

Self, Spirituality, and Mysticism

with William Simpson, "The Mystical Stance: The Experience of Self-Loss and Daniel Dennett's 'Center of Narrative Gravity'"; David Rousseau, "A Systems Model of Spirituality"; and David James Stewart, "The Emergence of Consciousness in Genesis 1-3: Jung's Depth Psychology and Theological Anthropology"

THE MYSTICAL STANCE: THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-LOSS AND DANIEL DENNETT'S "CENTER OF NARRATIVE GRAVITY"

by William Simpson

Abstract. For centuries, mystically inclined practitioners from various religious traditions have articulated anomalous and mystical experiences. One common aspect of these experiences is the feeling of the loss of the sense of self, referred to as "self-loss." The occurrence of "self-loss" can be understood as the feeling of losing the subject/object distinction in one's phenomenal experience. In this article, the author attempts to incorporate these anomalous experiences into modern understandings of the mind and "self" from philosophy and psychology. Accounts of self-loss from religious literature along with similar accounts from recent nonreligious writers, suggest that self-loss accounts are potentially legitimate descriptions and not simply the result of religious apologetics. Specifically, I examine self-loss through the lens of philosopher Daniel Dennett's theory of "self as the center of narrative gravity." I argue that Dennett's understanding of the self, if correct, allows for the relegitimation of self-loss experiences rooted in current views from the psychological literature, rather than rooted in metaphysical religious claims.

Keywords: Daniel Dennett; mysticism; psychology of religion; personhood; self; subjectivity

For centuries, mystically inclined practitioners from various religious traditions have articulated anomalous experiences of revelation, psychological ecstasy, and striking encounters with the divine. One common aspect of these mystical experiences is the feeling of the loss of the sense of selfhood, referred to throughout this work as "self-loss." How can we understand "self-loss," given the current state of philosophical and scientific

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understanding regarding the mind, the brain, and the nature of human experiences? Is the experience of self-loss a supernatural occurrence, an example of psychopathology, both, or neither? Can claims of these experiences be incorporated into a modern and philosophically respectable understanding of the mind or must they be rejected as simply hallucinatory? In addressing these questions, I will draw upon Daniel Dennett's philosophical work on the concept of the self. Ultimately, I intend to show that Dennett's conception of the self as a "center of narrative gravity" (Dennett 1991, 1992) can not only legitimate such descriptions as potentially phenomenologically accurate, but it can also illuminate the nature of self-loss experiences in light of contemporary psychology and philosophy of mind.

Descriptions of the experience of self-loss can be found in many of the world's major religious traditions. The denial of a unified "self" or "soul" is one of the foundational tenets of Buddhism, and realizing the lack of an essential self (known as *anātman* in Buddhism) is a requisite factor in achieving enlightenment, or nirvana (Mitchell 2002, 37). According to the Buddhist tradition, individuals are amalgamations of the five *skandhas*, or aggregates of existence (i.e., form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness) (Siderits 2007, 37). In this view, the feeling of independent selfhood seems ontologically independent and unitary, but is not. The Zen Buddhist Shunryu Suzuki claimed, "If you think, 'I breathe,' the 'I' is extra. There is no you to say 'I' . . . 'You' means to be aware of the universe in the form of you, and 'I' means to be aware of it in the form of I" (Suzuki 2002, 29).

While the experience of self-loss is most prominent within Buddhist thought, mystical writings from other religious traditions contain descriptions of such an experience as well. For example, Hindu texts that predate Buddhism contain the idea that the individual's self is identical with the totality of existence. The Upanishads state, "He [Brahman, the Ultimate] who is in the sun, and in the fire and in the heart of man is ONE. He who knows this is one with the ONE" (The Maitri Upanishad 6.17). The Indian political activist Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "To feel that we are something is to set up a barrier between God and ourselves. To cease feeling that we are something is to become one with God" (Gandhi 1999, 41). Christian mystics throughout the centuries, such as Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 5th century) and Meister Eckhart (c. 13th century), describe experiences of self-loss and the dissolving of the self into God (Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite 1980; Meister Eckhart 1996). The Catholic monk Thomas Merton (1915–1968) described his own experience, writing, "What happens is that the separate entity that is *you* apparently disappears and nothing seems to be left but a pure freedom indistinguishable from infinite Freedom, love identified with Love" (Merton 1972, 283). This theme can also be found in writings from the Sufi tradition within Islam (Rumi 1995, 273–276).

