

The Ontology of Me -- Phenomenology Meets Neuroscience

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Non-philosophers are probably puzzled that we ask questions like: What is a thing? There has been much disagreement about such questions. Aristotle's answer is that it is a substance and its particular accidents. I will take that to be basic to thingness, what we call ontology (or the study of being). Is the number four a thing? No. Plato thought so, but not us, at least those of us who take naturalism to be basic (a metaphysical commitment to a monistic materialism). Numbers can exist as concepts but to say they are things seems silly to modern, naturalistic people. If I say, dolphins are my absolute favorite things; am I talking about a thing? No. The language of things is useful, and it is the broad use, due to that utility, that causes confusion. When I say, "I", am I talking about a thing? People often think so but the best answer is probably No. Thing language is remarkably useful for talking about selves too. Like other "things" that are not really things, "me" is a sort of happening, an experience. By "me" I do not mean what the census means when it counts people, it counts my body. I mean what I call myself, to myself. The I that refers to itself and now understands itself to be typing. That self or me is a not a thing, but we are very used to talking about it as if it were a thing.

On the face of it there does not seem to be a problem with this me. I am a self and I have a body. But it turns out if we examine the situation we discover this Cartesian version doesn't work at all. There is much current agreement that I am (the experience of) a narrated self, and this narration centers around a body. This way of talking is called Naturalistic, as I mentioned above, but I think this view should be straight-forwardly called Metaphysical Materialism and

we should then get clear about it, but that language seems old fashioned to many. Metaphysics are controversial because such ideas are unprovable by definition (if we can prove it then it is physics). In some company this assumption is disputed; in some agreed. I will assume it and the basic value of systematic clarity are together the best approach to understanding we have so far. But phrased another way I think most people are happy to assume we live in the world described by the natural sciences. We must endeavor to try to explain the world in ways that are consistent with each other and especially with this commitment to scientific naturalism. In that framework one of the most vexing issues people have with consciousness is how to think about free will. This question has entranced me for decades now. Here I will attempt to explain how I think free will should be understood within a consistently naturalistic framework.

I was watching TV the other day and an ad came on for a pizza place that used images of “Tweets” and other social media, including – seemingly – “content” from real people. There has been more and more of this lately. My first reaction was to think it wasn’t worth the trouble. The culture seems to want me to join in the whole social media phenomenon and I am just not interested. A moment later, I felt like I really ought to because it would promote a feeling of belonging – which, of course, is what the marketers are intentionally trying to create. But the feeling of belonging is real, even while it is manipulated by something out of sight, seemingly less real.

Consciousness and free will are like that. What does that mean? Well, it means that even when what we do isn’t really free the feelings involved are nonetheless important and real on their own terms. The most important experience of consciousness is the one I call “me.” This paper seeks to describe the ontology of that me in terms of phenomenology but informed by the insights of modern neuroscience. These two paradigms for thinking about psychological

functioning are seemingly divergent but I would like to suggest that they can be understood together if one comes at the understanding in a particular way. The way I will describe is my own model for talking about these issues. That will be the focus for this paper and I think it provides an especially helpful lens for making this ontology relevant to the real world.

Consider this little speech (from Cher's character Loretta in the movie "Moonstruck"):

A person can see where they messed up in life and they can change how they do things and they can even change their luck. So maybe my nature does draw me to you. I can take hold of myself and say "yes" to some things and "no" to some things. I can do that. Otherwise, you know what, what good is this stupid life god gave us? For what? Are you listening to me?!

It is a great speech and of course the whole point of the movie is that Loretta cannot really help herself. She does fall in love the person who makes life complicated, not the one she wanted to choose to make life easy. I submit that what matters in all of this is both the experience of wanting, which is to say choosing, and of being swept away. This is curious because it is normally the wanting that we think matters. As in the speech, otherwise what is the point? This is a profoundly important point, but not exactly what it seems.

In the early 1970's a young philosopher named Judith Jarvis Thomson won the abortion debate with an article we now call the Famous Violinist Argument.¹ Religious objections have not necessarily recognized this yet, but in the secular world she seems to have won. That argument shows via a brilliant analogy that people naturally choose autonomy over life if those two principles are placed in conflict with each other. The deep philosophy is a resolution of what is called "The Murderer at the Door Problem" best known from Immanuel Kant. Kant held, in his last published work, that even little white lies are not permissible.² He argued that in taking up a challenge that involves having to choose between lying and being unwillingly

¹ Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1971).

