rejects the question concerning the basis of personal identity by denying that there is any such thing.

Lumbered with the contention that ideas are mental images and that the meaning of a term is the mental image that arises before the mind’s eye when we utter the term internally, Hume is easily persuaded that we have no idea, and therefore no concept, of the self:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate, after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is further requisite to make me a perfect nonentity. If any one, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection, thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Of course, this entire paper has been an attempt show that I, at least, have a different notion of my self than that offered by Hume, according to whom I am merely a series of externally related sense-data that thereby constitute a unified, albeit temporary and perishing, stream of consciousness. More than this, I contend that everyone else, including Hume, knows the self in the exactly the same way and possesses what Berkeley calls a notion, and today we call a concept, of the self as a self-conscious, rational subject or *res cogitans*.[[23]](#footnote-23) Hume is thus either badly misled by his preconceived ideas or simply being disingenuous.

In the famous passage just quoted, Hume uses the personal pronoun “I” twelve times, “me” and “my” once each, and “myself” twice.[[24]](#footnote-24) In each instance, Hume uses the term substantively in reference to his own self, but the irony of this seems lost on the ever-ironic Hume. If Hume *qua* self was nothing more than a series of externally related mental contents, the “I” could legitimately refer only to that stream of conscious contents taken as a whole. Yet “I,” “me,” and “myself” function throughout the passage to refer, not to any particular perception – the only things, according to Hume, of which I can be aware – nor even to the sum total of my perceptions, but instead to the thing that *has* these perceptions, i.e. the self-conscious subject that is both aware of those contents as the matter of his mental states and that over which his mental acts operate. On Hume’s own supposition, the mental acts he performs, the judgments he arrives at, and the propositions he claims to know on their basis could themselves be nothing more than externally related, successive mental contents occurring as part of that series without any subject to perform, draw, or affirm them. They could not be what Hume himself takes them to be – acts, judgments, and well-confirmed truths – and must take them to be if they are to function as philosophical arguments, something Hume clearly intends they should do. We can confirm this by a detailed analysis of the passage.

When Hume “enters most intimately into what he calls himself,” what is he doing? He is performing the mental act of introspection, turning his attention inward in order to contemplate the contents of his own mind, thus constituting those contents, *as such*, to be the matter of that act and thus at the same time the object contemplated in that act. Hume can only actually succeed in doing this if he is a self-conscious subject of the sort I have been characterizing in the earlier sections of this paper. On his own account of the self, the most he can do is state that certain externally related mental contents are succeeding each other in the stream of consciousness that constitutes him *qua* self. Actually, even this is too much, as we can see if we merely ask the question “*Who* is reporting that this series of events is occurring in Hume’s stream of consciousness?” If not Hume *qua* self-conscious subject, then it is not the product of introspection, and thus not a report of the contents of Hume’s stream of consciousness, since there is neither a self-conscious subject to introspect nor to report on the contents of that stream of consciousness. There is just the stream of consciousness itself, a series of contents/events occurring without a conscious subject distinct from it. In that case, the propositional content to the effect that a certain series of events is occurring in that stream of consciousness is itself just another content/event in the sequence of contents/events occurring in the stream of consciousness that Hume identifies with his self. This content/event is only externally related to those that went before and at best accidentally about the mental events that came before it; nor, on Hume’s view, can there be any self-conscious subject in a position to judge that this is so. After all, any such judgment would simply be another content/event in the sequence, only externally related to those that went before it and at best accidentally about them. And so on. If Hume is able to introspect or make judgments about his mental contents at all, then he is a self *qua* self-conscious rational subject and his claim to the contrary absurd.

Nevertheless, let us consider Hume’s report that, when he introspects, he does not find any self. Instead, he says, he finds only particular mental contents – perceptions – consisting in simple sense qualities such as heat or cold, pleasure or pain, or anger. Further, he says, he never perceives anything but perceptions and for all he knows would cease to exist without them. The evident conclusion he wishes to draw is that he is nothing but the sum total of his perceptions and the relations between them and nothing more. However, let us consider Hume’s claim that we never perceive anything but sense qualities. This claim seems obviously false on the face of it, unless we are *assuming* that in order for something to be perceived it has to be, or be constituted by sense qualities, in which case, a claim that we have seen ample ground to doubt in the case of the self. I am aware of the self that I am by being a self and, in this case, by my awareness of myself as a *perceiver*, engaged in the activity of perceiving my conscious contents through introspection and thereby as endowed with perceptual states, of which what Hume calls perceptions are the contents. Unless there were such states and acts, there would not be perceptions at all, but merely dissociated sense-data which were neither perceptions, memories, dream-images, nor products of the exercise of the imagination. If Hume is a perceiver at all, then he is also a self-conscious, rational subject – a self as I have defined it. The mere fact that he can classify the contents of his stream of consciousness by type shows that he is aware of more than those contents as such, but also of his mental states and acts.

