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Is Anyone on First? Sport, Agency, and the Divided Self

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Biography

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Abstract

The comedy team of Abbott and Costello performed a comic routine widely known as “Who’s on First?”. The skit exploits equivocation: specifically, use of words like “Who” “What” and “Why” as interrogatives, on the one hand, and as names of baseball fielders, on the other. This leads to dizzying, and to many, hilarious confusion. What is not disputed, however, is that someone is on first. In light of challenges from philosophy, the cognitive sciences, and personal testimonies this assumption can no longer merely be accepted at face value. At the very least, the response to “Who’s on First?” has become complex. Is someone on first? Or is it the case that no one is on first? Or are there perhaps many on first? These responses call into question the unity of the self, assumptions about human agency, and putative bases for ascribing praise and blame. I explain these challenges and examine their implications for sport. I argue that there are practical implications for both coaching and playing sports.

Keywords

Self, Sport, Coach, Athlete, Modularity, Split-Brain, Dissociative-Identity-Disorder, Plurals

Introduction

Beginning in the 1930s, the popular duo of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello performed a comedy routine widely known as “Who’s on First?” (Francis 2016). The skit exploits equivocation by using words such as “Who” “What” and “Why” as interrogatives, on the one hand, and as names of baseball fielders, on the other. This leads to dizzying and, to many listeners and observers, hilarious confusion. What is not disputed, however, is that *some definite one* is on first, whoever that might be. Many endorse this view, and indeed this is perhaps the default view for most of us in our unreflective moments.

But in light of challenges from philosophy and the cognitive sciences, including psychology and neuroscience, as well as personal testimonies, this assumption can no longer merely be accepted at face value. The standard, intuitive view that matches one body with one self has been variously called into question. At the very least, the answer to the question “Who’s on first?” has become more complex.

The challenges come from different directions. On the one hand, there is a spectrum of views that variously challenge the unity of the self, in some cases threatening the dissolution of the self, and in other cases the proliferation of selves. These challenges are relatively “weak” or “strong” in terms of contesting commonly held views. Among other issues, we face claims about “the modularity of mind” (Fodor 1983), “the new unconscious” (Hassin, Uleman, and Bargh 2007; Bargh 2017), the fragmented self (Levy 2018), the situated self (Ross and Nisbett 2010), and assertions by individuals that their actions don’t always represent their **true** selves (Eagleman 2011, 101-104). The notion of dissociative identity disorder suggests that two or more distinct personalities may be associated with one body. Neuroscientists speak about competition within the brain (Eagleman 2011, 101–150). Split-brain studies pose questions about the number of consciousnesses supported by the brain.¹ And “plurals” tell us that many persons exist as a society that shares one body (Schechter 2020).

On the other hand, we find the view that the self or the “I” is in some sense an illusion—a useful “user-illusion” (Dennett² 2017, 335–370) perhaps, a “center of narrative gravity” (Dennett 2013, 333–340), or a “strange loop” (Hofstadter 2007). It is a powerful illusion that we cannot shed, but nevertheless an illusion. Who’s on first? The counterintuitive answer is that **no one** is on first—at least not in the sense depicted in the “manifest image,” “the world as it seems to us in everyday life,” as opposed to the “scientific image” (Dennett 2013, 69).³

These challenges variously call into question the existence or unity of the self, personal autonomy, other assumptions about human agency, and putative bases for ascribing praise and blame. Who or what is the real or authentic self? Where does the buck stop in terms of accountability? The task of sorting out this complicated array of issues and perspectives presents daunting challenges. The theoretical landscape suggests that the old debates about personal identity and personal responsibility may need reframing.

So, who’s on first? And why should we care? Depending on the theoretical perspective that is adopted, the answer to the question, “Who’s on first?” may be someone, many, or no one. I am I. “I” am we. “I” am not. Both the correct answer and our

1. See Schechter’s (2018) recent work on the topic.

2. With respect to methodological considerations, see Daniel C. Dennett (2003; 2013, 341–346).

3. The distinction between the “scientific image” and the “manifest image” comes from Sellars (1962). See also Dennett (2013, 69–72).

assumed answer have practical implications for our lives in general, and specifically, for the world of sport. I provide no definitive answer to our question. However, in keeping with the sporting context of the “Who’s on First?” comedy routine, I argue in this paper that each option has implications for issues of blame, praise, and meritorious action in sport, as well as for aspiration to athletic greatness. Each option also adds complexity to the challenges of being a good coach, as well as a coachable athlete. And each option has potential ramifications for how fans might view and appreciate sport.

