

The Transcendence of the Self in Light of the Hard Problem: A Response to Bas van Fraassen

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Bas van Fraassen exists. But, he does not exist as one thing among other things. As a self he is not a physical object, not a mental substance, not an abstract entity, nor a compound thereof. I too exist as a self, in the same way Bas van Fraassen does. In fact, each of us who is a *Self* exists in a similar manner. It is language which uncovers and makes visible the human self. I refer to my self when I say “I,” and you refer to your self when you say “I.” Our language (*langue*) makes public self-reference in speech (*parole*) possible and understandable.

With this in mind, van Fraassen winds his way through a forest of thoughts about language and ends up at this destination: “Since having language is a central and crucial aspect of what I am, it is literally and logically impossible for me to have a complete or fully adequate answer to the question ‘What am I?’ The *I* is transcendent in the strong sense that the *I* is not only never entirely captured by our representations in fact, but is beyond the very possibility of fully adequate representation.”¹ Although intended to protect the self from its assailants, I fear this defense is too weak.

Yes, the self escapes being “captured” by language. Whew. Yet, can we say more about the self who escapes this capture? Yes, I believe we can. First, when speaking, what we say directs everyone’s attention to the one who is speaking, to our self as a self. Second, our fundamental experience suggests the self comes prior. The self is not the product of language but

¹ See Bas van Fraassen elsewhere in this issue.

rather the one who is speaking. This observation, simple as it sounds, should strengthen van Fraassen's argument.

I am concerned about the existence of the self just as van Fraassen is. I am concerned about protecting the existence of the intelligent human self with interior reflection. I am concerned about protecting the existence of the self with free will who considers alternatives, makes decisions, and takes action. I am concerned about protecting the existence of the self who determines things, who takes action that has an effect on the world's causal nexus.² This self is under threat by those who would drop the self from existence into nonexistence. Neurocentrists who interpret brain science are rallying an army to attack the human self, to demand unconditional surrender of the self to the forces of physical brain activity.

"There is no such thing as a self," contends philosopher Thomas Metzinger.³ Metzinger is not a scientist. He is a philosopher. Can the philosophical general muster scientific soldiers into his army to go to war against the self's existence? To my reading, van Fraassen has loaded the muskets on the rampart to defend the conscious human self from such an assault. I join van Fraassen on the rampart, but I fire with a different weapon. Here is my canon ball: although *self is not a thing*, nevertheless *it is not nothing*.

Bas van Fraassen's phenomenological and philosophical exploration to find the self follows the trail of language, of narrative. He has fellow travelers among the neuroscience interpreters. "Do you really want to know who I am?" asks Jennifer Ouellette. "Let me tell you a story."⁴

I applaud this appeal to language and narrative for self-construction. Yet, the narrative approach to selfhood is insufficient. It must be complemented by a phenomenology of the self which reveals that it is the prior self who constructs the narrative of the self. It is the prior self who tells the story in which the self is the protagonist. It is not universal language (*langue*) but rather speech (*parole*) wherein the existence of the self becomes a temporal event within the larger linguistic history. In sum, the narrative self requires supplementation by the phenomenal self. If van Fraassen would add the phenomenal self to his linguistic or narrative self,

² Here I apply basic arguments more thoroughly argued in Ted Peters, "Contingency and Freedom in Brains and Selves," *God's Providence and Randomness in Nature*, ed. Robert John Russell and Joshua M. Moritz (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2018), 261–88.

³ Thomas Metzinger, *The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self* (New York: Basic, 2009), 1.

⁴ Jennifer Ouellette, *Me, Myself, and Why: Searching for the Science of Self* (New York: Penguin, 2014), 282.

then he would solve the *Hard Problem*.

What is the *Hard Problem*? To that we now turn.

The Hard Problem as the Explanatory Gap

The *Hard Problem*, sometimes called the “explanatory gap,” arises when one attempts to explain exhaustively first person subjective experience in terms of third person objective causation. In recent years, the explanatory gap has opened up like the Grand Canyon as interpreters of neuroscience attempt to reduce human consciousness to brain activity. According to Susan Blackmore at the University of Plymouth in England, the “hard problem” of consciousness is this: “How does subjective experience arise from objective brain activity? . . . This is a problem of dualism: How can mind arise from matter? Indeed, does it?”⁵ In short, this is a hard problem because subjective self-consciousness resists being reduced to objective explanation. Consciousness resists being reduced to neuronal firings.