OUTLINING A WORKABLE UNDERSTANDING OF “SELF-LOSS”

Given the poetic, possibly metaphorical, and highly obscure language used in these descriptions, a clearer philosophical and phenomenological picture is needed of the experience being discussed. While this mental event admits of many conceptualizations and descriptions, the experience of self-loss will be understood in this article as a phenomenological renegotiation of the boundaries of what is normally experienced, from the first-personal perspective of the organism, as constituting the “self.” This description is designed to allow flexibility, for the moment, on the metaphysical question of whether selves are ontologically independent in some way. While I believe there is good evidence that the “self” does not exist as more than an incredibly useful interpretation of facts about organisms (Dennett 1991; Blackmore 1999, 238–34; Johnson 2002, 257; Skowronski 2012, 397), the question of the *experience* of the self, the psychological self, will play the primary role in this inquiry.¹

Claims of self-loss are not only found within the context of religious traditions, although self-loss is often associated with religious interpretations or purported to be primarily religious in nature (Hood 2002, 3). Discussions of these experiences also appear in current psychological research and philosophical explorations of the concept of selves. The neurobiologist and philosopher Sam Harris articulates the view brought about by his own experiences of self-loss. He writes, “This experience is characterized by a sudden loss of subject/object perception: the continuum of experience remains, but one no longer feels that there is a knower standing apart from the known. Thoughts may arise, but the feeling that one is the thinker of these thoughts has vanished” (Harris 2005, 213).

In her book *Zen and the Art of Consciousness*, psychologist Susan Blackmore gives a very detailed subjective account of her attempts to understand the self, which resulted in feelings of self-loss. She discusses her experience of attempting to locate the boundaries of her self, writing:

I look. I turn the looking inwards, from pointing out there at the stone to pointing in here at what is looking at the stone. What? I find nothing. I cannot grasp it. I know there must be something here. It is me, isn't it? But it seems to elude me every way I look . . . I was looking for the me that was looking and I found only the world. It's a familiar enough trick, but easily forgotten. Look for the viewing self and find only the view. I am, it seems, the world I see. (Blackmore 2009, 60–63)

The key feature of Harris's and Blackmore's descriptions, as well as of the more religious descriptions, is a shift in the perception of the self. Thus, self-loss is a “loss” only in the sense that the normal day-to-day experience of the self, as an independently existing, persisting, and unified owner of one's decisions, beliefs, tendencies, and attitudes, is lost temporarily. More

specifically, the awareness of the subject/object distinction (i.e., division between “self” and “world”) is lost during these experiences.

The fact that the self is not permanently lost through these occurrences is nontrivial. Those who undergo such experiences are not indefinitely functionally disabled, which would be seen as an obvious psychopathology.² Since the feeling of self is not permanently lost, psychologist Roy Baumeister prefers the term “dissolution” to refer to self-loss experiences. Baumeister writes, “The term is revealing because dissolution is not the same as loss It entails a merger of self with a larger whole The mystical experience may thus be one of unity of self with a greater entity. Expansion of self is ironically the opposite metaphor to loss of self” (Baumeister and Exline 2002, 19).

While Baumeister’s desire for clarity is admirable and his point is understandable, this experience is better understood as a *loss* of the day-to-day experience of the self than *exclusively* as a feeling of “unity with a greater whole.” This is due to the fact that while self-loss can involve feelings of greater unity, it is also discussed in terms of the self as “devoid of all attributes” (Hood 2002, 3), or “devoid of all content” (Sullivan 1995, 53). It seems reasonable that the two descriptions (i.e., unity with a greater whole and the self as contentless) are simply different descriptions or interpretations of the same phenomenological event. In both cases, the boundaries of the self are renegotiated and the outcome is the same: unity. “The essential point in understanding the phenomenology of subjective religious experience is to understand that every religious experience involves a sense of the unity of reality at least somewhat greater than the baseline perception of unity in day-to-day life” (d’Aquili and Newberg 1998).

Whether through unity or contentlessness, self-loss involves a suspension of the subject-object distinction in consciousness. In other words, there is no distinction between the “self” and the “world.” Whether the totality of the mystic’s phenomenological state is considered as “self” or as “non-self” (i.e., the world), what is lost is the *distinction* or *division* between self and world. The difference between the claim that an experience had “no *I* as its subject” (Sullivan 1995, 53) and the claim that “*I* am the All” (Angel 2002, 330, emphasis mine) are both expressible in terms of there being no perceived divisions, or “nonduality” (Blackmore 2009, 27). It should be noted that my suggestion that these two descriptions actually cover the same phenomenological ground is not the only available view. Often, self-as-all experiences and self-as-contentless experiences are classified and discussed separately (Chen et al. 2011, 329). However, both experiences constitute an experienced *monism*, whether the experience of unity is interpreted or deemed as “self” or as “not self” (i.e., whether the experience is couched in “self-as-all” or “no-self” language, respectively.)

As the psychologist William James put it, “This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic

achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness” (James 1902, 362–63). Whether the perceived boundary between self and world disappears or is simply expanded to include everything perceived as *within* the self, a form of experienced monism is achieved. Now that I have suggested a workable understanding of “self-loss” as an experiential renegotiation of the boundary of the self, resulting in an experienced nonduality or monism, I turn to the question of whether these descriptions should be understood as mistaken interpretations given *by* the self or as phenomenologically insightful events that accurately reflect a truth about the self.

