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Narrative or Substantial Self? Between Confrontation and Complementarity

Abstract: In this paper two concepts of the self are presented and contrasted, namely a narrative and a substantial self. The discussed concepts have been variously assessed in contemporary philosophy. It seems, however, that the substantial concept is nowadays an object of severe criticism, whereas the narrative notion celebrates its genuine triumph. In the paper, the author argues that this asymmetry is exaggerated and disproportionate, and opposition between them is not so obvious and clear-cut. The author argues that those two concepts in fact need each other and can, to a certain degree, complement one another. In the article, an example of such complementarity is sketched.

Keywords: self, narratives, substantiality, human subject, dialogue

Introduction

The human self is nowadays investigated by scholars representing various disciplines, among them the philosophy of mind, phenomenology, pragmatism, Buddhist studies, psychology and psychiatry, neuroscience, feminism and postmodernism (Gallagher 2011: 2). Accordingly, various approaches toward the self are developed and its different aspects revealed. This paper is limited to a philosophical approach which deals with the nature of the human self. I shall be concerned with two positions: a narrative concept of the self and a substantial one. It seems that although the latter is in retreat and the former celebrates its victory, the opposition between them is not obvious nor permanent. It seems that these two approaches are not radically opposed to each other and may profitably inform one

another. In the paper, I outline these two approaches to the self and explore the relationships between them.

The understanding of the self in modern and contemporary philosophy is quite complex and not easy to characterize. The self is sometimes identified with the human person or an aspect of it. Some philosophers compare it to human nature, to the transcendental self or even to the Absolute Self (Solomon 1998: 4). In this paper, I assume at the outset that the self is a relatively stable structure in human life, something more than, for instance, a personal feeling. Consequently, it plays an important role in establishing a personal identity. Below I elaborate more on the character of the self thus understood. There are many philosophers who pursued this topic and it is beyond the scope to this paper to take into account their contributions. Hence, in our presentation and discussions, only some of them will be mentioned. In other words, we are not making an overview of the problem but concentrating on some main characteristics of these two perceptions of the self, differences resulting from them and possible ways of coordination.

Doubts Concerning the Self

In modern and contemporary philosophy, the existence of the human self has often been questioned. Surprisingly, such a critical approach has been entertained by both empirically-oriented philosophers and by some philosophers representing phenomenology.¹ Let us briefly overview the main criticism levelled by David Hume and Jean-Paul Sartre.

David Hume's approach to the self is rather sceptical and as a result "the self— as it is put by the contemporary commentators—must be classified as a linguistic construct or as a product of reflection" (Gallagher, Zahavi 2008: 198). The Scottish philosopher attempted to establish the existence of the self via introspection into some basic feelings and experiences. The result of his investigation is expressed in the following declaration: "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 perception." (Hume 2000: Book I, Part IV, Section vi). Hume is unable to grasp anything that goes beyond empirical characteristics, i.e. something that would be an object underpinning those features. Various perceptions, that is their presence and content, set limits on his investigation. In a sense, for Hume, they constitute everything that is epistemologically given. Their multiple associations create a feeling and conviction that there exists a unity or a semi-subject.

Jean-Paul Sartre argues from a position of phenomenological insight into his own consciousness. He is reluctant to acknowledge that there is a need of the self for operations carried out by consciousness. Particularly, there is no such need for a very basic feature of consciousness, namely its unity. He argues as follow: "It is

¹ For instance, Bertrand Russell claimed that the self is not "empirically discoverable" (1956: 305); or Rudolf Carnap employed an expression "the given is subjectless" (1928: 87–90).

usually believed that the existence of a transcendental I is justified by the need for consciousness to have unity and individuality. [...] But it is certainly the case that phenomenology does not need to resort to this unifying and individualizing I. Rather, consciousness is defined by intentionality. Through intentionality it transcends itself, it unifies itself by going outside itself” (Sartre 2004: 3–4). In this passage, Sartre rejects the I as a useless reality in the structure of consciousness. In his further analyses, he also tries to show that a stream of consciousness constitutes itself as the unity of itself. The I is given (epistemologically) only when we employ an attitude of distanced reflection (Sartre 2004: 12). Thus the self is perceived here as an object but not a subject.

