

WHO IS SITTING BEHIND YOUR EYES?

The self, the empty boat, and the science of “I”

A lecture on ownership, agency, memory and the hidden observer

LEARNING PSYCHIATRY



The real question is what kind of thing a self is

A boat strikes yours in the fog.

Your anger rises—until you see that the other boat is empty.

What vanished?

**Not the collision.
Not the damage.
The imagined chooser.**

The lecture follows that hidden owner through philosophy, neuroscience and clinical experience.

Self-experience already contains separable jobs

POINT OF VIEW

experience is
given from here

OWNERSHIP

this thought or
body feels mine

AGENCY

I seem to be
causing this
action

CONTINUITY

I connect myself
across time

A unified self may be the coordination of these functions—not an extra thing behind them.

Key distinction for the lecture: ownership ≠ agency

Three philosophical moves expose the owner problem

- **DESCARTES**

Certainty that thinking occurs does not yet prove a permanent inner owner.

- **AVICENNA**

The Floating Man asks whether self-awareness can precede bodily awareness.

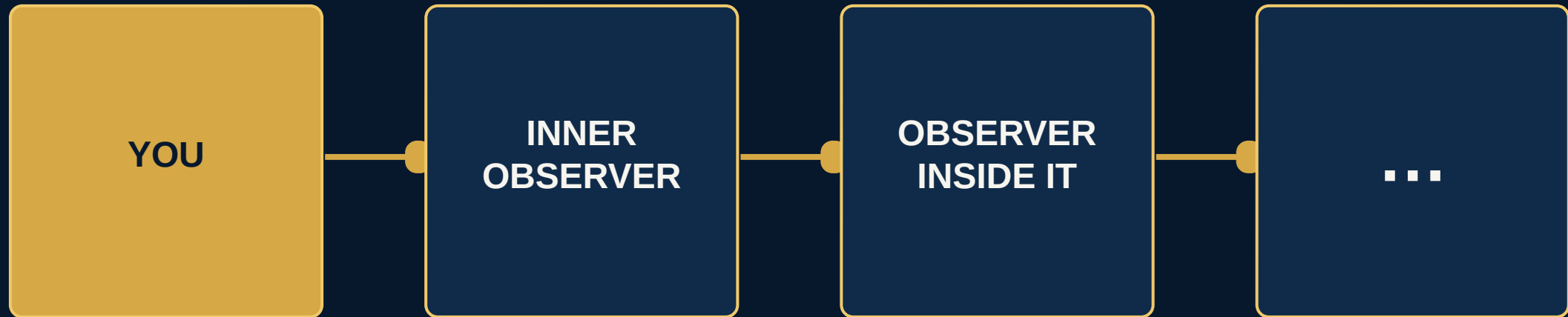
- **HUME**

Looking inward reveals perceptions—but no separate possessor of them.

Each move sharpens the question; none closes it.



The homunculus explains nothing—it repeats the problem



If seeing requires a viewer in the head, that viewer needs another viewer—and the explanation never begins.

The chariot opens a third category: real as a pattern



Neither...

- **A hidden essence**

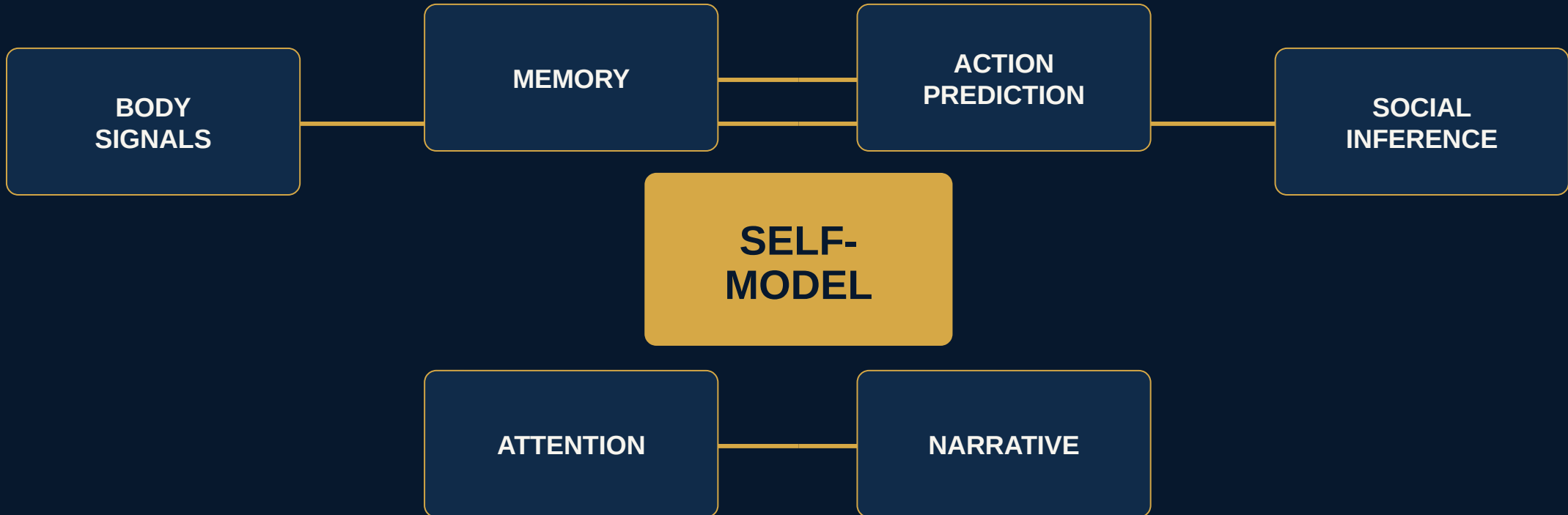
No extra “chariot” is found apart from the organised parts.