SELF-LOSS AS EXPERIENCED BY THE SELF?

Could it be that the experience of self-loss is simply one of many experiences that the *self* undergoes? In other words, is it more reasonable to understand self-loss as a conceptual interpretation of one of the self’s experiences, as opposed to as an accurate description of the phenomenology of the experience, which is devoid of selfhood? Perhaps the fact that the self is the very thing that retroactively reports the experience of self-loss is evidence against the plausibility of these experiences being legitimate. This possibility, that self-loss is simply a conceptual misinterpretation of an experience that the self has, needs to be addressed.

To speak to this question, we must disambiguate the term “self.” As I mentioned before, this article is dealing specifically with the psychological “self,” the experience of being a self. The existence of this psychological self is independent of the fact of whether or not there exists a biological self. The biological self, for example, might be something like the totality of a particular organism. The question of whether there is an ontologically distinct biological self is independent of the question of the existence of the psychological self. In other words, the ontological status of the biological self is conceptually independent of the ontological status of the psychological self. For example, even if the biological self is only a conventional designation, the psychological self could still be an ontologically distinct unity (e.g., some forms of substance dualism.) The reverse is also possible (e.g., ontologically distinct biological self with an illusory or merely conventional psychological self.)

John Skowronski addresses this point by referencing definitions of biological self that utilize immune system activity. He writes, “the capacity for an organism to act in self-relevant ways need not involve a sophisticated mental representation of the self, nor must it involve sophisticated mentalizing about the self” (Skowronski 2012, 399). Therefore, an objection to the legitimacy of self-loss based upon the fact that the biological organism *constitutes* the self would miss the point, since it is the legitimacy of the experience of self-loss (loss of the psychological self) with which we are

dealing. The “mentalizing about the self” is the issue in question, not the physical boundaries of the organism.³

The question at hand is that of the nature of the psychological self. So, the critique that self-loss is an experience had by the self (where the term “self” refers to the totality of the organism) is based on an ambiguous reading of the term “self.” Self-loss may be an experience that is had by the biological self (the organism) without necessarily being an experience had by the psychological self (the very thing the experiencer claims was lost.) The distinction and possible decoupling of these two selves is the question at hand and to presume their indivisibility would be to beg the question. Given that we are exploring claims of the disappearance of the experience of the subject/object distinction, is there any evidence (classic religious texts aside) that people have such experiences?

EVIDENCE OF SELF-LOSS EXPERIENCES

Knowing that there are claims to self-loss experiences in religious literature from various traditions, do we have other reasons to take seriously the claim that the psychological self is sometimes suspended in human beings? Experimental psychologists have developed numerous measures and questionnaires in an attempt to gauge just how prevalent claims of mystical experiences (including self-loss) are. Ralph W. Hood Jr. has developed a psychological measure known as the “Mysticism Scale,” which operationalizes claims to mystical experiences and attempts to measure claims to anomalous phenomenology independently of claims mediated by religious doctrines and concepts. In doing this, the Mysticism Scale utilizes 32 statements with which the individual may agree or disagree on a five-point scale (Hood 1975).

Reports of self-loss and unity are operationalized using items such as: “I have never had an experience in which I felt myself to be absorbed as one with all things” and “I have had an experience in which I realized the oneness of myself with all things” (Hood 1975, 31). Studies using this scale have been conducted in populations that included representation from all three Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), as well as Buddhism (Hood et al. 2001; Chen et al. 2011). Different levels of reported self-loss experiences were found in one study among Hindu, Muslim and Christian students. Higher levels of reported self-loss were found among Christian and Muslim students and this trend appears to be related to the emotional context of the experiences. As the authors put it, “Hindus’ involvement with vertical mysticism [i.e., self-loss] tends toward ambivalence” (Anthony, Hermans, and Sterkens 2010, 273). Nevertheless, evidence for self-loss is “comparable in the experience of adherents of the Christian, Islamic, and Hindu traditions” (Anthony et al. 2010, 273).

These studies were conducted in culturally dissimilar areas (the United States, Iran, and Tibet). The reliable similarities of phenomenological (as opposed to religiously interpreted) mystical reports between various cultures and religious traditions evidenced by Hood's experimental work suggest that, "a common phenomenology defines the core experience of mystical unity" (Hood et al. 2001, 704).

