

I | The Place of Selves in the Natural Order

Are not all phenomena of consciousness merely terminal phenomena, final links in a chain?

—*Frederich Nietzsche*¹

¹Nietzsche (1968), p. 352.



FOR INDEXING



1 | What Am I?

THE STARTING POINT FOR PHILOSOPHY is often perplexity. There is no more effective way to generate perplexity about what kinds of thing we are than by reading the astonishing, unsettling, and undeniably brilliant piece of philosophical writing that is Dennett’s “Where am I?” I highly recommend the piece itself. The story is a fictional autobiography in which Dennett relates a sequence of events in the first person with the causal and thoroughly convincing air of someone who starts up a conversation with a stranger on a plane. I will sketch the story quickly in what follows and use it to raise the problem of locating the self in an objective description of the world. Let yourself be lulled imaginatively and uncritically into the story and see if you can appreciate how special and puzzling thought about oneself is.

Here’s How the Story Goes

Dennett—whose name I’ll italicize, when I mean the fictional narrator of the story, instead of the real-world philosopher and author of the fiction—begins the story by relating that he was recruited to help rescue material from a sunken submarine. *Dennett* reports that the plan was to remove his brain from his body and place it in a vat in the lab, connecting it to his body by radio signals that would allow him to control it in the ordinary way. This was a precaution prompted by the danger of the assignment. The thought was that if anything went wrong below the surface, his brain would be safe above ground and they would be able to transfer it into another body. His body is sent underwater to perform the task, with his sensory organs rewired to send signals to his brain so that

he retains the sensory viewpoint of his body and phenomenologically immediate, willful control over its movements. The control is now causally mediated by electrical signals conveyed to his body from a chip in his brain with no discernible impact from the inside. As it happens, there is a mishap. *Dennett's* body is lost to radiation. As he tells it, from his point of view, all goes momentarily black, and the next thing he knows he is waking up in a hospital bed in Houston, to find himself seeing through the eyes, feeling with the hands, tasting with the mouth, of a new body. He is told that the new body is provided by a brain-dead donor, that a year has passed since the mishap, and that his brain has been in its vat in the Houston lab, where it remains even now. He is asked to take another pass at his original mission, this time donning a special kinetic virtual reality suit that controls the movements of a mechanical body substitute that has been sent underwater to the sunken submarine. He does this, and that task is completed successfully. Afterward, while his mind is still getting used to the slightly different dimensions of the flesh and blood body he inherited from the donor, he learns that a functional silicon duplicate of his brain was made, unbeknownst to him, as another precautionary measure. The duplicate brain has been mostly kept evolving “offline” alongside his real brain in the Houston lab, but it can be wired in as a substitute by the flick of a switch if his real brain suffers some kind of damage.

Dennett finds the arrangement a little disconcerting. He doesn't want the duplicate brain connected to another body (“some Johnny-come-lately Rosenkrantz or Guildenstern”), for then it would seem that there would be an imposter, who would seem to have equal claim to his job, his wife, and his wealth. To prevent that situation, the decision is made that he himself will utilize both brains. He will be given control of the switch that determines which brain is online and switch back and forth from time to time.

The various players in the story are conveniently provided with names:

- Yorick is *Dennett's* original brain.
- Hubert is the computer that instantiates Yorick.
- Hamlet is *Dennett's* original body.
- Fortinbras is Yorick's second body and later Hubert's first.

There is no question, at any of the relevant points in the story, where all of these objects are. The whole story is told in the first person, with interspersed philosophical musings in which *Dennett* wonders at different

stages where he—that is, he, *himself*—is located. This is another way of asking which of these objects—that is, Yorick, Hubert, Hamlet, or Fortinbras—is the bearer of his identity. The question is curiously hard to answer. And the difficulty does not stem from any doubt about what is happening objectively, or where Yorick, Hubert, Hamlet, or Fortinbras is when each enters the story. The difficulty resides in identifying any one of these with *Dennett* himself. If one imagines oneself into *Dennett*'s shoes and asks the same the question posed repeatedly by the narrator, “Where am I?,” the inability to say where one is *oneself* to be found in the dizzying whirl of brains and bodies can leave one with a sense of vertigo. In the early part of the story *Dennett* expresses an inclination to locate himself under water with Hamlet, his original body. To him it seems as though he is on the ocean floor looking at the hulk of a sunken submarine and trying to concentrate on his task. But when Hamlet is lost, since *Dennett* himself survives, he decides he must have been back in Houston with Yorick, his envatted brain. After all *he* is still around and didn't *move* from ocean to lab at the instant of dissolution. Yet when Fortinbras becomes his body and visits the lab to have a look at Yorick, *Dennett* says that he has little success sustaining the thought that he has been in Houston all along. As he writes:

