

Stanley B. Klein: The Two Selves—Their Metaphysical Commitments and Functional Independence

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The main claim of this relatively brief but unusually ambitious book is, as the title suggests, that the self is not one but two. On the one hand, there is the *epistemological* self, which has a definite neurocognitive basis. On the other hand, there is the *ontological* self, which, in Klein's view, is a matter of first-person subjectivity and may lack a material basis, in which case it may, in contrast to the epistemological self, not be amenable to investigation by standard scientific means.¹ The suggestion that the self may include an immaterial component is likely to strike many readers as, at best, highly improbable. Thus it is worth noting at the outset that the author is careful to present the immateriality claim as an hypothesis (though one that he clearly favours), acknowledging that it is not a conclusion entailed by the empirical research that he reviews. Indeed, the core of the book's treatment of the plural character of the self is independent of the immateriality claim, in the sense that we can consistently endorse the picture it develops of the self as consisting of two functionally independent systems, linked by a contingent relation of personal ownership, while rejecting the suggestion that the ontological self is immaterial.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the problem of the self with which the rest of the book is concerned. Acknowledging the availability of views on which the self is a mere illusion, the relative scarcity of psychological research focused directly on the self (as opposed to research that takes the self for granted without giving it an explicit characterization, e.g., research on self-deception or self-regulation), and ongoing theoretical controversy over the nature of the self, the chapter argues that this messy state of affairs may be due to the fact that there is not a single, unified

¹ Klein explains his somewhat idiosyncratic use of the terms “epistemological” and “ontological” in chapter 1, but nothing of substance turns on this terminological choice.

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self. The suggestion is that, rather than a single self, there are two distinct but interacting selves: the epistemological self, responsible for providing the ontological self with knowledge of who and what it is, and the ontological self, a first-person subjectivity capable of apprehending the epistemological self but not itself capable of being directly apprehended (as opposed to sensed or felt). It is, on the view defended by Klein, the interaction between the ontological and epistemological selves that gives rise to the sense of self that can be disturbed in certain clinical conditions.

Chapter 2 examines the epistemological self, which is itself composed of multiple functionally independent systems, including: episodic memory; semantic trait self-knowledge; semantic autobiographical knowledge; temporal consciousness; the physical self (e.g., mirror self-recognition); and the emotional self. Under normal circumstances, these components interact smoothly to give rise to a sense of self as a subjective unity; in certain clinical conditions, some components may be impaired without, however, entirely eliminating the sense of self. The chapter focuses on evidence for the functional independence of the first three components (i.e., episodic memory, semantic trait self-knowledge, and semantic autobiographical knowledge). For example, Klein discusses evidence from priming studies for the semantic abstraction view (as opposed to the episodic computation view) of trait self-knowledge, arguing that this supports the functional independence of semantic and episodic trait self-knowledge, as well as evidence from neurologically impaired and unimpaired patients. The latter makes for particularly interesting reading, describing how, for example, the famous amnesic patient K.C. was able to (semantically) know what his personality was like while lacking the ability to (episodically) remember any relevant events, despite the fact that his personality changed significantly after the accident which led to his amnesia.

Chapter 3, on the ontological self, is (inevitably) on less solid empirical footing, with the argument resting more on conceptual considerations. Klein appeals to an argument (offered in different formulations by a number of different authors) according to which, while we can observe things that are presented to the self, we necessarily cannot observe the self to which they are presented. The key idea is that the ontological self is irreducibly subjective, such that any attempt to transform it into an *object* of knowledge is bound to fail: the ontological self is not a potential object of descriptive knowledge but rather something we can know only by direct acquaintance. Most of the remaining argumentation in the chapter is negative, designed to respond to objections to immaterialism rather than to provide direct support for the view. The chapter discusses limits on knowledge imposed by physics (e.g., quantum indeterminacy), the suggestion being that such limits urge openmindedness with respect to the possibility that reality might include an immaterial aspect, as well as an objection according to which interactions between immaterial minds and material brains would violate the principle of conservation of energy. These discussions, however, are likely too brief to persuade opponents of immaterialism, and it might have been more effective, dialectically speaking, to devote more of the chapter to developing additional *positive* reasons for taking the ontological self

to be immaterial. It should be emphasized that, despite his view that it is (likely) immaterial, Klein does not mean to make the ontological self into a mystery: he grants that “[f]irst-person experiences are reportable and thus subject to objectification and quantification”, though he does maintain that quantification is bound to miss important aspects of the experiences in question, citing as an example Ebbinghaus’s reduction of memory to the ability to recall lists of nonsense syllables, which leaves the phenomenology of remembering—and much else besides—out of the picture.