The problem does not seem to be hard enough for neurocentrists, however, because neurocentrists have hastily constructed a rope bridge across the *Explanatory Gap* with an assumption, namely, that the mind can be reduced to the brain. Blackmore strings her rope bridge by declaring that the subjective “I” is a delusion. “We humans are unique because we alone are clever enough to be deluded into believing that there is a conscious ‘I.’”⁶

I have been calling this philosophical position *neurocentrism*. Neurocentrism “denies that the mind is *res cogitans*, thinking stuff, and it denies that the mind conceived as brain could have any other fate than other smart mammals have: namely, death and decomposition.”⁷

⁵ Susan Blackmore, “Decoding the Puzzle of Human Consciousness,” *Scientific American* 319, no. 3 (September 2018): 49–53, at 50.

⁶ Blackmore, “Decoding the Puzzle,” 53. For neuroexistentialist philosophers, the *Hard Problem* leads to the *Really Hard Problem*: the loss of meaning that accompanies the loss of the self. “The special problem for those of us living in the age of brain science [is] making sense of the nature, meaning, and purpose of our lives given that we are material beings living in a material world” (Owen Flanagan and Gregg D. Caruso, “Neuroexistentialism: Third-Wave Existentialism,” in *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, Morals, and Purpose in the Age of Neuroscience*, ed. Gregg D. Caruso and Owen Flanagan [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018], 1–22, at 9).

⁷ Flanagan and Caruso, “Neuroexistentialism,” 7.

Neurocentrism relies on a deterministic presupposition. “The universe is causally closed, and the mind is the brain.”⁸ Neurocentrist philosopher Daniel Dennett, whom van Fraassen cites, makes this very assumption. “The mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon. In short, the mind is the brain.”⁹ We can see that this is an assumption and not a conclusion, on Dennett’s part, because he uses the term “somehow” to confess that he lacks empirical evidence.

A neuroscientist who actually relies on empirical evidence, in contrast, is not likely to build such a flimsy bridge. Stanislas Dehaene, who directs the Cognitive Neuroimaging Unit in Saclay, France, for example, keeps the gap open. “Although neuroscience has identified many empirical correspondences between brain activity and mental life, the conceptual chasm between brain and mind seems as broad as it ever was.”¹⁰ For the empirical neuroscientist the gap remains wide, whereas the nonempirical neurocentrist prematurely bridges the gap with reductionist assumptions. Laboratory evidence falls short of proving neurocentric reductionism.

What I fear from neurocentrist philosophy is the threat it poses to the existence of the human self. My fear is not from determinism; rather, my

⁸ Flanagan and Caruso, “Neuroexistentialism,” 8. There is no self that, like a CEO, functions as a personal control center, according to Neil Levy, philosopher at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. “Rather, the mind consists of nothing but . . . unintelligent mechanisms. There is no central executive: nothing which occupies a seat of power” (“Choices without Choosers,” in Flanagan and Caruso, *Neuroexistentialism*, 111–25, at 115). Peter U. Tse objects to the “hard incompatibilism” of Levy and his denial of free will: “I find Levy’s denial of moral responsibility a profoundly nihilistic view of human beings, their choices, and life in general” (“Two Types of Libertarian Free Will Are Realized in the Human Brain,” in Flanagan and Caruso, *Neuroexistentialism*, 162–90, at 186).

⁹ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little Brown, 1991) 33. To my observation, empirical brain scientists tend not to reduce the mind to the brain. Those who interpret the science, such as neurophilosophers or neuropsychologists, however, tend to be more reductionistic, materialistic, and deterministic. Patricia Churchland is a neurophilosopher, not a neuroscientist: “Neurophilosophy . . . works the interface between philosophy’s grand old questions about choice and learning and morality and the gathering wisdom about the nature of nervous systems. It is about the impact of neuroscience and psychology and evolutionary biology on how we think about ourselves. It is about *expanding* and *modifying* our self-conception through knowledge of the brain” (*Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2013], 20; italics original). Here is Churchland’s reductionist move: “What we think of as the soul is the brain, and what we think of as the brain is the brain” (60).

