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Research Paper

A Reward-Recognition Model of the Self: The Development and Maintenance of 'I'

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ABSTRACT

The nature of the self—the enduring sense of "I"—remains one of the central challenges in both psychology and philosophy. Existing accounts, from neural mechanisms to narrative identity, often describe aspects of consciousness but do not fully explain how the self is experienced as continuous and reflexive. This paper introduces the **Reward-Recognition Model of the Self**, which argues that selfhood arises from recursive recognition processes reinforced by reward mechanisms. Recognition provides the structural act of binding perception to memory and identity, while reward sustains and stabilizes this act over time. To illustrate this dynamic, the **Cabinet Model of Mind** is proposed, describing how perception is continuously compared with stored representations, producing awareness of both the object and the perceiver. Together, these models explain how the "I" develops, maintains itself, and adapts to changing contexts. The framework aims to bridge psychology and philosophy by offering a unified account of the self as a process that is at once cognitive, motivational, and experiential.

Keywords: *Self, Recognition Reward, Reflexivity, Identity, Cabinet Model of Mind, Consciousness, Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, Motivation, Awareness*

The problem of the self

The question of the "self" has occupied thinkers for centuries, yet remains unresolved. Philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience each grapple with the elusive quality of the "I." William James famously distinguished between the "I" [the knower] and the "Me" [the known] [1], a distinction that continues to frame debates today. Despite progress, the self resists simple categorization: is it an emergent phenomenon, a narrative construct, or a fundamental structure of consciousness [2,3]?

Why understanding "I" matters

Understanding the self is not an abstract puzzle but a practical necessity. In clinical psychology, disorders such as schizophrenia, depersonalization, and borderline personality disorder all reveal how fragile the sense of "I" can be [4,5]. In technology, artificial intelligence increasingly models aspects of self-recognition, raising questions about whether machines could ever possess or simulate an "I" [6]. In philosophy, the notion of first-person experience lies at the heart of debates on consciousness and identity [7]. Across these

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domains, the stakes are clear: without a deeper grasp of selfhood, our approaches to mental health, human–machine interaction, and metaphysical inquiry remain incomplete.

Gaps in psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience

Despite rich traditions, each discipline encounters limits. Neuroscience often reduces selfhood to correlates of brain activity, offering valuable but partial insights [8]. Philosophy engages with subjectivity, yet frequently struggles to integrate empirical findings [9]. Psychology maps self-concept and identity but sometimes lacks a unifying theoretical anchor [10]. The result is fragmentation: models that illuminate one dimension of the self often fail to capture its wholeness. Recent proposals—such as predictive processing frameworks and global workspace theory—attempt integration, but the irreducible "I" remains elusive [11,12].

Aim of the paper: Reward–Recognition and the Cabinet Model

This paper introduces a new framework—the **Reward–Recognition model of the Self** and the accompanying **Cabinet Model of Identity**—designed to address this fragmentation. The Reward–Recognition model posits that selfhood arises from the interplay between **reward mechanisms** [how experience is valued and reinforced] and **recognition mechanisms** [how continuity and coherence are established across time]. The Cabinet Model further conceptualizes the self as a dynamic storage and retrieval system, where multiple "selves" [roles, memories, states] are organized within a coherent cabinet-like structure that is continually updated. Together, these models provide a language for unifying biological, psychological, and phenomenological aspects of the "I," aiming to move the discourse beyond reductionism and fragmentation.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Self in Philosophy: Subjectivity and Identity

Philosophical inquiry into the self has historically revolved around the tension between *subjective experience* and *objective definition*. Descartes famously proposed the cogito — "I think, therefore I am" — grounding the self in conscious thought [13]. Later phenomenologists such as Husserl emphasized the *first-personal givenness* of experience, arguing that subjectivity is irreducible and cannot be fully captured by third-person descriptions [14]. Heidegger extended this further, situating the self within a broader existential framework of "being-in-the-world," where identity is inseparable from relational context [15].

Contemporary philosophy continues to grapple with whether the self is a metaphysical entity, a narrative construct, or an illusion. Parfit, for instance, reduced personal identity to psychological continuity rather than an essential substance [16]. Meanwhile, narrative identity theorists argue that the self is constituted through stories we tell about ourselves across time [17]. This philosophical discourse highlights both the richness and ambiguity of defining the "I," a problem that psychology and neuroscience have attempted to address with empirical methods.

