

# How does the brain construct a sense of self?

written by Mick Gordon



The cognitive scientist David Chalmers calls it ‘the hard problem’: how do physical processes in our brains give rise to subjective experience? The neuropsychologist and writer Paul Broks, puts it another way: how does the kilo and a half of meat you call your brain, become your mind?

It is perhaps, the greatest scientific and philosophic question of all. It asks us to think about what we are, beyond our skin and bone and our hundred billion brain cells. It wonders how the conscious ‘you’ clammers from the numb darkness of the brain box out into a world of people and places, pleasure and pain, love and loss. It wants to know who ‘you’ are.

The answer is disconcertingly simple: not who you think you are. Paul Broks in his beautiful book, *Into the Silent Land, Travels in Neuropsychology*, gently reveals the mistake we so instinctively make about ourselves: our assumption that the first person singular pronoun, ‘I,’ describes a unified self.

I wake up in the morning; I go to work; I feel happy when things go well and I feel frustrated when they don’t; I hold certain beliefs and I express various opinions; I used to like Beethoven but now I prefer Mozart; I like chocolate better than cheesecake; I enjoy walks in the country-side; I take the view that people should be kind to one another, and I feel bad if I do the wrong thing. I act, I feel, I think, I believe, I grow older and I change in other ways. But ‘I’ am always there at the centre of things. But what is this ‘I’? The experiencer of experiences? The thinker of thoughts? The doer of deeds? The simple fact is that there is no ‘I’ beyond the ‘I’ of grammar.

This, of course, is very difficult to accept.

Try another approach. As you are reading this you are more than likely hearing a little voice coming from inside your head. Now think: whose is that little voice? Is it yours? Is it mine? Now recall a recent argument that you’ve had with a loved one. Has another voice arrived? Your lover’s perhaps? Your mother’s? Listen for a moment. Replay the argument. Hear their criticism and try to remember your reply. Now there are two voices in there - or maybe a third has started to commentate, “*I’m still right!*” So who are they, these voices? And who is it that is continuing to read this while they’re busy with their altercation? Who is ‘you’?

The fact is, we are divided and discontinuous and the mental processes underlying our sense of self - feelings, thoughts, memories - are scattered through different zones of the brain. There is no central core, no special point of convergence, no essence, no ego, no ‘I.’ We come together - when we do - in a work of fiction. Our brain is a story-telling machine and the ‘self’ is a story.

But as has been said, this is very difficult to accept. And it is this difficulty that inspired this theatre essay.