So, is anyone on first, and if so, who? Contrary to what the program hawker who greets you at the entrance to the ballpark would have you believe, your scorecard may not easily settle the answer to that question. Let us consider various options, some of which may overlap in certain respects.

II *Someone* is On First

Let us first consider the view that someone is on first, with an emphasis on *one*. This common view has a lengthy history. It is the view perhaps most associated with folk psychology in Western societies (though perhaps not universally), but its provenance is difficult to date. In early modern philosophy its most famous adherent was perhaps Descartes, who bequeathed his view, with all of its complications, to the subsequent history of philosophy.

In the *Meditations* (Descartes, [1641] 1993), Descartes announces that he is a “thinking thing” (e.g. 19, 51). That he thinks is indubitable, since, even when being deceived he must exist (Descartes [1641] 1993, 18). Being a thinking thing defines his essence. He has a body, but he is essentially a mind—an immaterial, indivisible mind (Descartes, [1641] 1993, 51, 56; Searle [2004], 8-11). This does not prevent the body and mind from interacting—with a special role given to the pineal gland (Descartes, [1649] 2021, 21–22)—though the question of how the mind and the body interact, given Descartes’ assumptions about each of them, has plagued philosophy ever since.

This thinking thing is his conscious self. So long as, and only so long as, it exists, Descartes exists (Searle 2004, 18).⁴ There is no room for unconscious mental states, which might undermine the unity of the self or otherwise complicate the picture. It is consciousness that occupies center stage (Searle 2004, 21).

4. The standard joke is that Descartes went into a bar for a drink. Afterwards the bartender asked him whether he would like another drink. Descartes replied, “I think not,” and poof, he disappeared.

Aspects of Descartes' view reverberate yet today in the popular imagination and manifest image, as well as in some philosophical accounts of the self, though with modifications. I am I. My experiences are filtered through a "dative of manifestation" (Sokolowski 2000, 65). My conscious self is the "driver's seat," though in more sophisticated version of this view, it may have to compete with unconscious impulses. The conscious self undergoes shifts in moods. It discovers that it has different sides. Sometimes I do not feel quite myself. I may be "off my game." At times the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak, and I may experience weakness of the will. I may feel pulled in different directions. But except in rare, pathological cases, there is an identity within a manifold (See Sokolowski 2000, e.g., 27–33). A sameness in difference persists. I am I, and as such, I am a responsible agent. While the self does not exemplify the attribute of divine simplicity, it displays a waxing and waning unity.

This view is economical. And when we apply it to the world of sport, it makes some things easier to understand and implement, some things more difficult, and others puzzling, if not incomprehensible.

In terms of coach-athlete interactions, it simplifies matters in some respects. A single self negotiates with another single self. Each self is perhaps complex, and sometimes obtuse, recalcitrant, or opaque, but an "I-Thou encounter," or a "fusion of horizons," is in principle possible. The coach must figure out what motivates the particular athlete, and the athlete must interpret and to some extent, assimilate the coach's viewpoint. There is mentorship, teaching and learning, and skill development as coach and athlete work toward common goals. There is also accountability on the part of both athlete and coach. The athlete is a responsible agent, as is the coach. Fans heap what is, from their perspective, merited praise and blame on the individual athlete and the coach.

The idea of coaching a team adds complexity to the picture, but not exponentially so. The task is to blend these individuals into an efficient and cohesive unit that works as a unity and engages in "team reasoning" (Papineau 2017, 131–144).⁵ With large squads and numerous assistant coaches, this becomes a more complex task. And yet there is often a seemingly significant degree of cohesiveness and coordinated effort.

