The Fluidity of the Self: From the Struggle of Forces and Language Games to Neural Networks of Self-Awareness

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Abstract: Self-awareness is a longstanding problem in philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science, particularly with regard to how a single individual can represent the self from first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. This article develops a theoretical framework that distinguishes referential identity, understood as the continuity of the individual to whom self-representation refers, from perspectival fluidity, the capacity to represent and evaluate that individual from different linguistic and psychological standpoints. It argues that shifts among "I," "you," and third-person self-reference need not imply changes in the identity of the subject; rather, they may reflect different modes of self-representation with distinct interpretive and regulatory functions. To develop this account, the article brings Nietzsche's conception of the self as a provisional configuration of interacting forces into dialogue with Wittgenstein's analysis of meaning as embedded in language use and forms of life, and with neuroscientific research on self-referential processing, autobiographical memory, and internally oriented cognition. These perspectives operate at distinct but complementary levels: Nietzsche provides a philosophical account of the plurality and instability of the self, Wittgenstein elucidates the linguistic and social conditions under which self-descriptions acquire meaning, and neuroscience investigates the distributed cognitive and neural processes associated with self-related experience. Findings concerning networks such as the default mode network are treated as empirical evidence about particular cognitive processes, not as proof of the philosophical interpretations advanced here. The proposed framework therefore does not assume a one-to-one correspondence between grammatical person, psychological perspective, and neural activity. Instead, it conceptualizes self-awareness as an ongoing process shaped by interactions among psychological organization, linguistic practices, social contexts, and neural-cognitive mechanisms. This distinction offers a basis for examining how perspectival shifts may relate to self-reflection, self-distancing, rumination, and emotion regulation, while recognizing that these relationships are context-dependent and require further empirical investigation. The framework thus provides a conceptual foundation for future interdisciplinary research on the relationship between linguistic self-reference, perspectival shifting, and the dynamic organization of self-awareness.

Keywords: Self-awareness, Self-reference, Referential identity, Perspectival fluidity, Self-talk, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Neuroscience, Self-distancing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The nature of the self and the conditions of self-awareness remain central problems in the philosophy of mind, psychology, and cognitive science. Self-awareness may be broadly understood as the capacity to experience, represent, and reflect upon oneself. Language provides an important medium for these processes, enabling individuals to describe themselves, evaluate their experiences, and communicate self-related meanings. Yet the capacity to refer to oneself through the first-person pronoun "I" does not, by itself, establish that the self is a unified, stable, and independent entity. A fundamental question therefore concerns how the same individual can represent the self from different perspectives while maintaining a sense of personal continuity (Bermúdez, 2017; Zahavi, 2005).

Although individuals ordinarily refer to themselves in the first person, self-related thought and inner speech can also involve addressing oneself as "you," using one's own name, or describing oneself from a third-person perspective. These variations raise a question about the relationship between linguistic form and psychological perspective. Research on self-distancing suggests that individuals can sometimes reflect on personal experiences from a less immersed perspective, with consequences for how they interpret those experiences and regulate their emotional responses (Ayduk & Kross, 2010). Research on self-talk further examines the varied forms and functions of inner speech in self-regulation and cognition (Brinthaupt & Morin, 2023). Studies of linguistic distancing have also investigated how changes in perspective may affect cognitive appraisals and emotional responses in particular contexts (Nasarudin *et al*., 2023). Such findings do not establish that grammatical changes necessarily produce psychological changes. Rather, they motivate a distinction between the linguistic form through which the self is represented and the psychological standpoint from which an individual interprets or evaluates an experience.

The central question of this article is therefore: How can an individual remain the referent of self-related thought while representing and evaluating the self from

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different perspectives? To address this question, the article distinguishes between *referential identity* and *perspectival fluidity*. Referential identity concerns the relative continuity of the individual to whom a self-representation refers, whereas perspectival fluidity concerns variation in the standpoint from which that individual represents, interprets, or evaluates the self. These dimensions are analytically distinct: a change in linguistic expression or psychological perspective does not necessarily imply a change in personal identity. Nor should first-, second-, and third-person expressions be assumed to correspond directly to distinct states of consciousness. The proposed distinction instead provides a conceptual basis for examining how different forms of self-reference may participate in self-reflection, self-evaluation, and emotion regulation.

Philosophical approaches to the self offer complementary resources for examining this problem. Nietzsche challenges the assumption that the experienced unity of the self requires a simple, indivisible inner subject. His account of the plurality and conflict of drives, affects, and forces invites an interpretation of selfhood as a provisional organization rather than an entirely homogeneous substance. Wittgenstein approaches the problem from a different direction by examining how expressions acquire meaning through language use and forms of life. His discussion of the distinction between the use of “I” as subject and its use as object further complicates the assumption that first-person expressions operate like ordinary names for an independently identified entity (Wittgenstein, 2009, §§ 404–410). Nietzsche's philosophical critique and Wittgenstein's analysis of language are not identical theories of the self; nevertheless, they direct attention to different limitations of the idea that selfhood can be fully explained by appealing to a fixed inner substance or to linguistic reference alone.

