

# SUMMARY

# THE

# EGO TRICK

JULIAN BAGGINI



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# **Summary of “The Ego Trick” by Julian Baggini**

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What Does it Mean to Be You?

Introduc-  
tion  
6

Are Spiritual Awakenings Just a Result of Brain Dysfunctions?  
7

The Existence of the Soul Is Not Logi-  
cal  
9

Multiple Personality Disorders Show Just How Biased Our Experiences  
Can Be  
11

Our Sense of Social Self is Formed By How Society Perceives Us  
13

The Ego is a Trick of the Mind  
14

The Existence of Free Will is Questionable  
16

Technological and Cultural Changes Are Rapidly Changing Our Sense of  
Self  
17

Final Summary  
19





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# Introduction

You've undoubtedly heard the term, "I've changed," before, right? It's usually a figure of speech that people use, and perhaps you've experienced a change in yourself before. Certainly, you aren't the same person you were at just seven-years-old. For instance, take a look at the seven-year-old boy whose ball was taken from his hands by an older schoolmate. Enraged by this, the boy grabbed a block of wood and hurled it at his rival, hitting him in the back of his head. For those few seconds, the boy was not himself, and it was the only act of violence in his life. That same man at forty-years-old doesn't recognize himself as that child, and he asks himself, "Was that boy me?" Similarly, people who suffer from dementia at an older age might not recognize that the person talking to them is the love of their life. As a result, family members and loved ones often mourn the loss of the person they knew long before their clinical death. In other words, our identity is separate from the body we inhabit. Identity is complex, and it is a puzzle that psychologists and philosophers have long tried to put together. So who are you? Are you the same person you were at the age of seven? Will you be the same person you are now at the age of seventy? And lastly, what makes you an individual? In an attempt to answer these questions, author Julian Baggini lays out everything he knows about identity and the self. According to Baggini, "Selves are like paintings: they cannot be brought into focus if you stand too far away or too close. Viewed properly, we will see that selves are real, but they are not what most of us imagine them to be."



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# Are Spiritual Awakenings Just a Result of Brain Dysfunctions?

In 1982, a four-month-pregnant, 27-year-old American woman named Suzanne Segal was waiting for a bus in Paris. At that moment, everything she had ever taken to be her personal self had completely disappeared. Without warning, “it was just gone,” and as she waited for the bus to approach, “something in consciousness was loosening somehow.” For Segal, the body and brain that she thought to be hers no longer belonged to her. Her personal self was gone and she was convinced that she didn’t really exist at all.

For the next ten years, Segal sought to cure herself of this absence of self by seeing a string of therapists. After a while, her attempts to find herself and reconnect to her personal self failed, so she began to view her transformed state in more spiritual terms. Perhaps she was feeling what the Buddha called *anattā*, which means “not-self.” She began to view her lack of self as a gift that many people have spent decades trying to find through practices like meditation. She wrote a book about her journey and became a spiritual leader, teaching others about “the Vastness,” or the belief that she is infinite, that she is “no one and everyone, nothing and everything - just as you are.” But in 1996, Segal began to feel like her old self, the person she was before waiting for the bus in Paris. Suddenly, her spiritual messages were becoming crossed.

Soon, Segal had difficulty holding a pen, remembering names, and even standing up without feeling dizzy. It became clear that she was ill, and on February 27, 1997, she was diagnosed with a massive brain tumor, one that was too large to remove. On April 1, Segal died at the age of forty-two, leaving people to wonder whether her spiritual experiences were the result of an illness. Neuroscience research suggests that many spiritual experiences are the result of brain dysfunction. In Segal’s case, doctors believed her

shift in consciousness began in 1982 as a result of the tumor's pressure on her brain. However, followers of Segal disagreed, believing it was the tumor that caused her to lose her connection with the universe.



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# The Existence of the Soul Is Not Logical

While many seek to answer the question surrounding the “self,” there is one belief surrounding the self that cannot be ignored: the existence of the soul. In many religions, people believe that a human being has, in addition to a physical body, a non-physical part that persists long after the physical body has rotted into the earth. “This soul is the true seat of the self: the body is merely a temporary vessel.” This idea is probably the most common belief around the world, and one of the most persuasive arguments for it comes from Persian philosopher Avicenna.

Avicenna approached the question of the existence of the soul through an experiment called “the floating man.” In this experiment, he asks you to imagine yourself as if you are without a body, and as if you are floating in the air without any feelings or sensations. Imagine as if your limbs are separated from each other and they neither meet nor touch. In this state, would you still believe that you exist? Most people would intuitively think yes, that we would indeed exist in a state of sensationless suspension. After all, our sense of self isn’t physical. But is this a logical conclusion?

