

5-1-2004

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### Recommended Citation

Napolitan, Nick (2004) "Making Persons and Selves from Lumps of Matter," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 7.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol13/iss1/7>

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## **Making Persons and Selves from Lumps of Matter** **Nick Napolitan**

The contemporary development of naturalism has left us in many ways ‘objectified’ our world, giving us a material world of laws and causes, that is in some ways strangely distant from our notions of ‘self.’ We might be said to possess a very strong ‘sense of self,’ and looking at our friends and neighbors, we get the impression that everybody holds similarly strong feelings. We live in a world populated by lumps of matter, but also rational agents, intricate persons, and perhaps most importantly, centered around a self. How can naturalism, without invoking the Cartesian ego, account for our deeply held conceptions of ‘self’ and ‘person?’

To answer some of these troubling questions, we need to need to examine the origins of these important yet mysterious concepts. We would do well to take a survey of the environment and mechanism by which the concepts of ‘self’ and ‘person’ come into being and persist. I am speaking, of course, of the brain. Understanding the brain, especially in the context of its adaptation to the world through the process of natural selection, may be the key to figuring out where these concepts come from as well as what sort of structure they possess.

### **Our Brains: Providing Structure to Human Experience**

The *tabula rasa*, or ‘blank slate’ conception of the human brain has become unpopular of late, and for good reasons. Thinking of human beings as a kind of passive observer that comes to know the world through bare and unstructured experience is simply a poor model for understanding the human condition. Steven Pinker discusses, in his aptly titled book *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, that this antiquated model of the brain is inadequate to account for the astoundingly complex tasks that the brain is capable of performing. Pinker points out that:

[A]s soon as one starts to think seriously about what kind of computation enables a system to see, think, speak, and plan, the problem with the blank slate become all too obvious: they don't do anything. The inscriptions will sit there forever unless something notices, patterns and then, combines them with patterns learned at other times, uses the combinations to scribble new thoughts on to the slate, and reads the results to guide behavior towards goals.<sup>1</sup>

Perception is a complicated process that effectively distinguishes between objects, forms expectations, and creates a framework that allows us to build and order concepts that are rather unlike the objects that are perceived. We do not just ‘see’ lumps of matter and blotches of colors—we ‘see them as’ things like humans, faces, and certain things, each of which may be involved in certain relationships that are not immediately present to our perception. Hume noticed this problem, primarily by observing the gaps that such a model leaves in its perception of the world—for example, if events are passively observed, then how we see an event as an instance of cause and effect, when all ‘bare experience’ presents us with is co-occurrence? Hume suggested that this notion was the result of *habit*, but such an answer only begs for a deeper explanation as to why such a habit would be universal, or even exist in the first place (a Darwinian approach was unavailable to Hume at the time). Kant wisely recognized the fact that such structuring, and such structuring concepts, requires an *active* rather than a passive observer. This structuring activity is an integral part of the processes of human perception, and without it we cannot even begin to imagine the disconnected and unstructured world that we would perceive ourselves as living in.

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2002). p. 34

Modern neurology offers a wonderful avenue for accepting Kant's *type* of answer to the problems posed by the structure of human experience (without getting into the messy details of his metaphysics). The origins of our spatial understanding can be located in this part of the brain, the structure of our grammar in that. For example, human faces have certain visual cues that can trigger a response from our fusiform gyrus, a region in the temporal lobe.<sup>2</sup> This region is strongly associated with processing faces, and damage to this area creates problems for facial recognition. It helps structure certain objects in the world (namely, faces) into something that we see as 'special'—that we can use in interacting with our environment.

Much of the structuring that comes natural to us is the result of highly specialized modules of our brains that are dedicated to particular tasks, such as structuring language or visual input. A module, such as the face-recognition module, is an often-localized portion of the brain that is dedicated to the processing of very particular sorts of information. Of course, not every concept or task that the brain performs is the product of a brain module that specializes in that process—even if there is a module dedicated to, say, basic physics, there is probably no module dedicated to advanced calculus, since the human environment would not create the sort of selective pressure necessary for developing such a complicated module. However, many of the mental and experiential structures that the brain creates can be understood in terms of this sort of processing.

### **Why We Have a Concept of 'Person'**

It is in the context of a brain that actively structures experience that we must search for the origin of our concept of 'self' and 'person.' To begin with, there is not a module in the brain that can be pointed to as containing the 'seat of selfhood.' Instead, Daniel Dennett and others have suggested selves and persons be thought of as *abstractum*, and to clarify this point, Dennett examines the properties of another abstractum: centers of gravity.<sup>3</sup> A center of gravity isn't anything that some kind of objective, ontological existence—you can't point to a particular piece of an object and say "here is the center of gravity." We posit centers of gravity as useful indicators and predictors.

As a quick thought experiment, imagine that you are a beginning investment banker. Various people come to apply for loans for different types of projects. To be successful, you must develop a method for identifying and distinguishing promising ventures from those likely to end in ruin. Sadly, you know nothing about business, finance, or economics. Every person that walks into your office sounds as promising and as legitimate as the last, and every proposal seems equally plausible. The only thing that you can do is approve a bunch of loans and see how they turn out. Hopefully, you begin to notice trends in the proposals. After what is likely to be a rash of dismal failures near the beginning, you become more adept at grouping the proposals, until you can, at a glance, recognize a good investment, a poor investment, or a long shot. The more accurately you can discriminate proposals, and the more able you become in knowing what you can expect from them, the more successful you will be as an investment banker.

