EXTREME SELF-DENIAL*

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Abstract

Some philosophers appear to be committed to the nonexistence of themselves and other selves or persons. We attempt to show that an unduly restrictive conception of personal existence is at the root of this peculiar view. As we see things, conscious experience itself provides us with reason enough to reject the view that we do not exist. The warrant thereby provided is neutral, metaphysically, in that it tolerates a range of possibilities as to what sort of thing we may be, but it does not leave open the possibility that we, persons and selves that we are, are nothing at all.
Extreme Self-Denial

“A man that disbelieves in his own existence is surely as unfit to be reasoned with as a man that believes he is made of glass.” (Thomas Reid, 1764/1970)

Introduction

Our topic, extreme self-denial, is a kind of nihilism about personal existence. In its most striking version it’s the view a person would entertain by thinking the thought, “I do not exist.” It’s closely related to a not uncommon view discussed (but not endorsed), for instance, by Owen Flanagan as “the death of the subject” (Flanagan, 1996), according to which there are no subjects, no agents, no selves. The connection with extreme self-denial is straightforward: if there really were no subjects, no agents, and no selves, then there would be no me or you.

We think it premature to announce the death of the subject, and we believe no one has good reason for thinking herself not to exist. In this paper we attempt to explain and undermine extreme self-denial.

Identifying deniers

Extreme-self denial faces a simple and apparently decisive objection: if I deny that I exist, then I exist. My denial that I exist cannot, therefore, be true. (It should be clear that one cannot get around this objection by saying, “well, maybe I only think that I deny that I exist”.) Call this the objection from Descartes. In his Meditations, Descartes wrote that although he could manage to believe that he had no body and that the world of physical objects was an illusion, he could not pretend that he did not exist. A. J. Ayer, transposing this Cartesian thought into a linguistic key, said of the words ‘I exist’: “…no one who uses these words intelligently and correctly can use them to make a statement which he knows to be false.” “If he succeeds in making the statement, it must be true” (Ayer, 1956).

Given this objection, it is tempting to ask, “Why would any clear-thinking person endorse extreme self-denial? Isn’t its absurdity simply patent? Why even discuss such a view? Who could possibly hold it?” We need to confront this question at once; we wouldn’t want to waste our time or the reader’s attacking a straw man.

There definitely are at least some people who claim not to exist or to be dead: claims of this sort are characteristic of victims of Cotard’s syndrome. (See Stephens & Graham, 2004; Young & Leafhead, 1996). But this fact is not enough to show that, given our purposes, we are not attacking a straw man; we mean to be going after thoroughly rational, non-delusional, philosophers (and others) who, though in some way committed to extreme self-denial, would presumably be appropriately sensitive to cogent considerations against the view.

So, are there really any such people? There certainly is, or was, at least one: Peter Unger. He once wrote, “Of course Ayer is right in pointing to the absurdity of a person’s trying to deny his own existence”. But he promptly went on to announce his intention to deny his own “putative existence” (Unger, 1979).

Perhaps it’s a measure of the force of the argument from Descartes that few philosophers embrace extreme self-denial so straightforwardly. Even so, it’s not uncommon for philosophers and others to say “there is no such thing as the self”, “the self is an illusion”, “there is no thinking, experiencing subject”, and other such things. Such people, even if they stop short of denying their own existence, are of interest to us. They seem to mean to deny the existence not of themselves, but of their selves: what are we to make of this?

We have considerable sympathy for Anthony Kenny’s caution that it’s a “philosophical muddle to allow the space which differentiates ‘my self’ from ‘myself’ to generate the illusion of a [special] metaphysical entity distinct from, but obscurely linked to, the human being who is
talking to you” (Kenny, 1988). Philosophers who deny, in the manner of the last paragraph, the existence of the self often seem to be doing precisely what Kenny cautions against: allowing the space that distinguishes “my self” from “myself” to generate the specter of a special metaphysical entity (the self) and then denying the existence of this problematic entity. We resist giving such metaphysical significance to that space and accordingly have trouble making good sense of one who denies the existence of her self but not of herself. If you deny the existence of your self, why should you not affirm “I do not exist”? As Peter van Inwagen (2002) writes, “what could [the referent of a typical use of ‘I’] be but the self of the speaker?”

