



Little Guliwer, Zdenek Janda

If I Were Me

*Each mind fabricates itself.
We sense its limits, for we have made them.*
Rilke, Book of Hours II

COGNITIVE NEUROSCIENTISTS are a reserved lot, more inclined to study extroversion than to display it themselves.

But if you happened to corner one at a cocktail party, he or she might relate the story of a researcher by the name of Michael Gazzaniga, who in the 1970s—while studying people who’d had their brains surgically split in an effort to control their epileptic seizures—discovered that each half of the brain was capable of producing a separate, independent mind, each with distinctly different abilities and attitudes.

Upon hearing the news that after having one mind, a bewildered patient now in effect, had two, the psychologist William K. Estes famously remarked, “Great. Now we have *two* things we don’t understand.”

Ask anyone where their sense of ‘self’ resides, and nearly everyone will answer “somewhere in my head”—typically right behind the eyes. (The eyes have long been thought of as the ‘windows to the soul.’)

The reason for this near universal belief is plain enough: our sense of self is informed by our dominant experience of the world, and nearly all of our input from the outside world is captured through our eyes.

That said, if you weren’t aware that your thoughts do, in fact, emanate from your brain, you wouldn’t necessarily say that was their source, because our thoughts don’t really appear to be localized *anywhere*.

In fact, it is now well established scientifically that various bodily signals and sensations—in particular the heartbeat—play a major role in forming our experience of consciousness and our sense of self.

(In effect, the mind is largely shaped by the body, which should put to rest any ideas about a ‘disembodied brain’ or science fiction’s proverbial ‘brain in a vat.’)

In reality, delineating where the ‘self’ begins or ends is a complicated task, and not just mentally but physically as well.

If we rely on genetics, we find that we are chimeras: parts of us are human, but genetically ‘not us.’ In fact, we are teeming with microbial life—bacteria, fungi, protists, archaea and viruses—especially in our gut. These fellow travellers may make up only a small part of our body in terms of weight, but at 38 trillion in number, they collectively far outnumber our human cells.

What is true on the ‘inside’ is true even more so on the ‘outside.’ Experiments confirm that our brain’s body map expands to encompass our immediate environment—for example, when we use a handtool or drive a car—which in the process become part of our ‘extended self.’ (Memories also contribute to our self-identity, and perhaps somewhat ominously, we are increasingly storing our memories in our smartphones.)

To further complicate matters, many cognitive scientists are now coming to the conclusion that our consciousness and sense of self are localized not specifically in the brain, body, *or* environment, but in the multifaceted relationship between all three. (In a much deeper sense than we may realize, “we are” indeed “the world.”)

This recognition of how closely we are shaped by our environment—not just in our beliefs but in *who we actually are*—has profound and unexpected implications.

One inescapable conclusion is that our tendency to view our minds as our ‘self,’ and to view that ‘self’ as highly localized, individualized, and personalized, may in fact be quite misplaced and misleading.

We might even say that most people are, in a sense, unconscious, to the extent that they identify with their mind’s deeply engrained, habitual patterns. Compelled to think and feel in ways dictated by mental conditioning, one is not really fully awake, and what appears to be free will is more akin to mechanical thinking and behavior.

The natural function of the mind is to generate thoughts, which come and go of their own accord, like clouds in the sky. But when we connect these thoughts together in a continuous flow, we create the illusion of a self, a ‘me’ who is thinking and directing all these thoughts, and out of this illusion comes the concept of a separate entity: a world outside and a ‘me’ who is ‘inside’ looking out at the world.

This fundamental misperception of who we are is the source all our anxiety, fear, and conflict. Although our true, infinite nature as Awareness is always present in the background, we grasp it only in fragments, in unexpected moments of insight or lucidity.

To experience real freedom, we must practice disidentifying from the mind, and become fully alive to the present moment, for it is only in the *Now* that we can be our authentic selves, free of all preconceptions. Only in that state of true freedom can one’s natural personality—what Buddhists call our ‘Original Face’—shine through, uncorrupted by the past or by the future.

Once we focus our attention away from the mind and onto the body—for example, on our breath—we can immediately feel the tension in our body and mind subsiding.

No longer split between our authentic and our perceived self, no longer dragged along like a leaf in the wind by our mind and its compulsive thinking, we might say that we are learning to think and feel not just with our heads, but with our entire body. ■