

*Notes on the self, from 2007*<sup>1</sup>  
(By Chris Wright)

Few issues are more prone to confusing philosophers than questions surrounding the nature of the self. Questions like “What is the self? Is there such thing as a self? Does each person have only one self? What is the relation between the present self and the past self? Is there any substance to the notion of ‘authentic’ selfhood, as opposed to ‘inauthentic’ selfhood?” Consider Daniel Dennett, the ludicrously respected philosophaster at Tufts University. This man occupies the dubious position of trying to explain away our sense of self without knowing he is doing so—specifically in his annoying book *Consciousness Explained* (1991), which is almost unreadable because of its cutesy, verbose style. Somewhere in that thicket of verbiage he manages to say that he thinks there is a self—indeed, that it’s obvious there is a self, for, after all, *someone* (namely, the author) is wondering right now whether there is a self—but that it is neither some kind of spiritual substance nor something corporeal: it is one’s “center of narrative gravity.” It is “an abstraction defined by the myriads of attributions and interpretations (including self-attributions and self-interpretations) that have composed the biography of the living body whose Center of Narrative Gravity it is.”<sup>2</sup> The self is an abstraction, an idea, a narrative nucleus. Since Dennett is a clever sophist, he is able to hide the fact that he has effectively defined me, and you, as a metaphor. *I...am nothing but a metaphor, a center of narrative gravity. This person who is writing, who has thoughts. I am not active, as my intuition tells me I am; I’m an abstraction, a concept, literally a metaphor. –If you find this idea at all coherent, I commend you.*

Other philosophers, influenced by Wittgenstein and the twentieth century’s “linguistic turn” in philosophy, argue that because “the substantival phrase ‘the self’ is very unnatural in most speech contexts in most languages,” the self itself is an illusion—“an illusion that arises from nothing more than an improper use of language.” Galen Strawson, from whose paper “The Self” these quotations are taken, persuasively argues that that position is untenable:

The problem of the self doesn’t arise from an unnatural use of language which arises from nowhere. On the contrary: use of a phrase like ‘the self’ arises from a prior and independent sense that there is such a thing as the self. The phrase may be unusual in ordinary speech; it may have no obvious direct translation in many languages. Nevertheless all languages have words which lend themselves naturally to playing the role that ‘the self’ plays in English, however murky that role may be. The phrase certainly means something to most people.... It is too

---

<sup>1</sup> See also [these thoughts](#) on consciousness and the self.

<sup>2</sup> *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), pp. 426, 427.

quick to say that a “grammatical error....is the essence of the theory of the self”, or that “the self” is a piece of philosopher’s nonsense consisting in a misunderstanding of the reflexive pronoun”.<sup>3</sup>

For many decades, much of philosophy and other humanistic disciplines has consisted in a fetishization of language, unsurprising in that intellectuals traffic in words. Ordinary people, however, would be surprised to learn that they, their selves, don’t exist, that they are illusions arising from improper uses of language.

So let’s try to be reasonable. What is the self? What is this sense of self that all people except pathological cases have? First of all, it incorporates the impression of continuity. We perceive ourselves as being the same person from moment to moment and day to day. Second, we sense that we’re active, that we’re (usually) in control of what we do. We have free will, we’re self-determining. When I read a book, I am choosing to do so.

These two facts (our continuity and our apparent self-control) seem to be the most important phenomenological reasons for the belief in a substantial, metaphysical self, a “soul.” “I am something *permanent*,” we think, “some kind of spiritual substance, some sort of *entity* or *thing*. This is intuitively obvious! It just *feels* that way.” When I introspect, I feel as if I am some kind of ineffably substantial thing, even as I cannot get a clear grasp of what this thing is. This is the sense in which David Hume was right when he doubted the existence of a self:<sup>4</sup> no graspable entity corresponds to our “substantial” self-intuition. Simply stated, there is apparently *nothing there* (in consciousness), nothing that would qualify as a self. Nevertheless, the irresistible power of our self-intuition has led many people, including philosophers, to assume that each person “has” or “is” a *soul*, or a Transcendental Ego, as Kant called it—some sort of self behind appearances. Our self-intuition gives us access only to the *tip*, as it were, of this Transcendental Self. The rest of it is located mysteriously “within” or “behind” us. When we die, this thing is supposed either to have an afterlife or to be reincarnated, depending on one’s religion.

I, however, am going to follow the Buddha, Hume, William James, Sartre, and many others in saying that the notion of a substantial self is a confusion, and a philosophically inelegant one. For it clutters up our conception of man. If we can provide a good explanation of psychic life without invoking a “soul,” we should

---

<sup>3</sup> Galen Strawson, “The Self,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 5.6 (1997): 405–428.

<sup>4</sup> In his *Treatise of Human Nature* he states, “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.” “The soul,” he says, “so far as we can conceive it, is nothing but a system or train of different perceptions.”

discard the idea as violating the principle of Ockham's razor. So for now I'm going to say that my, and your, self-intuition is deceptive: while it implicitly points to some sort of entity—a concrete *Self*—there is no such thing.