- **Nor mere nothing**

The chariot remains usable, nameable and causally effective.

**A real whole can depend on relations,
function and continuity.**

Neuroscience finds interacting systems—not a self-centre



The model is a proposal about coordination—not a discovered object in one brain location.

Body ownership and self-location can be displaced

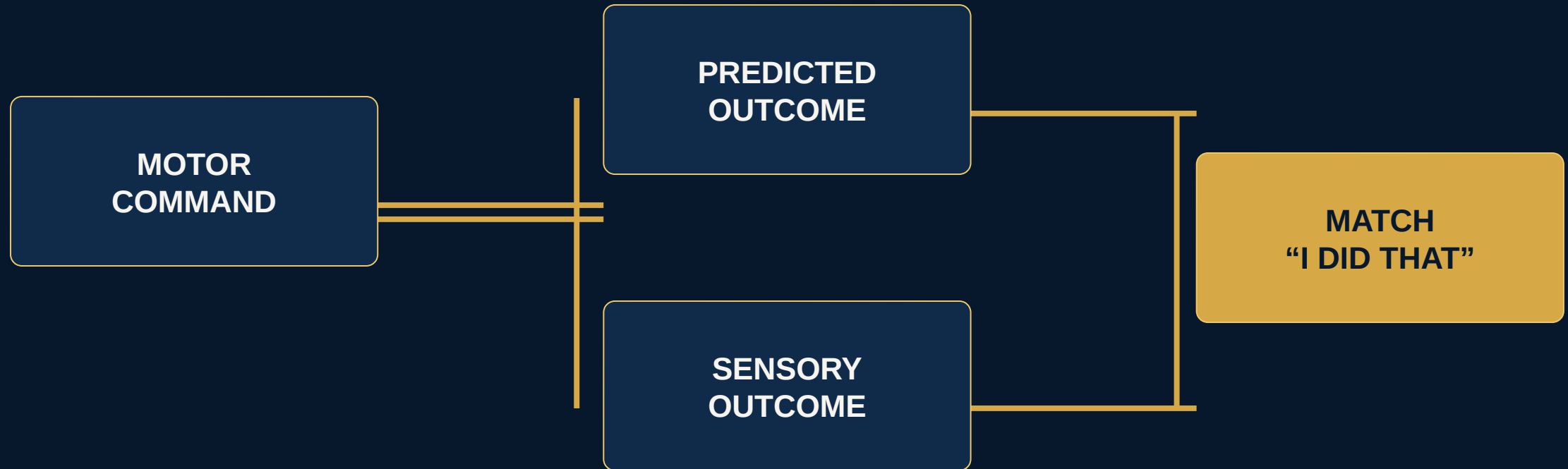


Synchronous signals can make an artificial hand feel like “mine”.

- **Ownership is constructed**
It depends on how vision, touch and body signals are integrated.
- **Self-location can shift**
Rare neurological and experimental cases show that “where I am” is also inferred.

Evidence for flexibility—not proof that persons are unreal.

Agency is inferred from predicted consequences



Ownership asks “is it mine?” Agency asks “did I cause it?”

Memory reconstructs a life; narrative explains it

- **Reconstruction**

Remembering rebuilds the past from traces, cues and present concerns.

- **Interpretation**

The mind often supplies a coherent account after actions have already occurred.