¹⁰ Stanislas Dehaene, *Consciousness and the Brain: Deciphering How the Brain Codes Our Thoughts* (New York: Viking, 2014), 162.

fear is the elimination of the self as one determiner among others, such as nature and nurture. I affirm three-part determinism: nature, nurture, and self-determination.¹¹ Neurocentric philosophers reduce the determinants to two, nature and nurture alone, without the self.¹²

The Implications of Our Brain's Readiness Potential

Is it the brain that makes decisions and then, later, deludes our consciousness into thinking we made those decisions? If this could be proved empirically, then could we dub conscious willing as a mere epiphenomenon? Could we eliminate the self and replace it with the brain alone?

To make the empirical case that consciously willed action is merely epiphenomenal and eliminable, determinists and incompatibilists frequently cite the 1983 experiments of Benjamin Libet and his colleagues on readiness potential, or "RP" (*Bereitschaftspotential*). In the human brain, the RP precedes self-initiated voluntary actions by measurable amounts of time. Their data showed that the motor cortex activated 350,000 milliseconds before awareness of a voluntary urge leading to action.¹³ This seems to support the notion that it is the brain who initiates voluntary action, not the conscious will.

Some critics have countered that the RP did not indicate readiness for voluntary movement but rather ongoing attention to the situation requiring or inviting willed movement. Other critics connected RP with introspection on the eve of a conscious decision. Still other critics demonstrated that the RP reflects a "general expectation" and not a specific decision for

¹¹ For most philosophers, *free will* implies that we could have done otherwise than what we did (counterfactual freedom). *Incompatibilism* holds that free will and determinism are incompatible; therefore, if determinism, then no free will. *Compatibilism* or *soft determinism* holds that the concept of free will implies, first, that we have the ability to do what we want or desire to do; and this entails, second, an absence of constraints or impediments (such as political restraints, coercion, and compulsion) preventing us from doing what we want. See Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13. In short, the self is an agent. Therefore, on the one hand, my own position—free will indicates self-determination in the form of agency—could be placed in the compatibilist camp. On the other hand, I contend that free will understood as self-determination could be placed in the determinist camp, as long as we accept three-part determinism: nature, nurture, and self.

¹² It is oblique to pit freedom and determinism against one another. Human freedom is best understood as self-determination.

¹³ Benjamin Libet et. al., "Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential): The Unconscious Initiation of a Freely Voluntary Act," *Brain* 106 (1983): 624–25.

motor activity.¹⁴ According to subsequent researchers, our choices are not predetermined by brain activity. At this point it appears that the Libet experiments do not provide decisive support for an epiphenomenal or eliminative judgment regarding the existence of the human self.

One of my students, Kung Rae Kim, who followed the Libet debate carefully, concludes: "Our conscious choice (or determination) is influenced by the result of unconscious brain operations such as desire, impulse, trauma, or emotion. However, this does not mean that our choice is predetermined by our unconscious brain operations."¹⁵

I would add that, even if it is in fact the case that the brain is responsible for some automatic human movement, this does not account for all human action. Certainly a portion of human movement embodies the structure of deliberation, decision, and action.

Bridging the Explanatory Gap with Neuro-Reductionism

Michael Gazzaniga wedges freedom into the spandrels of his otherwise reductionist temple. "We humans are about becoming less dumb," he says, trying to give us comfort over our loss of self. Despite our delusion, we can get smarter. But it is the brain, not the self, that is the agent for making us smarter. The brain "makes decisions based on experience, innate biases, and much more. Our freedom is to be found in developing more options for our computing brains to choose among."¹⁶ Gazzaniga's rope bridge across the explanatory gap asks the brain to walk where the self would otherwise have walked. Does this actually solve the hard problem, or merely restate it?

Let me try to reformulate the *Hard Problem*: if the neurocentric philosopher claims to explain the subjective self exhaustively in objective physical terms, then that very self gets explained away, not explained. The neurocentrist reduces the intelligent self to an agglomeration of neuronal firings, to a mental product of physical processes.¹⁷ The result is that the

¹⁴ Christoph S. Hermann, et.al., "Analysis of a Choice-Reaction Task Yields a New Interpretation of Libet's Experiments," *International Journal of Psychophysiology* 67, no. 2 (2008): 152–56, at 156.

¹⁵ KungRae Kim, "Not Puppet but Human: A Defense of Human Freedom against Arguments for Theological and Scientific Determinism" (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2019), 156.

¹⁶ Michael S. Gazzaniga, "On Determinism and Human Responsibility," in Flanagan and Caruso, *Neuroexistentialism*, 223–34, at 233.

