The Self As A Universal Necessity

Dennett’s interpretation of the self as a “center of narrative gravity” involves the idea of one’s self as an abstract entity, or what he would call an ‘abstractum,’ and one which is constantly engaged in the writing of that life’s autobiography. Much like an object’s center of gravity, the self too can’t be fixated to any particle in space time, just as, he suggests, it can’t be fixated to the physical in the same way other non physical properties such as shape, color, and size are physically fixated. “Each person,” he says, “has a self (in addition to a center of gravity) (105).” In this paper I wish to explore the idea of the self as an Author of a Narrative, as posited by Dennett, before turning to some issues for Narrativity raised by Strawson in light of a more restricted form of Narrativity which is, as far as I know, not adopted by either philosopher. A slightly deeper reflection on what Dennett says leads me to the realization that selves, much like centers of gravity, are endowed, perhaps too by their creators, with the qualities which they possess. Whether those qualities include it intelligence, or lack of it, gravity, or lack of that, is precisely due to matter’s being constituted around them in such a way as to give rise to the qualities in question. But their lack of fixation to the physical is perhaps the only similarity, in Dennett’s view, between selves and centers of gravity; “centers of gravity,” he says, “as fictional objects, exhibit the same feature. They have only the properties with which they have been endowed by the theory that constitutes them.” (106) That is to say that there are questions about such theoretical entities who’s answer is simply indeterminate. That is also to say, as he indeed does, that any answers to questions about real historical figures (real selves of the past) such as whether so and so had a mole, or a scar on his left shoulder blade are indeed determinate (that they are bound to either truth or falsity). But the previous quotation highlights what I think would be most required to believe Dennett’s view, and when distinguishing between the properties of real selves and fictional objects, that the former can somehow come to be endowed with powers beyond the theory which constitutes them.

If asked about the cause of the sinking of the Titanic, Dennett would suggest that there is a fact of the matter as to what that was. He, or a fan of his, might say that it was the iceberg’s rupturing of the ship’s hull, or else it was the water’s consequently, and uncontrollably rushing in. But this shows that such facts weren’t determined until certain minds made inquiries into causes where the very mechanism of the Mind’s inquiry is limited to recognizing causes of one form or another. And this further doesn’t rule out that said inquiries themselves were constrained, just as they were conducted, by the mechanisms of the inquiring minds themselves. In fact, from Dennett’s supposition that Selves are entities beyond constraint to the physical systems by which they are endowed by their creators, we get that selves aren’t just bound to those constraints in their everyday life, but are so, more specifically bound to them in self inquiry. Saying that the Titanic sunk because water rushed into its hull in an uncontrollable manner is pinning down the effect (the sinking) to the cause just stated. But that is not to say that the very methods by which one conducts said inquiry, and subsequently deduces the link between cause and effect aren’t themselves limited in quality, quantity, or both.

I will come back to these points later, but for now, I must look at some of the issues posited for the Gravitational Narrativity Hypothesis by Galen Strawson in his paper which is, perhaps optimistically, titled “Against Narrativity.” There, and while comparing events which occur in the present to those which happened in one’s past says the following;

So: it’s clear to me that events in my remoter past didn’t happen to me\*. But what does this amount to? It certainly doesn’t mean that I don’t have any autobiographical memories of these past experiences. I do. Nor does it mean that my autobiographical memories don’t have what philosophers call a ‘from-the-inside’ character. Some of them do. And they are certainly the experiences of the human being that I am. It does not, however, follow from this that I experience them as having happened to me\*, or indeed that they did happen to me\*. They certainly do not present as things that happened to me\*, and I think I’m strictly, literally correct in thinking that they did not happen to me\*. (433-34)

The literary accuracy of the statement that events in the past did not happen to me cannot be overstated as it is reached purely upon the reflection that one, and even their body, is undergoing constant change. Literally, every particle which made up my body yesterday is not identical to each one composing it today. But this, I don’t think, rules out the possibility of memories, or a persistent ‘from the inside’ feeling to all the outwardly detectable changes; this further doesn’t rule out that said memories and feelings are a direct result of the outwardly detectable changes. For anything not to have a “from the inside feeling” is, I think, for that thing to not be an experience at all.

