

# Making Sense of Jonestown

When Is an Action My Action?

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This thesis concerns the tragic events that occurred in Jonestown, Guyana, where the members of the People's Temple of the Disciples of Christ committed collective suicide. However, some have argued that this should actually be seen as murder, committed by church leader Jim Jones. The thesis presents a theory that explains how an individual can have ownership of an action. With the help of this theory, a thought experiment is presented that aims to clarify under what conditions the church members would have had ownership of their collective death, under what conditions they would not, and under what conditions we cannot tell.

On November 18, 1978 a tragedy occurred in Jonestown, Guyana. 918 Men, women, and children ingested a cocktail that was partly composed of cyanide, taking their own life. All victims of the tragedy were members of the People's Temple, a socialist church led by reverend Jim Jones. Founded in the 1950s, this church was initially an activist community that strived to improve the world they lived in: it denounced the racist environment that was present in the United States at the time, instead opting for equality for all members, no matter the colour of their skin, and actively participating in the community to help those in need. However, partly because of the increasing paranoia of their leader, the People's Temple became more and more isolated and ended up moving to the gated and secluded location of Jonestown in 1977. After an investigation into Jonestown by California senator Leo Ryan culminated in an airstrip shooting, killing Ryan and injuring several others, the inhabitants of Jonestown committed what they called 'revolutionary suicide' and turned Jonestown into a graveyard.

There has been a fair amount of dispute over how we should view the events in Jonestown. Some refer to it as a mass suicide, but many others insist that we should call it mass murder. The latter conviction stems from the practices that were used by the leadership of the People's Temple to bind the members to the cause. Among these were indoctrination of children, resocialisation techniques, and a heavy dose of social control, which was sometimes enforced with violence. This leads some to conclude that these people really had no choice in the matter anymore and that we cannot say that they died by their own hand, but rather that

the action came from the leader of the church, Jim Jones: it was his act and not the church members'. Furthermore, among the dead were a large number of children under the age of eleven, children at an age at which we do not yet hold them responsible for their actions.

Others, however, argue that the action was indeed the action of the members themselves. These are the persons who joined the People's Church and participated in its practices, who moved to the settlement in Guyana and who ingested the poison. Jones' position as the Church leader and the practices that were used in the settlement do not change that, according to the proponents of this position.

The aim of this thesis is to provide an analysis of the Jonestown Tragedy that can settle this dispute. I will attempt to determine if we should ascribe the final action in the church members' life, this revolutionary suicide, to them. To do this, I will first need to establish a few things. Firstly, I will need to establish what the prerequisites are to claim ownership of an action. What is required for me to say: this action is my own action and not the action of some external source? Secondly, how do we meet these requirements? When we know what is necessary to claim ownership of an action, then how do we make sure that we can?

To answer the first question, I will discuss Harry Frankfurt's hierarchical model of identification (Frankfurt, 1973), as well as Jan Bransen's notion of alternatives of oneself (Bransen, 1996). Frankfurt and Bransen allow for a theory of identification with an action, even when faced with conflicting desires within oneself. With the help of these theories, we can determine what is needed for ownership of an action.

The answer to the second question I will try to find in Daniel Dennett (1992; 1993) and David J. Velleman's (2003; 2006) theories of the self as a narrative. Dennett and Velleman argue that one can identify themselves through creating a story of their life, which can be used to guide and predict their actions. I shall argue that it is this narrative that gives one the ground for the identification that is advocated by Bransen.

But ultimately, of course, we hope to get an answer to the main question of this thesis. This means that we have to determine if the members of the People's Temple meet these grounds for ownership. Unfortunately, due to the sheer size of the group involved on that tragic day and the isolated, secretive nature of the commune, it is virtually impossible to provide an answer for the actual members that were there on that fateful day in November, 1978.

However, I do think we can approach an answer by creating a thought experiment in which we construct individuals that could plausibly have been inhabitants of the settlement. I will attempt to do this with the help of James T. Richardson's (1980) comparative analysis of the church, in which he analyses the church and its members on seven different areas. With the help of his work, I will present to the reader a thought experiment in which I will distinguish three fictive, possible members of the People's Temple, all of which will be presumed to have found their demise that tragic day, but who will represent members that respectively have claimed ownership, have not, or those that wander that difficult grey area in which we simply cannot speak of ownership or the lack thereof.

Of course, as I said, this cannot possibly include all who were involved and some outliers will not be accounted for, such as the aforementioned young children who were fed the poison by their parents, or possible victims who were forcefully brought to ingest the cyanide cocktail, but we are looking for those of whom we are, as of yet, not certain if they can be claimed to have ownership of the action, and I think that this approach can provide us with an understanding of the question of ownership of these tragic actions.

In the end, I hope that we can gain some insight into this tragic case and into the people that were there on that day.

## What Kind of Person Am I?

At first glance, it may seem easy to ascribe an action to a specific person. After all, in many cases you can clearly tell who performed an action. For example, you see me walking across the street, carelessly throwing some trash on the ground, rather than in the bin. In such cases, it takes little effort to identify the culprit: the guy you just saw dumping his trash where it didn't belong. Confronting me will have only one logical result: my apologies, and a correction of my behaviour by throwing my trash in the bin. However, things are not always this simple. The tragedy in Jonestown is a good illustration of this. After years of influence by the church, can we still say that one's actions, or even one's desires are a good indicator of one's ownership of an action? In these cases, one's desires and beliefs are warped through the influence and practices of the church. Are his acts, desires and motivations still his own?