¹⁷ Intelligence belongs to the human self, and perhaps even to pre-human selves. Elsewhere I have argued that intelligence is most adequately defined in terms of seven traits: (1) interiority; (2) intentionality; (3) communication; (4) adaptation;

self becomes unreal, and subjective consciousness becomes an illusion. Or, to say it as van Fraassen might consider asserting it, by reducing all first-person speech to third-person speech, we eliminate the person who speaks. Yet, we ask, is this possible, due to the fact that some first-person speaker must utter every third-person statement?

Why would such a problem arise? Would anyone want to eliminate the existence of the self? Again, this “hard problem” arises because the methods of objective scientific research are unprepared to deal with the phenomenon of the self’s subjectivity. Here is my observation: we know we exist, because our very existence is the condition for the possibility of knowing that anything exists, including the objects of scientific knowing. Is this not a corollary of René Descartes’ indubitable axiom, *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore, I am”)?¹⁸

Philosopher of science Thomas Nagel recognizes the indubitability, as well as the inexplicability, of the self’s existence. “The physical sciences will not enable us to understand the irreducibly subjective centers of consciousness that are such a conspicuous part of the world,” Nagel surmises. “If the mental is not itself merely physical, it cannot be fully explained by physical science.”¹⁹ These observations put a limit to a strictly materialist ontology. “The possibility opens up of a pervasive conception of the natural order very different from materialism—one that makes mind central, rather than a side effect of physical law.”²⁰

(5) problem-solving; (6) self-reflection; and (7) judgment. Humans, along with many mammals, exhibit all seven traits. See Ted Peters, “Where There’s Life There’s Intelligence,” in *What is Life? Earth and Beyond*, ed. Andreas Losch and Andreas Krebs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 236–59.

¹⁸ Science and religion scholar William Grassie describes the stubborn resistance of the self against brain–mind reductionism. “Our physical descriptions of the way the brain works at the level of neurons, brain anatomy, and neurological processes bear no resemblance to our subjective experience as people with brains having complex mental and emotional states. Nor is there any neurological definition of consciousness as such. We have no device that can measure presence or absence of consciousness” (*The New Sciences of Religion: Exploring Spirituality from the Outside In and Bottom Up* [New York: Macmillan Palgrave, 2010], 96).

¹⁹ Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 14.

²⁰ Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 15. The self is an agent, even a causal agent that partially determines the course of future events. “Self as agent is indeed what philosophers struggling with the so-called free will paradox should be focused on, rather than freedom from determinate constraint. . . . An agent is a locus of work that is able to change things in ways more concordant with internally generated ends and contrary to extrinsic tendencies. . . . This is not a breakdown of causal efficacy; in fact, just the opposite. Being an agent means being a locus of causal efficacy.”

In sum, philosophical neurocentrism builds a weak bridge across the explanatory gap, a bridge underpinned only by an assumption that is not conclusively demonstrated by empirical brain research. Brain–mind reductionism seems to arise solely from materialist ideology, not from observation that includes the fundamental human experience of self-awareness. I wish to arm the sentries on the ramparts with a phenomenological observation—the subjective self is fundamental to knowing anything objectively—to defend the existence of the intelligent human self from this external onslaught.

Models of the Self

What is this self we are protecting? Just what kind of self might we be defending? Here are five models of the self which I observe at work in current discussion.

The first model is the self understood in terms of *ego continuity* or, in religious parlance, the self as the *soul*. Accordingly, the self is structured by a persistent self-awareness. The traditional Western doctrine of the immortal soul relies on ego continuity in this life and the next, despite what happens to the physical body. Ego continuity would represent the classical Platonic or Cartesian position.

Second, the *self as confused expression of a higher self*. Accordingly, our individual soul is but a manifestation of the over-soul, the spiritual reality that unites all things. We find this model in the American transcendentalists of the nineteenth century and New Age spirituality in the late twentieth century.

The third model is the *self as delusion*. This position is taken by many philosophers who claim to base their cognitive theory on neuroscience. This is the neurocentrist position, the reductionist model according to which no substantial ego exists.

The fourth model seems to be assumed in van Fraassen's account, the *self as story or narrative*. According to this linguistic model, the self is an evolving social construction whose identity is defined by our language, our history, our story. For a historical or biographical self to develop, it requires relationship, a set of relationships apprehended through language.²¹

(Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2012], 479–80).

²¹ “The development of a sense of self relies on the regulating, reliable, and felt presence of the other” (Serbern F. Fisher, *Neurofeedback in the Treatment of Developmental Trauma: Calming the Fear-Driven Brain* [New York: W. W. Norton, 2014], 21).