These two critical approaches to the self are based on different understandings of the concept. Hume questions the existence of a psychological self as well as the metaphysical one. Sartre, in turn, rejects the concept of a transcendental self. The latter one was basically formulated by Immanuel Kant and further elaborated by Edmund Husserl. Sartre in his analyses directly refers to those two philosophers (see Sartre 2004) and finally distances himself from them. However, if we assume that there are such selves, we must say that the former would be a subject of empirical experience, whereas the latter is a subject of consciousness, that is “an ‘existent’ presented to consciousness” (Richmond 2004: ix). Putting aside apparent differences between the objects of these criticisms (the selves), let us treat these claims as a clear sign of scepticism concerning the existence of the stable structure that underlines experiences of various kinds. It is worth noting that such a scepticism has been further radicalized to such a point that the self is considered as a non-existent reality or a secondary product of external factors. The views of some postmodern philosophers are examples of such radicalization.²

Salvaging the Self

Scepticism concerning the self does not have to lead us to its rejection. It can concentrate on its main characteristic, namely on the existence of the self as a stable structure; but, at the same time, it does not entail its total rejection. One can assert that the self is a dynamic reality created in the course of our lives and we actively contribute to its final shape. This approach seems to be employed among the advocates of the narrative view of the self. As Gallagher and Zahavi point out, “According to this view, which has become increasingly popular lately, the self is constructed in and through narrative self-interpretations” (Gallagher, Zahavi 2008: 200). Thus the self returns to philosophy in a new guise and some prominent thinkers take up this approach and propose its further developments. It is important to notice that, as it is in the case of critics and sceptics, they come from various walks of the philosophical world.

² For instance, for Michel Foucault, we do not exist as endowed with stable structures, including our self, but we do exist in a discourse characterized by dispersion (Foucault 2002: 60). We are not things but activities we do (McGushin 2001: 134–135). One of them is language, which gives us a new identity coming from outside, namely from society and culture (Rancevskis 1994: 143).

An attempt to establish an identity of a person is strictly associated with a story that that person recounts about himself. It contains all essential elements concerning his life and in a sense builds him up as a person. Understandably, it is not a process of discovering an existing and hidden self. The narrative self is constituted by what happens to and with a given individual and is referred to him (and by him) as an important event shaping his life. It usually takes time and storytelling plays a unifying role among various happenings and occurrences and makes them into a single stream of personal existence. As it is put by Alasdair MacIntyre: the unity of “a concept of self resides [...] in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end” (MacIntyre 1981: 205).

The narrative self has a strong social character. Although *prima facie* it results from activities of a given individual who is their author, the social also has its share in it. First, a new narrative is produced among the people who listen to it and take their stand towards it, accepting or rejecting it. Usually, they do it on the basis of the heritage of the community (its history and traditions, etc.) they belong to. Second, formulating one’s narrative, the individual draws on resources of this or that language community, uses its cultural models and must take into account already existing narratives (Gallagher, Zahavi 2008: 201). The latter is strictly connected with a multidimensional history of the community. MacIntyre directly characterizes this social and historical profile of the self saying: “What I am, therefore, is in key part what I inherit, a specific past that is present to some degree in my present. I find myself part of a history and that is generally to say, whether I like it or not, whether I recognize it or not, one of the bearers of a tradition” (MacIntyre 1981: 221).

An interesting aspect of the narrative self is that it is constituted at the intersection of language, history and culture; such a view has been developed by an American philosopher Calvin Schrag. Basically, he has been involved in a critical discussion with postmodern philosophy. He attempted to work out a refigured concept of rationality that he calls “the transversal rationality of praxis” (Schrag 1992). Moreover, Schrag undertook the task of defending the self against the postmodern onslaught. In his view, a language is strictly associated with the human self. He reasons as follows: “When we speak, we speak a language, and thus we always speak *from* language, from a context of delivered significations. Words [...] stimulate the economy of discourse [...]” (Schrag 1997: 17). On this account, we can even say that a language is the bedrock of the self. His further remarks make this plain; he claims that “it is within this economy of discourse that the self is called into being, and it is called into being as the who that is speaking and listening, writing and reading, discoursing in a variety of situations and modalities of discourse” (Schrag 1997: 17).

According to Schrag, the language plays an important role for the self. He claims that “in this temporalized economy of discourse the self lives through a multiplicity of changing profiles and a plurality of language games in which it holds court [...]” (Schrag 1997: 17). The philosopher does not go as far as to claim that a language generates or creates the self. A language in its variety is a sphere where

the self exists and unfolds. Thus, there is a clear suggestion in the above statements that the self is something more than the function of a language. In a sense, the self has control over the language. However, the latter contributes enormously to the nature of the former. As Schrag points out, “discourse provides its own resources for self-unification and self-identity, and it does so specifically in the form and dynamic of narrative” (Schrag 1997: 19).