This question is closely related to Harry Frankfurt's (1971) conception of freedom of the will. According to him, to determine if one's will is free, we must first distinguish two levels of desires: first-order desires and second-order desires. *First order desires* are simply desires to act in a certain way. So if I desire to get a beer, that is a first order desire. *Second-order desires*, Frankfurt states, are desires that concern first-order desires. I may, for example, desire to get a nice, juicy hamburger for supper. This would be my first-order desire. However, let's say I am on a diet. In that case, I may still desire a hamburger, but I also have a second-order desire, namely the desire to want a salad instead. Now imagine that I have both the first-order desire for a hamburger and the first-order desire to have a salad, and that I am still on a diet. In this case, we are dealing with a special kind of second-order desires, namely the desire that one of my first-order desires is effective. I desire both a hamburger and a salad, but I also desire that it is just the latter which is the one I act upon. This kind of second-order desires is what Frankfurt calls *second-order volitions*.

These second-order volitions are of paramount importance for our will to be free. This has to do with Frankfurt's conception of the will. He defines the will as the first-order desire that motivates our actions.

*'An agent's will, then, is identical with one or more of his first-order desires. [...] it is the notion of an effective desire - one that moves (or will or would move) a person all the way to action.'*

- Frankfurt (1971), Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person

But we do not just want to have a will. We want our will to be free, and this is why second-order volitions are important. Our second-order volitions concern the first-order desires that we want to be effective. In other words, to have a second-order volition is to desire that a specific first-order desire determines my will. Now, if this is the case - if my will is constituted by the first-order desire that I want to be effective - then my will is free.

To illustrate this, imagine a person who is struggling with alcoholism. At some stage, he may admit to himself that he has a problem, and that he must fight hard to break free of alcohol's grip. For the time being, however, it has not come that far and the thirst for liquor remains. However, he also has the conflicting desire to stay away from alcohol. Furthermore, now that he has faced the fact that he has a problem and decided to do something about it, he also has the second-order desire that his first-order desire to refrain from drinking alcohol will be effective. This, then, is a second-order volition, because it concerns the desire which he wants to be his will.

If, then, he gives into his desire for an alcoholic drink, despite of his second-order volition, his will is not free, because it is constituted by the first-order desires that he does not want to be effective. If he refrains from alcohol and gets a glass of water, instead, his will is free, because it is constituted by that first-order desire of which he has a second-order desire that it is effective.

According to Frankfurt, second-order volitions are what make the question of freedom of the will possible. Without this capability of reflecting upon our will,



we cannot speak of freedom of the will. If we cannot determine which desires we want to be effective, our will is neither free, nor unfree. Without these second-order volitions, it is simply meaningless to speak about freedom of the will.

We can ask ourselves the question why specifically these second-order volitions give us the tools for free will. For if we have second-order desires that concern our first-order desires, are there also third-order desires that concern those of the second-order? If my second-order desire is to want to not want a beer, can I have a third-order desire to want to want to not want a beer, or maybe even a third-order desire to not want to want to not want a beer? And if this is possible, what about fourth-order desires? Or fifth-order? Or sixth? Very soon, things will get very convoluted. What is so special about second-order desires that, in this seemingly endless chain of higher-order desires, they are what make up the freedom of our will? This is what is called the problem of infinite regress. Another problem that is frequently pointed out is the *ab initio* problem. This problem regards the question what tells us that the second-order desires pose ones authority over ones will. Why do second-order desires offer autonomy and first-order desires do not? Why do we even need a hierarchical structure?

Frankfurt acknowledges these problems, stating that *'there is no theoretical limit to the length of the series of desires of higher and higher orders; nothing except common sense and, perhaps, a saving fatigue that prevents an individual from obsessively refusing to identify himself with any of his desires until he forms a desire of the next higher order'* (Frankfurt, 1971, p16). His response to this problem is that it is possible for someone to identify decisively with one of his first-order desires. This identification will then resound through all possible higher orders. The decisiveness of this identification renders the question of any higher orders pointless. This, according to him, is a solution to both the *ab initio* and the infinite regress problem.

We may now wonder, however, how we perform such an identification. Bransen (1996) states that there are two different ways to interpret Frankfurt's view on identification. On the one hand, the idea that one radically identifies with one of his first-order desires, so that it resonates through all other desires, suggests

that the person is something like an entity that exists among his desires. This person has a clear view on all his desires and volitions (and other motivational factors) and can then determine which he identifies with. The other reading, preferred by Bransen, is that seeing an autonomous person as someone who acts in accordance with his second-order volition means that these second-order volitions represent the person herself and that this is why they have authority. Both of these readings require some more discussion, which is the aim of the rest of this chapter. Let us first turn to the former reading.

The best way to properly explain the first reading of Frankfurt's identification principle might be to picture a football game (the European kind). In the field are two teams, which both want to score as many goals as possible, in order to win the game. The two teams, caught in a fierce battle for victory, represent two opposing first-order desires. Winning the game means being the effective desire. In other words, the winning team represents the will of the person. Sitting on the grandstand is the home crowd. The supporters are wearing the game shirts of the home team, singing, cheering, screaming, and rooting for their team to win. They represent the person, decisively identifying with the home team, rooting for them to be his will.