Contemporary neuroscience provides another level of analysis by investigating the cognitive and neural processes associated with self-referential thought, autobiographical memory, self-reflection, social cognition, and internally directed cognition. These processes are associated with distributed neural systems rather than a single, localized cerebral center. The default mode network (DMN), for example, has been implicated in several forms of self-related and internally oriented cognition (Menon, 2023). Such associations, however, do not warrant treating the DMN as a unitary neural representation of the self or as a sufficient explanation of self-awareness. Neural findings concerning self-related tasks must also be distinguished from broader philosophical interpretations of what the self is.

Within the present framework, neuroscience therefore contributes empirical knowledge about processes that may support self-representation, but it does not independently establish the philosophical claims considered here. In particular, the possibility that linguistic shifts in self-reference are related to changes in self-reflection or emotional regulation remains a theoretical proposition unless directly supported by evidence examining those relationships. Establishing whether particular forms of self-talk or perspectival shifting are associated with distinct cognitive or neural patterns requires appropriately designed empirical investigations. This distinction between established empirical associations and their theoretical interpretation is essential to an interdisciplinary account that brings philosophical, linguistic, psychological, and neuroscientific perspectives into dialogue.

1.1. The Original Theoretical Contribution: Referential Stability and Perspectival Fluidity

The central theoretical contribution of this article is the distinction between the relative stability of personal identity and the variability of the perspective through which the self is represented, evaluated, and potentially regulated. Research on self-reference, inner speech, and self-distancing addresses related but distinguishable phenomena. The present framework proposes that their conceptual relationship can be clarified by treating the identity of the referent and the standpoint of representation as separate analytical dimensions. An individual may represent the same experience as an immediate participant, address the self as an addressee of guidance or criticism, or describe the self as an object of observation. These positions may differ in their psychological functions even when they refer to the same person.

The significance of this distinction lies not in the assumption that changes among first-, second-, and third-person expressions necessarily produce corresponding changes in consciousness. Rather, it lies in identifying a relationship that can be investigated between linguistic positioning and the organization of self-reflection. Research on self-distancing and linguistic distancing suggests that the perspective adopted during reflection can influence appraisal and emotional responses under certain conditions (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Nasarudin et al., 2023). However, pronoun use, psychological distancing, metacognitive reflection, and emotion regulation are not interchangeable constructs. Their relationships may depend on the nature of the experience, the social and emotional context, and individual differences. The framework therefore treats these relationships as

questions for further theoretical clarification and empirical testing, rather than as established causal effects.

To develop this proposal, the article brings together three complementary but non-equivalent analytical perspectives. Nietzsche's philosophy provides a basis for questioning whether the apparent unity of the self requires an indivisible inner agent. Wittgenstein's account of language use and forms of life draws attention to the linguistic and social conditions under which self-descriptions become meaningful. Neuroscience investigates the distributed cognitive and neural processes associated with self-referential processing, autobiographical memory, and internally directed thought. These perspectives address different explanatory questions: the philosophical organization of selfhood, the conditions under which the self is linguistically articulated, and the cognitive and neural processes associated with self-related experience. Their integration is conceptual rather than reductive; it does not assume that philosophical concepts, linguistic forms, psychological functions, and neural mechanisms are equivalent or map onto one another in a one-to-one fashion.

On this basis, the article proposes a multilevel framework in which self-awareness is understood as an ongoing process of self-representation shaped by interactions among psychological processes, linguistic practices, social contexts, and distributed neural systems. Its principal hypothesis is that changes in representational perspective may influence how self-related experiences are interpreted and regulated without necessarily disrupting the continuity of personal identity. This proposal generates questions for future research: under what conditions might perspectival shifting facilitate adaptive self-reflection, and when might it contribute to repetitive self-criticism or rumination? How might emotional salience, interpersonal context, and individual differences moderate these relationships? The framework does not provide established answers to these empirical questions; rather, it specifies conceptual distinctions that can guide their investigation.

The article proceeds by examining the relationship between self-reference and linguistic representation, considering Nietzsche's critique of the unified self and Wittgenstein's analysis of first-person language, and then discussing relevant findings from neuroscience. It concludes by integrating these perspectives into the proposed framework and considering its implications for cognitive psychology and psychotherapy, while distinguishing the framework's theoretical claims from empirical findings that remain to be established.