While I recovered my equilibrium and composure, I thought to myself: “Well, here I am sitting on a folding chair, staring through a piece of plate glass at my own brain . . . But wait,” I said to myself, “shouldn't I have thought, ‘Here I am, suspended in a bubbling fluid, being stared at by my own eyes?’” I tried to think this latter thought. I tried to project it into the tank, offering it hopefully to my brain, but I failed to carry off the exercise with any conviction.²

And later, when he flicks the switch that takes Yorick offline and wires Hubert into Fortinbras, there is the question of whether he goes with Yorick or Hubert. And the next question is: What if Yorick is destroyed, what if it has already, unbeknownst to him, *been* destroyed and replaced with Hubert? The flick of the switch, recall, had “no perceptible effect.” In his

² Dennett (1978), p. 312. The passage continues: “I tried to build up to the task by doing mental exercises. I thought to myself, ‘*The sun is shining over there,*’ five times in rapid succession, each time mentally ostending a different place: in order, the sunlit corner of the lab, the visible front lawn of the hospital, Houston, Mars, and Jupiter. I found I had little difficulty in getting my ‘there’s to hop all over the celestial map with their proper references. I could loft a ‘there’ in an instant through the farthest reaches of space, and then aim the next ‘there’ with pinpoint accuracy at the upper left quadrant of a freckle on my arm. Why was I having such trouble with ‘here’?”

own words: “Every few months I reconnoitre the situation by switching channels. . . . The two positions on the switch are intentionally unmarked, so I never have the faintest idea whether I am switching from Hubert to Yorick or *vice versa*”³

What Do We Make of All of This? Two Responses: Descartes and Dennett

I take it we can make perfect sense of this story from the inside. We can attach imaginative content to the full history reported by *Dennett* in the first person. And although it doesn’t matter much for the purpose it serves here, the story even has a surface-level technological plausibility. The question is what to make of it. Ordinarily we locate ourselves where our bodies are. We each have a special relationship to our body. We see through its eyes and ears, and it moves under our command. We hurt when it is damaged. But we can also imagine—like *Dennett*—having different bodies. And if we can imagine having different bodies, then it would seem that we cannot be one and the same thing as our bodies. If we cannot be one and the same thing as our bodies, perhaps we are just our brains. There are two reasons that brains suggest themselves as bearers of identity. The first is that we are such intensely visual creatures that we tend to center ourselves at the place from which we see, somewhere just behind the eyes (at the apex of binocular vision), and that is where the brain is.⁴ The second is that science has taught us that the brain is the causal seat of experience. We could lose arms and legs without ceasing to exist, but without our brains, according to science, there is no mental life. That suggestion does not, however, seem to work very well for *Dennett* either. Once his brain is separated from his body and point of view, *Dennett* says that he feels almost no inclination to locate himself where his brain is. By the end of the story, he bears entirely symmetrical relations to his brain and a computer program that simulates its activity, and he has no knowledge of which of them is supporting his mental life at any given time or where it is. He feels the strongest inclination from his own perspective to locate himself at his point of view, that is, the point in space that he is receiving visual, tactual, auditory, and other information about. But the story teaches how easy it is to push the point of

³Dennett (1978), p. 322.

