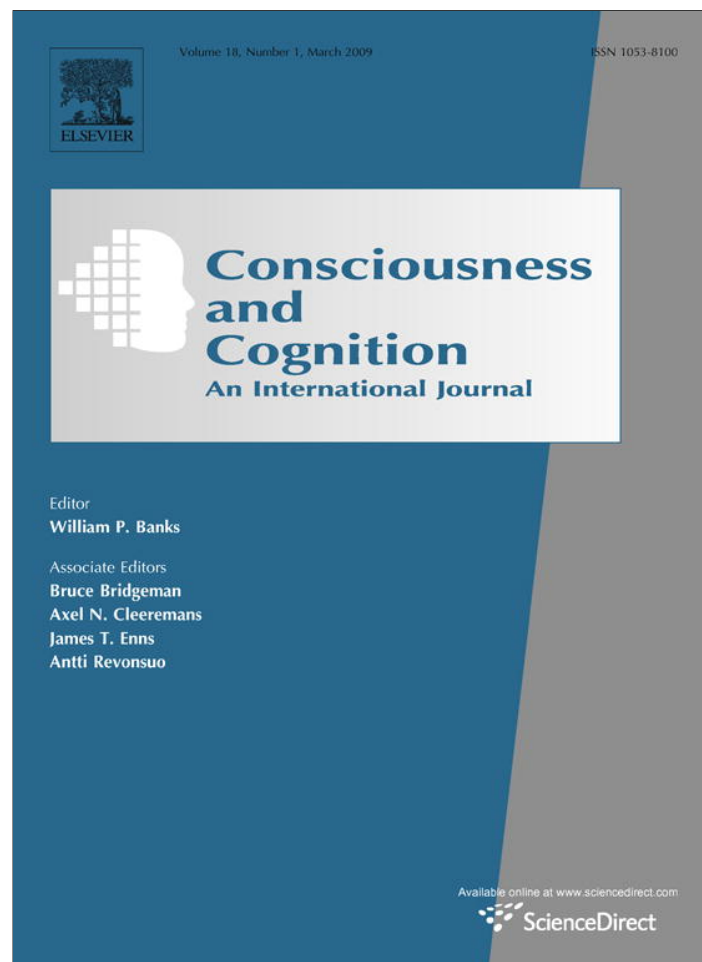


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## Commentary

# Two arguments for a pre-reflective core self: Commentary on Praetorius (2009) <sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Contra Praetorius (2009), I present two brief arguments which support the existence within the human brain of a pre-reflective core self.

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In disputing Zahavi (2005), Praetorius (2009) questions "...whether the self has any *real* existence, i.e. is there anything of 'substance' being referred to by the notions of 'self', 'I', 'mine', or is the self a mere narrative construction...". The author concludes that absent linguistic reflection, there are no valid grounds for asserting that such a thing as a minimal core self exists. Indeed, Praetorius claims that "it is not until the child can apprehend that his or hers 'point of view' may differ from those of other[s]" that one can ascribe a sense of self to the child. One wonders where the *subject* is when, during reflection, the child finally decides "*I* now see that *I* have a different point of view." How could such a reflection even make sense without a *prior* referent of the linguistic term "I"? What is the referent of the lexical "I"? My claim is that there is a discrete, *innate*, enduring part of the cognitive brain that can properly be described as the self and that serves as the subjective referent for the lexical "I".

In the following sections, the arguments are made that (1) there is a pre-reflective core self (the origin of experience), and (2) that no reflective sentential proposition about oneself (or anything else) can carry the weight of personal belief without having a basic attachment to a paralinguistic self.

