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Author(s): Ralph Hunt and Glenn A. Hartz

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Self-Identity and Free Will are Beyond our Control

A local campus newspaper column commented on twins who failed in a prison-break attempt. In a suicide pact, one twin killed the other, then himself. The writer speculated that the one twin was so stupid that he was trying to kill himself but shot his twin by mistake. What makes this funny (if somewhat tasteless) is the utter absurdity of mistaking anyone, even a twin, for one's own self. It is a mistake no member of any species could make and survive an hour. This awareness of the boundaries of one's self represents the crux of the personal identity issue.

Identity is too complicated to be solely either an aspect of memory, as Locke claims, or simple permanent occupation of the same physical body. It is not cognitive awareness of any particular aspects of the environment or of psychological events. Personal identity and the awareness of the self as a distinctive, tangible object is an overall characteristic of a brain, rather than something that a brain perceives. The intellectual awareness of experiential continuity is parasitic on that brain activity.

After noting several examples of the radical dependence of self-identity on proper brain function and its independence of memory, we argue that even free will cannot be given its usual metaphysical analysis if this holds. That is, we usually take free actions to begin with "self-conscious" thoughts. But if these thoughts are furnished to us from the brain with a well-defined self already present, we aren't the prime mover of those actions. The brain hands-us us readymade; we can't "start fresh" and initiate a series of events which defines our self-identity. John Searle ends his recent book with the observation that

... for reasons I don't really understand, evolution has given us a form of experience of voluntary action where the experience of freedom, that is to say, the experience of the sense of alternative possibilities, is built into the very structure of conscious, voluntary, intentional human behavior. For that reason, I believe, neither this discussion nor any other will ever convince us that our behavior is unfree.¹

We argue that this sense of freedom is tied up with the sense of the self, and that both are built into us, at the same level, by the brain. We "sense" our identity at a certain level, at the level of conscious thought, and that sensory level is given us by the brain. The way our thought is constructed makes most sense if we conceive "being given" awareness of self at that specific level. Otherwise we tend to see our mental lives as either magically arising from nowhere or else being manipulated by dark lower forces with their own intentions.

In addition, there is a tendency to think of identity over the long haul - realizing that the little drummer boy and the old general are the same person - as being quite different from the short term realization that the leg in bed with us belongs in fact to us. There is certainly a conceptual difference, but it doesn't seem to be a metaphysically deep one. Self-identity of both sorts is an integral, in-built part of our general awareness.

Identity is a pre-conscious matter, much as is language-ability, but our position is not in any way connected with Freudian theories of the unconscious. Also, maybe more than one unconscious factor is involved: a sense of balance, for instance, requires a feeling for who or what exactly is being balanced, and this aspect of identity might be something quite different from distinguishing right from left. Identity works in conjunction with consciousness, but is not a product of consciousness. To know who you are, you have to be conscious, i.e., have your wits about you. But the sense of identity is pre-conscious. Similarly, you have to be conscious to speak, but you do not need awareness of the subconscious processes related to speaking to speak. Identity is a component of consciousness rather than an act of consciousness. (We are aware of identity at a conscious level, but that is not the point. We can also be aware of using language.)

I Personal Identity is a Given

In order to have a sense of personal identity, we need an innate sense of what and where we are. Perhaps this is what Kant alludes to when he tries to tell us why space is “presupposed” by “outer experiences” rather than derived from them:

...in order that certain sensations be referred to something outside me (that is, to something in another region of space from that in which I find myself), and similarly in order that I may be able to represent them as outside and alongside one another. . . , the representation of space must be presupposed.²

The fact that I “find” myself in a definite region of space anchors the entire “outer” realm. As Kant would no doubt add, this placing of the self in a region is done pre-consciously - we would add, by the brain.

Without a ready-made sense of bodily identity, the twin example above would not be so absurd. Kinesthesia, the ability to sense the positioning of our limbs, takes a sense of bodily identity for granted. It would seem silly to say we decide that those sensations pertain to us. Of course, for practical purposes there is usually no time to consider matters of bodily identity. Here again such identity is largely unconscious. If you see an iron falling toward your foot, the foot moves. Philosophical reflection on the unity of ‘selfhood’ at this point would just result in a broken foot.