⁴However, the ancients tended to locate us at the heart, where it is sometimes said that we feel emotions.

view around in space by attaching remote sensors to the signals and wires feeding the brain. The right sorts of informational connections will project anyone's point of view onto the hardhat of a coalminer, the facemask of an astronaut, or the intestinal tract of a naked mole rat, even while (one is inclined to say) the person himself sits comfortably at home. And if we do locate ourselves at the place in space about which we are getting perceptual information, then instantaneous switches in point of view would have to be described as cases in which we move from one location to another faster than the speed of light and without passing through the intervening space. And that can't be right. And it is almost irresistible to ask, what happens if our point of view gets divided so that, for example, we are getting tactual information from one place and visual information from another? This is all just very confusing. There doesn't seem to be any single object that can act as bearer of *Dennett's* identity in the story. There's a quite fluid connection to different bodies, brains, and a point of view that doesn't seem to bear any fixed relationship to a given body or brain.

And, perhaps the weirdest thing about all of this is that (as I remarked earlier) it doesn't seem like there is anything that we don't know about the situation, some additional, objectively describable *fact* that would answer *Dennett's* question "Where am I?" We know where all of the bodies and brains are and what role they play in *Dennett's* psychological life. We know where *Dennett's* point of view is centered and how it is shifted around by the right kinds of informational connections. And still we are left with the question that *Dennett* raises in the first person: Where am I, this object that retains its identity through switches of brains, gaining and shedding bodies like casting off clothing, seeing now from one place, now from another?

This is a puzzle that should at least make us reflect on what we refer to when we use the word "I." Many people react to this sort of puzzle by saying that when we use the word "I" we refer not to a brain or body but to a soul (or sometimes to a mind, except that the mind, so conceived, has to be distinct from the brain, because we saw that brains could be switched out without affecting our identity). The idea behind this thought is that the soul is the bearer of identity. The soul is not identical to a body but is rather something that *inhabits* a body, seeing through its eyes, and animating its limbs. It is what moves from one body to the next when there is a transfer of identity. And there is something that is right about this thought, because as we use the notion of a soul, it does seem right to say that you could remain yourself under switches of brain or body, but not switches of soul. But then the question is: What is a soul? Is it by its nature something

immaterial, something that falls outside the scope of physics? And if it is, then is it just an illusion that souls control the movements of bodies? For, unlike souls, bodies are indisputably material things, and their behavior falls entirely under the scope of physical laws, for bodies are material things, and their movements are governed by the laws of physics.

Dennett (the actual author, not the fictional narrator) has the view—only implicit in this story, but quite explicit elsewhere—that this is where thinking about the self will lead you. His view is that the self is just the modern form of the idea of a soul and that science has taught us that there is no such thing. In his view, the self is a fiction that serves a purpose in everyday discourse but has no literal interpretation in a scientific view of the world. We'll look at Dennett's view in a little more detail in later chapters. He is the most conspicuous and articulate proponent of the idea that selves are prescientific fictions that have been swept away by the advancing tide of science in the contemporary philosophical literature, but there are others that hold that position.

One might just as well, however, see Dennett's story as reinforcing the ordinary man's nonreflective view of himself as a *nonphysical* thing, that is, a spirit or immaterial locus of mental life that inhabits a body. There are many complex pressures that push in that direction. I have to confess that when I first read Dennett's story, this is how it struck me. Up until that point, I had been a confirmed physicalist, but the story threw into complete turmoil my complacent assumption that there was a satisfactory physicalist account of what we—that is, we *ourselves*—are. I wasn't willing to go Dennett's route. It seemed undeniable that, as Descartes observed, I have an immediate apprehension of my own existence, but Dennett's story convinced me that neither my body nor my brain could be the bearer of my identity. Neither could be the thing to which I refer when I use "I" to refer to the experiencing, thinking, loving, willing me. I have a brain and body to be sure, but Dennett's story convinced me that my connection to both is complex, contingent, and essential neither to my identity nor to my existence. It seems inessential to my identity, because I can have different brains and bodies, while remaining myself. And if I can imagine having different brains and bodies while remaining myself, then what makes me *me* is not that I have a particular brain or body. And it seems inessential to my existence because if I can imagine waking up—as Dennett does—and being told that my body has been destroyed, then its existence cannot be essential to my own existence. What these imaginings show is not, of course, that these are real physical possibilities, but they provide a *prima facie* case for thinking that "I" means something other than "this body,"

that is, that the question of whether I exist is not one and the same question as the question of whether this body exists and that what makes me one and the same person over time is not that I have the same body. Similar reasoning would seem to establish that I can't be identical with my brain. Science tells us that the existence of our brains is causally necessary for the continuation of our mental lives, but as Dennett's story invites us to imagine, someone could switch out my brain for a different one or even upload the information it contains to a silicon duplicated, and neither my identity nor my existence would be jeopardized.

