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BEYOND WORDS. FINDING CENTERS OF NARRATIVE GRAVITY IN NON- LINGUISTIC ANIMALS



MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS PALABRAS. ENCONTRANDO CENTROS DE GRAVEDAD NARRATIVA EN ANIMALES NO LINGÜÍSTICOS

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ABSTRACT

Dennett's theory of the self as a center of narrative gravity (CNG) stands out as a rare instance of human exceptionalism within a philosophy otherwise characterized by a deep commitment to the notion of evolutionary continuity. According to CNG, though all living organisms possess a minimal or biological self, only human beings —through their use of language— create the kind of self-representations necessary for the possession of a richer, socially constructed, *narrative* self. Dennett points to this uniquely human trait of narrative self-representation as the means by which we generate a self that is *different in kind* from the selves of all other animals. In this paper I suggest that we can resolve this tension between CNG and evolutionary continuity by (1) reconsidering the notion of narrative as it plays a role in Dennett's theory of self, and (2) acknowledging that the same social pressures Dennett cites as the impetus for our development of a self-concept are present for many other animal species as well. If other animals can also think in narrative terms, then CNG need not be understood as an endorsement of human exceptionalism. I conclude that expanding CNG in such a way that it can include the selves of both human and some non-human animals is appropriate in light of both the evidence of highly complex social worlds of several non-human animal species and the central role that evolutionary continuity plays in Dennett's overall philosophy.

Keywords: Dennett, center of narrative gravity, self-consciousness, animal selves, animal minds, narrative self, social constructs.

RESUMEN

La teoría de Dennett sobre el yo como centro de gravedad narrativa (CGN) destaca como una rara instancia de excepcionalismo humano dentro de una filosofía caracterizada por lo demás por un profundo compromiso con la noción de continuidad evolutiva. Según la CGN, aunque todos los organismos vivos poseen un yo mínimo o biológico, solo los seres humanos —a través de su uso del lenguaje— crean el tipo de autorrepresentaciones necesarias para la posesión de un yo *narrativo* más rico y socialmente construido. Dennett señala este rasgo, exclusivamente humano, de la autorrepresentación narrativa como el medio por el cual generamos un yo que es *diferente* en especie de los yoes de todos los demás animales. En este artículo sugiero que podemos resolver esta tensión entre la CGN y la continuidad evolutiva (1) reconsiderando la noción de *narrativa* tal como interviene en la teoría del yo de Dennett y (2) reconociendo que las mismas presiones sociales que Dennett cita como el impulso para nuestro desarrollo de un autoconcepto están presentes también para muchas otras especies animales. Si otros animales también pueden pensar en términos narrativos, entonces la CGN no necesita ser entendida como una adhesión al excepcionalismo humano. Concluyo que ampliar la CGN de tal manera que pueda incluir los yoes tanto de animales humanos como de algunos animales no humanos es apropiado a la luz tanto de la evidencia de mundos sociales altamente complejos de varias especies animales no humanas como del papel central que juega la continuidad evolutiva en la filosofía general de Dennett.

Palabras clave: Dennett, centro de gravedad narrativa, autoconciencia, yoes animales, mentes animales, yo narrativo, constructos sociales.

People have selves. Do dogs? Do lobsters? If selves are anything at all, then they exist. Now there are selves. There was a time, thousands (or millions, or billions) of years ago, when there were none—at least none on this planet. So there has to be—as a matter of logic—a true story to be told about how there came to be creatures with selves. This story will have to tell—as a matter of logic—about a process (or a series of processes) involving the activities or behaviors of things that do not yet have selves—or are not yet selves—but which eventually yield, as a new product, beings that are, or have, selves. (Dennett, “The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity” 413)

