

# The Extended Self as a Centre of Gravity

## Introduction

In this paper I argue that the self is, to borrow a term from Charles Taylor, *dialogical*. This definition of identity is not meant to abstract the self, reduce it to some sort of narrative fiction<sup>(1)</sup> or to conceptualize it in purely immaterial terms. What I have in mind is a concept of the self that I will call the *extended self as a centre of gravity* (ESCG from now on).

The idea of an *extended self* comes from Andy Clarke's and David Chalmers paper "The extended mind". From them I borrow the idea that a person's *skin and skull* do not represent a person's boundaries. The idea of a self as a *centre of gravity* was first developed by Daniel Dennett in his essay "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity" and in this paper I borrow the concept of a centre of gravity in order to defend my position that the world always gravitates towards an individual, or what I call, a *dweller*<sup>(2)</sup>. While in his paper Dennett develops a theory of the self that is to be understood as a centre of gravity for a narrative self, I argue that the self is to be understood as a centre of gravity for a material, embodied self that necessarily exists (or existed) in the world<sup>(3)</sup>. In this way, I contend that embodiment is a necessary condition for personal identity.

## I. The self as a centre of gravity

According to Dennett the self is a centre of narrative gravity. The idea here is that the self is not a thing or an object reducible to any form of matter. This is why the neuroscientists' search for the seat of consciousness in the brain is an ill conceived

project. On this point, Dennett is essentially correct. However, while Dennett maintains in large part the Humean claim that *no one has ever seen a self* and therefore agrees that the self is indeed some sort of fiction (albeit a narrative fiction), I contend that the self is not a fiction. The inability to pinpoint a centre does not entail its fictionality. To illustrate my point, consider the example of a car. The inability to pinpoint the centre of its *cariness* (whatever it is that makes a car a car) does not mean there is no car. Where is the identity of the car? Is it *in* the engine? The fuel injectors? The wheels? Certainly no precise point of the car *is* the car. Yet the car is not a fiction. What the car does have are internal and external components. It also has a centre of gravity that enables the car to cohere and maintain a certain unity. And we certainly gravitate towards the car when we think about it, talk about, work on it and want to use it. Just like a centre of gravity, the car pulls us towards it. Furthermore, whenever we talk about a specific individualized car, that car *is* physical. In this same way, then, I argue that selves are necessarily physical.

As a consequence, what I borrow from Dennett is essentially the idea that there is some point in space that draws in the others, that draws in the world—a point in space that I contend must be physical (even though, as Dennett points out, in science centres of gravity are theoretical abstractions). Just as things revolve around, are attracted *to*, pulled towards and get close *to* centres of gravity, the same applies to selves. A self draws in other people, other people that bring with them their concepts, values and emotions. But what is unique about selves, as opposed to other “objects” (like cars), is that a self does not only draw others towards it. A self *emanates*. What I have in mind here is nothing new. The idea that a self emanates as well as it *draws in* is traced back to G.W.F. Hegel<sup>(4)</sup>. In his well developed dialectical theory of self-consciousness, Hegel argues that

a self requires the presence of another self in order for each of them to validate their own *selves*. The process works like this: Two selves meet and as they draw the other in, they also *actively* go out towards that other and engage in what Hegel calls a *struggle-to-the-death*. The purpose of this going out to the other, and of the subsequent struggle that ensues, is to make self-consciousness possible by subduing the other.

Yet, whereas for Hegel each self tries to control the other self in order to maintain them as slaves, the centres of gravity I am describing here attempt the opposite. That is, they try to draw others *in* in order to secure more control over their identities. This is what a centre of gravity does and this necessary meeting of the other is what *dialogical* being-in-the-world consists of. In other words, the self needs to validate its own self by having other selves revolve, rotate and gravitate towards itself in order for them to meet.

## II. David Chalmers and the *extended self*

The opening line in the paper “The extended mind” by Andy Clark and David Chalmers asks us to consider the following question: “Where does the mind stop and the rest of the world begin?” (Chalmers). Paraphrasing that question, I ask that we consider the following: Where does the self stop and the rest of the world begin? At the centre of the extended mind thesis is the claim that the mind does not stop at the skull and skin. By echoing Hegel’s dialectic, Chalmers states that,

In these cases, the human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right. All the components in the system play an active causal role, and they jointly govern behavior in the same sort of way that cognition usually does. If we remove the external component the system’s behavioural competence will drop, just as it

would if we removed part of its brain. Our thesis is that this sort of coupled process counts equally well as a cognitive process, whether or not it is wholly in the head (Chalmers)

The main point here is that the mind is not enclosed within the *skull and skin* of the individual. However, the claim is not that the mind *just* reaches out to the external world. The thesis is much stronger and it states that the mind *is* a coupled system that includes the individual brain *and* the external world. He does this by arguing that the mind is constantly coupling with the world in order to extend cognition (think of laptops, maps, books and others). Furthermore, this *coupling* is not to be understood as an optional action on the part of an *originally* isolated mind. On the contrary, this *coupling* is “part of the truly basic package of cognitive resources that we bring to bear on the world” (Chalmers). In other words, Chalmers states that evolution has favoured a model of the mind that exploits and actively couples with the external environment in order to enhance cognition.

