

METAPHORS OF AGENCY AND MECHANISM IN DISSOCIATION

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ABSTRACT

Modern theorists have proposed various metaphors for the dissociation of the psyche. These metaphors are often inadequate in that they tend to reify process and/or depict the individual psyche outside of a social context. Some metaphors view dissociation as an automatic process happening to the person, whereas others view dissociation as an intentional act by the person. Implications of each view are explored, and it is recommended that Sarbin's (1995) role-taking view of dissociation be supplemented by Hermans and Kempen's (1993) concept of the dialogical self. It is suggested that any adequate concept of dissociation must include both mechanistic and agentic aspects.

Our understanding of ourselves and our psychological interiors is shaped to no small extent by the cognitive maps and psychological metaphors we employ to describe and delineate our inner experience. The metaphor of "having a soul," the metaphor of "being a self," and the metaphor of conscience as an "inner voice" are all examples of such cognitive models. These models are in some ways similar to the Palo Alto Research Center's "desktop" metaphor which has been familiarized in both the Windows and Macintosh computer operating systems, and which provides a graphical representation of actions which occur at the human-computer interface. Persons whose sole experience with computers is through that metaphor have a different understanding of how computers work than do microchip designers or programmers who understand low-level languages.

Many metaphors have been devised to describe a profound inner conflict and fragmentation within the modern experience of selfhood: Janet's (1924) concept of dissociation, Freud's topographical (1900/1972) and structural (1923/1960) divisions of the psyche, Jung's complexes (1911/1973) and archetypes (1916/1953), Federn's (1952) ego-states, Perls's (1969) polarities, Tart's (1975) identity

states, Hilgard's (1977) cognitive control structures, Mahrer's (1978) operating and mediating potentials, Kernberg's (1984) splitting of good and bad self-representations, Ornstein's (1986) modular "multimind," and Hermans and Kempen's (1993) "dialogical self" are all examples of the metaphors of inner fragmentation that have been a prominent aspect of all modern descriptions of the self. These psychological theories have been paralleled by a similar fascination with inner dividedness in both literature and popular culture as exemplified by classic tales such as Stevenson's (1886/1962) *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and contemporary entertainments such as Steven King's (1993) *Gerald's Game*. While Berg (1961) believes that this interest in internal dividedness is a consequence of modernity, models of inner division have been posited well before the modern period, as Plato's (1964) theory of the tripartite soul attests.

What can it mean when patients describe themselves as being "fragmented," as being different "people," or as having different "parts"? How can one understand these statements? Can they be taken literally as accurate self-descriptions? Should they be understood metaphorically as poetic expressions of inner experience? Are they mistaken cognitions about one's "inner workings"? Are they duplicitous attempts to manipulate, entertain, or deceive the listener? It seems conceivably true that at different times, and/or within different speaker-listener dyads, several of these possibilities might be true in different measures, separately or simultaneously.

It would be a mistake, however, to take these descriptions literally, thereby reifying them and turning processes into objects (Orne & Bauer-Manley, 1991). Events signified by such metaphors as "ego-state," "amnesic barrier," "traumatic memory," and "abreacted affect" are often misunderstood as possessing "thing-hood," but they would be better understood as processes occurring within an interaction between a listener and a speaker, and within a specific functional context. Within that context, listener and speaker are both engaged in a variety of ongoing tasks, some of which are part of the overt agenda that explicitly exists between them, and some of which are not.

A brief example may serve to illustrate this point: *A client who is telling her therapist about alleged childhood abuse sponta-*

neously slips into the present-progressive tense as she narrates her account. She speaks in a small, high-pitched voice and with child-like vocalic intonation which is unlike her usual prosody. As she reports this, her body gradually becomes racked with convulsive sobs. She continues on in this way until she reaches a point of exhaustion, and then in a slightly dazed manner, resumes her normal manner of speaking.

How can one understand the process of what has just occurred? Is it best described as a process taking place within the client, as an interaction between the client and the therapist, or as a combination of both? Has the client "gone into the past," or is she reconstructing (or inventing) an event in the present? Is this tale being narrated by a part of the person that is still a child (or has "age-regressed" to childhood), or is it a complex performance by an adult? Is the affect being expressed damned-up, pent-up affect created in the past which is being "released" or "re-experienced" in the present, or is it new affect being generated in the present as part of a process occurring either within the client, or between client and therapist?

