

Philosophers often draw a distinction between the personal level — the ontological realm of conscious beings, of agents, of rationally coherent thinkers, of normative properties — and the subpersonal level, which is (part of) the ontological realm of mechanisms, of natural laws, of physical causation, and merely descriptive properties. In most discussions of this distinction, the personal level is assumed to be higher than the subpersonal level, in roughly the way in which biology is at a higher level than chemistry. More to the point, this layered view is commonly wedded to a certain account of cognitive science: that its job is to investigate the mechanisms enabling or implementing personal-level states, capacities, and abilities. On such a view, the explananda of cognitive science lie at the personal level. In this talk, I argue for a different picture, one according to which psychology is ontologically flat (or at least, countenances no distinct personal level). The explananda of cognitive science are not personal-level states or capacities; rather, the explananda are publicly observable data, both behavioral and physiological. And, the best explanations of those data do not appeal to distinctively personal-level states, properties, or capacities, even though the explanatory models at issue might posit modules that store autobiographical memories or construct self-narratives.

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Cognition and the Personal Level: Cognitive Neuroscience, Human Action, and Flat Psychology

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