

Class Eight: Dennett On Selves and Stories

Philosophy and Science Fiction - Ryan Simonelli

October 24, 2022

1 From Parfit to Dennett

- Parfit argues that there were cases in which the question of Personal Identity *had no answer*.
- Implicit in Parfit's argument here is the rejection of the a metaphysically subsistent "self," such that there's some fact of the matter about what happens to this thing.
- Even we agree with Parfit that *really* there is no such thing, Parfit's account still doesn't give us any understanding of our *sense* of personal identity, our *sense* of self.
- Dennett will give us an account of the self that should help us make sense of Parfit's problem cases and the even stranger ones that Dennett imagines.

2 Dennett's First "Where Am I" Scenario

- **A Dangerous Mission:** Dennett is asked to perform a mission in which he'll have his brain removed and envatted so that it can operate his body *remotely* in order for him to be able to enter a cave and retrieve a radioactive device whose radiation only affects brain tissue.
- **Hamlet, Yorick, and Dennett:** To refer to his body and brain post-operation, Dennett picks some names that are to remind us of this scene in *Hamlet*:



- **Hamlet:** Dennett's body, which has been "debrained" so that it can go into the cave under Tulsa without being affected by the radiation.
- **Yorick:** Dennett's brain, which has been disembodied, placed into a vat where it can be fed the inputs received from Hamlet's sensory system and feed back outputs that will go into Hamlet's motor system.
- **Dennett:** Dennett's *self*, which he describes in the paper of his that we read, as his "center of narrative gravity."
- **Three Possibilities Regarding the "Where" of Dennett:** Dennett wonders *where he is* and he thinks of three possible principles that could settle this question.
 - **Possibility One:** Where Hamlet goes, there goes Dennett
 - * But consider cases of brain transplantation.
 - **Possibility Two:** Where Yorick goes, there goes Dennett
 - * But this case seems to conflict with that.
 - **Possibility Three:** Dennett is wherever he thinks he is.

- * It's not clear what this could mean.
- **A Shift in Perspective:** Dennett conceives of himself as located in underground in Tulsa, but then, when all of the cerebral radio links break and he loses all of his senses, he undergoes a shift in perspective: rather than conceiving of himself as stuck in a cave and blind, deaf, and without smell, taste, and touch, he conceives of himself as disembodied in a vat in Houston.
 - **Dennett's Quick-Changing Location:** As this happens, the location of Dennett seems to *change* from Tulsa to Houston and to do so faster than any physical object could. Dennett refers to this fact as "an impressive demonstration of the immateriality of the soul."

3 Dennett's Second "Where Am I" Scenario

- **A Bionic Back-Up Brain:** A neuron-for-neuron computerized duplicate of Dennett's brain, called "Hubert," is made to run in parallel with his biological brain, Yorick. As Yorick is fed the inputs from Hamlet's sensory system, so is Hubert. Hubert produces the same outputs as Yorick in response, but only Yorick's actually get fed to Hamlet's motor system.
- **A Control Switch:** The scientists make a "control switch" that enables Dennett to switch the control of his body—the neural outputs that are fed to Hamlet's motor system—from Yorick to Hubert. He presses it and . . . nothing happens. There is no noticeable difference.
- **Some Questions:** At this point, are we inclined to say that there are *two* Dennetts here? Or simply *one* Dennett with two brains? What would a memory-based account of identity such as Locke's say on the matter?
- **Getting Out of Sync:** At some point, Yorick and Hubert get out of sync with each other, and, when Dennett flips the switch after having not flipped it for some time, a drastic change in his behavior results upon his motor inputs being supplied by Hubert. It seems like he's a different person, one who's been stuck as a mere observer of his own body for two weeks.
- **Comparison with Cloning and Brain-Splitting:** This is interestingly different than the other cases of "branching" we've already considered.
 - In the cases of cloning and brain-splitting, there is a correspondence between duplication of *brains* (and the rest of the people, but the brain is really what matters) and duplication of *persons*. That is, the duplication of persons coincides with the duplication of brains.
 - Here, we have a duplication in brains but only a duplication in persons when these brains become out of sync.
 - If the self were to be understood as a kind of higher-level physical phenomenon, emerging from certain patterns of brain processes, then one would think that duplicating self-conferring brain processes would duplicate the self. This thought experiment challenges that idea.
- **An Interesting Change:** We shift from a case in which we have *one person* with *two brains* to a case in which we have *two people* with *one body*.

4 Dennett's Theory of the Self

- **Centers of Gravity:**
 - **Abstracta:** Not themselves physical objects in any sense, but, rather, abstract objects, "theorists' fictions."
 - **Mistake to Identify with Physical Things:** It'd be a category mistake to identify an object's center of gravity with a particular atom, say, even if that atom happens to be located at the same spot as the center of gravity.

- **Has a Spatio-Temporal Location:** A center of gravity can be pinpointed in space, it can be low or high, and it can change over time.
 - * This distinguishes centers of gravity from some more familiar abstracta such as numbers, which aren't located in space and time.
- **Change in Location Need Not be Continuous:** Unlike a physical object, which has to move continuously through space (and can't do so faster than the speed of light), a center of gravity can change location instantly—for instance, by sticking a big piece of gum on an object.
- **The Basic Analogy:** Selves are analogous to centers of gravity *with respect to all of these points*. They're *narrative* centers of gravity, the loci of the stories of ourselves we tell for ourselves.
- **Another Analogy:** Selves are like fictional characters.
 - **The Novel-Writing Robot:** Dennett has us imagine a novel-writing machine that tells a story with a main character named "Gilbert." He then has us imagine that the robot tells this story as it goes around doing things that bear a striking resemblance to the events in the story. In such a case, we're going to be inclined to say that it *is* Gilbert.
 - **Indeterminate but Determinable:** Fictional characters are indeterminate in various ways. For instance, there's no fact of the matter as to whether Sherlock Holmes has a mole on his left shoulder. So are selves. However, as ongoing stories questions about selves can be determined by the story tellers.
- **An Explanatory Hypothesis:** Talking to ourselves—providing a sort of literal self-narration—may have actually played a critical role in the formation of conscious thinking.
 - Julian Jaynes proposes a theory of this sort.
 - * Influenced the HBO show *Westworld* where it is actually discussed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8HQoMyu-iQ>

5 Applying Dennett's Theory

- **Multiple Humans With A Single Self:** Consider the following two cases, one from science fiction and one from real life:
 - **K Le Guin's "Nine Lives":** Ursula K. Le Guin's "Nine Lives" has a "character," Chow, who is a "tenclone," of a set of ten clones who seem to exist as a single person, spread out across nine humans.
 - **The Powers Twins:** Paula and Bridget Powers are two twins who are always together, talk in near unison, and, like Le Guin's Chow, seem to exist as a single person, spread across two humans (and that's how they characterize themselves). Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtEdP267TZ0>

On Dennett's account, we can make sense of these cases as one in which *two* humans who share *one* center of narrative gravity.

- **Branching Narratives:**
 - **The Different Sams of Moon:** The sense in which Sam₅ and Sam₆ are the same person is that they *share a narrative*—that of Sam₀—up to the point at which Sam₀ gets his information scanned. Yet these narratives *diverge* once we have the clones going off on their own.
 - **The Two Teletransporter Cases:**
 - * **Non-Branching Case:** There is a single narrative that goes from the Earth to the moon. That's why these cases seem pre-theoretically unproblematic.
 - * **The Branching Case:** We now have a split in narratives, and that's why the case seems problematic.

Question: Does an account like Dennett's help dissolve the intuitive pull of the "Two Possibilities" argument I presented last class?