2. THE "SELF" IN THE MIRROR OF LANGUAGE: FROM SELF-REFERENCE TO PERSPECTIVAL FLUIDITY

The first-person pronoun "I" is a fundamental linguistic means through which individuals refer to themselves. However, the ability to use "I" should not be equated with self-awareness as a whole. Personal pronouns, particularly "I" and "you," derive their reference partly from the speaker's and addressee's positions within a communicative context. Their use therefore illustrates how self-reference is embedded in linguistic and interpersonal relations. Research on language development suggests that children's acquisition of personal pronouns occurs within broader developments in language and the understanding of mental states and social relationships (Smolík & Chromá, 2023). The emergence of "I" is thus better understood as one aspect of developing capacities for self-reference and self-representation, rather than as sufficient evidence for the emergence of self-awareness itself.

This distinction also matters when considering the relationship between individual development and the evolution of self-awareness. Haeckel's historical recapitulation thesis, according to which ontogeny repeats phylogeny, cannot serve as a reliable basis for reconstructing the evolutionary history of self-awareness from children's linguistic development. Language acquisition during individual development and the historical evolution of language are distinct processes; any proposed relationship between them requires independent evidence. Accordingly, the present article treats the development of personal pronouns as relevant to understanding linguistic self-reference, not as a direct reconstruction of the evolution of human self-awareness.

Nor can self-knowledge be reduced to a single behavioral measure. The mirror self-recognition test provides evidence about a particular capacity for self-recognition, but it does not capture the full range of self-awareness or self-representation (Adolph & Tamis-LeMonda, 2024). Moreover, interpretations of mirror self-recognition in nonhuman animals remain debated, and performance on such tasks should not be treated as equivalent to the complex forms of human self-awareness (Anderson & Gallup, 2015; Lei, 2023). These considerations support a multidimensional approach in which self-recognition, linguistic self-reference, reflective thought, and the representation of personal experience are related but distinguishable capacities.

A particularly important feature of human self-awareness is the capacity to adopt different

perspectives toward one's own experience. Through inner dialogue, individuals can evaluate their actions, address themselves, or reflect on personal events from a degree of psychological distance. Research on inner speech examines how internal language can support thinking, planning, and self-regulation rather than merely reproduce external speech (Fernyhough & Borghi, 2023). Related work on self-talk investigates the forms and functions of self-directed verbal activity, including the ways individuals address themselves during thought and reflection (Brinthaupt & Morin, 2023). These findings make inner language relevant to the study of self-representation, although they do not establish that any particular pronoun or linguistic form necessarily produces a specific psychological effect.

The distinction becomes especially important when considering shifts among first-, second-, and third-person self-reference. An individual may say, "I made a mistake," address the self by asking, "Why did you do that?", or describe the self from a third-person standpoint. These expressions can preserve the same referent while presenting the experience through different linguistic positions. In some circumstances, such shifts may accompany self-distancing: a change from an immersed perspective toward a more distanced standpoint from which an experience can be reconsidered. Evidence from a systematic review and meta-analysis indicates that self-distanced reflection can have different effects from self-immersed reflection, although the nature and magnitude of those effects depend on the conditions under which reflection occurs (Murdoch *et al*., 2023). It is therefore important to distinguish the observable use of a pronoun from the psychological process of distancing. A change in grammatical person may be associated with a change in perspective, but the two are not identical.

The central proposal of this article is that referential identity can remain relatively stable while the perspective of self-representation changes. The individual who describes an action as "I made a mistake" may later address the self as "you" or refer to the self in the third person. In these examples, the person being referred to may remain the same, while the standpoint from which the experience is interpreted or evaluated varies. This shift does not mean that one person literally becomes another. Rather, it illustrates the possibility of taking different cognitive or communicative positions toward the same self.

This capacity is described here as *perspectival fluidity*. The term refers to the possibility of representing and evaluating the self from different standpoints while retaining relative continuity in the identity of the referent. It does not imply that first-, second-, and third-person expressions correspond to discrete states of consciousness, nor that a shift in pronoun use necessarily entails a change in self-awareness. Instead, perspectival fluidity provides a conceptual distinction for examining how linguistic positioning may relate to self-evaluation, self-criticism, reflective distance, and the interpretation of personal experience. These relationships remain sensitive to context and individual differences and require further empirical investigation.

This distinction brings the article's central philosophical problem into focus. If the same individual can be represented from different perspectives, what does this tell us about the unity and transparency of the "I"? Does the continuity of self-reference require a unified and independently existing inner subject, or can the coherence of self-experience be understood in relation to dynamic processes of representation and interpretation? These questions lead to two complementary but distinct philosophical approaches. Nietzsche challenges the idea of the subject as a simple and unified entity by emphasizing the plurality and conflict of internal forces, whereas Wittgenstein examines how the meaning and function of first-person expressions depend on their use within language. Considered alongside neuroscientific research on self-related cognition, these approaches provide the basis for investigating whether perspectival fluidity can be understood as one dimension of the multilayered organization of human self-awareness.