Extreme self-denial may be part of a general philosophical outlook constructed to bring one’s conception of oneself into harmony with one’s conception of the rest of the world (see, again, Flanagan, 1996). One has to enter into the outlook to appreciate not just the reasons for the denial, but whether it is indeed a denial. Unger was led to extreme self denial by reflections on vagueness (Unger, 1979). Derek Parfit (1984), Buddha, and many others commend views of a self-denying kind as being not only true but conducive to serenity in the face of the vicissitudes of life. Parfit writes, “Instead of saying, ‘I shall be dead’, I should say, ‘There will be no future experiences that will be related, in certain ways, to these present experiences’. Because it reminds me what this fact involves, this redescription makes this fact less depressing.” (Parfit, 1984).

Unger is (or was) an extreme self-denier. Can the same be said of Parfit? This is, admittedly, less clear. Parfit describes his own view as reductive rather than eliminative: I exist, but what this fact involves is nothing more than such and such. My existence is not a “further fact” beyond the existence of certain experiences, certain physical processes, and certain relations among them (see Parfit, 1984, part 3, throughout.)

Nevertheless, we’re inclined to see Parfit as a self-denier. As we read him, the comfort to be gained from reconceptualizing one’s own future non-existence as involving only the failure of certain relations to hold between these present experiences and any future experiences occurring after a certain date is connected with the thought that one’s demise, so understood, does not involve any genuine ceasing-to-exist. This is why, as far as we can see, the proposed reconceptualization is supposed to make the prospect “less depressing”.

Bertrand Russell once wrote: “If we are to avoid a perfectly gratuitous assumption, we must dispense with the subject as one of the actual ingredients of the world” (Russell, 1959). In his Tractatus Wittgenstein wrote “There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas” (Wittgenstein, 1951).

If I exist, I do think and entertain ideas. (Perhaps this can be doubted, but we assume it to be true.) Anything that does think and entertain ideas is a subject, so if subjects do not exist, I do not exist. If I were to become convinced of the view expressed by Russell and Wittgenstein in these quotations, it seems I should then deny my own existence.

Is Daniel Dennett a denier? (cf. Flanagan, 1992). As if anticipating this question, he provides the following little dialogue in Consciousness Explained:

Interlocutor: “But don’t I exist?” Dennett: “Of course you do. There you are, sitting in the chair, reading my book and raising challenges” (Dennett, 1991). What could be more straightforward? Dennett appears to be going on record as rejecting extreme self-denial.

In context, things are less clear. Consider this little riff on “Call me Ishmael” from the immediately preceding page: “‘Call me Dan,’ you hear from my lips, and you oblige, not by calling my lips Dan, or my body Dan, but by calling me Dan, the theorists’ fiction created by . . . well, not by me but by my brain, acting in concert over the years with my parents and siblings
If Dennett is right, I am a “theorist’s fiction”. If I’m (just) a fiction I don’t actually exist. I’m like Moby Dick: my “existence” is nothing more than the existence of a fiction (novel, short story, etc.) having a certain character. So, we take it that a person who, like Dennett, maintains that he is only a “fiction” has said enough to justify being classified as an extreme self-denier.\(^3\)

Thomas Metzinger announces on the first page of his *Being No One* (2003) that “no such things as selves exist in the world”. The self is an illusion, he says, though it’s not actually suffered by anyone because “There is no one whose illusion the conscious self could be, no one who is confusing herself with anything” (see also Graham & Kennedy, 2004; 2003. Emphasis in original) Merely calling the self an illusion thus threatens not to do sufficient justice to its utter unreality, since the very idea of an illusion may suggest too strongly the existence of things capable of suffering illusions! *Nothing* capable of suffering an illusion exists, and this is clearly meant to include you and me. As he writes in a note late in the book, “Strictly speaking, no one ever was born and no one ever dies” (p. 633 n.). It seems no stretch to call Metzinger an extreme self-denier.