{Footnote: For clarity of the model, in simpler terms, the self can be imagined like a cabinet with different drawers. Each drawer holds a side of who we are — one for being a parent, one for being a worker, one for being a friend, and so on. Depending on the situation, we "open" the relevant drawer and act from that side of ourselves. The theory behind this metaphor is that our mind is organized into different identity patterns, and whichever one gets activated depends on context and attention.}

The Self in Psychology: Cognitive, Developmental, and Social Views

In psychology, the self has been explored across multiple domains. Cognitive psychology has often treated the self as a schema — an organized structure of knowledge about one's traits, roles, and preferences [18]. Developmental psychology traces the self from early childhood, where recognition in the mirror test [around 18 months] is seen as a landmark in self-awareness [19]. Social psychology adds another dimension, emphasizing that the self emerges through interaction, social comparison, and recognition from others [20].

James's classic distinction between the "I" [the subjective knower] and the "Me" [the objective self as known] remains influential [21]. More recent theories, such as self-determination theory, stress the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in self-maintenance [22]. Yet, these psychological accounts sometimes treat the self as fragmented — cognitive, social, or developmental — without offering a unified model of how recognition and reward mechanisms link across these domains.

The Self in Neuroscience: Brain States and Reductionism

Neuroscience approaches often reduce the self to neural correlates, seeking brain regions or networks responsible for self-related processing. Research has implicated the default mode network [DMN] in self-referential thought, autobiographical memory, and mind-wandering [23]. Studies of minimal selfhood point to the integration of bodily signals in the insula and temporoparietal junction [24].

While these findings are valuable, critics argue that a purely neural approach risks collapsing the self into brain activity, ignoring subjective, narrative, and relational dimensions [25]. For instance, while activity in the medial prefrontal cortex may correlate with self-evaluation, it does not explain *why* these evaluations matter to the individual or how they sustain continuity of "I." This reductionist tendency leaves open the challenge of connecting first-person experience with third-person neural data [26].

Unresolved Tensions Across Disciplines

Despite advances in each field, major tensions remain unresolved. Philosophy underscores the irreducibility of subjectivity but struggles to integrate empirical findings. Psychology provides rich accounts of self-construction but often compartmentalizes cognitive, social, and developmental views without a unifying mechanism. Neuroscience offers precision but tends toward reductionism, failing to account for lived experience.

Thus, the self remains a contested concept, oscillating between being treated as an illusion, a narrative, a set of neural processes, or a social construction [27]. This tension underscores the need for integrative models that bridge phenomenological depth, psychological structure, and neuroscientific grounding. The Reward–Recognition Model, supplemented by the Cabinet Model, aims to provide such a framework by explaining how the self is both dynamically *constructed* and *maintained* through mechanisms of recognition, reward, and organization.

THE REWARD–RECOGNITION FRAMEWORK

Recognition as a Core Human Need

Recognition constitutes one of the most fundamental dimensions of human experience. Developmental psychology demonstrates that infants rely on caregiver recognition—expressed through gaze, vocal affirmation, and responsive attunement—to establish the earliest forms of self-awareness [28]. Without recognition, the infant's proto-self remains

fragmented, lacking an anchoring point in intersubjective reality [29]. This aligns with Honneth's social theory of recognition, which situates the struggle for recognition at the heart of personal identity and social participation [30]. In attachment theory, recognition is operationalized as "mirroring," wherein the caregiver reflects back the child's affective states, thereby scaffolding the transition from raw sensation to stable self-representation [31].

Philosophically, recognition secures the intersubjective dimension of the "I," preventing it from collapsing into solipsism. As Ricoeur suggested, the self becomes intelligible through the act of being recognized by another [32]. Empirical research confirms this: social exclusion or neglect of recognition triggers neural pain circuits similar to those activated by physical injury [33], underscoring its necessity not as a luxury but as a baseline psychological need.

Thus, recognition is not peripheral to selfhood; it is constitutive. Without recognition, there is no "I" in any stable, socially meaningful sense.