² From "On the Supposed Right to Lie" which was an appendix to his *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

involved in a murder. Kant was just digging in his heels, we hope, as it is not really clear what to do with what seems like such a bizarre conclusion. But the point is the Murder at the Door Problem is a very basic problem for Deontological systems of ethics – how does one decide which principles trump which others? At least with these two, Thomson showed that we spontaneously choose autonomy, as Loretta did in the speech.

Something vital seems to be lost if we lose our autonomy. But ironically enough, something different seems to be lost if we are not also swept away from time to time, especially in love. We want our emotions to move us almost as much as we want to be self-determining. Can we have both? Yes, as long as one understands that these are experiences we have, not realities with which we are in touch. I believe we evolved to have and to value both of these sorts of experiences, so much so that we seek them out and will act out when those desires are frustrated.

These sorts of conversations are philosophically difficult because it is easy to get confused about the subject. Consider how I described Loretta, “she ends up with the man she didn’t want to choose.” Who is choosing and who is doing the wanting? Neuroscientists are accused of getting confused about words like that all the time. They say things like, “the brain wants this...” or “the brain decided that...” If you talk with people they say, “I want this...” or “I decided that...” But is it really that confusing? I think the people who make the most strenuous objections are assuming some Kantian rational agent has to be the subject “I.” To attribute that thought to a non-rational agent (brain is just hunk of protein based jelly) that the claim is by definition mistaken. It is not really confusing, unless defined as such. When the neuroscientists are talking this way they are trying to portray brain activity but have only anthropocentric language to do that. So they say that brains do things and want things or

presuppose things. Are they confused about the subject? Some may be but the language is just an unfortunate artifact of the culture and it has built in limitations. To say anything in the English language is to be subjected to its limitations, to work within the parameters of that language as I know it in my time.

I heard V.S Ramachandran talk about learning in a way that relates here. In a TED Talk, seven years ago, he discussed paralysis and one pernicious problem that afflicts about half of people who have limbs amputated after a period of paralysis. Because the patient's brain has been sending signals to try to move a nerve damaged limb that does not respond the brain learns the paralysis. It becomes a learned paralysis. So when the limb is amputated, in a misguided attempt to resolve pain, the surgeon creates phantom limb pain. This does not always happen but does about half the time. Ramachandran discovered that if he can show the patient an image as if the limb were functional (he discovered this can be done with mirrors) that the pain often goes away. It is as if the brain learned that the limb could move, at least briefly, and that allowed the felt spasm to resolve and the pain to disappear.

Is that difficult to follow? Who is learning? The patient in some sense is learning, but this learning is sub-conscious, they are not aware of it. The effects are very real. So who learned? The patient did but did not know it. To express this idea we say, "the brain learned." This way of talking is straightforward when we think about Pavlov and his dogs. The dog does not have to consciously know that food is one the way. The brain pathways fire on their own – that is what psychologist mean by learning. The brain has developed a pattern, at a level below consciousness, and when the first part of the pattern is initiated (the stimulus, dogs hear bell) the brain follows the pattern (responds, the dogs salivate). I don't think the phrase, "The dog's brain

learned,” causes us any trouble. We do usually mean something conscious when talking about meaning but this other general usage is quite clear nonetheless.

On a related note, what people find most elusive and difficult to fit into a naturalistic account of self is the phenomenology of the recursive quality of thought. My brain, essentially three pounds of jelly, can contemplate the meaning of infinity, and itself contemplating infinity, but not just that, it can write about itself contemplating itself contemplating infinity. In that TED Talk, Ramachandran said that the recursive quality of human thought is consciousness. Phrased this way is it really so elusive?

