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REAL SELF-PATTERNS



PATRONES REALES DEL YO

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Daniel Dennett makes two important contributions to thinking philosophically about the notion of self. First, his narrative conception of the self (self as the “center of narrative gravity”). Second, his concept of ‘real patterns’ which, when applied to the self, forces us to rethink the idea of self as a center of narrative gravity. If we understand the self as a self-pattern, then it is more than a center of narrative gravity. Self-narrative is only one factor in the self-pattern although it plays two important roles: (a) as one among other elements of the self-pattern it contributes to self-constitution; (b) self-narrative reflects all the other significant factors that make up the self-pattern. Accordingly, as Dennett himself suggested, self-narrative “is a much more complicated concept” than an abstract center of gravity.

Keywords: Daniel Dennett, self, narrative, real patterns.

RESUMEN

Sostengo que Daniel Dennett hace dos contribuciones importantes al pensamiento filosófico sobre la noción del yo. Primero, su concepción narrativa del yo (el yo como el “centro de gravedad narrativa”). Segundo, su concepto de “patrones reales” que, cuando se aplica al yo, nos obliga a repensar la idea del yo como centro de gravedad narrativa. El yo es más que un centro de gravedad narrativa; la auto-narración es solo un factor en la constitución del auto-patrón, aunque desempeña dos papeles importantes: (a) como uno entre otros elementos del auto-patrón contribuye a la auto-constitución; (b) la auto-narración refleja todos los demás factores significativos que conforman el auto-patrón. En consecuencia, como el propio Dennett sugirió, la auto-narración “es un concepto mucho más complicado” que un centro de gravedad abstracto.

Palabras clave: Daniel Dennett, yo, narrativa, patrones reales.

Daniel Dennett makes two important contributions in regard to thinking philosophically about the notion of self. First, directly, he offers a narrative conception of the self, according to which the self is defined as the “center of narrative gravity” (Dennett, “The self as a center of narrative gravity”). Second, indirectly, he develops the concept of ‘real patterns’ (Dennett, “Real patterns”). Although he does not apply the notion of real patterns to the self, I’ll argue in this paper that he could have, and he should have done so, and if he had done so his narrative conception of self would have radically changed.

The narrative center of gravity

Dennett’s conception of the self as the center of narrative gravity is well known. I’ll briefly rehearse the idea in this section. I’ll then suggest that it captures something important about the self, but that in his deflationary analysis it turns the self into an abstraction, something that is seemingly disembodied and has no real physical status, despite his use of a metaphor from physics.

There is currently some consensus that the concept of narrative captures something essential about human existence, although there is no consensus that an account of the narrative self is the whole story about the self (Fabry; Hutto; Ricoeur; Taylor). Dennett’s conception of the narrative self is one among a number of theories that equate self with self-narrative. In some regards, however, his analysis is less developed than some of the others. For example, Paul Ricoeur proposes a very rich account of the narrative self. It’s a rich account not only because it is complex, but because self-narrative is embedded in a multi-dimensional human existence. His analysis looks at the relation between narrative identity, action, and moral relations. One’s self-narrative is always entangled in the narratives of others. Ricoeur thus proposes a productive tension between a unified life structure and specific distributed instabilities found within the variety of perspectives that contribute to the self-narrative. His account suggests that the self is the sum total of its narratives, including many of the equivocations and contradictions that find expression in personal life. As he characterizes it, self-narrative involves a tension between concordance and discordance.