Reward Dynamics and Reinforcement of "I"

While recognition provides the external scaffolding, reward mechanisms supply the internal reinforcement that sustains the sense of self. Decades of research in neuroscience link self-relevant processing with activation in reward-related networks, including the ventromedial prefrontal cortex and striatal dopaminergic pathways [34]. These systems register not only material rewards but also symbolic affirmations [e.g., praise, social approval], which are coded as intrinsically rewarding experiences [35].

From a psychological perspective, self-esteem can be conceptualized as a cumulative reward ledger—a dynamic tally of recognition received over time [36]. This explains why consistent recognition [e.g., in supportive environments] produces resilient selfhood, whereas erratic or absent recognition destabilizes identity and heightens vulnerability to psychopathology [37].

Moreover, reinforcement learning models clarify how the self "updates" in response to reward prediction errors: when anticipated recognition fails, the system adjusts, either recalibrating expectations or intensifying strategies for seeking validation [38]. Here, the self is not a static construct but a continuously updated outcome of reward-contingent feedback loops.

How Recognition and Reward Interact to Stabilize Selfhood

Recognition and reward function synergistically to maintain the self as an enduring phenomenon. Recognition supplies the necessary **external validation**, while reward mechanisms provide the **internal reinforcement** that consolidates recognition into a felt experience of "I." When recognition is absent, the reward system starves; when reward pathways are dysfunctional, recognition lacks subjective depth. Only in their interaction does selfhood achieve stability.

Empirical evidence supports this dual-process view. Studies show that self-related rewards [such as being praised for personal achievements] activate stronger dopaminergic responses than non-self-related rewards [39]. Conversely, recognition devoid of rewarding significance [e.g., perfunctory acknowledgment] fails to sustain identity structures over time [40]. This

suggests that recognition alone is insufficient—it must be *rewarding* to become psychologically efficacious.

In turn, this framework sheds light on pathological cases. In narcissistic disorders, excessive reliance on recognition without genuine reward integration leads to fragile, externally dependent selves [41]. In depressive states, deficits in reward processing diminish the impact of recognition, producing feelings of worthlessness despite social validation [42]. Thus, the balance between recognition and reward emerges as a regulatory principle for the development and maintenance of the "I."

In sum, the **Reward–Recognition Framework** posits that the self is neither purely socially constructed [recognition alone] nor purely biologically sustained [reward alone], but emerges through their constant interaction. This dual scaffolding offers a dynamic account of how the "I" persists against fragmentation, while also providing explanatory leverage for psychological disorders where this balance is disrupted.

THE CABINET MODEL OF THE SELF

The **Cabinet Model of the Self** is introduced here as a novel theoretical framework for understanding how identity is structured, maintained, and dynamically reorganized. Building on the Reward–Recognition model, the cabinet metaphor conceptualizes the self not as a static entity, but as an organized yet permeable system of compartments, each representing aspects of identity, memory, values, and roles. The model explains both the stability and fluidity of the "I," offering a unifying account that bridges phenomenological, psychological, and neurocognitive perspectives.

Structure of the cabinet: compartments of identity

The cabinet is imagined as containing compartments or drawers, each holding a cluster of identity-related elements such as roles [e.g., parent, professional, friend], values [e.g., honesty, ambition], and narrative memories [e.g., past achievements, traumas]. These files are not static records but *living documents*: they are updated each time recognition or reward feedback is processed, strengthening some elements while diminishing others. Shifts from one drawer to another occur dynamically, triggered by contextual cues (e.g., workplace setting vs. family environment), emotional salience (e.g., anger, pride, shame), or social recognition (e.g., receiving praise or criticism). Transitions are facilitated by attentional control and motivational salience, such that the "active drawer" dominates current self-experience, while others remain latent but accessible. In this sense, the Cabinet Model provides a structured but flexible architecture: files are cross-referenced (values may appear in multiple drawers), and the ease of transition depends on prior reinforcement history. Over time, habitual pathways form between certain compartments, explaining personality consistency, while crises or novel experiences can reorganize the filing system entirely.
These compartments are not rigidly separated; rather, they are semi-permeable, allowing information and affective valence to pass between them [43,44].

Psychological research on **self-complexity** parallels this view, where individuals maintain multiple self-aspects that can buffer against stress or amplify conflict depending on how they are integrated [45]. Similarly, cognitive neuroscience suggests that **distributed neural networks** support different facets of self-representation [e.g., autobiographical memory, bodily awareness, and social role], which must be coordinated for coherent selfhood [46]. The cabinet model synthesizes these strands by proposing that the "I" resides not in a single compartment, but in the **relational architecture** of the entire cabinet.