Before I get back to Free Will and the main line of the conversation I would like to introduce one way to understand what is different about human consciousness – the roots of creativity. Neuroscience has found that the Angular Gyrus is large in humans and smaller in related primates. It is the place where synesthesia seems to occur (the experience of senses crossing, like numbers having specific colors). Synesthesia is thought to be eight times more common in artists, writers and poets than the general public and it runs in families. It is also known that patients who have damage to the Angular Gyrus lose the ability to understand metaphor. Consider: “It is the east and Juliet is the sun.” Normal functioning people can understand that Juliet is not being identified with a flaming ball of gas; that is literal meaning. Metaphor seems to be very human. We engage in art; where animals we teach to paint engage, many think, in a craft. We want to see those elephants as intending art but that is anthropomorphizing them – in particular, it seems, it is assuming they too have a large Angular Gyrus, and they don’t.³ What makes humans human seems to be this combinational activity, which enables complex phenomenon like metaphor possible. I submit that part of what gives the

³ Taken from Ramachandran, his examples as well

world its feeling of mattering to us is this mixing of senses that enriches experience and allows for poetic expression, even calls for it.

On to Free Will. What I have in mind specifically is a version of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism woven into conversation with a reductive neuroscience that seems, on the surface, to deny the plausibility of Sartre's approach. But that is just the surface. If we peek below the surface a new, combined model becomes possible. The model for this is Inside versus Outside what I will call "The Myth of Free Will." The phenomenology of the self is all about freedom, that experience of autonomy I discussed above. The conclusions about the self from neuroscience are about experiences. The self is experienced, is an experience and not a thing. The experienced self is focused on freedom, while the brain producing that experience is bound by its materiality. Another way to think about this is like John Locke's Primary versus Secondary Qualities distinction. When I am talking Inside the Myth I am talking about Secondary Qualities, how I experience what brain is doing. When I am talking Outside the Myth I am talking about something like Primary Qualities, what is going on below awareness that causes my experience. For example, we know now that one big reason people get multiple tattoos is endorphins. They have a mild addiction to endorphins and will seek out additional tattoos to satisfy the craving. But if you ask the person why they are getting another tattoo they will talk about anything but endorphins. Inside the Myth of Free Will the person has an aesthetic vision they would like to see realized. Outside the Myth of Free Will the desire has a foundation in addiction that is rationalized by the individual prior to their own awareness of being addicted.

For my purposes then I want to explore an understanding of what it would mean for existentialists (Inside the Myth of Free Will) and neuroscientists (Outside the Myth of Free Will) to both be right. Let me start with an overview of the existentialists' position. Sartre famously

said things like: “To act is to modify the shape of the world; it is to arrange means in view of an end.”⁴ This is an intention and specifically an intention of consciousness to bring about that which is not the case. “Man is the being through whom nothingness comes into the world.”⁵ In this transformation of the world we see the activity of consciousness. “Man’s relation to being is that he can modify it.”⁶ It is generally understood that he was saying that it is through our actions, intentional actions that we become persons, we form selves. We become not a consciousness-in-itself but a consciousness-for-itself through our choices, or decided actions in the world.

One criticism of this view is that it is not situated in the same way human beings are situated in a social context. That social context is a facticity into which we are born and Sartre’s view, in his early work, sees the social as inherently conflicting with the individual. This is common to the existentialists, of course. I think that critique is fair and in fact Sartre himself makes it explicit by going on to write his other major work, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. For my purposes here I am interested in his early and more purely existential thought. This view is compelling but must also incorporate the social context and I think that much is not controversial. The other criticism is the one that interests me especially. Sartre’s view seems incompatible with modern science, and especially neuroscience. I am here suggesting that this critique is not correct as one can bring them together, as I am presently.

The most intellectually challenging aspect of what science tells us about the brain is that it is a material system existing in a causally determined universe. William James wrote about this in his psychology text book over a hundred years ago. It is a deep challenge. I want to

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, 433.

⁵ Sartre, 24.

⁶ Sartre, 24.

suggest we meet that challenge head on and accept those findings. For one example, there is a very famous study called the Lippert Experiment.⁷ The experiment appears to show that awareness of a decision to act follows the action. The findings are disputed both scientifically and philosophically. I think both types of challenges are expressions of wishful thinking at this point. We wish this was not the case but it is. On the scientific side it seems to me that the evidence just is compelling. On the philosophical side it seems to just be quibbling over words. In the business (philosophy) there are two dominant models for Free Will. The most popular with philosophers is “Soft Determinism.” The second is that people are (magically) free, Metaphysical Libertarianism, technically. The Soft Determinist view holds that we do indeed live in a deterministic universe and so yes of course what we do and think is determined, but that is not what Free Will is really about. What it “really” is about is a social conversation regarding ordinary and extra-ordinary determining factors. A person is acting “freely” on this view if they are not being constrained or coerced. This control could be exercised by an external agent, like a person compelling me to do something, or internal like a psychiatric conditioning. This is the view of “free” that our legal system uses. I am free and thereby culpable if I am not insane or not being otherwise forced to do something.