Frankfurt's later work gives us an idea of how this identification comes into being. He states that caring about something makes that one is invested in the object of his care: the interests of that object are also his own and harm to that object will also mean harm to him:

*'A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He identifies himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced.'*

- Frankfurt, *The Importance of What We Care About* (1982, p260).

That a person identifies with that which he cares about, makes it that it is essential to him. Therefore, he has no other choice than to endorse the desire that aligns most with the object of his care. This is what Frankfurt calls a volitional necessity.

Let me, again, illustrate Frankfurt's theory. The football-supporter has come to care deeply about his hometown, for he has lived there all his life. His home team is a representation of his hometown. Therefore, he has no other choice to endorse his home team, to go to the stadium, wear his home team's game shirt and to cheer for them to win, rather than cheering for the other team. Cheering for the other team would compromise their status as a person who cares for his hometown and wants its team to fare well. Similarly, endorsing a first-order desire that does not fall in line with that which someone cares about goes directly against the essential nature of the person, and thus destroys him as a person.

Now, one might expect that such a position might elicit some responses, and that suspicion would be right. One of Frankfurt's critics concerning this issue is David J. Velleman, who, in his 2006 essay *Identification and Identity*, presents his problems with Frankfurt's position. One of Velleman's arguments is that there is no such thing as an essential nature of a person. More important is, however, that even if there was, this would, at most, mean that the person is authentic, but not that he is autonomous.

He argues that Frankfurt's construction of an essential nature of the self is an attempt to achieve wholeheartedness. Frankfurt wants to define the person as one coherent whole. Doing so means that one can resolve conflicts between desires - a conflict that would otherwise take place within a person - by externalising one of these desires. This way, the person does not have an internal conflict, but a conflict between the person and some desire that is external to him. Frankfurt treats the conflicting desires of the addict as if the desire of the person is fighting against a desire that is somehow external to him. According to this conception, the addict who asks 'who can help me fight this demon' really has a demon to fight, in a way. And the family member who explains away the irrational behaviours of the addict by saying that 'it's not him, but the booze that's acting' has the right of it.

According to Velleman, this amounts more to wishful thinking than to anything else. It is a way to cast out ambivalence as a normal, but problematic notion. For in Frankfurt's proposal, a self should be coherent, and identifying with conflicting desires is to break down the self. It is a 'disease of the will' (Frankfurt, 1987, as cited in Velleman, 2006). Just like disease breaks down the body, ambivalence breaks down the will as a coherent whole. And, in Frankfurt's eyes, the way to cure the disease is to externalise the desire that does not align with those things the person cares about. Or in other words, those desires that do not align with the essential nature of his self. The cure for ambivalence is the banishment of those desires that do not fit into what he loves. But as Velleman points out, this seems an unproductive strategy for a healthy mental life.

He illustrates this with Sigmund Freud's account of the *Rat Man*. The Rat Man appears in Freud's notes as a patient that suffered from radical ambivalence toward his father, who he loved as well as hated with a burning intensity. As a result of this, the Rat Man's personality was deeply divided, his thoughts contradictory, and his actions continuously undoing his earlier actions (Velleman, 2006). The Rat Man coped with his ambivalence by only accepting his love for his father, while he fiercely tried to suppress his hatred. His feelings of hate were not acknowledged by him as feelings of his own, leading to them surging and the Rat Man becoming deeply divided. Furthermore, the feelings of hate still found their way out, but now they were focussed on himself and his therapist.

It seems, then, that identifying with one of his conflicting desires hardly led the Rat Man to a coherent self. The strategy led him to misinterpret his feelings, thoughts and actions as actions that were not his own, even though he did remember performing them. Frankfurt's strategy did not bring the Rat Man mental health, but rather mental illness.

This first reading of Frankfurt views the person as an entity that can view his desires and can pick and choose from them which he identifies with as his own and which one he banishes from the realm of his personal desires. But as we can see from Velleman's comments and the example of the Rat Man, this does not lead to much of a healthy mental life, but only to an alienation of these desires

and, as a result, risks a divided account of oneself. And we can still ask how this even accounts for autonomy. Velleman states that the idea of identifying with a desire or motive is, in itself, a deceptive notion. Identification, he says, is something we do with others, and not with ourselves. When identifying with someone, we imagine being like him or her. So identifying with our emotions in this sense would be to imagine being this desire. This, however, seems strange. Our desires are a part of us. How would we imagine being a just part of ourselves? Velleman argues that this would be self-deception. We simplify ourselves by imagining to be only those motives that we want to be, because they fall in line with that which we care about. We are, however, more complex than that, and we should not strive to eliminate this complexity, but rather find a way to integrate it into our conception of autonomy.

Frankfurt's notion of identification, it would seem when read this way, has some big problems, both on a conceptual level, in the sense that we cannot identify with just a part of ourselves. but also on a practical level, because casting out desires that we do not like can lead to mental illness, rather than mental health.