As noted, this view, while not simple, is, in certain respects, simple relative to other possibilities. But it is opaque in other respects. How do I explain playing in the "zone," or how do I accomplish many athletic achievements while I am not conscious of how I am

5. It is said (see Lazenby 2014, 309) that Tex Winters, former assistant coach of the Chicago Bulls of the National Basketball Association, once told Michael Jordan following a game that "There's no I in *team*." Michael Jordan supposedly responded, "Yeah, but there is in *win*."

executing the skills? Why do the athlete's effort and desire wax and wane? Why does the athlete's commitment to training vary, and the lure of temptations and diversions differ according to context or social situation? Why is an athlete sometimes a team player while at other times selfish? Why does a coach blow up, only to experience regret? Why are athletes sometimes incomprehensible even to themselves when they exhibit lapses of judgment, succumb to choking, or otherwise have subpar performances? There are perhaps responses that are consistent with this approach. But the defenses may assume forms of self-transparency and unified agency that are difficult to reconcile with the scientific image. So, let us consider a different tack.

II No One is On First

The first answer to our question "Who's on first?" is that I am on first. To the contrary, the second response is that no one is on first—at least there is no self as traditionally understood. As we will see, this view is slippery, and as such difficult to hold within one's mental grasp. It consists of a corpus of views that stand in a family relationship of overlapping stances. Some are more radically deconstructionist than others. In each case, an illusion is exposed. One can point here to the Buddhist doctrine of "no self." Among Western philosophers, David Hume stated that when he cast a gaze inward, he did not discover a self, but rather only fleeting perceptions (Hume 1968, 239). Among other relevant thinkers under this large umbrella, we find Daniel Dennett, who speaks of the self both as a "user-illusion" (Dennett 2017, 335–370) and as a "center of narrative gravity" (Dennett 2013, 333–340). Dennett writes that "all of the work done by the imagined homunculus in the Cartesian theater has to be broken up and distributed around (in space and time) to lesser agencies in the brain" (Dennett 2017, 354). I also include Douglas Hofstadter's (2007) notion of the "I" as a "strange loop." Hofstadter writes: "An 'I' loop, like an audio feedback loop, is an abstraction—but an abstraction that seems immensely real, almost physically palpable..." (Hofstadter 2007, 180). According to Hofstadter "the 'I' [is] a hallucination perceived by a hallucination," or "a hallucination *hallucinated* by a hallucination" (Hofstadter 2007, 293). There is also Thomas Metzinger (2004), who in his book suggestively titled *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* tells us that

no such things as selves exist in the world: Nobody ever *was* or *had* a self. All that ever existed were self-models that could not be recognized as self-models. The phenomenal self is not a thing but a process—and

the subjective experience of *being someone* emerges if a conscious information processing system operates under a transparent model. (Metzinger 2004, 1)

Others who might be mentioned include Susan Blackmore (2017, 67–82); illusionists (Frankish 2017); Daniel Wegner (2002); Martha Farah and Andrea Heberlein (2010); and to some extent, Galen Strawson, whose “Transience View of the self” holds that “there are many short-lived or transient selves, if any at all” (Strawson 2009, 9). For our purposes, though, our guide will be the philosopher Neil Levy (2018).

Levy notes how some existentialists undercut the belief in objective values. For some this lent a certain bleakness to the world. However, Levy states that the view expressed by contemporary cognitive scientists is yet bleaker (Levy 2018, 111). Levy writes:

But existentialists remained confident that there was *someone*, an agent, who could be the locus of the choice we each confront. Contemporary cognitive science shakes our faith even in the existence of the agent. Instead, it provides evidence that seems to indicate that there is no one to choose values; rather, each of us is a motley of different mechanisms and processes, each of which lack the intelligence to confront big existential questions and each pulling in a different direction. (Levy 2018, 111).

Instead, we are each of us multiply divided minds, and much of our mind is opaque to introspection. These facts spell trouble for the claim that we choose our values freely; cognitive science threatens to dissolve the self and thereby the very agent who was supposed to do the choosing. (Levy 2018, 114).