Another aspect of the self is that it lives in social and historical settings. Again, the self is deeply connected with all elements making up the latter and in this way it becomes a social and historical self. Schrag presents this view in following way, “the self in community is a self situated in this space of communicative praxis, historically embedded, existing with others, inclusive of predecessors, contemporaries, and successors” (Schrag 1997: 109). Nevertheless, this self cannot be entirely reduced to these social and historical influences. Schrag emphasizes this aspect in the following manner: “never an island entire of itself, the self remains rooted in history but is not suffocated by the influx of historical forms and forces. The communalized self is *in* history but not *of* history. It has the resources for transcending the historically specific without arrogating to itself an unconditioned and decontextualized vision of the world” (Schrag 1997: 109). Thus, what we face is the narrative and contextualized self but at the same time the self that is not reducible to an act of narratives and a set of various contexts.

The Self as a Strong Structure

Now let us turn our attention to a stronger concept of the self. It is disregarded or at least undervalued by the majority of the above-mentioned philosophers. Nevertheless, it may contribute to the investigations of the nature of the human self. Many philosophers advocated this approach but I will limit the discussion to one figure, namely Thomas Reid. He engaged critically with David Hume’s assault on the self and avoided extreme positions in formulating his stance. He is known as a common sense philosopher and his concept of the self can be roughly described as a realist one. Dealing with the problem of personal identity, Reid remarked that identity implies the “continued existence of that indivisible thing which I call myself. Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks, and deliberates, and resolves, and acts, and suffers. I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts, and suffers. My thoughts, and actions, and feelings, change every moment; they have no continued, but successive, existence; but that self or I, to which they belong, is permanent, and has the same relation to the succeeding thoughts, actions, and feelings which I call mine” (Reid 2002: 264).

The point underlined in the above quotation concerns the existence of the subject of all activities undertaken by an individual. Reid was aware that particular experiences and acts given to and performed by the individual presuppose an underlying structure. Identifying those elements with the structure-subjects amounts to accrediting them with too strong an ontological status. If it was the case, then feelings, thoughts and actions taken together would constitute such

a subject. However, it would be incomprehensible why such transient and temporal occurrences make a given individual an enduring entity; or what makes them into a coherent rather than a chaotic unity? Or maybe they act on their own and create such an effect by themselves? In order to avoid such unresolvable issues, we should assume that there must be a kind of background for them, which exists permanently despite the temporal and changeable character of feelings, thoughts and actions. Moreover, that background is a centre of activity and further dynamism.

If we do not accept such a solution, we can be prone to criticism directed to the Humean scepticism. Hume—as has been presented above—argues that via an insight into his inner experiences, he discovers only perceptions but not the self. Thus the latter is not discovered and, if anything, it is nothing more than a bundle of perceptions. Roderick Chisholm levelled a strong critique against this position. He pointed out that the Scottish philosopher's narrative is not a subjectless report. Chisholm states that "What Hume found [...] was not merely the particular perceptions, but also the fact that *he* found those perceptions as well as the fact that *he* failed to find other things. And these are findings with respect to himself" (Chisholm 1969: 11–12). We can comment on that observation in the following way: we cannot talk about perceptions, feelings and actions without a subject in their background. From a certain perspective, that subject can be "invisible" and even "hidden" because it permeates all the undertakings of a given individual. In other words, the self is always present and operating but at the same time it is "transparent" (Chisholm 1969: 13).

Between the Selves

We can now juxtapose these two approaches to the self and reveal their essential points as well as their weaknesses. The narrative self comes into being amid human activities; in a sense, it takes its roots from individual and social practices. A positive aspect of it consists in a close association with a given cultural and historical context, as well as with human agency. In other words, we can claim that this self grows from our common heritage we are familiar with, and we have some influence on its final shape. A problem with this approach is that it does not explain how this self is constituted in such a setting. It looks as if we have endowed history, culture and finally our particular efforts with enormous constitutive powers. Thus, one can claim that all those factors possess decisive creative powers and should be considered as some kinds of selves (non-human selves) that is, as originators and perpetrators of various actions. Several objections are possible here. First, how to explain causation powers in those mega-structures, especially when we realize that they must be strictly associated with rational intentions. For instance, does a language possess such intentions? Is this a semi-subject? Second, if we claim that the self is a fruit of a language we use, who or what is that 'we' in the first place? It looks as if a self was tacitly assumed here, that is an agent who uses the language in a purposive manner. Third, if history, culture and language take their

leading roles, it means that the human self is secondary; the latter seems to be ontologically weaker here than the former. Do we really salvage the self in this way?