Defenders of Soft Determinism argue that this is what “Free Will” has always meant and in using this language we are simply confirming this historical usage. Some will add that if we did not live in a deterministic universe we would have no basis for anticipating what anyone would ever do and so this determining model is necessary for any social actor to be understandable. “Our will, quite the opposite of being free, is steady and stable, like an inner gyroscope, and it is the stability and constancy of our non-free will that makes me and you

⁷ Benjamin Lippert, “Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action,” *Behavior and Brain Sciences*, Vol. 8, 529-566, 1985.

you, and that also keeps me me and you you.”⁸ According to the Soft Determinists “Free Will” is a linguistic convention that refers to a lack of external control and ordinary cognitive functioning. It is reportedly the most popular view among professional philosophers today. I think it is mistaken, however. The “Hard Determinist” position has been defended by people who simply say that Free Will is an illusion and that as a result all social rules are not legitimate and have to be eliminated. This view is not social useful and so is rejected on those grounds. But I think there is a more coherent way of explaining Hard Determinism. That view says to Soft Determinism, if our society actually had a functional justice system then it might be the case that the Soft Determinist view was correct. But as long as that view is only coherent inside complex philosophical models that never make it out to the world to influence policy then that model is itself useless and immoral. Hard Determinism, reasonably defended, argues that we live in a deterministic universe and so our ordinary moral terms are problematic, but they can be rescued by reference to social ethics. On the deterministic view it is unethical to put people in prison regardless of proof they committed the crime because the person was not free to do otherwise, in a full and complete sense. (They are free to do otherwise on the Soft Determinist account because it says we mean the person was not externally coerced; but that is not what people really mean so that language is confusing.) The accused was not free to do otherwise in any meaningful sense of the English language, because s/he does not have a free will. This seems to say that we cannot then do anything about crime and so we need Soft Determinism back. But that is just laziness. There is work to be done to integrate these understandings. It starts with the observation that society can have morally justifiably grounds to control people’s behavior to some degree (including excluding them from society in a place only remotely like

⁸ Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am a Strange Loop*, Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2007, 341. Hofstadter is actually a Hard Determinist and both positions agree on this detail.

prison), either permanently because they are dangerous to others, or temporarily to try to teach them to behave differently. What is not moral is treating those people badly, as we do currently. Since our so-called justice system is anything but, this shows that we need to do the philosophical work of developing a system that is morally defensible, a system that honestly accepts conclusions from science it has no good reason to reject.

Well, why do people reject the science? It has everything to do with The Famous Violinist Argument. We value our sense of autonomy. Ethics then must account for the fact that this is an apparent universal human value, yet it is scientifically unsupportable. What is supportable is the observation that this autonomy is not really real but is really experienced. We experience ourselves as free and we value that experience above all others, it seems.

I should immediately remind the reader that consciousness itself is an experience. Ramachandran said it is the experience of the recursive nature of human thought in particular. This is also the model proposed by my favorite Soft Determinist philosopher Dan Dennett. Dennett's model of consciousness is that it is like a narrative web of our thoughts and deeds as these happen over time. Consciousness is awareness of the focus of these experiences being constructed around a central narrator. We tell one story at a time as we go through life. In fact the Libet experiment shows that this is true at the neurological level. Our brains, at a level below conscious awareness, are acting all the time. They hear, taste, see, feel and smell the world all the time. We have needs as well, some very natural others culturally conditioned and we act on those needs. As we act our brains are telling a story to justify the actions. I am doing this because...I wanted ice cream. I discovered that I wanted ice cream in my acting to acquire it or in the growing awareness of thoughts directed towards planning how to get the ice cream. I did not choose to want ice cream and I do not choose how to get it – although it seems to me that

I am choosing how to get it. The sense of autonomy that we are so keen to protect is the illusion that something called Me wants ice cream and it evaluates how to get it. In truth a brain having a certain set of experiences, called Me in my case or you in your case, processes various desires and possibilities based on previous experience and inner states and that information processing ability sets about solving what is presented to it as a problem. I want ice cream. In thinking about solutions to this problem I become aware that thinking is happening and this thinking is organized such that what I call Me owns the thoughts. They are my thoughts. But are they free? No, they just occur to me. I have these thoughts. One of them will be about how to get the ice cream and once that is figured out I will own it too. I figured out how to get ice cream. No, my brain figured it out and that brain is organized to experience all of that activity in the form of self-ownership.