Undoubtedly, Hume would want to supplement his claim that he has no concept of the self by appealing to the empiricist criterion for meaningfulness, common property of all British empiricists from Hobbes onward. According to this claim, the meaning of a term is the idea corresponding to that term. Since, for Hume, ideas arise from impressions, it is the original impression that is the source of the meaning of a term, so that all substantively meaningful terms arise from sense-experience. This gives us a simple, straightforward test for the meaningfulness of any term, one constantly employed by Hume, usually preceded by the admonition to “consult your own experience.” One simply utters the word inwardly to oneself and then waits to see if a corresponding mental image arises in the imagination; if one does, then the term is meaningful; if not, then it isn’t meaningful. If I want to know whether “redness” is a meaningful term, I say “red” to myself and then observe that a red patch appears in the perceptual space of the imagination. Again, if I want to know whether “giraffe” is a meaningful term, then I utter “giraffe” to myself and observe that a mental image of a giraffe, perhaps of a drawing of a giraffe taken from a children’s dictionary, appears before the mind’s eye. However, when I utter the words “self,” “soul,” or “God” inwardly in the same fashion, I observe that nothing (or at any rate, nothing suitable) corresponding to these terms arises as a mental image in my intentional field of imaginative awareness. This, then, is taken to prove that, since I have no idea deriving from an impression of this putative object of awareness, that I altogether lack a concept (“notion”) of it as well.

Again, I believe that I have already made a sufficient positive case for knowledge of the self (*qua* self-conscious rational subject) to establish the fact that I am a self, and so, too, is everyone else capable of following that positive case, including David Hume, deny it as he might. If the empiricist criterion for meaningfulness is incapable of confirming that fact by means of its peculiar method of consulting one’s own experience, then that is simply a *reductio* on that particular test for meaningfulness. Indeed, if Hume is even capable of applying this test and reporting its supposedly negative results, or even so much as denying that he is a self *qua* self-conscious rational subject, then he is such a self by that very fact. One needs just ask, “Who is consulting his own experience? Who is reporting these results? Who is denying that he is a self?” Clearly, the answer is that it is David Hume, *qua* self-conscious rational subject, that is doing so, and who has no plausible alternate explanation of this consistent with his own account of the self as merely an externally related series of mental “events.” If we consult our own experience, or are even capable of doing so in accordance with Hume’s own admonition, the palpable absurdity of such an account must surely be evident to us.

Let us now, in the next place, note that Hume does not simply report his claims about the self as merely his own opinions about these matters, he presents them as arguments, addressed to other inquirers, intended to persuade them that there is no such thing as a self or soul. Thus, Hume, the self-conscious subject, addresses other self-conscious subjects through his writings, in an attempt to persuade them that they are not, after all, precisely what they would have to be in order for that activity, and that address, to make any sense at all – i.e., self-conscious rational subjects. Once again, we need only ask, “Who is making this appeal? To whom is this appeal addressed? If this is not an appeal by one self-conscious rational subject to another, then how are we to describe what is going on here? Even if we could describe it, could we do so in such a way that the activity had any point as an exercise in theoretical inquiry?” Once again, if Hume is any position to make this appeal to others, and for them to be able to consider, let alone accept, it then the conclusions he wishes to draw based on those arguments cannot be true. The reader may easily ask the same questions in his or her own case – as Hume says, “consult your own experience.” Do so, and I think that you will agree that Hume’s account of the self cannot be correct; indeed, the very possibility of your doing so proves this.