Two prima facie responses were noted. One can think of the thought experiments as exposing the notion of a self as a new name for the soul, a mythical, ghostly bearer of identity that should be relinquished conclusively in a properly scientific worldview. I call this view nolipsism. Or one can think of the thought experiments as reinforcing Descartes' view of selves as primitive nonphysical substances that inhabit bodies. That view is known as dualism. I hope that you're not ready to adopt either of these views yet. What we really have here is a dilemma that motivates some deeper soul searching about how we are supposed to conceive of ourselves, our relationship to brains and bodies, and our place in the natural order.

Thought Experiments and What They Show

Dennett's fiction provides an example of what philosophers call thought experiments. A thought experiment is an imaginative exercise in which we are asked to envision a hypothetical situation that presents a test case for the application of concepts. They can function to clarify conditions of application, as a kind of laboratory in which concepts are taken out of their customary setting and placed in artificial conditions. But sometimes they produce confusion rather than understanding. They leave us in a state of *aporia*. *Aporia* comes from the Greek *ἀπορεία* meaning "impasse, lack of resources, puzzlement, doubt, confusion." It was used by ancient philosophers to signal a state of puzzlement that arises when one is at a loss about what to say or think, in this case because one's concepts do not seem to apply. The best thought experiments require no philosophical education and shake the core of one's understanding of even basic concepts. Thoughts about the self are particularly vulnerable to *aporia*-inducing thought experiments. We normally think of ourselves as embodied minds. *Dennett's* story forces us to ask the question: What does "I" refer to? What

is this object that retains its identity through switches of brains and bodies and moves instantly from one place to another with transfer of identity? And because Dennett leaves us with no easy answers, the story presents a puzzle that should set us reflecting on the notion of a self and how well we understand its relationship to facts about brains and bodies and the situation of the objectively describable material elements in the story. It is no accident that the “self,” so understood, has much in common with the traditional notion of a soul. The soul is sometimes conceived as the bearer of identity. Unlike your brain or body, your soul is inalienable. You could remain yourself under switches of brain or body, but not switches of soul. The soul is what moves from one body to the next when there is a transfer of identity.⁵

Descartes’ arguments for dualism from the Meditations—still among the most famous arguments drawn from the history of Western philosophy—are just as effective for throwing into turmoil our ideas about how the self fits into the material contents of the universe. The arguments proceed by showing that the self—identified as the subject of thought, the “I” of “I think such and such”—has properties that nothing material has. First, I cannot fail to be certain of the existence of the self, though I can fail to be certain of the existence of anything material. Second, the self has a kind of unity that nothing material has. Descartes says that when he turns his gaze inward he discerns no parts, but finds himself—as he puts it—“clearly one and entire.” Both of his arguments are pinpointing the very features of our thought about ourselves that render the Dennett story imaginatively intelligible: namely, that I am given to myself in thought as something whose existence and unity cannot be doubted. Or, to put it a little differently, my existence and my unity as the subject of these thoughts and experiences are presupposed by every act of cognition. It is because of this fact that we can imagine switches in brain and body without loss of identity. And it is because of this fact that the self seems to be a thing apart, a thing that floats free of the material contents of the universe,

⁵ Wikipedia, which is as good a source as any about the popular conception of a soul, writes (on August 4, 2013) that “The soul, in many mythological, religious, philosophical, and psychological traditions, is the incorporeal and, in many conceptions, immortal essence of a person, living thing, or object.”

The first three entries for *soul* in the Merriam-Webster dictionary are as follows:

1. the immaterial essence, animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life.
2. the spiritual principle embodied in human beings, all rational and spiritual beings, or the universe.
3. a person’s total self.

looking in and interacting with the world through a body that serves as a shed-able garment for the self.

