Language, Intentionality and Appropriation

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In the mid 80s Daniel Dennett has published a series of articles on the problem of the self. His suggested solution to the problem is rather unique and seems to be at odds with some more recent work on the subject. It is my aim to try to square his thoughts with some other approaches that tentatively point to quite different sources of selves. Dennett in all of his papers relies heavily upon a strategy that made it all the way to the title of one of them. He speaks of selves as *centers of narrative gravity* (Dennett 1992). This strategy uses two crucial components – language and fiction. Let me say few words about each of them. First, in accordance with a general tactics of his post-behaviorism and fully in line with his method of heterophenomenology (see Dennett 1991), he treats mental phenomena in linguistic terms. We only know of a presence of the former via our confrontation with the latter. Psychological self receives the same treatment. Claiming to capture a fundamental building block of the self, Dennett gives elaborate examples of linguistic practices that lead one to *become oneself*. It is in the game of asking and answering questions on their history, present conditions and future plans or desires that organisms arrive to a coherent, stable and lasting view of their selves. He doesn't seem to be troubled by questions of subjectivity, i.e. what constitutes subjects and whether in fact some accounts of their selves is needed. At various points where he speaks of subjects, he dismisses philosophical explanations and wants to replace them with biological ones (e.g. Dennett 1989).

Second, this linguistic strategy leads Dennett to adopt an anti-foundationalist view of the self. He employs the metaphor of the center of gravity to illustrate that explanatory models in sciences are often furnished with items of a rather dubious ontological status. While everyone knows how important centers of gravity for explanations are, a short contemplation reveals there is no material object that would necessary correspond to any of them. It's not their material being that constitutes their existence. Such abstracta enter scientific explanations to serve the purpose of enabling successful predictions of conduct of various entities. Centers of gravity help to predict behavior of physical objects. For a successful prediction of human beings, we need to utilize a different, more complicated fiction. "It turns out to be theoretically perspicuous to organize the interpretation around a central abstraction: each person has a *self* (in addition to a center of gravity). In fact we have to posit selves for *ourselves* as well" (Dennett 1992, 105). Although an introduction of selves with all their intricacies into our explanatory web presents a much more sophisticated problem than introduction of centers of gravity, it adds no more reality to the final product. Selves are as ficticious as centers of the gravity. „It is a category mistake to start looking around for the self in the brain," (ibid., 108) pronounces Dennett in his Rylean dialect.

True to his naturalism, he also supplies empirical evidence to support his claims. In the collaborative work with N. Humphrey (Humphrey and Dennett 1998), he ventured to investigate clinical case studies of Multiple Personality Disorders (MPD). These cases are particularly intriguing for the proper treatment of the origins of the self, because patients with MPD exhibit a variety of fully developed selves. Dennett and Humphrey convincingly argue that emergence of multiple selves is a direct consequence of a narrative strategy patients employ through their development. In defense of their integrity under long-term attack (most of them have a history of child abuse), they create a second (or third…) personality that encompasses unwanted memories, moods and feelings. These are continuously supplied with a battery of beliefs, so that a complete psychological trait establishes itself. Competing selves then occupy one body.

So far I didn't say much new and in fact I believe on a certain level of description Dennett's assertions are basically on the right track. However, there seem to be something missing in his picture. The problem of the self is in his picture strongly tied with operations of language. In fact there seem to be for him a direct correspondence between language use and maintenance of the self. But if the claim is to establish an exclusivity of language in self-deliverance, the claim is a way too strong. If language produces selves and nothing else does, we should encounter instances of neither developed selves without language capacities, nor selfless language users. However, we find examples of both. On one hand, we seem to unproblematically assign selves to adult human beings without language (aphatics of various kinds, savants). On the other hand, there are humans with fully developed language who lack selves nevertheless.

Now, for the first group of cases, Dennett can reasonably defend himself by saying that his notion of language is broader than that of verbal behavior. Intentional intelligent behavior of people without spoken language can still accumulate enough of subject-centered information to establish and preserve their selves. Under such a broad definition, selves could still be thought of in categories of language. As I don't want to enter the debate on the nature of language and thinking, I will grant Dennett this strategy and concentrate on the second group of cases, i.e. people with fully developed language who fail to complete their self building and show some striking discrepancies in making distinctions between self and the rest of the world. I have in mind patients showing various symptoms of schizophrenia.

