Other Grounds: Breaking Free of the Correlationist Circle

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Here Comes Two of You

In the movie *Toy Story*, there’s a scene in which Buzz Lightyear sees a commercial about an action-figure astronaut who walks, talks, and looks unaccountably like him, and even bears his name. Having strenuously denied up to this point that he’s a toy, Buzz is suddenly struck mute. It seems impossible, yet there it is. The viewer might be forgiven for identifying with him in his puzzlement, since we are made of stuff, too. How can I be thinking if I am this thing? Am I, in fact, this thing, even though I can’t fathom how it could be so?

My aim in this book will be to reconcile the strangeness of being a thinking object, and therefore somehow different from other objects, with the possibly even stranger idea of being an object on par with other things, and so in some way equal to everything else. The assertion of equality, a cornerstone of object-oriented ontology, is almost trivial to demonstrate in theory. A pear tree exists just as truly as does a typewriter, just as truly as does a civil war or a black hole, and the same can easily be said for a human being without further delay. But in order to render this position practical — to actually do something on an equal footing with other objects — it seems evident that one must begin with the object one is, and this is not so simple.

As with our action-figure hero, we usually don’t think of ourselves as objects. In fact, it’s difficult to maintain this line of thought when presented with the evidence. If we try to separate our thoughts from our own existence, from our own nuts and bolts, we’re essentially trying, as the skeptic David Hume put
it, to catch ourselves without having a perception,¹ and the attempt to make sense of such a pursuit has proven discouraging, even for those who make it their business. My entry into the fray will involve isolating an entity that, strange as it sounds, actually shares my hardware with me, and then capitalizing on the difference between this other entity and me, in order to resolve the vexing circularity of trying to “find oneself.” The core idea of this procedure is not original with me. My contribution, such as it stands, will be to extract its basic structure, so as to be able to apply it to my relations to other objects — those pear trees and typewriters, and then some.

Of course, for some, my insistence on describing humans as objects will be typical of everything that’s wrong with society. To objectify humans is, after all, to make them ends to be gained, and so to encourage various forms of aggressive behavior or materialistic consumption, or to strengthen the complicit link between them. The complaint is understandable, given the hostilities crowding the horizon, but, to be annoyingly correct, it confuses the claims that object-oriented ontology actually makes. If proponents of OOO rarely use the term subject, it’s largely because they’re oriented toward objects, which is not the same thing as denying the existence of subjects. On the contrary, it’s possible to push the argument until all objects do something resembling thinking. For the object-oriented, the assertion of thingness is not reductive of humans so much as it is generous to the inanimate.

So much sounds gracious enough, yet having granted that everything exists, I may still insist on a residue of uniqueness. Am I not special merely by virtue of my ability to entertain these considerations? Certainly. I readily concede the uniqueness of the human position. But I also concede the uniqueness of a waterfall. The question is: What propels us to think of other be-

¹ “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.” David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 194.
ings—waterfalls and all the rest—as extensions of our agenda at the cost of the equal information they provide, and what might be attempted from within our special disposition, whatever it turns out to be, that could open a communication line for receiving that information?

In addressing these questions, I will take the account provided by Levi Bryant in his book, *The Democracy of Objects*, as my point of departure.

On Bryant’s view, which he has christened *onticology*, every being is made up of two parts: its *local manifestation*—how it appears at any given time—and its *virtual proper being*—the withdrawn remainder that is never exhausted by its local manifestations. This will hold for panthers and for paperweights, and it will hold for humans. As a local manifestation, a human might have lots of hair at one age and none at another, be small in youth and tall in middle age, and charming at unreliable intervals. Throughout these changes, there will be some *power* to manifest that never appears—its virtual proper being.2

Most people will easily point to examples of locally manifested humans and, if pressed, will also admit to a certain ineffability in them that could qualify as a virtual being. This virtuality seems to add a wrinkle, though, because we are, to all accounts, *in* it. Normally, object-oriented ontologists establish the withdrawal of objects and promptly move on to implications. My challenge is different, because the best candidate for the human’s virtual being is agency, or thought itself, and after all the strivings of philosophy, agency has turned out to be a fairly cold case. In *Consciousness Explained*, Daniel Dennett poses the difficulty vividly: In order to explain an observation that takes place in the brain, it seems necessary for there to be some kind of interior space, or Cartesian Theater, in which the observation can take place.3 But if this is so, then we surely ought to be able to find it, and no one has succeeded so far. While we can patently affirm

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that thinking takes place (at least sometimes!), the actual location of our mental activity remains elusive.