Introduction

Dennett’s theory of the self as a center of narrative gravity strikes some as a deeply appealing account of a philosophically complex and seemingly anomalous feature of our world. Others find the idea counterintuitive, perhaps bordering on nonsensical. Borrowing from the popular *narrative theory of identity* of contemporary psychology, rooted in the writings of James and Erikson, Dennett’s theory posits two *kinds* of self to account for the similarity and differences between the selves of animals in general and the self of human beings in particular. According to Dennett, all animals (human or otherwise) possess a biological *self* (often referred to as a minimal or core self).¹ In addition to this primitive kind of selfhood, humans stand alone in possessing an additional kind of self; something richer and more conceptually nuanced than a minimal system of biological organization. This richer self is born from the human tendency to understand oneself, other individuals, and their world as a whole, in terms of a life-long unfolding story; a personal narrative with oneself at the center. The complex, human-specific self is an abstraction from this narrative, what Dennett calls our “Center of Narrative Gravity”. A *center of narrative gravity* (CNG) is something akin to a main character in the story of oneself, crafted by oneself, and used by oneself as the grounds for self-knowledge and successful social interactions with the selves of others.

Dennett’s theory of the self as a CNG may have some philosophical appeal for the mere reason that it can maintain the metaphysical simplicity of physicalism while accounting for the existence of something none of us can sincerely deny: ourselves. I do not here intend to argue for Dennett’s notion of the self as a center of narrative gravity as an

1 For issues in clarifying the distinction between minimal and narrative self, see Zahavi.

attractive, or even viable, theory of self. Many philosophers are drawn to Dennett's theory of self, and at least as many find it to be deeply unsatisfactory.² My aim here is to address —and hopefully resolve— the seeming incongruence of a theory such as CNG, which posits a uniquely human form of the self, with the rest of Dennett's overall philosophy: a systematic approach that takes *evolutionary* continuity to be central to an adequate understanding of the world and our place in it.

On the face of it, a theory that attributes a wholly different kind of self to human beings than the kind of self had by all other animals is one that endorses an acute form of human exceptionalism. Dennett's philosophy rarely deviates from the philosophical principles held by Darwin, who in 1871 asserted that 'the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind'.

I propose that we can resolve this tension between endorsing CNG and embracing a general commitment to evolutionary continuity by reconsidering the notion of *narrative* as it plays a role in Dennett's theory of self. More specifically (and no doubt contentiously), I will argue that humans may not be the only animals capable of narrative understanding or narrative thought. Understanding the world and the agents populating that world in narrative terms would be useful for any highly social animals engaging in socially complex interactions. If other animals can also think in narrative terms about the world at large as well as the individual agents who occupy that world —potentially including themselves— then CNG need not be understood as a kind of human exceptionalism. Expanding CNG in such a way that it can include the selves of both human and some non-human animals will require us to re-evaluate the connection between *language* and *narrative*, and reject two common, related assumptions: (1) that language is the foundation of narrative itself, and (2) that language is essential for narrative thought.³

2 Those who find it to be an unsatisfying theory of self have pointed to a variety of reasons; some object to a socially constructed self in general (holding that the self must be objectively *more real* than any kind of construction could be), while others (such as Velleman) endorse a social constructivist theory of self but object to Dennett's characterization of the self as a *fictional* construct.

3 Even accepting CNG as a *prima facie* instance of human exceptionalism, the kind of exceptionalism here is a limited form; there is no *essentialist* human exceptionalism to be found within Dennett's overall philosophy. The extent to which humans are, in fact, exceptional among the denizens of the natural world stems from their capacity to use *language* as a tool for communication and thought. Language creates the scaffolds on which humans can hang their exceptional attributes and artifacts: art, science, religion, and all of humanity's complex creations owe their existence to the cultural

Rather than being exceptional in our capacity to understand the world —and ourselves— in narrative terms, I propose that our richly detailed and nuanced narrative selfhood merely lies at one of many positions along and across a wide, multi-dimensional, space/spectrum of more or less nuanced, more or less richly detailed, degrees of self-conception.⁴ Various highly intelligent animal species, possessing the requisite conceptual capacities and having evolved under the appropriate selection pressures, likely occupy various positions within that multi-dimensional space/spectrum of self-understanding, some of which involve varying degrees of narratively sparse or complex notions of oneself.