In recent years, a revived interest in schizophrenia has brought into the light patients with particular difficulties pertaining to their selves. Schizophrenia is a complex disorder, uniquely characterized by symptoms such as thought insertions, alien limbs or illusions of control (Franck et al. 2001, 454). Clearly, such symptoms are best understood as problems with self-ascription of activities. And there is no complete self without self-ascription. Schizophrenic patients, while moving around, observing activities of others or even thinking apparently can't locate the agent who does all this. In extreme cases, they either live in the world where they are in command of virtually nothing (depersonalization) or, conversely, in the world where they are in charge of almost everything (delusions of control) (Proust 2000, 308). Several research groups, despite the fact they greatly disagree over the general picture of the mind, have conclusively demonstrated that schizophrenic patients have significant difficulties in self-ascription of their actions in comparison with controls when matched for IQ, verbal abilities, attention or memory capacities (see Firth 1992; Franck et al. 1997 or Stirling et al. 2001). These differences are present even when patient's conditions are not acute. In one such an experiment, patients were asked to draw simple geometrical figures pictures out-of-sight and subsequently select their own works from a set of four where the additional three were drawn by other participants of the experiment. Overall,

schizophrenics had much bigger difficulties appropriating their own works and their "impairments appeared to be unrelated to performance on other cognitive or attentional measures" (Stirling et al. 2001, 201). While fulfilling rather sophisticated tasks they are unaware of the task originator.

There is something deeply puzzling about these results. Schizophrenics in these experiments are undoubtedly involved in intentional actions and it's hard to see how one could interpret their behavior using non-intentional vocabulary. (After all, they listen to the commands of experimenters!) It's natural for us to ascribe intentionality to agents. The talk of intentionality is bound to *who* is intending, as if intentionality and subjectivity were intrinsically tied together. (Just on a side: I take this to be the reason behind the initial appeal of Searle's Chinese room argument – computers can't think as there is "nobody at home".) In ordinary discourse, intentionality is paralleled by subjectivity. And subjectivity could be either external (it's him, or them who have done this…) or internal - the self. Inability to find the agent therefore leads in schizophrenics to problems with selves. How it is possible that intentionality of actions of schizophrenics lacks a purported relation to its source?

In her discussion of similar experiments, Joëlle Proust suggests there is nothing intrinsic about the connection between intentionality and agency (Proust 2000). She points out that various experimental paradigms in cognitive science suggest detachment of goal-directness of executed actions from its executor. According to her, the above-mentioned case of schizophrenia establishes one illustrative example of a more general trend. This dissociation is not confined to pathological cases. Normal subjects often entertain mental states with a dubious status of authorship. For example, visual imagery can be reasonably thought of as being deprived of its agent. This is not supposed to mean subjects of imagery are confused about who is undergoing imagery. It only says there might exemplify occasions in which subjects are sincerely confused about origins of their mental states. In this sense, fantasies or daydreams are often subjectless in a way similar to experiences of schizophrenics and one has to undertake a further effort to make its creator unequivocal. Crucially, even without such an effort mental events without representations of an explicit agency still seem phenomenologically coherent. In spite of a need for an additional step of determining the agent, we have no problem experiencing them. Although first-person accounts are central to discussions of the self, evidence from the third-person domain would make the case Proust's case stronger. Fortunately, a mounting support now emerges from various areas of neuroscience. Indirect support for a separation between intentionality and agency is now offered by research on sensory modalities. Most of the sensory processes, whether visual, auditory or motor, are carried out by the same networks, regardless of agency involved. As Kosslyn's (Kosslyn 1986) notorious findings show, visual imagery and vision are carried out by the same cortical areas. Similarly, mental simulation of action performance activates motor cortex (Bonnett et al. 1997).While in normal vision ownership appears to be locked in the viewed scene (i.e. there is a backward state of awareness that indicates to the subject it's her who is looking), imagery is short of clear agency ascription. Analogically, the difference between performed and simulated actions dwells, among other things, in owner attribution. This evidence seems to imply that in addition to processing of intentional sensory states there has to be a further neuronal processing that associates (or fails to associate) visual processing with its owner. More direct evidence bearing on the issue comes from a hotly debated discovery of mirror neurons in macaque monkeys (for discussion of results and implications see Gallese 2000). In a manner analogical to the role of visual cortical areas in imagery tasks, mirror neurons track intentional motor activities, usually hand movements. In doing so, they do not take account of authorship of actions and fire both in cases of grasping initiated by the monkey or observed grasping carried out by a different monkey. Thus mirror neurons appear to present the strongest empirical base for the needed dissociations between intentionality and ownership.

Where does this lead us in our discussion of Dennett and his narrative strategy? It seems like Dennett is unaware of this dissociation and operates on the level where the parallelism of intentionality and subjectivity is unquestioned. His narrative strategy presupposes normal functioning of the "ownership" neural network. People indeed *become themselves* with the help of discourses they participate in. However, there is a permit one needs to obtain just to enter the game of becoming. That permit consists of a functioning bridge between intentionality and agency ascription. Once that bridge is lacking, no amount of game participation can cure the initial setback. It is an additional empirical task to discover what exactly breaks down in these cases – some believe a module is impaired (Firth 1992), others speak of lower level explanations (Proust 2000). It is not my intention to come up here with a conclusive answer. My conclusion aims elsewhere. Schizophrenics have no apparent problems using first-person (or other) pronouns, they understand and produce sentences about themselves and easily execute tasks asked of them. Still, their selves are in an important aspect incomplete. Language is not able to help them in overcoming initial conditions that do not favor self-ascription. Behind the intended fictive anti-foundationalism of Dennett rests something that is very real and concrete, namely one's brain.

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