Let us also imagine the client in the above illustration giving a subsequent report that "*It felt like I was a child and it was happening all over again.*" This may be a phenomenologically accurate report of an event which was experienced and is expressed within a metaphor borrowed from the broader popular and psychological cultures. It is possible, however, that the client might be capable of experiencing this process differently if she shifted her internal vantage point ever so slightly. (For example, the client might be able to identify an "as if" quality to the experience.) Even if the initial phenomenological description was the "truest" one for the client, it might not be the most useful way to describe this experience within a scientific or clinical vocabulary. On the other hand, a direct translation of this metaphor into a mechanical and dehumanized set of hypothetical constructs and their interactions does nothing to improve the matter. It does not significantly aid our understanding to say that "a dissociated child ego-state breached an amnesic barrier and took executive control and abreacted." It might help our understanding better, however, to view this illustration as a complex intentional performance occurring within the present and within an interpersonal context.

The use of the word "intentional" is not meant to imply that the motives for this performance are necessarily conscious or correctly construed by the performer (although at times they may be). The switch in role enactment to that of the role of child may feel like it "just happened" much like hypnotic behavior often feels involuntary (Bowers, 1991; Lynn & Kirsch, 1995), but that does not make the behavior any less intentional. Similarly, to call this a "performance" is not meant to be perjorative, nor does it in any way prejudice the essential truthfulness of the content of what is being communicated. Nor does the word "performance" imply that the role being enacted is not an important part of the per-

former's behavioral repertoire, or that the performance is only intended for one particular audience in one particular context. Such performances can also be performed for oneself in solitude as a meaningful act. Complex performances for which we ourselves are both actor and audience are commonplace, as is evident in solitary child's play, daydreams, and self-hypnosis. Lastly, calling it a "performance" does not deny its personal meaningfulness or potential clinical utility.

Sarbin (Coe & Sarbin, 1991; Sarbin, 1995) has taken the lead in understanding both hypnosis and dissociative identity disorder (DID) as role-taking and performance, as well as in understanding remembering as a narrational act. Sarbin has been unfriendly, however, to the clinical reality of DID as a disorder. It is easier for him to imagine the disorder emerging iatrogenically as part of the client-therapist dialogue, than to see it emerging as part of the interaction between a betrayed child and her abuser. Sarbin finds it hard to accept that clients often come to therapists' offices already experiencing themselves in a fragmented and incoherent way, and that this fragmentation and incoherence existed long before they read too many novels or watched too many television talk-shows. (For a critical look at the sociocognitive perspective of DID and iatrogenesis, see Gleaves [1996]).

Sarbin's narrational and role theory, however, does not in and of itself have to be unfriendly to DID as a "naturally occurring" disorder. Ross (1995) has indicated the compatibility between his view of DID as a naturally occurring disorder and Sarbin's role-enactment theory when he wrote that DID is "a little girl imagining that the abuse is happening to someone else" (p. 67). Ross noted that "...the identities or personality states are not concretely, physically, or literally real - they are not composed of matter, and do not occupy physical space. They are constructs, enactments, devices, or internal autohypnotic structures, depending on one's choice of vocabulary" (p. 67). This view is virtually identical with Sarbin's claim that dissociation is a "skill" (1995, p. 168), related to the fact that human beings can "with considerable success deploy their attention from one actual situation to another, from one imaginal context to another" (p. 168). Kluft (1991) has also recognized the role-playing element involved in ego-state enactment when in defining the "disaggregate self-state" (Kluft's term for "ego state") he noted that they may be "behaviorally enacted with note-worthy role-taking and role-playing dimensions" (p. 611).

Sarbin, emphasizing the human-being-as-agent, prefers to use the metaphor of "self-deception" rather than the mechanistic metaphor of "dissociation" to describe the process of ego state generation and/or enactment. Unfortunately, the metaphor of "self-deception" has perjorative connotations as it emphasizes the "bad faith" and "false consciousness" (Hacking, 1995) aspects of multiple identities at the expense of emphasizing the skillful and adaptive aspects of this form of behavioral self-defense. Both aspects are equally impor-

tant to an understanding of DID. It is important to remember that so-called "self-deception" is a more-or-less successful strategy, and that the client's experience of multiplicity is genuine, even if it is ultimately a less than optimal self-description.

I suspect that most DID clients would, based on their own monitoring of their own internal experience, consider the idea that they are in control of their switching of mental states to be a cruel joke. They would give almost anything to feel more in control of their emotions, sensations, impulses, and thoughts (especially if control meant not to have some of them at all). They often feel at the mercy of an inexorable and overwhelming ego-alien process of self-revelation (or self-unraveling) which makes them feel "crazy." I also think that to dismiss that "out-of-controlness" as self-deception is to misread something very important about the illness. There needs to be a way to reconcile Sarbin's criticisms of a mechanistic and authorless dissociation with the experience of dissociated control that seems patently self-evident to DID patients.