3. NIETZSCHE AND THE DISRUPTION OF THE UNITY OF THE SELF: SELF-AWARENESS AS PLURALITY AND CONFLICT

Friedrich Nietzsche offers a sustained critique of the traditional conception of the self as a unified, stable, and transparent subject. Whereas the Cartesian tradition places the thinking subject at the foundation of knowledge, Nietzsche questions whether thoughts, acts of will, and actions must be attributed to a single, enduring agent. In his account, what is experienced as the self is better approached through the plurality of drives, affects, valuations, and interpretive activities involved in human experience. Contemporary interpretations of Nietzsche similarly emphasize his challenge to the idea of the subject as a simple substance underlying psychological life (Anderson, 2026).

From this perspective, the apparent unity of the self need not indicate the existence of an entirely independent and unchanging center. It may instead reflect a relatively organized configuration of interacting forces and processes. In *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche challenges familiar assumptions about willing, thinking, and acting by directing attention to the plurality of forces involved

in these activities (Nietzsche, 2006, 2007). The unity attributed to the self in everyday experience can therefore be interpreted as a practical and interpretive organization of psychic life rather than as conclusive evidence of a metaphysically simple subject.

Language and grammar are important to this critique. Grammatical constructions can encourage us to infer an agent behind an activity, as though the structure of a sentence necessarily revealed the structure of the process it describes. The statement “I think,” for example, may invite the assumption that an independently identifiable “I” exists as the cause and owner of the thought. Nietzsche challenges this inference by distinguishing the occurrence of thinking from the additional assumption that a self-identical agent must stand behind it (Nietzsche, 2006). His point is not that grammatical subjects have no legitimate function, but that grammatical form alone cannot establish a corresponding metaphysical structure. Language may thus represent psychological activity as more unified and straightforwardly agentive than a closer analysis warrants.

This argument should not be taken to mean that Nietzsche simply denies the existence of the self or reduces it to a linguistic illusion. His alternative is more accurately characterized as a conception of the human being as an organized plurality of drives and forces. On this interpretation, the self can possess functional, practical, and interpretive coherence without being understood as an indivisible substance. Relative organization and internal plurality are therefore compatible: the presence of conflict does not eliminate every form of continuity, just as continuity does not establish complete internal unity.

This distinction is relevant to the present article's central proposal concerning referential identity and perspectival fluidity. If the self is not necessarily a wholly unified psychological agent, it becomes conceptually possible to distinguish the individual to whom self-representation refers from the perspective through which that individual is represented. In inner dialogue, a person may address themselves as “you,” describe themselves in the third person, or speak from a first-person standpoint without thereby becoming a different individual. Such shifts may be interpreted as changes in the representational position from which the self is considered. Nietzsche's account makes this possibility philosophically intelligible, although it does not itself establish that particular pronoun shifts correspond to specific psychological or neural mechanisms.

The distinction is essential because Nietzsche's philosophy is not a scientific theory of the brain, nor does it offer a systematic linguistic account of the first-person pronoun. Its contribution lies instead in challenging the assumption that self-awareness must originate from a completely unified and transparent subject. It allows the self to be approached as a dynamic organization shaped by interacting drives, affects, interpretations, and historical and social conditions. This philosophical perspective complements Wittgenstein's investigation of how expressions concerning the self acquire meaning in use, while remaining distinct from neuroscientific explanations of the processes that support self-representation.

4. WITTGENSTEIN AND SELF-AWARENESS: THE “I” AS A LINGUISTIC PHENOMENON

Ludwig Wittgenstein approaches the problem of the self from a different direction. Whereas Nietzsche questions the unity of the subject by examining the plurality of forces involved in psychological life, Wittgenstein directs attention to the uses of language through which concepts of the self acquire meaning. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he challenges the tendency to generate philosophical problems by treating words as though their meanings were determined by hidden objects or essences independently of their use in human activities (Wittgenstein, 2009).

A central principle of Wittgenstein's later philosophy is that the meaning of a word must be examined in relation to its use within linguistic practices. This principle is particularly relevant to first-person expressions. The pronoun “I” does not perform an identical function in every statement: “I am in pain,” “I made a mistake,” “I decided to leave,” and “I know this person” operate within different linguistic and practical contexts. Their differences caution against assuming that every use of “I” refers to an inner object whose nature remains constant across all these contexts. The grammatical continuity of the pronoun does not, by itself, establish a single metaphysical interpretation of the self.

Wittgenstein's discussion of first-person statements also distinguishes uses in which a speaker identifies themselves as an object from uses in which such identification is not ordinarily at issue. In “I am in pain,” for example, the speaker typically does not identify a person by observing them and determining that the person in question is the speaker. By contrast, “He is in pain” ordinarily involves identifying or otherwise establishing who is being discussed. Wittgenstein's distinction between the use of “I” as subject and its use as object helps clarify why first-person statements

cannot simply be treated as descriptions of an inner object (Wittgenstein, 2009, §§ 404–410).