Rather startling proof of the role of the brain in assigning identity even prior to one’s awareness of one’s body is given by the phenomenon of what is generally termed hemispherical neglect or hemi-inattention. Heilman, Watson and Valenstein indicate that

Patients with profound hemi-inattention may even fail to recognize that their contralesional extremities [limbs on the side opposite to the cerebral hemisphere with brain damage] are their own. They may complain that someone else’s arm or leg is in bed with them. When confronted with objective evidence, they may still deny that their own extremities belong to them. Patients with milder neglect may be aware that their extremities belong to them (because they are attached), but still refer to their extremities as though they were objects.

Patients with unilateral neglect are most inattentive to stimuli contralateral to their lesion, but it is not unusual for them also to be inattentive to ipsilateral [same side] stimuli, although ipsilateral neglect is not as severe.³

Oliver Sacks⁴ gives a popularized account wherein the man complained of a “severed human leg” in bed with him, that was in fact his own leg. Sacks tells of correspondence concerning a similar patient (who “had atrial fibrillation and had thrown off a large embolus giving him a left hemiplegia”) from Dr. Michael Kremmer:

When I asked him what happened at night he said quite openly that when he woke in the night he always found that there was a dead, cold, hairy leg in bed with him which he could not understand but could not tolerate and he, therefore, with his good arm and leg pushed it out of bed and naturally, of course, the rest of him followed.

In other cases the victim will completely ignore one whole side of his body, usually the side opposite the cerebral hemisphere that has suffered stroke or other damage. The fact that such phenomena are fairly widespread argues for the existence of an in-built sense of self-identity. The sense is something we are made with - which is, as Kant would say, "presupposed *a priori*" - rather than something we cognitively discover or decide upon. It relates, as the foregoing examples indicate, to our whole bodies, and is presumably possessed of a long evolutionary history.

Ever since Locke it has been thought that self-identity has something to do with memory. If it does, then self-identity would seem to be constructed at least in part by self-conscious reflection: I think therefore I was.

It has been convincingly argued long ago by Bishop Butler⁵ that memory already requires a person to possess a sense of identity in order for memory to operate the way it does. We remember our life as a more or less continuous whole, but there is no *a priori* reason why memory should function like that. As Hume showed, without already possessing a sense of 'self', our memories would be nothing more than isolated images or isolated facts - blind sense-data. Using memory to explain our sense of self, then, already presumes certain concepts of self.

Again Kant was onto something like this with his doctrine of the "synthesis of apperception":

Intuitions are nothing to us, and do not in the least concern us if they cannot be taken up into consciousness. . . . In this way alone is any knowledge possible. We are conscious *a priori* of the complete identity of the self in respect of all representations which can ever belong to our knowledge, as being a necessary condition of the possibility of all representations. For me they can represent something only in so far as they belong with all the others to one consciousness.⁶

Kant claims that the "abiding and unchanging 'I'" is due to a "synthesis of imagination," which, "is, though exercised *a priori*, always in itself sensible." He says that without that synthesis,

. . . even though we should have the power of associating perceptions, it would remain entirely undetermined and accidental whether they would themselves be associable . . . ; there might exist a multitude of perceptions, and indeed an entire sensibility, in which much empirical consciousness would arise in my mind, but in a state of separation, and without belonging to a consciousness of myself. This, however, is impossible. For it is only because I ascribe all perceptions to one consciousness . . . that I can say of all perceptions that I am conscious of them.

Of course, one Kantian theme which is not transferrable into our predominantly materialist metaphysics of identity is his neo-Cartesian dismissal of animal consciousness. As he writes in a famous passage,

[If I had the mentality of a sub-human animal, I might have intuitions but] I should not be able to know that I have them, and they would therefore be for me, as a cognitive being, absolutely nothing. They might still exist in me (a being unconscious of my own existence) as representations. . . , connected according to an empirical law of association, exercise influence upon feeling and desire, and so always disporting themselves with regularity, without my thereby acquiring the least cognition of anything, not even of these my own states.⁷

First, it seems plain that in any realistic environment no animal could long endure -

certainly not long enough to reproduce - with such abysmally shallow mental capacities. Second, Flip just does seem to know which leg is his. If the perception of his own leg were literally "nothing" to him, we'd expect him to have as little interest in its well-being as he does the rabbit's leg he's eating. (A sure sign of illness in an animal - which isn't in a trap - is its chewing destructively on its own limbs.) Finally, evolutionary continuity would favor attributing awareness of self to organisms pretty far down the phylogenetic tree. Before long (say, when we hit hermit crabs), it would probably become uninteresting and more like a built-in reflex response (but might hermit crabs "identify" their scavenged shells as limbs?). Long before slugs, it would no doubt dwindle out altogether.

