Some recent work in experimental philosophy and in social psychology addresses central issues in cognition and culture. Case in point: an article by Nina Strohminger, George Newman, and Joshua Knobe entitled "The True Self: A psychological concept distinct from the self" (forthcoming in Perspectives on Psychological Science *and available [here](#).) We thought discussing both the substance of this article and the place of this kind of work in research on cognition and culture would be worth a "journal club" webinar at CognitionAndCulture.net. Here below is the précis of the article prepared by the authors. In the coming days we will publish seven commentaries by Simon Cullen, Ophelia Deroy, Victoria Fomina, Larry Hirschfeld, Gloria Origgi, Brent Strickland, and Radu Umbres, and the reply of the authors. The discussion of the précis and of the commentaries is open to all. (The picture illustrating this webinar is that of James Stewart, Donna Reed, and the young Karolyn Grimes in Frank Capra's film* It's a Wonderful Life*) (The ICCI team)*

Précis of "The True Self," By Nina Strohminger, George Newman, and Joshua Knobe.

In self research, a boundary is typically drawn around the 'self' and everything else (other people, the environment). But emerging research shows that a further distinction can be made. Among those characteristics that are part of the self, a subset are seen as belonging to the *true self*. The contents of the true self are believed to make a person who they really are, deep down.
People's understanding of the true self differs from their understanding of the self, in several key respects:

THE SELF	THE TRUE SELF
Encompasses entire range of personal features	Emphasizes moral features
Valence-independent; can be positive or negative	Valence-dependent; positive by default
Perspective (first- or third-person) dependent	Perspective-independent
Cross-culturally variable	Cross-culturally stable

While the self is comprised of a long list of mental and physical features, the true self is primarily moral. Moral features contribute to perceived identity more than any other personal feature [1,2]. Moral traits are also considered to be the most deeply rooted, causally central aspect of a person's identity [3]. This pattern is quite robust. It shows up regardless of the context (changes brought on the aging process, medical interventions, supernatural events), and regardless of the type of moral feature (disposition, behavior, or belief); [4,5]).

The true self is not merely moral, but morally good. When asked which part of the self is responsible for a person becoming bad (e.g. a deadbeat dad), subjects attribute this change to the surface self, but becoming a better person (e.g. a loving father) is attributed to the true self [6]. This effect is contingent on the values of the person rendering the judgment: liberals think homosexual urges are part of the true self, but conservatives think it is not. Though we are perfectly willing to conceive of people as bad, we are unwilling to see them as bad deep down.

One of the more fervent research programs of social psychology has focused on actor-observer asymmetries. Yet the true self appears to be perspective invariant. People judge that their own true selves are morally good, but they also judge that other people's true selves are morally good.

A long tradition of research uncovers dramatic differences in conceptions of the self across cultures. Nonetheless, preliminary investigations find that the true self is seen as morally good across a variety of cultures. This finding shows up even amongst the notoriously misanthropic Russians and

Tibetan Buddhists, who expressly disavow the existence of the self [7,8].

One possible explanation for these findings is that true self attributions arise as a result of more domain-general cognitive processes. In support of this view, recent work finds that a wide range of non-human entities are also seen as essentially good [9,10]. Recent studies show that beliefs about the true self are characterized by telltale features of essentialist reasoning, such as immutability, informativeness, and inherence [11]. The features attributed to the true self might therefore be due to the influence of psychological essentialism.

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