For the present article, the significance of this analysis is not that Wittgenstein provides a direct theory of shifting perspectives in inner speech. Rather, his work makes it possible to examine how different ways of speaking about oneself function within different contexts. When an individual says "I must reconsider this," addresses themselves as "you," or narrates their behavior using their own name, the linguistic form and practical role of the expression may differ. Such differences do not necessarily imply that the individual has become another person or that each expression corresponds to a separate state of consciousness. They invite investigation into how linguistic position, communicative function, and psychological perspective relate to one another.

The concept of a *language game* further clarifies this point. Statements about feelings, memories, responsibility, decisions, and personal identity acquire their significance within activities governed by shared linguistic practices and criteria. Self-description is therefore not simply the transmission of an already complete inner content into words. The ways in which people describe, interpret, justify, and revise their experiences are embedded in social practices and forms of life (Wittgenstein, 2009). This does not mean that language creates every aspect of experience or that self-awareness can be reduced to verbal activity. Rather, it means that the meanings of many concepts through which people understand themselves cannot be adequately explained without examining their use.

This qualification is important. A Wittgensteinian analysis should not be interpreted as demonstrating that the self is merely a linguistic invention. Nor does it establish that all forms of self-awareness depend on explicit language or inner speech. Its contribution is methodological and conceptual: it shows why claims about the self must attend to the distinctions made in ordinary language and to the practices within which those distinctions operate.

Nietzsche and Wittgenstein thus contribute different but complementary perspectives. Nietzsche questions the assumption that a unified agent must underlie every thought and action; Wittgenstein examines how the uses of language shape the intelligibility of claims about the self. Neither perspective, on its own, establishes a psychological or neural mechanism for perspectival shifting. Together, however, they support a framework in which the relative continuity of the individual can be distinguished from the plurality of ways in which that individual is represented and understood. Neuroscience provides a third, empirically oriented level of inquiry by investigating the cognitive and neural processes associated with self-related experience, memory, and perspective-taking.

5. NEUROSCIENCE AND SELF-AWARENESS: NEURAL PROCESSES SHAPING THE SELF

Cognitive neuroscience provides evidence that self-related processing cannot be adequately explained by reference to a single brain region. Research using neuroimaging, neurological case studies, and investigations of memory and self-representation instead implicates interacting neural systems involved in autobiographical memory, self-evaluation, internally directed cognition, decision-making, and bodily processing (Heatherton, 2011; Feinberg, 2011). These findings support a distributed account of the processes contributing to self-related experience, although they do not establish that every component of self-awareness depends on the same mechanisms.

Regions of the prefrontal and parietal cortices contribute to several functions relevant to self-processing, including evaluation, cognitive control, decision-making, and the integration of information. However, their involvement should not be interpreted as evidence that any one region contains or independently generates the self. The available evidence is more consistent with the participation of multiple interacting systems whose contributions vary with the task and type of self-related processing under investigation (Friedman & Robbins, 2022; Monti *et al*., 2021).

One extensively studied system is the default mode network (DMN), which includes the medial prefrontal cortex and posterior midline regions, alongside other interconnected areas. Research associates this network with several forms of internally oriented cognition, including aspects of autobiographical memory, self-referential processing, mental simulation, and thinking about other people (Menon, 2023). These functions make the DMN relevant to understanding how information about the self is organized and maintained across time. Nevertheless, the network should not be equated with self-awareness itself. Its activity varies across tasks and contexts, and the processes associated with it are neither exclusive to the self nor sufficient to establish a unified account of conscious experience.

Clinical and neurological findings provide a complementary source of evidence. Brain injury and neurodegenerative conditions can affect autobiographical memory, personal knowledge, self-reflection, and aspects of the experience of personal continuity. Such cases help identify the

contributions of particular cognitive and neural processes to different dimensions of self-related experience (Feinberg, 2011; Mograbi *et al*., 2024). However, disruptions in one dimension of self-processing do not necessarily imply the disappearance of the self as a whole. The clinical evidence therefore supports a differentiated account in which distinct capacities can be affected in different ways.

Neuroscientific research also raises questions about the relationship between neural activity, conscious awareness, and agency. Studies of voluntary action have examined whether neural activity associated with a decision can precede a person's reported awareness of deciding. Such findings are relevant to debates about the timing and interpretation of conscious intention, but they do not, by themselves, demonstrate that the self is an illusion or that conscious awareness is merely a retrospective report. The interpretation of these experiments depends on the task, the measures used to estimate the timing of intention, and the theoretical assumptions connecting neural activity with conscious decisions.

For the present framework, the central implication of neuroscience is therefore not the non-existence of the self, but the need to distinguish the experienced unity of selfhood from the multiple processes that contribute to it. A relatively continuous sense of personal identity may depend on interactions among memory, bodily information, cognition, affect, and self-representational processes. This continuity can coexist with changes in attention, emotional state, context, and the perspective from which an individual considers themselves. The neural organization supporting self-related experience is thus relevant to the present distinction between referential identity and perspectival fluidity, without establishing a direct correspondence between either concept and a particular neural network.