While we are inclined to agree with Avicenna - that the sense of self is separate from the body, there are still some things to consider. The floating man exercise simply has us imagining what it would be like to have no awareness of our bodies, but is this the same as imagining a self that is separate from the body? As it turns out, the use of imagination seems to be somewhat unclear here. For example, if you imagine yourself floating above the clouds, then you are imagining yourself located in space and time, so we can then argue that you are assuming some kind of physical presence.

Additionally, our sensations can become wildly misleading. For instance, imagine someone in a psychedelic-drug hallucination, convinced that he is a cockroach. Perhaps the person really does feel and see his body as that of a cockroach, we know that this can never be true. In fact, he is just one

“freaked-out hippy.” In other words, the mere fact that someone can conjure up the feeling of a soul separate from the body doesn’t make it true. Additionally, Descartes’ famous claim, “I think therefore I am,” suggests that human beings are human because of their ability to think; however, it doesn’t mean that human beings are only thinking minds. In fact, humans are much more complex.



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# Multiple Personality Disorders Show Just How Biased Our Experiences Can Be

“Once upon a time, in a castle on a large hill, there lived eleven strange, fractious individuals.” There was the naughty imp, Bobby, who liked to play jokes and go roller-blading; however, Bobby was often locked in a dungeon by Tommy, an angry young man prone to anger and violence. Then there was also Bob, who sat on the castle walls playing his flute. Does this sound like the beginning of a fairytale? Perhaps, but it is also an accurate representation of what happens in the mind of a person with a multiple personality disorder.

In 1990, Robert B. Oxnam was diagnosed with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), more commonly known as multiple personality disorder. Before his diagnosis, Oxnam was a very successful and respected academic dealing with alcoholism, bulimia, and depression. In the last decade, he had begun experiencing memory blanks. One day during an hour-long psychotherapy session, Bob believed the session was just beginning when he realized his session was coming to an end. His therapist, Dr. Jeffrey Smith, revealed that an angry young man named Tommy had been talking to him. Bob had never physically left the room, but it seems as if he had left his body and Tommy had taken over.

Throughout the years, nine more alters emerged, and along with them, an entire mythology surrounding the castle. It soon became clear that each personality was separate from each other, and whenever he switched personalities, he'd blackout and forget everything he had said and done. When he came back into consciousness, the personality would skulk back into the recesses of his unconsciousness, affecting Oxnam in many mysterious ways. For Oxnam, his multiple personality disorder stemmed from early childhood abuse, in which he struggled to make sense of what was happening to him. Of course, Oxnam is not alone in this experience.

Sufferers of childhood trauma, whether it's physical, sexual, or emotional, cope with the abuse by creating a "memory barrier." That is, they create an alternate universe with alters who experience the trauma instead of them. Oxnam's trauma was so intense, he needed to create eleven alters to cope with his experiences. Through therapy, Oxnam was able to address his childhood trauma and reduce his number of alters to just three.



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# Our Sense of Social Self is Formed By How Society Perceives Us

“Sometimes we miss something important simply because we are looking in the wrong direction, or at the wrong end of the telescope.” Perhaps, we have made a similar mistake when looking at the self. You see, when we think of the self, we think of something inside us. But what if the key to identity was not found in our minds, but in the social world? The idea that the self is “socially constructed” is a relatively new concept, but the idea of a “social self” dates back to 1890 when William James discussed “the images other men have framed of me.” It is these images that we internalize and become part of our self-image. In other words, how we are seen by others affects how we see ourselves.

This is why transgender people must be perceived in the way they perceive themselves. In fact, if people are treated differently depending on how they appear, that can change how they perceive themselves. For instance, Dru Marland transitioned from male to female at the age of 43, and like many other transwomen, she experienced something incredibly common. She found that as a woman, she was often disregarded or completely ignored, causing her to lose confidence.

There is another argument for the social construction of the self, based on the claim that notions of the self vary enormously from culture to culture. For example, the philosopher Rom Harré has argued that the different use of pronouns in different cultures reflects the various conceptions of the self. So while the West centers its sense of self on the individual, other cultures do not. The Inuit people, for example, don’t have the equivalents of “I,” “you,” “s/he,” “we,” and “they;” in other words, they have a less individualistic sense of the self. This can also be seen in the way their emotions appear to be much more socially dependent. Once they become part of a community, they quickly take on the emotional state of the community. Similarly, decisions are made as a unit, not as an individual.



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# The Ego is a Trick of the Mind

It was the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume who suggested that the mind “is only a bundle of thoughts, passions, and emotions.” In other words, our minds are an unstable entity separate from our bodies. Does this mean that our identity is simply an illusion? Well, according to Hume, it is. He argued that the ego was simply a trick of the mind, and to prove his theory, he practiced introspection.