**Why deny?**

Denial is, then, a real phenomenon, and by no means one restricted to the mentally ill. As we noted earlier, there seems to be nothing at all to be said in favor of denial in at least its most extreme form: the assertion “I do not exist” cannot be true when asserted. The propensity of some philosophers to say things of a self-denying kind thus warrants investigation.

We argue two things. First, we argue that in at least some instances extreme self-denial arises out of a tendency to adopt a distorted or inappropriate view of what sort of thing I must be in order to exist and perhaps also to know that I exist. When extreme self-deniers talk of (or commit themselves to views that entail) their not existing, they are often, unwisely, presupposing standards for personal existence that are disastrously mistaken. Second, we argue that warrant for belief in one’s own existence as a conscious subject is readily found in the experience of being a conscious subject. We are each manifest to ourselves as conscious subjects or as consciously experiencing. And so – in the words of Roderick Chisholm (1978) – “in being aware of ourselves as experiencing, we are, *ipso facto*, aware of the self or person – of the self or person as being affected a certain way” (p. 144).

Here’s a cartoonish example to illustrate what we have in mind by speaking of a tendency to embrace unwisely or inappropriately restrictive standards for personal existence. Suppose that you once went through a Cartesian phase during which Descartes’s claim that you are essentially an immaterial substance struck you with great force as being true. That was long ago. Now you are a materialist, but you’re still infected with a significant residual Cartesianism. So it seems to you that if you really have being, you must be an immaterial substance. However it also seems to you that there are no immaterial substances. So, you conclude that you don’t exist. You become, as a result of accepting the Cartesian standard of personal existence, an extreme self-denier.

It seems evident that a much more reasonable thought, given your present conviction that there are no immaterial substances, would be that you needn’t be one in order to exist. You are directly aware of yourself as “feeling warm, feeling cold, . . . enjoying and disenjoying, . . . feeling happy or feeling sad” (Roderick Chisholm, in Hahn, 1997); you are manifest to yourself as having certain conscious properties (being happy and so on); such manifestation provides “topic neutral” (Smart, 1959) warrant: it justifies us in believing ourselves to exist and have the relevant properties without justifying any particular view about what sort of thing we may be.
Apprehending one’s existence: self-manifestation

In his commentary on Kant’s first *Critique*, P. F. Strawson (1966) notes that the pronoun ‘I’ can be used by a person “in consciousness of [himself] as being in such-and-such” a conscious state “without criteria of subject identity and yet refer to [himself]”. (See also Bennett, 1974). One conception of introspection and self-ascription to be avoided, Strawson claims, is the assumption that in being aware of a conscious experience as my own, I need be aware of myself as an “object of singular purity and simplicity” (p. 166). I can know that I am thinking of Paris without knowing anything about what sort of thing it is that is thinking about Paris. Introspection is neutral here.

William James says that “Whatever I may be thinking of, I am always at the same time more or less aware of myself, of my personal existence” (James, 1961). Alvin Goldman (1970) makes a similar remark: “The process of thinking about x carries with it a non-reflective self-awareness” (p. 96). James and Goldman are claiming the following: conscious experiences manifest themselves as modifications or alterations of the subject or person who has the experience. In experiencing I am aware of myself as experiencing. And it is in virtue of the fact that I am aware of myself as experiencing, James suggests, that I can be assured of my existence.

Suppose a thought or other conscious event occurs in a stream of consciousness. James and Goldman then claim that this thought or other conscious event appears as a modification of its subject.

James then suggests that insofar as the subject is aware of herself as being modified, it is manifest to her that she exists. Or again: for it to be manifest that I am affected or am having certain experiences, it must also be manifest, of course, that I am something that exists.

