



Extracts from Personhood's Self-Cancellation

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# Personhood's Self-Cancellation

Henry A. Flynt, Jr.

My work on personhood theory in the last two years has taught me a very important lesson which I must not forget because I am now deciding to "make the great return to language." Just because I am going to target in on "cognitive language"—or properly, *proto-semantic consciousness-events*—I must never again succumb to the tendency in Western philosophy to take the universe of thought or illumination as "the knowing subject qua verbal cognition-machine." I must not hem myself into a narrow, cognitive-linguistic strip at one side of the person-world. Proto-semantic consciousness-events must be studied as they interpenetrate with the whole person-world. . . .

Personhood inherently and pervasively involves a capacity to make attributions of veracity, realism, etc.; and a capacity to question veracity, realism, etc.—or just to question, in a moment in which one wants a realistic or veracious answer. When these capacities, attributions, attitudes are not especially spelled out in words, that is when my new designation of proto-semantic consciousness-events is most needed. Earlier paradigms of personhood seemed inert because these proto-semantic events were not made central. Without imputations of objectivity, attributions of "that-happened," judgments of veracity or realism, wariness of deceit and delusion, self-observed self-deception, and apprehension, expectation, anticipation, the person-world does not "arise" or subsist. In short, inherent to personhood is the capacity to ask or question, "Is this actual?" or "Does this exist?" in the sense of "*Is this what it pretends to be?*"

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Now we arrive at the illumination which I have not previously formulated. ASK THE QUESTION "IS THIS WHAT IT PRETENDS TO BE?" OF THE QUESTION "IS THIS WHAT IT PRETENDS TO BE?"

If the question "Is this what it pretends to be?" is not what it pretends to be, then you cannot

question whether it is what it pretends to be. It must be what it pretends to be for you to be able to ask whether it is what it pretends to be.

The answer is an automatic "yes" if the question can be asked. *Yet nothing has established that the question IS asked* (that I am not "dreaming," as it were). Let me resort to the anachronistic language of philosophy to explain, hoping that this surrender of rigor will help clarify rather than confuse. Nothing has proved that semantic consciousness-events exist, i.e. that the raw experiences which are "indicated" as semantic consciousness-events have the trans-experiential dimension required for a semantic consciousness-event. But the situation is more acute than this remark recognizes. "Some proof that they exist is needed." Yes indeed, some proof that what I conventionally indicate as semantic events *are what they pretend to be* and not moments of deception, delusion, hoax, mirage. The conceptual thinking which supposedly is constituted of semantic consciousness-events has this "requirement of verification of realism" as its foremost inalienable norm. That there are semantic consciousness-events needs to be a *contingent* actuality so that it *can* be verified. *But it can't be a contingent actuality.* The point is obvious to me—I don't know if anyone else will see it—"that there are semantic consciousness-events" is *too* true: the question is settled and disposed of before anything (contingent) has been established or verified. We need to be outside of this question of whether "Is this what it pretends to be?" is what it pretends to be; and we can't get outside it. There is a very good illustration which I am preparing to use in "Argument That the Metatheory of Arithmetic Is Inconsistent." Consider

This sentence is in English, and the proof that it is in English is just the sentence itself, which is in English.

Do you think that is permissible reasoning? Then what about

This sentence is in German, and the proof that it is in German is just the sentence itself, which is in German.

Ultimately, no matter how much you are convinced that the second sentence expresses a delusion, there is nothing with which to prove that it expresses a delusion. ("Ultimately": In this context, it is not permitted to "prove" assertions by citing sources of authority which are more derivative than what is to be proved. We don't prove how many teeth are in a horse's mouth by looking it up in an encyclopedia, or prove the existence of God by looking it up in the Bible.) The form of the proposition is automatic self-validation; and this form closes the circuit in such a way that a contingent actuality cannot be tested. The illumination which emerges from this meditation is that the whole realm of semantic consciousness-events takes the form of automatic self-validation and therefore is caught in a circuit of futility.

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Viewed along the axis of semantic consciousness-events, personhood is in a bind of global self-cancellation or impossibility or irreparable conflict with the norms of its subsisting or establishment or installation.

I don't know if it will help, or make things worse, if I make the following heuristic statement. The foregoing is a demonstration that the person-world "does not exist." (Curiously and ironically, Eastern thought promised to establish the same illumination. But I deliver the promised "demonstration" here and now; while Eastern thought defers the demonstration to some inaccessible thought-escape from empirical consciousness.)