Indirect evidence exists for that conclusion. Consider the pupils of your eyes (or anyone else's, for that matter). Ordinarily—say, when you look casually at a mirror—they appear ineffably substantial, as if they're a *presence* rather than an *absence*. This makes sense, since we intuitively perceive the eyes as being the gateway to the soul, or the self. When we're having a conversation, for example, we look at the other person's eyes: this is significant because we think of ourselves as communicating with *him*, with his *self*; and so if we naturally look at his eyes, then the obvious conclusion is that we naturally associate his eyes with his self more than we do his other facial features. And yet—the pupil is an *absence*, a hole for light to enter! Our eye-intuition is mistaken! This is indeed rather horrifying, though most people don't think so. But try this: get so close to the bathroom mirror that your nose is almost touching it, and look intensely into one of your pupils for a while. Keep looking until you suddenly get the intuition that your pupils are a *nothingness*. Then back away, and they'll revert to “substantiality.”

When I conduct that little experiment I always “see” that there is no “self-substance” behind my eyes, which look vacant. For a brief moment I see it with irresistible force. And then when I back away I always find it disturbing that I involuntarily return to the old misperception that the pupils are a presence. Evidently our brains are hardwired such that we naturally have this misperception, just as we have the deluded intuition of a self-substance. (Interestingly, we also misinterpret shadows: we see them as a presence when in fact they're an absence (of light).)

So I'm rejecting the strange and probably incoherent notion of a self-substance, something like “a spirit or thinking substance,” to quote Bishop Berkeley. But then what is this sense of self we have? I can see that I exist; but what am *I*? I made light of Dennett's definition of the self as a metaphor, an abstraction, because it neglects the self's active nature. It is one-sided. All definitions of the self as some kind of idea suffer from this deficiency. They avoid Berkeley's and Descartes' mistake of attributing to the self a substantiality (which would imply an implausible mind-body ontological dualism), but they sacrifice the insight into the self's essential activeness. As Berkeley wrote in the *Third Dialogue Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), “I my self am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas.” This active thing is what we should analyze first.

In his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), William James gives a multifaceted definition of the self. The part I want to mention now is what he calls the “I,” as opposed to the “me.” The I, or the “pure ego,” is the “active principle” in oneself, i.e., “that which at any given moment is conscious.” But what is this if not “the entire stream of personal consciousness” itself?—or, at any rate, the present segment of it. What else can be conscious but consciousness itself? “The I is a *thought*.” “The consciousness of self

involves a stream of thought, each part of which as 'I' can remember those which went before, [and] know the things they knew...."<sup>5</sup> James is adhering to the principle of theoretic economy: rather than positing a cumbersome division between thought and thinker, or activity and substance, he is fusing the two. The I is not separate from thoughts; "the thoughts themselves are the thinkers." If this fusion does the work that we need a philosophical theory of the self to do, then it should be accepted as true.

But what exactly is James saying? The self, the I, is a thought, the present thought in a continuous stream of thoughts. But which thought is it? It can't be the entire stream of consciousness, for the self feels itself as wholly existing in each moment, whereas the stream of consciousness extends over a period of time. Nor can the self be (every thought in) the entire state of consciousness at any given moment, for included in this state is an awareness of things like one's environment, one's body, etc. The self, in its most immediate manifestation, is neither its environment nor its body, nor the *thoughts* it has of its environment and its body. It is just *itself*. But what is this? Well, if the self is a thought rather than a substance, then it can be nothing but the *thought of itself*. In other words, it is *self-thought*, or *self-consciousness*. "*I am self-consciousness*."

Now we're in the territory of Fichte, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Sartre, and other phenomenologists. They defined the self as (self-)consciousness. Kierkegaard, though—at least until Sartre came along—may have been the one who most appreciated the paradoxical character of his definition. For self-consciousness, as such, is a relation—a relation of itself to itself—and a *relating* of itself to itself—and is thus both a self-difference and a "self-differencing." As he wrote in the beginning of *The Sickness Unto Death*, "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself...." In other words, while the self (i.e., (implicit) consciousness of being conscious) is, from one perspective, a relation, it is really an activity, and as such cannot be a mere abstract relation. It has to be a *relating*, a relating itself to itself. Moreover, this is *all* it is. It is just a self-relating—an (implicit) awareness of awareness (*as a particular awareness*).

I have to be careful how I express myself here. For there are many different kinds of self-consciousness. There is consciousness of one's past, one's personality-traits, one's emotions, one's nervousness in social interactions, etc. These are not necessarily entailed by the kind of self-consciousness I'm referring to. For the moment I'm ignoring them. Instead, I'm talking about the most universal and "immediate" manifestation of self-consciousness, namely awareness of being aware (of some given thing). All fully developed and un-pathological human beings share this awareness. In certain moments it is merely half-conscious or "unreflective," merely "implicit," while at other times it is explicit and reflective. But in some form it is always present, this self-consciousness or sense of self. Gerald Edelman describes the phenomenon well: "[implicit in] conscious

---

<sup>5</sup> William James, *Psychology* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1948), p. 215.

awareness of objects is the *immediate experiential apprehension* of oneself aware of them. Even when our attention is not on ourselves but on what we perceive, conscious perceptual awareness includes awareness of our own perceiving.”<sup>6</sup> What I’m saying is that, almost by definition, to the extent that there is this “awareness of our own perceiving,” there is a self—i.e., a sense of self.