Call this the “manifestation of self” thesis. According to the manifestation of self thesis when a person has a conscious experience, she apprehends herself as undergoing the experience, and therein apprehends herself as being altered or modified in some manner by the experience. What we should say is not merely that she is thinking but that she is aware of herself as thinking. To which James adds perhaps the obvious given the preceding description: And from the fact that she is aware of herself as thinking, it follows that she is manifest to herself as existing.

So, the self manifestation thesis may be summed up as follows: In conscious experience one apprehends oneself as existing insofar as one apprehends oneself as being affected or modified by experience.

What kind of thesis is the self manifestation thesis? It is a thesis about the phenomenology of experience, about the appearance of a person to herself in conscious experience. It is intended to be a truth about the conscious content and phenomenological character of experience. It is in virtue of reflecting on one’s own experience that its truth is expected to be grasped or appreciated.

The self manifestation thesis is perhaps not obviously true. Might I be thinking of Paris without apprehending myself as thinking of Paris? Much depends upon just how explicit (or attentive) self manifestation or self-awareness is supposed to be. By some standards, the proposition that experiences present themselves as modifications of their subjects (the James-Goldman thesis) may not hold true in every instance (although see Kriegel (2004) for a detailed and subtle argument that the proposition does, in fact, always hold true). Suppose, e.g., it were held that in order to apprehend myself in experience I must consciously entertain the proposition that I exist. We take such a demand not to be what James or Goldman have in mind, when they refer to self-apprehension being ‘more or less’ or ‘non-reflective’, respectively. In any case without wandering off into a discussion of the explicitness or attentiveness of self-apprehension,
it is clear, we believe, that at least oftentimes in undergoing conscious experiences we are aware of ourselves as experiencing – of ourselves as being altered or modified some way. So, for example, a toothache may be manifest as my toothache. I grasp my jaw with my hand, examine my open mouth with the mirror, and I report “My tooth hurts” or “I have an ache in my tooth”. The ache appears not just to or in me but for me i.e. as mine. Or consider feeling warm, feeling cold, or feeling happy or feeling sad. Such feelings may wear their being mine character on their phenomenal sleeves. I delight in my own happiness. I write letters to friends telling them about it. I therein apprehend myself as feeling happy – as modified.

So, let us state the manifestation thesis as follows: Oftentimes in conscious experience the subject apprehends herself as existing insofar as she apprehends herself as being affected or modified by experience. A toothache may appear not just as a toothache (whatever that might mean) but as her toothache.

Assuming that the manifestation thesis qualified with ‘oftentimes’ is correct, does this mean that we are out of the metaphysical woods of extreme self-denial? If a toothache appears as mine does that mean it is mine and that therefore my existence as a subject is (at least while the toothache lasts) assured?

This is not so clear. Might deniers not with some warrant take the line that there is a profound epistemic gap between experiences that appear as modifications and the purported fact that such experiences really are modifications – between, that is, the ‘selfy’ content of some experiences and the ontological underpinnings of experience? Phenomenology notwithstanding, it is the underpinning that the denier claims is self-less. Unger (1979), for example, might not mind admitting that some toothaches appear as modifications. But he would deny that he exists, toothaches and other sorts of conscious experience notwithstanding. So the denier could easily enough grant the purely phenomenological thesis that some experiences appear as modifications of subjects, but deny that any experiences actually are modifications of subjects. Whether one knows it or not, she might say, one never apprehends oneself as being affected or modified.

Consciousness and impersonality

Suppose the deniers are right. Suppose, that is, that despite appearances, one never apprehends oneself as modified in one way or another. Experience must be described in quite another way. How would this go?