The question as to whether or not thoughts occupy space is a good one, and I will take it up later in these pages. For the moment, what Bryant’s onticology allows us to hazard is that the human object is simply the human body, because this will immediately mean that there is something in the human body that gives us the same chase that we encounter whenever we try to locate a mind. Far from being troubled by the terrible attendance record for the executive director of our being, we should expect there to be infinite regress. If we look at a being we recognize as a human, we can simply take for granted that there is something about this human that will necessarily evade our every scrutiny.

All objects withdraw. The mind is withdrawn from the human body. Therefore, the mind is the virtual being of the human object. We don’t know for certain that this deduction is true, but the reasoning is sound enough for the sake of argument.

Continuing with Bryant’s onticological line of reasoning, then, I will also maintain that the mind is real. The withdrawn portion of an object is held to be really there. It’s not said to be non-existent simply by virtue of its withdrawal. This doesn’t force me into an extreme position, since I can just as easily assert the reality of gravity as the virtual being of a planet without being able to find anything but its effects. We do not hold gravity to be unreal — at least not on these grounds. Withdrawal is the norm throughout the universe, not the exception.

So thought is what recedes from the human object — problem solved? Not exactly. Onticology, along with most other arguments about the composition of objects, allows us to consider the body as a part of other objects — in Bryant’s terms, its exo-relations. Even if it is subsumed into another object, such as a family or a society, the human object will resist totalization. So much seems eminently plausible. There will always be some aspect of “me” that escapes my family or the society in which I live.
A disturbance appears, however, when we consider the human object’s endo-relations — the objects that the human contains.4

As a matter of consistency, the objects within the body will resist totalization just as the body frustrates totalization by objects without. I won’t know everything there is to know about my heart. This is useful, because for the heart to operate without my intervention eliminates a great deal of micro-managing! Notice too, though, that there are two withdrawals in play, one from the heart and another from the entire body inside which the heart resides, neither of which be referenced as my own awareness. The example is not arbitrary. On his website, Larval Subjects, Bryant addresses the problem of endo-relations by referring to cells as objects within the human object, and one can see what motivates his choice.5 It’s quite amazing to contemplate the comings and goings of cells while the organism endures. The stakes are low in his example, however, because while cells are undoubtedly objects, their very expendability implies that they make no difference to the body. The heart makes a significant difference, because the body cannot continue without it. Of course, where many cells expire at once, they will make an evident difference, but this is also precisely where the body’s existence independent of them is thrown into jeopardy.

The point isn’t overturned by the transience of cells making up the heart. Whatever is crucial to the function that the heart serves — be it an artificial pump or a gene sequence — is tantamount to the part on which the body is dependent. Yet the human body is not entirely manifested as the heart.

Here a doubt arises: Doesn’t this interdependence of local manifestations simply confirm the mortality of their corresponding virtual beings? In one sense, yes — separate the parts and agency disappears. On the other hand, something occurred to make their interdependence endure, yet I’m hard put to identify myself as the cause of this endurance. Descartes makes this

4 Bryant, The Democracy of Objects, 68.
precise point an important link in his ontological argument for the existence of God. "It does not follow that because I existed a little earlier, I must exist now, unless at this moment some cause produces and creates me a new, so to speak, that is to say, conserves me."  

There are many ways to take down Descartes’ ontological argument, yet whatever rebuttal we choose, this part of his case remains formidable. Even if we rule out that the interdependence of heart and body was intended in advance, the persistence of their interdependence as such requires the admission of a virtual being that organizes the parts of the body without my conscious involvement. Grant that the interdependence is contingent and the point still holds. Something favors the interdependence of heart and body over their independence — for as long as it does.

Now we can take the argument home. Once the heart is admitted as a necessary part of the body, it’s trivial to ask whether the brain also entails a withdrawal from the body that is different from thought. If so, there will be two virtual beings that we recognize as overall coordinators of the same local manifestation. That is, if the non-brain parts of the body and the brain itself are interdependent, then there will be a withdrawal from the entire body that “thinks” but cannot be referenced as thought, because this interdependence between the brain and the rest of the body is maintained in a manner at least partly withdrawn from what we normally recognize as thinking. This means that all of the workings of the brain, the spectacular array of synapses and neurons, have a withdrawn dimension that does not reduce to the observation of those workings. Something carries you.