It’s worth noting that this account of the self is basically tautologous. By discarding the idea of a substantial self (“behind appearances”), I’ve accepted the idea that the self just is the *sense* of self. And what can the sense of self be but self-consciousness? The two terms are synonymous. Since the most immediate and necessary manifestation of self-consciousness is consciousness of consciousness, this must be what the self is. Moreover, this definition is useful in that it explains our perception of free will: self-consciousness, in being *of itself*, tends to see itself as existing through itself, as being the cause of itself, as having self-control.<sup>7</sup> It must see itself as positing itself, just as each person—each I—implicitly sees himself as positing himself and his acts, or as having free will. Another advantage of the definition of the self I’ve given is that it explains Hume’s confusion. The reason this definition didn’t occur to Hume is that it’s so phenomenologically *obvious*. His probing of his consciousness was too *deep*: he searched all its nooks and crannies (his perceptions, his memories, etc.) for some obscure thing corresponding to an entity called the “self,” when in fact it was right there in broad daylight. One cannot “search carefully” for the self without thereby passing right through it. Self-consciousness attends every thought; it is the human mode of consciousness, such that to look “*within*” oneself is effectively to look *past* self-consciousness, and hence the self.

[...]

I’ll distinguish between four main categories of the self’s relation to itself and the world, but the reader should keep in mind that these categories, as such, are simplifications, merely heuristic devices intended to simplify my discussion. There are no mutually differentiated “categories” in concrete consciousness; everything exists in an immediate holistic unity. Indeed, this is the case with regard to any object of analysis, be it in economics, psychology, biology or whatever: the object is always a unity, so to speak, its analytically differentiated facets thoroughly interrelated and interpenetrating, each empirically presupposing the others. The act of distinguishing

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Kathleen Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness: Sartre and Contemporary Philosophy of Mind* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 146.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre* (New York: Meredith Corporation, 1970), p. 97: “The *self posits itself*, and by virtue of this mere self-assertion it exists; and conversely, the *self exists* and *posits* its own existence by virtue of merely existing. It is at once the agent and the product of action; the active, and what the activity brings about; action and deed are one and the same, and hence the ‘I am’ expresses an Act...”

them is an act of theoretic violence, which, however, is necessary if we are to understand the object. For understanding consists in placing concepts in such relations to each other that they “mirror” the object of analysis in fundamental respects.<sup>8</sup>

The four categories I’ll briefly discuss comprise four different kinds of relations between self-consciousness and the world: namely, its relations to *time*, to the *body*, to the *external world* and particular objects in it, and to *itself*. The latter category ultimately includes the others, but it’s useful to distinguish it from them. One of the themes of my discussion will be that in each “mode” or “category” of experience, self-consciousness conflicts with itself—or, rather, features of its experience conflict with each other, ultimately because self-consciousness is self-negation. I’ll use my analysis later in the chapter to make some sense of human relationships, including the individual’s relationship with himself.

The first mode of experience I’ll mention is the temporal one. Briefly stated, human consciousness is, for itself, temporally more extended than, say, a dog’s. That is, the present moment as experienced by a human is more extended, more “inclusive” of the passage of time and more “retaining” of each past instant (*as past*), than is the moment experienced by a dog, which is characterized by a kind of brute immediacy. Likewise, the consciousness of a mentally healthy person is more aware of time *as time* than is the consciousness of someone, say, with Down syndrome. William Faulkner portrays this fact well in Part One of *The Sound and the Fury*, which is written from the perspective of a mentally retarded 33-year-old named Benjy. Benjy is apparently not capable of reflective self-consciousness; nor is he aware of the past as past. Time does not exist for him, and he does not fully exist for himself. As Faulkner said in an interview, “To that idiot [Benjy], time was not a continuation, it was an instant, there was no yesterday and no tomorrow, it all is this moment, it all is [now] to him. He cannot distinguish between what was last year and what will be tomorrow, he doesn’t know whether he dreamed it or saw it.”<sup>9</sup> The fully developed, healthy person retains the just-past in his consciousness—and is pre-reflectively, or “half-consciously,” aware of it as just past—even as he anticipates or “protends” the immediate future. This phenomenon can be

---

<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty criticizes the correspondence theory of truth in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), but his account is, I think, incoherent. The notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation, or of truth as correspondence with reality, is implicit in all theorizing. Propositions “reach out” towards a “transcendent” reality; they are intended to portray or “picture” this reality. (Are the hypotheses of natural science not supposed to accurately represent nature, or those of the social sciences not supposed to be true of society?) In any case, when Rorty enjoins us to “see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature,” he overlooks the fact that these conceptions are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>9</sup> David Minter, ed., *The Sound and the Fury: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), p. 238.