The insight that personhood does not exist is not a privation—except for those who were incorrigibly credulous and addicted to "creed-

alism” in the first place. Again as a heuristic illustration (maybe a misleading one—I don’t know), dreams don’t *disappear* in consequence of what you decide about their realism. That is, there is a phase of experience which the inherited culture calls dreaming which does not disappear. But the whole of your experience may be profoundly reshaped in consequence of what you decide about dreams’ realism. The insight which I, in my love of provocation, improperly express as “Personhood does not exist” gives us a far more powerful means of chaos’ sorcery. As for those who wanted a credo which would be a synthetic religion, I part company with them. Their desire for a new world-view *in the sense of a credo* shows them to have been people of small stature to begin with.

How quickly this inquiry has moved! Earlier I posed the problem as one of finding a framework which produces an organized, identified world without depersonalizing us. I pictured this problem as one whose solution might lie far in the future, and might require a whole series of theoretical pastiches and bluffs. But now I have the desired result; and it places the project of the sorcery of chaos in a different, and to me more plausible light. The “framework” is not a creed. Rather, it is a “short-circuit” of the person-world. So the “ultimate knowledge” is not a dogma but an undermining illumination. The project of personalist meta-technology is now to spell out all the sorceries this undermining illumination opens to us, sorceries which because of the prevailing backwardness will have the guise of awesome new sciences. The job of the remainder of this manuscript is to begin to spell out how this approach is going to work.

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Another widely-pervading constituent of the person-world is BELIEF IN (THE EXISTENCE OF) NON-IMMEDIATES. It goes without saying that this constituent overlaps with proto-semantic consciousness-events. These two specifications of constituents allow us to look at the same subject-matter from different angles; and thereby to gain greater range or flexibility for our methods.

Belief in past and future times (distinctly separate from the present) appears at the proto-semantic level as the attributions of realism involved in acts of memory and expectation. At the semantic level, it appears as e.g. use of clocks, or past events which cannot be remembered in “daydreams,” but only through sentences about them.

Fundamental in personhood is the comportment of oneself to “objectivities.” The same process of comportment can be described in different ways. We can say that I believe in the stability and persistence of a table (when I am not looking at it, etc.); or that I impute a context of objectivity to a glimpse of a table (or visual-table-apparition). Then, there is the

identification of the table I see with the table I touch. We can say that I believe that the visual and tactile tables are the same; or that I seek to make an objective table, a coherent table-object, by identifying the visual and tactile tables.

But the latter manner of expression does not permit the conclusion that this identification is a straightforward, unexceptionable stipulation. On the contrary: the usual “stipulations” cannot yield coherence at all moments. *It is more honest to say that the ordinary organization of the world is made of beliefs than of collations or stipulations.* “Stipulation” connotes a discretionary (or voluntary and optional) rule-making action which is independent of all matters of belief. But rule-making is independent of belief only relative to the tenets of a specific doctrine. The notions that regularities can be discerned, that there is a language in which to formulate rules, and that there is an “I” to discern and to formulate, are in no wise independent of beliefs. The activity of “making a rule to unite and unify a visual apparition with a tactile apparition” not only presupposes beliefs but indeed presupposes highly abstract beliefs. *What do you mean, “unite” a sight with a touch “in thought” to make a “substantial integrality”?*

The entire attribution of consciousness to other people—specifically, “intentions of consciousness” such as purpose, planning, manipulation, duplicity, cordiality, resentment, vindictiveness—is a matter of beliefs. A closely related matter of belief is the meaningfulness of language, the medium of transmission of thought between myself and others. The conception of my “self” as a univocal personality demarcated from the environment and continuous through time (including sleep/waking alternation and unconsciousness) is a matter of beliefs. The expectations which guide my actions, my realized choices, are matters of belief (causal belief, in fact).

The survey I have just made concerns the role of beliefs in informing the elemental life-world or person-world. That I have memory and expectation, that I conceive object-gestalts, that I attribute consciousness to other people, that the “I” of the moment conceives a sustained, continuous self, that I act in accord with cause-and-effect expectations: these are basic to the ordinary personal totality. Beyond this there are elaborate intellectual systems—myth, science, political-economic ideology—which it is superfluous to dwell on. One distinction between the “systems” and the elemental beliefs is that the systems are specialized, i.e. they are monopolies of small minorities in the community (in many societies).

The investigation of personhood leads me to notice a manner of expression which might otherwise have gone unremarked. “I do”; “I see”; “I believe.” It is the self of the moment that is referred to here; but what is notable is that the totality-of-the-moment is verbalized as an “I” doing, seeing, feeling, thinking. All this

verbal ego-demarcation is assuredly informed by belief. But now there is a circle, for who is the believer? Belief is the ego as self-caused cause? (Also the use of “self” as a generic word in the preceding sentence. The fallacy of explaining a particular with an abstraction which would have to have the particular as its inspiration. Like defining a human father as a God-like figure.) There is a zone more intimate than belief in the conventional sense, the zone in which belief is constituted as a believer’s act.