Such a difference — the difference of the double — does seem to follow from the evidence. If nothing else, the reflexes function autonomously from thought, yet they’re highly organized in favor of keeping brain and body together. My case has some backing from philosophical quarters, too. From Bryant’s perspective, this drive to persist, or negentropy, remains withdrawn.

from every object, so I’m within an onticological ambit to believe that it remains withdrawn from the human body, even as it eludes direct appearance to a conscious subject in that body.

In Anglo-American circles, one speaks of “other minds” in a similar way. The tiger may not think the concept of an antelope, but in stalking one, it is clearly focused on a goal, and the situation involves variables that cause the tiger either to pounce or to wait. The argument here is that the decision suggests the presence of a mind of some kind. Of course, the object-oriented ontologist will go further and make the same claim about, say, water, which we might imagine as forming a droplet on the eaves of a roof. Depending on the circumstances, the droplet may or may not drop to the ground, and this difference traces back to a conserving force that, for all the attributes of wateriness that we might inventory, remains withdrawn. For the most part, I’m in agreement with this view. There’s something about H₂O that works to remain H₂O-like, even if from time to time this means turning to steam or ice. What I would like to add to the debate is that the human body has the same kind of conserving agency as other objects do — and another one as well.

Let’s put it forward as a thesis: The human object is minimally composed of two virtual beings that withdraw from the same local manifestation. I mean this in a strong sense. In a gentler mood, one could suppose two virtual beings, each of which governs a different part of the body. I’m claiming that two virtual beings manifest themselves in the same part of a human body — that they are colocated. Technically, colocation requires that our virtual beings are not proper, as on Bryant’s view, but rather improper — that is, without undisputed title to a place — so I’ll be dropping this modifier from here on.

While I may be foolhardy in embracing this thesis, I’m by no means the first to have stumbled upon it. In the Anglo-American tradition, the literature devoted to this peculiar outcome

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is often traced to Locke and falls under the general heading of personal identity. The problem hinges largely on psychological continuity. If I have a memory that stretches back in time, then the persistence of my identity has a psychological basis. Yet I was somehow “me” when I had no memory, and will still be me should I lose all recall. As in the argument I’ve put forth, there seems to be an animal “me” and another “me.” I’m made up of coincident entities, or what some have called too many thinkers.

Note that the reasoning that leads to this excess of thinkers is not inherently dualist. Whatever the variation, dualism asserts a separate and heterogeneous status for mind and body. Here, we’re talking about a single body housing two agents distinct from each other. It would be possible, for example, to make a materialistic case for coincident entities. A scientist could look for two superimposed but distinct patterns of neuron behavior, or weigh in on the interpretations of quantum mechanics in which the role of consciousness figures prominently. The dualist could likewise make a psychological argument for the colocation of distinct virtual forces, as Freudians at least begin to do when they pluralize the self into ego, superego, and id. Moreover, in holding the view, I complicate the matter in my own way by addressing agency as an instance of withdrawal, which makes me what’s called a non-reductionist (the mind cannot be reduced to the body), but also makes me a non-reductionist for objects in general and therefore raises questions about the kinds of objects that are capable of thought.

All this having been said, most participants in the coincidence debate consider dualism to be off the table because it threatens to reintroduce the existence of souls, or because it precludes any connection between mind and body, and bend their talents instead toward resolving the “ontological danglers.”

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8 Locke’s definition, from a chapter that ranges widely over the problem: “in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.” John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1690), ed. Jim Manis (Hazelton, PA: The Electronic Classics Series, Pennsylvania State University-Hazelton), 318 (accessed January 3, 2015).
that coincidence creates. A leading voice in the pro-coincidence camp is Sydney Shoemaker, a neo-Lockean whose argument requires coincident entities not to share all of their physical properties.9 Others hold that the logic of too many thinkers is simply incorrect, and that the problem is ill-posed. Eric T. Olson promulgates this view vigorously under the banner of animalism. I hold a somewhat lonely third position, which not only argues for coincident entities that share physical properties, but actively affirms the too many thinkers problem as a fact of the human condition.

