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## ONE SELF: A MEDITATION ON THE UNITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS<sup>1</sup>

I am looking at my baby son, as he thrashes around in his crib, two arms flailing, hands grasping randomly, legs kicking the air, head and eyes turning this way and that, a smile followed by a grimace crossing his face. . . And I'm wondering: what is it like to be him? What is he feeling now? What kind of experience is he having of *himself*?

Then a strong image comes to me. I am standing now, not at the rail of a crib, but in a concert hall at the rail of the gallery, watching as the orchestra assembles. The players are arriving, one by one – strings, percussion, woodwind – taking their separate places on the stage. They pay little if any attention to each other. Each adjusts his chair, smooths his clothes, arranges the score on the rack in front of him. One by one they start to tune their instruments. The cellist draws his bow darkly across the strings, cocks his head as if savouring the resonance, and slightly twists the screw. The harpist leans into the body of her harp, runs her fingers trippingly along a scale, relaxes and looks satisfied. The oboist pipes a few liquid notes, stops, fiddles with the reed and tries again. The tympanist beats a brief rally on his drum. Each is, for the moment, entirely in his own world, playing only to and for himself, oblivious to anything but his own action and his own sound. The noise from the stage is a medley of single notes and snatches of melody, out of time, out of harmony. Who would believe that all these independent voices will soon be working in concert under one conductor to create a single symphony.

Now, back in the nursery, I seem to be seeing another kind of orchestra assembling. It is as if, with this baby, all the separate agencies of which he is composed still have to settle into place and do *their* tuning up: nerves need tightening and balancing, sense organs calibrating, pipes clearing, airways opening, a whole range of tricks and minor routines have to be practised and made right. The sub-systems that will one day be a system have as yet hardly begun to acknowledge one another, let alone to work together for one common purpose. And as for the conductor who one day will be leading all these parts in concert into life's *Magnificat*: he is still nowhere to be seen.

I return to my question: What kind of experience is this baby having of himself? But, as I ask it, I realise I do not like the answer that suggests itself. If there is no conductor inside him yet, perhaps there is in fact no self yet, and if no self perhaps no experience either – perhaps nothing at all. .

If I close my eyes and try to think like a hard-headed philosophical sceptic, I can almost persuade myself it could be so. I must agree that, in theory, there could be no kind of consciousness within this little body, no inner life, nobody at home to have an inner life. But then, as I open my eyes and look at him again, any such scepticism melts. *Someone* in there is surely looking back at me, someone is smiling, someone seems to know my face, someone is reaching out his tiny hand. . . Philosophers think one way, but fathers think another. I can hardly doubt sensations are registering inside this boy, willed actions initiating, memories coming to the surface.. However disorganised his life may be, he is surely not totally unconscious.

Yet I realise I cannot leave it there. If these experiences are occurring in the baby boy, they presumably have to belong to an *experiencer*. Every experience has to have a corresponding subject whose experience it is. The point was well made by the philosopher Gottlob Frege, a hundred years ago: it would be absurd, he wrote, to suppose “that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about the world without a bearer, independently. An experience is impossible without an experient. The inner world presupposes the person whose inner world it is.”<sup>2</sup>

But if that is the case, I wonder what to make of it. For it seems to imply that those “someones” that I recognise inside this boy – the someone who is looking, the someone who is acting, the someone who is remembering – must all be genuine subjects of experience (subjects; note the plural). If indeed he does not yet possess a single Self – that Self with a capital S which will later mold the whole system into one – then perhaps he must in fact possess a set of relatively independent sub-selves, each of which must be counted a separate center of subjectivity, a separate experiencer. Not yet being one person, perhaps he is in fact *many*.

But, isn't this idea bizarre? A lot of independent experiencers? Or – to be clear about what this has to mean – a lot of independent consciousnesses? And all within one body? I confess I find it hard to see how it would work. I try to imagine what it would be like for me to be fractionated in this way and I simply cannot make sense of the idea.

Now, I agree that I myself have many kinds of “lesser self” inside me: I can, if I try, distinguish a part of me that is seeing, a part that's smelling, a part raising my arm, a part recalling what day it is, etcetera. These are certainly different types of mental activity, involving different categories of subjective experience, and I'm sure they can properly be said to involve different dimensions of my Self.