The substantial self solves some of the above problems. It exists prior to conscious human activities and the latter can be considered as its products. Thus, there is a clear originator and agent who creates and makes things happen. History, culture and the current personality of a human being gain new origins. Now they are effects of the activity of the self or stem from common efforts of many selves acting together. In the case of a specific human being, the self is the owner of his further powers, including a language.³ The problem with this understanding of the self is that the latter seems to reside beyond this world, in a kind of atemporal sphere. The transcendental self can be easily perceived as an extra-worldly reality unaffected by history, culture, and beyond any influence of human causation. This would be a continuation of the Cartesian and dualistic stance where the self is identified with a mental substance (*res cogitans*). Then, there appear obvious problems with reaching out to this self.⁴ This scenario does not exhaust all possibilities connected with the self; we can go beyond this narrow approach. We can devise a concept of the self that is understood as a broader ground for human activities, not only for mental and spiritual ones. Later in the paper, I am going to sketch such a broader notion but now I can point to some positive and promising points linking these seemingly divergent selves.

In some respects, these two concepts of the self can be complementary and bring with them a kind of support for each other. The narrative self needs a stronger interpretation in order to be a viable structure of human existence. Intentionality or other powers cannot constitute by themselves a subject as an enduring unity: they are always secondary and detached from a subject, they are non-existent; let alone external elements like history, the culture or the language. For instance, there is no history with its narratives beyond a community of selves. Also, the Hume-like proposal that the self is an illusion caused by a succession (or closeness) of impressions is inadequate. It is so because we do not know what makes the former into a sophisticated centre of thought and decision, amid randomly occurring and scattered impressions. If the self is in history but not of history, as Calvin Schrag maintains, it suggests that the self in itself must have a stronger character than other adherents of this approach are ready to acknowledge. Of course, we can conduct further discussion on what this stronger character might mean. At any rate, the substantial self is one of the options.

³ As Richard Sorabji put it, the self is also “at beginning of his actions” and is “the single owner” of these actions (Sorabji 2006: 260).

⁴ Besides David Hume, also Wittgenstein finds a problem with grasping consciousness, which is in a close association with the self. He argues as follows, “But what can it mean to speak of ‘turning my attention on to my own consciousness’? This is surely the queerest thing there could be! It was a particular act of gazing that I called doing this. I stared fixedly in front of me—but *not* at any particular point or object. My eyes were wide open, the brows not contracted [...]. No such interest preceded this gazing. My glance was vacant; or again like that of someone admiring the illumination of the sky and drinking in the light” (Wittgenstein 1968: §412).

The substantial self in turn also needs some corrections. If we question the credibility of the transcendental self, then we must admit that a more acceptable concept of the self would imply that it is vitally immersed in a surrounding reality, namely in history, culture and a language. This means that there is no pure self but the self that participates in various human activities and in this way, is affected, modified, and ‘coloured’ by them. However, in this approach, the self remains in the centre. All influences coming from these environments are secondary and at most can play roles of modifiers. For instance, when I say that I am moved by historical events of my country, I talk about my self who is affected by painful events from the past. In this way, my self is historically “coloured” and even conditioned to a certain degree. I am thrown into the history of my country and bear its legacy upon my shoulders. Thus, history contributes to a certain profile of my self but it does not constitute it. In a similar way, a language and culture shape my self. They contribute to its specific profile making it, for instance, into the English-speaking-I and the European-culture-I, etc.

The Self: Narrative and Substantial

Now we try to clarify the concept of the self, assuming that it could be a ground for a broader set of human activities than the transcendental self. For many philosophers, putting the self under critique means that self which stems from the Cartesian tradition. They focus their attention on the self that is a separate reality in the human being, and because it cannot be grasped by the senses and evades reflection, is considered as a by-product of other faculties, even an illusion. But we must not succumb to this perception and employ a stance which claims that the self is not a separate entity located in this or that part of the human body, and consequently not separated from other powers and faculties (as a ghost in the machine or in the stream of consciousness); we can assume that the self, as a strong structure in the constitution of the subject, is ubiquitous. Such an interpretation was suggested by Henry Price who questioned the inability of finding the self entertained by David Hume. Price observed—as reported by Chisholm—that “the self that Hume professed to be unable to find is the one that he finds to be stumbling” (Chisholm 1969: 10; Price 1940: 5–6).