A further question is whether changes in linguistic self-reference, such as shifting from “I” to “you” or to third-person self-description, are associated with identifiable changes in self-reflection, emotional regulation, or neural processing. Research on self-distancing and perspective-taking offers a basis for investigating this question, but linguistic shifts should not be assumed to produce the same effects across individuals or situations. A shift in pronoun use may accompany a change in psychological perspective, but the relationship between the two requires independent assessment. Similarly, activity in the DMN or another neural system cannot be taken as a direct indicator of a particular linguistic perspective without evidence establishing that relationship.

The resulting framework operates at three distinguishable levels. At the philosophical level, Nietzsche challenges the assumption that the self must be a simple and unified agent. At the linguistic and social level, Wittgenstein directs attention to the practices through which expressions of selfhood acquire meaning. At the neural and cognitive level, neuroscience investigates the processes that contribute to self-related experience and its relative continuity. These levels can inform one another, but they should not be collapsed into a single explanatory account. In particular, the proposed relationship between perspectival fluidity and processes such as self-reflection, self-distancing, and emotion regulation remains a theoretical proposal that requires empirical testing.

Taken together, these perspectives support a conception of self-awareness as a dynamic yet potentially coherent process rather than as the expression of an entirely fixed and independent center. The individual to whom self-representation refers may remain relatively continuous while the linguistic, psychological, and situational perspectives through which that individual is understood change. This distinction provides the conceptual basis for the article's central proposal: the fluidity of self-representation need not entail the loss of referential identity, and its cognitive and emotional consequences should be examined empirically rather than inferred from philosophical or linguistic considerations alone.

6. INTEGRATING THREE PERSPECTIVES: TOWARD A MULTILAYERED FRAMEWORK OF THE SELF

The preceding analyses of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and neuroscience suggest that self-awareness cannot be adequately explained by assuming a simple, fixed, and entirely transparent subject. Each perspective addresses a different aspect of the problem. Nietzsche challenges the assumption that the self must constitute a unified agent; Wittgenstein examines how expressions of selfhood acquire meaning through language use and forms of life; and neuroscience investigates the cognitive and neural processes associated with self-representation, autobiographical memory, and internally directed cognition. These approaches are complementary in their potential implications, but they operate at different explanatory levels and should not be treated as interchangeable accounts.

The present article integrates these perspectives into a multilayered framework that distinguishes five analytically related dimensions of self-awareness:

psychological organization, linguistic self-representation, social context, neural–cognitive processes, and regulatory outcomes. The framework does not propose five independent modules or a fixed sequence of causal stages. Rather, it identifies dimensions through which self-related experience may be organized, represented, interpreted, and regulated.

The philosophical perspectives discussed above inform the interpretation of this framework without mapping directly onto individual dimensions. Nietzsche's critique of the unified subject draws attention to psychological plurality and internal conflict. Wittgenstein's analysis of language use highlights the linguistic and social practices through which self-descriptions acquire meaning. Neuroscience provides empirical approaches to investigating the cognitive and neural processes associated with self-related experience. The distinction among these contributions matters: a philosophical argument about the plurality of the self is not itself a psychological measurement, a linguistic distinction does not establish a particular neural mechanism, and neural evidence does not independently settle the philosophical status of personal identity.

The five dimensions may interact reciprocally. Consider an emotionally significant interpersonal experience. It may evoke autobiographical memories and activate concerns about responsibility, rejection, or personal worth. Through inner speech, the individual may revisit the event from an immersed first-person perspective or attempt to consider it from a more distanced standpoint. This reinterpretation may influence subsequent appraisal and emotional responses. The resulting evaluation may, in turn, modify the individual's personal narrative and shape how similar experiences are approached in the future. This example illustrates a theoretically plausible pattern of interaction rather than a universal or empirically established causal sequence.

The framework therefore distinguishes referential identity from perspectival fluidity. Referential identity concerns the relative continuity of the individual to whom self-representation refers; perspectival fluidity concerns the capacity to represent or evaluate that individual from different linguistic and psychological standpoints. These concepts describe different aspects of self-related experience. A person may preserve a sense of personal continuity while changing how they interpret their actions, address themselves in inner dialogue, or evaluate an earlier experience. Such changes need not imply that the individual has become a different person, nor do they establish that the same psychological process is operating whenever a particular pronoun is used.

This distinction is especially important when considering first-, second-, and third-person self-reference. Pronoun choice can provide an observable linguistic feature for studying inner speech, but it should not be treated as a transparent measure of psychological perspective. First-person language may occur during both constructive reflection and repetitive rumination; second- or third-person self-reference may accompany distancing, but may also serve other communicative or cognitive functions. The psychology-cal significance of a linguistic shift must therefore be assessed in relation to its context, content, and function.