Perhaps, in this case, instead of saying “my tooth aches,” we should say “a toothache is now occurring here,” referring thereby only to the ache and not to the subject on whom it appears adjectival. We’ll call this sort of impersonal, self-less, description “Lichtenbergian,” after Georg Lichtenberg, who urged us not to say “I think” or “I experience” but rather to say “thinking is going on,” “experience is going on,” and so on. (See Shoemaker, 1963; G. Strawson, 1994; van Cleve, 1999; Williams, 1978). Parfit endorses Lichtenbergian descriptions when he writes: “We could fully describe our experiences, and the connections between them, without claiming that they are had by a subject of experiences.” “We could give what I call an impersonal description” (Parfit, 1984).

Can the extreme self-denier somehow prune her introspective experiential reports of any reference, however indirect, to herself as subject of those experiences (see van Cleve, 1999) and still have fully adequate reports? In the next section we consider some reasons to doubt that she could.

The unity and identity of experience

We find it implausible that one could fully describe the underpinnings of conscious experience in impersonal or Lichtenbergian terms. Many philosophers say that a self or subject
to whom conscious experience occurs must exist if conscious experience occurs. Galen Strawson (1994) writes: “A subject of experience … is simply something that must exist wherever there is experience, even in the case of mice or spiders.” Shoemaker (1996) claims: “Experiencing is necessarily an experiencing by a subject of experience, and involves the subject as intimately as a branch bending involves a branch.” Chisholm (1978) writes: “What one apprehends when one apprehends . . . love or hatred is simply oneself.” “Whether one knows it or not, one apprehends oneself as being affected or modified” (p. 145).

We find these assertions of Strawson, Shoemaker, and Chisholm quite congenial and so turn to a discussion of some arguments, one at least vaguely Kantian in spirit and the other quite definitely Chisholmian, in support of the idea that one cannot adequately describe experience without referring to a subject.

The “Kantian” argument goes like this: conscious experiences often are as of objects in a spatially-temporally extended world. Dan Lloyd (2004) refers to such experiences as of an objective world as “the inescapable experience of the real as real” (p. 250). In conscious experience, he says, “there is . . . a world for us, reality for us” (251). Colin McGinn (1988/1997) refers to the world as experienced as the outward-face of conscious experience. (See also Grush, 2000; P. F. Strawson, 1959). Moreover the world as experienced as real or outward typically consists of distinguishable elements – some cross-time, some at-a-time. At a time, I might be having several different thoughts, perceptions, and sensations. Suppose, to illustrate, that in addition to a toothache occurring, the following conscious contents occur: a twig is heard to snap, sweet chocolate is tasted, and rotten fish is smelt. Suppose, too, that what Galen Strawson (1994, pp. 5-13) calls an “understanding-experience” (an experience of immediately comprehending the meaning of an utterance) occurs at the same apparent time. An understanding-experience, unlike a tickle, taste, or smell does not possess a proprietary or distinctive sensory or perceptual quality (G. Strawson, 1994, p. 7). It is the conscious experience of, say, hearing a statement in a language one understands and immediately comprehending it. Someone says “The smell of rotten fish will make you sick” and you instantly understand. The utterance’s meaning “is as present within your experience as the sound of the words” (Dainton, 2000, p. 11).

Multiple experiential at-a-time contents, though distinguishable, typically form a conscious unity or overlap as part of experience as of one world. Typically, that is, there is an experienced relationship between the contents as occurring here and now. The relationship is that of a co-conscious or co-present toothache, fish smell, utterance grasp and so on. The philosophic question is what explains this unity of the experienced world? What unites various experiences so that they are as of a single world? The “Kantian” answer is that they are united because they are manifest to a self or subject and this self or subject is itself single. They “attach” to it. The unity of experience therein presupposes an I for whom the experiences form a unified, simultaneously experienced whole. The presence of such a subject is needed to explain the fact that what is experienced is as of something unified (a world) rather than of separate worlds for each distinct conscious content (a world of tasty chocolate, a world of snapping twigs, a world of understood utterances and so on).