This is pretty different from what the brain does, but there are some similarities. Assuming that the mind is a blank slate, our bodies are exposed to countless indiscernible lumps of matter. In order to be a successful body, the brain needs to figure out what it can expect from the different lumps. It needs to do something like saying that "this is a good lump" and "this is a bad lump." More accurately, it needs to say that "this lump has these properties and the potential

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Schwarz, "Special Training May Help People with Autism Recognize Faces." University of Washington Autism Center. Accessed online from EurekAlert (American Association of the Advancement of Science) at [http://www2.eurekalert.org/pub\\_releases/2004-02/uow-stm020904.php](http://www2.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2004-02/uow-stm020904.php) on Feb 12, 2004. Released on Feb 12, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Dennett, "Why Everyone is a Novelist." I need the rest of the source for this.

to do these sorts of things.” In order to be a successful brain with a successful body, it needs to quickly figure these things out.

Fortunately, the brains of modern humans never need to do this. Instead, we are born with a certain predictive capacity. We are spared the experience of seeing the universe as ‘indiscernible lumps of matter.’ We see objects, animals, and people. This is true even of very young infants, who show the capacity to identify these distinctions, predict behavior and form expectations based upon them. Stephen Pinker explains:

People interpret certain motions not as special cases in their intuitive physics (perhaps as weird springy objects) but as a different kind of entity altogether...Infants divided in the world into the animate and the inert early in life. Three-month olds are upset by a face that suddenly goes still but not by an object that suddenly stops moving. They try to bring objects toward them by pushing things, but try to bring people toward them by making noise. By six or seven months, babies distinguish between how hands act upon objects and how other objects act upon objects. They have the opposite expectations about what makes people move and what makes objects move: objects launch each other by collision; people start and stop on their own.<sup>4</sup>

It would make sense that a brain endowed with the ability to discern object from animal, and that knows what to expect from each class, would have a greater chance at passing this trait to offspring than would a less discriminating brain. And of all the animals that brains have to deal with, the most important type is undoubtedly human beings. It is no wonder, then, that our brains come ready-equipped with mechanisms for identifying humans and predicting their behavior.

## **Applying the Concept of Person**

For this purpose, we are born with mechanisms that are, for the most part, ready to help us generate and deal with the concept of ‘person.’ This concept involves more than simply seeing human beings as something different from non-human lumps of matter, as the face recognition module helps us accomplish. Although this step is certainly important, the concept of person further requires a set of expectations that can be used to predict, understand, and explain the behavior of these very special lumps.

Once we have this separate class of objects, what properties in particular set it apart from non-person objects? What is special about this concept of ‘person’ that distinguishes it from ‘chair’ or ‘lima bean,’ besides the fact that we might say it contingently has a ‘face’ or certain physical form? The concept implies things beyond physical form—things like conscious action, an emotional capacity, the possession of beliefs, and the ability to act with intentions and agency, etc. Inclusion qualifies an object as a candidate for becoming the subject of certain person-based predicates<sup>5</sup>. Classifying a lump of matter as a person and not as an object involves interpreting that lump and its behavior differently. We treat it as something that has a mind, and predict and explain what it does by appealing to beliefs and desires. This tendency to interpret things in terms of intentions, beliefs, etc. is similar to what has come to be known as ‘folk-psychology’ or the intentional stance.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997) p. 322

<sup>5</sup> P. F. Strawson, “Persons” in David M. Rosenthal (ed.) *The Nature of Mind*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). p.108. In this article, the concept of person-based predicates or “P-predicates” is outlined and discussed. Strawson includes such things as “‘is smiling’, ‘is going for a walk’, as well as things like ‘is in pain’, ‘is thinking hard’, ‘believes in god’, and so on” (Ibid. p.109).

<sup>6</sup> See especially Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987)

Although we instinctively place human beings within this category, ‘person’ is an abstract conceptual class. It can be broadened or shrunk should changing its boundaries serve our needs. We often ‘personify’ things that have no human form, or even things that have no form at all. We might attribute things like intention and desire to things as inhuman as plants and rocks, or to phenomena as formless as the weather. For the most part, the category is assigned not by an act of reason, but by the gut, and the standards and criteria that we use remain, in general, opaque to the assessor.

It is interesting that this ‘intentional stance,’ as Dennett puts it, is something that humans have taken towards an extremely wide variety of objects and phenomena. It is clear that the predictive and explanatory power that it holds is useful for dealing with human beings, but why would we have evolved to capacity (or the tendency) to apply it so broadly? If taking the intentional stance towards something like a storm cloud gives one less predictive accuracy than when one takes such a stance towards a human (which is likely), that does not mean that the broad application of the intentional stance is harmful in terms of natural selection. Once selective pressure has introduced the intentional stance into human psychology, further selective pressure to narrowly define its application may not exist. There is no reason for those who narrowly apply the intentional stance to be significantly ‘more fit’ than those who tend to apply it broadly.

Two consequences arise from holding that this mental distinction forms the basis for the concept that we have of ‘person.’ First, the ultimate distinction between persons and non-persons rests in the perception, and not in the object itself (although the form and behavior of the object will largely influence which category it is most helpful to group it with). Second, there is an overwhelming (but not insurmountable) bias towards putting human beings into this conceptual class, yet the class is not closed to non-humans as shown by our ability to personify non-humans and even inanimate objects.