expressed in Husserlian language: the retentional and protentional structures of consciousness are more prominent in a human than in, e.g., a dog.<sup>10</sup> Peter K. McInerney summarizes Husserl's theory of time-consciousness as follows:

A perceptual act-phase (an instantaneous slice of a perceptual act) has one feature that retains earlier phases of the perceptual act, another feature that perceives whatever is present, and a third feature that protends later phases of the perceptual act. ....Although retention is actual at one time, its intentional object is at an earlier time. Retention reaches to earlier moments in time and directly intuits earlier moments as *earlier*. ....[P]rotention portrays the future emptily....as indeterminate and open.<sup>11</sup>

Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi elaborate:

The retentional structure of experience, that is, the fact that when I am experiencing something, each occurrent moment of consciousness does not simply disappear at the next moment but is kept in an intentional currency, constitutes a coherency that stretches over an experienced temporal duration. Husserl's favorite example is a melody. When I experience a melody, I don't simply experience a knife-edge presentation (primal impression) of one note which is then completely washed away and replaced with the next knife-edge presentation of the next note. Rather, consciousness retains the sense of the first note as I hear the second note, a hearing that is also enriched by an anticipation (protention) of the next note (or at least, in case I do not know the melody, of the fact that there will be a next note, or some next auditory event).

Maybe you're wondering what the relation is between all this—this discussion of the temporal structure of consciousness—and self-awareness. Gallagher and Zahavi explain the connection:

The temporal (retentional-impressional-protentional) structure of consciousness not only allows for the experience of temporally extended objects or intentional contents, but also entails the self-manifestation of consciousness, that is, its pre-reflective self-awareness. The retention of past notes of the melody is accomplished, not by a "real" or literal re-presentation of the notes (as if I were hearing them a second time and simultaneously with the current note), but by a

---

<sup>10</sup> The comedian Bill Maher was once attacked by the politically correct media for saying that a mentally retarded person is in some ways like a dog. He was more right than he knew.

<sup>11</sup> McInerney, *Time and Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 98–100.

retention of my just past experience of the melody. That is, the retentional structure of consciousness captures the just-past qualities of intentional content only by capturing the just-past experience of that intentional consciousness. This means that there is a primary and simultaneous self-awareness (an awareness of my own identity in the ongoing flow of experience) that is implicit in my experience of intentional content. At the same time that I am aware of a melody, for example, I am co-aware of *my ongoing experience* of the melody through the retentional structure of that very experience—and this just is the pre-reflective self-awareness of experience.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, humans' advanced temporal awareness is one manifestation of their relatively advanced self-consciousness. For it involves the pre-reflective perception that our present self is a continuation of the immediately past self, and that the immediately future self will be a continuation of the present self. In being aware of the *present moment* as extended, we are aware of *ourselves* as extended. This also makes possible our reflective awareness of our distantly past and distantly future selves as being, in a sense, us.

One of the “paradoxes” of the temporality of human consciousness is that the retentional and protentional features of experience exist “together,” as it were—indeed, together with the impressional feature. All three are somehow immediately united in consciousness; there is no temporal succession between them. A second paradox (closely related to the first) is that the present moment is both *fleeting* and *extended*. The reader has but to introspect to see how the moment is extended: it is experienced not as a discrete fraction of an instant but as a continuity. This property, I have said, is explained by the presence of retention and protention. At the same time, though, there is the property of *fleetingness*: reflectively we know that any given moment can be divided into instants that can be measured in milliseconds or less. But even pre-reflectively there is a fleetingness, as indeed there has to be if we are to be aware of the temporal structure of every moment. This essential fleetingness is not obvious when reflection first tries to discern it, because the *continuity* of consciousness is more noticeable. But try, for example, saying the word “now” a series of times, twice a second or so. “Now now now now now now....” Although the perception of temporal continuity remains, there is also an awareness of fleetingness, manifested by the fact that you experience each “now” as instantaneously prior to the next (and later than the previous). The continuity and fleetingness exist together on a pre-reflective level, such that there is a sort of temporal contradiction at the heart of self-consciousness. This isn't

---

<sup>12</sup> Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, “Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2006 edition), Edward N. Zalta ed., at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness-phenomenological> (accessed May, 2007).



just an “objective” contradiction that we don’t subjectively experience until we reflect on it; rather, it exists at the very heart of our subjective, ordinary, pre-reflective experience. Every waking moment is characterized by it. In every moment, then, self-consciousness exhibits a temporal restlessness, so to speak: continuity opposes fleetingness and vice versa; retention opposes protention and vice versa. Self-consciousness, or the self, is never at rest under such conditions. It is dynamic, in constant movement, perpetually “unsatisfied,” as Hegel saw.