In calling this answer “Kantian” we intend no scholarly claim. What we do urge is that, again, whether or not the I is this, that or another sort of metaphysical entity (immaterial substance or whatever), it must be there – it must exist – it seems, if the phenomenal unity of different simultaneous contents of experience is possible. So a Lichtenbergian description would
necessarily fail to capture the unity of a world as experienced. To illustrate, suppose, for example, it is true that:

- A toothache is now felt here;
- A twig snap is now heard here;
- Sweetness of chocolate is now tasted here;
- Rottenness of fish is now smelt here;
- The meaning of an utterance is now comprehended here.

Suppose that the ache is not experienced as disconnected from the sweetness or from the meaning comprehension. Each occurs in the same phenomenal here and now. The toothache, the twig snap, the chocolate taste, the fish smell, and the utterance-grasp are simultaneous parts of one experienced world. How can we understand this experience of multiple objects in the here and now without presupposing that these are experiences of a single subject or “binding agent”, as Barry Dainton (2000) puts it, “which (somehow) is responsible for (the) experiential unity” (p. 27) (parenthesis added)? An impersonal or Lichtenbergian mode of description misses something crucial. It is not just that an ache occurs while rottenness is being smelt. It is not just that a sweet taste occurs while an utterance is being grasped. It is that such elements occur as parts of a single experiential world. And it seems only in virtue of assuming that such a world appears to a subject or self that the phenomenal unity of experience can somehow be explained.

There is a second argument for the necessity of the subject with a somewhat different emphasis – not on the unity but on the identity or individuality of experience. Chisholm (1976), Williams (1978), van Cleve (1999) and others have argued that conscious experiences cannot be individuated in an idiom free of reference to ‘I’ or to a subject of experience. Certain individuating facts about consciousness are I-bound or subject-presupposing. To illustrate, suppose that my tooth does not ache. Suppose I report the absence of an ache in an impersonal way. I say something like “An ache is not now felt here”. Chisholm (1976) says that using an impersonal construction such as ‘An ache is not now felt here’ would be “speaking rashly and non-empirically and going far beyond what [the] data warrant” (p. 41). How so? What does Chisholm mean by this charge? Well, suppose (the example is adopted from van Cleve (1999)), unknown to me, tiny microbes are sentient. Suppose one such microbe is housed in my tooth, sharing its space with me. Suppose, too, that an ache is occurring in the microbe. If so, it would be false to say that no ache is now felt here, for an ache occurs here, although in the microbe and not to me. More generally, the point of raising the possibility of the hypothetical microbe is that what ‘here’ and ‘now’ refer to when I speak of no ache felt here and now depends upon which subject fails to feel (or in the contrary case, feels) the ache. The identity of a conscious experience depends in part upon to whom its content is directly manifest.

The Chisholm-Van Cleve argument that the individuation of experience requires reference to a subject of experience is, again, evidence for saying that given the occurrence of conscious experiences, selves or subjects are real. They are not just in experience (in James’s sense) but necessary presuppositions of experience. The argument also helps to show why, as P. F. Strawson (1966, p. 165) says, “It would make no sense to think or say: This . . . experience is
occurring but is it occurring to me?” Yes, it is occurring to me. I am its subject. That’s why I am in a position to refer to it as this experience. Its distinctive identity as represented by the demonstrative is inseparable from my own presence or existence as the subject modified by the experience.

**Consciousness eliminativism**

What now are we to make of the doctrine of extreme self-denial? We have tried to motivate the following assumption: conscious experiences presuppose a subject – a real subject – of experience. We have also noted that some experiences manifest their own subject as the subject of experience: some experiences manifest themselves to me as mine, for example. So we pose the following challenge to the extreme self-denier: assume that conscious experiences occur. Assume also that conscious experiences require subjects. Assume, finally, that some conscious experiences are manifest as their subject’s own. Now try to deny that you exist. Hard to do; very hard to do. This is because – as noted in the moderated James-Goldman thesis – some experiences appear as yours. If you deny that they appear as yours to you, because no you, no subject, exists and is a subject of conscious experience, then this flies in the face of how best to understand the unity and identity of conscious experience. Note well: conscious experience is subject presupposing and not just subject appearing (in the experience itself, oftentimes).