## **Brain Deficiencies and Conceptual Deficiencies: A Look at Autism**

The mental category of person is something that comes naturally to most of us. However, there are some individuals to whom the concept is not so rich, or who might not be able to apply it so intuitively. In trying to establish an origin of the concept of person that is based on brain modularity, it is useful to consider such individuals. If individuals are capable of losing a particular capacity while retaining the capacity to generate and manipulate other concepts, then it gives us strong evidence to believe that such capacities are the product a particular module, which, if damaged or underdeveloped, can result in the relatively isolated failure of the capacity in question.

Autism is a disability of this nature. One of the leading interpretations of autism is that autistic individuals are, in a sense, ‘mind-blind’—that is, they do not have a properly developed ‘theory of the mind,’ and have difficulty assuming an intention stance. Autism is a psychiatric condition associated with impaired social ability, excessive interest in certain types of objects, and undue distress and attention given to trivial occurrences. It affects different people to a varying degree—some autistic individuals are almost incapable of social interaction while others are capable of earning degrees, mastering extensive vocabularies, and leading very productive lives. One of the core problems of autism is that, as Kristen Andrews writes, it prevents “a full understanding of mental states and others’ rational agency.”<sup>7</sup> Evidence seems to suggest that, unlike most individuals, autistic people have an impaired ability to differentiate between people

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<sup>7</sup> Kristen Andrews. “Interpreting Autism: A Critique of Davidson on Thought and Language.” *Philosophical Psychology*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2002, pp.317-332. p. 324. Note that Andrews is using autism to critique Donald Davidson’s claim that all speakers are interpreters. Andrews’ argument is that although autism often restricts an understanding of other people’s minds, it does not always restrict their linguistic capabilities.

and other lumps of matter. Baron-Cohen, one of the founders of the ‘mind-blind’ theory of autism, recalls an incident involving one autistic child:

...on a crowded beach he would walk straight toward his goal irrespective of whether this involved walking over newspapers, hands, feet or torsos, much to the discomfort of their owners. His mother was careful to point out that he did not intentionally deviate from his course in order to walk on others, but neither did he make the slightest attempt to avoid them. It was as if he did not distinguish people from things, or it least did not concern himself about the distinction.<sup>8</sup>

A number of studies have shown that children with autism have an impaired ability to *interpret the behavior of others in terms of mental states*. They have difficulty with concepts such as false beliefs, and might not be able to attribute them to others *as well as to themselves*.<sup>9</sup> Autistic Children rarely engage in pretend play (which involves taking an intention stance towards dolls, toys, etc.)<sup>10</sup>

Autism is now known to be rooted in neurological and genetic causes.<sup>11</sup> This suggests there may be some module (that autistics lack) that is responsible for interpreting certain lumps of matter separately—much as the fusiform gyrus allows us to interpret visual data from faces differently from images of rocks and grapefruits.<sup>12</sup> This strongly suggests that the mental class of ‘person,’ and the attribution of intention, beliefs, and mental states, may have a biological root.

## Discerning the Self

All this talk about persons is overlooking an important feature of our mental world—one person, namely the self, is in some way (almost) always distinguished from every other person in a very peculiar way. It seems overly simplistic to claim that the self is ‘just another person’ in our mental landscape, even if we say that it is a very special person. There must be something more to the self—something to be said about first person experiences, and those kinds of experiences that referred to as containing ‘self-consciousness.’ I am, to myself, somehow different from all other people, in that experiences of myself are *subjectively different* from my experiences of other people in a significant way. Self-consciousness is more than merely consciousness that contains, as just another object, a person who happens to be identified as the self.

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<sup>8</sup> S. Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: an essay on autism and theory of mind*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), as cited in *ibid.* p.325

<sup>9</sup> For example, in the Smarties test, the subject is shown a Smarties tube (a kind of candy), and asked what it contains. Most children answer ‘Smarties.’ The experimenter reveals that the tube in fact contains a small pencil, which is placed back in the tube. A third person enters the room. The subject is then asked what this person will expect to be in the Smarties tube. The subject will then be asked what he himself thought was in the tube when the test began. Most children have little difficulty answering “Smarties” for both questions, but autistic children consistently have a difficult time. Kathrin Gluer and Peter Pagin, “Meaning Theory and Autistic Speakers.” *Mind and Language*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2003, pp.23-51. p.27

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, *et al.* p. 332

<sup>12</sup> One of the most common characteristics of autism, and an ‘early sign’ used to test for autism, is a lack of interest in human faces and following the eyes of others. These behaviors are extremely common in infants without autism. See, for example, Joel Schwarz, *et al.* This suggests that there might be a strong relationship between the module that identifies the form of a person and that which takes an intentional stance, although these modules must not be totally incorporated. For example, Oliver Sacks give an account of Dr. P, a man who has lost the ability to visually recognize a variety of things, from faces to roses, yet maintains an ability to take an intentional stance. See Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*. (New York: Summit Books, 1985)

G.E.M. Anscombe identifies a particular set of thoughts, which she calls I-thoughts, that are explained as “unmediated conceptions (knowledge or beliefs, true or false) of states, motions, etc. of this object here [the body], about which I can find out (if I don’t know it) that it is E.A. About which I learn that it is a human being.”<sup>13</sup> Such thoughts seem to have what William James refers to as “the power to produce in a stream of consciousness excitement of a certain particular sort”<sup>14</sup> that serves to differentiate I-thoughts from thoughts that merely contain ‘other’ persons, who are not identified as the self. Daniel Dennett<sup>15</sup> focuses on the obvious biological advantage of recognizing a physical self—that is, of distinguishing self from not-self (in much the same way as we distinguish person from non-person). These advantages include, among other things, the “self-regard that prevents the lobster, when hungry, from eating itself.”<sup>16</sup>