Neuroscience reporter Jennifer Ouellette, cited above, belongs in the self-as-narrative model.²²

Because this narrative model depends largely on the role of language in self-reference, it requires philosophical hermeneutics to grasp how it functions. According to the late Paul Ricoeur, “it is therefore plausible to affirm the following assertions: a) knowledge of the self is an interpretation; b) the interpretation of the self, in turn, finds narrative, among other signs and symbols, to be a privileged mediation; c) this mediation borrows from history as much as fiction making the life story a fictive history or, if you prefer, an historical fiction.”²³ When we compare the third and fourth models, we note that, for the self-as-delusion model, the self is a fiction in the sense that it does not exist, whereas for the self-as-narrative model, the self is a fiction in the sense that it is a construction.²⁴

The fifth model is the phenomenological model, the *self as experiential dimension*. Here, “the self is claimed to possess experiential reality, is taken to be closely linked to the first-person perspective, and is, in fact, identified with the very first-person *givenness* of the experiential phenomena,” according to Dan Zahavi, who directs the Center for Subjectivity Research at the University of Copenhagen.²⁵ Zahavi follows in the footsteps of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, wherein the self or ego is that which understands itself pre-linguistically and pre-objectively as imbedded in the world. When *consciousness of* intends an object, this experience presupposes a subjective ego who is intending that object. Consciousness requires a self to be conscious, according to this model.

I select two from this list of models, the fourth and the fifth, and put them together, and I recommend that van Fraassen do the same to strengthen his argument. The experiential-dimension model combines

²² Ouellette, *Me, Myself, and Why*, 260. The feeling of self “is not an illusion, because the physical brain/body is providing continuity and a reservoir of memories that can be called upon, even though each thought is . . . a separate entity” (Henry P. Stapp, “The Hard Problem: A Quantum Approach” in *Explaining Consciousness—The Hard Problem*, ed. Jonathan Shear [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997], 197–216, at 210).

²³ Paul Ricoeur, “Narrative Identity,” *Philosophy Today* 35 (1991): 73–80.

²⁴ Whereas van Fraassen tends to conflate Dennett’s version of the third model with the narrative of the fourth, I sharply distinguish them. The term “fiction” is equivocal, used differently in the two models.

²⁵ Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 106. A theologian, Paul Tillich, weighs in: “A self is not a thing that may or may not exist; it is an original phenomenon which logically precedes all questions of existence” (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951–1963], 1:169).

well with the story or narrative model. Phenomenologically, the human self exists intuitively, indubitably, and unquestionably at the level of presupposition. This experiential self gains self-confidence and character through narrative formation as well as through linguistic self-reference. The model of the narrative self suggests that the philosopher coin a linguistic ontology to account for the status of the self.²⁶

Conclusion

My focal point has been this: by defending human selfhood within a fortress of language accompanied by narrative, van Fraassen has fired a warning shot against the approaching enemies who are attempting to kidnap and execute the self. However, I fear that van Fraassen's defense is in itself inadequate. The bulwarks of his fortress could be strengthened by allying with the experiential model of the self. The narrative and the experiential models of the self are complementary, because it is the experienced self who tells his or her autobiography.

I wish to thank Bas van Fraassen for defending the existence of the conscious human self against those who would assail its existence, against those who would claim that selfhood as we daily experience it is actually a delusion. I have joined forces with van Fraassen in this battle. But my march has assaulted the enemies of the self on a different flank.

I have loaded my arsenal with this: the self may not be a thing, but it is not nothing either. I combine this observation with another one: the task of both science and philosophy is to explain, not explain away. The problem among neurocentrists is that they try to explain the self away. They do not explain the self; rather, they assume the self is a delusion fopped off on an epiphenomenal consciousness by physical brain activity. Nevertheless, the indubitable existence of the self as seen from the point of view of the self is a phenomenon which will inflate the horizon of objective science to grow beyond reductive materialism to include consciousness and first person subjectivity.

"I must first know myself" (Γνισθεαυτον), said Socrates.²⁷ We enjoy a direct intuition of our self both before and after mediated knowledge of objects in the world enters our awareness. Unless we know our self, we do not know that we know anything else. What we would like from the scientifically oriented philosopher is to explain this, not explain it away. N.V

²⁶ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 1994), part III.

²⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus* 229e.