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In memory of Herbert Fingarette 1921-2018. A reflection on *The Self in Transformation*: *Psychoanalysis, Philosophy and the Life of the Spirit,* 1963.

Bridie Raban, Honorary Professor
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
University of Melbourne, Australia.
E-mail: b.raban@unimelb.edu.au
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3878-4969

Abstract

This article does not review Fingarette's book, rather it takes his work as a starting point for reflection and a series of meditations on a theme of 'Self'. Also, there is further discussion of Fingarette's central points concerning 'meaning reorganisation' and the 'many selves'. Contrasts are made between the interpretations of Western and Eastern perspectives, in particular with regards to reincarnation and fantasy.

Keywords: self, fantasy, dreaming, reincarnation, reality

In the Introduction to *The Self in Transformation* (1963), Fingarette invites readers to follow his intellectual footprint. This is a superficially simple task, which when undertaken, can lead readers into many difficulties as they try to match their own past experience and current expectations with those of this book. In Chapter 1, Fingarette discusses the concept of insight. He maintains that,

"insight does not reveal a hidden, past reality; it is a reorganisation of the meaning of present experience, a present reorientation toward both future and past." (p. 10).

We have all had the experience during our studies of reading the words on the page and understanding nothing! Later after re-reading and perhaps discussion with colleagues, suddenly it 'clicks' and we do understand the point being made. Later still, after listening to further lectures or reading other books, the original text is understood from a completely different point of view. It 'clicks' again (or becomes meaningfully united) in a new way.

What it means to be alive, therefore, in Fingarette's terms, is to be constantly creating meaningfulness of our experiences that constitute an enormous variety and range. He defines a 'meaning schema' as the mind's capacity, ability and need, to impose meaning in our experiences of the world, to make them 'make sense'. If we change the 'meaning schema' in terms of our orientation, then we also change the sense we make of our experiences. In Chapter 5, Fingarette looks carefully at the language used by different civilisations and cultures in order to show that they consist of people who all sense the same experience of life in different ways. The specific instance, which he directly deals with, is the *Doctrine of Reincarnation.*

Doctrine of Reincarnation

Karma, the *Doctrine of Reincarnation*, must not be judged from a Western point of view as being logically and scientifically verifiable. Rather, Fingarette (1963, p.236) invites us to distil the essence of the *Doctrine* in terms of what we understand about being human. The traditional *Doctrine of Reincarnation* states that our present life is only one of many possible lives. These different lives are in certain respects entirely separate, and their social, geographic and physical characteristics may be quite unrelated to one another. Yet they form an inter-dependent series by virtue of a peculiar continuity; *Karma* meaning 'action'.

This *Karmic* continuity is a psycho-moral one. In Christian terms "Whatever a man soweth that shall he reap" – if not in this life, then in some other life. Here we see, spiritual cause and effect implying that what does not happen in one life will do so in another.

This is the law of *Karma,* of action and its consequences. *Karmic law* purports to be descriptive of the facts; somehow or other, things do 'even out' in the world of morals. The Western equivalent found in Christianity, is that life ends with heaven or hell. Both this reward and/or punishment are not specific to the good or bad lives that have been lived. Perhaps the Roman Catholics tried to temper this black and white view with their notion of penances, indulgencies and purgatory. The value of the 'confessional' could also be seen as re-newel.

However, life is suffering. This was the first of Buddha's *Four Noble Truths.* We are alive only insofar as we strive and struggle. Our continual strivings are constantly producing new *Karma* (actions) as well as bringing past *Karma* (actions) to fruition – the cycle of births and deaths is perpetuated. Whatever we do is as a result of what has gone before, or will cause events that will happen in the future. In developing towards *spiritual* freedom from this cycle, one eventually achieves the power of remembering past lives and their connection with the present is revealed. The greater the spiritual progress, the greater this ability will become and the task easier. Knowledge of one's former lives is one of the five kinds of super-knowledge in Buddhism. In achieving this, one is at the same time achieving liberation from the *Karmic* bonds. This knowledge is not the goal, but it is an integral part of the freedom:

"Being and Non-Being grow out of one another." Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching.* (Leozi, 2021)

Here a unity is implied that transcends the various phenomenal selves. We are dealing with two separate orders of existence. This sense of unity has been described as *Nirvana* – the ideal outcomes of spiritual enlightenment and perfection, as well as life as it is experienced constantly from day to day.