Cardena (1995) has pointed out that the word "dissociation" has been used as a hierarchical concept that bridges disparate phenomena, some of which may, in reality, be quite unrelated to others. It is possible to imagine a form of dissociation in which the authorial "I" is an active agent, and for which role-playing or self-deception may be an apt metaphor (e.g., certain ego-state enactments), and at the same time to see other forms of dissociation (e.g., the rapid-onset state of mental "shock" that can occur during or immediately after psychological trauma) as being non-agentic, perhaps primarily neurohumoral, in nature. We may also note that these disparate forms of dissociation may eventually become interrelated. For example, Koopman, Classen, and Spiegel (1994) note that trauma survivors who experience greater automatic peritraumatic mental "shock" go on to experience a greater degree of the intrusive and dissociative symptoms of PTSD, some of which may be agentic, and some of which may be more automatic in nature. Braun and Sachs's (1985) model of DID etiology assumes a process by which automatically entered states, if repeated, may become linked together over time and evolve into phenomena with a more agentic character to them. In fact, it may be helpful to look at the process of dissociation in DID clients as being similar in some ways to the process of breathing: Breathing has an automatic, involuntary, and unconscious aspect to it, but it can also have its rhythm and depth altered by conscious intent. Actors, opera singers, swimmers, yogis, tantrum-throwers, and expectant mothers learn to use modifications of breathing for their own purposes, but that does not make breathing an entirely intentional performance.

Sarbin's role-taking and narrational theory can be deepened by supplementing his metaphor of the univocal actor/narrator with Hermans and Kempen's (1993) multivocal narrational self. As Hermans and Kempen have written:

Whereas in Sarbin's ... version of the self-narrative a *single* author is assumed to tell a story about himself or herself as an actor, the conception of the self as a polyphonic novel goes one step further. It permits one and the same individual to live in a multiplicity of worlds with each world having its own author telling a story relatively independent of the authors of the other worlds. Moreover, at times the several authors may dialogue with each other. The self, conceptualized as a polyphonic novel, has the capacity of integrating notions of imaginative narrative and dialogue (p. 46).

According to Hermans and Kempen's metaphor of the dialogical self, the Self does not exist as a single univocal entity, but exists as a conversation between antiphonal positions, each of which is authorial. The domain of selfhood consists of a variety of "I positions" which stand in relationship to one another. At any given time one position may be dominant, but this relative dominance of positions shifts over time depending on changes in internal need states and the effects of social interactions. There is a dynamically shifting equilibrium balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces that threaten to cause either the disintegration of the psyche or the dominance of one "I position" over all others. As a way of averting these dangers, there is a "meta-self," much like an observing ego, which strives for balance and mutual assimilation and accommodation of these disparate "I positions," but this meta-self enjoys no privileged position, and can itself be submerged and dominated by a variety of "I positions." So, for example, Hermans and Kempen examine the multiplicity of "I positions" within the therapist, and how the internal voice of the scientist often contends with the internal voice of the clinician. Hermans and Kempen would view DID not as a fracturing of a single whole then, but as a failure to intercoordinate a true multiplicity, much as Bowers's (Bowers & Davidson, 1991; Woody and Bowers, 1994) theory of dissociated control in hypnosis suggests an absence of higher integration of lower subsystems by superordinate control systems, rather than a splitting of the superordinate control systems through a resort to amnesic barriers.

How are these different actors/agents/narrators that Hermans and Kempen denote as "I positions" summoned forth to take center stage? The process here need not be terribly different than those suggested by Spence's (1960) model of response selection from within a hierarchy of competing response tendencies, Selfridge's (1959) Pandemonium model of feature recognition, or Hofstadter's (1979) ant-colony metaphor of human and artificial intelligence. Models such as these have been proposed to describe a variety of biological and cybernetic phenomena, from the functioning of the intellect to the functioning of the auto-immune system. Any individual will have a diverse repertoire of constellations of behavioral/cognitive/affective states that are

evoked to different degrees by the aggregate of features of the stimulus situations they find themselves in. If two or more of these psychological states are activated equally by the stimulus context (presumably an infrequent event) there will be a need for some monitoring process that selects the most appropriate psychological state according to some set of criteria. Perhaps this is where the experience of making a conscious decision occurs. Most of the time, however, these elections of states do not need conscious attention. They occur as easily as one slips into the ethnic accents and rhythms of the speech of one's childhood when one revisits one's family of origin. No controlling "entelechy" is called upon except in unusual situations. To the degree that these psychological states have mutually assimilated, are compatible, or are conjointly under the control of a superordinate psychological schema, the switching of psychological states is all experienced as the seamless operation of an "I." To the extent that stimulus conditions have fostered sequestration and non-integration of these states, and to the extent that they are incompatible, the seamless experience of "I-ness" will be disturbed. This model preserves both islands of continuity and discontinuity in human experiencing and behavior. Any useful metaphor of personality functioning must do just that: allow for both the reality of integrated self-experience as well as the reality of *decalage* and self-contradiction.