The relations between (self-)consciousness and the body are similarly paradoxical. There is an implicit awareness of our separation from the body, but there is also an awareness of our union with the body. Both these awarenesses have been analyzed by past philosophers: on the one hand, phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty have examined the ways in which consciousness is united with the body. (See, e.g., the *Phenomenology of Perception*.) Merleau-Ponty pointed out that there is a kind of bodily self-consciousness, a bodily intentionality “present in motor activity and in perception” — “a form of intentionality that underlies the intentionality of the mental and of language.”<sup>13</sup> And Gareth Evans notes that “perception involves the subject’s awareness of himself as a sensorimotor organism acting in the world. There can be no perceptual consciousness of the world without consciousness of oneself as embodied.”<sup>14</sup> In general, I am aware of my body not only as *mine* but also as, in a sense, *me*. I am, e.g., thin and pale-skinned. I look in the mirror and see *myself*. But while the whole body is experienced as me, the face, of course, is especially important. For the face most directly manifests states of consciousness. The experience of sadness consists partly in the experience of one’s face as twisted into a frown; the pleasure of laughter is a result partly of the pleasure of smiling. The face is a direct “objectification” of the self, and the inner perception of one’s facial expressions is an essential component in consciousness. (The universal preference of lovers for good-looking people would be inexplicable were the face not half-consciously seen as the person, or the self, himself. When looking at the face and body we are looking at the person himself; the idea of a self “behind” the face doesn’t even enter our thoughts. Therefore, a good-looking face is seen as signifying a good, or desirable, person. Unfortunately the correlation is far from perfect.)

Moreover, in many modes of experience, the body is experienced almost unambiguously and immediately as the *subject* of consciousness, rather than as an object in the world. For example, when one is engaged in strenuous physical activity, one has effectively become one’s body acting on the world. One’s consciousness has become practically one’s *bodily* consciousness. This example is yet another illustration of the “intermixture” between consciousness and body.

---

<sup>13</sup> Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, p. 122.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

On the other hand, I am not really, strictly speaking, my body. The mere fact that I am reflectively able to distinguish myself from it is significant. Evidently there must be some difference between it and me. Dualists such as Descartes have expounded the differences, but even pre-reflectively everyone distinguishes himself from his body. One of the reasons is that consciousness looks out at the world from “up above,” from the head and the eyes, while most of the body is located down below. So there is even, to an extent, a physical separation between consciousness and the body.<sup>15</sup> The half-conscious duality that this separation supports is what makes possible our reflective awareness of the body as an object, as something in the world that is different from the subject (the I) that is our immediate self-consciousness. But we even half-consciously distinguish ourselves from our *face*: while its contours and expressions, as inwardly experienced by us, are important components of our consciousness, the mere fact that we can’t see it without using a mirror or some sort of reflecting device is enough to support our not completely identifying with it, since we *can* “see” our self at all times—and indeed we *are* seeing it at all times, in that we always have a sense of self (except during moments of unconsciousness). Others, not us, see our face; we, not others, are aware of our inner (sense of) self.

In short, consciousness has a complicated and paradoxical relationship with the body it inheres in, in that it is unreflectively aware of both its separation from it and its fusion with it. This relationship, however, does not signify quite the same self-restlessness and self-opposition as is implicit in the self’s temporal relations with itself. The latter are essential to the very notion of self-consciousness, its very activity—the activity that constitutes self-consciousness as such. The former relationship, on the other hand, is between self-consciousness and something external to its self-constituting activity. Even so, this relationship can be the source of much psychological conflict and pain, depending on what a person thinks of his body and on the degree to which he identifies himself with it. If his body is obese, for example, his body-image might be extremely important to his conception of himself even as he doesn’t want it to be, with the result that his sense of himself will be ambiguous and conflicted, fickle and insecure. At times (in moments when he identifies strongly with his body) he may be self-contemptuous, while at other times (when he rebels against such an identification) he may feel resentful and angry at the world, this world that has reduced him to his body.

The third main “category” of the self’s experience is made possible by awareness of its separation from the external world and from other selves. Everything in the world confronts consciousness as an external thing, something *other*, whether it be as a brute

---

<sup>15</sup> I’m not saying that consciousness has a physical location. It doesn’t. It isn’t the sort of thing to which the predicate of “location” applies. Nonetheless, the head is in some sense (perceived by it as) its “home.”

object (such as a table or a stone) or as another self. A great deal has to be said about the self's "being-in-the-world"; I'll do so later in the chapter.

The fourth and final universal category of self-consciousness's experience consists of "free will," which, however, is shot through with unfreedom. Let's consider the freedom first.— The I perceives itself as controlling itself, which is to say that a person half-consciously experiences himself as free. He chooses his acts, he even posits his own existence. His existence, as Fichte said, is experienced as an act of his: he "*exists* himself." At any particular moment he is actively "throwing himself" into existence, into the world, both through his physical activity and through the phenomenological structure of his self-consciousness. Actually, the two aspects are interrelated, since the self partly identifies with the body. In immersing myself in some activity or other, like writing or playing soccer or cooking dinner, I am projecting myself into the world, embracing my existence—bringing it to pass, in fact, causing myself to act and to exist. (I am not *literally* doing so, but this is how I implicitly or explicitly experience it.) I am "acting myself," acting my body, as well as my self-conscious being itself. For self-consciousness, even when it is occupied in acting-on-the-world, always, as such, is acting on itself, simply because it is *of itself*.

