The Self: An Argument

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I asked my sister to look in the mirror, a thing that humans often do. When she did so, I asked her what she saw. She said: "myself." I asked her what her "self" was, and all she could do was point to herself, indicating her "self," and then point to me, indicating the discrepancy between her "self" and my "self"; it was very much a "Me Jane, You Tarzan" moment. Naturally, she eventually got frustrated and walked away angrily, but her frustration left me with an important set of philosophical questions. Why *do* so many refer to their "selves" without a proper definition for what they're referring to? Is it, perhaps, because we don't really know what the "self" is? Well, what *is* it?

To answer this, I first wondered what makes one person different from another person; I did this because, ultimately, when one indicates a "self" she is indicating a person. A self cannot be floating around aimlessly, but is rather always associated with a particular body that defines herself with such a thing—a "self." The origin of this "self" comes from the fact that we do a lot in life: we eat, we wake up, we walk, we dance . . . what *don't* we do? In these terms, it is pretty clear that our bodies do the doing; but there is more to life than this. Life is an experience, which means that we not only act, but we think and perceive and feel. While there are parts of our bodies that help us do these things, like eyes and ears, all they do is relay sensory information over to our brains, which then process it. Because of our bodies and the brains that are encapsulated in them, we have experience—but still, to have experience we have to have consciousness. And consciousness is the only thing that has yet to be explained by science the way our bodies and brains have already been. This is what my sister meant when she was distinguishing her "self" from my "self"—although we both have bodies and brains that function in much the same way, we do not share an identical consciousness *because* we have separate bodies, completely different containers for our experiences. Just like a "self," a consciousness can't be floating around like a dent with no car; it has to have a bodily vessel. Thus, for an experience to happen, there has to be someone there to experience it! So we use the term "the self" as a way of creating a narrative for our conscious experiences.

Furthermore, the reason we cling to and are so comfortable with the constant reference to "the self" is because it is in our human nature to create wholes. If I draw three black circles on a page, with each circle having an equally sized slice cut out of it, and I position the circles so that all of them are directly facing the center of the page with respect to their missing slices, we illusively see a white triangle present—in other words, we fill in the gaps. We create a triangle where, in reality, there is only an impression of it. In the same way, our concept of the "self" is an illusion, our attempt to piece together the various parts of ourselves, to encapsulate them all in one thing. We throw around the word as if it is a physical thing we can touch, like the brain, but it isn't—it's beyond that. When people say "the self," they might really mean the brain, the body that holds it, *and* all of the experiences they've had through both—once again, it comes down to consciousness, the culmination of all of these things. So, since no two people's consciousness are one and the same, no two selves are one and the same. In this respect, "the self" is not so much an illusion as it is a *misnomer*. Luckily, however, we have philosophers, who, as Wittgenstein said, are the unspoken janitors of the world, taking on the job of cleaning up after our dirty linguistic habits.