“I” am always a second order phenomenon of what my brain, the brain my body carries around, constructs of what it experiences as being of a Me. Perhaps this will help: I do not think of my cats as having free will. I think they have desires and anxieties (both are rescues and quite neurotic) but they do not choose any of that, any more than I choose my anxieties. When I watch them run around the house they seem in control, like when hunting. The cat is scanning its environment and deciding what to do. But then suddenly the dog (who is equally neurotic) notices one of them and a chase begins. The cat does not then seem to be making any decisions. It just runs and as it encounters obstacles it maneuvers around them and tries to use them to confuse the dog, the predator now chasing. The cat does not decide that the couch is useful for this, it simply encounters the couch and scoots under it. The cat’s brain is scanning its environment looking for things that it can fit under or over, both means of escape it already knows either from previous experience or its genetics (I don’t really know how much of either is

involved). My point here is that in full chase it seems clear that neither animal is acting on a free will, even though it might seem that way when they are just exploring.

Well, we are the same, except our brains are organized such that the experiences have this unique first person perspective – they are my experiences. For humans, the most interesting contexts are social, because of the myriad ways our innate desires to be social run into difficulty in society. This often makes conformity the price of being social, and that means challenges to my autonomy. It is not easy being human. In discussing Nietzsche a scholar named May had this to say:

And yet the very conditions of our lives as intellectual honey-gatherers declare the underlying truth of our condition to be otherwise – to be in fact exactly as our conception of (self-)knowledge as gatherable would expect. For as such gatherers, we are constantly making towards the hives of our knowledge, hence always returning from journeying away from those homes, and so never actually residing in them: we are, in short, always on the way to or from home but never at home – always not-at-home.⁹

When I am in full flight I am no longer aware of myself as decider, I simply do. This is what training is about. Deciding can drop away because the details are now stored in muscle memory. But what is that? It is the memory I am not aware of having. When I get on a bike and can ride after many years of not, it is not that I decide how to do it from a storehouse of possibilities, no my brain just knows, the memory is there but not in the storied form of consciousness. What I am saying is that even when things move slower and it seems to me that I am deciding, that this is just an illusion that slower movements allow. What is really happening is just like when I am at full speed and not aware of the decisions; it is just that when things are calm there is time for the myth of that ownership to be created. This is a very powerful illusion too as it makes possible all of higher culture. It is in human culture that we seem to feel most

⁹ Simon May, *Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 235.

free, because that is the realm in which creativity is possible, novelty is possible (to get us back to Sartre). In acting I experience myself as Sartre described; but we know from science that this experience is not what it seems – it is an experience.

Even these examples are reminiscent of the complex interplay between free and unfree that we seem to value. Like love taking me away, the memory of how to ride takes me away when I am on the bike again. My drum teacher told me that when performers are really on and it is working they lose that first person sense and get swept away in the experience. We lose the ego, in his language, and the music just comes through. In fact, he said, when the ego is present the music does not flow. His “ego” has qualities of “super-ego.” Either way, my point here is that this is another example of ways in which we value losing that sense of being in control, but only in certain ways. I do not seem able to control having those experiences at will, but I seem to cultivate them nonetheless. I try to get to that place where the ego has faded to the background that people call a pure consciousness. Buddhism and Hinduism have made this a cosmic principle. In ecstatic experiences of all types the self seems to drop away, and mystics have sought out these experiences for millennia. Both being in control and being swept away are valued though they seem opposites.

All of that has been Outside the Myth of Free Will talk. When I am inside the myth I sound like Sartre. Here it might help to remind the reader of Camus’ position on Free Will. He said that he doesn’t care because all he knows is the experience. Well, I agree with that but I think if we just stop there that we have only half the story – the phenomena. If we want to understand, let alone help or treat, then a deeper understanding is necessary, and available.