Anscombe suggests that such thoughts are gained “through learning to say what one had done, was doing, etc...” which lead to notions of a self that become a “(deeply rooted) grammatical illusion.”<sup>17</sup> Within thoughts produced by our brains, there exists a sort of immediate awareness of our bodies, somehow different from our awareness of other bodies, which consists of a much narrower spectrum of senses. Not unnaturally, actions performed by this specially perceived body are given special linguistic attention, which is learned and incorporated deep within the structuring of our thoughts and mental frameworks. Whether these thoughts are learned or innate, it is the special nature of such thoughts, which deal with the immediate body and later the aspects of the person identified with that body, which serves to distinguish the self from other persons.

### **Losing the Self: Limb Denial and Schizophrenia**

There are a number of cases that suggest that the ‘self consciousness’ involved in perceiving oneself as something separate from the rest of the world is the product of a particular module of the brain. Injuries and strokes can result in an impaired ability to recognize and assess the self. Dramatic examples can be found in patients who have suffered from strokes within their right hemisphere’s parietal cortex. Not only can severe lesions lead to paralysis of the left side of their body; they may also include what has been called “limb denial.” Patricia Churchland notes a patient who “remarked about her left arm, ‘I do not know whose it is. Perhaps it belongs to my brother, since it is hairy.’ Other patients with limb denial have been known to throw the arm or leg out of bed, believing it to be alien.”<sup>18</sup> It seems that a part of the brain that is responsible for distinguishing self and not-self has, in these patients, ceased to function correctly.

Deficiencies of this sort are not limited to a ‘depersonalization’ of the body—some evidence suggests that certain thoughts or one’s own whispered voice might become depersonalized for people suffering from schizophrenia.<sup>19</sup> For such people, certain thoughts, sensations and noises that arise from what we would classify as the ‘self’ do not register as such, and are attributed to external forces, rather than the self.

We might hypothesize that selves are constructed by a process similar to the process by which persons are constructed. We first create a self/non-self distinction, just as we created a person/non-person distinction. That which is considered self is held in a “special regard,” that prevents us from doing things like eating it or throwing it off of beds. Even the intentions and

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<sup>13</sup> G.E.M. Anscombe, “The First Person” in David M. Rosenthal (ed.) *The Nature of Mind*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). p.79

<sup>14</sup> William James, “The Principles of Psychology” in *William James: The Essential Writings*, Bruce W. Wilshire (ed.). (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984) p. 95

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Dennett, “The Origins of Selves.” I need the rest of this source.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.167

<sup>17</sup> Anscombe, *et al.* p.79 & p.81

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Churchland, *Brain-Wise: Studies in Neurophilosophy*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) p. 67

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

desires that we so often attribute to the self may be traced back to an ‘intentional stance’ process similar to that involved in interpreting others.

## Constructing a Psychology for the Self

Our intuition suggests that the process of interpretation that occurs when we attribute intentional states to *other* people is different from the process that occurs when we ourselves attribute the cause of our action, say, ‘getting up and leaving the room’, to a desire, such as ‘wanting a Coke.’ Surprisingly, there are some reasons to believe that the intra-personal ascription of intentions, beliefs, etc. is *also* a process of interpretation. These reasons might be broken into two categories.

The first reason is modeled on the ‘deficit’ argument, and comes from individuals who have deficiencies interpreting their own actions via an intentional stance. I have already mentioned the inability of some autistic individuals to attribute themselves with false, past beliefs.<sup>20</sup> Patients of brain damage sometimes completely eliminate certain self descriptions from their repertoire; R.B., a patient with severe problems that also destroyed most of his memory, lost the ability both to describe himself and others in negative ‘states of mind.’ He would see a picture of a man attacking a woman, and when asked to report the contents, he would interpret it as a man helping a woman up. When asked to report his own condition or state of mind, he was always “fine.”<sup>21</sup>

The second type reason for suspecting that our own desires and beliefs are self-interpretations might be called *confabulation*, where individuals construct an intention-based account of their actions that do not mesh with common sense account. An example of confabulation comes from patients who have had their corpus callosum severed (the corpus callosum connects the two hemispheres of the brain). Many patients are capable of living fairly normal lives after this procedure. Under experimental situations, however, the patients behave in such a way as can be described as having two separate “spheres of consciousness.” Literally, it seems, the right brain doesn’t know what the left is doing (or seeing, or feeling). If this is the case, how can such people live what seem like totally ordinary lives? The answer may be more disturbing than the problem. Pinker explains:

The left hemisphere constantly weaves a coherent but false account of the behavior chosen without its knowledge by the right. For example, if an experimenter flashes the command ‘WALK’ to the right hemisphere (by keeping it in part of the visual field that only the right hemisphere can see), the person will comply with the request and begin to walk out of the room. But when the person (specifically, the person’s left hemisphere [which, for most people, exclusively controls speech] is asked why he just got up, he will say, in all sincerity, ‘To get a Coke’—rather than ‘I don’t really know’ or ‘The urge just came over me’ or ‘You’ve been testing me for years since I had the surgery, and sometimes you get me to do things but I don’t know exactly what you asked me to do.’<sup>22</sup>