I can even agree that these parts of me are a relatively loose confederation, that do not all have to be present at one time. Parts of my mind can and do sometimes wander, get lost, and return. When I have come round from a deep sleep, for example, I think it is even true

that I have found myself having to gather myself together – which is to say *my selves* together – piecemeal.

Marcel Proust, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, provides a nice description of just this peculiar experience: “When I used to wake up in the middle of the night,” he writes, “not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure at first who I was; I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence, such as may lurk and flicker in the depths of an animal's consciousness . . . But then . . . out of a blurred glimpse of oil-lamps, of shirts with turned-down collars, [I] would gradually piece together the original components of my ego.”<sup>3</sup> (Proust, 1981: 5).

So it is true, if I think about this further, that the idea of someone's consciousness being dispersed in different places is not completely unfamiliar to me. And yet I can see that this kind of example will hardly do to help me understand the baby. For what distinguishes my case and the baby's is precisely that these “parts of me” that separate and recombine do not, while separate, exist as distinct and self-sufficient subjects of experience. When I come together on waking, it is surely not a matter of my bringing together various sub-selves that are already separately conscious. Rather, these sub-selves only come back into existence as and when I plug them back, as it were, into the main me.

As I stand at the crib watching my baby boy, trying to find the right way in, I now realise I am up against an imaginative barrier. I will not say that, merely because I can't imagine it, it could make no sense at all to suppose that this baby has got all those separate conscious selves within him. But I will say I do not know what to say next.

Yet, I am beginning to think there is the germ of some real insight here. Perhaps the reason why I cannot imagine the baby's case is tied into that very phrase: “*I can't imagine . . .*.” Indeed, as soon as I try to imagine the baby as split into several different selves, I make him back into one again by virtue of imagining it. I imagine each set of experiences as *my* experiences – but, just to the extent that they are all *mine*, they are no longer separate!

And doesn't this throw direct light on what may be the essential difference between my case and the baby's? For doesn't it suggest that it is all a matter of how a person's experiences are owned – to whom they belong ?

With *me* it seems quite clear that every experience that any of my sub-selves has is *mine*. And, to paraphrase Frege: in my case it would certainly make no sense to suppose that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about my inner world without the bearer in every case being *I!* But maybe with the baby every experience that any of his sub-selves has is not yet *his*. And maybe in his case it does make perfect sense to suppose that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about inside his inner world without the bearer in every case being *he*.

How so? What kind of concept of “belonging” can this be, such that I can seriously suggest that, while my experiences belong to me, the baby’s do not belong to him? I think I know the answer intuitively; yet I need to work it through.

Let me return to the image of the orchestra. In their case, I certainly want to say that the players who arrive on stage as isolated individuals come to belong to a single orchestra. As an example of “belonging”, this seems as clear as any. But, if there is indeed something that binds the players to belong together, what kind of something is this?

The obvious answer would seem to be the one I have hinted at already: that there is a “conductor”. After each player settles in and has his period of free-play, a dominant authority mounts the stage, lifts his baton and proceeds to take overall control. Yet, now I am beginning to realise that this image of the conductor as “chief self” is not the one I want – nor, in fact, was it a good or helpful image to begin with.

Ask any orchestral player, and he’ll tell you: although it may perhaps look to an outsider as if the conductor is totally in charge, in reality he often has a quite minor – even a purely decorative – role. Sure, he can provide a common reference point to assist the players with the timing and punctuation of their playing. And he can certainly influence the overall style and interpretation of a work. But that is not what gets the players to belong together. What truly binds them into one organic unit and creates the flow between them is something much deeper and more magical: namely, the very act of making music; that they are together creating a single work of art.

Doesn’t this suggest a criterion for “belonging” that should be much more widely applicable: that parts come to belong to a whole just in so far as they are *participants in a common project*?

Try the definition where you like: What makes the parts of an oak tree belong together – the branches, roots, leaves, acorns? They share a common interest in the tree’s survival. What makes the parts of a complex machine like an aeroplane belong to the aeroplane – the wings, the jet engines, the radar? They participate in the common enterprise of flying.