Chapter 4 is only a few pages long, serving mainly to provide a brief summary of the conclusions of the preceding chapters. (It does, however, also include an interesting discussion of whether Chalmers-style philosophical zombies could have a sense of self—given that zombies lack the sort of consciousness definitive of the ontological self, and given that it is the interaction between the ontological and epistemological selves that generates the sense of self, they could not.)

Chapter 5 reviews empirical evidence for the functional independence of the epistemological and ontological selves, relying primarily on the reports of patients suffering from loss of the sense of ownership of their mental states. Patient D.B., for example (discussed by Klein and colleagues elsewhere), suffered from severe episodic amnesia, resulting in loss of much of the self-knowledge normally constituting the epistemological self; as his ontological self remained intact, he was aware that this information was missing and experienced its absence as disturbing. Cases such as that of D.B. are consistent with the claim that there is a single self, as they can always be interpreted as showing that different components of a complex self are differentially affected by the same event, and Klein therefore also considers cases in which both the epistemological and the ontological selves are intact but in which the connection which ordinarily holds between them is apparently severed, resulting in a loss of the feeling of personal ownership on the part of the ontological self for the content presented to it by the epistemological self. In thought insertion, for example, the subject experiences his own thoughts as not belonging to him. In certain cases of anosognosia, patients fail to experience certain parts of their own bodies as belonging to them. In depersonalization, patients again fail to experience their own bodies or thoughts as belonging to them. These cases involve delusions, but the chapter also discusses non-psychopathological cases of loss of the sense of personal ownership, including that of patient R.B. (discussed by Klein and colleagues in more detail elsewhere), who, as a result of an accident, suffered a variety of transient cognitive impairments including anterograde and retrograde amnesia. Interestingly, after R.B.’s other impairments had passed, he continued to experience a loss of the feeling of personal ownership for his own episodic memories. Taken as a whole, the evidence provided in this chapter strongly supports the view that the epistemological and ontological selves are functionally independent systems, contingently linked by a sense of ownership.

Chapter 6 provides a brief summing-up, restating Klein’s view that the two selves—two metaphysically distinct aspects of reality—are united by the sense of ownership.

As Klein recognizes, the evidence offered in chapter 5, however suggestive it may be of functional independence, cannot directly support the metaphysical

claim that the ontological self is immaterial. The latter claim is, of course, far more difficult to swallow than functional independence. What, then, are we to make of the suggestion that the ontological self may be immaterial? In a sense, Klein's aim in making the suggestion is relatively modest: in the book's preface, for example, he urges us to be open to "the *possibility* that this aspect of self [the self of first-person experience] might exist in non-material form" (p. xiv; original emphasis). Klein points out that materialism is a scientific presupposition, a presumption that shapes our inquiries, rather than something that can itself be confirmed or disconfirmed by science; he infers from this that "a materialist stance does not have a greater claim on our credence than does any other metaphysical position" (p. xiv). However, the conclusion does not follow: the fact that metaphysical positions such as materialism cannot be directly confirmed or disconfirmed does not imply that they are all on a par, rationally speaking, for such positions receive indirect support from the success of the kinds of inquiry with which they are associated. As Klein acknowledges, modern science presupposes that reality is ultimately entirely material. The extraordinary success of modern science therefore provides strong reason to endorse materialism. Thus, while it is perhaps unobjectionable to urge us to keep an open mind, we should want far more evidence of problems for materialism than any one book can provide before it becomes reasonable to seriously doubt materialism.²

Aside from this worry about the immateriality claim, the core of Klein's argument is convincing, and any disagreement with the details of his view should be dwarfed by admiration for the originality of his approach. While Klein's home discipline is psychology, this is as much a book of philosophy as it is of psychology. Such truly interdisciplinary work is, unfortunately, extremely rare. There are relatively few philosophers willing to invest the time and effort required to come to terms with relevant psychological theory and results (as opposed to cherry picking findings that fit with theories arrived at by standard *a priori* means). There are probably even fewer psychologists interested in drawing on philosophy for anything more than the occasional clever quote, never mind venturing into speculative philosophical territory themselves. As Klein's book demonstrates by example, both disciplines are very much the poorer for it. It is to be hoped that more of us will follow his lead in the future.

² Moreover, the immaterialist picture of the self will inherit basic difficulties afflicting non-materialist views in general. Klein refrains from entering into the details of debates over specific versions of substance dualism, property dualism, and so on. This decision is understandable, as detailed discussion of such debates would be out of place in a book on the self. Nevertheless, anyone who defends a form of non-materialism ultimately owes us a concrete characterization of the metaphysics of the non-material. How, for example, is the sense of ownership described in chapter 5 supposed to accomplish the impressive feat of relating the ontological self to the epistemological self, given that the former is immaterial and the latter is material?