How the Mind Stabilizes Separable Conceptions of Self and World

This aporia sets up the basic question for the first part of the book: What are selves and how do they fit into an objective description of nature? In Dennett's story, the "I" whose location is being queried is the thing whose thoughts and experiences are being reported in the first person. I think that there is no question that we can follow the fictional *Dennett's* description of the events through his eyes unproblematically, and the story illustrates all of the pressures that lead us to think of ourselves as immaterial things: primitive loci of mental life able to survive the destruction, and to retain their identity through exchanges, of brain and body. The reason these things are so easy to imagine is that we all have an immediate and inalienable grasp of ourselves as the owner of our thoughts and experiences. It is this fact that makes Dennett's fictional autobiography readily intelligible from the inside.⁶ The fact that we can separate the self in this sense from both brain and body in our imagination is what fundamentally encourages the view of the self as a soul or spirit.⁷ Instead of confronting the question of what this self is directly, I'm going to sidle up to it by asking instead *how we build up to the psychological standpoint from which this kind of imagining is possible*. Here, we have rather a lot of research to draw on, but we have to abandon the introspective perspective and look at what the brain is doing outside our field of conscious awareness. To do this is to adopt the mode of description that is standard in cognitive science, by treating the brain as an information-processing system, looking at the representational structures in the mind and computational procedures that operate on those structures. This lets us abstract from the tremendous

⁶ We don't say these thoughts, experiences, and acts of will belong to me because they are related in the right way to a body that we identify independently as our own. We identify a certain hunk of matter *as* our bodies because it plays a certain role in our experience; that is, it occupies one's spatiotemporal perspective and carries out one's will.

⁷ Dennett concurs: "I had become one of those scattered individuals we used to hear so much about. The more I considered this answer, the more obviously true it appeared. . . . This answer did not completely satisfy me, of course. There lingered some question to which I should have liked an answer, which was neither 'Where are all my various and sundry parts?' nor 'What is my current point of view?' Or at least there seemed to be such a question. For it did seem undeniable that in some sense I and not merely most of me was descending into the earth under Tulsa in search of an atomic warhead . . ."

complexity of what goes on in the human brain and get an illuminating description at the level that is directly relevant to human thought. In our information age, this kind of description is more familiar than it used to be and needs less introduction. If you understand the hardware/software distinction in your computer, then you probably understand everything you need to follow this way of viewing the mind.

From the introspective perspective, you open your eyes and you have an immediate, apparently unfiltered awareness of the way that the world is. You are aware of objects arrayed in space that can be seen, heard, viewed from different angles, approached. It is very natural to think of perception as a transparent channel that gives us direct awareness of the environment. The true story is a lot more complicated. A good deal is going on inside your brain to produce that immediate awareness. The information that the brain is actually getting consists of fragmentary bits of sensory information through separate pathways. Information coming in through those pathways is integrated so that what you see is not an uninterpreted pattern of light, color, sound, and smell, but a spatially ordered world populated by objects that can be seen, heard, approached, and touched. Visual information is related to tactual information, the object seen is related to the object felt, and those are related to auditory perception and kinesthetic awareness. The brain accomplishes this remarkable feat of integration by discerning patterns across sensory streams and stabilizing a conception of a world about which we get information through multiple sensory channels and which can be viewed from different locations. Computationally, it is a very involved task. Information about different objects is funneled into different packages and information about the same object is funneled into the same package. Tactual, visual, and auditory information—about, say, a ball or a tree, or a car, or whatever—goes to the same package, and auditory visual and kinesthetic information about the bat goes to another package, so that if you see a ball in front of you, you know immediately that you can reach out and touch it and what it will feel like if you do. If you hear the rustle of leaves in a tree, you expect the feeling of wind on your skin. If you see a car coming toward you, you know how to step out of the way to avoid it. Even if you don't consciously think about it, the expectations guide your behavior.