But, as stated before, there is another reading of Frankfurt's work, as proposed by Jan Bransen (1996). Maybe this reading will provide us with a more satisfactory account. This reading entails that our second-order volitions must be viewed as authorized representatives of us. The decisive act of identification now means that one grants authority to one second-order volition, rather than to another. So instead of overseeing all desires and picking out one of the second-order volitions, stating that 'this is me', we make one of our second-order volitions the one in charge. We should be careful, however, not to make the mistake of thinking that Frankfurt views the person as some independent entity that walks among his desires and grant some of them authority. Bransen argues that this misinterpretation has its origins in the phrase 'identification with'. Rather, we should speak of 'identification as'. To do this, we have to do a bit of reformulating. It would be nonsensical to state that we identify as a desire. So Bransen states that

the act of identification entails that one identifies as the person moved by a certain desire. Identification, as an act, now means that we determine the identity of someone whose identity we, until now, we had not determined. So to identify would not be to describe, but rather it would be to recognise.

Let's apply this to the example of the alcoholic. After months, or maybe even years of practically living in bars and getting utterly wasted every day, the whole day, our alcoholic companion one day decides to get this monkey off his back. He wants to refrain from touching a drink ever again, even when, because of his addiction, he desperately craves for one. However, he does not identify as a person who is moved by his craving for a drink. He identifies as a person who is moved by his desire to quit drinking. He recognizes himself as that person.

Bransen describes this view on identification as choosing the right alternative of oneself, but not in the sense that the right alternative is the desired alternative. The right alternative is the alternative that is the most plausible one. Imagine seeing someone walking up to you through a thick mist. At first, you only see the silhouette of this person and it is hard to determine who he or she is. But gradually, as he comes closer, more features are defined. You might be able to determine she is a woman, and you might be able to begin making out what she is wearing. This way the list of persons she could possibly be gets shorter and shorter, until enough features are visible for you to determine that she can only be your good friend Linda. Or in other words, there are less and less alternatives that can be the right one. Identification is similar, recognising yourself as a person who is moved by a particular desire.

Bransen's account has an edge over the reading above, because he does not attempt to cast out any form of ambivalence. It is perfectly possible for us to have conflicting desires within us and accept both desires as our own, instead of discarding one or more as alien. We deal with this ambivalence, by determining which alternative of ourselves we are: the alternative that is led by one desire or the other. Whereas we may prefer one of our desires, there is no need to cast the others out as if they were not our own.

Autonomy now consists of two things: one must be able to determine the right alternative of herself and one must be able to act in accordance with this alternative. Bransen stresses that this account does not tell us how someone becomes autonomous, but that he only tells us what one must be able to do to be an autonomous person. We must be able to know what the best alternative of ourselves is, before we can be said to be autonomous. The question now remains what that alternative is.

So, now we may briefly return to the case that started this thesis: the Jonestown tragedy. Can we say that these people's actions were their own? If we approach the question from the perspective of Bransen's account, then these people must have been able to determine that the best alternative of themselves was the person that is moved by their desire to commit revolutionary suicide. However, we do not have enough, at this point, to determine if they were really able to identify as this person. To reach a conclusion, we should construct an account as to how one determines that this is the best alternative of oneself. On what basis does one identify as a person moved by a certain desire? This will be the subject of the next chapter.

## The Story of Us

So far we have established a few things. Firstly, if I want to be the author of an action, I must have acted autonomously. Secondly, to be autonomous is to have determined the best alternative of oneself and to be able to be guided by this knowledge (Bransen, 2016). But as we are dealing with the specific case of the Jonestown tragedy, we must go a little further. Bransen's account states only that we should be guided by our knowledge of the best alternative of oneself and does not answer the question what that alternative may be. This, however, is what we want to find out. Are these people the authors of their tragic action? To solve this riddle, we must know if the right alternative of themselves was a person moved by the desire to commit revolutionary suicide. To determine this, we must find out how one reaches the best alternative of themselves.

So, when this gradual recognition of ourselves occurs, what is it then that we see? What do we even recognise when we determine that 'I am a person moved by a particular desire'? Recognising myself as that person, means that I must come to understand what person I am. We could call this a question of our identity: who am I and what is it that makes up *me*? This is a question into what philosophers may call the *self*: that which constitutes me.

This is one of those questions that, at first glance, look pretty obvious, but are more problematic at closer inspection. 'What is my self? Well obviously, it is me. You can see me sitting here, behind my desk.' It is easy to refer to the biological boundaries of us as our selves, but that would not be enough (Dennett, 1993, p414). Consider that, for instance, there are more bacteria living in our intestines than there are humans living on earth. Maybe you could respond that those are not truly part of us, but just foreign entities that treat us as their homes. However, many of these bacteria are of vital importance for us to survive. Without them, we would not be able to process our food and get the necessary nutrients. 'All well and good', you might then answer, 'but that does not mean that they are not still foreign entities. We have just formed a symbiotic relationship with them.'



Then let's now go a little further and delve into the building blocks of our bodies: our cells. Human cells are eukaryotes. This means that they have a cell body and within this body a cell core. Inside of this cell core, there are organelles, a specific kind of which are mitochondria. A peculiar thing about mitochondria is that they possess their own DNA, different from our human DNA. Because of its different DNA, it is believed that mitochondria used to be separate organisms, a bacteria that was 'swallowed' by one of our unicellular forefathers some billions of years ago (Margulis, 1970; Dennett, 1993). From that point, the mitochondria and the cells evolved together, staying part of increasingly complex life forms. Nearly all of our cells have mitochondria, and without them we would not only not survive, but we would not even have been able to come into existence.