From psychology we learn that memory's development can be fairly complete in individuals whose self-identity is still undergoing maturation. Localization of tactile stimulation in fingers, for instance, seems to be part of full-fledged self-identity. Benton in Heilman and Valenstein⁸ reports research by Lefford et. al. (1974) which shows that performance on specific finger-identifying tasks is maturation-related:

The easiest task was pointing to fingers that the examiner touched as the child watched him: 73% of the three-year-old children, 93% of the four-year-olds, and 99% of the five-year-olds showed successful performance. Localizing fingers which the examiner pointed to (but did not touch) was about as easy. . . . But purely tactile recognition (i.e., identifying touched fingers without the aid of vision) was more difficult for the children (24, 63, and 72% successes at three, four, and five years, respectively). Still more difficult was tactile localization of touched fingers on a schematic representation of the hand instead of the child's own hand. . . . Only 11% of the three-year-old children, 28% of the four-year-olds, and 52% of the five-year-olds succeeded on this task.

These and similar investigations on older children indicate to Benton⁹ that "Clearly there are aspects of finger recognition which reach maturity only after the age of twelve years." Similar maturational development, apparently independent of memory, can be seen in left-right orientation. Benton reports¹⁰ that

Many five-year-old children and the majority of six-year-olds are able to identify single lateral parts of their body in terms of 'right' and 'left.' (Terman, 1916; Benton, 1959; Belmont and Birch, 1963). However, they are likely to make errors in the execution of double commands, particularly 'crossed' commands. In the latter instance, failure to cross the midline is the most frequent type of error (e.g., the child touches his left ear with his left hand in response to the command to touch his right ear with his left hand.) Some children perform decidedly less well with their eyes closed than with their eyes open. Most of them fail to make the necessary 180 degrees reversal in orientation in pointing to lateral body parts of the confronting examiner.

The ability to execute double commands develops rapidly after the age of six years and it is unusual to encounter a nine-year-old who has difficulty in executing these commands. . . . By the age of twelve years, practically all normal children perform successfully in identifying body parts of the confronting examiner and in combined orientation tasks.

Presumably these children had normal memory long before they were adolescents (or at least no memory disabilities were reported by the researchers, who were using normal children). Yet the memory did not allow them mature perception of finger stimulation or left-right differentiation. These would seem to be maturational aspects of self-awareness and identity development independent of memory.

II Location of the Self and the Will

Our sense of identity reaches into what we consider the “seat” of the self; this is also to some extent built-in. We seem to sense conscious thought as being at the “control center” of all our mental activities. The level of conscious thought is where volitions begin. It is also where the “I” starts: anything earlier is considered as at best unformed.

Now free will, to be at all meaningful, has to be conceived of as occurring at the level of conscious thought. We consider the initiation of volition to occur at the level of contemplating the act, even though such contemplation must be an end stage of brain processes. If we contemplate, for instance, shutting the door, and we have the thought in natural language, then the thought has been put into natural language by the time it ‘occurs’ to us in that form. The ‘voice’ is not an initiating stage, although we usually tend to think of it as such. If I tell myself, “I will now raise my arm,” I get the distinct feeling that the thought originated right there. But that couldn’t be right, since I had the thought in English. There had to be some earlier activity at some level that put the thought into natural language. The thought was the effect of mental processes rather than the cause of anything. I am no more consciously inventing the words in my head at the moment when I think them than I am inventing the words on the page when I read them. While introspection is notoriously deceptive, it nonetheless does seem to get this right: the voice in my head when I read and the voice in my head when I think are exactly the same. If I read a sentence from a book, then “decide” to repeat it in my head, I can find no difference in the voice. Yet I have an irresistible feeling that the “thinking voice” is in command, whereas the “reading voice” isn’t. The thinking voice is the center of what we would call the self. There is no ‘me’ listening to the thinking voice in the sense that there is a me reading the words. The me is the thinking voice.