A fuller account requires including this contemporary (psychological) consensus of self as narration. What I as narrator or author, I-A, calls the present is actually a slight fraction of

second later than it happened – due to neural distances and processing time. One of the things I-A is telling a story about is what I in a different sense did in that fraction of a second ago called now, what the behaving I did, or I-B. I-B does things and I-A is narrating the life of I-B while owning what I-B does because it is all I. The recursive quality of thought is the author I, I-A, owning what the behaving I, I-B, does. So to experience there is one I, but in the world there are two senses, two aspects to the ontology. One tells the story and the other does stuff, including says stuff. Most of the time the I-A is just about on top of the I-B and that is what we call in control. Sometimes the I-A gets a bit behind and that can lead to a moment when the I-A does not like the story twist and scolds the I-B. “I can’t believe I did that!” Really, “I-A cannot believe I-B did that?” The author seems very Super-Ego like and I suspect is part of what Freud was talking about. The I is not self-made, and so what an I-A would judge one way or another may be mostly culturally conditioned. Id certainly seems very I-B, so that one is easy. Ego itself is perhaps the experienced self, qua actual phenomenon.

Taking another run at this – I encountered a philosophy text book that asked, Why bother with philosophy? The answer was: “Perhaps because the unexamined life is not a life chosen freely in awareness of alternatives, but a furrow mindlessly plowed.”¹⁰ If free will really is just an illusion of sorts, a creation of how our brains experience the world and themselves, then a “life chosen freely” is only a sort of illusion, and a remarkably important one. We think of ourselves as deciding and intending but all of the evidence suggests this is a constructed experience. Clearly that experience of seeming to be free is central to our psychology, basic to ethics, and presumably evolutionarily advantageous. Douglas Hofstadter summarizes it this way:

¹⁰ Stephen Law, Forward to *30-Second Philosophies*, Barry Locker, ed., NY: Metro Books, 2009, 6.

The foregoing means that we can best understand our own actions just as we best understand other creatures' actions – in terms of stable but intangible internal patterns called “hopes” and “beliefs” and so on. But the need for self-understanding goes much further than that. We are powerfully driven to create a term that summarizes the presumed unity, internal coherence, and temporal stability of all the hopes and beliefs and desires that are found inside our own cranium – and that term, as we all learn very early on, is “I”. And pretty soon this high abstraction behind the scenes comes to feel like the maximal real entity in the universe.¹¹

It appears we can think more complicated thought, solve more complicated problems, if we have our selves in the thinking. Creatures that pass psychological tests for self-consciousness have in common the ability to solve very complex problems. One theory I encountered somewhere is that a key cognitive ability in this is mental time travel – the ability to project self into past or future. We can learn more complex lessons from our experience as a result, and we can plan an imagined future. All of this is vital to how we function.

We know that human brains have some built in habits and some basic primate needs. We know that we narrate a story of our lives to ourselves as go along, apparently rationalizing our behavior and even thoughts to ourselves based on past experience and current emotional state, which may or may not be clear to the individual. What I mean is we can react emotionally and not really know what the feeling was, and this is why we find psychotherapy useful. The psychotherapist is in a position to interrogate our rationalizations. What strikes me as useful for understanding these things is to go back to Freud. In his scheme what is me? I think me is what he called ego. This me is torn by demands made by my id, my desires and emotions taken as raw data. This me is managed by a superego that seems in part to be the product of primate evolution and how attachment patterns evolved. I have to fit in socially to some significant degree, and so this super-ego keeps track of what are taken to be the demands of being social. It seems then this

¹¹ Hofstadter, 179.

model suggests that when super-ego and id are out of balance that the patient will be neurotic (and that is one standard view).

Remember my goal here is not an updated understanding of Freud but an ontology of me. I submit that this me is what Freud called ego, and it is not really mediating between id and super-ego, but as the narrator it seems to have that role. In truth the ego is an after the fact story teller and so cannot be deciding, but as the record keeper it is in a position to tell the story such that it, ego, seemed to be mediating between id and super-ego. This mediation is not happening prior to behavior but rather after and so it rationalizes behavior by telling the story of seeming to mediate between competing demands.