One further problem with the idea of our biological boundaries forming the boundaries of the self is the Ship of Theseus. Imagine a ship, that has damaged some of its parts during a long journey. These parts must be replaced of course. But after the next journey, other parts are in need of replacement, and still other parts during the next. Eventually, all the ship's parts have been replaced at least once. The ship has not got a single piece that it had during its first voyage. Can we still say that this is the same ship?

Now consider a common urban legend: this legend entails that during every span of seven years, all of your bodily cells have died and been replaced. Of course, this does not happen all at once, but no cell in your body is the same one that you had seven years ago. Some may be six years old, others four or three years, or even just a few days, but all have been replaced since the year two thousand ten. Some intelligent mind might point out that this urban legend is just that, a legend, and scientists know it to be untrue. However, I would argue that this does not matter for the question at hand. What matters is that there are many who believe it. After all, we do not hold funerals or memorials for people every seven years, even though there are those that believe that no biological part of us is the same as it was seven years ago. We still believe that we, as persons, are very much the same as we were a decade ago, even if the possibility exists that we, biologically speaking, have been completely replaced.

There might be more arguments to be given, but I think these points are enough to understand that our biological boundaries are not the boundaries of the self. Rather, I would like to follow the footsteps of Dennett (1992; 1993) and David J. Velleman (2006) in their assertion that we construct our selves through narratives. As such, our selves are not a concrete entity, but an abstraction. The reason we have difficulty pointing to our selves is that there really is nothing to point at. There is no physical thing of which we can say 'Here it is! This is our self'. The self is real, but not in the same way that the table I am currently sitting at is real. It exists - as Dennett would say it - as a centre of narrative gravity (Dennett, 1992).

Now one might ask what he means by this. Imagine throwing your phone in the air. Your phone is an object with mass. Every imaginable particle of which this phone consists has mass and this mass influences how fast the particle will fall to the ground. However, these particles may not be evenly divided over the phone. A lot of the particles may be found in the battery, for example, or in the screen, while very few particles are located at other places. Furthermore, some of these particles may have more mass than others. These areas with more, or heavier particles will fall faster than the areas with only a few particles, or with very light ones. But, of course, as they are part of the phone as a whole, they will not just leave the rest behind. What these areas do is influence the trajectory of the phone's fall in some way or another. The point where all these differences come together is what we call it's centre of gravity. This is the point where the 'average' mass of the phone is found. In scientific models we say that this is the point where gravity takes its effect and pulls it down. Of course, we know that this is not really the case. Gravity pulls at every point on the entire phone, but we can make reliable predictions of the phones trajectory by using its centre of gravity.

According to Dennett, this is also how the self works. I might walk around on campus and ask a girl who she is. Her first reaction will most likely be telling me here name: 'I'm Lisa'. That is, of course, a logical reaction. But I am not satisfied with just her name, so I might further my inquiry: 'Yes, but who is Lisa?' Now Lisa may reconsider her first answer and provide me with some more

information. Her response may be something like this: 'Well, I'm 24 years old, getting my master's degree in organisational psychology. I live in Nijmegen, where I have lived since I started at university some six years ago. I have a boyfriend called Mark and we've been together for 3 years now. We met at a party in the bar where I work to pay for my tuition. When I'm not studying or working, I like to play hockey and go to parties in the city centre. But most of all, I like going to the beach with my friends. We can lie in the sun for hours on end, just relaxing and enjoying the warmth.'

So who is Lisa? Is Lisa one of those things? Is one of the things she has told us the essence of Lisa? Is Lisa's essence that she is Mark's girlfriend? Or is her essence that she lives in Nijmegen? That she is a hockey player perhaps? Of course not! What Lisa is, is not just one of those things. Lisa is all of them. Just like the centre of gravity is the points in an object on the basis of which we can make accurate predictions about its trajectory during a fall, we use Lisa to summarise all the elements of the narrative of her life and predict what she is going to do. Lisa is a hockey player, so when we see her on her bike going in the direction of the hockey field on a Sunday afternoon, we can pretty safely predict that she is going to her hockey game.

Note that Lisa's description of herself is one that seems incomplete. For Lisa is much more than that what she has just said: she is a girl, for instance, and a daughter. More specifically, she is the daughter of her parents, rather than another couple. Maybe she is a niece, or an aunt. A high-performing student, perhaps, or an underachiever, or maybe just an average student. She's a former child and - hopefully - a future retiree. It is very well possible that I could fill the rest of this thesis with things that fit into a narrative of Lisa, but that would make for a very dull read, so I hope that this is enough to illustrate the point at hand. A tempting intuition is that we have just provided an incomplete description *of an entity* that is Lisa, but Dennett states that this is an illusion (Dennett, 1993, p.416).