Research on inner speech and self-distancing provides a basis for investigating these relationships, although the relevant constructs should remain distinct (Fernyhough & Borghi, 2023). The central question is not whether changing pronouns is inherently beneficial, but under what conditions changes in linguistic self-representation accompany changes in perspective-taking, cognitive appraisal, and emotional regulation. The proposed framework identifies these relationships as empirical questions rather than assuming a one-to-one correspondence among

Table 1: A Multilayered Framework of Self-Awareness

Dimension	Core Processes	Role in the Proposed Framework
Psychological	Emotion, motivation, memory, internal conflict, and self-evaluation	Shapes the content and emotional significance of self-related experience
Linguistic	Inner speech, pronoun perspective, and personal narrative	Provides forms through which the self can be represented, addressed, and evaluated
Social	Interpersonal relationships, social norms, and cultural contexts	Shapes the meaning of self-descriptions and the criteria used for self-evaluation
Neural–cognitive	Autobiographical memory, self-referential processing, bodily processing, and distributed neural systems	Supports cognitive processes involved in self-representation and self-reflection
Regulatory outcomes	Cognitive reappraisal, self-distancing, rumination, and emotion regulation	Identifies possible consequences of interactions among the preceding dimensions, subject to contextual and individual differences

grammatical person, psychological perspective, and neural activity.

Accordingly, the central premise of this article can be stated as follows: self-awareness can be understood as an ongoing process through which self-related experience is represented, interpreted, and organized, while retaining a degree of personal continuity across changing perspectives. Language provides means of articulating and evaluating experience; social practices shape the meanings and normative implications of self-descriptions; psychological processes influence how experiences are remembered and interpreted; and neural–cognitive systems support the processes involved in self-representation. These contributions are related, but none alone provides a complete explanation of self-awareness.

6.1. Implications for Cognitive Psychology and Psychotherapy

The proposed framework has implications for cognitive psychology because it separates the linguistic form of self-reference from the psychological function of self-reflection. A shift from first-person to second- or third-person self-reference may sometimes accompany psychological distancing, but the grammatical form alone cannot establish whether reflection is adaptive. Its effects may depend on the emotional context, the content of inner speech, the individual's goals, and whether reflection supports constructive reappraisal or sustains repetitive negative thinking.

This distinction is relevant to research on emotion regulation. Self-distancing may enable some individuals to reconsider an emotionally charged event with less immersion in their immediate reactions. However, distancing should not be equated with emotional suppression, disengagement, or successful reappraisal. Nor should rumination be identified solely by the use of first-person language. A more precise account would examine the interaction among linguistic form, attentional focus, interpretive content, emotional response, and the individual's subsequent behavior.

For psychotherapy, the framework offers a conceptual basis for examining how individuals relate to their thoughts and autobiographical experiences. Therapeutic discussion may explore whether a person's inner dialogue supports flexible perspective-taking and constructive reinterpretation or instead reinforces self-criticism, repetitive negative thinking, and rigid negative self-evaluations. Linguistic distancing could be investigated as one possible component of this work alongside established cognitive and emotion-regulation strategies. The framework does not, however, establish the clinical efficacy of a particular pronoun-based technique, and it should not be interpreted as a replacement for evidence-based treatment.

The distinction between referential identity and perspectival fluidity may also help formulate therapeutic questions without presupposing that a person's self-description reveals a fixed underlying psychological structure. For example, a clinician or researcher might examine whether a person can reconsider a past action from a different standpoint while maintaining a coherent account of their responsibility and personal history. The relevant outcome would not simply be a change in pronoun use, but a demonstrable change in appraisal, emotional response, or subsequent coping. Such applications remain proposals for investigation rather than established clinical conclusions.

6.2. Testable Questions and Directions for Future Research

The framework generates several empirically tractable research questions.

First, experimental studies could compare different instructions for reflecting on emotionally significant events, including immersed and distanced reflection. Outcomes could include emotional intensity, cognitive appraisal, the specificity of autobiographical recall, and subsequent problem-solving. Where pronoun use is manipulated, it should be distinguished from other components of the intervention, such as changes in attentional focus or the adoption of an observer perspective.

Second, experience-sampling studies could investigate how naturally occurring inner speech and self-reference vary across interpersonal situations, emotional states, and daily activities. Such studies could examine whether particular linguistic forms reliably accompany self-distancing or rumination, while allowing for individual differences and contextual variation.

Third, longitudinal and experimental research could examine whether changes in self-representation predict subsequent changes in emotion regulation, or whether emotional and social conditions primarily influence both linguistic choices and regulatory outcomes. Designs that assess alternative explanations would help distinguish correlation from causation.

Fourth, neuroimaging studies could investigate the neural processes associated with different reflective tasks. These studies should test whether immersed

and distanced reflection involve overlapping or distinguishable patterns of activity, rather than assuming in advance that first-, second-, and third-person expressions map onto specific networks or neural states. Neural measures would need to be interpreted in relation to task demands and independently assessed psychological processes.

