

## Fragmented Consciousness and Sense of Self

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Philosophy Blog

Stimulus:

The 2013 video game "Deadpool" follows the humorous and irreverent anti-hero Deadpool (Wade Wilson). The game, with frequent fourth wall breaks and self-referential humor, is built around Wilson's own self-awareness of being in his own video game. In a cutscene, a man from the future, Cable, seeks Wilson's exceptional powers to stop Mister Sinister from using DNA from mutant superheroes to create an army of supersoldiers. Wilson's powers came from a government experiment that promised to cure his terminal cancer. As a result of the experiment, Wilson's body cells mutated to constantly kill his rapidly advancing cancer in a continuous cycle, giving him accelerated healing and enhanced strength and immortality, but also numerous mental disorders, namely dissociative identity disorder (DID) and a grotesque scarred appearance. After a period of struggle, Wilson eventually embraces these traits. Wilson's resultant personalities and identities are prominent in the cutscene, in which Wilson's various personalities argue in first person plural. Some are bored by Cable's request, and others explicitly encourage Wilson to listen due to its significance as a plot device. Wilson ultimately shoots himself, unable to bear his boredom, but wakes up, healed, with a note containing Cable's instructions. Cable ultimately helps Wilson to calm his impulsive nature and to value the importance of patience and selflessness.

Essay:

The 2013 video game cutscene offers a glimpse into the complexity of Wilson's character and raises profound questions about the nature of personal identity and unified consciousness. Beneath the surface of irreverent humor, fourth-wall-breaking antics, and captivating unpredictable nature lies a deeper philosophical question: how do Deadpool's multiple

personalities and dissociative identity disorder impact his sense of self, identity, and consciousness? Through his ever-changing personalities and body composition— does he retain the same sense of self? Is his consciousness unified or is it fragmented by dissociation? What are the ethical implications of experimentally altering Wilson’s sense of self? In this essay, I will investigate the philosophical implications of Deadpool's multiple disorders, and through this inquiry, I will argue that a person's sense of self and personal identity remains intact even when their consciousness is fragmented and divided as the basis for sense of self is not inherent. I will consider the neuroscience basis for unified consciousness, the aesthetics of human consciousness, and how multiple personalities affect sense of self and unified consciousness, gaining a deeper understanding of the impacts of biological and psychosocial factors on personal identity and consciousness.

The first step of my inquiry will be in tackling the concept of unified consciousness, wherein a noteworthy counter argument can be made. Kant discusses ways in which divided attention and consciousness can lead to a loss of agency and a weakening of the self. This argument would mean a unified consciousness is necessary for one to not only have free will, but to also exercise it because of the disconnect from one’s values and desires that a fragmented consciousness would sow.<sup>1</sup> Superficially, this argument seems intuitive. Nietzsche argues however, that the will is not a stable and unchanging force, saying, ”The ‘inner world’ is full of phantoms and will-o’-the-wisps: the will is one of them. The will no longer moves anything, hence does not explain anything either — it merely accompanies events; it can also be absent.”<sup>2</sup> If the self was necessarily unified in order to have a concrete definition identity, individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 1724-1804. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Cambridge, UK ; New York :Cambridge University Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Edited by Robert C. Holub, Translated by Michael A. Scarpitti, Penguin Classics, 2013.

would be limited to a single dimension of existence. In accordance with Nietzsche's perspective, the doctrine of the superiority of a unified self is alarming as it suggests that humans should rather be complex and ever changing to avoid being reduced to a single, boring entity. In this viewpoint, fragmentation is a strength upon which consciousness subsists. Wilson's multiple conversion personalities perfectly exemplifies this perspective, as it allows him from being minimized to a boring entity. If his sense of self is an external definition, independent of the "inner world," then Wilson's many personalities would not undermine his determination of his sense of self, only enhance it.

To that end, it is possible to see a parallel between Nietzsche's rejection of a stable and unified self and Wilson's multifaceted and fragmented consciousness. Fabian Niecieza writes, "Deadpool's consciousness is a twisted maze of conflicting thoughts and emotions. He's a product of his traumatic past, and this is reflected in his scarred and enigmatic appearance. Rather than trying to hide or suppress his fractured consciousness, however, Wilson embraces it, using it to his advantage and becoming a symbol of individualism and personal empowerment." From the perspective of aesthetics, Wilson is seen as exemplifying the Nietzschean idea that fragmentation of consciousness can express individualism and ownership over one's identity. This expression of individualism and ownership is necessary in formulating a sense of self. Wilson's multiple personalities are a necessary component of how he expresses his individualism which is in turn a critical part of his character in a self-aware narrative. Without the fragmentation of his consciousness, he would not be able to reach this greater sense of self. Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Representation," echoes the importance of embracing perspective and experiences to achieve a sense of transcendence.<sup>3</sup> Wilson is able to transcend the limitations of his appearance to achieve a higher aesthetic experience that allows him to achieve

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<sup>3</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur, et al. *The World as Will and Representation*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.

a sense of unity and fulfillment. By achieving a higher aesthetic experience, one is able to have a deeper understanding and appreciation for their own identity rather than a lack of consistency and coherence as would be suggested by Kant.