“Well and good,” the denier might say: “Perhaps it is true that if conscious experiences occur, they require subjects; perhaps it is true that such subjects would sometimes appear to themselves to be subjects of experience; perhaps it is true that I cannot appear to myself as a subject of experience without myself existing. What follows? It’s open to me as a denier simply to deny conscious experience altogether, which I hereby do. It’s a fiction, I say. And if there are no conscious experiences, there are no subjects; and if no subjects, then no subjects to which conscious experience is manifest as their own.”

We’ll let the denier’s imagined use of the first-person pass. That to one side, how good are the prospects for this “reply from consciousness eliminativism”? How could a denier go about arguing in its favor?

There are various ways in which she might proceed. She might conceive of alleged conscious experience as possessing a certain property (say, that of being ineffable) and then deny that anything has that property. Or she might assert that conscious experience must possess several properties jointly (being ineffable and being subject to privileged first person introspective description, for examples) but then deny that these properties are compatible. Or she might claim that conscious experience should be eschewed in a scientific materialistic worldview and then argue in favor of the worldview. The strategy for rebutting her arguments would be to find a description of consciousness she would accept (as getting the idea right) and then to argue either that the description is satisfied (e.g. conscious experience really is ineffable or truly does fit into a scientific worldview, etc.) or that the description does not identify an essential feature of consciousness.

Consciousness denial, of course, is a startlingly bizarre prerequisite for endorsing extreme self-denial. It is telling, though, that at least one denier seems to believe that it is necessary to deny the reality of conscious experience; at any rate, he certainly does not flinch from such denial. Daniel Dennett writes: “What about the actual phenomenology?” “There is no such thing” (Dennett, 1991, p. 365). According to Dennett there are no conscious experiences, and there is no phenomenology. If in some sense there seems to be a phenomenology, that’s because (false) memories and judgments of conscious experience are being formed instantly and continuously by the brain and create a kind of non-phenomenal illusion of conscious experience
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(see Seager, 1999, pp. 107-131, for relevant discussion of Dennett). Individual experiences seem to occur but don’t.

Dennett’s picture of consciousness is intricate and difficult to understand. More than one philosopher has called it utterly wrong-headed (Flanagan, 1992; Seager, 1999; Galen G. Strawson, 1994). We have no space to discuss the view here, or to defend our interpretation of Dennett as a consciousness denier. It’s just that Dennett usefully manages to pinpoint precisely an easily overlooked move open to an extreme self-denier: consciousness eliminativism.

How effective is this Dennett-inspired defense of extreme self-denial? Obviously, it can be effective only to the extent that consciousness denial is plausible, and it is just here where things begin, in our view, to look especially bleak for the denier. Even so arch a physicalist as Quine, to whom Dennett alludes in his discussions of ‘quining qualia’ (see e.g. Dennett, 1997), was not an anti-realist or eliminativist about consciousness. Quine noted as early as 1952 (in an essay presented that year) that his brand of physicalism is not meant to “deny that we sense or even that we are conscious. Near the end of his career Quine wrote as follows: “I have been accused of denying consciousness, but I am not conscious of having done so.” “We know what it is like to be conscious, but not how to put it in satisfactory scientific terms.” (1987, pp. 132-3).

Where are we and how did we get here? We have recognized that Lichtenbergian or impersonal descriptions of conscious experience are inadequate to describe certain facts about experience. The subject to whom conscious content appears is a proper and essential part of experience as well as of its metaphysical presuppositions. There is also another key idea we have been advertising here. The oftentimes self-presenting modificational character of experience makes the rationale for recognizing a real me much stronger than anything that might be said in favor of extreme self-denial. It is evident that when a conscious experience directly presents itself as a modification of its very subject (of me, say), such an experience is that of that subject (it is mine). And for those self-deniers unsuspicious of apparently modified non-exists, consciousness eliminativism seems to be the only option.