Marya Schechtman likewise defends “a view according to which a person creates his identity by forming an autobiographical narrative—a story of his life” (*The Constitution of Selves* 93). Individuals, she indicates, “weave stories of their lives, and it is their doing so which makes them persons” (94). Narrative helps us to weave together both linguistic expressions and extra-narrative things like “traits, actions, and experiences” and an individual’s “subjective relation to her actions and experience”, which are always caught in “a web of social institutions

and interactions” (94-95). These factors are “extra-narrative” in that they are not reducible to narrative and operate on rules that are different from the rules of narrative. Schechtman emphasizes these extra-narrative factors even more in her later work where narrative self-constitution has a “more limited scope” (*Unity of a Life* 99). She argues that social narratives —the stories that others tell about us— allow for a more inclusive concept of self, according to which those who may not be able to express a self-narrative (e.g., pre-linguistic infants and those with cognitive deficits such as Alzheimer’s that might preclude coherent self-narration) can still be attributed personhood. Beyond this, she makes it clear that what we call self is determined not by any one factor, “but rather by a complex set of factors interacting over time” (*The Self: A Very Short Introduction* 52). Self-narrative continues to be important, offering “resources for thinking about the self”, but it is not the exclusive constitutive factor at stake.

In contrast to these accounts Dennett offers a more deflationary account. He characterizes the self as an abstract “fictional object” similar to the abstract concept of the center of gravity (“The self as a center of narrative gravity” 275), which, as he puts it, “is a well-behaved concept in Newtonian physics”. Importantly, a center of gravity is not some physical thing (not even a subatomic particle); it is without mass, color, or any other physical properties, although it does have spatiotemporal location. It is 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 in the universe in addition to the atoms” (275). Dennett is referencing Hans Reichenbach’s distinction between abstracta, understood as non-observational abstract conceptual constructs (such as the center of gravity), and illata, understood as theoretically inferred entities like electrons or atoms that have existence and causal power. Although there is a debate about how to understand the ontological status of Dennett’s abstracta (see, e.g., Yu & Fuller), and on whether an abstractum might nonetheless have causal power (which puts pressure on a strict instrumentalist understanding), Dennett is never a strict instrumentalist (see Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* 71-2). If the self is a “theoretical fiction”, as Dennett says, it’s not some

idle fantasy; it must pay for itself by being supremely useful to the various human beings in the neighborhood who are trying to make sense of, and live peacefully with, the human body whose brain is largely responsible for the spinning [of the narrative]. I confess to not having made this sufficiently clear. (Dennett, “Artifactual selves” 17)

A center of gravity can figure in a causal explanation of why things tip over or do not; it can also be manipulated. It can move around in

time and space, and it can have a history of changes that we can track, if we were so inclined. The self enjoys accordingly the same ontological status of abstractum:

A self is also an abstract object, a theorist's fiction. The theory is not particle physics but what we might call a branch of people-physics; it is more soberly known as a phenomenology or hermeneutics, or soul-science (*Geisteswissenschaft*)... The hermeneuticist or phenomenologist—or anthropologist—sees some rather more complicated things moving about in the world—human beings and animals—and is faced with a similar problem of interpretation. It turns out to be theoretically perspicuous to organize the interpretation around a central abstraction: each person has a self (in addition to a center of gravity). (“The self as a center of narrative gravity” 276)

Beyond enjoying the same status of abstractum as a physical center of gravity, for Dennett, the specificity of the self is produced by narration, rather than by a theoretical effort: it is a *narrative* center of gravity in which the self is a product rather than an author. A self is like a fictional character but not authored by a real self. In his essay Dennett asked us to believe what we might have thought “incredible” in 1992, but which is no longer incredible, that an AI machine (or robot) could write a novel and create a character that tracks its own robotic adventures. His point was that the brain, being moved around as part of a body, operates in the same way. “[The AI robot] does not know what it is doing. It does not even know that it is creating a fictional character. (The same is just as true of your brain; it does not know what it is doing either.)” (“The self as a center of narrative gravity” 282). The self is not *in* the brain but is rather the product of the brain's narrative capacities.