It seems as though this patient’s self-attributed desire is something of a confabulation—but also a sincerely felt interpretation of his behavior. The fact that such individuals live their lives without an apparent loss of explanation for much of their behavior<sup>23</sup> leaves open two

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<sup>20</sup> Gluer and Pagin *et al.*

<sup>21</sup> Churchland, *et al.* p.65

<sup>22</sup> Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, *et al.* p.43

<sup>23</sup> This is true for most patients, although some encounter confusing behavior, the most notable being the patient who found himself pushing away his wife with one hand while pulling her towards him with his other. It is interesting that the only ‘gaps’ that are consistently mentioned in the literature is one in which contradictory actions like this are performed, whereby the brain would have to formulate two intentions to explain it (if it is in

possibilities. Their brain hemispheres *may* be communicating through more subtle channels that are unavailable in a laboratory setting. Alternatively, their brains (and possibly ours) regularly engage in confabulation, making intention-based accounts for all explanatory gaps. Dennett offers the following interpretation:

...[E]ach of us is in most regards a sort of inveterate auto-psychologist, effortlessly *inventing* intentional interpretations of our own actions in an inseparable mix of confabulation, retrospective self-justification, and (on occasion, no doubt) good theorizing. The striking cases of confabulation by subjects under hypnosis or suffering from various well-documented brain disorders (Korsakoff's syndrome, split brains [mentioned above], various 'agnosias') raise the prospect that such virtuoso displays of utterly unsupported self-interpretation are not manifestations of a skill suddenly learned in response to trauma, but of a normal way unmasked.<sup>24</sup>

At the very least, these results seem to suggest that interpretation may be the source of self-based intentionality just as it is for other individuals.

### The Limits of the 'Simple Concept' of Person and Self

It seems that the brain is responsible for differentiating our self from other lumps of matter just as we differentiate other people from non-personal lumps. These 'special lumps' are then attributed with beliefs, intentions, etc. But we are still at a loss to explain our rich, intricate and, most importantly, *personal* conception of persons. This account still seems to simple, and unable to account for the much more rich concepts that we use in every day life—it certainly doesn't come anywhere near the complexity of the concept that we form for any one individual that we may know, let alone for ourselves. The account given above explains the concept of person as a distinction, with the potential for thoughts, beliefs, etc. (perhaps we should call them proto-persons), but it does not explain how we conceive of 'full persons.'

To illustrate the deficiency of this account, consider the case of an individual who was still somewhat capable of 'taking an intentional stance' towards others. Patricia Churchland further discusses the example of R.B., an amnesiac who has suffered the loss of both temporal lobes after an attack of herpes simplex encephalitis.<sup>25</sup> "He has no recollection of his past, save for one or two facts such as that he has lived in Iowa... Everything else—whether he was married and has children (he did), whether he was in the army or went to college or owned a house—is beyond his ken."<sup>26</sup> R.B. can no longer make *new* memories, and "has a short term memory of about 40 seconds."<sup>27</sup>

In spite of these deficiencies, R.B. is still capable of self-representation, and correctly refers to himself with the pronoun "I." He is able to form a conception of 'persons' that is consistent with the description given above. He doesn't seem to have difficulties distinguishing between people and furniture, and he attributes feelings and intentions to others.<sup>28</sup> In spite of this, can we really say that R.B. has a fully formed sense of himself *as a person*? Can he form a concept of a 'full person' at all? Critical characteristics of personality and a sense of continuity

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the intention formulation business at all). For more, see either Pinker, *The Blank Slate, et al.* or Thomas Nagel, "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness" in John Perry (ed.), *Personal Identity*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975)

<sup>24</sup> Dennett, *The Intentional Stance, et al.* p. 91

<sup>25</sup> Churchland, *et al.* p. 65

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* See also, for example, the account of Jimmie G. given by Sacks, *et al* in the chapter entitled "The Lost Mariner." There are also accounts of numerous patients given in A. R. Luria, *The Neuropsychology of Memory*. Translation by Basil Haigh. (Washington, D.C.: V. H. Winston & Sons, 1976).

<sup>28</sup> Although, as mentioned earlier, these attributions are skewed towards 'positive' interpretations.

over time are unaccounted for. It seems a though *something is missing* from R.B.'s sense of personhood that would prevent him from every really grasping 'persons' in a way that is much easier for the rest of us.

We might conclude from the example of R.B. that the sole missing ingredient in constructing persons is *memory*. Yet another case suggests that the ability to fully conceptualize personhood requires more than just the capacity to take an intentional stance plus some capacity for memories. The now famous account of *Zazetsky*, a Russian soldier who received a severe bullet wound to the left occipitoparietal region of his brain, gives us an example of an individual who, in spite of have both capacities to some degree, was still *missing something*. He retained some memory, but in his own words, it had "shattered into pieces," and "came out the wrong way."<sup>29</sup> Flanagan explains that "despite his possession of a great deal of information about his life and success at experiencing certain 'memories *as memories*' at the moment of recollection, *Zazetsky's* brain damage prevented him from drawing this information together into an experientially robust sense of his self."<sup>30</sup> A. R. Luria, the Russian Neurologist who worked closely with *Zazetsky* through the rest of his life, commented that "he could try gradually to assemble bits and pieces of his past, compare and arrange them into episodes, create a coherent view of what his experiences and desires were," but only through a painstakingly difficult process that required a great deal of time, effort, and the aid of writing.<sup>31</sup> Unlike R.B., *Zazetsky* was capable of memory, yet he lacked what we might call the capacity to recall and synthesize that memory in the 'right kind of way.'

