

The narrative self, distributed memory, and evocative objects

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In his book, *The Principles of Psychology*, William James (1890) argues that the human self is partly constituted by objects and other people. He writes:

“A man's Self is the sum of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank-account. All these things give him the same emotions. If they wax and prosper, he feels triumphant; if they dwindle and die away, he feels cast down, not necessarily in the same degree for each thing, but in much the same way for all” (1890, p. 291-292).

James thus argues that not only our embodiment and cognitive capacities, but also objects and other people are constitutive of the self because they cause emotions. In this essay, I advance a new perspective on this claim by developing the following argument. First, I argue that the self is essentially a narrative construct realized by autobiographical memory systems. Further, as James and more recently Richard Menary (2008) remind us, we construct our self-narratives out of embodied experiences. In this article, I extend Menary's view by arguing that not just our embodiment but also our embodied interactions with external artifacts and other persons are important for the narrative we develop. In other words, our narratives are embodied *and* distributed. Specifically, I argue that evocative objects (i.e., objects that are connected to past personal experiences) trigger and sometimes constitute emotionally-laden autobiographical memories (Petrelli & Whittaker 2010). Based on these premises, I conclude that the self is partly constituted by the web of evocative objects in our lifeworld. I call this the *distributed self view* (Heersmink 2016). It provides an important alternative to traditional psychological (continuity) views and animalist views of the self, but at the same time recognizes that memory and embodiment are essential to selfhood.

The argument unfolds as follows. In section 2, I outline the narrative approach to personal identity, mainly building on the work of Marya Schechtman (1996). Her neo-Lockean view on personal identity emphasizes narrative as an important criterion of persistence of selfhood over time. On this view, a narrative is a subjective and personal story with of a series of connected events and experiences that are (essential to) the person. In section 3, I analyze various ways in which artifacts transform and are interwoven with autobiographical memory systems. I do so by drawing on and integrating distributed cognition theory and empirical research on human-technology interaction (Michaelian & Sutton 2013). In section 4, I conceptualize the implications

of distributed autobiographical memory for the self. I argue that artifacts but also other people often afford continuity for our personal identity by providing a stable ecology of memory cues in our environment. Who we are as persons or selves thus depends on and is partly constituted by a distributed network of environmental structures.

References

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