Platonizing the Abstract Self

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ABSTRACT

In this note I examine the two main differences between Plato's and Dennett's views of the self as an abstract object. I point out that in the presence of certain forms of ontological realism, abstract-object theories of the self are compatible with the full reality of the self. I conclude with some remarks on the relationship between ontology and ethics.

The idea that the self is an abstract object is not at all new. One finds this view, or something close to it, in Plato's *Phaedo*, where the highest part of the soul is regarded as akin to the Forms [Plato, 79-80]. Interestingly, the view that the self is an abstract object is compatible, not only with Plato's view of the soul, but also with extreme materialistic positions in the philosophy of mind. Dennett, whose position in *Consciousness Explained* certainly falls into the latter category, argued in that book that the self is an abstraction [Dennett 2, especially ch. 13]. Thus, thinkers as different as Plato (a mystically inclined rationalist) and Dennett (an advocate of science-based materialism) have held that a self is, at least in part, an abstract entity of some sort.

The most significant difference between Plato's and Dennett's versions of the abstract self is a difference in the epistemological foundations of the two viewpoints. Dennett's theory of mind in *Consciousness Explained* is rooted in the empiricism of science, and not in the sorts of intuitive insights, honed by logic and mathematics, upon which Platonism relies. The second most important difference between Plato's and Dennett's conceptions of the abstract self arises from the differences in the two authors' views on the reality of abstract objects. Plato regarded abstract objects as real and very important entities. As far as I can tell, Dennett, in *Consciousness Explained*, did not *unequivocally* regard the self as real.

In *Consciousness Explained*, Dennett states that the self, as an abstract object, is a "fiction" [Dennett 2, pp. 411 and 429]. In other places, he seems to be saying that other abstract objects are fictions, too [Dennett 2, pp. 95-6, 367]. In yet another place, he seems to be saying that the question of the reality of persons is not worth asking [Dennett 2, p. 460]. In a separate paper, Dennett argued for a "mild realism" [Dennett 1, p. 30] with regard to a particular kind of abstract objects -- namely, patterns. This "mild realism" apparently labels as "real" only those patterns that have some scientific, or other predictive, utility. Thus, this so-called "realism" has little to do with traditional metaphysical questions about the reality of abstract objects of different general kinds (properties, relations, sets, and so forth). Indeed, when discussing the reality of beliefs,

Dennett explicitly sets aside "the 'metaphysical' problem of realism" with regard to beliefs [Dennett 1, p. 50], and develops a science-driven notion of realism that has little to do with the general philosophical problem of the reality of abstract objects (see [Dennett 1, pp. 28-29, 30, 45-46, 50]).

To suppose that the reality of an alleged abstract object is a function of the predictive usefulness of that object is to ignore some serious questions about the ontological status of abstract objects in general. Philosophers have long debated the question of the reality of abstract objects such as properties, relations, and sets. Those who have thought about this question have proposed various kinds of nominalism, which state that there really are no abstract objects (or at least no multiply exemplified abstract objects like properties), along with various kinds of realism, which give different accounts of real abstract objects. (For an introduction to these theories, see [Armstrong].) Plato, of course, is the paradigmatic realist -- though one does not have to be as thoroughgoing a realist as Plato to believe that abstract objects are real.

If we assume unequivocally that abstract objects are real, we stand a chance of being able to reconcile the hypothesis that the self is an abstract object with an even more important thesis: that the self is real. Whether the abstract self is real will, of course, depend upon which kinds of abstract objects are real, and which kind of abstract object the self turns out to be. If the self is an abstract object and is real, then one can believe that the self is an abstract object and still consistently believe in the full-blown, undiluted, and undeflated reality of the self. One can believe that the self is "only" an abstract object, and simultaneously believe in the reality of the self as fervently as any dualist or idealist might. One does not have to adopt a realism as bold as Plato's to get this consequence. A much weaker form of realism might do.

If Dennett, in *Consciousness Explained*, had argued unequivocally that abstract objects are real, then he would not have had to call the self a fiction, and the character of the final chapters of *Consciousness Explained* -- which, in my opinion, have virtually nihilistic implications regarding persons -- might have been different.

In closing, I would like to point out one reason for thinking that the self, whether

concrete or abstract, is real. The doctrine of the nonexistence of the self has a consequence of great moral import: that doctrine implies that, strictly speaking, the harming of a human being really harms no one. After all, if the self does not, strictly speaking, exist, then the killing of a human body does not, strictly speaking, really kill anyone. Note that I am *not* attributing belief in this morally loaded consequence to any actual philosopher. However, I do think that some existing philosophical positions may lead us toward this consequence. From a moral standpoint, this consequence is mind-numbingly bad. I would suggest that we avoid this consequence by maintaining that the self, whether abstract or concrete, is real.

This suggestion leads to a more general thought about the relationship between ontology and ethics. Ultimately, we must decide whether we want ontology to be an afterthought to science, denying the reality of anything that is not scientifically useful, or whether our ontology should be robust enough to underpin our moral beliefs as well as our scientific convictions. If we decide that ontology should support ethics as well as science, then we should assume that the self is real. If we do not care whether our ontology is sufficient to support our ethics, then perhaps we remain too much in thrall to the scientism of a bygone century.

References

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