Ismael's Anscombian and Dennettian Selves[*]

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A member of the Harvard Philosophy Department, to remain unnamed, is reported to have uttered a sentence, in Italy, in which the word "here" meant Harvard University—the institution, not the location. That was a small-scale reminder that the straightforward analysis of one of the easier indexicals does not always match up neatly with more freewheeling uses of what sounds like the same word. An analogous phenomenon is of greater philosophical importance. On the one hand, there is a relatively straightforward use of the first-person pronoun that has attracted ongoing philosophical attention, generally because its apparent immunity to error has been seen as an anchor for ambitious results of one sort or another. On the other hand, there are much more complex notions of the self, amounting to answers to the question of who one is. Both of these contrasting notions of self appear towards the end of Jenann Ismael's fascinating treatise. There is a long tradition of philosophers attempting to explain how these more minimal and more contentful renditions of the self are tailored to one another, probably because it is the promise of traversing the link from the error-immune 'I' to the contentful 'I' that promises all those ambitious results. Against this background, Ismael's marvelously clear discussion amounts to a large, blinking red light: we should not expect a particularly good fit between these two notions of the self at all.

Sydney Shoemaker once observed that it was easy to account for a rather thin form of self-knowledge: simply prepend "I believe that..." to whatever

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it was you were about to announce, and you are all set to report on your inner mental life.[1] Ismael points out that a willingness to cross-index the results of this sort of prepending will reconstruct the peculiarly incorrigible use of the first-person pronoun that so puzzled Anscombe. If the thoughts, "It's raining," and "It was snowing" are floating through my head, attach "I think that. . . " to the front of both of them; then be prepared to (borrowing a term from Bernard Williams) agglomerate the pieces into, just for instance, "I think that it's raining and it was snowing." That being the procedure, there is no room for wondering whether *I'm* the one having that thought. The utility of the procedure is underwritten by an architectural feature of our cognitive hardware, that we are closed informational envelopes. The pathways down which information flows are sealed off by experiential interfaces. You can tell me what you think, but I'll have to *hear* you in order to acquire the information, which puts your thoughts outside my envelope.

Let's pause for a moment and consider what the point of such an architecture would be, from an engineering point of view. Partitioning information into envelopes or pockets underwrites inferential requirements of the following form: if I believe that p, and I believe that q, I may (and may be required to) draw the conclusion, p & q. Whereas if I believe that p, and *you* believe that q, there is no enforceable inferential requirement at all. The informational envelopes—along with the minimal 'I's whose workings Ismael so gracefully describes—are machinery for handling information: they demarcate jointly deployable bases for inference, whose scopes roughly coincide with the boundaries of the top-level cognitive architectures of organisms. The minimal self is accordingly a winning device on the assumption that, for inferential purposes, tagging information as belonging to *these* sorts of pool is a winning strategy.

Turning now to the more ambitious notion of the self, Ismael follows and perhaps extends Dennett (the exegetical question is acknowledged to be tricky) in describing it as an ongoing, constantly updated self-representation, one that includes a constantly revised representation of its own past. (Various philosophers describe that wing of the self-representation as a 'narrative,' but I've never met anyone willing and able to explain what they meant by that, and I'm going to avoid the term myself.) Ismael observes that this much overhead is not going to get paid for without a very good reason, and let me add into the mix what I take one of the most important reasons to be. We are keeping track of where we picked up—or how we generated—

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[1] "On Knowing One's Own Mind," in *The First-Person Perspective and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

various pieces of information, in the first place so that we can prevent them commingling indiscriminately in inference. I adopted p as a useful idealization for solving a particular class of problems; I need to tag it so that I do not agglomerate p with a claim from an incompatible idealization.[2] As a defense attorney, I ignore hearsay, even though as a private person, I find this piece of hearsay quite credible, and am correctly willing to act on it. As a philosopher, I have no opinions about the morality of some particularly egregious variety of businessmen's misbehavior, because there are no decent treatments of it in the professional literature; of course, as a layman, I am as outraged as anyone else. As some of these examples suggest, task specialization and the need to use approximately true representations are among the reasons for deploying the more complex tagging technique.

A further and related reason we keep track of the sources of our information is that the high-level and more sophisticated information management methods do not respect the experiential boundaries of the organism's informational envelope: since the envelope takes care of itself, if these techniques respected the experiential boundaries, there'd be no need to keep track. As a professional, I do not discriminate between information I have been taught in school, information I have acquired by reading the professional literature, and information I have acquired through observation. I do not normally remember whether I read it or I saw it: all of it belongs to the same informational envelope, which is itself carefully segregated from other pockets of information which I and others maintain and deploy.

It appears, then, that the more and less minimal notions of the self are aspects of two very different information management strategies, and these strategies seem to be at cross purposes. The hardwired architecture is implemented on the assumption that any information floating around in the top-level cognitive system whose borders are roughly those of the organism can be, for the purposes of inference, freely agglomerated. The flip side of that background assumption is that information floating around *outside* the boundaries of the organism needs qualitatively different and much more cautious processing. (You are to treat it as *experience*, and wonder carefully what it is telling you.)

The hugely complicated layers of self-modifying code piled on top of the hardwired base behave as though they were implemented on a startlingly different and seemingly incompatible assumption: that information floating around in that top-level cognitive system *cannot* be, for the purposes of

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[2]For examples, see Mark Wilson, *Wandering Significance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

inference, freely agglomerated. A related and subsidiary assumption is evidently that, for purposes of keeping track of inferentially agglomerable pools of information, the borders of the organism do not matter all that much. (Not nearly as much, say, as the borders of your applied mathematics problem, or the borders of your professional specialization.)

Marvin Minsky used to preach from the pulpit that if the theory of evolution is true, the human mind is almost certainly a kludge. If the sketch I have just given—of cognitive strategies that underwrite Ismael's more minimal and more ambitious selves—is anything like correct, Minsky was right, anyway about his conclusion. The two versions of the self do not fit together well or cleanly at all. And if that is the case, here is a cautionary conclusion: recall that gesture at philosophical modes of argumentation that hope to begin with the certainty adhering to the more minimal 'I', and come out the other end with exciting, ambitious results pertaining to the more contentful 'I'. Those forms of argument can be expected to founder on the mismatch between the intelligible and the empirical selves.