Studies of self-loss, however, suggest that these experiences are not necessarily beneficial. The line between mysticism and psychopathology is a highly contested one. One study found a correlation between self-loss experiences and psychological distress. Loss of self, the authors claim, can be a disconcerting and emotionally negative experience. This correlation between reported self-loss and psychological distress did not hold for the people in the sample who maintained a regular spiritual practice, suggesting that "the decisive effect of spiritual practice consists mainly in buffering the effect of threats to the integrity of the ego derived from experiences of ego loss [i.e., self-loss]" (Kohls and Walach 2007, 1311). Spiritual practice, in this study, was operationalized as "regular practice of any one spiritual discipline of meditation, prayer, contemplation or spiritual or mindful body work like Tai Chi, or Chi Gong, as well as several kinds of Yoga" (Kohls and Walach 2007, 1305). This evidence of negative self-loss experiences may be seen as evidence for the legitimacy of these experiential descriptions, because these examples are clearly not offered in the service of doctrinal or religious motivations.

Other work in psychology, both theoretical and empirical, provides evidence that claims of self-loss are fairly common, occur outside of religiously interpreted contexts, and have interesting correlates. For example, a correlation has been suggested between mystical experiences and certain physiological states, specifically, "an individual's propensity for producing [electroencephalogram or EEG] microseizures" (Livingston 2005, 85) in the temporal lobes of the brain. Portions of the temporal lobes are thought to be responsible for various processing, including recognition of objects, face recognition, temporal and spatial designations, and emotional experiences (Livingston 2005, 82–84).

Also, a correlation between self-loss and ingestion of the hallucinogen known as psilocybin has been found (Griffiths et al. 2006). In one particular double-blind study, many of those in the sample who had unknowingly consumed the drug described "a sense of unity without content (pure consciousness) and/or unity of all things" (Griffiths et al. 2006, 277). Finally, seeking self-loss through "religious exercises" has been explored as one of many ways in which people attempt to escape self-awareness and "reduce negative self-evaluations or worrisome thoughts" (Leary, Adams, and Tate 2006, 1811). Other methods for reducing self-awareness include

“masochism, alcohol and drug use, binge eating . . . and suicide” (Leary et al. 2006, 1811).

While the previous examples are largely negative, these nonreligiously conceived experiences of lowered self-awareness may also bring about positive psychological and physiological consequences. For example, “flow” states are often brought about through intense concentration during sports or musical performance (Leary et al. 2006; Kotler 2007). Sleep, during which one is not self-aware, is an obvious necessity for physical and psychological health. Additionally, medical professionals have utilized meditation practices, particularly mindfulness, in order to reduce narrative self-awareness and reduce stress (Kabat-Zinn 1990).

These examples serve to ground the philosophical discussion of the experience of self-loss in relevant empirical findings. The fact that this type of experience is reported across cultural and religious divides strengthens the case that such occurrences may be legitimate in terms of both phenomenological accuracy and third-person psychological description, as opposed to *solely* religiously legitimate. Also, the fact that self-loss is not necessarily a positive experience supports the idea that reports of these experiences are not simply the result of religiously motivated apologetics. Given that there is empirical evidence supporting the idea that reports of self-loss are due to more than simply cultural or religious causes, the question remains as to whether or not descriptions of self-loss represent accurate insights into the nature of selves from a third-personal psychological viewpoint. Before turning to the psychological question, I will explore the philosophical theory of selves put forth by Daniel Dennett. Dennett’s theory, I argue, serves as an effective philosophical framework in which to situate the current psychological discussions of the self, and also lends credibility to the phenomenological legitimacy of descriptions of self-loss experiences.

DENNETT’S MODEL OF SELF-AS-NARRATIVE

The philosopher Daniel Dennett has put forth a theory of the self, which he developed through many of his works (Dennett 1991, 1992, 2004). Dennett claims that the self, rather than being a unified entity which persists across time, is an evolutionarily adaptive cognitive interpretation utilized by organisms (primarily human beings) in order to effectively navigate their social and physical environments. As an analogy, Dennett compares the self to the concept of a center of gravity of an object. The center of gravity, he writes, “is a purely abstract object. It is, if you like, a theorist’s fiction. It is not one of the real things in the universe in addition to the atoms. But it is a fiction that has nicely defined, well delineated and well behaved role within physics” (Dennett 1992). In other words, centers of gravity do not exist as *things* in the world, but as useful conceptualizations

or interpretations that help people explain the past behavior of things in the world and predict how those things will behave in the future.

For Dennett, the self is a similar “abstractum” (Dennett 1992). Selves are an almost unavoidable conceptual tool when interpreting the actions of other organisms, as well as one’s own actions. Selves, like centers of gravity, have “a history” (Dennett 1992). A story can be told about the actions and events in a self’s past. In fact, for Dennett, this *narrative* about some persisting thing that is the doer of actions and the thinker of thoughts *is* the self. This is due to the fact that the concept of “self” is simply a useful abstractum, an interpretive tool to which humans can attribute the actions and thoughts of any particular organism. As Dennett puts it, “Like the biological self, this psychological or narrative self is yet another abstraction, not a thing in the brain, but still a remarkably robust and almost tangible attractor of properties, the ‘owner of record’ of whatever items and features are lying about unclaimed” (Dennett 1991, 418). Dennett’s idea that the term “self” refers to an *interpreted* boundary between subject and object, as opposed to an ontologically determined boundary, resembles Derek Parfit’s account of personal identity. Parfit’s reductionist account mirrors Dennett’s claim that the self is mistakenly conceived as essentially unitive. Moreover, Parfit’s theory of personal identity has even been used to examine self-loss experiences (Robinson 2012).