At the same time, though, it includes an element of passivity, precisely because it is "of itself." It is its own object; therefore it is unfree, just insofar as it is an object for itself. Inasmuch as it observes itself, it is free and active; inasmuch as it is observed by itself, it is unfree and passive. We can use the terminology of Martin Heidegger to express the point. Heidegger emphasized man's "thrownness," his "always-already thrownness" into the already-existing world. Man finds himself in the midst of a world he didn't create, embodied in a body he didn't create, possessing a personality he didn't choose, accompanied by a self he didn't create (namely, himself), saturated with an unfree facticity. To quote Magda King:

By "thrownness," Heidegger does not mean that man is cast into the "natural universe" by a blind force or an indifferent fate, which immediately abandons him to his own devices, but means: his own "real" existence is manifest to man in the curious way that he can always and only find himself *already* here, and can never get behind this *already* to let himself come freely into being. But although he can never originate his being, yet he is "delivered over to himself": he has to take over his being as his.... Tuned by moods and feelings, man finds himself in his thrown being, in the inexorable facticity "*that I am and have to be,*" delivered over to myself to be as I can, dependent upon a world for my own existence.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> Magda King, *Heidegger's Philosophy* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1964), pp. 77, 78.

Thus, the individual exhibits a certain passiveness in his relationship with the world. He doesn't create it; it is always already there, as he himself is already here. He is therefore not *absolutely* free. –There is a kind of “dialectic” here, between the self's freedom and its thrownness. There is an opposition, a self-opposition. The self feels itself free to do as it pleases; every act and thought feels as if it's chosen, such that in its very existence (i.e., its being conscious) the self seems to choose itself. But at the same time, it doesn't: the self is already here and can't do anything about it. It never makes the choice to exist, nor to exist in the way it exists (possessing a certain body and personality), and on some level, in every moment, it obscurely recognizes this fact. The two contradictory terms in this dialectic (the freedom and the unfreedom) always exist in an immediate synthesis; they aren't separated concretely, in consciousness, but only conceptually. They do, however, make for a certain half-conscious restlessness in the self, comparable to the restlessness inherent in the self's experience of time.

The individual's unfreedom and facticity are brought home to him especially forcefully in moments of self-dissatisfaction. Indeed, all unhappiness is first and foremost consciousness (however implicit) of unfreedom. There are, of course, always other conceptual and phenomenological elements in a particular experience of unhappiness, but the unifying thread through all such experiences is awareness of a frustrated desire (i.e., of unfreedom).

Anyway, the paradox of these self-oppositions is, in a way, not very paradoxical, for, as I have said, self-consciousness itself is a self-opposition, a self-difference. It relates itself to itself; it is both subject and object—its own object—i.e., active and passive, free and unfree. In other words, it is not completely identical to itself, which apparently means it violates, in some sense, the law of identity. Sartre agreed. He embraced this violation of the law of identity and made it the foundation of *Being and Nothingness*, in that it explains the distinction between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. A chair or a tree, for example, is identical to itself; it just is what is. Self-consciousness, however, is not. Indeed, there are two reasons it isn't: the first, I've said, is that it “steps back” from itself and observes itself. “The for-itself exists as presence to itself. ....To be present to something requires separation from that to which one is present. So there must be a separation of consciousness from itself. 'If being is present to itself, it is because it is not wholly itself.'”<sup>17</sup>

The second reason is that consciousness is *intentional*, which means it is self-transcending. Awareness is never just itself, just pure awareness (of nothing). It is *of* something (as indeed the grammar of the word shows). As such, it transcends itself toward an object. It “goes beyond” itself. “Consciousness is not a thing, a determinate

---

<sup>17</sup> Kathleen Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, p. 52.

Dasein; it is always beyond itself; it goes beyond, or transcends, itself.”<sup>18</sup> Or, as Wider says: “a phenomenological description reveals, for both Sartre and Husserl, that consciousness cannot exist without an object. Consciousness must always be of something.... [Indeed, it] must always be of that which is not itself, even when it takes itself as its own object.”<sup>19</sup> Its content, then—i.e., that of which it is—is, of necessity, not itself. Hence, consciousness is, from more than one perspective, not self-identical.

Many philosophers have objected to that Sartrean (Hegelian, Kierkegaardian) claim. After all, it throws out logic! Or at least it limits its range of applicability. Their objection is misguided, though. For they’re objecting to self-consciousness itself, not to a deficiency in the arguments of any philosopher. No one can plausibly deny that consciousness is necessarily of an object, nor that *self-consciousness*, as such, involves a sort of separation from itself. This is just the way it is, the way it logically has to be. In giving his “paradoxical” formulation in *The Sickness Unto Death* that I quoted earlier, Kierkegaard was simply articulating what is logically implicit in the notion of self-consciousness. It has to be a self-relation, a self-difference; and consciousness of whatever kind involves an element of self-difference, because it is of something other than itself. Thus, the law of identity apparently does not apply absolutely to everything.