The product of this integration is not just a conception of a spatially ordered world populated by objects that can be seen, heard, approached, and touched and *yourself* as an embodied presence in the landscape, doing the seeing, hearing, approaching, and touching. Separable conceptions of the object viewed and the relationship of the viewer to the object

are stabilized jointly out of changing patterns of sensory information. The need for the separation of information about the object viewed and the relation of the viewer to the object is obvious, if you think about it. The sensory pattern presented by a particular object depends not only on the way the object is but also on our relationship to it. Think of the difference in the sensory pattern that a table presents when viewed from the front and when viewed from the side. The separation allows us to keep track of objects even as we move through the landscape, changing our position relative to them. It also allows us to talk to other people about the same objects, notwithstanding that they are viewing them from a different angle. The distinction gets articulated in stages. At first it is just a matter of separating changes in our experience that are due to changes in the objects that we are looking at from those due to changes in our spatial relationship to those objects, but it matures into something much more nuanced. The parsing of experience and the rudimentary idea of self as an embodied and active presence in the landscape is only the first step in the development of a mature conception of self. The world-as-I-see-it becomes articulated into the *world as I see it*, where the removal of the hyphens signals separable conceptions of self, world, and seeing, now understood explicitly as the relationship between them. The most important parts for developing the concept of a self happen as we mature, but even the infant who is kicking his limbs in his crib is discovering himself at the same time that he is discovering the world, and stabilizing a distinction between the two. These are two sides of a single coin and they get articulated together. Perception involves much more than passively watching or listening, but actively exploring, approaching, touching, smelling, and tasting. We learn to distinguish what we do from what merely happens and to use our bodies to explore the environment with increasing skill. The early sense of oneself both as a thing that sees, hears, and feels the impact of the world and a thing that acts (initiates changes in the world) becomes the basis for the notion of self that gets articulated at the conscious level. One of the most poignant stages in that development is awareness of oneself as a thing that is perceived by others. How we appear to others, and what they think of us, becomes a source of often-conflicted emotion.

The full development of one's sense of who and what one is studied and described by developmental psychologists. It's a fascinating and ongoing process that is never really complete. It's a process in which (I will suggest later) the distinction between discovery and creation breaks down in a fascinating and distinctive way. But I'm getting ahead of myself. The point of all of this for present purposes is that there is a whole ocean of

unseen activity that goes on in the human mind that separates independent dimensions of variation from the changing patterns of sensation. Separable conceptions of world as the *object* of perception (thing being perceived) and the self as the *subject* of perception (thing doing the perceiving) are *products* of that process. A notion of self arises first in a rudimentary form, as a byproduct of the way that the brain processes sensory information, and then develops into something much richer. The process is gradual and partly self-conscious.

We use “I” in many ways, but when we use “I” from a first-person point of view, we often use it to refer to ourselves as subjects of thought and experience. As I appear to myself in thought, I am that which experiences, perceives, suffers, thinks, and deliberates. I am a subject of experience, an enjoyer of auditory, tactual, visual, gustatory sensations, a perceiver of a world distinct from my sensations, a sufferer of pain, bearer of memory, and entertainer of ideas. I am that which receives the information coming in through the senses and controls the movements of the body. I am, in short, an embodied intelligence. I come into being *as such* with the forging of an internal point of view on the world. Because of the way that the articulation of experience into separable conceptions of self and world occurs, by the time you are aware of the world as something that can be seen, touched, heard, and felt, you are also aware of yourself as a perceiver. And by the time you are in a position to reflect on yourself and ask, “What am I?”—that is, what is this thing, this “I” that is *doing the perceiving?*—all of that complex restructuring of the information coming in through sensory pathways has been achieved and you yourself are on the scene. It is not that a new object has been created; it is that your experience has become parsed, or articulated in a way that separates information about the world as object from information about you as subject.

I began the chapter with a quite famous quote from Nietzsche: “Are not all phenomena of consciousness merely terminal phenomena, final links in a chain?” I want to say that the answer is yes, and the sense in which the “phenomena of consciousness” are “terminal” is that although it seems to you as though you have an immediate, unfiltered awareness of the world, that appearance is misleading. Your awareness is the product of a lot of unseen, behind-the-scenes activity, and your conception of yourself as an embodied presence in the landscape is a product of that unseen activity. You will spend a lot of time developing and articulating that concept as you live and grow. Your sense of self will develop into a full-blooded

conception of yourself as a thing with a history, hopes and desires, values and principles.

Back to Dennett's Story

Earlier, we took a side-on view of the hidden underbelly of conscious thought to see how conception of self arises from its early glimmerings to its fully mature form. Once we've stabilized separable conceptions of the way the world objectively is and our point of view on it, we can deploy those concepts to imagine arbitrary subjective paths through the objective order. The imaginative exercise is just a matter of piecing together a psychological history in which there are discontinuous shifts in point of view, while maintaining the kinds of internal unity that are characteristic of a single person's psychological life. We will be looking more closely at what those kinds of internal unity are in sections to come.