Dennett's view, as he originally stated it, seems very much a deflationary view. A view that claims self-narrative as exclusively constitutive of self, however, claims too much or too little. If such a view is meant to be a strong reductionist claim—that the self just is one's self-narrative and nothing more, or even more narrowly, that the self just is an abstract “center of narrative gravity”, as Dennett (“The self as a center of narrative gravity”) put it—it claims too much for narrative. At the same time, it ignores or says too little about other aspects of selfhood, without which there would be no self-narrative. Yet Dennett immediately qualifies this kind of deflationary tendency: “It is a much more complicated concept” than the physicist's concept of the center of gravity. Self-narrative, he indicates, is about “life, about [one's] beliefs and desires, [one's] acts and attitudes” (“The self as a center of narrative gravity”). So, there is more to the self than just the narrative. It is this

complexity that is of interest here. Accordingly, in a later defense of this idea, he clarifies some of its features:

The main reason I talk of the self as the center of narrative gravity is that I view it as an artifact of our (mainly unselfconscious and innocent) efforts to solve the myriad little problems of interpersonal activity we encounter every day, from the moment of our birth... We learn eventually how to express our wants, to tell Mother where it hurts, and, as we grow more worldly, to dissemble, deceive, and conceal. (Dennett, "Artifactual selves" 19-20)

Dennett's attempt to develop this metaphor leads him to include other relevant factors in the constitution of the self: beliefs, desires, acts, attitudes, and something that phenomenologists refer to as intersubjective relations, reflecting what Fanti Rovetta calls the 'permeability' of narratives to social interactions.

[T]he narrative self results from the continuous activity of making sense of one's past and planning one's future from a socially and historically embedded perspective, while negotiating the products of this process with others. Indeed, a widely recognized feature of the narrative self is its permeability to social interactions: parents and caregivers, teachers and peers, during development, concur to determine both the initial narrative self of the child and the narrative self of the person throughout life. (Fanti Rovetta 978)

The reality of patterns

In this and the next section I'll outline Dennett's idea of real patterns and show how it can apply to the notion of self. In his essay "Real patterns", Dennett ("Real patterns") starts his discussion asking about beliefs. Belief is usually thought to be a paradigm example of a mental state. Do beliefs really exist? After suggesting that this is not a 'yes' or 'no' type of question, he cites Peter Smith's discussion of the intentional stance, which is Dennett's own way of explaining why we attribute mental states to a system. According to Smith, Dennett

insists that to adopt the intentional stance and interpret an agent as acting on certain beliefs and desires is to discern a pattern in his actions which is genuinely there (a pattern which is missed if we instead adopt a scientific stance). (22)

Taking the intentional stance involves discerning a behavioral pattern, and that pattern is what we reference—it is what we mean—when we say that the other person has a belief. This transforms the initial question: Is a belief real? into the new one: Is a *pattern* of the belief type real?

Dennett's answer is that we should think in terms of scientific realism (in contrast to metaphysical realism). The question of metaphysical realism considers "the existence of abstract objects generally, and does not distinguish them in terms of their scientific utility" (Dennett, "Real patterns" 28). For example, what metaphysical status does a mathematical point have? In contrast, something is scientifically real if it serves a productive purpose in science. This is the case even for an abstraction or an abstract object, such as a center of gravity. In very precise terms, Dennett explains that something serves a productive purpose in scientific explanation if it provides some explanatory power that we do not get from a more basic account. Something, even an abstract entity, has scientific reality if it cannot be reduced to or computed from all the facts that can be iterated in some lower-level account. A center of gravity is real on this view. Accordingly, to answer the question about belief, if we can show that the pattern that constitutes what we call a belief is real in this sense, then a belief must have this kind of reality.

Dennett focuses on behavioral patterns rather than neuronal patterns, but a belief may be both, or some kind of integrated neuronal-behavioral pattern. On the one hand, we can see these patterns, directly in the case of animal behaviors, and indirectly (using technology) in the case of neurons. On the other hand, a pattern is something like an interpretive event — 'the pattern is discernible in agents' (observable) behavior when we subject it to 'radical interpretation' (Davidson) 'from the intentional stance' (Dennett, "Real patterns" 30). In this epistemic respect Dennett makes the notion of pattern observer-relative: "a pattern is 'by definition' a candidate for pattern recognition" (32) — and a recognition does not exist without some act of recognition. Going back to the idea that a pattern is something that can be perceived, however, Dennett suggests that "a pattern exists in some data — is real — if there is a description of the data that is more efficient than the bit map, *whether or not anyone can concoct it*" ("Real patterns" 34, emphasis added).¹ This seems to indicate that a pattern can be observer-independent.²

