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Philosphy of the Mind

April 24th, 2015

The Narrative Self

Many of us have this conception of self which is a boundary create with the purpose to distinguish ourselves from others. In “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity,” Daniel Dennett argues against the pre-reflective conception of the self, where a unified entity will persists through time, and argues that the “self” is a central abstraction or a theorist’s fiction. Perhaps the strongest argument that Dennett gives for his claim relies on the analogous concept, center of gravity. In this paper, I will argue that our conception of “self” is superficial, because the “self” is an abstract and nonexistent object that is created for the purpose for making sense of behaviors and actions.

Dennett begins by introducing a crucial analogy of abstraction or the theorist’s fiction. First, Dennett uses an useful physics theoretical fiction, “the center of gravity.” Dennett compares the self to the center of gravity of an object, by stating that they are similar in that they do not have any physical properties besides spatio-temporal location. The representation of your self is a fictional character which depends on the stories told and that is what Dennett calls the center of narrative gravity. At the same time, the center of gravity can also be manipulated. It is easily demonstrated by imagining an object and its center of gravity, because by simply shifting an angle of an object, the center of gravity will also shift. At the same time, the center of gravity is only an abstract point in the object and not an actual physical marker.

Our conception of self is superficial because Dennett claims that the creator is not self, through thought-experiment of Gilbert, the “novel-writing machine.” A machine, an artificial intelligent machine, is programmed to write any novels. When the machine is turned on and allowed mobility, the machine starts to write lines such as, “call me Gilbert” and starts to write stories that are similar to the “life” of the machine. Dennett argues that these novels written by the machine and Gilbert are the fictional self, where the machine is creator of the self but is not a self. The machine would be considered a self-interpreter, because it provides itself a narrative of itself in the world, making it an expression of a self (our own). However, this is not suggesting that the machine knows the world, and it does not know that it has created a fictional character, similarly to our own brains, because we are not even aware of it. Therefore, Dennett would claim that like machine, we are constructing and narrating an autobiography that is expressing our self. The idea of a “dumb” machine writing a novel is not inherently wrong, because we will interpret said novel and discuss it similar to how we would discuss other written novels.

Dennett argues that our consciousness’s main function is created a sense of reasonable narrative for our experiences, so the concept of the self is a convenient fiction such as center of gravity. Like the use of center of gravity to solve physic problems, the self is used to make sense of behavior and actions, and is not corresponding to anything that is tangible. This self-representation can be easier mistaken as our true self, but it is only a representation of self that is used to organize our self narrative and other information that we collect to refer to one. It is normal for people to make stories to make sense of the world; an example would be the pantyhose study. Researchers presented four of the same pantyhose and asked women to choose the one they prefer and give a reason. Women would pick one out and give many reasons for why their choice was different from the other despite it being the same type of pantyhose. Like the pantyhose study, the self is a convenient fiction used as a self-representation of our sense of self. Therefore, the self is the protagonist of a self narrating story, where the mind is the creator.

The center of narrative gravity is a fictional character that is much like the main character in a book. The usual example is Sherlock Holmes, where Sherlock Holmes is the analogous to the self or center of narrative gravity, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is the author but also the mind. Like the protagonist in a novel, the self is describe with a set of personality, dispositions, characteristics, and even plans for the future. For an example, Sherlock Holmes is an eccentric consulting detective, with an infamous personality, whose drive is find interesting mysteries. Similar to fictional characters presented in novels, the self is not determinant in some dimension, meaning that there are some properties that are neither true nor false, because the principle of bivalence does not hold. Yet, a fictional character can be discussed and can be predicted often and can be debated, such as, “what would Sherlock Holmes do if he got into a bar fight?” It would be possible to predict, because the character is defined and plays a certain part in the story, unifying story. Therefore, the center of narrative gravity, like the central character, is the center which the story revolves around.

For many, the question, “where is the self?” is constantly asked. Dennett would state that it is categorical mistake to look for self in the brain, because, unlike center of gravity, the self’s spatio-temporal position is roughly defined. Sometime in the future, brain research may be capable of the localization of where it can pinpoint to the exact location. Then one day, it may be possible to say that there is a self.