In this same direction, the concept of extended self operates by moving personal identity *beyond* the skull and skin out into the world in order to form a coupled system with others.

### III. Remarks on embodiment, being-in-the-world and personal identity

When neuroscientists delve deeper and deeper inside the brain searching for the seat of consciousness with the use of ever more sophisticated scanners, they are reliving a 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Descartes’ original project. But this time we are not looking for the pineal gland—we are looking for something else. However, no matter how deep we look or how much more definition we achieve with our machines, Dennett rightly points

out that it is wrong to suppose that one day neuroscientists will be able to say “That cell there, right in the middle of the hippocampus (or wherever)—that’s the self!” (Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity”). Clearly, if there is a self (and I contend that there is), it is not a *thing* located within the individual. The failure of the Cartesian project is the success of the *ESCG* project.

Alzheimer’s and amnesia are prime examples of why the Cartesian project fails to capture our understanding of personal identity. What these cases (Alzheimer’s and amnesia) have in common is that with them the individual has lost the ability to carry out the Cartesian project. In other words, she has lost the ability to introspect, to access her foundational self and actively affirm her identity. And if personal identity was an inherently internal, private, Cartesian and atomistic affair<sup>(5)</sup>, then we would be entitled to conclude that a person with Alzheimer’s has effectively lost herself. In effect, the argument would go, if she can no longer claim her identity as *x* she no longer is person *x*. Yet, this seems to run counter to the way we live and relate with others *in the world*. Clearly, to most of us, a known person that has Alzheimer’s or amnesia continues to remain *essentially*, the same known person with the same identity.

In what sense, then, can we speak of our identities as being effectively ‘ours’? How can I say that my identity *is* mine? The answer I am proposing is that identity is in fact not mine—it is not something I possess, that belongs to me or something I must find inside myself. The reason why we can continue to say that person *x* with amnesia continues to be person *x* in spite of her inability to recognize herself as *x* (as in a person with Alzheimer’s) is that her being *x* is not decided, and never was, by her ability to introspect and auto-define herself. This is because a self extends itself out into the world

in order to form a coupled identity system that is akin to Chalmers` concept of the extended mind.

In order to illustrate the importance of the world in the shaping of our identities, it is useful to consider the following points: from the very start of our lives (at whatever point that may be) we are ‘constructed’ from the outside by the world, by the actions of others. Initially nothing comes from within the individual (echoing Sartre’s claim that ‘existence precedes essence’, we can affirm that ‘existence is equiprimordial with identity’). First, our genes are *given* by others and then they come together to form an *us*. These then determine, among other things, our ethnic identity, our physical appearance as well as (arguably) certain psychological traits or dispositions. Later on, our place of birth, city and/or country of residence, as well as our names and families are also given to us. All of these aspects—to simply name a few—are essential components of any claim to identity and yet none of them are created, found or dependent on any action by the individual. They are *not* private matters. Furthermore, while most of these aspects can be effectively changed and modified later on in life by the actions of the individual (consider plastic surgeries, legal name changes and others) what cannot be doubted is that initially all those features are made possible by the actions of *others*, by the external world and as such our actions are always *reactions* to the actions of others—thereby asserting the primacy of the others.

What this is meant to show is that all discussions on the nature of personal identity necessarily involve a discussion about the others and the world that is always already inhabited by those others. The two (personal identity and the others) are not separable which is why a dialogue with the others is always *inescapable*. Even if the

intent is to deny the role of the others in the constitution of the self, such denial is only possible, as I just mentioned above, after the actions of others. Consequently, the world in which we always necessarily find ourselves in has a primordial and undeniable role in the shaping of our personal identities<sup>(6)</sup>.

Charles Taylor gives the world and the society in which we find ourselves in a crucial role in the formation of our identities. According to Taylor,

We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us. Even after we outgrow some of these others—our parents for instance—and they disappear from our lives, the conversation with them continues within us as long as we live (Taylor, *Politics of Recognition*)

This is the all important *dialogical* aspect of identity that, as I stated at the start of this paper, is at the foundation of personal identity. This dialogue requires the presence of *others*, of a society in such a way that, according to John Russon, “one cannot separate one’s identity from the identity of one’s society, for it is as an appropriation of one’s society’s narratives that one develops a sense of who one is” (Russon, *The Human Experience*, 71).

Embodiment thus plays a central role in defining our identities. This is because we are seen, individualized, approached, evaluated and identified by the others (the others that form the society which we find ourselves in), in virtue of our physical bodies. Our identities, insofar as they are dialogical, require that we be individualized and this individualization happens by virtue of our physical presence. What this indicates is that our bodies are not optional add-ons to the self. Our physical being-in-the-world is not a problem that needs to be solved in order to arrive at an answer about the nature of the

self. On the contrary, our embodiment and being-in-the-world is a part of the answer; it is an integral and foundational component of what a self is. Our bodies act as the centres of gravity for our identities.