1 The notion of a 'bit map', as Dennett used it in his essay, refers to a complete listing of how a set of dots (colored black or white) composing a geometrical pattern are positioned *seriatim* ("dot one is black, dot two is white, dot three is white..."). If we needed to send a bit-map description of a pattern consisting of 900 dots, for example, we would need to send 900 pieces of information. Describing the bit map is a possible but the least efficient method of describing a pattern. But it is the only accurate way to describe a random arrangement (not a pattern).

2 This leads Haugeland and others (e.g., Ladyman & Ross 205ff.) to note some ambiguity or equivocation in Dennett's essay.

An enactivist would say at this point that a pattern has a relational existence, in the same way that an affordance exists. Certain features may physically exist in the environment but may only be noticed by someone with expertise; in contrast, someone without expert skill will not be able to see the pattern. Dennett seems to agree. He holds that mechanisms of pattern recognition differ in different animals (that is, some animals may be able to see patterns that we cannot see, perhaps because they have a different kind of body, which also implies different behavioral and neural patterns). We can add, however, that a pattern that is there to be seen may not be seen, not simply because the perceiver lacks knowledge or expertise, or has a different bodily form, but also because the perceiver may have different interests. As a geologist I may easily see a pattern in the rock formation, for example, but only if I am not distracted by some other event. Or, perhaps I do not see the pattern because I am not looking for it.

When two individuals confront the same data, they may perceive different patterns in them, but since we can have varied interests and perspectives, these differences do not all count as disagreements. Or in any event they should not. (Dennett, "Real patterns" 35)

Two different patterns in the same data can both be real in a pragmatic (instrumental) sense. That is because they can serve different purposes, or the same purpose differently. This kind of pragmatism characterizes scientific practice. The use of a toy model, for example, involves a pattern that is oversimplified in comparison to the explanandum; but for purposes of explanation the model may serve the purpose better than trying to work out a more detailed explanation. This is exactly the claim about the intentional stance in contrast to explanations in terms of design (explaining what a system is designed to do) or physics (explaining the architecture of the system). It is also possible that we can pick up on some minimal set of elements of a behavioral pattern, for example, and see enough to attribute a pattern that counts as an intention. In some cases, perhaps, even a single perceived element of a pattern may trigger these attributions. More likely, attributions of sentience, intention, or selfhood are triggered by perceiving relations between one or more factors.

For humans with typical sense modalities set up by evolutionary forces, practically speaking, a large set of patterns can be recognized to the extent they serve survival, or a variety of pragmatic interests. A belief is a useful pattern that rests on "a reality diffused in the behavioral dispositions of the brain (and body)" ("Real patterns" 45; Dennett is endorsing a view he finds in Paul Churchland, and rejecting Fodor's view that would put beliefs in the head, correlated to brain processes).

This is Dennett's mild realistic view of pattern. He makes it clear that the opposite of the pattern is the random, that is, complete disorder.

The concept of self-pattern

It is telling that even those theories that start with strong claims about the centrality of self-narratives for self-constitution lead almost inevitably to other factors and the idea that the self is more than narrative. As we have seen, this is what we find in Schechtman, for example, but also in Dennett if we consider his immediate qualification on his claim about the narrative center of gravity: "It is a much more complicated concept". Although Dennett did not apply the notion of real patterns to the question of selfhood, doing so would have provided a way to understand its complicated nature. Furthermore, if he understood the self as a self-pattern, his narrative conception of self would have radically changed. I will argue that once we see the self as a real pattern that involves a set of multiple, complex factors, including the self-narrative, we can understand why self-narrative cannot be the exclusive maker of the self. The 'pattern theory of the self' (Gallagher, "A pattern theory of self"; *The Self and its Disorders*) explains why.