Other philosophers would oppose to this argument by using split-brain cases. In split-brain cases, the main linked, corpus callosum has been severed. This becomes a problem for many split-brain patients, because each hemisphere contains different information. For an example, speech production is located in the left hemisphere, but the right hemisphere responsible for somatosensory system on the left hand. Patients would have to talk to themselves to find out what is going on in one hemisphere of the brain. As a result, these people demonstrate a self that is not whole and unified; because it would seem that the two hemispheres would have two different narratives. It would seem that there is not a full narrative available for the nonlinguistic part, aka the right hemisphere, of the brain, so it would mean that these people are missing access to themselves. However, this object does not succeed, because split-brain cases only further shows that the self is a created abstract.

Despite the division of the hemispheres, split-brained patients continue to report that they still feel unified. It seems to me that Dennett’s argument for center of narrative gravity allows for the existence of one or more minds within a body or one mind with multiple bodies that is sharing the same self. With the split-mind cases, center of narrative gravity exists because patients have that feeling of apparent unified “sole inhabitant” of the body. Split-brain patients are capable of using tricks that exploits the pain system to undergo different types of relaying information. Therefore, the self is present to keep the narrative unified and maintained. As a result, the split-brain case provides a strong argument for Dennett’s existence multiple minds in a body or a mind in multiple bodies.

At the same time, if we look at “normal” brains, we can see that are similar to those with severed corpus callosum. In normal brains, it is not unusually for us to ask ourselves questions to understand a story, similar to how a split-brain patient would ask themselves questions to unite their hemisphere. Normal brains also stumble upon problems where information can be incorrect, incomplete, or even inaccessible, meaning that there are usually missing parts. For us, that does not mean that we are also not unified nor have a disrupted or a false narrative. Dennett would use the Updike thought experiment as an example to show how inconsistency does not mean a broken narrative. In the thought experiment, Dennett proposes that Updike may decide to write a sequel, but many years have passed and the new novel may end up with several inconsistencies with the first novel. It may seem that “true story” is erroneous.

However, Dennett would say that the inconsistency is something we should object, but instead, we have a tendency to fill in gaps when it comes to interpreting events and others in order to resolve any conflict and inconsistencies. I find this to be very convincing, because these phenomena can be seen in many psychology cases studies on memories. In many psychological studies, participants have show many memory errors, because people tend to use schematic knowledge to help fill in the information gaps. Examples of this are flashbulb memories, very emotional memories, participants are asked to recall emotionally memories, and majority of the time, participants will report false memories or put in fillers using schematic knowledge to make sense of those emotionally memories. The participants’ reconstructive memories are often used to help explain the inconsistencies that often happens two events, because sometimes certain memories are lost. This not only happens in memory but also our visual perception. Naturally, there is a blind spot in every eyeball due to the optic nerve, and as a result, there is a spot in the visual field that has no information. However, we do not see a blank space, instead, our visual cortex and mind fills in the gap to correct the vision.

An argument against Dennett would be that there is no problem of the self. Olson’s article “There is No Problem of the Self,” eliminates the concept of the self, by arguing that there no agreed upon philosophy definition of the self. Olson explains that the various definitions are unclear and incoherent, because the self problem is a topic that often misinterprets by philosopher due to lack of clarity and reference. Therefore, it should be eliminated suggesting that Dennett’s center of narrative gravity is among the many subjective definitions of selves. Olson states that if the self is ineffable then it cannot be described through the concepts of analysis, characteristic feature, paradigm cases, or scope of application; therefore, the definition of the self cannot really be criticized. If the entity of self cannot be understand and not defined, then these philosophical problems pertaining to the self, such as the center of narrative gravity, are not problems. However, it would seem that Olson can agree with Dennett that the self is one’s way of seeing oneself or a certain set of beliefs about one self. It would seem that Dennett would go further in purpose to say that center of narrative gravity is generation of the “way one sees oneself” in order to make sense of their and others’ behavior and action.

In conclusion, Dennett’s argument suggests that the source of narrative unity (the self) is the abstraction to be understood the same way as physicists understand the abstract nature of the center of gravity for physical objects. Therefore, he claims that the center of narrative gravity provides a strong case that the conception is not an unified entity that persist through time but a theorist’s fiction or an abstract object. In this argument, we see that the self is a fictitious character, which we create to understand ourselves and to make sense of the world. In the end, we are the product (self) along with the source (mind) of our own narratives.