In the rest of the chapter from which the above excerpt is drawn, Hume goes on to claim that the notion of the self as anything endurant, simple, and unchanging is utterly false. He then attempts to reduce the self to the stream of consciousness, and to explain how it is that the illusion that there is a self arises, though once again we have to ask, “If there is no self, why do we need to explain the illusion that there is a self?” Only self-conscious rational subjects are subject to illusions, delusions, or false beliefs. If there are no self-conscious rational subjects, there is literally no one capable of being subject to such an illusion. Again, just ask yourself, “Who is it that is subject to this illusion, if there are no selves?” Once again, if there is anything at all to explain here, such as how some benighted people (“metaphysicians,” Hume calls them) get the false idea that they are selves, i.e. self-conscious rational subjects, then there clearly are selves, and our apprehension of ourselves as such, described earlier, is not and cannot be an illusion. The only one who could possibly be laboring under an illusion here is Hume himself; while this may be remarkable, it is by no means mysterious in the way it would be if Hume’s view were conceivably true. Upon reflection, it just seems quite obviously impossible for the notion of the self, *qua* self-conscious rational subject, to be an illusion.

Hume ends the quoted paragraph with a series of remarkable statements. He claims that if anyone, upon reflection, thinks he has a different notion of himself, then Hume can no longer reason with him. Perhaps, he avers, some people are different from himself in this respect; he admits the possibility, but firmly reasserts that there is no such principle in himself. Once again, unless Hume were a self, in the sense of a self-conscious rational subject, it would not be possible for him to even so much as formulate these possibilities, let alone confirm one of them, either introspectively or on the basis of argument. Only a self-conscious rational subject could do anything like this, so it is quite impossible for Hume not to possess the concept of such a subject or plausibly to deny that he is one, however much he may refuse to acknowledge this. Indeed, were it not for Hume’s explicit claims and statements in this chapter of his *Treatise*, one would never attribute such a view to him, given that he clearly does assume throughout the *Treatise* and indeed all of his writings that both he and his readers are self-conscious rational subjects. That this is so is not surprising, since no other supposition is even coherently conceivable. On the other hand, that his official doctrine forces him to deny this unavoidable supposition simply shows that Hume’s philosophy is deeply incoherent, at least as far as its results are concerned. In this, to quote Hume against himself, he may read the downfall of his principles.

Hume’s entire discussion in this chapter of the Treatise is an exercise in *performative* self-refutation. Throughout this text, Hume constantly engages in activities – introspection, judgment, argument, and so on – that would not be possible for him to do if his official doctrine of the self were true. Like someone who sings, in good tune and with perfect pitch, “I can’t sing, can’t sing a note…” his very performance refutes his theoretical contentions. At the same time, these very performances illustrate that Hume is precisely what he claims to *know* himself, on the their basis, not to be, namely, a self-conscious rational subject, or self, distinct as such from his stream of consciousness considered simply as a set of externally related mental contents. The same holds for everyone reading these words. No matter how one twists or turns, one cannot escape the self. Indeed, even to try to do so proves its inescapability, since only a self could undertake such a project. It is thus useless to even try. Only when we accept this fact can a true philosophy of the human person begin.