This alternative approach to the self tends to associate it with the whole human existence. As Robert Sokolowski points out, “the self is scattered through the lived body and active in all its parts, not stationed behind it. It is identifiable in its unconscious and even its bodily life” (Sokolowski 2000: 127). Thus that self generates various acts and cannot be identified with a kind of spirit or a spirit-like reality, although one of its vital functions is to say “I” and execute categorical actions (Sokolowski 2000: 128); thus, it guarantees the existence of the first-person perspective and plays an important role in undertaking personal decisions. Generally, it has a multidimensional character operating in bodily, psychic and spiritual realms. Such actions like movement, perception, memory, feeling and thinking will be the proper domains of that self.

This understanding of the self is strictly associated with the concept of the human being alien to the Cartesian and post-Cartesian traditions. Rather, it belongs to a realist tradition close to the Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy. David Braine would characterize such an entity in the following way: “this subject who perceives, feels, or acts is not an inner self, nor a mind realized in a brain, but an animal or human being.” Understood thus, human beings “are integrated natural unities of a kind which is *sui generis*, at once mental and physical in character” (Braine 1992: 63). We can wonder to what extent the self belonging to so understood a human being (or just identified with the human being) can be prone to narratives coming from outside or produced by this individual himself. Obviously, there is no simple solution to it and we should consider separately various spheres of its operations.

It would be hard to argue that the narrative of whatever kind has an essential influence on bodily functioning. Genetic programming in our cells is basically not susceptible to such factors as current cultural pressures. Of course, some phenotypic characteristics, in the long run, can be shaped by influences coming from the environment, including the social environment. Nevertheless, those aspects of the self which are connected to bodily (physiological) operations cannot be substantially modified by social or individual narratives, especially at short notice. For instance, strong genetic tendencies cannot be reversed or nullified this way. Further variables appear when we consider psychological and spiritual (mental) undertakings. They are more prone to be shaped by the intentional actions of a subject or by the social environment. Individual and social narratives can play more decisive roles here.

As an example of how such influences work, we can point to modifications of self-knowledge, which is one of the powers of the self. *Prima facie*, the former is utterly an inner activity of a subject. Thus, it seems to be enclosed and limited in its scope to the interiority of the subject. Basically, it penetrates him and contributes to his subjective picture; properly operating self-knowledge brings with it an enormous help in the building-up of the subject, especially his interior life. However, subjective self-knowledge has far more functional competences in the realist concept of the self. If we abandon the self understood as the inner, extra-worldly reality for the self who is connected with a subject more integrally and holistically, then self-knowledge plays its important role not only in the realm of the interiority of the subject but also in its exteriority (bodily dynamism and interactions). In other words, any activity and function of the subject are penetrated by self-knowledge and in this way is affected by the realities the subject is facing all the time. A personalistic philosopher, Karol Wojtyła puts it this way, “self-knowledge centred on the own ‘I’ as his proper object, goes with it into all domains in which this own ‘I’ permeates” (Wojtyła 1994: 88). Those domains have various characters because they reflect all engagements the I is involved in, in the course of his life. As a result we obtain moral self-knowledge, religious self-knowledge and social self-knowledge (Wojtyła 1994: 88); because of the complexity and multidimensionality of the world the subject lives in and interacts with, there are many other variables, for instance historical, scientific, and cultural self-knowledge (Holub 2015: 158).

This makes us realize that the subject faces various narratives produced by these specific environments. They leave their imprints on him and to a certain degree form his way of being (his subjectivity). However, although social, historical and other narratives do have their bearings on the self, they do not make this self come into being in the first place; they always play secondary roles. Thus, what is really modelled by narratives is the “second face” of personhood, not the first one.

Conclusion

There is a tension between the above-discussed two concepts of self and we can favour either the narrative or the substantial approach. Nevertheless, we do not have to employ this way of proceeding and seek for a middle ground between these two seemingly opposing understandings. Without ignoring existing differences, we can work out a place where they meet each other, cooperate with each other, and finally complement one another, at least partially.

Thus, between the narrative and substantial self there is a nexus of various relations and dependencies; revealing them can result in a better understanding of the human subject as such. These relations demonstrate that the self should be perceived in a way that avoids two extremes, namely the self as an extra-worldly reality and the self as a secondary product of activities performed by an individual or a community. The self exists in itself and in relations to others, and these two dimensions are inseparable. It is always a relatively stable structure but at the same time interacting and dynamic. Thus, the substantiality of the self and its narrativity must not exhaust their mutual interactions in a confrontation but reach a level where complementarity is possible, for the sake of the comprehensive understanding of the human being.

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