On the Freudian version of this, Karen Horney (the famous interpreter of Freud) had this to say:

The idealized image might be called a fictitious or illusory self, but that would be only a half truth and hence misleading. . . . It is an imaginative creation interwoven with and determined by very realistic factors. . . . More relevant it is born of very real inner necessities, it fulfills very real functions, and it has a very real influence on its creator.¹²

A full Hard Deterministic view (straight material causality) would suggest that this ego, qua self, is only a happening. It is the experience of storytelling, not really the story teller. Dennett seemed to think that the storyteller being free was enough to support Soft Determinism, but I think that over-reaches the power of the narrator to affect the future. That story teller, or inner narrator, is – on my view – telling the best story it can from the material available, and that availability of material is sufficiently restraining that we cannot consider the narrator to be free in the meaningful sense of having a free will. It tells the story that is expected of it by the super-ego, which it does not control, even while it may resist some times. Its only ally is also not under its control the id. So the ego balances in telling the story, becoming narrator, but is so

¹² Karen Horney, *Our Inner Conflicts*, quoted by Hofstadter, 185.

constrained on all sides that it cannot be called, or morally (if we are to build a completely moral society) treated as freely responsible for either praise or blame.

This model is useful for engaging other selves. Ethics demands we treat other people as freely determining. Science tells us this is not true, but real enough to the experience of people to be foundational. I must treat people as free and also be patient with their limitations; and I should do this with myself as well. I think there is a fear some have that things like psychotherapy that seek to engage people on a rational level that Hard Determinist models are threatening to rationality. That is not the case. Rationality is about organized thinking, not free thinking. In the end the biggest lesson is patience and tolerance. People are not free so they are going to make mistakes, fail to follow through, make bad decisions. People are also going to excel. All of that is human and so we have to embrace both as the human experience and try what we can to limit the failures and encourage success for all. But since none desire, in an ultimate sense, praise and blame must be measured functionally against the goal of a humanitarian, which is to say patient and understanding, ideal for society. The lessons of Behaviorism are clear but must be applied in a context that assumes autonomy overlaying the behavior that is being modified. The extreme carrots (being a billionaire) and sticks (life in solitary confinement) that we use currently to try to modify behavior were all built and understood using a scientifically discredited theory of mind. It is time to do better, and it is not impossible but it will demand breaking powerful illusions – most especially the illusion some people have that they, more than all others, deserve privilege.

As a way of concluding this examination I should acknowledge that some may have noticed that I seem to have avoided the most dramatic implications of full-fledged metaphysical causality. I agree. What I have done is treat Outside the Myth of Free Will as being really

Outside of the Psychology of the Myth of Free Will. I am defending what amounts to Psychological Determinism, not quite metaphysical determinism. The reason for this is that I know of no language to approach that topic. Our interactions with each other assume that we have influence, that other people have moral responses to us. If there is full metaphysical causality all of that just happens. But as I navigate the world I think of it as being psychologically fluid, and so I have focused on that level. I interact with people and these interactions change me and them. In a fully determined universe all of this just occurs because the laws of nature are guiding everything from the beginning. My point is that we cannot live or even talk about that level because it all starts to become fatalistic. That fatalism is not a reasonable response because people and situations do change. The change seems, at times, to be a response to what I did so what I do seems to have consequences in the world. If it was all determined then my actions had an effect that was predictable as was my action. Nothing moved freely in that system. But I still experience myself acting in that system so I want to insist psychological determinism fits the needs of our time. I see most of this need being ethical. We have to come to terms with the fact that people are not self-caused and yet we blame them for what they are. And of course capitalism centers around this demonstrably false belief in the reverse, by claiming that some people deserve to live in opulence and others do not. None of that is morally defensible in our world (capitalist theorists have to assume free will and they seem to know this, thus the enduring irrationality of capitalist culture – reason would challenge this ethically monstrous arrangement so it has to be ideologically defended and this is done well by fantastical religious beliefs that big money perpetuates). Our whole social world has to be reworked if we want to claim we are moral beings. To do this we have to understand ourselves and act as I have described above.