To practice introspection, Hume would sit and search for evidence that a self existed independently of his emotions. However, whenever he tried to enter his true “self,” he always found that his sense of self emerged with a sense of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, color or sound. He simply couldn’t experience himself in any way other than when experiencing an emotion or sensation. As a result, Hume concluded that the self does not exist and is just an illusion. This is the heart of the Ego Trick. The trick is to create something that has a sense of unity and singleness from what is a messy, fragmented sequence of experiences and memories.

The idea of the self as an illusion is relatively new to Western philosophy, but the practice of Buddhism has long taught the self as an illusion. As you may remember, the first chapter introduced you to the concept of anattā, or “no-self.” However, many translators now prefer “not-self,” since no-self can easily be implied to mean that there is no self at all. On the other hand, the not-self interpretation implies that the notion of self can, and should, be negated. Buddhist thought took inspiration from the idea of the Brahmanic tradition. That tradition thought of brahman as the impersonal idea of the deity containing the true self. The non-self then is the body, the mind, and the temporary thoughts and experiences that individuals use to construct their identity.

There are many interpretations of the not-self concept in Buddhism; for instance, some believe that Buddha rejected the entire model altogether and declared that there was no brahman at all. Instead, there is only an “open field of impermanent and contingent and very often tragic suffering and painful events.” In other words, pain and suffering are all that exist and the self is formed through your actions, and that is only possible because there is no fixed self. This simply means that the self is not something that we are born with or given; instead, the self is something that we create through the actions we take and the choices we make.



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# The Existence of Free Will is Questionable

The idea of free will suggests that we have control over every decision we make, from what we eat for breakfast in the morning to what career we choose for the rest of our lives. But what if we didn't have control over these decisions at all? For some, the idea of no free will might be both terrifying yet freeing; however, if we can't make choices, then life wouldn't seem worth living, right?

Well, as it turns out, whether or not you believe in the idea of human free will depends on how you view the existence of the soul. If you accept anything like a bundle theory, in which who you are and what you do is simply the result of your brain and body function, and your brain and body are part of the physical world, subject to physical laws, then all of your thoughts and actions would simply be products of natural forces. In other words, you would deny the existence of free will. Many people find this idea outrageous; for instance, if you are in a cafe and order an espresso, you feel that you could've just as easily ordered a cappuccino instead. But is this true? Not according to the theory of determinism.

The theory of determinism states that we behave in certain ways and make decisions based on our life experiences and the circumstances at the time, like how much money we have, how hungry or thirsty we feel, and so on. As a result, it is only inevitable that we will choose the drink that we do. Of course, this doesn't mean that our choice is predictable. In fact, the combination of causal factors is so complicated, it would be near impossible to predict human choice with any accuracy. This unpredictability, however, doesn't mean freedom. After all, chaos theory explains why many complex systems, like the weather, are unpredictable, but that doesn't mean clouds have free will!



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# Technological and Cultural Changes Are Rapidly Changing Our Sense of Self

“It is often said that the primary purpose of fiction set in the future is not to speculate about what possibly will be, but to shine a light on our human nature in the present.” If this were the case, many writers then have imagined worlds in which “human nature” is no longer one thing. Instead, we see societies in which human beings experience a virtual reality, while their real bodies are kept alive in pods in a completely different location, as we have seen in *The Matrix*. Distopias like these, however, are easily imagined because we realize that human nature doesn’t need to be set in stone, and that “technology might change us more in a generation or two than evolution has done over millions of years.” As a result, what we understand about the self will become entirely reconstructed.

Today, the sense of self is entirely different to what it once was. For instance, children now grow up without the uniformity and consistency of experience which used to form them into conventional, strongly singular personalities. In the last twenty years, everything has exploded. Now, you get people who may live in the same community with a stable family, and yet still be subject to a thousand different cultures every time they walk out the door. And as they interact with these cultures and internalize new information, their personalities take on new facets.

Of course, there’s more as well. According to neuroscientist Susan Greenfield, the very nature of human identity can change because of the impact media can have on young, developing minds. Furthermore, humans perceive themselves as individuals, as someone, but also as “nobody.” The sense of nobody comes when we let ourselves go completely; perhaps, this happens when we go out dancing and lose ourselves to the music, or when we binge the latest television series. Being Nobody can be both wonderful and dreadful. Greenfield’s worry, however, is that screen culture will allow us to

be nobody, and as a result, we will lose our sense of identity, both in ourselves and among our peers.



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## Final Summary

The sense of self is a complex thing. Even though we think we know who we are, what we stand for, and what decisions we will make, there is much research to prove that the sense of self is simply an illusion. The ego is a trick of the mind that connects our constant flow of thoughts, emotions, and experiences into a streamless experience that we perceive to be united. As a result, our actions are simply a reaction to our environment, meaning the concept of free will might not exist. So even if you feel as if you are in full control of your thoughts and actions, research suggests that you might not be as in control as you think. So, who do you think you are?



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