Regardless of whether any experience can be felt “from the outside,” this is but the beginning of a host of issues which arise, for me at least, upon reflection on what Strawson says. Another distinction which seems as useless as the one just mentioned in rendering any judgement about Narrativity is that which he raises between Diachronics and Episodics. For, it is evident that Strawson only raises this distinction in order to charge the Narrative, mainly Dennett, with being Diachronic;

Diachronics may feel that there is something chill- ing, empty and deficient about the Episodic life. They may fear it, although it is no less full or emotionally articulated than the Diachronic life, no less thoughtful or sensitive, no less open to friendship, love and loyalty. And certainly the two forms of life differ significantly in their ethical and emotional form. (431)

But this assumes that one is either black or white, Diachronic, or Episodic in this case. Furthermore, in raising this difference, Strawson aims to disassociate himself from the former, while claiming to belong to the latter.

But, off course, the unwarranted distinctions don’t end with the one just mentioned. Strawson additionally raises other characteristics which may or may not be present in a given personality along with others. Those characteristics include being Diachronic (D), Form Finding (F), Story Telling (S), and Revisionary (R). Aside from charging Dennett with being [+D +F +S +R], Strawson claims himself to be lacking all such characteristics;

I take myself to be [-D -F -S -R]. The claim that I don’t revise much is the most vulnerable one, because it is in the nature of the case that one has no sense that one revises when one does. So I may be wrong, but (of course) I don’t think so. (447) which I find scarcely believable. Surely the Revisionary stance can be reduced to that of Story Telling, that (if story telling, then revisionary), but this leaves no room for his following comments that the Revisionary can be present while the Story Teller is not. Charging against the “frustrated story-tellers,” he says that they “may fall into revision simply because they can’t find satisfying form in their lives and without being in any way motivated by a wish to preserve or restore self-respect. (445)” While this may be the least serious of the issues to come up with his argument, if preserving or restoring self-respect is not what he himself is after, only then is his charge against the story-teller’s revision even warranted. Furthermore, given what he says about the tendency to form find, that “one must have some sort of relatively large-scale coherence-seeking, unity- seeking, pattern-seeking, or most generally [F] form-finding tendency when it comes to one’s apprehension of one’s life, or relatively large-scale parts of one’s life, (441)” it is plausible to view his entire endeavor to disprove Narrativity as purely, and strictly one of Form Finding [+F], which I openly charge him with.

Thus, when asked about the cause of the fall of a man who was lined up in front of a firing squad, an Episodic, as Strawson claims to be, would, in a manner that is neither story telling nor form finding I suppose, attribute it to the Universe’s lining up in such a way as to cause his fall at that moment. That the 10 bullets or so which entered his body may have been linked to his ultimate fate in a way which is left to the mind to determine, but that, regardless of such a link, each of the bullet entering his body is its own event, as is his fall. Thus, I find his following claim with regards to his own tendencies to be generally unwarranted;

Some think that all normal human beings have all four of these properties. I think that some normal human beings have none of them. Some think that Narrativity necessarily involves all four. I think (as just remarked) that the limiting case of Narrativity involves nothing more than form- finding story-telling (it does not even require one to be Diachronic). (446) as to have non of the properties in question is to be left with a theory which, for nothing else, is a Pure Form Finding one. And if any theory’s aims are not to fit within the larger cohesion of things, then such a theory is good at explaining absolutely nothing within said cohesion.

So far then, the proposed alternative to narrativity has, as I have hopefully shown, proven to be much more problematic than the theory which it sets out to set straight. This is why I still feel that Narrativity deserves another chance. Perhaps it is Dennett’s view that is at stake, or perhaps it is the whole tendency of many western Philosophies to blindly assume intentionality. But regardless of which it is, what I have in mind is perhaps also what Jerome Bruner was alluding to in saying; "another critic comments on the autobiographical narrator's irresistible error in account- ing for his acts in terms of intentions when, in fact, they might have been quite otherwise determined.” (13) That is to say that the source of what is normally regarded as ‘intentional’ may turn out to be something other than intentionality altogether. What if we are but characters in the narrative who’s life simply unfolds in front of their own eyes with us having no control whatsoever over the events in the narrative? And what is the basis for the assumption that we are in the seat of the driver of the bus when, all we may turn out to be is merely passengers? Those are but some questions that I, and I suspect too would Bruner, call for some more convincing answers to.

Works Cited

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