What was it that *Zazetsky* lacked that made personhood unattainable to him? He did not lack memories in the exactly the sense that R.B. lacked them. Lacking the ability hold onto his memories, he also lost the ability to structure his memories in a meaningful way—in a way that is necessary to piece together a full and robust conception of personhood. In order to fully understand this critical capacity, we need to take a step back from the context of persons and selves and explore our seemingly unimpressive capacity to conceive of any string of events or entities over time at all.

## **Necessity as the Mother of Compression**

At first glance, conceptualizing beings as existing over time doesn't appear to be problematic. After all, we do it constantly. But what does it really involve? When I think of myself, or of another person, I do not think of that person as 'momentary', even though an instant of existence may be all that is necessary for me to process their objective being (as a 'lump of matter') as a conception of a person or maybe a 'person-instant'. But on the other hand, I do not 'relive' my life down to the last detail when I think of myself as existing over time, unless I am someone like *Funes*, a fiction of *Borges* who could spend the entire length of a day remembering every detail of the events of a past day. Since we don't make a habit of conceptualizing things in such detail, yet often do remember things in greater spans than 'moments,' we need a way of compressing chunks of data down to a useful size when we remember or conceptualize as existing over time. That is not to say that it needs to fit into a 'single thought', but it does need to be more accessible than the mass of 'discrete' experiences upon which it is based.). I must construct, from my memory, an adumbration of experiences in order to conceptualize a person as existing over time, or as having a life. A representation of a full person is therefore necessarily an adumbration.

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<sup>29</sup> A.R. Luria, *The Man with a Shattered World: The History of a Brain Wound*. Translation by Lynn Solotaroff. (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972)

<sup>30</sup> Owen Flanagan, *Consciousness Reconsidered*. et al. p. 143

<sup>31</sup> Luria, *The Man with a Shattered World*, et al p. 83-84

There are almost limitless ways of adumbrating a large set of data. Yet, when I conceptualize myself as existing over time, it does not seem as though my brain arbitrarily selects a jumble of experiences, or randomly picks an adumbration from the set of all possible adumbrations. *The adumbration that constitutes the conceptualization of a person is not arbitrary, but is in fact structured.* Adumbration occurs according to important rules of organization (we could almost say a grammar). Certain kinds of data will consistently retain a degree of richness, while less important data will be disproportionately simplified or left out—it is not accidental that traumatic events may deeply impact our narratives while Tuesday’s breakfast is nigh forgotten. Events are structured in such a way as to retain a great deal of coherence and consistency. The final adumbration that results from this organized process comes very close to what we consider to be a narrative.

Our brains tend to favor narrative-type structures over others when creating person-constructing thoughts. This narrative-type adumbration is more than a chronological series of events, but it is something that is perceived, or ‘comes about,’ whenever we conceptualize certain chronological series of events. Our brains have a fantastic capacity for this sort of construction from the compressed data of memories. The case of Zazetsky may be an example of someone who has lost this capacity, since much of the content of his adumbration could not be consciously accessed, and as a consequence his narrative always seemed to come out lopsided (or as he said, his memories came “the wrong way”). Luria writes:

Knowledge is not stored in the memory like goods in a warehouse or books in a library, but is preserved through a succinct system of codification that creates a *framework of ideas*. Hence, whatever the memory has retained in this concise way can be revived and developed. This is precisely the faculty that was missing in Zazetsky.<sup>32</sup>

It is essentially the framework or structure that our brains impose upon events and memories that give thoughts the organization we need to constitute an adumbration in a meaningful way, and produce what can be called a self-constructing narrative.

## **Born Storytellers**

As we structure and compress the different person-instants into something conceivable, we create a rich and valuable conception of a full person that is more than the sum of his or her atomic parts. As Jerome Bruner puts it, a narrative “is composed of a unique sequence of events, mental states, and happenings involving human beings as characters or actors. These are its constituents. But these constituents do not, as it were, have a life or meaning of their own. Their meaning is given by their place in the overall configuration of the sequence as a whole...”<sup>33</sup> Future person-instants can now be contextualized by the narratives that we habitually form, which allows them to have a meaning beyond what is immediately present.

Of course narratives (or the exact structure of our adumbrations) are to a great extent socially influenced. On the one hand, adumbration is a necessity of the brain—not just something that children simply pick up from their parents or their culture. The fact that the brain creates a ‘self’—i.e.: recognizes a body that is distinct from the rest of the world—and constructs and adumbrated conceptualization of it will be true no matter what their social or cultural conditions. That we adumbrate is biological necessity—but much of how we adumbrate, on the other hand, is strongly influenced by our society and culture. We might draw a simple comparison with certain song birds that learn regional ‘dialects,’ or variations on their songs. Some song birds are biologically determined to sing; even if artificially isolated or deafened they

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<sup>32</sup> Luria, *The Man with a Shattered World, et al.* p. 140. Emphasis added.

<sup>33</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). pp.43-44

will generate their own songs haphazardly. But under normal conditions, song birds will learn to imitate the songs and styles that they are exposed to early in life.<sup>34</sup> The same is generally true with narratives. Culture tells us that some sorts of structures are good, others bad, that certain characteristics and values are desirable and others not. Culture can therefore be an important factor in helping to compose our identity-constructing narratives. Although it would be unlikely that a human raised in isolation would have nothing that we might call a narrative, it would be reasonable to expect the narrative to be more haphazard, less rich, or even impoverished.