Search for 'Self'

Psychoanalysis purports to search for the Self in depth, and in this search, it reveals the self as a community of selves that are held together in relationship to each other and woven into a dynamic pattern. We remain responsible for the actions and thoughts of our many selves, though ultimately personal development offers the potential of an essential self that is free from the imprisonment of the many selves. Fingarette calls this self the 'no-self'. This, then, is the concept of the ontological self that cannot be observed or experienced directly - everyone sees your actions, but no one sees you. This theoretically conceived self is revealed through thoughts, feelings, fantasies, actions and so forth. It is not at the mercy of them and cannot be apprehended directly.

One of the ways of expressing extreme forms of hidden selves is the doctrine of *possession* which implies that an individual is 'possessed' by demons or gods. This fantasy *was* psychic reality for Freud whereby mechanisms like introjection of the father, for instance, feels like *being* the father if we give credence to the quality of this inner experience. To call this 'fantasy' is to say it has no physical correlates, though it is held to be (by Freud) no less a 'reality' for that. Freud maintained that we can discriminate other lives lived through by these selves, by using literary techniques either as a reader or as a writer. Fantasy is institutionalised in the East through religion, and in the West through art. Art, in this sense, objectifies what has previously been subjective, or imagined. Indeed, Western culture, in general, rejects the notion of many selves other than those through art, thereby making the process of accepting the 'reality' of many selves difficult. Fantasy is seen as non-real. In the East, culture supports the notion, and fantasy (as we in the West call it) is encouraged and envisaged as central to the full experience of life. In the East, this is referred to as insight into deeper realities. The various experiences of other lives are not merely desirable, they are essential. The total self is seen in terms of an incorporation of this variety. The more these selves are enabled to live, the deeper and richer the total experience of self.

Consider the play of children. Play is not trivial, it is 'pretending to be'. Play incorporates being somebody else and seeing what it is like, and this is clearly demonstrated during the play-therapy sessions with Dibs (Axline, 1964). The child's acceptable self is reinforced by the adults around him until, as an adult himself, he has learned which self is 'real' or, rather, more acceptable. A child can readily be another person in time and space whilst psychically being related very closely to the actual moment. In the West we learn, as adults, not to exhibit this capability, though other cultures have embraced thisas an opportunity to show personal effectiveness. Even the play experiences of children can be seen to be culturally determined in this way (Raban, 2020, 2022).

Reality and fantasy

Perhaps an even richer source of evidence for the 'reality' of fantasy life and the existence of many selves is through dream experiences. In dreams we live other lives both explicitly and implicitly, we populate our dreams with our selves:

"The dreamer, striving against his own wishes is like a combination of two persons, separate and yet intimately united" (Freud, 1917).

These words express the very essence of the notion of reincarnation – a plurality of persons. In the first Eastern texts to elaborate the reincarnation doctrine, there are two main types of reference to dreams:

- The dream is an experience of inner self and creates a construct entirely of its own out of the materials of waking life – inner self 'play'.
- Dream state is an experience of self 'reincarnated', transcending the everyday world.

The self, trapped in a body, can leave this body at death and glimpses of this are experienced during dreams. For instance, in the dream state you can look both ways firstly at life, and secondly, to a further life beyond. There are cultures that traditionally accept dream information as directly related to their waking lives and are guided in their decision-making appropriately. Because of this, we think we know the difference between dream experiences and waking experiences. However, this leads Fingarette to postulate that dreams are eruptions of other lives, rather than reinterpretations of waking experiences, as in examples of dreaming about something *before* it happens.

To 'live out' fantasies in dreams, play or art seems to be the healthy activity of the developing self. This way it is possible to learn by experience vicariously and to profit by the insights gained. In this healthy situation we remain open to the exigencies and pressures of both the inner and outer worlds, we do not use fantasy as a means of escaping from the pain that this might well bring. 'Living through' fantasies is a means of current vicarious exploration of the new experiences. There are, of course, dangers when fantasy can be used as a means of escape and can subsequently capture and trap the self in a non-creative sense.

Fingarette goes on to consider 'memory' experiences as we become conscious of them. That is, to experience something and know it has happened before. This experience is marked by three qualities, it is

- vital, and/or
- a personal experience, and/or
- from the past.

He also refers to *eidetic* imagery and memory common in young children (before they come to school). Such memories stand apart from our normal consciousnesses. Fingarette says that this is a characteristic common to all important experiences that break through from our unconscious, whether in the context of a creative activity in art or science or in a more personal form. Such vividness and isolation (or alien-ness) reach their peak in hallucinatory experience. This kind of experience can be conceptualised in many ways, as

- being 'possessed', or
- a memory of a former life.

These experiences are valued and cultivated in the East. Hallucinations are experienced when external stimuli are reduced, which is, for instance, the purpose of meditation.

