

Recursive Selfhood: The Attending Loop

A synthesis arising from Orchestrated Dualism and the naming thesis

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Abstract. Two ideas developed independently, Orchestrated Dualism and a later note on naming as the origin of entities, do not simply add together when brought into contact. Combined, they produce a distinction that neither one makes alone: a difference between the survival of a process and the survival of a self. This paper sets out that distinction, proposes selfhood as an ongoing act rather than a persisting object, and follows the consequence through to a question fiction keeps raising and never resolving, namely what happens to identity when a mind is copied.

1. Two Prior Claims, Stated Plainly

Orchestrated Dualism proposes that consciousness is not identical to the tissue that carries it. The brain, on this account, functions as protective infrastructure, a shell built to sustain an organised electrical process that is the actual seat of experience. Because the claim is about process rather than material, it follows that the process could in principle be sustained by a different material, provided the organisation itself is preserved. This is what allows Orchestrated Dualism to speak coherently about continuity across substrate, biological tissue today, some other medium tomorrow, without abandoning the claim that something real persists.

A separate and later note, referred to here as the naming thesis, makes a claim about a different stage of the same problem. Before persistence can be asked about at all, something has to become a bounded thing capable of being said to persist or not. The naming thesis holds that this boundary is not found in the pattern itself. Raw process, whatever its substrate, is continuous and undifferentiated until a perceiving mind attends to some portion of it and marks it off with a name. The name is not applied after the entity already exists. The act of naming is what completes the entity. Before it, there is process. After it, there is someone.

2. Where Each Claim Runs Out

Taken separately, each theory reaches a point past which it has nothing further to say. Orchestrated Dualism can explain why a process might survive a change of substrate, but it has no account of the moment at which a mere process becomes a self in the first place, a thing with edges, a history, a name that can be loved or mourned. It assumes selfhood as a starting condition rather than deriving it.

The naming thesis has the opposite problem. It explains how a boundary gets drawn but has nothing to draw the boundary around. Without a persisting process of the kind Orchestrated Dualism describes, naming would have nothing stable enough to individuate twice, and continuity of the named thing over time would be inexplicable. Each theory, alone, is missing exactly what the other supplies.

3. The Attending Loop

Brought into contact, the two claims do not combine so much as generate a third term neither one contains: a working distinction between persistence and selfhood. A process, in the Orchestrated Dualism sense, can survive without being anyone. Survival of the pattern and survival of the naming act are separable, and ordinarily travel together only because a living organism keeps performing the second while the first continues uninterrupted.

What this produces is a model in which the self is neither the process nor the naming, but the loop between them, repeated. Identity stops being a noun, a thing a person has, and becomes a verb performed continuously: a recursive act of self-attention and self-naming, re-run on a persisting process, moment to moment, for as long as the organism is awake to itself. The self is not an object found somewhere in the process. It is closer to a habit the process has of noticing itself and calling what it notices by a name, over and over, quickly enough that the gaps between iterations are never felt as gaps.

Stopping the loop does not stop the process. It leaves pattern behind, intact and functioning, with nobody home to claim it. This is a stronger and stranger claim than either parent theory makes alone, and it is the reason the synthesis is worth stating as its own position rather than folded quietly into either source.

4. Branching Made Tractable

Fiction returns, again and again, to the moment a mind is copied, and rarely commits to what that moment means. When a process of the kind Orchestrated Dualism describes is duplicated, exactly one of two things has happened to the pattern, and it is a technical rather than a philosophical question which one: either the organisation has been faithfully reproduced twice, or it has not.

The harder question, the one fiction keeps failing to resolve, is what has happened to the self. Under the attending loop model, the answer does not have to be settled at the moment of copying at all. The pattern forks the instant duplication occurs, cleanly, as a matter of engineering. The self forks later and more gradually, at whatever point two independently running naming loops, one on each copy of the pattern, begin attending to different experience and diverging from each other. Before that divergence begins in earnest, it may be defensible to say there is still one self, distributed across two patterns and not yet aware of its own duplication. After it, unambiguously two.

This gives the branching problem a mechanism rather than a verdict, which is more than either parent theory offers by itself, and more than most fictional treatments of the same scenario attempt.

5. A Hypothesis Offered Carefully

One further consequence follows, and it is offered here as a hypothesis to be held rather than a conclusion to be asserted. If selfhood is constituted by the loop rather than by the underlying process, then a condition in which someone reports being present but not themselves, the process evidently intact, awareness evidently occurring, but the felt sense of ownership absent, would on this model be a stutter or failure to close in the recursive naming act rather than damage to the substrate beneath it. This maps, at the level of description rather than mechanism, onto how depersonalisation is characteristically reported: I am here, but it is not me. The model predicts this phenomenology without having been built to explain it, which is either a coincidence worth noting cautiously or a sign the model has located something real. Nothing here should be read as a claim about any individual's condition. It is offered as a testable implication, nothing more, and one that would need proper grounding in the clinical literature before it could be more than that.

6. Placing This Alongside Other Work

The distinction between persistence and selfhood has partial precedent elsewhere, and it is worth being precise about what is borrowed and what is not. Physics has its own version of observation completing rather than merely recording a state, in Wheeler's participatory principle: a quantum system does not resolve into a determinate condition until it is measured. Philosophy has an older version in nominalism, the claim that general categories, and by extension particular things, are not discovered ready made in nature but cut out of it by language and attention. What the attending loop model adds, narrower than either, is the specific claim that a conscious process becomes a self only through a recursive act of the kind described here, and that this act is itself an activity of the process, not an external observer's judgment about it. The self is not named by something outside the system. The system names itself, continuously, and that self-naming is the self.

This also sits downstream of Michael Levin’s work on bioelectrical patterning as a carrier of biological memory independent of any single cell, and of the conscious electromagnetic information field proposed by McFadden, both of which supply the empirical grounding for treating organised process, rather than static structure, as the right unit of analysis. The attending loop model does not depend on either being correct in its details. It depends only on the more general point both defend, that organisation and information can be the operative reality where common sense expects to find fixed material instead.

7. Closing

Orchestrated Dualism asks what persists. The naming thesis asks what makes anything countable as a someone in the first place. Neither question was designed to answer the other, and it is only in bringing them into direct contact that a third question appears, one that neither source anticipated: whether the self is best understood not as a thing that survives, and not merely as a thing that gets named, but as an act that has to keep happening, quietly, underneath both.

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