Consequently, because we can affirm that personal identities do not belong to individuals, we can also affirm that in cases of Alzheimer's or amnesia the identity of an individual is maintained so long as there are others around to maintain that identity precisely because the amnesiac's identity never depended on her.

#### IV. Concluding remarks

Taken to its logical conclusion, the extended self has implications that reach into the ethical realm. This is because it is possible to construct an argument around the idea that empathy is not *just* a connection or an identification that one self has with a distinct and separate *other* self. Consider emotions and sensations. They constitute fundamental parts of our identities and, insofar as our identities are always out *there* in the world, it follows that our emotions are also out *there*. Thus, when someone close to us feels pain, is in distress or feels happiness, that pain or happiness is actually happening to us. In other words, we are not simply identifying with an *other* pain. That other pain *is* our pain.

Recent advances in neuroscience lend credence to the thesis that what happens to others *actually* happens to us. While the extended self thesis can accommodate this claim quite easily, neuroscience appeals to the existence of mirror neurons to explain *why* we feel empathy. According to the mirror neuron theory, when a self sees an *other* self act, certain neurons in the first self (located in the premotor cortex) activate as if the one was not merely watching the actions of that other but was actually carrying them out (a form

of *virtual*, covert imitation). When we see another person cry, our mirror neurons activate *as if* we were crying. This is, the story goes, the origin of empathy. Yet, the claim I am making here is stronger than this. This sort of scientific reductionism is premised on the idea that the self is still essentially an atomistic individual that only later identifies with others—which is why the neuroscientific search for personal identity is focused and enclosed inside the *skull and skin* of an individual. However, I have argued that as selves we are essentially social and plural. Thus, our empathy is not to be explained by appealing to specific neural activity that is locked inside the individual, *underneath* the skin and skull. This would be an explanation of empathy that reduces it to mere identification with a separate *other*. Rather, I have argued that our empathy is to be explained by a specific way of *being-in-the-world* that necessarily entails the view of the *extended self* I have so far developed here. And, as we have seen, this view holds that insofar as the other holds the key (or a part of the key) to my personal identity she also holds a part of my emotional life. This is why we can affirm that anything that happens to her emotionally *also* happens to me, and vice-versa.

This dialogical process need not be smooth or amenable. Taylor—and Hegel more so—made it clear that the dialogue with the *others* often develops into a struggle. As *centres of gravity*, we pull the others in at the same time as we resist the pull of others. In other words, we often resist being identified and/or classified by others. We resist their influence and the power they have over our personal identities. In an effort to assert our own individuality, we deny the others power over ourselves. This, as we have seen, is the essence of a centre of gravity—it *attracts*. And when two centres of gravity meet, the more powerful one wins over the other, which is to say that the more powerful centre of

gravity is able to exert more control over its identity—a process similar to the one that, as we saw above, Hegel described as a *struggle-to-the-death*.

## Notes

(1) As we shall see later in this paper, Daniel Dennett uses the concept of the self as a center of narrative fiction. I make extensive use of the concept of a centre of gravity, but contrary to Dennett, I argue that as selves we are not *fictions*—narrative or otherwise.

(2) In another paper of mine, I argue that a complete picture of personal identity must not only answer *who* we are but *what* kind of beings we are. Based on the work of Martin Heidegger, I conclude that we are dwellers. Although I will not use the term dweller in this paper, whenever I refer to an individual, or a person throughout this paper, I am referring to a dweller. For a detailed discussion on the concept of a *dweller* please refer to my paper (*removed for blind review purposes*) Vol. 7, No. 4, 2009

(3) There is an argument to be made about the permanence of identity after death, but it goes beyond the scope of this paper. The argument is that as long as there has been a person in the world, then after she dies she continues to act as a centre of gravity. In other words, we continue to identify person *x* as *x* in virtue of her having being alive and having engaged in a dialogue with the world and her society. In this case, perhaps, the centre of gravity acts in a much more abstract manner akin to Dennett's idea of a narrative fiction.

(4) For a detailed explanation of this dialectical process, see Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, sections 178-196.

(5) Stefaan Cuypers tackles the question of the atomistic identity in his paper "Hacia una concepción no atomista de la identidad personal". In that paper, Cuypers argues that many of the problems associated with personal identity are due to atomistic understandings of the self. I am in agreement with Cuypers in that atomism is at the root of most puzzles and dilemmas in the philosophy of personal identity. This is why the answer I propose herein is that of a plural, open, dialogical and extended self that is opposed to the atomistic self.

(6) For an interesting discussion on this topic, Martin Heidegger's concept of *Mitda-sein* (Heidegger *Being and Time* 113) is essential. When referring to our relation with the world and to our relation with human-made objects, Heidegger points out that when we encounter those objects they always point to the existence of others *before* they point to their usefulness. In other words, a boat can only *be* a boat insofar as the idea of a boat always already contains the idea of an *other* person (an *other* person that fabricated the boat and/or uses the boat for this or that purpose). This shows that for Heidegger the others are always *there* first which is why they are existentially primordial. The others are what make any meaning about objects in the world possible. We can assert this same principle about identity. That is: the others are *there* first and they are what make personal identity possible.

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