## 1. The self as the origin of phenomenal experience

In order for humans to behave adaptively in the real world, each of us must have within our brain a useful internal representation of the world from our unique egocentric perspective. This means that the human brain must contain a biophysical counterpart to some kind of a 3D coordinate system with an ego/self location as its fixed origin (the 0/0/0 coordinate). Because consciousness implies some kind of phenomenal content, we can assume that when we are conscious we are aware of *something somewhere*. Revonsuo (2006) puts it this way:

*The phenomenal level is based on an egocentric, bounded coordinate system whose regions can instantiate qualitative features. When that coordinate system is present in the brain, the brain is in a conscious state (i.e., capable of realizing*

<sup>☆</sup> Commentary on Praetorius, N. (2009). The phenomenological underpinning of the notion of a minimal core self: A psychological perspective. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 18, 325–338.

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phenomenal contents); when it is absent, the brain is in an unconscious state (i.e., incapable of realizing phenomenal contents).

In speaking of the presence or absence of the brain's coordinate system, I think it is fair to assume that Revonsuo is really referring to a brain system that can be either active (conscious) or inactive (unconscious). If this is the case, can we reasonably identify any biological part of such a coordinate system as a pre-reflective *core self*?

I can think of no better candidate for a core self than the biophysical origin of the brain's spatial coordinate system. In formulating an explicit neuronal model of the cognitive brain, I found that I had to model a dynamic system of brain mechanisms that could transform arbitrary sequences of *retinocentric* stimuli into the stable, coherent, 3D *egocentric* space which constitutes our volumetric phenomenal world. This is the *retinoid* system with the *self locus* as its egocentric origin (Trehub, 1977, 1991, 2007).

Just on the basis of the innate spatiotopic organization of the retinoid system with the self locus at its origin we can see that the perspectival quality of phenomenal experience is intrinsically given within the mechanisms of the brain before any cognitive reflection or linguistic locutions. The most primitive sense of self, the core self, is a paralinguistic event which is simply the neuronal activity of a cluster of autaptic cells at the origin (the self locus) of the volumetric surround of retinoid space (Trehub, 2007). Thus we can say that a core self really exists, and that it is the origin of all phenomenal experience.

## 2. Personal belief cannot exist without attachment to a paralinguistic (core) self

Imagine thinking this thought: "I believe I can read other people's minds." Would this be an expression of your true belief? For most readers of this commentary, I would guess not; but we must acknowledge that someone might truly believe that he/she can really read other persons' minds. In such a case the identical sentential proposition would be a valid expression of a personal belief. In fact, any sentential thought or statement can be an expression that is either believed or disbelieved by the owner of the thought. Among all the propositions we might think or utter, those we *believe* have a very special status and are most likely to influence our behavior. But if the import of true belief can be attached only to particular propositions, and if the lexical content of the proposition alone cannot determine belief, then how does our brain represent which expressions are *our* beliefs and which are not? I suggest it happens the following way.

In the retinoid model, the self locus (the core self) is synaptically coupled to a neuronal token which is symbolized as **II**. This can provide a biological marker within the cognitive brain to distinguish just those internal propositions which constitute our personal beliefs from all other kinds of reflections or statements (Trehub, 1991, 2007). Thus:

<I believe I can read other people's thoughts>

<I believe I can't read other peoples thoughts>**II**

<Metzinger (2003) thinks there is no such thing as a self>**II**

<I think there is no such thing as a self>

Notice that in each case the status of belief depends on the linkage or non-linkage of the paralinguistic, pre-reflective core self (**II**) to the proposition expressed.

The concepts of a reflective self (Praetorius, 2009) or a phenomenal self-model (Metzinger, 2003) are well founded ideas with which I agree, but these do not preclude the existence of a pre-reflective core self—indeed, they depend on the prior existence of just such an entity. What is a reflective self or a phenomenal self-model but a *characterization* of a self. How could one characterize a self without having a pre-existing/pre-reflective self (a core self) as the subject of characterization? It is evident that an *innate* core self is a necessary precondition for the brain's continuing construction of a reflective self during personal maturation.

The challenge for those who deny the biological existence of an innate core self is to show how belief can be individuated wholly on the basis of linguistic expression, and how the first use of "I" can have any meaning in reference to oneself without a pre-existing referent that constitutes a unitary self.

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