- **Narrative continuity**

Stories link changing episodes into a socially legible life.

Coherence is useful—but it is not the same as literal replay.



A life need not be experienced as one continuous story

NARRATIVE VIEW

Identity is maintained by an evolving account of who I have been and where I am going.

EPISODIC CHALLENGE

Some people live meaningfully without experiencing life as a single autobiographical arc.

Pluralism is the safer conclusion: narrative is one powerful mode of selfhood, not a universal requirement.

Clinical windows show components coming apart

DEPERSONALISATION

**I know I am here—yet I
do not feel real.**

knowing ≠ felt presence

THOUGHT INSERTION

**A thought may feel
present without feeling
authored.**

ownership ≠ agency

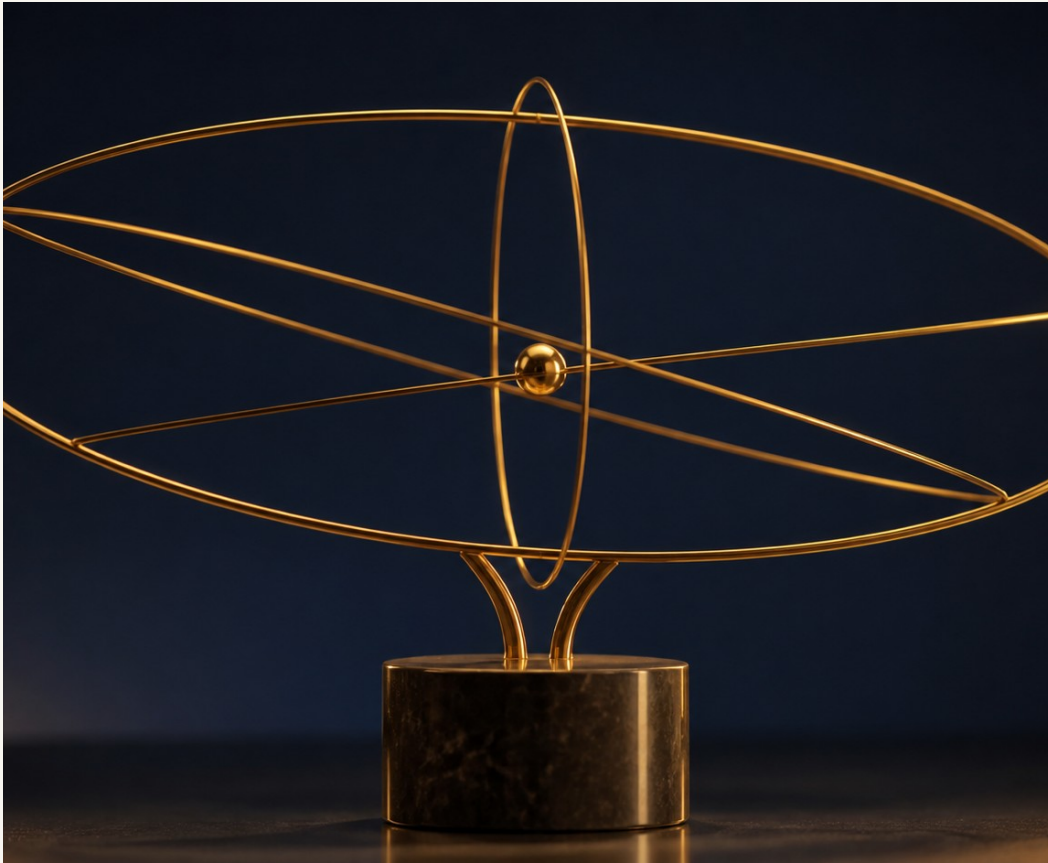
DEMENTIA

**Memory can fade while
others still judge identity
through moral character.**

continuity has many anchors

These are clinical phenomena, not philosophical experiments. They require humility and care.

No hidden captain does not mean nothing



A self can be real as...

- **An organised pattern**
distributed across body, memory, action and social relations
- **A practical centre**
useful for prediction, responsibility and communication
- **A continuing relation**
maintained through degrees of psychological connection

The question remains open—and that changes how we look

If the self is a coordinated process rather than a hidden owner...

UNITY

What makes many
processes one point of
view?

RESPONSIBILITY

How much ownership
is needed for blame?

FORGIVENESS

What changes when
the “chooser” is less
simple than it appears?

The empty boat does not end the inquiry. It makes the inquiry possible.

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Full references and reading notes appear in the Companion Paper and Reading Edition.