The pattern theory argues that what we call self just is a self-pattern, a pattern that is a dynamical integration of multiple factors, different processes that include bodily, experiential, affective, behavioral, and cognitive/reflective processes, as well as ecological, social, and normative factors. The notion of the self-pattern does not exclude self-narrative. Self-narrative is one element that facilitates not only our own self-understanding but also how we understand the concept of self. In this respect I will argue that self-narrative contributes to self-constitution, but not that it is self-constituting in an exclusive way.

Consider, then, the processes that make up the self-pattern. They include processes that extend across the brain-body-environment system. *Bodily processes* include bio-systemic processes related to motoric, autonomic, endocrine, enteric, immune and interoceptive functions. These processes register a basic distinction between self and non-self, common throughout biological systems. Such a distinction becomes conscious in *experiential processes* that include prereflective self-awareness, the experiential sense of ownership or mineness for some bodily processes as well as for one's experience, and a sense of agency for one's intentional action. The self-pattern includes *affective processes*, ranging from basic bodily affect (e.g., hunger, fatigue) to typical emotion patterns (Newen et al.), as well as existential feelings (Ratcliffe), and moods; *cognitive and psychological processes* contributing to psychological continuity and memory; reflective processes including second-order cognitive processes involving the ability to

consciously reflect on and evaluate one's first-order experiences and actions;³ *behavioral/action-related processes*, actions and habitual behaviors which contribute significantly to our self-identity and character; *social/intersubjective processes* including those that range from basic capacities for attuning to others to those that underpin what pragmatists would call a 'social self'. The self-pattern also extends to include *ecological processes* that allow for an identity-defining integration of our embodied actions with environmental situations that include artifacts, instruments, and structures, that in turn define our possibilities and affordances; and *normative factors* that are expressed in oughts, obligations, and expectations. Self-identity in this respect is shaped by values connected with one's profession, one's religion, social status, the various roles involved in marriage, in parenting, in friendship, as well as constraints imposed by gender, race, and economic circumstances (Gallagher, *The Self and its Disorders*).

In addition to this set of diverse processes, the self-pattern also includes the capacity to self-narrate, to frame one's experiences and actions in a structured story-like fashion. According to the pattern theory of self, self-narrative recursively reflects other processes in the self-pattern and contributes to the formation of a coherent life.

It is important to note that the self-pattern is not simply a collection of these factors. Rather, these processes need to be understood as dynamically related to each other such that the self-pattern can be characterized as a recursively self-organizing *dynamical gestalt*, precisely defined as an arrangement in which an intervention on any one element, above a certain threshold, will have an effect on the other elements, and on the pattern as a whole. That is, each factor or process is related in a dynamically causal way to the others, testable on principles of interventionist causality (Woodward). For example, an intervention or trauma that changes bodily function does not simply affect the body; it can have a profound effect on the patient's affective state, his personality, and on his intersubjective relations (Gallagher, *The Self and its Disorders*).

Meta-theoretically, in the most abstract sense, no element in a pattern need be considered a necessary condition; the pattern consists of several jointly sufficient conditions. In this respect the concept of a self-pattern can accommodate different conceptions or theories of self or personal identity. Medieval theologians and 20th-c. cognitive scientists might agree that bodily processes do not contribute anything essential

3 Reflective processes are closely related to notions of autonomy and moral personhood. They include the capacity to evaluate and form second-order volitions about one's desires (Frankfurt; Taylor).