Before things get ugly, let me be clear as to what I’m claiming. I’m not developing a theory of the unconscious, at least not in the sense of a passive repository of my formerly conscious thoughts. Nor, strictly speaking, am I advancing a theory of the subject. On my view, my other thinker is an entity that disrupts the traditional binary opposition of subject–object — a paraject, if you will, or epiject, or any other neologism that conveys the idea of a being alongside myself. My other thinker is not me, yet it has a perspective of its own. To use Thomas Nagel’s memorable phrasing, there is “something that it is like” to be my other thinker, and this “something that it is like” is not what it is like to be me. And yet here we10 are, joined at the metaphysical hip. My defense of this position, which for the sake of simplicity I will describe as colocationism, most certainly does leave ontological danglers and, in my opinion, very well ought to. Since I’ve gone on record as a non-reductionist, I should add that I intend to argue this view without recourse to arguments, Cartesian or otherwise, for the existence of a necessary being or prime mover. But, for reasons that will become clear, I also intend to make my case without opposing such arguments, either.

9 “To avoid the too many minds problem one must, at least if one is a physicalist, deny that coincident entities must share all of the same physical properties.” Sydney Shoemaker, “Persons, Animals and Identity,” Synthese 162.3 (2008): 313–24.

10 The first person plural is destined to wreak havoc on any discussion of coincident entities. Having broken the rule at the outset, I will try my best going forward to reserve the words “we,” “us,” “our,” and “ours” for instances that include I, the writer, and you, the reader.
A great many essays about coincidence begin with a little mad science. The writer asks: If your brain were transplanted to another body, would your personal identity go with the brain, or would it stay with the body in which it began? The scenario provides a common terminology for both camps, pro and con, without handing a knockdown case to either. The assumption throughout, however, is that the existence of the brain is sufficient for a thinker to exist. My position makes a sort of end run around this assumption, because I hold that the other thinker, the animal “you,” is not the brain alone, but rather a force withdrawn from a body that happens to have a brain as one of its parts.

The distinction is not trivial. On my view, once the scrubs are removed and the release forms signed, the animal “you” would resume its role in keeping your parts functioning in concert, but for all that, it would remain inaccessible to you, because it’s performing the same function that was inaccessible to you in your original body. That’s just what a human body with a brain in it does. If your previous intentions and memories went with the brain, you might have an interesting session in front of the mirror when you were able to get up and about, but there would still be too many thinkers. If, on the other hand, your intentions and memories failed to make the transition, the outcome would be unfortunate, but it would simply resemble familiar scenarios in which personal identity ceases to be, and so leave the argument unaffected, because in every case the entities that are coincident are presumed to last only as long as they do.

The colocationist take on the brain-transplant scenario — where coincidence occurs, it obtains across local manifestations — is at least not ridiculous. But I have other objections to contend with that don’t rely on gruesome experiments.

One of these is made on testimonial grounds: If there’s more than one of me, why do I always step forward to speak for both of them? By what right do I ever say “I was born” if my personal identity is founded on memories? Why do I say that I am sitting in the chair if two of us are sharing the seat? And who will
find the technique to bury “me” in the family plot, if I’m just my memories, beliefs, and desires? While there are sincere replies to this challenge, I personally don’t think they need voicing, because people routinely say things that violate clear thinking. When your friend casually says, “it’s cold out today,” she probably doesn’t have the slightest idea what “it” is — because nobody does. Nor should it rank as the defeat of Copernicus if your neighbor remarks at dusk that “the sun is going down.”

As objections go, the test of “how people talk” is weak enough that we might actually be content to drop it altogether — except that one of these statements is not like the others. If I believe in coincident entities and yet find myself saying, “I’m sitting in the chair,” I might be able to dismiss it as just another of language’s many quirks. But after considering the matter further, I would probably not admit to an absurdity, as I would at the oddity of “it” being cold out. In fact, I would probably still say the same thing, because it really doesn’t seem as if anyone else is sitting in the chair. This leads to a second objection, which Olson calls the epistemic problem.

If your body contained two thinkers, Olson reasons, you wouldn’t know which one was which. Since this confusion never occurs, the two thinkers are indiscernible and therefore amount to the same thinker. In the neo-Kantian camp, Christine Korsgaard has mounted a similar defense, arguing that the single outcome of any action is equivalent to the unity of agency. In other words, just as we have a clear impression that only one person is sitting in the chair, it truly appears that only one agent is causing something to happen. Therefore, if we admit that the

12 “[It] is hard to see how you could ever know which thinker you are, the animal or the person (the one with the psychological conditions).” Eric T. Olson, “An Argument for Animalism,” in Personal Identity, ed. R. Martin and J. Barresi (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), http://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.101685!/file/animalism.pdf (accessed November 11, 2014).
epistemic confusion is missing, we ought to concede the existence of only one thinker.