Flow between compartments: integration vs. fragmentation

The vitality of the cabinet depends on the **flow between compartments**. A well-functioning self is characterized by smooth integration, where recognition [from others and the self] and reward [emotional validation, dopamine-driven reinforcement] enable connections between compartments [47]. For example, professional success may reinforce personal self-worth, which in turn enhances social identity.

Conversely, when flow is disrupted, **fragmentation** occurs. Traumatic experiences may create sealed compartments, inaccessible to other parts of the self, leading to dissonance or dissociation [48]. Clinical psychology has long noted that compartmentalization is both adaptive [allowing survival under duress] and potentially maladaptive when integration is chronically blocked [49]. The cabinet model provides a structural metaphor to capture these processes, situating fragmentation not as pathology per se, but as a disruption of recognition–reward dynamics within the cabinet.

Reward–Recognition as the organizing principle of the cabinet

While the compartments provide the **architecture**, the Reward–Recognition framework serves as the **organizing principle**. Recognition assigns value to compartments ["this role matters," "this memory defines me"], while reward reinforces or weakens the salience of compartments over time [50].

For instance, repeated recognition of one's creative abilities can strengthen the "creative self" compartment, expanding its influence on the cabinet as a whole. Conversely, the absence of recognition or the presence of negative reward can marginalize or suppress compartments [e.g., social rejection reducing the prominence of the "social self"] [51].

This dynamic reflects the interaction between **external validation** [social recognition] and **internal reinforcement** [neurobiological reward circuits]. By linking recognition to reward, the cabinet model explains how identity compartments are prioritized, stabilized, or diminished within the ongoing self-organization process [52].

Case illustrations [e.g., social validation, trauma, creativity]

To demonstrate its applicability, three case illustrations highlight how the cabinet model can explain phenomena across domains:

1. **Social validation**: An adolescent repeatedly praised for academic achievements experiences recognition that reinforces the "student" compartment. Dopaminergic reward circuits strengthen the salience of this compartment, integrating it with future-oriented goals [53].
2. **Trauma**: A survivor of childhood abuse may relegate traumatic memories to a sealed compartment. While protective in the short term, the lack of integration impedes coherence. Recognition from therapy and safe relationships can reopen this compartment, allowing gradual reintegration [54].
3. **Creativity**: A poet draws from multiple compartments—personal memory, cultural identity, emotional experience. Recognition [e.g., publication, audience response] reinforces the creative self, integrating disparate elements into a coherent artistic identity [55].

These examples illustrate how the cabinet model accounts for the **dynamic balance of integration and fragmentation**, highlighting the pivotal role of recognition and reward in shaping the structure of the self.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF

Early Childhood: Recognition from Caregivers

The emergence of the self begins in early childhood, a period marked by intensive interaction with primary caregivers. Infants develop a sense of agency and selfhood largely through **responsive feedback**, which can include recognition of emotions, needs, and accomplishments [56]. Caregiver attunement provides both **emotional validation** and a template for understanding social norms, effectively establishing the first **reward–recognition loops** that underlie self-concept formation [57,58]. Research in developmental psychology indicates that consistent positive feedback enhances secure attachment, fostering the integration of affective and cognitive self-components [59]. Conversely, neglect or inconsistent validation may produce fragmentation within early self-representations, setting the stage for later identity vulnerabilities [60].

Adolescence: Social Feedback and Identity Formation

During adolescence, social contexts expand beyond the immediate family to include peers, educational settings, and broader cultural environments. This stage is characterized by **heightened sensitivity to social recognition** as adolescents negotiate self-image and personal identity [61]. Peer approval and social status act as **powerful rewards**, reinforcing particular self-aspects while discouraging others [62]. Cognitive developments, such as metacognition and perspective-taking, enable individuals to internalize societal expectations and engage in self-reflection, a process that strengthens the **cabinet compartments of identity** described earlier [63]. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that adolescents who experience coherent recognition across multiple social spheres tend to exhibit higher self-esteem and resilience [64,65].