Note that the proposition that we are subjects of consciousness is not a very substantial metaphysical claim. It is austere and metaphysically noncommittal. P. F. Strawson (1966) claims that there is a natural and powerful temptation for subjects to believe that they are aware of themselves as very special sort of individuals – substances of singular purity perhaps – precisely because self-ascription of thoughts and experiences involves no use of a criterion of subject identity. Nothing could be further from the introspective truth. That a loving feeling appears directly as mine tells me only that I am undergoing the feeling. It says nothing more generally about what sort of thing I am. All sorts of metaphysical views are compatible with what we know about ourselves when we know of ourselves as subjects of experience.

My existence and my nature

We have argued that we are (at least when conscious) but we have said very little, in the paper, of what we are other than speaking of ourselves as subjects of experience (cf. McGinn, 1999, p. 165). So, more generally and metaphysically fulsomely, what am I? What are we?

I certainly appear to myself to be, and believe myself to be, something of a sort that persists through change, something that is embodied and can move its body through a spatially and temporally extended world, and thus as something that persists through alteration of motion and position, and is much else besides.

Suppose materialism is true. Material candidates for the subject of experience include: the entire nervous system, the brain, perhaps one or another hemisphere, or perhaps the complete living animal organism. It may be noted that identifying a subject with something (such as an
animal) that has robust physical boundaries and cross-time duration comports with our sense that we persist and are embodied and embedded in the world. “We (therein) may talk confidently, of an undeniably persistent object . . . who perceptibly traces a physical, spatio-temporal route through the world” (P. F. Strawson, 1966)

Should we accept materialism about the conscious subject? If not materialism, what alternative non-materialist view is plausible? Vexing metaphysical questions remain. We have no desire to suppress further speculation about candidates for a more fully-realized metaphysics of personal existence. However, as we have tried to show in this paper, no such further account is needed specifically to defeat the case for extreme self-denial and to undermine the proposition that neither you nor I exist. As subjects we ourselves and our conscious experiences are intertwined. So unless some way can be found to prune consciousness of its subject or to expunge consciousness itself from the World of True Being, the conclusion must be that the basic idea of extreme self-denial is deeply flawed, even absurd.
References


Footnotes
1. “Yet now I know for certain both that I exist and at the same time that all such images and, in
   general, everything relating to the nature of body, could be mere dreams <and chimeras>.”
   (Descartes, 1986)
2. Unger has since abandoned this view (see, e.g., Unger, 2004). In the current paper
   unqualified references to Unger will be to the Unger of the 1979 paper
3. In an email exchange with Dennett one of the co-authors of this paper asked him why he
   could not accept a characterization that included the following: “I am not a fictional entity. I
   am real. Or more precisely, if living human animals are real, I am real.” In response Dennett
   said he was not sure that he disagreed and that he might be willing to say that he exists. So,
   perhaps Dennett is best understood, then, as the sort of theorist who denies that selves exist
   (except as fictions), but does not mean that he himself does not exist. We are indebted to
   Dennett for the correspondence. Because of it we do not wish to insist that he continues to
   hold the extreme form of self-denial that is evident us in Consciousness Explained.
4. Kant does not present the transcendental deduction as an “inference to the best explanation,”
   hence our continued use of “scare” quotes.
5. Again, this would be at least contentious and probably downright wrong as a claim about
   what Kant actually said. To say that these experiences are all manifest to a single subject is,
   on most accounts, to go well beyond what Kant meant by saying that the “I think” must be
   able to accompany all my representations. For a good discussion see Bermudez (1994).
6. As we noted earlier, whatever Dennett may have once thought he may no longer wish to say
   that he is a fiction.
7. For an influential recent discussion of the possibility that we are human animals see Olson,
   The Human Animal  (1997).