On this view, then, all the things attributed to the self (e.g., actions, thoughts, mental phenomena, voluntary bodily processes) have a different ontological status than the “self” to which they are attributed. The psychological self, as an ontologically independent and persisting entity, is simply an illusion, albeit a useful one. All of the attributes and characteristics of the self exist. The self does not, at least, not in the same way. Human selves are not “independently existing soul-pearls, but artifacts of the social processes that create us” (Dennett 1991, 423). The social nature of human beings seems to account for the genesis of selves on Dennett’s view.

The origin of the psychological or narrative self is the human proclivity to communicate via language combined with the need to represent other agents within one’s environment and also to represent one’s own physical and mental activity *to oneself*. In other words, the self is useful precisely because humans are social animals. The illusion of a united “inhabitant” of each human body (or brain for that matter) may have, according to Dennett, originated with our preconscious ancestors when speaking their questions aloud (Dennett 1992). This behavior allowed the portions of their cognitive processes that were less integrated to receive and answer questions posed by the organism itself. Talking to oneself, then, may be an evolutionary prerequisite for *constructing* a self. In fact, there is evidence that during mindfulness meditation there is a reduction in activity in the default-mode network (DMN) of the brain of the meditator. The DMN is associated with mind-wandering and internal “self-related preoccupations”

(Brewer et al. 2011). So meditation, which is classically associated with self-loss experiences, may achieve this effect by reducing the extent to which one has internal discussions *with and about oneself*.

The understanding that the human organism often needs to answer questions for itself, especially questions *about itself*, illuminates the evolutionary utility of highly integrated cognitive processing. Humans' augmented cognitive integration creates the first-personal illusion of the unity of mental processes. Ultimately, however, "there is no conscious self that is unproblematically in command of the mind's resources. Rather, we are somewhat disunified. Our component modules have to act in opportunistic but amazingly resourceful ways to produce a modicum of behavioral unity, *which is then enhanced by an illusion of greater unity*" (Dennett 1992). This illusion of greater unity is the psychological self.

Selves, on this account, are a natural product of the biological tree of life. The illusion of a core or essential self is simply one of the naturally evolved features of the human species. "Each normal [homo sapien] makes a *self*. Out of its brain it spins a web of words and deeds, and, like the other creatures, it doesn't have to know what it's doing; it just does it" (Dennett 1991, 416). This subjective feeling of unity determines much of the philosophical and scientific quest for an understanding of the self. When looking for others' selves from a third-person perspective, we naturally look for a *thing in the world*, when actually the self is an ever-fluctuating narrative. It is constantly being constructed and adjusted in order to serve our purposes.⁴

The self, again, is not a physical thing. While some determinate number of neurocognitive systems likely realize the self, the term "self" in its standard use, neither refers to those systems nor to the totality of the biological organism (the biological self.) The biological self (including brain processes) is likely included in one's self-concept, but clearly the biological self is not exhaustive of it. For example, one's name(s), social roles, events in the past, plans in the future, and perceived personality traits are all aspects of the psychological self, in addition to the biological self (one's body.)

Some of those exploring brain regions associated with selfhood have argued that the right parietal lobe (Johnstone et al. 2012) or broader regions within the right hemisphere may realize the self due to the fact that "injury to that hemisphere consistently leads to disturbances of the self" (Morin 2011, 374), while others have maintained that much self-related behavior engages "a wide network of sites located in both hemispheres of the brain" (Morin 2011, 376). While the interpretation of the organism's mental and physical behavior in terms of a "self" is most likely realized by some portion of brain activity, these lower level physical processes are conceptually distinct from the "abstractum" that is the self. Along this line, philosopher Leonard Angel writes, "conventional self-identification is not

meant to be identification of the first person with a particular brain Therefore the standard physicalist psychologist, who accepts the brain as the seat of consciousness, asserts that the brain is capable of a postulate, if you like, of a self-identity whose extension is greater than, or allegedly different from, that of the brain itself" (Angel 2002, 327). Dennett's view of the self parallels Angel's view, acknowledging that self-identification, from either the first or third-person perspective, is an interpretation of physical facts. "It is a category mistake to start looking around for the self in the brain. Unlike centers of gravity, whose sole property is their spatio-temporal position, selves have a spatio-temporal position that is only grossly defined" (Dennett 1992).