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1. Berkeley*, Principles of Human Knowledge*, I, 27 – in Ayers (1975), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hume, *Treatise*, I, IV, V – in Selby-Bigge, 132-133 and I, IV, VI, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For some dissenting views, see Ramsey in Steinkraus (1966), 17-31, and Tipton, 59-70 in the same volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hume, *Appendix* to the *Treatise* – Selby-Bigge, 633-636, especially the second to last paragraph on 636. The difficulty Hume identifies arises from two of his own (apparently ungiveupable) principles, i.e., each mental event is a distinct existence and between distinct existences we can perceive no connections, and is precisely the problem of the unity of consciousness, which even he sees is necessary in order for the illusion of the self to be possible. In passing, we may note that, although he never read the *Treatise*, Kant seems to have divined that the issue of the unity of consciousness was a major problem that any psychology adequate to the facts of consciousness must face and solve; whether he managed to solve it is a question I cannot discuss here. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Descartes, *Meditation* II (in *CSM*, Vol. II, 19); there are a number of different meanings attaching to the term “self,” all of which are important but not all of which concern us here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In traditional Aristotelian terminology, first potency is pure potency or capacity, not yet realized in any way, as when we say that a baby in the crib is potentially a language-user. Second potency/first act is the realization of a potency consisting in the possession of a skill or ability that one is not currently exercising; the same person as a young man is a language user, but having taken a vow of silence is not currently exercising that skill or ability. The same person, released from his vow and currently engaged in animated conversation, is a language-user in second act, one who both possesses and is presently exercising that skill or ability. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The term “disclosed” is Ramsey’s – see his “The Elusive Self” in Ramsey, (1974) 159-76. The name of this essay was inspired by the title of Ramsey’s article. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In particular, nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers, such as Tetens, Brentano and the phenomenologists, and introspective psychologists such as E. B. Titchener routinely held such a view. This led to the largely unsuccessful attempt to base a scientific, observational psychology on introspection, intended to simultaneously live and observe our conscious episodes. For some of the difficulties with this approach, see Sartre (1957), first published in 1936 and Paton (1949), 233-238. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One version of this argument is found in his treatise *al Shifa*, as quoted in Nasr and Leaman (1997), 1022-1023. This is apparently one of three different versions of the argument. Avicenna’s claim is that we do in fact have an apprehension of the self independently of sensuous intuition, though we do not ordinarily advert to it. If successful, this thought-experiment shows that the soul is an immaterial self-conscious subject in no way dependent for its activity, hence its existence, on the body. It also refutes Hume’s contention (discussed below) that we are never conscious of anything except perceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nor, in passing, is it possible for us to reduce space and time to relations between phenomena, since these relations can only be characterized as external, contingent, spatial and temporal relations between them, thus constituted independently of, hence prior to, those phenomena themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Kant was clearly wrong about this, but I will not go into this matter here. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For this, Descartes was taken to task by Malebranche; see (e.g.) Nicholas Jolley, “Malebranche on the Soul,” in Nadler (2000) and references. It is to be noted that I have left the nature of this substance an open question; substance dualism, idealism, and emergent materialism are available for all I say here as possible accounts of the relation of mind and body; however, reductive materialism and physicalism are not. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Not all Kant scholars read Kant as asserting this; Paton, for example, suggests that there is the noumenal and phenomenal selves are not two selves, but simply one self viewed from two points of view; see his (1949), 273-275. In response to this, we need merely ask, “Viewed by whom?” No matter how we answer this question, we come back to the self as a self-conscious subject, which is neither Kant’s noumenal self nor his phenomenal self *qua* appearance to “inner sense.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Aquinas, *ST*, I, I, 84 a. 1-4. This is my own interpretation, rejected by some Aquinas scholars, especially those who regard Aquinas as a materialist who denies that we are conscious of our mental states and acts; see Pasnau (2002) and Machuga (2002). Both of these writers, eager to evade the problems they perceive to be associated with Cartesianism, ultimately end up attributing views to Aquinas that are obviously self-refuting. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hume, of course, disputes this, claiming that if we restrict ourselves to the contents of consciousness and the relations between them, then mind is no more active than Locke’s matter, and is itself wholly passive. I shall argue that Hume is wrong to restrict us in this way, and in so doing falls into performative self-refutation. See section III below. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As has been pointed out many times, Kant’s strictures on our knowledge of noumena, if consistently embraced, would make his own transcendental investigation of the necessary conditions of the possibility of experience impossible. The categories, the various forms of synthesis, and the transcendental unity of apperception cannot be understood to be features of consciousness or as reducible to such features. They are pre-conscious structures, processes, and realities that transcend consciousness, the positing of which is the entire point of transcendental argumentation. Given the success of that argumentation, we are surely justified in positing these pre-conscious structures (etc), and thus positing them precisely *as real* in the full-blooded sense, i.e., as things-in-themselves. If so, then we are also warranted in claiming to know that they exist, on the ground that experience as we actually live it in and through consciousness would be impossible unless they existed as its (partial) cause. We are thus justified in claiming to know that they exist, and to make various claims about them. All of this is to know things-in-themselves, contrary to Kant’s official strictures on knowledge of this kind. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Again, we must reject Kant’s idea that the empirical self is an appearance to “inner sense” that represents a noumenal self that is really calling the shots prior to and without our consent, which itself is just the reflection of that self’s activity. If that is the case, then I am not a self at all *qua* empirical self and my agency is merely an illusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For an account of how this is possible on a Cartesian substance dualist account of the person, see Duncan (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Of course, it might not be the complete answer – there may well be other motives for denying the self. However, I will not speculate about this here. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. William Barrett applies the image of the last paragraph to Hume; see Barrett (1987), 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. In Hume, *Treatise*, I, IV, VI, in Selby-Bigge, 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hume, *Treatise*, I, IV, VI; in Selby-Bigge, 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Berkeley, since he accepted the empiricist account of the meaningfulness of words, used the term notion for what we would today call a concept; given the empiricist strictures of his philosophy, however, Hume .as right to point out that Berkeley has no right to the use “notion” in this way. Since we have seen past this limited perspective, however, that no longer need trouble us today. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Actually, he uses “my” three times, but in two of these cases, the use of the pronoun is possessive, modifying “perceptions.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)