However, Sartre didn’t seem to appreciate the sense in which the law does apply to consciousness. For, after all, insofar as we speak of something, it is (identical to) itself. Otherwise we couldn’t speak of it. Insofar as some given thing changes in every instant or is necessarily different from itself, it is senseless to speak of *it*.<sup>20</sup> Self-consciousness is, therefore, tautologously identical to itself: it is (“identical to”) this thing that is a separation from itself, a presence to itself. The lack of self-identity is simply a property of this (self-identical) thing. *Formally*, that is, self-consciousness is just itself; its *content*, though, is (of) something that, so to speak, differs from itself.

All these ideas will be useful later, when I indulge in a bit of phenomenological psychology. Before I do that, though, I have to at least sketch answers to the questions I posed at the beginning of the chapter, in order to mitigate postmodern doubts about the nature of the self.

---

<sup>18</sup> Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Wider, *The Bodily Nature of Consciousness*, p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche recognized the degree to which language and thought presuppose stasis in (or the “self-identity” of) what is thought about, and therewith all the other logical laws. See *The Will to Power*, §520—or, indeed, the whole of section five in Book Three. For an account of self-consciousness that remedies the one-sidedness of Sartre’s, see Hegel’s *Encyclopedia*—or Robert R. Williams’s book *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 69–72.

The “sense of self” I keep referring to—self-consciousness, the I—never exists in its essential purity, as bare consciousness of consciousness. But neither does any thought, as such, really exist. A thought, considered as a single “determinate” thing (a definite, clearly defined thing), is an abstraction from reality. There is never such a thing as “a thought,” a single thought existing in isolation from others. The “thought” of, e.g., this table exists in an empirical unity with many other thoughts, which all merge together in the same state of consciousness. For example, right now I’m aware of the computer I’m writing on, the music I’m listening to, the feel of the keyboard on my fingertips, the itching in my leg, the desire to be doing something other than writing, etc. Thus, while we are always at least implicitly conscious of consciousness (except when *unconscious*), we never experience self-consciousness “purely” or “in itself.” It is always combined with our awareness of other objects, as Kant saw.

Since self-consciousness interpenetrates and is interpenetrated by every other thought and sensation in a given state of consciousness, such that (in its concrete reality) it is, so to speak, implicit in each of them and each of them is implicit in it, the real (sense of) self that someone has (or *is*) in a particular moment is the entire state of his consciousness. One’s sense of self can be only imperfectly described, however, for it is fundamentally intuitive—and extremely rich, in part explicitly conscious (in a given moment) and in part implicitly.

Anyway, in order to explain people’s impression of their own self-continuity we have to invoke the protention and retention I mentioned earlier, i.e., the perception of psychological and physical continuity over consecutive instants. I already noted that (self-)consciousness is (or experiences itself as) temporally extended; now I’m saying that the other aspects of one’s being, such as the body and one’s personality, are temporally extended as well. The reason is that they are objects of consciousness, and insofar as consciousness is extended in time, its objects are as well—including the body and its actions and sensations, as well as emotions and thoughts. These things differ from other objects of consciousness in that they are, crudely speaking, the main features of the world to which consciousness tends to have an immediate “affective” attachment (such that it implicitly sees them as “its own”), with the result that they are experienced by consciousness as the concrete, empirical aspects of the self. Since, via protention and retention, they persist over time, the self in its full concreteness persists over time. That is, I see myself as the same person right *now* as I am right *now*, and *now*, and *now*.... Across short time-spans like this, protention and retention are essential to my perception that I remain the same self.

The perception that one remains the same self between longer spans of time is explained in much the same way, namely through memory. In *Reasons and Persons* (1984), Derek Parfit distinguishes between “direct memory connections” and

“continuity of memory.”<sup>21</sup> It is a useful distinction. There are direct memory connections between my present self and me as a fifteen-year-old if I can remember experiences I had then; there is continuity of memory if there has been an “overlapping chain of direct memories” between my past self and my present self. “In the case of most adults, there would be such a chain. In each day..., most of these people remember some of their experiences on the previous day.” Both kinds of memory-experiences are relevant to the perception of self-continuity. The reason I think that the I that I experience now is the same one that I experienced then is both that I remember certain experiences I had when I was fifteen and that I know there has been an unbroken continuity of memories between then and now. In addition, I can see from photographs that there was a body then that looks almost identical to mine now, from which I conclude that I “inhabited” (and *was*) that body.

Before proceeding, I should answer a possible objection I postponed considering earlier, namely that “I” cannot be equivalent to “this (self-)consciousness,”<sup>22</sup> as I have been saying it is, because it makes sense to say “*my* consciousness,” which implies that I must be something over and above consciousness. Furthermore, in any ordinary utterance, the words “this consciousness” cannot be substituted for “I” without a significant change in the utterance’s meaning. Therefore, they cannot mean the same thing, and I cannot be (*self-*)consciousness.