The philosophical advantages of Dennett's view aside, this account of selves intuitively may seem problematic. He attempts to preemptively address any potentially negative emotional response to the content of his view by sticking up for the usefulness and importance of such theoretical "fictions" (Dennett 1992). For example, when claiming that a center of gravity is just an "abstractum," Dennett writes that he "[does] not mean to disparage it; it's a wonderful fictional object, and it has a perfectly legitimate place within serious, sober, *echt* physical science" (Dennett 1992). He goes as far as to call these "fictions" "magnificent" (Dennett 1991, 429).

Psychological selves, likewise in his view, have value not because they are ontologically independent or distinct, but because they are a natural and beneficial part of the human psychological makeup. He writes, "[The self] is an abstraction one uses as part of a theoretical apparatus to understand, and predict, and make sense of, the behavior of some very complicated things" (Dennett 1992). These "very complicated things" include others in one's social environment and, equally, one's own thoughts, reactions, and behavior. This account of the self-as-narrative is an impressive theoretical construction. It is philosophically sophisticated and malleable, but is Dennett's self-as-narrative model compatible with current understandings of the self within the psychological sciences?

CURRENT PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEWS OF SELF

Dennett's model of self-as-narrative very closely corresponds with much of the prominent psychological literature on the nature and role of the self. For example, the psychologist Roy Baumeister writes, "the notion of an inner true self that is discovered by some kind of treasure hunt is probably best regarded as a troublesome myth. Ideas of self come in multiple, sometimes conflicting *versions*, and the reality of selfhood is likely an emerging project rather than a fixed entity" (Baumeister and Finkel 2010, 146, emphasis mine). Baumeister's use of the phrase "multiple and conflicting versions" directly parallels Dennett's view that the self is a narrative construction (Dennett 1991, 111–38). Dennett even discusses the organism's ability "to

go back and think about one's past, and one's memories, and to rethink them and rewrite them" (Dennett 1992). The history of one's self is not held by the "principle of bivalence," as Dennett says. While questions about the biological self have determinate answers (even if we can never know them), questions about the psychological self need not have determinate answers before the question is asked.

In Baumeister's summation of the psychological consensus, he maintains that the "self exists at the animal/culture interface" (Baumeister and Finkel 2010, 140). This view of the self as a conventional psychological construction with social utility aligns nicely with Dennett's view that the self is a fluid conceptual point, which is a useful tool in the project of constantly "presenting ourselves to others, and to ourselves, and hence representing ourselves – in language and gesture, internal and external" (Dennett 1991, 417).

The idea that there is no persisting self that serves as the core of an individual's psychological make-up is prominent within the psychological literature. John Skowronski puts forth a model of the self that he calls a "multiple systems view" (Skowronski 2012, 408). Skowronski's view can be read as even more eliminativist than Dennett's, since he believes the fact that "there is no single entity that can be referred to as the self" (Skowronski 2012, 397) entails that "it is probably a mistake to discuss the self" (409). Skowronski claims that there are many aspects of selfhood, which take place "on multiple levels, from cellular to psychological" (Skowronski 2012, 400). This is only one of many multiple systems views within the psychological literature (Sullivan 1995; Baumeister and Exline 2002; Hood 2002; Baumeister and Finkel 2010, 142; Morin 2011).

Dennett's view that the self is a narrative construction, a conceptual structure produced by the organism, is echoed in much of the work on the psychology of self, as well. For example, Skowronski's view includes an aspect of self that he refers to as the "symbolic self." This, for Skowronski, is a distinctly human form of selfhood. He even discusses the symbolic self as a "*narrative identity*: An individual's integrated, internalized, and evolving idea of the self as reflected in the stories that are constructed about the self" (Skowronski 2012, 402).

Other psychologists refer to this symbolic representation of one's psychological self as one's "self-schema." Self-schemas can be thought of as bits of information, making up an interconnected network of beliefs and ideas about oneself. The model of the self as a network of bits of information "has the added benefit that a person can be aschematic on some dimension, which means not having a specific or clear idea about the self" (Baumeister and Finkel 2010, 145). The self-schema model's flexibility and capacity to incorporate inconsistent and contradictory self-representations mirrors Dennett's view that the self as an indeterminate abstractum. The self can be redefined and adjusted and therefore, the history of the self is not

identical to the physical history of some brain state or process. The self is an *interpretation* of certain physical and social processes.

Another line of thought within the psychological literature that fits nicely with Dennett's model of self is the role of human language in the construction of the self. Dennett writes, "Our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee, and conspecifics with whom to mate, but words, words, words. These words are potent elements of our environment that we readily incorporate, ingesting and extruding them, weaving them like spider webs into self-protective strings of *narrative*" (Dennett 1991, 417). Language allows humans to create narratives that enable them to conceptualize their pasts, futures, and ideas about their seemingly enduring personalities. "Evidence increasingly suggests that language, and more precisely inner speech, plays a fundamental role in self-awareness" (Morin 2011, 376).