Adulthood: Maintenance, Adaptation, and Reconfiguration

In adulthood, the self requires **ongoing maintenance and adaptation** to changing life circumstances. Reward–recognition dynamics continue to operate in professional, interpersonal, and familial domains, stabilizing selfhood through repeated validation [66]. Adults often engage in deliberate **identity reconfiguration**, integrating new experiences, roles, and feedback into existing self-structures [67]. Cognitive flexibility and reflective capacities allow for **adaptive modulation of the cabinet compartments**, enabling individuals to reconcile competing identity claims and maintain coherent selfhood [68,69]. Failures in recognition, whether through social isolation, career setbacks, or relational discord, can disrupt these loops, leading to periods of self-doubt or role confusion [70].

Self in Crisis: When Recognition/Reward Loops Break

Situations of extreme social or personal stress can **interrupt reward–recognition mechanisms**, producing acute or chronic crises of self [71]. Trauma, rejection, or sustained lack of validation may fragment self-compartments, destabilizing identity and impairing psychological functioning [72]. Psychotherapeutic interventions that focus on **restoring recognition and re-establishing reward contingencies** have been shown to facilitate reintegration of the self and promote recovery [73,74]. Understanding these dynamics highlights the centrality of the reward–recognition framework and the cabinet model in both developmental and clinical psychology, underscoring their relevance for promoting **resilient and coherent selfhood** across the lifespan [75].

MAINTENANCE OF THE SELF ACROSS CONTEXTS

Social Contexts: Group Belonging and Exclusion

The self is continuously maintained and shaped by social interactions, with group belonging serving as a primary source of recognition and reward. Social identity theory posits that individuals derive self-esteem from membership in valued social groups, and positive feedback from peers reinforces self-coherence [76,77]. Conversely, social exclusion or marginalization disrupts reward–recognition loops, leading to fragmentation of self-perception and heightened vulnerability to psychological distress [78,79]. Empirical research demonstrates that even brief episodes of ostracism can activate neural regions associated with physical pain, underscoring the deep interconnection between social validation and self-maintenance [80]. Social reinforcement thus functions as a continuous stabilizing mechanism, allowing the self to navigate the complex dynamics of interpersonal networks [81].

Cultural Contexts: Collective Recognition and Identity

Culture provides structured frameworks of recognition, shaping the self through collective values, norms, and rituals [82]. In collectivist cultures, the self is often defined relationally, with validation arising from family, community, or societal alignment, whereas in individualist cultures, personal achievement and autonomy are emphasized [83,84]. Cross-cultural studies indicate that the reward–recognition dynamics of the self are mediated by culturally contingent constructs of honor, reputation, and moral responsibility [85,86]. The **cabinet model of the self** is particularly relevant here: compartments representing culturally endorsed roles receive reinforcement through symbolic and social rewards, which stabilize identity across life domains [87].

Digital Contexts: Online Feedback and Algorithmic Rewards

In contemporary digital environments, online platforms constitute novel contexts for self-maintenance, providing immediate and quantifiable forms of recognition, such as likes, shares, and algorithmic promotion [88]. The self's reward–recognition loops adapt to these virtual contexts, with social media feedback acting as both stabilizing and destabilizing forces [89]. Positive reinforcement enhances self-esteem and social identity, while negative feedback or lack of engagement can induce anxiety, self-doubt, or compulsive behaviors [90,91]. Psychology research increasingly highlights the **neurocognitive parallels** between algorithmic rewards and traditional social reinforcement, indicating that digital interactions engage the same reward circuitry implicated in offline social validation [92,93].

Potential Applications and Validation [Clinical, Social, Experimental]

Understanding the maintenance of the self across contexts has **broad translational implications**. Clinically, interventions that restore or simulate recognition and reward—such as group therapy, social skills training, and digital platforms promoting positive engagement—can strengthen fragmented selfhood [94,95]. Socially, policies fostering inclusion and collective acknowledgment help stabilize identity in marginalized populations [96]. Experimentally, laboratory paradigms employing controlled social feedback, virtual reality environments, and algorithmic reward manipulation provide quantifiable validation of reward–recognition dynamics, offering robust metrics for studying self-coherence [97,98]. The integration of these approaches across clinical, social, and experimental domains underscores the universality of reward–recognition mechanisms in maintaining the self, confirming their relevance across age, culture, and technological context [99].