For of course, all of these things that we could further add have actually taken place, or are actually true, and they can all potentially be included in the story, but these questions are beside Dennett's point. The self is not a fixed entity,

and those elements that are incorporated are not the only ones that can be incorporated. The shape of the story depends on the situation at hand. The construction of the self is a means to an end, a tool to explain and predict our behaviour. And as such, our selves only exist as the narrative that is spun. And this narrative expands and shrinks, twists and turns depending on the situation. Take, for instance, Dennett's own example:

*'I'm not cornering well on rainy days because my tires are getting bald.'*

- Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (1993, p. 417)

The person uttering this sentence has expanded his boundaries so that his self now includes his car or motorcycle. This might seem ridiculous at first, or at least very counter-intuitive, but this happens more often than you would think. Imagine driving down the motorway, when all of a sudden some reckless driver cuts you off. Now, if you were inclined to a bit of road rage, you might angrily shout 'Didn't you see me, you idiot?' You have now also expanded the boundaries of your self to include your car. If you had not, the most probable answer by far is 'no'. Of course he did not see you, because you are hidden inside a big steel box, mostly out of sight from annoying reckless drivers like your newfound arch-enemy. And you would not really think that that is what he should be looking for. He should have seen you: the red BMW he just cut off.

'But now you are just playing with language.' I hear you thinking. But this is exactly Dennett's point. The self as an entity only exists as a construction through language. This is why it is so hard for us to pinpoint exactly what our self is: there is no one, concrete self. We continuously construct the self through narratives and this narrative is ever changing, depending on the context and what is relevant in certain situations. Let's say that I have a certain talent, something wildly trivial and unimportant, something that is useful in virtually no situation whatsoever, but that I have discovered quite by accident. My completely useless talent is that I can estimate quite accurately how many blades of grass there are in a small field of grass. Would this prime example of triviality ever be used to

define me? After the discovery of this amazing talent, I may go years without even thinking about it, encountering no situation that reminds me of it, entering no situation when it is relevant in any way. Will I ever include this talent in my narrative? Will I think of myself as a blades of grass estimator? My talent is an enduring one, but my inclusion of it in my narrative, in my self is not, because it is never salient or relevant, or so we can assume in this scenario. Therefore, it never appears in my construction of my self. The fact that I am a philosophy student, however, is much more salient and much more relevant. Great lengths of time every week are spent at the university or are killed doing work related to my studies. Many conversations involve people's education and (prospective) job. In my construction of my self, it will therefore be much more often part of the narrative that I construct. This, however, does not mean that being a philosophy student is inherently more essential to my self than being a glass blade estimator is. It is more essential only on the grounds that it is more impactful in my story. Maybe we could imagine a world where my glass blade estimating talent made a monumental impact on my life, making that the more essential part of me. However, as it stands, this is not the case.

Thus, Dennett's conception of the self as a centre of narrative gravity is a way to make sense of what we do. To explain and predict our actions, we are constantly constructing a fiction that we call the self. The self is, in this sense, a tool for self-interpretation. Dennett therefore argues that it does not causally do anything. The self does not play a part in a causal chain, but rather, as the centre of narrative gravity, is the interpretation that we have of this causal chain. This means that, according to Dennett, there are no fixed outcomes regarding further proceedings in the narrative. They all come down to interpretation, meaning that what comes next is still very open. In other words: what has been places few constraints on that which is to follow.

Of course, this narrative has to be constructed somehow and according to Dennett, this takes place in the brain. He compares the way this happens with the dynamic taking place in a termite colony (Dennett, 1998). Such a colony works in such a sophisticated way that some argue that it should be seen as a single

organism, rather than as a society of termites working together. However, the termites don't work as a single organism, Dennett says. The termites are just 'doing their own thing'. They are not working as one organism, but rather each individual doing what they are specialised in, whether this be building, foraging, or defence. The result of those millions of termites doing their own thing is that the whole colony seems to act as one, while the individuals the colony consists of haven't got the faintest idea of the big picture that they are painting.

Dennett argues that our brain is doing the same thing when constructing our narrative. The brain is not trying to make on coherent story, integrating all information that is coming in, every action that we take, all subprocesses that are going on and painting a complete picture. Rather, all subsystems are just processing the information that they are specialised for. All these subsystems are, again, just doing their own thing and are not following some centrally guided plan. We may *feel* like that is the case, but this is only an illusion. This perceived master plan is only the centre of gravity of all those separate subsystems working individually. It is a fiction, a story we tell ourselves. Just like the termite colony seems to act as one unified individual, our brains do not work as a unified self. The termite colony as an individual is a fiction, just like the self is a fiction.

That is also why, according to Dennett, the self does not have a causal role. The systems that are doing all the work do not adhere to such a thing as a grand overseeing plan of the self. The self is a result of the works of the subsystems who are only doing what they are specialised to do. If they do only go about conducting business as usual, without adhering to anything like a master plan, then the self does not have any causal role. After all, as Dennett establishes, all these systems that are running in parallel do not even know of any master plan, any self.

Not everyone, however, agrees with Dennett that the self is only a fiction with no causal power. David J. Velleman agrees for a large part with Dennett's conception of the narrative of the self, but he does not agree with the causal ineffectiveness of the self (Velleman, 2006). Dennett views the self as a fiction, an illusion that does not have any control over the actions we perform. It just seems

to us that it does. Velleman agrees that the self is a fiction, but he does not grant that the self is as ineffectual as Dennett presents it.