Much of the psychological literature recognizes this fact, acknowledging "the special importance of the processes of language-based communication to the human self" (Skowronski 2012, 402) (e.g., the "symbolic self" within Skowronski's model.) Finally in this vein, self-perception theory posits that one acquires knowledge about one's self in the same way that one acquires knowledge about the selves of others. Namely, "They see what the person (in this case, the self) does and draw conclusions about traits that produce such acts" (Baumeister and Finkel 2010, 147). This theory holds that the self is constructed by "observing behaviors and making inferences" (147). Dennett's view is compatible with this psychological theory as well.

So the current psychological understanding of the nature of the self and how it is realized can be incorporated into Dennett's self-as-narrative model. The self should not be thought of as the essential core of an individual's personality, but rather as an interpretative conceptual representation of the biological self's thoughts and behavior. Given that the self-as-narrative model is able to incorporate the current psychological views of the self, how can the experience of self-loss be understood within this framework?

SELF-AS-NARRATIVE AND SELF-LOSS

Now that I have discussed the plausibility that the psychological self is a narrative interpretation of one's own (and others') thoughts and behavior, the question remains as to whether one can have an *experience* that is devoid of this self-narrative. The short answer to this question is: yes. But, as science journalist John Horgan writes, "It is one thing to know intellectually that the self is an illusion and quite another to know it firsthand" (2003, 114). The narrative, or psychological self that Dennett expounds, supports claims to self-loss experience because this conception of self is a one that *can be separated* from experience.

The psychological self, being a narrative interpretation of one's experience, is not inherently united with one's moment-to-moment phenomenal consciousness. The feeling of a self that is distinct from one's mental phenomena, the feeling that there is a do-er of actions and a thinker of thoughts, is only present as an abstracted interpretation of one's phenomenal experience. Self-loss experiences can be thought of, then, as the dropping of the self-narrative in consciousness. This leads to the evaporation of the subject/object distinction because the abstractum that usually plays the role of subject (i.e., the psychological self) is absent.

This idea can be more clearly understood when taking into account the role that emotional judgments and linguistic self-relevant thoughts play in experiencing the self in the normal way. Emotional judgments of objects, sensations, people, situations, ideas, and more, support the illusion of the psychological self, because the judgments are usually made on the grounds of their relevance (e.g., supportive, obstructive, neutral) to the desires and goals *of the self*. Here, I tend to agree with Dennett's impulse to praise the concept of the self for its obvious role in the promotion of the survival of human organisms. Note, here, that my praise for the illusion of the self falls squarely under the heading of emotional judgment based on the interests of the "self."

As one might expect, traditional practices that are known to result in self-loss experiences, such as meditation, often prescribe methods for overcoming the tendency to identify with one's spontaneous thoughts and judgments. As Susan Blackmore writes:

One trick is to concentrate on the present moment—all the time—letting go of any thoughts that come up If you can concentrate for a few minutes at a time, you will begin to see that in any moment there is no observing self. Suppose you sit and look out of the window. Ideas will come up but these are all past- and future-oriented; so let them go, come back to the present. Just notice what is happening staring determinedly into your own experience does not reveal a solid world observed by a persisting self but simply a stream of ever-changing experience, with no obvious separation between observed and observer. (Blackmore 1999, 242, 226)

The goal of this kind of meditative practice is to *experience* the absence of the constant interpretations of experiences out of which humans usually construct the self-narrative. An important aspect of this type of attempt to rid one's conscious experience of the narrative self is detachment from thoughts about the past and/or future. Notice that thoughts about other time periods are part of constructing the narrative of the self, which is thought to persist over time. The idea that the self is an object that endures across time "allows for mental time travel, so that organisms are not limited to the here-and-now but can think about themselves in the context of the past and can project themselves into the future" (Skowronski 2012, 400). The default mode (DMN) of human brains, which consists of

mind-wandering and self-related concerns, has been found to correlate with lower levels of happiness (Brewer et al. 2011, 2054). Experiencing lower levels of “mental time travel,” therefore, may have mental health benefits. The focus on attending to one’s present sensations (e.g., breathing) is part of the attempt to experience the psychological self as the illusory conceptualization that it is.

Sam Harris elaborates on the method and result of attempting to undermine one’s experience of self, writing:

If you will persistently look for the subject of your experience . . . its absence may become apparent, if only for a moment. Everything will remain—this book, your hands—and yet the illusory divide that once separated knower from known, self from world, inside from outside, will have vanished. (Harris 2005, 416)

The loss of the subject/object distinction in one’s experience most likely results from low self-awareness (Skowronski 2012, 406), in this case brought about by “focusing attention on the lowest level of self—that is, an aspect of self that defies meaningful elaboration [e.g., direct sensory perception] The complex symbolic identity is thus lost from awareness, replaced by a minimalist focus on the self as a concrete, physical being existing only in the immediate present” (Baumeister and Exline 2002, 16). The feeling of distinction between thoughts, sensations and actions with which an organism identifies (e.g., *my* thoughts) and things which are perceived as nonself is what usually grounds the illusion of a separate psychological self. In other words, our narrative self is built out of the underlying organism’s discriminations about the world and reducing these discriminations reduces the prominence of the self in one’s awareness. “Reducing inner self-talk stops one’s ongoing interpretations and judgments, thereby minimizing the degree to which one’s perceptions of reality are filtered through conscious self-thought. When a person’s conscious thoughts, conceptualizations, and judgments are silenced, he or she may experience the world as an undifferentiated unity” (Leary et al. 2006, 1810).