Then, here’s the question: What makes the parts of a person belong together – if and when they do? The clear answer has to be that the parts will and do belong together *just in so far as they are involved in the common project of creating that person’s life*.

This, then, is the definition I was looking for. And, as I try it, I immediately see how it works in my own case. I may indeed be made up of many separate sub-selves, but these selves have come to belong together as the one Self that I am because they are engaged in one and the same enterprise: the enterprise of steering me – body and soul – through the physical and social world. Within this larger enterprise each of my selves may indeed be doing its own thing: providing me with sensory information, with intelligence, with past knowledge, goals,

judgements, initiatives, and so on. But the point – the wonderful point – is that each self doing its own thing shares a final common path with all the other selves doing their own things. And it is for this reason that these selves are all *mine*, and for this reason that their experiences are all *my experiences*. In short, my selves have become co-conscious through collaboration.

But the baby? Look at him again. There he is thrashing about. The difference between him and me is precisely that he has as yet no common project to unite the selves within him. Look at him. See how he has hardly started to do anything for himself as a whole: how he is still completely helpless, needy, dependent – reliant on the projects of other people for his survival. Of course, his selves are beginning to get into shape and function on their own. But they do not yet share a final common path. And it is for that reason his selves are not yet all of them *his*, and for that reason their experiences are not yet *his* experiences. His selves are not co-conscious because there is as yet no co-laboration.

Even as I watch, however, I can see things changing. I realise the baby boy is beginning to come together. Already there are hints of small collaborative projects getting under way: his eyes and his hands working together, his face and his voice, his mouth and his tummy. As time goes by, some of these mini-projects will succeed; others will be abandoned. But inexorably over days and weeks and months he will become one coordinated centrally conscious human being. And, as I anticipate this happening, I begin to understand how in fact he may be going to achieve this miracle of unification. It will not be, as I might have thought earlier, through the power of a supervisory Self who emerges from nowhere and takes control, but through the power inherent in all his sub-selves for, literally, their own *self-organisation*.

Then, stand with me again at the rail of the orchestra, watching those instrumental players tuning up. The conductor has not come yet, and maybe he is not ever going to come. But it hardly matters: for the truth is *it is of the nature of these players to play*. See, one or two of them are already beginning to strike up, to experiment with half-formed melodies, to hear how they sound for themselves, and – remarkably – to find and re-create *their* sound in the *group sound* that is beginning to arise around them. See how several little alliances are forming, the strings are coming into register, and the same is happening with the oboes and the clarinets. See, now, how they are joining together across different sections, how larger structures are emerging.

But, perhaps I can offer a better picture still. Imagine, at the back of the stage, above the orchestra, a lone dancer. He is the image of Nijinsky in *The Rite of Spring*. His movements are being shaped by the sounds of the instruments, his body absorbing and translating everything he hears. At first his dance seems graceless and chaotic. His body cannot make one dance of thirty different tunes. Yet, something is changing. See how each of

the instrumental players is watching the dancer – looking to find how, within the chaos of those body movements, the dancer is dancing to his tune. And each player, it seems, now wants the dancer to be *his*, to have the dancer give form to *his* sound. But see how, in order to achieve this, each must take account of all the other influences to which the dancer is responding – how each must accommodate to and join in harmony with the entire group. See, then, how, at last, this group of players is becoming *one orchestra* reflected in *the one body of the dancer* – and how the music they are making and the dance that he is dancing have indeed become a *single work of art*.

And my boy, Samuel? His body has already begun to dance to the sounds of his own selves. Soon enough, as these selves come together in creating him, he too will become a single, self-made, human being.

1. Lecture for the Dutch arts organisation, De Balie, Amsterdam, December 1997. Published in *Social Research*, 67, 32-39, 2000.
2. Gottlob Frege, 1967, "The Thought: a Logical Inquiry," in *Philosophical Logic*, ed. P.F. Strawson, p. 67, Oxford: Oxford University Press..
3. Marcel Proust, 1981, *Swann's Way*. Vol. I of *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin, p. 5, London: Chatto & Windus, 1981.