Do Children Think of the Self as the Soul?

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Abstract

Bering’s work provides new insight into the child’s concept of the self. For his results indicate that children don’t regard bodily identity as required for identity of self across time. Bering’s methodology for investigating afterlife beliefs might also be exploited to explore the extent to which children think that psychological similarity is required for sameness of self.

Jesse Bering’s delightful research indicates that the belief in an afterlife is quite natural for children. The work also has important, but largely unnoticed, lessons on the child’s concept of the self. The results provide some evidence for, and a methodology for exploring further, the hypothesis that children think of the self as the soul.

One central tenet of the traditional view that the self is the soul is that the self is not the body. Surprisingly, earlier developmental work on the child’s concept of self has suggested that children identify the self primarily with bodily features. For example, when young children are asked “What will not change about yourself when you grow up?”, 7 year olds tended to refer to physical characteristics (e.g., hair color) and only rarely referred to psychological characteristics (Mohr 1978, 428). Indeed, one prominent view has been that young children have only a “physicalistic” conception of the self (e.g. Montemayor & Eisen 1977; Selman 1980). Bering’s results provide the antidote to this view. In Bering’s experiments, children tend to say that Brown Mouse is still hungry and still thinking about Mr. Alligator, despite the fact that Brown Mouse’s body has been destroyed. This provides new evidence that children have a concept of self that is not identified with physical, bodily features. For it’s natural to interpret the children as claiming that Brown Mouse – the same individual – persists after the destruction of his
body. This indicates that children don’t regard bodily identity as required for personal identity. The children seem to think that the same self persists across destruction of the body.

A second central tenet of the soul view is that the self can’t be identified with a set of memories, thoughts, or other psychological states. Thomas Reid expresses the point with characteristic directness: “Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks, and deliberates, and resolves, and acts, and suffers. I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts, and suffers.” (Reid 1785/1969 341). Psychological states change constantly, and so they seem too fickle to be the basis for an enduring self. Rather, soul theorists maintain that the self is the thing that has the capacity for psychological states, regardless of the particular psychological states it happens to have. A soul theorist maintains that it is because the self endures that it’s possible for the psychological states to persevere.

Bering’s experiments do not tell us whether children’s views of the self coincide with this second tenet of the soul view. For the experiments don’t explore whether children would maintain that Brown Mouse can continue to exist even if he loses his distinctive psychological states. However, Bering has given us the most promising methodology to date for exploring this question. We can use his methodology to examine the extent to which children think that psychological similarity is required for personal identity. This might be done with two changes to Bering’s design. First, one would need to ask exclusively about psychological capacities rather than psychological states. In Bering & Bjorklund (2004), some questions are about the specific psychological states that Brown Mouse had before he got eaten. For instance, children are asked of Brown Mouse, “Is he still thirsty?” and “Is he still thinking about Mr. Alligator?” To show that children’s views cohere with the second tenet of the soul view, we would have to ask only about capacities, e.g., “Will Brown Mouse ever think again.” The second change is more challenging – we would need to specify that after Brown Mouse is eaten, there will no longer be anyone who has the particular psychological states that Brown Mouse had. For instance, we might explicitly state that no one will ever remember the things that Brown Mouse did. If children still tend to maintain that Brown Mouse will think and feel again, then this would provide evidence that children’s notion of the self also follows the second tenet of the soul view.

There is yet a third tenet of the traditional soul view – that the soul is an immaterial substance. It’s natural to think of this third tenet as providing a story about the metaphysical ground of the capacity to have psychological states. Bering’s data do not show that this tenet is reflected in the child’s view of the self, nor does he suggest otherwise. I think it unlikely that children naturally have opinions on such rarefied issues in metaphysics. Rather, the idea that there is an immaterial substance underlying our psychological states is most likely an intellectual innovation that has become part of the culture in major religious and philosophical traditions. But if children find it intuitive that the self can survive the death of the body and the radical disruption of psychological states, this would go some distance to explaining why the doctrine that the self is an immaterial substance has achieved such cultural prominence.
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