Cognitive science lends support to the modularity of the mind and the view that these modules are “functionally discrete.” There is no CEO; rather there are only “unintelligent mechanisms” (Levy 2018, 115). Levy writes that “there may be a genuine case for thinking of behavior as driven by temporary or persisting coalitions of processes” (Levy 2018, 117).⁶

6. Levy contrasts the view of the mind that he is presenting with the account of the mind in folk psychology. He writes: “The account of the mind as modular is deeply at odds with our folk psychological conception of ourselves as unified beings, delegating top-down to constitutive mechanisms. Instead, it reveals each of us as a multiplicity; more community than a single organism. Worse, the community is fractured: our modules

Levy adduces varieties of evidence to support this thesis of the modularity of the mind. This includes double dissociations between processes that are suggestive of brain localization for specialized functions. Some of the evidence comes from the study of anomalous conditions. As an example, he discusses Capgras syndrome and *prosopagnosia*. Capgras syndrome is a condition in which, due to brain injury, a person fails to register the expected emotional response even though they recognize a face. The double dissociation is established with cases of *prosopagnosia*, in which the emotional reaction is intact, but the individual is unable to recognize faces (Levy 2018, 116).

As other evidence of “fractionation” and of modules with competing goals and values, Levy cites disinhibition displayed by dementia patients, individuals who exhibit anarchic hand syndrome, and cases of weakness of will (Levy 2018, 117).

Nevertheless, Levy does not totally abandon the notion of a self, but it is “an achievement and not a given” (Levy 2018, 121). Levy writes:

There is nevertheless a case for thinking that something like a self can be constituted out of this motley, a self with goals that it may pursue and which it may choose. We are limited and constrained beings, but we can impose a degree of unity on ourselves and a purpose on our lives. (Levy 2018, 121)

The modules may become functionally integrated as to form a single system that can be identified with the self (Levy 2018, 121–122). The self is “the entire collection of mechanisms” and is therefore not to be identified with consciousness acting as a CEO (Levy 2018, 117–118). In this view, the unity of the self is always a fragile accomplishment.

Clearly this view presents a complex picture. The athlete has competing modules that, to a greater or lesser extent, may cohere with one another. The same holds true for the coach. Within each athlete and coach there will be competing forces—a kind of internal athletic competition, requiring internal “team reasoning” (see Papineau 2017, 131–144). Somehow, this must all be welded into a cohesive team effort. Given this view, it is remarkable that we find consistency in athletes and coaches, and in their interactions, to the extent that we do.

This view has explanatory power. It accounts for much that transpires beneath the level of consciousness. It helps explain the double-mindedness of athletes and coaches

have different goals and different values, The fractionation may not be revealed by brain injury, but it also underlies everyday behavior” (Levy 2018, 118).

alike. It complicates the notion of loyalty in sport. And to the extent that we tie praise and blame to transparent choices made by conscious agents, the grounds and targets for these ascriptions are blurred.

There are various ways of looking at this view, depending on the degree of agency that we ascribe to modular processes and the degree to which they can be unified. Is there a self? Are there many selves? One's response may hinge on where one sets the threshold for agency.

Our third answer to the question *Who's on First?* is perhaps in some ways less ambiguous. Nevertheless, it poses its own puzzles.

III Many Are on First

There are remarkable, rare cases where it seems that multiple agents, rather than subpersonal modules, inhabit one body. The famous work by neuroscientists Roger Sperry and Michael S. Gazzaniga on so-called "split-brain" patients poses the issue in one way (See Gazzaniga 2016).⁷ The work involved the study of patients with intractable epilepsy whose condition was treated by severing the corpus callosum, a neural tract that serves as a major communications thoroughfare between the two hemispheres of the brain. By severing the corpus callosum, doctors are able to stop the spread of abnormal electrical activity from one hemisphere of the brain to the other hemisphere, and thus they are able to attenuate seizures. The now famous tests on postoperative patients led to questions as to whether post-surgery there were two separate consciousnesses at work (Gazzaniga 2011, 44–73). Furthermore, might there have been two separate consciousnesses—one mute, since language seems often to be centered in the left hemisphere of the brain—prior to severing the corpus callosum?⁸

Another condition involving multiplicity is dissociative identity disorder (DID), a controversial diagnosis that was formerly referred to as "multiple personality disorder." In this case, distinct alters are housed by a host. Often, the different alters are seemingly unaware of the existence of one another. The condition is thought to arise out of experiences of trauma, and as such it bears resemblance to PTSD. The traumatic