Finally, research could examine the conditions under which perspectival flexibility supports adaptive reflection and those under which it may contribute to avoidance, self-criticism, or rumination. This would require assessing not only whether a person changes perspective, but also how the new perspective affects the interpretation of the event and the person's subsequent emotional and behavioral responses.

Taken together, these directions provide a route for evaluating the proposed framework without treating its theoretical assumptions as established empirical findings. The model's contribution is to distinguish the continuity of the person being represented from the changing perspectives through which that person is understood, and to specify how psychological, linguistic, social, and neural–cognitive processes may be investigated in relation to that distinction. Its explanatory value will depend on whether future research can identify the contextual conditions and mechanisms through which perspectival shifts are associated with adaptive or maladaptive forms of self-reflection.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has examined the fluidity of the “I” as a conceptual entry point into the study of self-awareness. Human beings can refer to themselves from different linguistic and psychological standpoints, address themselves in inner dialogue, and evaluate their own experiences from perspectives that differ from the standpoint of immediate experience. These shifts raise a central question: how can the self remain relatively continuous while the perspectives through which it is represented and understood change?

The article addresses this question by distinguishing referential identity from perspectival fluidity. Referential identity concerns the relative continuity of the individual to whom self-representation refers, whereas perspectival fluidity concerns the capacity to represent and evaluate that individual from different standpoints. The distinction makes it possible to consider changes in self-representation without assuming that they necessarily indicate a loss of personal identity or a fragmentation of self-awareness. It also avoids the opposite assumption that a relatively continuous sense of self requires every aspect of self-experience to remain fixed.

The dialogue among Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and neuroscience provides a framework for developing this distinction across different explanatory levels. Nietzsche's critique of the unified subject draws attention to the plurality of forces and processes involved in psychological life. Wittgenstein's analysis of language use clarifies how expressions of selfhood acquire meaning within linguistic practices and forms of life. Neuroscience, in turn, investigates the distributed cognitive and neural processes associated with self-representation, autobiographical memory, and internally directed cognition. These perspectives are complementary in the questions they make possible, but they do not establish a direct equivalence between philosophical accounts of the self, grammatical person, psychological perspective, and neural activity.

The central theoretical implication is that the coherence of the self may be understood as an ongoing achievement rather than as evidence of an entirely fixed and independent core. On this account, relative continuity can coexist with changes in emotional state, autobiographical interpretation, social context, and the perspective adopted during self-reflection. The framework therefore shifts attention from the search for a single, invariant center of selfhood toward the processes through which self-related experience is represented, interpreted, and organized over time. This is a conceptual proposal, not a claim that the present article has established a complete causal account of self-awareness.

The distinction also has potential implications for cognitive psychology and psychotherapy. Shifts in self-reference may sometimes accompany self-distancing, reappraisal, or changes in emotional response, but linguistic form alone cannot determine whether reflection is adaptive. The effects of a shift in perspective may depend on its context, the content of inner dialogue, the individual's interpretive goals, and whether reflection supports constructive reconsideration or reinforces rumination and self-criticism. Accordingly, the framework does not establish that pronoun shifts are inherently beneficial, that linguistic instability causes psychopathology, or that a pronoun-based intervention is clinically effective.

Several limitations follow from the theoretical nature of the present analysis. The article does not provide direct empirical evidence that shifts among first-, second-, and third-person self-reference reliably correspond to changes in psychological perspective, emotion regulation, sense of agency, or neural activity. Nor does it establish that such shifts explain disturbances of identity or contribute causally to psychiatric disorders. These possibilities require independent investigation, with linguistic, psychological,

behavioral, and neural measures treated as distinct variables rather than assumed to be interchangeable indicators of the same underlying process.

Future research could test these propositions through experiments comparing immersed and distanced reflection, experience-sampling studies of naturally occurring inner speech, and longitudinal investigations of self-representation across changing emotional and social contexts. Neuroimaging studies could examine the neural processes associated with different reflective tasks, without presupposing a one-to-one mapping between grammatical person and a particular neural network. Such research could help establish when perspectival flexibility supports adaptive self-reflection, when it is unrelated to regulatory outcomes, and when it may accompany maladaptive patterns of thought. The relevant question is not simply whether individuals shift perspectives, but under what conditions such shifts occur and what consequences, if any, follow.

Ultimately, the question “Who am I?” need not be framed exclusively as a search for a hidden and unchanging substance. It can also be approached as an inquiry into how individuals represent, interpret, and maintain a sense of themselves across time and changing circumstances. By distinguishing the relative continuity of the person from the variability of self-representation, the present framework offers a conceptual basis for further dialogue among philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience. Its value will depend on whether this distinction helps generate clearer explanations and empirically testable hypotheses about the dynamic organization of self-awareness.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

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