to self-identity since, on their view, what counts for self-identity is purely cognitive, and, respectively, can be instantiated in angels (pure intelligences) (Jones) or artificial systems (e.g., Kurzweil; see Cappuccio). Someone in a coma, who lacks any consciousness, will still be considered a self or person. A person with schizophrenia suffering positive symptoms may be lacking a sense of agency, but is still considered a person; likewise someone lacking the capacity for self-narrative, as in cases of dysnarrativa (in Korsakoff syndrome) (Bruner), or memory, in cases of Alzheimer's, since other aspects of the self-pattern are still intact. Furthermore, there is no one element in the pattern that counts as a self, or that operates as an agent. As Scott Kelso indicates, dynamical "patterns in general emerge in a self-organized fashion, without any agent-like entity ordering the elements, telling them when and where to go" (Kelso 1). Accordingly, there is no self within a self-pattern. Rather, a self just is the pattern or dynamical gestalt arrangement of factors. Dennett's concept of real pattern, however, rules out the idea that the self-pattern is some sort of illusion. John Haugeland, in his commentary on Dennett's notion of pattern, suggested that the closer one looks, the more each element of a pattern itself looks like a pattern that lacks a well-defined border, and in this regard, both the elements and the constituted pattern can be said to be observer-relative. This just is as it should be for the self-pattern. I see myself, and others see me, from a variety of perspectives. To focus on any one factor, including self-narrative, in a way that ignores its relations in the pattern is to focus on an abstraction.⁴

Two roles for self-narrative in the self-pattern

I have traced out two lines of thought in this paper so far. First, I took a critical perspective on the deflationary tendency to reduce the self to the notion of a narrative self. Second, I have proposed the application of Dennett's concept of real pattern to the concept of self-pattern. Clearly, these lines intersect. Understanding the self as a self-pattern requires that Dennett's narrative conception of self would have radically changed. Self-narrative cannot be the exclusive maker of the self.

4 To be clear, I am using the term 'abstraction' in the sense that Haugeland uses it to contrast 'abstract' and 'concrete'. This use of the term is not equivalent to the notion of 'abstractum' (Reichenbach) discussed above and in Dennett ("Real patterns"). Haugeland defines 'abstraction' as considering "properties apart from any particular instantiations in things", whereas 'concrete' involves "determinacy in particular individuals" (281). Real patterns, whether or not they are treated scientifically as abstracta are always concrete insofar as they are perceivable and regardless of whether they are observer-relative or observer-independent.

Self-narrative in the self-pattern plays two roles: first, it is one factor in the self-pattern, and second, it reflects, directly or indirectly, all the other factors. That is, the self-narrative is one of many processes/factors that contribute to the self-pattern, and in that sense is partially constitutive of the self-pattern. In addition, it is also a factor that reflects all of the other factors, both in terms of its content and its structure. My self-narrative may selectively pick out specific experiences, or feelings, or actions or interpersonal relations that have some significance for my life; as such it reflects the self-pattern. Here one can see the recursive dynamics at work since those same processes also shape my self-narrative, not just in terms of its content (the story I tell about myself) but also in its formal structure. For example, a narrative motivated by a highly emotional incident may involve changes in narrative distance, signaled by changes in verb tense, and by shifts “from more complex, textured sentences to shorter, more staccato, subject-verb-object constructions” (Stewart).

Furthermore, reflecting the ‘permeability’ of narratives to social interactions (Fanti Rovetta), my self-narrative may change depending on the other person’s reception of it, their ongoing emotional response, or it may alter when I am telling it to one specific person or group in contrast to another, or in situations governed by one set of norms rather than another. For example, the stories I tell about myself, and the language I use can differ when I am telling them to my church group from when I am telling them to my mates down at the pub. Affectivity, intersubjective relations and normative factors can also affect both the content and the structure of self-narratives, just as changes in the experiences of agency and ownership can affect the coherence or connectedness of expression in self-narrative (Arzy & Schacter).

Conclusion: Changing the narrative

Self-narrative is a real practice, but the self is more than a center of narrative gravity. As such, self-narrative is only one factor in the constitution of the self-pattern although it plays two important roles. First, as one among other elements of the self-pattern it contributes to self-constitution, which is to say that the practice of self-narration is part of what makes us who we are. Second, self-narrative reflects the other significant factors that make up the self-pattern. It has a reflective function insofar as it selectively registers implicitly or explicitly in structure and/or content, those processes, feelings, actions or interpersonal relations that have some significance for my life and as such reflects who I am. From the perspective of others, self-narrative serves as a means of access that allows us to understand a particular person.

Accordingly, as Dennett suggested, self-narrative “is a much more complicated concept” than an abstract center of gravity.

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