The question of if there is multiplicity of consciousness has raised ongoing controversy. Some experts feel that DID's behavioral dissociation would result in an impaired sense of self because of the brain's delegation of tasks to various parts of the brain, others would argue the opposite.<sup>4</sup> This has merely come from results from study of brain bisection and split brain patients. From the results of a change blindness experiment, Dennett concluded that information is not taken into one unified consciousness, rather a collection of parallel mental processes that form a web of information processing.<sup>5</sup> Dennet says that though there is a multiplicity of consciousness whether individuals have DID or not, Dennet contends that the sense of self is from a "center of gravity" that unifies all personalities into one to form the sense of self as a kind of illusory unified consciousness.<sup>6</sup> This center of gravity fully encompasses the varying personalities of an individual, and is capable of change over time depending on individuals experiences. In Wilson's case, his various personalities are co-conscious to his experiences, and contribute to a greater center of gravity. As such, Dennet would contend that rather than Wilson having an incoherent sense of self, that he has a more complex and fluid sense of self that he creates.

Existentialists would agree that Wilson's fragmented construction yields a stoic sense of self. Sartre in particular, whose philosophy holds that humans have no predetermined sense of self, would say that we must create and shape our identities through actions and choices. This

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<sup>4</sup> Brook, Andrew, and Paul Raymont. "The Unity of Consciousness." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 19 May 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-unity/#DisIdenDiso>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Dennett, Daniel C. (1989). *The origins of selves*. *Cogito* 3 (3):163-173.

would counter any assertion that a sense of self is inherent.<sup>7</sup> Descartes's famous quote "cogito, ergo sum" states that thoughts prove one's own existence. He also took up the stance that the mind is unified, because anything material has parts, ergo the mind cannot be; we can now disprove this.<sup>8</sup> Because selfhood needn't be inherent, rather a perpetually dynamic process influenced by experience, a sense of self is not predetermined and static. Because Wilson's personalities are constantly changing as a result of his constantly changing body, it satisfies the requirement of having a dynamic sense of self that continually builds. Hume's ideas on the refutation of unity of consciousness are also notable as he explores the notion of a fixed or enduring self as well. Calling consciousness just a "bundle of different perceptions," Hume also supports the notion that there is no overarching unity of the perceptions that dictates sense of self.<sup>9</sup> So even though Wilson develops his Dissociative Identity Disorder as a result of the experimentation on his body, it would be a part of his experience and merely become a component of his existing sense of self. This further highlights the fluidity and complexity of the human identity.

Now, if sense of self is experiential and predicated on interactions with the environment, meaningful relationships with others is necessary in the development of a sense of self. Without any relationships, it would be difficult to create a complex human sense of self with merely non-human external stimuli and experiences. We would not be able to define these non-human learnings as a sense of self as we define it. People define themselves in relation to others. Sartre would also agree, taking up the stance that the man must make something of himself for others as

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<sup>7</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Translated by Hazel Estella Barnes, 2nd ed., Routledge, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Brook, Andrew, and Paul Raymont. "The Unity of Consciousness." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 19 May 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-unity/#DissIdenDiso>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

a social being.<sup>10</sup> Relationships yield a complete sense of self with unity and fulfillment, as Schopenhauer spoke about.<sup>11</sup> With the opportunity for self-discovery that relationships provide, individuals may become more aware of their own beliefs, values, and individuality, yielding a more nuanced understanding of their own identity. We see Wilson accomplish this in “Deadpool” when Cable teaches him the value of sacrifice and selflessness as well as patience and planning.

However, to allow individuals to develop their sense of self by interaction with the environment and others, they must possess the freedom to do so. One prominent case in which lack of freedom infringes upon sense of self is demonstrated by prisoners held in long-term solitary confinement. Individuals who are confined for long periods of time experience a decreased sense of social connectedness and self-identity. One could argue that Wilson’s immortality could provide a barrier of confinement for him. Nagel, Glover, and Fischer contend that for those who are immortal, life would become dull and tedious.<sup>12</sup> Wilson’s confinement is a source of conflict as he struggles with existentialism and nihilism. This sentiment is echoed in the myth of Tithonus, who was granted immortality by the gods and ultimately begged for release from his endless life. It could be argued that the finite nature of human life is what gives meaning and purpose. But if Wilson can certainly ensure avoidance of boredom and ennui by seeking eudaimonia, is he safe? While it is difficult to make a conclusive assertion, if Wilson’s perpetual self-discovery by way of his constantly changing personalities, he will have perpetual eudaimonia. In this case, Wilson retains his sense of freedom and is free to explore different aspects of himself to continue to build upon his sense of self.

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Translated by Carol Macomber, Yale University Press, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> *The World as Will and Representation* (n3)

<sup>12</sup> Luper, Steven. “Death.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, 25 Aug. 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/death/>.

My stimulus from “Deadpool” raises significant questions about the nature of personal identity, consciousness, and the impacts of biological and psychosocial factors on sense of self. Through an investigation of the philosophical implications of Deadpool's multiple disorders, this essay has argued that a person's sense of self and personal identity remains intact even when their consciousness is fragmented and divided. While some argue that a unified consciousness is necessary for free will and exercising agency, fragmentation can actually express individualism and ownership over one’s identity. Moreover, perspectives from numerous thinkers suggest that the sense of self is not derived from a single, unified consciousness but rather fragmented consciousness and parallel mental processes that come together to form the sense of self. This theory applies to individuals with DID and those without, indicating that sense of self is not necessarily impacted by the fragmentation of consciousness. This essay has also demonstrated that the basis for a sense of self is not inherent but rather formed through the experiences and perspectives that one accumulates throughout their life, a view substantiated by the aesthetic and psychosocial perspectives on consciousness. Deadpool's character serves as a reminder that our sense of self is not fixed, but rather a constantly evolving and complex entity shaped by our experiences, perspectives, and relationships.



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