Chapter 3

SO YOU THINK YOU EXIST?

In Defense of Nolipsism

Jenann Ismael and John L. Pollock
University of Arizona

Human beings think of themselves in terms of a privileged non-descriptive designator—a mental “I”. Such thoughts are called “de se” thoughts. The mind/body problem is the problem of deciding what kind of thing I am, and it can be regarded as arising from the fact that we think of ourselves non-descriptively. Why do we think of ourselves in this way? We investigate the functional role of “I” (and also “here” and “now”) in cognition, arguing that the use of such non-descriptive “reflexive” designators is essential for making sophisticated cognition work in a general-purpose cognitive agent. If we were to build a robot capable of similar cognitive tasks as humans, it would have to be equipped with such designators.

Once we understand the functional role of reflexive designators in cognition, we will see that to make cognition work properly, an agent must use a de se designator in specific ways in its reasoning. Rather simple arguments based upon how “I” works in reasoning lead to the conclusion that it cannot designate the body or part of the body. If it designates anything, it must be something non-physical. However, for the purpose of making the reasoning work correctly, it makes no difference whether “I” actually designates anything. If we were to build a robot that more or less duplicated human cognition, we would not have to equip it with anything for “I” to designate, and general physicalist inclinations suggest that there would be nothing for “I” to designate in the robot. In particular, it cannot designate the physical contraption. So the robot would believe “I exist”, but it would be wrong. Why should we think we are any different?

1. THE MIND/BODY PROBLEM

I look around and see the world, and when I do I see it from a certain perspective. I see the world as a spatial system with myself located in it, and I see it from the perspective of where I am. My perceptual system locates objects with respect to me. For example, my visual system represents objects in a polar coordinate system with myself at the origin—the focal point. On the basis of my perceptions I make judgements about the way the world is, and adopt goals for changing it. Most of my goals are egocentric—I want to change my own situation in the world. I am equipped for this purpose with various causal powers. I have the ability to perform actions that have effects on my surroundings. These causal powers are centered on my location in the world. I have a body, and I act on the world by moving various parts of my body.

This simple self-description of myself and my place in the world seems uncontroversial, but it leads to perplexing philosophical problems. Although I am intimately connected with my body, and can only act on the world via my body, I do not think of myself as simply being my body. When I turn my gaze downwards and see my own body, I think of myself as being “up here looking down”. This follows from the way my perceptual system represents the objects I see as being in front of me, with I myself being located at the focal point of my visual field. Anything that I can see is in a different physical location than I am. This includes the parts of my body that I can see, and so they can be neither me nor a part of me. The focal point of my visual field is located inside my head, between my eyes, so I think of myself as being “in here”. This leaves open the possibility that I am some physical system that is a proper part of my body and located inside my head—perhaps my brain, or my pineal gland. But it also seems to leave open the possibility that I am something entirely different from my body that is simply residing there in my head. Thus is born the mind/body problem—what kind of thing am I, and what is my relationship to my body?

Familiar philosophical jargon puts this by saying that I am a “self”, and then asking what kind of thing selves are. Philosophers have traditionally attacked the mind/body problem by observing that they have various kinds of self-knowledge and then spinning out the consequences of that knowledge. It should be noted that this is the approach that generated the problem in the first two paragraphs. Although we will stop short of rejecting this approach, we will call it into question, and we will entertain the radical solution to the mind/body problem that we call “nolipsism”—there are no selves. Literally, we do not exist. It will be argued that there is more to be said for this position than might be supposed, although, of course, if it is true then we cannot say it.