The alert reader may have already noticed how in extending Sarbin's role-taking metaphor with Hermans and Kempen's dialogical self metaphor we have surreptitiously inserted a mechanism into his originally purely agentic theory. While each of the authorial selves is an agent, the process of switching selves is not always or usually directed by an agent. We may have multiple selves, but there is still no ghost in the machine to determine which self is "out" at which time. Unless one posits some shadowy puppeteer pulling strings in the background, no theory of DID can avoid the idea of mechanism.

I suspect that for Sarbin, that would be reason enough to object to Hermans and Kempen's extension of his theory. Nevertheless, I think that combining Sarbin's work with Hermans and Kempen's work creates a useful metaphor for the dissociative process. In fact, I think it is impossible to create a truly useful description of human behavior which does not include both agentic and mechanistic elements. As Hofstadter (1979) has so elegantly pointed out, reductionistic/mechanical descriptions of biological systems and holistic/intentional models need to be combined to fully understand such systems. Using one or the other will not do, just as describing light as only a wave or only a particle will not do. Any biological system can be analyzed at different levels, and combinations of actions which at a lower level of analysis may be mechanical and automatic, may at a higher level of organization and integration, emerge as goal-oriented and intentional. At a lower level of analysis the various agents called "I positions" are separate, but at a higher systemic level,

they form parts of an integrated whole. While the process of switching agents is mechanistic, it is goal-directed and "intelligent" in the sense that there is meaning in the switches as they reflect changing organismic and social stimulus conditions and promote (or are at least "intended" to promote) sociobiological adaptation. Interestingly enough, this combination of agentic and mechanistic analyses is phenomenologically more accurate than a purely agentic model as well: We all have the experience that some of our actions are things which we do, whereas other actions just seem to happen without our conscious volition. Something valuable is lost by viewing dissociation as only an internal mechanism, or as only an intentional transaction. These ideas need to be coordinated and synthesized to produce an enriched metaphor.

Metaphors emphasize and draw our attention to one aspect of reality at the expense of other aspects in a way that is intended to be helpful for some purpose. A metaphor tells us that a certain phenomenon is, in some respects, similar to something else more familiar in hopes that we will obtain a better understanding of that phenomenon. Metaphors, however, can only bring us so far: "x" may be *like* "y," but "x" is *not* "y." Light, for example, can appear "wave-like" or "particle-like," but light itself is neither: it is the Kantian "thing-in-itself." It only seems more "wave-like" or "particle-like" depending on the questions we ask of it. The actuality of a phenomenon transcends and eludes metaphor.

So it is with dissociation which, in its richness and complexity, eludes the metaphors used to describe it. For some purposes it may be better described as a functionally autonomous process occurring within a person; for other purposes it may be better described as something one does with an intent. Dissociation straddles the same fault line in Western philosophy that bedevils the debate over the existence of free-will in a deterministic universe, and which threads its way through the "special state" vs. "socio-cognitive" argument among theorists of hypnosis. Our inability to resolve these debates is a consequence of our inability to define who is the "I" who intentionally does things, and to what extent, if any, this "I" exists as more than a epiphenomenal specter.

This difficulty is fundamentally unresolvable because science cannot answer the question of what it means to be a Self. All metaphors of the Self, whether monolithic, protean, or dialogical, are in the final analysis more-or-less useful fictions. They are like the Buddhist analogy of the "finger pointing at the moon," not to be confused with the moon itself.

Metaphors may not have an ultimate scientific truth value, but they do have varying degrees of clinical utility. The real question is: "Which metaphors of dissociation and selfhood are most useful in the psychotherapy of a dissociative client?" Orne and Bauer-Manley (1991) have pointed out that metaphors of multiplicity can be dangerous when they

encourage reification of self-states, encourage dissociation of control and responsibility, and discourage integration. On the other hand, failure to fully appreciate the severity of the disintegration of self which DID clients bring to their therapy from the very start, and failure to respect the client's authentic experience of selfhood, can only impede the process of healing and recovery. Therapists do best when they understand the advantages and weaknesses of each of these metaphors, and strive towards a middle path, understanding the client as both process and person, object and agent, fragmented, and yet, ultimately, whole. ■

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