One of no doubt many reasons for this abrupt emergence of self is that very little of our mental life gets into consciousness, and we seem to be given information there only on a “need to know” basis. “Leading” a receiver or target when throwing requires an incredible amount of mental activity (no other animals, including chimpanzees, can throw with any sort of accuracy), yet none of this mental activity reaches consciousness. We simply find ourselves able to do it. Probably there is no need for this type of mental activity to become conscious: we need no nuts and bolts information to carry out these activities, and energies put into making such things conscious would be energies wasted. Similarly with the processes that lead to speech, memory, or thought, awareness of the preliminary steps would serve no purpose and just waste space. Thus the steps leading to the thought, like the steps leading to the throw, are at a pre-conscious level. A consequence is that the thought seems to start suddenly when we become aware of it in our minds.

There is a difference, however. We seem to have no problem with the fact that our football passes have been led up to by unconscious mental activity. We, or some of us, do have a problem with the idea that all “our” thoughts have been prepared for us, as if by a speech-writer. The latter preparation should seem as natural as the former, but it doesn’t. It seems that somehow our mind is not our own if the thought has been constructed “for us,” while it does not seem as if the pass is not our own if it was pre-arranged.

Similarly, if we believe ourselves to have free will, we can only accept the willing as free

if it occurs at the level of verbal consciousness. That, after all, is the control center. Anything occurring at an earlier or lower level is perceived as being done to us rather than by us. And events done to us aren't free acts.

The standard model of the self usually postulates a single factor, me (as in Plato's "rational part" of the soul), which is in control of typical decisions and thoughts. Any other factor (the "appetitive part") is often seen as antithetic to this one. The alien factions are sometimes, unlike Plato's, external, and sometimes, like his, internal.

External factors include a whole panoply of historical beings: "The Devil made me do it," is sometimes heard to this day. Sirens and mermaids seem invented in part to account for sailors' sleepy inattention at the helm, and Incubi and Succubi invented to account for other unconscious sleep activities.¹¹ Witchcraft was once a burning issue, and bewitchment construed as another of the outside impediments which inhibit the normal operations of the self.

Internal factions which are of the same ilk as Plato's parts of the soul include the familiar baroque ontology of Freudian theory. Here partitioned systems operate in much the same direction. It is the 'Id' that exerts its dark influence on "us." The undesirable aspects are somebody else. When we speak of controlling the 'Id' we are speaking of controlling a unified entity that interferes with the 'Ego' at the level of conscious thought, rather than as one of the factors that in part comprise the conscious thought.

More recently, theories of self-deception have sub-systemized the deceptors: when we refuse to recognize we are not getting tenure, it is because a sub-system is keeping that unpleasant information from the main system. There are also the little voices that insist we take a fourth piece of cake. The mind's history is full of corridors of whispers urging us on to dirty deeds. The fact that these voices are echoes of our own seems unacceptable.

In theories which try to spell how free will is realized despite deterministic forces, free will is often explained in terms of mechanisms which operate below the level of consciousness. The Epicurean swerve of the atom is an example. We are told by Epicurean theory that sometimes the atoms that operate our mentality unaccountably swerve, producing a randomness that permits indeterminate action. Theorists who hold that some brain action occurs at the quantum level are saying much the same thing. Mental process at the quantum level cause indeterminacy in operations at higher levels. Thus our thinking is not determined.

This is cold comfort. Even if true, it does our self-esteem no good to think that some atoms somewhere in our brains are determining what we think. We would be just as determined, just as ruled, at the conscious level, whether atoms are determinate or indeterminate. It is the atoms, undetermined or not at that level, which are ruling our thoughts at the conscious level. Free will has to be free at the level of consciousness if it is to count as free will at all.

It is this difficulty in conceiving of our identity as being built by the brain at the level of conscious thought that makes for some confusion in accounting for that thought. On the one hand there is a temptation to suspend the normal laws of causality and assume that thoughts more or less just happen on their own. This is difficult to entertain seriously, since it would mean, for one thing, that it is just a coincidence that thoughts form only in people

and not in chairs or geraniums. There would be no reason, if thoughts could form freely, that they would always pick people to form in. Once we assume something special about humans as the housings of thoughts, we are opening the door for requiring some fairly special physical substrata from which those thoughts arise.