Put another way, I believe that just as ethics demands the centrality of agency, requires that we do ethics Inside the Myth of Free Will, so living a human life requires assuming agency, demands that think about how to live from Inside the Myth of Free Will. True or not we live as if the myth is true. Upon reflection we can recognize the myth as such, we can step Outside the Myth of Free Will. From that perspective we recognize that big social institutions like our “justice system” are morally depraved because they inappropriately operate Inside the Myth. From a policy perspective we have to live Outside the Myth, while taking the phenomenology of the myth, what it is like Inside as basic to our goals. Social institutions and practices must encourage the myth, but to be moral must understand the myth as myth. From the perspective of the Many Worlds interpretation of Quantum Mechanics every possible outcome does occur, it is just that our awareness follows only one of those possible outcomes. Why do we believe people are really responsible for the possible outcome that their consciousness actually follows? That seems utterly impossible. But remember one of the causal details that become reality is the learning that our brains do, the patterns we learn to recognize and then come to assume – as Pavlov demonstrated. It may be the case that what we call psychological determinism (as I have defended it) is caused by material reality and what we call learning is just what was going to happen anyway – but that is the world of our experience. We experience a world of learning from the world and so as that is the world we must protect and enlarge. We do value the phenomenology of human consciousness, with its freedom and while occasionally being swept away.

It may be there is no freedom and no learning, that nothing we do changes anything. But it seems like there is freedom and that what we do changes things, and it very much seems like those experiences are vitally important to us. I am merely suggesting that we take both science

and our desires seriously. I think what we are left with is only experiences and so the cultivation of valuable (to us) experiences is central to human life. We cannot pretend what we know from science is not true if it is uncomfortable. So we have to understand that while the phenomenology of our experience is of great value that it is not what it seems.

Yet, what matters to us is not fundamentally an analysis but an experience – freedom. Erich Fromm told a professional audience: “The fundamental human right of man is to be an end in himself and not to be used as a means, not by any other man or any organization including the sovereign state [or the business].”¹³ Fromm takes our desire for the experience of freedom into the very roots of our being by seeing this drive in the way Freud saw sexuality. It is a kind of essence to our beings to strive to be self-creating and self-expressing. It is bizarre irony that the author who writes the story of me does not have direct control over me but yet owns what that me does. The story of me is a story of me striving to be free...when I am honest about my natural desires, otherwise it is a complex rationalization of why I do not strive to be free or how I am already free.

Fromm further observes, “Inasmuch as man is not productive, inasmuch as he is receptive and passive, he is nothing, he is dead.”¹⁴ Freud famously said that human beings need work and love to be happy. Something deep in us wants to produce. Evolutionary psychology sees this as a natural product of living in a world of scarcity. We need to work to survive and so we evolved a restlessness that is satisfied best in productivity, but also other ways that can be destructive or just unproductive. Needing love seem like it requires less theoretical understanding in some

¹³ Erich Fromm, lecture to the annual meeting of the Orthopsychiatric Association 1966. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpfW1xfouAM>. Later on he adds that what is sufficient for human rights is “The right to be one’s self.” What does “self” mean to him? To be a person and not a thing. We can become things spiritually. We do this when we are what he called “homo-consumptuous.” When we are merely consumers, and producing things only to acquire things.

¹⁴ Erich Fromm, “Marx’s Concept of Man,” Part 4.2, accessed from Marxists.org, original 1961.

ways because we are social creatures. Some cultures have seen this drive as overlapping with Freud's theory (to bring us back to Freud). Eros is vital energy that can accomplish great things, as well as being perhaps indulgent as erotic. Traditional (Temple) Jewish thought curiously agrees with Greek thought about this connection (curious because traditional Jewish thought encountered Greek thought as a hostile invader at one time, before embracing it in its Rabbinic form). Perhaps in the Christian dominated English speaking world we confuse these things and really ought to see Fromm and Freud as closer than we usually do. Regardless the point here is that need to be productive becomes a ceaseless striving in some ways and a dominating super-ego in other ways. The poor self struggles to tell a coherent story of autonomy to itself (ego), as the being is battered about by and responds to social (super-ego) and internal (id) pressures that often undermine the story. Rousseau would probably say that this is why we need to return to nature, to be just wild beings freely telling their stories. I suspect evolution played a strong role and so that return to "nature" would have to be a return to some earlier primate/monkey existence, to a much simpler brain.

In future explorations of these ideas I hope to add a discussion of how clinical practice might understand these ideas. Specifically I will suggest that the therapist, understood as an intervention in the psychological determined world of the patient, is in a position to effect change specifically because they are external to the patient. The therapist is an instance of the world

intruding on thoughts and behaviors in a way that can question them and cause the patient to question, and then rework them.