Dennett's theory of self as a center of narrative gravity

Dennett's theory of the self as a center of narrative gravity is, in part, an attempt to reconcile a commitment to ontological physicalism with some of our widely-held intuitions about the nature of the self. Intuitively, it seems as though I *myself* am a *something* that exists over time and through drastic physical change, and could persist through certain events in a way impossible for any ordinary physical object. I can conceive of myself surviving teletransportation and reincarnation, even exchanging bodies with another human being. If we want to accommodate these intuitions about the self (even as merely what is *conceivable*, if not in fact possible) then the self cannot be a physical thing, because *physical* things cannot behave in all of the ways that our intuitions require a *self* to behave. And if no ordinary physical entity can behave as a self can supposedly behave (i.e., retaining its identity through such extraordinary changes) what *kind* of a self could satisfy these intuitions without introducing any additional nonphysical something into our otherwise wholly physicalist ontology?

Enter: the extraordinarily useful notion of an object's center of gravity. Dennett writes,

a center of gravity is not an atom or a subatomic particle or any other physical item in the world. It has no mass; it has no color; it has no physical properties at all, except for spatio-temporal location. It is a fine example of what Hans Reichenbach would call an *abstractum*. It is a purely abstract object. It is, if you like, a theorist's fiction. It is not one of the real things

.....
transmission of knowledge, enabled by our use of a language that can represent that knowledge.

- 4 As an example of a promising multi-dimensional approach to self-consciousness, see Bekoff & Sherman, in which they describe self-consciousness as a capacity that involves *degrees of self-cognizance*, according to which it is "useful to consider knowledge of self, or 'self-cognizance', as a continuum ranging from self-referencing to self-awareness to self-consciousness" (176).

in the universe in addition to the atoms. But it is a fiction that has nicely defined, well delineated and well behaved role within physics. (“The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity” 1)

A center of gravity belongs to every object; as the physical structure of the object changes, so will its center of gravity adjust its location. An object’s center of gravity, we can say, persists through time and through change in the object’s physical form as a numerically single, self-identical center of gravity, existing at different times in different locations, in some case “traveling” significant distances instantaneously, without ever being located in the space between.

A center of gravity is a well understood abstraction; it plays a “nicely defined” and “well-behaved” role for a *physical* entity. Dennett suggests a self, though less well understood, plays an analogous role for a *social* entity. Or, to put the point more precisely: in order for something to be a physical object, that thing, in virtue of being physical, will thereby have a center of gravity. In order for something to be an individual who socializes with other individuals, that thing, in virtue of its social activity, will thereby have a *self*. To continue the metaphor, as Dennett does: while the physical properties of an object determine the particular location of its center of gravity, there are features of an individual that constitute or determine the particular nature of its self.

If the self (as a metaphysical entity) is an abstraction, of course we must be abstracting away from something. The notion that one’s personal identity is constructed through developing a narrative understanding of oneself and one’s life is intuitively plausible, serves as a useful framework for understanding personal identity in psychology, and grounds the psychological (continuity) criterion of personal identity endorsed by David Lewis, Sidney Shoemaker, and Derek Parfit. Dennett takes this notion of personal identity as personal narrative and abstracts from this narrative its central figure —its main character— identifying this abstraction as the *self* to whom this personal identity belongs.

“Self-protective strings of narrative,” and the selection pressures that could give rise to the development of a self-concept

According to Dennett, humans are constantly engaged in the process of giving accounts of who they are, presenting themselves as having certain personality traits and not others, making claims about what past and future actions are in accord with the person who they themselves really are.