So how can the self be a fiction and still have a causal effect? Velleman states that this is because the narrative that is spun is also a guide to actions that follow. Consider Dennett's research into Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD), conducted along with Nicholas Humphrey (Humphrey & Dennett, 1989). They describe multiple personality disorder as different clusters of speech, produced by different subsystems in the brain, that cannot be made sense of. Because we cannot make sense of these as produced by one single self, we attribute them to different selves. So these are still different abstracta, which are purely fictional. So if, all of a sudden, we start uttering speech which is incompatible with the current narrative of our self, we conclude that another self has taken over: another person that resides in the brain. This is merely a matter of interpretation and not a causal force. But, as Velleman points out, this only accounts for the verbal behaviour of the patient. What we see in MPD is not just some defiant verbal speech of the patient that has to be accounted for, but what seems like a complete takeover of a different person. The patient's posture, handwriting and a host of other behaviours change after the 'entrance' of the other self. Dennett's view does not account for this. After all, if a self is just a set of subsystems working mostly independent of each other, then we should not expect this anomaly in speech to have a significant effect on the other subsystems. But such an effect does occur. The onset of a different personality seems to be the onset of a completely different and relatively coherent person. When another personality - let's call him Michael, for convenience - takes over, he walks the walk and he talks the talk of Michael. Michael seems to have his own interests, his own mannerisms, his own ways of thinking and writing. Velleman states that this is because something has changed in how his behaviour is governed. This is because '*the autobiography and the behaviour that it narrates are mutually determining*' (Velleman, 2006, p. 211). Our behaviour determines the narrative that we spin, but this narrative, in turn, forms a guideline for how we behave.

Consider writing a book. At the beginning of the story, basically anything goes. The writer has complete freedom in what he writes. But as the story progresses, some constraints start to fall into place. The characters are written, events are unfolding or have come and gone, foreshadowing has been put into place. Because of these things, the author is committed to following up on them in a coherent fashion. A well-written story needs to have some logical progression in order to make any sense. So if the star in a spy-thriller is trying to retrieve some intelligence from a foreign power, the author must write the story in such a way that the protagonist's actions will believably follow that goal. So as the story progresses, constraints are put into place that limit the directions the story can unfold in. As such, the part of the story the author has already written influences heavily the direction it will take in the future.

But this example also provides us with a difficulty: the story presented above has an author, an external writer that determines how the story progresses. If we are a narrative, however, who is the author of our story? Velleman acknowledges this question. He states that the actor in question is both the author and the enactor of his story. He is writing an autobiography as it is unfolding. Thus, when describing a behaviour, one is not just describing the behaviour that is executed, but one is also describing oneself as the executor of this behaviour. For example, when I say 'I'm taking a coffee break', I am both describing taking a coffee break and describing *myself* as someone taking a coffee break.

In doing this, I am creating constraints for my actions. If I were to describe myself as someone taking a coffee break and not follow up on that, it would seem pretty strange. Furthermore, what would be the point of the narrative? The narrative's goal, as Dennett stated it, is to explain and predict behaviour. If these narratives would be inconsequential, then, they would lose all their predictive and explanatory power and be rendered useless. After all, what explanatory power would they have when the actions do not necessarily follow in any logical or coherent manner from what has preceded them?

Thus, by creating our narratives, Velleman says, we are making commitments. Those things that are written in our narrative are not just a



reflection of our behaviour, but our behaviour also complies with our narrative. This way Velleman reintroduces the central controller that Dennett so explicitly rejects. There may be no 'real', physical central control unit in our brain, or anywhere else, but by creating our narrative, which guides our behaviour, we have made this fiction our central controller.

A tempting intuition may now be that this conception ignores the possibility of ambiguity in our decision-making, that, according to this view, we would always be absolutely coherent in the actions we perform. After all, this view entails that our actions are decided by our narrative - as central controller - on the basis of coherently progressing the story. To create a truly coherent story, only one choice should be the correct one, all things considered. But therein lies the catch: *all things considered*. We have already established that the narrative is dynamic and depends on context. At different times, different motivations and circumstances may result in different versions of the narrative. An impactful occurrence in one's life may make different motivations more salient. Experiences, beliefs and desires may be forgotten or remembered. At no two times our narrative will be completely the same, with different factors weighing in more or less, or even be in- or excluded entirely.

Imagine someone who has experienced a life-changing event, like having narrowly survived a horrifying car crash. Of course, this does not change those things she may have experienced throughout her life. It does not change the job she had, her school life, her marriage or children, the way she has always interacted with her friends, or any occurrence that she has undergone in all her years. But what it could change is the perspective she has on these things. Those things that she used to view as fundamentally important may now seem mundane and others may now be seen in a much brighter light. The focus she has had on her work, staying late and skipping dinner with her family, may now seem like a big mistake. Those Saturdays she spends with her kids may now be the most vital things in her life, something she vows never to neglect again in the future. But, of course, time goes on and the years pass. Her horrible crash may fade somewhat and become less salient. Her job requirements may go up, as she gets more

responsibilities. She might go days, or longer, without even thinking of her accident. And alas, those wonderful Saturdays with her children may have to take a back seat in order for her to keep up with all her work. The circumstances have once again changed and shifted the weight her experiences have for her decisions to act.

Of course, this is philosophy and that means that theories such as Dennett's and Velleman's have their opponents. Two important ones that I would discuss before the end of this chapter are Eric T. Olson and Lynne Rudder Baker. Let's begin with the former.