The structure of our language requires that belief presupposes a self to espouse it (not a life-long self, just a self of the present). Espousal is willful thought. Yet the constitution of a self is a “matter of belief.” Of course, I already noted the curiosity that the personhood paradigm is expressed as “I this,” “I that”—but that “self” confronting a “screen” of visual apparitions, grappling with contents, etc., is just what ordinary personhood is about.

This self of the moment or self of the present is turning out to be as much of a curiosity as proto-semantic consciousness-events or beliefs in non-immediates. “I have the option of credulity or radical unbelief.” But in a state of radical unbelief there is no ground for the I-concept. The “I” doesn’t necessarily arise with actions; actions can be performed absentmindedly. The “I” doesn’t necessarily arise with sense-receptiveness: the room can get a little warmer or lighter without my being attentive to it. The moment where something is palpable as an “I” is the moment of willful thought. The “I” arises with thoughtful willfulness or attentiveness.

Proto-semantic consciousness-events, and beliefs, are closely inter-related with willful thought—which is the palpable “I.” To visualize a table is willful thought without a semantic event or belief. (I don’t mean ideation of the meaning of the word “table”; I only mean visual ideation, and I’m mentioning “table” to make the example concrete, easier to follow.)

So what do we have? A palpable “I” sometimes manifested with beliefs and sometimes manifested without beliefs. But that’s like saying that the palpable table is sometimes manifested as a sight, sometimes as a touch. The “substantial integrality” that is claimed here is a matter of belief. But the “I” is unique among substantial integralities installed by belief, because the form of language, at least, requires the I as believer of the belief that installs the I. Let us conclude that the I-of-the-moment, or ego-consciousness, involves a “bootstrap consciousness-event.”

Let me return to the main avenue of discussion, and see if the above reflections will not find their place once my conclusions are reached. With respect to belief in non-immediates, we ask

Are non-immediates actual?

or

Are there non-immediates?

or

Do non-immediates exist?

Once again, the affirmative answers to these questions, the declarative correlates of the questions, are automatically self-validating. But now the automatic self-validation is indirect. It involves an intermediate moment. Non-immediates have to exist so the question regarding their existence can be meaningful. That is why I began with the question of semantic consciousness-events, because it is at the very center: it is the intersection of non-immediates with our reflection upon them.

Nevertheless, the present avenue of discussion produces a useful subsidiary result. Non-immediates must be actual *if* we can reflect upon them. Yet, nothing has ESTABLISHED that we can reflect upon them, i.e. that our purported reflection upon them *is what it pretends to be*. Nothing has proved that the “thoughts” which are indicated as reflections upon non-immediates have the trans-immediate or trans-experiential dimension. That there are non-immediates needs to be a contingent actuality so that it can be validated. But it can't be a contingent actuality. The question is settled and disposed of before anything has been established or validated.

Non-immediates compose a realm which as a whole is automatically self-validating and therefore is caught in a circuit of futility. Viewed along the axis of belief in non-immediates, personhood is in a bind of overall self-cancellation or impossibility.

Semantic consciousness-events and beliefs in non-immediates are bootstrap events which shouldn't be bootstrap events. Because of that, they are exposed as circuits of futility which annul the person-world. Coming back to the “I” of the moment, it is another, perhaps distinctly different, bootstrap event: caught in a circle of self-installation. This circle perhaps annuls personhood along a different axis. You have memories but you can't have them. You have expectations but you can't have them. You believe that the Empire State Building exists when you are not looking at it but you can't so believe. And you are a you even though evidently you can't be a you, even though the “you” is an impossible fiction. “I am stuck with myself and with being here even though it is impossible that I should be here.” Now personhood is becoming dizzy. Now we should be able to read uncanny moments directly out of the person-world.

Here is, perhaps, a better heuristic illustration than the example of dreams which I gave earlier. Consider “perceived space.” It pretends to have depth in the visual mode, but there is no way to expose that depth in the visual mode palpably. I stand on the other side of the room from my desk and say “The chair is nearer me than the desk.” But there is no way I can validate this visual impression, *or even say what this visual impression means* (as long

as I remain within the static visual modality). Like depth and depth-distance or away-distance in the visual field, personhood is an impression which cannot be substantiated—as it were. Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy was to announce that all the things we were supposed to believe but couldn't prove are “innately added by the mind.” Very well. There remains only one qualification. These innate additions of the mind are *impossibles*.

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These issues of the momentary “I” and of whether belief is possible at all constitute the intimate zone relative to which my early philosophy failed to square the extremism of its conclusions with the explanations that prepared the way for those conclusions. . . .