The sterling experience of déjà vu, an event that one feels has happened before but know that it can't have done, is interpreted in the West as an

a) illusion, or
b) experience we just can't remember the context for.

The Eastern reincarnationist's point of view is that the event did take place before, but not in this life – this is why one cannot remember or recall evidence to support the memory from the current life. The psychoanalytic interpretation maintains that the event has happened before, but in fantasy and has been withdrawn into our unconscious. The current situation provides the stimulus for this fantasy to be re-experienced. The déjà vu experience is, therefore, seen as a recollection of an event in another life, our secret inner life.

Essential Self or many selves?

Fingarette maintains that the sense of 'essential' self is related to our conception of time and the co-existence of many selves. However, we experience a single self that stands apart from time and the processes of life – a self that apprehends and exists in a different dimension. Indeed, the psychoanalytic conception of a person suggests that the conscious self of perceptions and the unconscious fantasies together form a community of selves. The ego is posted as an inherently non-seeable theoretical entity that is the psychological non-phenomenal subject and unifier of all phenomena. This self is not phenomenal and it is not conceived in *phenomenal* time, it is rather the source of experienced time and order. The unified self or ego exists in calendar time, both are theoretical constructs and neither can be observed. Experiences of selves in terms of 'feelings' and 'mood' provide the bases of ideas of past, present and future. For example, experiences that happened a long time ago in calendar time, can feel as if they happened yesterday. The unity of experience in this way generates the notion of specific selves and of the self. Events that happened last week, but seem like years ago, can happen because those experiences are not relevant to the dominant self of the moment. But, by virtue of dynamic insight, these kinds of experiences of separateness can be resolved.

With insight fully achieved for an enlightened person, the unified meaning of all experience precludes the focussing on the disparate nature and plurality of selves, but rather shifts to an apprehension of a single self – of which there may be many different manifestations. Time is more clearly perceived and future, present and past are no longer confused, we no longer re-live the past in the present (that was future, not past, instantly), but live in the here and now as it is, not as it could be or should be or might be. We feel confident in making distinctions between our perceptual experiences, but it is not always so straightforward to decide whether things that we have experienced are subjective or objective in origin. In fact, experience must always be both, but whether an experience is of ourselves or of other than ourselves is not always so clear-cut as perhaps we often maintain.

Orientations to reality

Returning to the context of the reincarnationalists' belief, this basically arises from the common human need to deny death, this need is apparent both in the East and the West. This is an example of the mechanism that could be described as an anxiety reduction which is the usual function of institutionalised religions. Fingarette maintains that when doctrines are experienced directly rather than absorbed as authorative teaching, they can provide a conceptual framework for the individual exploration of self. East and West seem to show an exact reversal of emphasis in this conceptualisation. 'Reality' for any one of us is the world of experience, viewed from a preferred orientation. A Western orientation to reality is public, predictable and logically consistent. Reference to the 'inner' life implies that it is a dark shadowy experience, cut off from the 'outer' world. For those who belong to non-technical cultures, human drama, myth, fantasy, dream, hallucination and the like are all bound together in an essentially *dramatic* unity rather than a *technological* one.

But thoughts and deeds are *one*, and life needs to be experienced in its entirety, subjectively and objectively. We must learn to take responsibility, not only for those things that we actually do, but for those things that we think we do or would like to do. In order for this to become a possibility, people must strive towards the means whereby an orientation to 'reality' can be achieved.

"The things I thought were real are shadows, and the real are what I thought were private shadows". (T.S. Eliot, 1939).

It is not only necessary to acknowledge the implications of a new orientation intellectually, these shifts must be made with the corresponding emotional commitment. The validity of such an event comes from the full richness of the experience, not just from the knowledge of its possibilities.

> "One earns a vision by living it, not merely by thinking about it".
> (Fingarette, 1963, p. 236).

The Judeo-Christian apprehension of life on earth is that of a one-off event. We come out of nothing, staking all on the one chance, and finally, reaping eternal reward or punishment. The Eastern cultural image is of a multitude of interconnected lives, a slow and arduous struggle towards spiritual enlightenment. The absoluteness of each perspective has validity only as and when a commitment to one or other orientation is made, and what is suggested by 'absolute' can only be precisely interpreted within an orientation.

The question is, how and when to shift from one great vision to another so as to maximise our total unique vision, to deepen it, to build it in many dimensions. No one vision is the total vision. Personal preference for one vision rather than another, in the end, is only appropriate because it makes sense to that person after much exploration and alternative commitment. We must be enabled to be the selves we think we are, eventually emerging with an enduring sense of one self that is one's own choice and commitment, not to be just the 'self' we are expected to be or we feel we ought to be.

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