It should also be mentioned that adumbration is a dynamic process. The adumbration that constructs the self is always changing, in at least two ways. First, they keep getting longer. Every moment of life means more information that can potentially be integrated into our narrative. Second, there can be reinterpretations. A year spent in pursuit of some ideal and unachievable goal may become a year squandered by the foolishness of youth; a moment of shame and embarrassment can be recast as the catalyst for redemption and incredible growth. It is clear that when we compose our narratives, we do not etch them in stone, adding another entry for every day or event. The composition of our narrative is entirely different from writing an autobiography, or writing at all (which would produce a work distinct from the narrative, albeit similar in many ways).

These adumbrations are not things that we store away in the backs of our minds and reference every time we think of our selves. Instead we store memories, events, feelings, and bits of data. *Every time we conceptualize the self as existing over time, the narrative is reconstructed anew.* We generally construct it similarly, or in familiar ways, each consecutive time, but over a span of years it is quite probable that extreme changes will occur. Mood also plays a role in how our adumbrate memories relating to the self or others, placing emphasis on positive experiences on good days, and negative on bad days. In extreme cases (religious conversion, epiphanies, etc.) we might suddenly recompose our narrative in a radically different way over a much shorter period of time. The ‘self’ that is constructed through adumbration can be considerably different at different times in terms of what experiences and memories are emphasized and to what degree.

## **Narration and Reality**

Although there is a resemblance between the narrative process that I have discussed above to the imaginative process of composing fictitious stories, there is also an added element to person-constructing narratives that needs to be addressed. One might point out that constructing a stream of imaginary events is quite different from the processes of piecing together a *true account* of an actual historical reality. We can compose narrations of facts, and we can compose narrations of fiction, but most of us seem quite convinced that there is a significant difference between the two. The brain treats these types of stories differently, and adds a new dimension to factual narratives. ‘Accounts’ (which I will use to imply factual or historical based stories) become a certain type of story that has a defining feature: we feel that there is to be a single ‘best’ account, or at least an account that our own intuition seems to prefer over others (although there may be a number of coexisting or competing ‘plausible’ stories). Unlike other forms of stories, these accounts undergo an unconscious, often-rigorous process of evaluation (let’s call it the ‘account test’), and are valued to the degree that they correlate to the relevant facts.

Of course, different perspectives, and different facts, may well lead to different and competing accounts. Moreover, available facts may be insufficient to provide a coherent or comprehensive account—this underdetermination of accounts can lead to several coexisting plausible accounts, of which none may be clearly ‘most true’. Yet when information is abundant, we are inclined to believe that there is one ‘best’ account of a given situation (we only value the account that ranks highest on the account test, and reject the rest).

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<sup>34</sup> Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 1997) p. 124

It should be clear from this that good identity-constructing narratives are also accounts. Narratives are to some degree falsifiable; they can be discarded or disregarded if an alternative account is deemed to correspond more closely to facts that the brain deems relevant. This also accounts for the normal singularity of narratives—what Dennett refers to as the “one to a customer” principle.<sup>35</sup> One human can be only one person, because he or she generally has only one narrative (i.e.: we favor one account). This is not because we can only generate one narrative for any given human being—it is because all of the narratives that we *might* generate undergo the process of evaluation that all accounts undergo, until one ‘best’ account, which seems to be valued, is selected as the true narrative.

This is somewhat similar both to Flanagan’s hypothesized ‘actual full identity’ and to Schechtman’s ‘reality constraint.’<sup>36</sup> The objects to which we compare the events of our narratives exist only as a pool of events that are eligible as elements within the narrative, and contain far too much information to possibly be conceived of within a single human thought, or even in a series of human thoughts (exceptions being made for certain fictions of Borges). Any human-created conception of this pool will necessarily be an adumbration, and the human brain will naturally develop and favor story-structures.

The nature of identity constructing narratives as accounts explains why narratives are subject to more than just our fancies and imaginations. We cannot make gratuitous omissions—anyone aware of the omission would automatically integrate the omitted event into a new narrative that would then rank better within the ‘account test,’ and would then reject the previous narrative. The same goes for unwarranted additions. That the brain should create and utilize such principles of identity formation should come as no surprise. Having a realistic idea of abilities and past of achievements, being able to learn from past mistakes, and any kind of self evaluation depends upon such a principle. Consequently, it has great survival value, and brains that were biased towards such account-based narratives would naturally have an advantage over those that do not, in terms of natural selection.

## **Fact, Fiction, and Those Who Cannot Tell the Difference**

The ability to run accounts through the so-called account test can be impaired for those who have suffered certain types of brain injuries. This is common for individuals who have also lost a much of their capacity for memory. According to A.R. Luria, this condition is characterized by a loss of “association selectivity,”<sup>37</sup> by which irrelevant associations or confabulations are reported as factual accounts. Some patients construct only mild confabulations when questioned directly—others go out of their way to share extravagantly confabulated autobiographies. Such individuals weave fantastic tales, *and seem to accept them* in lieu of their lost memories. Dr. Oliver Sacks recalls a meeting with a patient, who, in trying to identify the doctor, “would whirl, fluently, from one guess, one hypothesis, one belief, to the next, without any appearance of uncertainty at any point—he never knew who I was or what and where *he* was, an ex-grocer with severe Korsakov’s [syndrome], in a neurological institution.”<sup>38</sup> Confabulations may be constructed so convincingly that anyone taken in may believe that they

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<sup>35</sup> Dennet, “Origins” *et al.*

<sup>36</sup> For Flanagan, see both *Consciousness Reconsidered* and *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). For Schechtman, see *The Constitution of Selves, et al.*

<sup>37</sup> Luria, *The Neurology of Memory, et al.* p.254

<sup>38</sup> Sacks, *et al.* p.104. Luria gives many similar examples in his above book. It is worth noting that these confabulatory tendencies are present or absent depending on which part of the brain is damaged. Tumors in the third ventricle will generally cause memory loss but not confabulatory tendencies, while patients with tumors that extend into the upper brain stem and limbic region exhibit the tendencies mentioned above.

