

J. T. Ismael

The Situated Self.

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Ismael offers a naturalistic account of mind and self, emphasizing the construction of internal reflexive models that represent the external world and one's place in it. Building upon the work of John Perry, Fred Dretske, Daniel Dennett, and others, Ismael presents a plausible and nuanced perspective on our embodied existence as conscious thinking beings, while also dispelling some deep-seated misconceptions concerning the nature of mental representations, phenomenal concepts, the self's unified persistence across time, and other thorny topics in the philosophy of mind. Though occasionally repetitive, Ismael's writing exhibits masterly use of examples and analogies to illustrate her claims, thereby putting some descriptive meat on the bones of her arguments. The philosophical depth, subtlety, and thoroughness of her work is commendable and worth the time of readers interested in the difficult conceptual issues surrounding naturalistic approaches to mind and self.

The Situated Self consists of three interrelated sections. The first begins by addressing problems in the traditional representationalism stemming from Frege, criticizing its over-intellectualized conceptions of thought and its neglect of the importance of context in understanding the nature of mental states. This critique clears a path for Ismael's core ideas concerning self-representation and the coordination of dynamic internal representations with the external environment. Ismael argues that our minds' representational abilities are grounded in the construction of internal models that indicate our situated position within the surrounding environment, similar to the case of a 'you are here' map—Ismael's key analogy, as depicted on the book's cover—that uses a dot to indicate its location within itself, such as the self-referencing maps found at fixed locations throughout shopping malls. This conception of the nature of thought embeds abstract intentionality within the concrete architectural requirements of embodied cognition, emphasizing the coordination of mental structures with an organism's navigation of its environment through a changing flux of sensory data. Ismael draws upon a variety of philosophical developments to support this perspective, but does not spend a lot of time on background history. Readers unfamiliar with twentieth century analytic philosophy may find her coverage of much-debated territory (Frege, Burge, Putnam, Lewis, and other thinkers on the nature of thought) a bit tough to follow, especially in the foundational chapters of the first section. This should not deter interested but uninitiated readers, however. Ismael offers a variety of interesting insights that ought to come through without a thorough understanding of the background ideas from which they emerge.

The book's second section is aimed at uprooting some major misconceptions that underlie dualistic intuitions. Ismael has three targets here: Frank Jackson's knowledge argument, the problem of inverted spectra, and John McTaggart's argument against the reality of time. In Ismael's analysis, all three exhibit problematic conceptualizations of mental phenomena that can be resolved through the situated approach she advocates. With Jackson's famous Mary thought experiment, for example, the problem lies in mistaking a simple lack of conceptual coordination with the presumed incompleteness of physical accounts of the mental. Under Ismael's interpretation, Mary is akin to a lost person with a map; she has all the knowledge she needs, but she cannot use it because she has not yet coordinated the knowledge with her experience, just as a lost person cannot use a map until she locates her position within it. Similar critiques of other dualistic ideas round out the second section of the book, providing a strong basis for naturalizing some of the seemingly mysterious aspects of the conscious mind.

In the third and final section, Ismael fleshes out her conception of the self, defending the idea that 'a self is nothing more than a sealed pocket of world-representing structure, communicating with its environment through controlled channels' (182). There is a lot of interesting material offered here, from clarifications concerning the existence of selves over time, to a nuanced discussion of the roles of narrative self-portraits in thought and action. Regarding the latter topic, Ismael picks up Dennett's well-known conception of the self as a narrative fiction, simultaneously highlighting the genuine understanding Dennett has provided while also clarifying where he goes awry in failing to credit the 'Joycean Machine' with its substantial efficacy in conscious deliberation.

Overall, Ismael's work presents a sophisticated and convincing case for a naturalistic understanding of the self, providing a set of inter-connected insights that further our understanding of ourselves as embodied beings in a complex and changing world. However, there are a few notable shortcomings that I will mention briefly in closing. In her introduction and a few other isolated places, Ismael points toward important social components of mind and self, stating that 'it is of fundamental importance in understanding our own minds that most of our information now comes to us through socially and linguistically mediated channels' (5). I was disappointed to find that Ismael fails to sufficiently develop this territory, as this could have been among the more unique contributions she could have made to the philosophy of mind. Ismael could have also more fully motivated the need for internal models in accounting for the nature of the human mind. Within the embodied approach to cognition, there are several noteworthy thinkers who off-load internal representation onto the information available in the external environment, e.g. Rodney Brooks, J. J. Gibson, Alva Noë, and others. Ismael briefly mentions some of this work in places, but it would have strengthened her account to confront it head on, providing more detail concerning the inability of externally-available content alone to explain the higher-level processes of the human mind.

Another disappointment is Ismael's failure to integrate the work of a key compatriot in her cause: Douglas Hofstadter. Hofstadter has been working on some remarkably similar ideas for over thirty years now, from his celebrated classic *Gödel, Escher, Bach* to his recent *I Am a Strange Loop*. Ismael discusses several themes that are central to Hofstadter's work: Gödel numbers, Escher's paradoxically self-referential artwork, and the core concept of a self-representational loop, all without a single reference to Hofstadter. Some analysis of Hofstadter's work, in the same vein as the subtle and nuanced treatments that Ismael offers of other key thinkers, would have been an appropriate, interesting, and potentially advancing component of the book. This is far from a fatal flaw, however. Ismael's book is quite successful overall, as a well argued account of some key insights into the nature of mind and self.

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