DISCUSSION

Integrating Reward–Recognition with Existing Models of Self

The Reward–Recognition framework offers a dynamic complement to existing models of the self, emphasizing how subjective experience and social feedback shape identity. Traditional psychological models, including Erikson's psychosocial stages [100] and self-determination theory [101], often highlight social, cognitive, and motivational factors but do not fully capture the iterative reinforcement of selfhood via recognition loops. By framing recognition as both an internalized signal and a social feedback mechanism, this framework bridges cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of the self [102]. Furthermore, the integration of reward mechanisms aligns with reinforcement learning perspectives in developmental and social psychology, illustrating how repeated acknowledgment of competence, acceptance, or love stabilizes the sense of "I" over time [103].

Strengths of the Cabinet Model

The Cabinet Model provides a tangible structural metaphor for the organization of selfhood. Each compartment represents distinct aspects of identity—roles, values, memories, and social positions—while the flow between compartments accounts for both integration and fragmentation [104]. Compared to holistic or trait-based approaches [105], this model accommodates the multidimensionality of selfhood and the context-dependent activation of different identity facets. The incorporation of reward–recognition principles as the organizing mechanism offers explanatory power for phenomena such as resilience in identity, adaptive reconfiguration following trauma, and the selective prioritization of self-aspects in response to social feedback [106].

Limitations and Challenges

Despite its strengths, the framework and model present several limitations. Empirical validation remains a critical challenge: the conceptual abstraction of compartments and recognition loops requires operationalization through measurable behavioral, neural, or social indicators [107]. Additionally, cultural variability may influence the relative weight of recognition versus intrinsic reward, complicating cross-cultural generalizability [108]. The model also raises questions regarding temporal dynamics—how recognition-reward cycles evolve across the lifespan and how disruptions may produce chronic identity instability [109]. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, neuroimaging, and cross-cultural samples to test the Cabinet Model's predictive capacity and to refine its operational parameters.

Philosophical Implications: The Nature of "I" Beyond Materialism

Philosophically, the Cabinet Model challenges strictly materialist accounts that reduce selfhood to neural or biochemical states. By emphasizing the recursive interplay between social recognition, reward, and identity compartments, the model frames "I" as an emergent, self-stabilizing process rather than a static entity [110]. This perspective resonates with phenomenological and existential traditions, which conceptualize consciousness as inherently relational and narrative-driven [111]. Importantly, the model accommodates subjective continuity alongside the plasticity of selfhood, offering a framework that reconciles objective neuroscience with first-person phenomenology.

In sum, the integration of Reward–Recognition dynamics with the Cabinet Model provides a robust, interdisciplinary account of selfhood. It bridges psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy, offering both explanatory depth and practical pathways for empirical research, clinical application, and social understanding.

CONCLUSION

Summary of Contribution

This paper has introduced the Reward–Recognition framework and the Cabinet Model of the self, providing a novel interdisciplinary perspective on identity formation, maintenance, and adaptation. By integrating principles from developmental, social, and cognitive psychology with philosophical insights into subjectivity, the framework explicates how recognition and reward loops stabilize selfhood across contexts [112, 113]. The Cabinet Model operationalizes this process, illustrating the compartmentalization of identity facets, their dynamic interactions, and the influence of social and intrinsic feedback on overall self-coherence [114]. Collectively, these contributions extend traditional models by offering both a conceptual and mechanistic account of how the self persists, evolves, and responds to internal and external perturbations.

Broader Implications for Psychology and Philosophy

The integration of social, cognitive, and reward-based mechanisms into a unified model has several theoretical and practical implications. For psychology, it suggests new avenues for understanding resilience, identity crises, and the effects of social environments on mental health [115]. In clinical practice, the framework provides a basis for interventions targeting disrupted recognition-reward loops, such as in depression, trauma, or social anxiety, by systematically reinforcing adaptive identity compartments [116]. Philosophically, the model challenges strict materialist accounts of the self, framing identity as an emergent, self-organizing process that bridges first-person phenomenology with third-person empirical observation [117]. This synthesis promotes a more nuanced conception of "I" that accommodates both stability and plasticity, addressing longstanding debates in the philosophy of mind regarding personal continuity, agency, and relationality [118].