In his story Dennett is employing all of the structure that is the product of the stabilization of separable conceptions of self and world and using it to get us to imagine how the *world* would appear to a self that travelled a discontinuous path through the events. What we are really following in through the story is a subjective *point of view* that is being shifted from one vantage point to another in the way that a movie can make discontinuous shifts to the content displayed on screen by stringing together the view from different cameras, while still displaying the kinds of internal unity that are characteristic of a single stream of consciousness. We will speak more of those kinds of internal unity in sections to come, but for now, we just need to observe that what jumps around in the Dennett story is not a special sort of nonphysical thing, but the point of view from which the world is seen.

Dennett himself wanted to use his story to expose the notion of a self as an illusion that should be swept away by the advancing tides of science. I read it rather as a story about the emergence of the self. I hope to make it convincing in the coming chapters that it is the emergence of an inner point of view that has all the richness and sense of interiority that we know ourselves to have. If it now seems too ephemeral and insubstantial to anchor your conception of yourself, bear with the discussion and see whether your worries about its ephemerality get dispelled as the story is filled in. But there is no point arguing over the label. If you like a different way of speaking, I use self with a small "s"; you can use self with a big S to refer to whatever more substantive notion of self you have in mind. But

you might want to stay on board and see how much of the phenomenology of ordinary life we can reproduce with selves with a small “s.” I’ve never found good reasons to believe in selves with a big S. I hope to convince you that your awareness of your own self is just the self-awareness of an embodied mind. But more of that as we go. For now, it’s enough (hopefully) to have dispelled at least some of the mystery, while also indicating something wonderful and quite marvelous about the emergence of an inner point of view on the world, an inner point of view that is fed by experience and memory and flowers into something elaborately complex and entirely unique.

Recap

This chapter used Dennett’s story to set up the central difficulty of locating the self in the natural world: Cartesianism and Nihilism seem to be the only available options because no physical thing presented itself as the bearer of our identity.

In this chapter, we looked at the processes behind the scenes in which the brain stabilizes separable conceptions of self and world out of patterns in sensory information, and how those concepts mature into a fully developed conception of self as autobiographical subject. The concept of self as subject of experience and world as mind-independent object of experience were portrayed as joint products of that stabilization. I suggested that the story of how the concept of self as subject arises (the rarefied Cartesian “I” of “I think,” which is a concept I think we all have, and the one that allows us to give imaginative content to Dennett’s story) is at one and the same time, the story of how selves arise, because the self is nothing more than the formal subject of an internal point of view on the world.

This should give you a way of thinking about the self that confirms important parts of the pretheoretical conception of what you are, without the philosophical slant that casts you as an inner substance or immaterial particular, or immortal soul. You are an embodied presence in the physical landscape, a sensory subject and source of motor activity. You aren’t a concrete particular, but something more abstract, something given to yourself in thought as unified subject or possessor of a point of view, stabilized out of the changing patterns of light, color, sound, and smell, movement initiated and tacitly perceived not by conscious inference, but by a brain designed to generate a user interface. The biggest psychological obstacle to coming around to this view of the self is reconciling it with one’s

immediate grasp of oneself as an indivisible unity that seems to have the most concrete and substantial existence.

Notice (and this is something that will turn out to be quite characteristic of topics discussed here) that we started out with an ontological question: What is the self and how does it fit into the material contents of the universe? That is a question that would seem to be the purview of the metaphysician or the physicist, whose job it is to give a comprehensive catalogue of what there is. But most of the discussion has been psychological. It has been about the processes inside the skull that give rise to the concept of a self. The reason is that physics tells us what there is fundamentally, and selves are not fundamental. They exist in the form of high-level, virtual objects that emerge rather late in the hierarchy of complex systems, when collections of low-level objects band together into a very particular kind of unit. It is because you are given to yourself in thought as a unified subject of experience by things that happen outside your field of conscious awareness that you appear to yourself as an indivisible locus of mental life, separable from brain and body.