At this point, those manning the trenches of speculative realism will recognize a familiar bugle call: The epistemic argument against coincidence is actually a variant of correlationism. If we were to spell it out in schoolbook form, the argument would run something like this: Logic tells me that another thinking entity exists in my body. I do not experience the thoughts of this other entity (there is no epistemic confusion). Therefore, the logic must be flawed and there is no such entity. As an object-oriented ontologist, however, I feel honor-bound to turn this argument around. Logic tells me that another thinking entity exists in my body. I do not experience the thoughts of this other entity. Therefore, this other entity must have thoughts independent of mine. Since we’ve invoked Kant, we might, alternatively, take the animal “me” as an instance of the thing in itself, which as friends of ooo know, is the very battle cry for speculation to commence.

In seeking to make the case for colocation, then, my job will be to show that the existence of this other entity — my other thinker — makes a difference to the object that I am, without contradicting the basic outlines of experience. In short, I will have to explain how the thoughts of my other thinker coincide with my being without coinciding with my thoughts. This, on the presumption that, if I can learn the slightest bit about my other thinker through our shared manifestation, I might gain a foothold for learning about other objects outside my thoughts as well.

Ironically, another objection gets me part of the way there. On the evergreen subject of pain, Roderick Chisholm presses his case with a horror story of his own. Suppose I’m asked to undergo an excruciating operation under the influence of a drug that induces temporary amnesia, such that I will have no memory of the pain after the fact. Since this operation is cheaper than the alternative, my friends urge me to do it. I’m only myself by convention, they say, so I can easily suppose the person undergoing the operation is someone else. But can I? Wouldn’t it still
be me writhing on the table? Chisholm constructs his scenario as an argument for the continuity of the person, but in so doing he tacitly suggests the existence of a single entity faced with the prospect of an agonizing experience. After all the conditions are tallied up, only one being feels the pain.

My reply here is to draw a distinction between sensation and thought. To feel pain, after all, is not identical to thinking, because it’s possible for me—the “me” who has a memory to lose—to feel pain while thinking something else. Is it even possible only to experience pain? In moments of physical discomfort, I often have thoughts that don’t reference the sensation directly. By the same token, another entity in my body might be able register the pain without thinking the extraneous thoughts that I do. There might, in other words, be a coincidence of thinkers who experience the same pain but respond differently. If so, Chisholm’s example simply brings my other thinker into view by putting my familiar identity on temporary leave.

This “response differential” can be seen without resorting to special cases. Many people will attest to a sudden crisis during which apparently useless thoughts surfaced. At the moment of alarm, you noticed some peculiar detail—a bird on a nearby branch, or a dent in the snow shovel leaning next to the door—oblivious to the fact that you were already beating a hasty retreat until you heard the sound of your heart in your ears. The onset of shock is actually fairly good evidence of separate human agents. At the very moment when the body is mobilized most clearly to a single purpose, thoughts without any evident relation to that purpose persist.

In addition to the surplus of thought beyond pain, there is ample evidence of the attempt to withstand it. Whether or not you will have any memory of an upcoming operation after the fact, the deliberate effort to conquer the agony of it certainly suggests the existence of two wills at work in one body. We don’t

see this kind of conflict in many other kinds of objects, and when we do, the inclination is to accord that object some power of thought separate from instinct.

Needless to say, according to some fairly well-known theories, symbolic thought derived from pain forms the very bedrock of psychological continuity. To be unable to have such thoughts is also certainly not to be this sort of thinker. Still, this only secures one side of the issue. If there is a negentropic force distinct from my thoughts that strives to hold my brain and body together, can I really know that it thinks, as opposed to doing something else that is not really thinking?

Does the tiger think? Does my body, when it conserves itself, think? The difficulty is that, by my own definition, the thinker withdraws, making it hard to deduce anything about the internal experience of agents from the identification of distinct behaviors, even if we can establish a quantity greater than one. It’s possible to maintain, for example, that what I take to be another mind in my body is simply the body itself. Indeed, science can present empirical evidence of two distinct domains of memory in the body, and so seems able to demonstrate multiple agents without resorting to metaphysics at all. This presents a worry from another quarter altogether. After all, if neuroscience supports a physical explanation of coincidence, why bother with the trappings of virtual beings and local manifestations? Why not dispense with whole notion of unseen minds, no matter how many there are in a body, and go straight for the “ism” in materialism, with Ockham’s razor in hand?