“have been everywhere, done everything, met everyone.”<sup>39</sup> The capacity that these disturbed patients have lost is “that feeling of judgment, which distinguishes between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, ‘true’ and ‘untrue’ (one cannot speak of ‘lies’ here, only of ‘non-truth’), important and trivial, relevant or irrelevant.”<sup>40</sup> This capacity is necessary in constructing the narratives that we use to understand and flesh out people and selves.

## Consciousness and the Self

We have now examined two important tendencies of human thought that are involved in the creation of persons and selves: 1) To take an ‘intentional stance’ towards certain objects, especially those that are identified as human via certain related modules, and 2) To adumbrate a chronology of such experiences and memories, which allows for beings to be conceived of as exiting over time.

Only by combing these tendencies can we come to appreciate what goes on when we have a conception of an actual, real life person. These are two important processes or filters that sensory, memory, or other kinds of data must pass through in order to construct a person. The first process takes objective, impersonal facts and lumps and turns them into things like persons and selves that are consciously perceived. Those of us who are not autistic are capable of perceiving what is, objectively, an impersonal world without selves and persons, as a world populated by people and revolving around a single, unitary self. These modified objects and facts exist only within consciousness, and get stored in memory. Thinking of these entities as things that exist over time or have value utilizes another process, which structures the memories and multiple perceptions into a narrative that is compressed enough to be conceptualized. Both processes occur unconsciously in the brain and reliably produce the conceptualizations that occur in conscious thought.

The persons and selves that we experience might be compared to the “English” that I am reading on the computer screen in front of me. The keyboard sends only non-English ones and zeros into the system, which the processors built into my computer instantly filter into English. These can be stored, in non-English binary, for later access. Assume that my computer has a ‘summary’ function (and as a matter of fact, it does)—it can at a later time access this binary data, put it back into English, and by analyzing syntax and content to find the most important parts, put it into something that might be useful for quick and easy access. I can ask for a summary small enough to fit on a screen, or one that is 3 or 4 pages, which I can then mull over at my leisure.

Most if not all of the information that enters our consciousness has been subject to these person/self building processes. It is likely that if it hasn’t entered our consciousness, *then it hasn’t passed through these person-making processes*. Our consciousness therefore sees the world in stories, and in persons. With this picture of consciousness in mind, we need to go back and, similar to Hume, see if we can find something that might be called the ‘self’ that exists within these well organized landscapes of the mind. This time we shall not be looking for the subject of experience, but rather for an object of experience that we refer to when we think of the self.

Narratives are things that are *thought about*, as are the entities and concepts that form within them. It is in this sense that the self can be referred to as an *object* of thought and experience (in contrast to the *subject* of experience that was discussed in chapter one). We must not make the mistake of thinking that there is a person that is ‘out there,’ objectively existing, that is used as a reference or point of comparison to check the facts of the narrative. There is only the unprocessed, impersonal ‘pool of facts’ that objectively exists, or the processed yet inactive data encoded in memory. Bringing our identities into consciousness involves pulling these facts

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p.105. This is from a taxi driver who conversed with a patient without knowing of his disability.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 107

through the ‘personalization’ filter, and then narrating them into a coherent and familiar structure. There is no ‘person’ that is used as a reference or point of comparison to check the facts of the narrative. Persons and selves are found *within* thoughts rather than outside them or possessing them.

There can therefore be no identity or self outside of consciousness, and only fragments of a self outside of the narrative. But, it may be countered, we often attribute unconscious events and characteristics, such as a latent racism, or an unconscious oedipal complex to people. How are these to be accounted for? These too first exist as behavior in an impersonal pool of facts, and must be interpreted, via the filters of personalization, before we can call them intentions, desires, etc. To be attributed to a full person, they usually have to be narrativized. One person might go through this complex mental process (“you’re a racist!”), while another may not (“no I’m not!”). This can lead to two competing accounts. Our culture has come up with a novel way of dealing with competing accounts like this—we can reconcile them by claiming that one was conscious (the interpretation produced in the thoughts that identify with the person in question), and the other is ‘unconscious’ (the one ascribed by a third party, or even by the person in question at a later time). But these ‘unconscious’ activities and characteristics must be identified consciously *by someone* in order to go through the process of personalization. No one *objectively* possesses any unconscious traits—or any mental traits at all. It is only by the similarity of structure in different human brains that impersonal, objective facts can consistently be processed into the same or similar conscious, personal facts.

There are no selves in the ‘real world.’ There are no people, no emotions or intentions that are ‘out there.’ Fortunately, most of us are never exposed to this cold, objective reality. We live our mental lives, along with the vast majority of humanity, behind a kind of special veil, a personalizing filter. It makes our lives and the lives of those around us more livable, and perhaps most importantly, something valuable.