Future Directions for Research

Future research should focus on empirically validating the Cabinet Model through behavioral experiments, neuroimaging, and cross-cultural studies. Longitudinal designs could explore the temporal dynamics of recognition-reward loops and their influence on identity stability across the lifespan [119]. Computational modeling and network analysis may help quantify compartment interactions and predict outcomes under social, cultural, or digital perturbations [120]. Additionally, examining variations in recognition sensitivity and reward processing across individual differences, developmental stages, and clinical populations can refine the model's applicability and enhance translational potential [121]. Ultimately, these investigations will advance a more integrated science of selfhood, bridging psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy.

PRACTICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE CABINET MODEL

Mood Dynamics: Understanding Shifts in Affective States

Mood represents the global affective tone of the cabinet, reflecting the balance of reward and recognition signals across compartments. Unlike transient emotions, mood is sustained and shapes cognitive appraisal, decision-making, and behavior over time. Understanding mood dynamics helps explain patterns of motivation, engagement, and vulnerability to psychological disorders [122]. The Cabinet Model highlights that mood is both a product and regulator of self-stabilizing processes.

Learning and Novelty: Mechanisms for Acquiring New Knowledge

Learning emerges from the interaction between recognition, reward, and cognitive compartment activation. Novel stimuli trigger exploratory behaviors and adaptive updates in

cabinet organization, with reward signals reinforcing meaningful patterns. This framework aligns with reinforcement learning theories while emphasizing the centrality of selfhood in guiding adaptive knowledge acquisition [123]. Recognition of progress or novelty strengthens compartment integration, supporting long-term cognitive and emotional stability.

Boredom: Conceptualizing the Brain's Neutral State

Boredom arises when reward and recognition inputs fail to engage cabinet compartments meaningfully. It signals a deficit in stimulating self-reinforcing interactions, motivating exploration or behavior change [124]. Within the Cabinet Model, boredom is not merely an absence of pleasure but a functional state indicating misalignment between environmental affordances and internal recognition-reward processes.

Memory and the Past: Role of Autobiographical Reflection

Memory allows the cabinet to integrate past experiences into current selfhood, shaping identity and decision-making. Autobiographical reflection enables prediction, planning, and contextual understanding, providing continuity across temporal states [125]. Memories are compartmentalized, activated, and evaluated for relevance and reward potential, reinforcing the stability and coherence of the self.

Personality: Emergence from Habitual Engagement of Cabinet Compartments

Personality arises from the preferential activation and weighting of certain compartments over time. Stable patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior reflect habitual recognition-reward loops within the cabinet [126]. This perspective aligns with trait-based psychology while highlighting the dynamic interplay of internal motivation, reinforcement, and compartment integration.

Recognition and Identity: Core Drives Shaping the Self

Recognition functions as a fundamental human need, guiding social behavior and self-maintenance. Identity emerges from the alignment of external feedback with internal cabinet organization [127]. Reward-reinforced recognition stabilizes the sense of self, providing both coherence and adaptability in diverse social contexts. Failures in recognition or misalignment with external validation can destabilize identity, illustrating the importance of this mechanism in psychological health.

Soul and Mind: Distinguishing Imagination, Consciousness, and Selfhood

The Cabinet Model distinguishes between imagination [internal generation of possibilities], consciousness [moment-to-moment awareness], and selfhood [integrative, meta-cognitive organization]. Soul can be conceptualized as the enduring, organizing principle of cabinet compartments that sustains selfhood across time [128]. This delineation provides philosophical clarity for debates on the mind-body problem and subjective experience.

Love and Partner Selection: Interplay of Recognition and Preference

Love is conceptualized as a dynamic interplay of recognition and reward, guiding partner selection and social bonding [129]. It reinforces relational identity and stabilizes emotional and social compartments, facilitating adaptive long-term attachment. The Cabinet Model frames love not merely as an emotion but as an organizing principle that sustains selfhood through social recognition.

Introversion and Indirect Approval: Social Dynamics and Self-Perception

Introversion reflects preferential internal compartment engagement and moderated reliance on external recognition [130]. Indirect approval mechanisms illustrate how subtle social cues influence reward-processing and self-perception, shaping identity without overt reinforcement. Understanding these dynamics provides insight into personality variation and adaptive social behavior within diverse environments.

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