On my view, two reasons tilt the case in favor of a non-reductive colocation rather than a reductive one.

First, when scientists take the possibility of colocation seriously, they tend to track the passage from conscious thought to unconscious habit, and to ignore the traffic in the other direction. The so-called unconscious memory takes on the menial tasks I’m too busy to trifle myself with, freeing me up to think the More Important Thoughts. Not only does this attitude set up an expectation of servitude from objects in general, it shuts out whatever this other entity might be able to teach the “me”
I know as me. And a receptive attitude toward other entities, aside from being the ground zero of the OOO view, seems intuitively like a good idea.

Second, when science does consider physical causes for consciousness, it doesn’t really know what to do with the first-person perspective, with the “me” I know as me. If a study implicates some part of the brain — say, the amygdala — in emotional response, the methodology of the test might be impeccable, and the proof compelling, and still do nothing to explain my experience of an emotional response. A functionalist could go a little further and establish a correspondence between my amygdala and a mental state, but this only serves to highlight the existence of a mental state that’s not my amygdala itself. Again, Nagel puts the point well:

If physicalism is to be defended, the phenomenological features must themselves be given a physical account. But when we examine their subjective character it seems that such a result is impossible. The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective, physical theory will abandon that point of view.15

Of course, the biases of empirical scientists don’t automatically make my own case airtight. On the contrary, my commitment to the existence of virtual beings entails that one of them never shares my perspective, and there’s still something ad hoc about this proposal. It may be that there is another object in my body with its own perspective, but just saying so doesn’t advance our knowledge very much. Someone could argue that my reflexes are emergent from my parts (say, an aggregation of genes) and constitute an assemblage of adaptive advantages rather than a mind. I could then argue the opposite — we can’t say for sure that this same behavior does not constitute a mind — and we

would come to a draw. (Nor should we be surprised at such an outcome, given that we’re talking about two different objects— one just a brain, the other a body with a brain.)

Then again, maybe the problem is that we don’t still have a good grasp on what we mean by thinking. Another assumption shared by most parties to the debate is that thinking comes in only one variety. If the animal “you” has the same body as you, then it has the same equipment for thinking, so it should have all of the same capacities as you do. So goes the reasoning. But why? An estuary is a body of water in which both tides and currents are present. Both tide and current have the same equipment at their disposal, but we don’t for a minute assume they have the same characteristics. Nor, for that matter, do they interfere with each other spatially. So why should it follow that my other thinker is just a straight-up replica of my mental states, if it causes so much trouble to believe it and I can imagine an alternative?

What, for example, if my other thinker were unable to give a report? A certain muteness does seem to be an attribute in every scenario in which the problem is posed. The survival of the body past the personal identity actually defines this difference as the loss of reportability, as does the operation in which amnesia is induced. One could argue that the epistemic objection stems from the same silence: No one appears to be announcing itself, so no one is there. But what if someone actually is there?

If there were thought without language, what would that mean? We can feel justified in saying that the agency that conserves my body, whatever it may be, is involved with thought, since its effects coincide with actions that I can call my own, or, perhaps more to the point, actions for which I can be held accountable. On the other hand, if this agent can give no report, then any thinking it does will clearly be of a different order than the kind of thinking that I, the articulating I, can produce. Is there a framework that captures both the sameness and otherness of thought that this apparent colocation suggests?

I would like to propose that a mathematical description of our virtual beings, improper as they are, can provide such a
framework where natural languages cannot. The intuition here is that questions about the existence of the mental states closely resemble questions about the existence of mathematical objects. When I think of an equilateral triangle, how big is it? If the physical universe were to end, would numbers still exist? Such questions are not easily answered, and no wonder, since they recapitulate the epic standoff between idealists and realists. Circles and prime numbers really do seem to exist, yet, like our minds, they’re almost comically difficult to find. In pursuing the intuition of mental activity as mathematical, then, my first aim will be, not to resolve the existence debate so much as suspend it, in hopes of establishing a commonality inside which the various beings of our nature can be described.