An opposite approach to that of thoughts formed by themselves is that of multiple and intentional subsystems or partitions in the mind. If we assume that the buck both starts and stops at the level of conscious thought, then it becomes easy to look at conflict in terms of other, darker thoughts and feelings that start at a similar level. According to this position, if the thoughts we want, like the thoughts of resisting the midnight piece of pie, arise full-blown and spontaneously, then unbidden thoughts and desires of consuming the pie must arise fully-formed too. Thus cases of ambivalence, weak will, etc., are often construed in terms of warring intentional systems. Freudian notions of 'ids' and 'egos' are in part a result of seeing thought originating at the level of consciousness. On the Freudian model, the thought process of the subsystems is explainable in the same way regular thought is - it just happens.

Freudian ideas of repression follow the same model, similar to some of the models for self-deception. There is a fully-intentional sub-system hypothesized to "fight back" thoughts and feelings that for one reason or another the subsystem believes the main system - you - shouldn't have. The Represser, with its full compliment of intelligence and intentions, does battle with the Main Man, sometimes winning and sometimes losing. It is not difficult to come up with these interior battalions once we have accepted the basic premise that thoughts and feelings can spring up full-grown like the crop of soldiers from Jason's planted dragon teeth.

We can forego all this partitioning and its attendant appeal to subsystems by thinking of these phenomena in terms of a different model. Why not just say that the "repressed" thoughts never attain realization enough to need repressing? Instead of saying that a thought becomes fully-formed and then is beaten back, it would seem more economical to hypothesize that the thought never quite gets there. Salience is a well-established property of the brain's functioning: it ignores what it doesn't need. You don't notice the same old scenery on the long drive home, but you do notice a sudden obstruction in the road. The brain doesn't form thoughts and then repress them; it just never "needs" certain thoughts in the first place (like the thought about not getting tenure.) This would help account for the 'inklings' of ideas, desires and so forth that we often feel.

A well-known problem with intentional sub-systems and partitions is infinite regress. If intentionality is comprised of sub-systems, and sub-systems themselves have intention, then it would seem as if the sub-systems themselves are built up of intentional subsystems. This, like a philosophy article, can go on and on. If we accept the premise that our thought is formed before it seems to be, we can in large part dispense with intentional subsystems and partitions. It may be nearly impossible, however, to conceive of the level of thought as a monitor rather than a control center, as someone managing the crow's nest rather than the helm. Our sense of identity may be so deeply embedded in this respect as to be insurmountable.

A clearer, if not totally cheerful, picture of will and self-control can however emerge if

we buy the premise that the idea of a conscious self at the level of thought is one of the brain's by-products. There is no reason to think that the interior forces that form us are any less a part of us, for all their secret control. We are not being manipulated by them any more than we are being manipulated by uncontrollable forces when we ride a bicycle. The interior processes that allow us to balance the bicycle are no more sinister or out of our hands than the forces that form our thoughts. We are those forces, only in a more polished, sophisticated form. Our identity does include, after all, our ingrained sense of identity. It is just a whole lot more.

A convincing exercise of free will, then, would be to resist the inbuilt inclination to believe in free will.

Ohio State University at Mansfield

Notes

- ¹ John Searle, *Minds, Brains and Science* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard Univ. Press; 1984), 98.
- ² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martins; 1965), 68 (A23/B38)
- ³ "Neglect and Related Disorders" in *Clinical Neuropsychology*, ed. Kenneth M. Heilman and Edward Valenstein, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press; 1985), 244.
- ⁴ *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. (New York: Harper and Row; 1987). All examples from 55-58.
- ⁵ Joseph Butler, "Of Personal Identity" (first published in 1736) in *Personal Identity*, ed. John Perry (Berkeley: University of California Press; 1975), 99-105, esp. 105.
- ⁶ Kant, *Critique*. First quotation from 141-42 (A116); next oblique quotation from 146 (A123-24) and final block quotation from 144-45 (A 121-22).
- ⁷ A letter to Herz, quoted in Jonathan Bennett, *Kant's Analytic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1966), 104-05 and Norman Kemp Smith, *A Commentary to Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1923); xlix-l.
- ⁸ *Clinical Neuropsychology*, ed. Heilman and Valenstein; 117.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 118.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 123.
- ¹¹ Sometimes actual external factors are further externalized: Being 'under the influence of alcohol' suggests, in line with the ordinary model of the free-wheeling self, that the real me is fully in charge now, and that the unseemly remarks "my body" is making are, as they say, 'the drinks talking', not me.