7. Again, see Schechter's recent (2018) important work on split-brain phenomena.

8. While I recall reading this point somewhere, I cannot attribute it with certainty.

experiences can be so difficult to bear that distinct identities arise to help the individual cope with their lives (see Walker 2008).⁹

Many will remember Herschel Walker as the former outstanding running back for the University of Georgia and, later, the NFL. He recently lost his bid to become a Senator from the state of Georgia. As an adult he was diagnosed with DID. He claims to have had as many as 12 alters, some of which were aware of the presence of other alters. Walker traces their possible origin to traumatic childhood experiences, involving verbal and physical abuse. The alters have different personalities. One alter is aggressive, and another one is consoling. Walker acknowledges that these different identities have been helpful to him (Walker 2008).

Here we have the competition between modules mirrored but at a different level. Once again, the unified self, is a task, mediated by therapy, which can bring about a convergence of alters. The condition may go undetected, and it poses a significant challenge for a coach who may not be aware of this condition. Recognition of the condition is complicated by the fact that at some level it resonates with each of us. We are all on a spectrum. But what may be mistakenly taken as mere inconsistency or moodiness may in some cases be a manifestation of a more profound reality. Which alter of the athlete has shown up for a practice or game? And for that matter, which alter of the coach?

Yet a third phenomenon involving multiplicities is presented in the case of “plurals.”

Insofar as we are dealing with multiplicity, plurals share a similarity with those diagnosed with DID. Plurals, in particular, claim that multiple persons inhabit one body. This is in contrast to singlets, who claim that one person inhabits their body. The experiences of many plurals don't match the diagnostic criteria for DID. First, in the case of plurals, the different entities may communicate with one another. Second, plurals may not experience the plurality as a pathological condition. Instead, they seek respect and understanding (Schechter 2020). The philosopher Elizabeth Schechter writes: “Plurals don't just *feel* as though they are psychologically multiple – they believe that they are. And they take each of these psychological beings, inhabiting one shared body, to be a full person” (Schechter 2020). Schechter adds, “a plural human being isn't a person, but a co-embodied group of people” (Schechter 2020) Plurals do not mean for their claims to

9. There are numerous credible Websites that discuss this condition. See, for example, the National Institute of Health's “Dissociative Identity Disorder,” National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK568768/>, accessed June 26 2023.

be taken metaphorically. Nor do they merely mean that they have different sides. Rather, multiple persons inhabit one body (Schechter 2020).

Schechter suggests that plurals can teach us something about respecting identity. In the case of plurals, showing respect might be manifested in acceptance, which she does not conflate with belief (Schechter 2020).

Taken at face value, plurals' claims have deep metaphysical and ethical implications. But they also have practical implications. Consider sport once again for illustrative examples. How do plurals execute split-second decisions on the playing field? What happens when there is disagreement? Which person(s) merit(s) praise or blame? How free is any person? To whom should a coach address instruction? Perhaps future research will illuminate these and other practical issues.

IV Conclusion

So, who's on first? The array of responses by philosophers and cognitive scientists and personal testimonies present a complex picture perhaps no less dizzying than the comedy routine of Abbott and Costello. We are presented with a range of options. Each of us is a single, more or less unified entity. Or, we are rather a co-op, whose members are either known or unknown to one another, and who compete with one another. Or, perhaps each of us is (paradoxically as it sounds) no one, at least not in the traditional sense. To paraphrase from the old TV show, "To Tell the Truth," will the real person on first please stand up?

We are also left with practical questions. How does this all work in the real world, and what can we do about it? Should we seek to be a one in the many—a unified self that exemplifies wholeheartedness? Is that even possible? Whichever view of the self that we adopt, or seek to realize, it will present challenges for understanding and negotiating the world of sport. And no one view comfortably covers all of the data.

As we shift from one view of the self to another, everything changes. And yet, everything remains the same. For, whichever view is correct, it is, though perhaps unknown to us, a reflection of the world we actually live in. And that is remarkable in itself, whoever is on first.

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