So, if there’s no *self* to have these self-loss experiences, who has them? The organism does, in the same way the organism has the experiences that *are* interpreted as belonging to a self. In fact, the retrospective incorporation of self-loss experiences into the narrative of the self is an important aspect of this phenomenon. In other words, the dropping of the narrative must be assimilated into the narrative after the fact. This corresponds to Dennett’s point that “A self could be . . . gappy, lapsing into nothingness as easily as a candle flame is snuffed, only to be rekindled at some later time, under more auspicious circumstances” (Dennett 1991, 423). Self-loss is stored in the memory of the organism, even though at the time the occurrence is not interpreted into the story of the self (Sullivan 1995, 53).

The way these psychological events are incorporated into the story of the self may determine their effects on one's long-term mental health. As I mentioned earlier, some empirical work has suggested that people who are prone to such self-loss experiences are more mentally healthy if they have a regular "spiritual practices." The authors hypothesize that such practices serve to frame these experiences in a positive way, writing, "spiritually practicing individuals seem to be particularly able to make more sense out of their deconstructive [i.e., self-loss] experiences" (Kohls and Walach 2007, 1312). Loss of the ostensible unity of one's selfhood (Hood 2002, 4) is a potentially negative experience. Notice that the positivity or negativity of a self-loss experience is not inherent to the experience, but rather is brought about by a later process of interpretation as to how such an experience squares with the desires and goals *of the self*.

CONCLUSION

Experiences and discussions of self-loss appear as early as approximately 2,500 years ago in the writings of ancient religious teachers (Mitchell 2002, 11). However, self-loss experiences are neither inherently religious nor inherently positive. They are, rather, experiences of the dissolution of the normal conceptual interpretations of the human organism's moment-to-moment experience. These interpretations include distinction between phenomena that count as "self" and those that count as "non-self." Since this perceived distinction provides the ordinary phenomenal feeling of a unified subject, the loss of this distinction dissolves ordinary subject/object discriminations. Self-loss is the suspension of the perceived boundaries of the psychological self, but the biological self need not be affected (aside from possibly some unknown change in brain activity.)

The psychological literature supports the view that the self is a fluctuating, often organism-serving, and sometimes-contradictory or indeterminate interpretative conceptualization produced by the biological organism. Self-schema theory, self-perception theory and other multiple systems views exemplify this more fluid and less essentialist interpretation of the self. Dennett's model of self as the center of narrative gravity, an abstractum spontaneously produced by normally functioning human organisms, easily incorporates the modern psychological understanding. In doing so, Dennett's view reveals the plausibility that self-loss occurrences are both phenomenologically legitimate and psychologically accurate. Reports of these unconventional experiences, rather than being only remnants of ancient religious dogma or reports of delusional hallucinations, seem to be experientially legitimate insights into the nature of psychological human selves.

NOTES

1. John Searle's view that institutional "facts" can be constituted by collective intentionality and, therefore, that social institutions (including the self) "exist," albeit not as bare facts in the world, is worth acknowledging (Searle 1997). However, regardless of one's possible adherence to this ontological view, the claim of this paper is only that the self exists *at most* as a linguistic construction and not an objective fact about the world. The "illusion," then, is that selves exist as bare facts about the world.
2. The relationship and potential similarity between mystical experiences, such as self-loss, and psychopathology is still a contested issue. Some experimental findings have suggested that the two are mainly distinct in their effects or consequences, which are influenced by the religious practices of the individual (Kohls and Walach 2007, 1311). If this is the case, then the immediate phenomenology may be similar in both types of experience.
3. However, the physical boundaries of the organism are also apparently very difficult to determine, due to the interconnected nature of physical systems. One author, discussing the immune system approach to selfhood, writes, "Animals are not individuals anatomically, and microbes, by cell number, constitute approximately 90% of human bodies" (Tauber 2012).
4. The phrase "to serve our purposes" should not be read to suggest that people are consciously aware of these adjustments or the reasons for them (e.g., self-esteem maintenance). For example, "People are selectively critical of evidence that depicts them badly while being uncritical of more agreeable feedback" (Baumeister and Finkel 2010, 150). Also, it should be noted that such adjustments are constrained to some extent by the physical structure and environment of the organism, which the self is used to interpret.

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