We... are almost constantly engaged in presenting ourselves to others, and to ourselves, and hence representing ourselves —in langua-

ge and gesture, external and internal. The most obvious difference in our environment that would explain this difference in our behavior is the behavior itself. Our human environment contains not just food and shelter, enemies to fight or flee, and conspecifics with whom to mate, but words, words, words. These words are potent elements of our environment that we readily incorporate, ingesting and extruding them, weaving them like spiderwebs into self-protective strings of narrative. (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* 416)

Dennett points to our need to present ourselves to others as agents with whom others can *repeatedly and predictably interact, over multiple episodes that are separated by significant periods of time*, Dennett identifies as the selection pressure which gives rise to a develop a self-conception. We produce and employ these “self-protective strings of narrative” to guard our reputation against evidence that we might act in ways inconsistent with *who* we are.

The need to socialize in sophisticated and complex ways makes developing a conception of oneself as an individual —someone who has interacted with others in different ways at different times, and who ought to interact with them in certain ways in the future depending on past interactions, etc.— extraordinarily valuable for any member of a socially complex species. Autonoetic memory allows you to track how you stand in relation to those in your social milieu based on (1) an understanding of others as individuals with specific persisting character traits and (2) the nature of your specific past engagements with those individuals. You may know from observations of George’s general interactions with others that George will act aggressively towards someone in your troupe soon because George has recently tussled with someone and George always acts aggressively towards whomever has tussled with him in the very recent past. And if this is so, it would be quite advantageous to know, of yourself, whether *you* are the one who has tussled with George recently.

According to Dennett, this narrative-generating behavior does not stem from but rather *gives rise to* self-conscious awareness. As he states, “Our tales are spun, but for the most part we do not spin them; they spin us. *Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source*” (*Consciousness Explained* 418, emphasis mine).

CNG identifies this narrative-generating behavior as *the feature* of which a creature is conscious when it is self-conscious; there is no *self* that is represented by the narrative *other than* the self that is *abstracted* from the narrative. Though complicated to articulate and challenging to understand, this theory of self is especially valuable for its *ontological minimalism*. The self emerges from (1) a creature’s biological

organization (its *minimal self*), and (2) its self-representing *behavior* (its more complex *narrative self*). Though conceptually complex, the theory itself requires nothing metaphysically additional to physical systems and physical processes in order to account for a *self* that can satisfy a significant number (if not all) of our intuitive commitments regarding the nature of that self.

Language, narrative, and socially complex non-linguistic animals

Given the centrality of narrative-generating behavior to this account of the self, if narrative thought is a type of thought available exclusively to language-using creatures, then the kind of self that is responsible for self-consciousness will be available exclusively to language using creatures as well.⁵ But the ability to represent yourself to yourself as something that exists in a world with other individuals and stands in different relations to those individuals (some of which are *dynamic* relations —such as shifting power hierarchies within social groups— that can change depending on the behavior of yet other members of that social group) would be a highly adaptive trait for any socially complex species. Observations of verbal behavior may provide the clearest evidence that a creature engages in the project of self-creation and self-representation, behaviors that serve to present itself (to others, as well as itself) as a single unified agent with character traits that persist through time. If other animals are engaged in such an act of self-creation and self-presentation, evidence for this activity would have to take the form of something other than public speech. Given the enormous adaptive value of this ability for highly social species, we should be surprised to discover it wholly absent from all other animal species.

5 Dennett himself saw this as neither a bug nor a feature of CNG, but rather one of many apparent but minute ruptures in evolutionary continuity that we are bound to encounter now and then, depending on the question that we are investigating. Within the context of his account of the emergence of self, he writes,

Since selves and minds and even consciousness itself are biological products (not elements to be found in the periodic table of chemistry), we should expect that the transitions between them and the phenomena that are not them should be gradual, gerrymandered. *This doesn't mean that everything is always in always gradual; transitions that look gradual from close up usually look like abrupt punctuations between plateaus of equilibrium from a more distant vantage point.* (*Consciousness Explained* 421, emphasis mine)

Dennett's original text here cites Eldredge and Gould, 1972; and *see also* Dawkins, 1982, pp. 101-109.