My answer to this objection is that, in part because the presence of memories establishes a connection between a past self and the present self such that the latter “appropriates” the former to itself, and hence sees itself as persisting across time, consciousness “reifies” itself, sees itself as a sort of substance, an entity, a unifying principle, a thing-like “I” that is both within and outside consciousness.<sup>23</sup> Human self-consciousness locates itself outside itself and yet within itself. It projects itself beyond itself into a sort of “active concept,” namely the concept of oneself—of “Chris Wright,” in my case—which is constant and unchanging amidst all the shifting determinations of bodily and mental states. I, Chris Wright, am always Chris Wright, the same Chris Wright ten years ago as I’ll be ten years from now. Insofar as I am unchanging in this way, I am really nothing but a concept or idea, albeit an “active” one, an idea that has

---

<sup>21</sup> *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 205.

<sup>22</sup> Partly included in which consciousness, I have noted, is the body, or awareness of the body. Its sensations, feelings, etc. are in consciousness, and so the latter experiences the body as somehow a part of it, though also something external to it.

<sup>23</sup> There are other causes of this self-reification. I’ll note here only that the assigning of a name to each person at birth is well-calculated to coax his consciousness eventually into self-reification. He will see himself as something that coheres around his name—“I am Chris. Chris Wright. That is who I am, that entity called ‘Chris Wright’”—and will thus see himself as a “substance,” a substantival self.

free will and can act. But this is absurd, of course. No idea, as such, can *act*. The only reason it seems as if the idea, the person, that is Chris Wright can act is that consciousness is what is doing the acting. Consciousness—a fairly reflective consciousness<sup>24</sup>—conflates itself with the idea, the person-idea, that is Chris Wright (for example in its, i.e. *my*, assent to the statement “I am Chris Wright”). It reifies itself, turns itself (for itself) into an unchanging thing that functions as the bearer and unifier of physical and mental states and acts across a lifetime.

A moment ago I realized that Sartre anticipated these ideas in *The Transcendence of the Ego*. So I’ll quote him:

The ego [i.e., the idea of the “person”] is a virtual locus of unity.... Consciousness projects its own spontaneity into the ego-object in order to confer on the ego the creative power which is absolutely necessary to it. But this spontaneity, *represented* and *hypostatized* in an object, becomes a degraded and bastard spontaneity, which magically preserves its creative power even while becoming passive. Whence the profound irrationality of the notion of an ego.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, when I reflect on myself, implicit in my (self-)consciousness is awareness of myself as something “over and above” my immediate consciousness, something that remains the same not only between instants but also between minutes and hours and years, something that Sartre called an ego. This thing—in its active aspect<sup>26</sup>—which I see as being *me*, has free will, temporal awareness, self-awareness, is fused with the body but is not merely the body—in short, has all the properties of self-consciousness and would *be* self-consciousness if it didn’t have the additional property that it is self-identical and unchanging. (You are just *you*, the same *you*, in a sense, that you were ten years ago.) Self-consciousness is not. It exists only in the moment, and to say that *this* self-consciousness (in this moment) is identical to the self-consciousness of ten minutes ago is meaningless. It is either truistically false or truistically true: true because self-consciousness as such is *always* the same—it is, after all, just consciousness of consciousness, it is never anything else—and so to say that two instantiations of the concept of “self-consciousness” are the same is tautologous; false because two instantiations are, in being two, not one and the same. In other words, two self-consciousnesses are always *qualitatively* identical but never *numerically* identical. However, the “ego” is both qualitatively and numerically identical to itself across spans

---

<sup>24</sup> “The ego [e.g., ‘Chris Wright’] is an object apprehended, but also an object constituted, by reflective consciousness.” Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), p. 80.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> See below on the distinction between its active and passive aspects.



of time. It must, therefore, be a concept, since a concept is always numerically and qualitatively self-identical. (The concept of 2 has never been anything but the concept of 2.) “The ego, being an object [i.e., a concept], is passive.”<sup>27</sup> But it isn’t *merely* a concept, because I am not merely a concept (much as Dennett would disagree); I am also active. What the ego, or the person, is, then, is a fusion of passiveness and activeness, of conceptness and self-consciousness. “The ego is an irrational synthesis of activity and passivity.”<sup>28</sup> This is why I said that (self-)consciousness locates itself both within and without itself. Consciousness, which is the acting self in any given moment, doesn’t see itself as mere consciousness; it sees itself as a *person*, a fusion of activity and passivity. It sees the ego as the self;<sup>29</sup> and since it also sees itself as the self, it sees itself as the ego. Which means it sees itself as not-itself, or rather as more than itself. [...]

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> Reflectively, the self takes the form of oneself. Which is just to say that it takes the form of the ego. Hence, the sentence “Reflective self-consciousness sees the ego as the self” can be rephrased as “When I explicitly think about myself, I see myself as Chris Wright, an unchanging self (an ego, a person) extended through hours, days, years.”