As research in ethology and animal cognition reveals more details of other animals' cognitive abilities and social worlds, we find mounting evidence that the same social pressures Dennett cites as the impetus for the human species' development of the concept of the self present for many other animal species as well.

If other individuals in your social group interact favorably or unfavorably with you depending on how you have acted toward them in the past, it would be advantageous for you to have a conception of yourself that extends over time and on which you can hang memories, knowledge of past interactions with individuals that include —significantly— knowledge of one's own behavior and the reactions that behavior evoked. It is by remembering your own past actions (and their consequences) as *your* past actions, *rather than merely past actions simpliciter*, that an individual can benefit from past social experience to improve future social interactions.

Narrative: with or without language

Though Dennett explicitly treats language-use as a prerequisite for *having a self*, and by extension being self-conscious, I suggest we reevaluate the extent to which the most fundamental aspects of creating and understanding a narrative—which is, at root, a story; a set of meaningfully connected events—requires possessing the distinct tools of language. Philosophers generally accept that language is necessary for narrative, but others who are closely engaged with narrative creation and story-telling do not make such an assumption. We are all familiar with the narrative form silent movies can take, as well as fully pictorial children's books and graphic novels. Dynamic pantomime performances and static paintings can convey narratives as well. Language adds a richness to narrative that non-linguistic representations of narrative may not capture, but these non-linguistic forms of representation indisputably convey narratives in their own way—detail-poor, but still displaying a genuine depth of meaning.

At root, a narrative is an expression of a story. We can think of the story as the meaning which the linguistically composed narrative conveys. But just as sentences are ways of articulating propositions and propositions themselves are not exhausted by the sentences that express them, narratives are not exhausted by the words in which they can be expressed.

To be the kind of creature that can think in narrative terms—that can create and understand *stories*—one needs certain narrative-enabling conceptual resources: the ability to conceive of episodes or events that have a causal or *temporal* structure, and to see the world as containing *goals, purposes, intentions, and agents* (see Garcia-Pelegri et al.). These

concepts are the fundamental features of stories. Infants can understand and impose story-structure on a series of events (see Heider & Simmel), young children can create more elaborate stories, and if there are other creatures that conceive of the world as containing this kind of structure, those creatures thereby possess the conceptual capacity to engage in narrative thought. In the right circumstances, a creature with such a capacity might think about the individuals around them—and of themselves—in narrative terms as well.

The suggestion that many non-human animal species possess the conceptual resources necessary to engage in narrative thought is supported by a large body of research in comparative cognition. A small sample includes Andrews's analysis of mind reading in great apes, Call et al.'s research on chimpanzee judgments of agency, the bottlenose dolphin's use of specific sounds as names for individuals (King & Janik), and the importance of long-term reliability for mate selection in avian species that engage in extended biparental care of offspring (Cockburn).

Re-phrasing narrative in self-understanding

These strings or streams of narrative issue forth as if from a single source—not just in the obvious physical sense of flowing from just one mouth, or one pencil or pen, but in a more subtle sense: their effect on any audience is to encourage them to (try to) posit a unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are: in short, to posit a center of narrative gravity. (Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* 418)

Dennett's expression of his theory of the self as a center of narrative gravity has been phrased entirely in terms of linguistically-constructed narratives, assertions, and linguistically-represented thoughts about who one is and the nature of one's own character. To retain the narrative content without the explicit reference to language, we could reimagine these as emissions or performances as *displays of character*, rather than "strings of narrative". We can *get to know* a character through repeated encounters and observations of consistent patterns of behavior from a single individual. A character can be revealed to others (and to itself) through deeds as well as words. Words may add enormous depth to our description of that character, but the character itself can be presented to us with or without the aid of words.

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