In his essay *Was I Ever a Fetus?* (Olson, 1997) Olson argues that theories of personal identity that are based on psychological continuity, such as the ones discussed in this chapter, cannot be correct. He draws his conclusion on the basis of the following argument: if person x is only the same person as person y if he is psychologically continuous with person y, then he can never have been an early stage foetus, because early-stage foetuses do not even have any psychological functions. However, we know, for biological and embryological reasons, as well as common sense, that every one of us has been a foetus. Thus, our personal identity cannot be derived from psychological continuity.

Olson asserts that theories of the self as narratives do derive identity from psychological continuity and, thus, states that the self as a narrative is a flawed concept. His alternative is what he calls the Biological View. This view entails that one survives when her vital functions, those that make up living beings, are preserved. This view on personal identity, according to Olson, lacks the 'foetus-problem'. Because a person comes to exist not when he has developed psychological capacities, but when he is alive, the foetus and the person are not separate entities. Contrary to psychological continuity view, he says, his theory does not entail that 'I was never a foetus'.

However, Olson's claim that theories of the self as narratives derive identity from psychological continuity is simply incorrect. The theories, as championed by, among others, Dennett, Velleman, and in this thesis, may include psychological continuity to some extent, but it is certainly not the whole story.

What they do derive identity from is a coherent whole that can be used to predict, interpret, and explain behaviour. And while psychological capacities are necessary to construct a narrative, we are able to construct a narrative of someone else, even when we do not expect them to have full psychological capacities (yet). Indeed, this regularly is the case for the very foetuses Olson is talking about. An expectant mother will readily interpret the developing child she is carrying as a person, however in its infancy it may be.

The key in this misunderstanding may lie in the status of the narratives as abstracta. They are not physical things, but exist as interpretations of patterns that exist in the world and can be made into a coherent, meaningful whole. Olson seems to erroneously conclude that this status as non-physical means that it must be psychological. However, both aspects play a part in the construction of the narrative. For I will grant his biological view that, for us to interpret someone as a person, she needs to have those vital functions that make up living beings. We should, however, not, in turn, make the mistake of thinking that this is enough to constitute a person. This point brings us to the view held by Lynne Rudder Baker.

Lynne Rudder Baker (1999) agrees with the conclusion that Olson ends up with: a theory of personal identity that hinges on psychological continuity necessarily leads one to the conclusion that she was never an early term foetus, because early term foetuses have no psychological capacities. What she disagrees with, however, is that that conclusion is wrong. Baker argues that what constitutes a person are not the vital functions that make up life, but rather the capacity to take in a first-person perspective. This perspective cannot be taken in, however, by a foetus that has not yet developed any psychological process. So while the foetus is a human organism - as it possesses all the biological characteristics of a human organism -, it is not yet a person. A new person, as an entity, only comes into existence when the organism's brain has developed far enough to enable the first-person perspective. At this point, the human organism has come to constitute a person. This does not necessarily mean that when the organism becomes a person, the organism that already existed is killed, or that it should share the body with the newly formed person, as Olson suggests. Just like the pieces of granite

that constitute the Vietnam Memorial are still there, only now they constitute the memorial. Thus, Baker argues that, although a human organism may be alive, that does not mean that it is a person. It can, however, come to constitute a person, when it takes on a first-person perspective.

However, Baker's constitution view, she argues, also poses a problem for theories of a narrative self (Baker, 2016), which I will briefly consider. She argues that a theory of personal identity should answer two questions, that were posed by Marya Schechtman (1996):

- 1) Under what conditions is a person considered at time  $t$  the same person as a person considered at time  $t'$ ?
- 2) Under what conditions are 'actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on to be attributed to a given [human being]'?

Baker calls the former question the numerical-identity question. The latter she calls the characterisation question. She argues that narrative theories of the self only provide an answer to the characterisation question, but fail to provide an answer to the numerical-identity question. Baker states that her Constitution View does provide an answer to the numerical-identity question, while leaving room for theories of narratives to answer the characterisation question, as they can, in her words, 'put flesh on the bare bones of an account [...] of numerical personal identity' (Baker, 2016, p14). In doing this, her view has more explanatory power than the biological view discussed above: Olson provides what he believes is an answer to the numerical-identity question, as to what fundamentally constitutes personal identity, but it leaves little room for the characterisation question. If I am the human organism that has grown out of the foetus, we can attribute every action that organism produces to me, but that leaves us with little room for forced actions or manipulation, or any of the problems discussed. Olson's theory fails to answer exactly the question that concerns this thesis. Baker, however, shows

exactly that narratives selves can answer the questions we want to answer in this thesis: attribution of action, desires and so on.

This section has discussed the merits and possible limits of the narrative self and how it will be able to help us find an answer to our research question. In the next, I will discuss how the notion of the self as the author-enactor of a narrative and Bransen's notion of alternatives of oneself together can help us in solving the problem at hand. Can we conclude, with the help of these views, that in cases like the Jonestown tragedy the people have acted out their own actions? Should we say that these actions were not theirs? Or is there still something missing?

## Continuing Our Story

Now, how do we unify the theories that were introduced in the last chapters and how do they help us answer the question at hand? What we need to know is how recognising the correct alternative of oneself and the narrative self fall into alignment. The aim of this chapter is to explain how that happens.

Bransen refers to the process of recognising the right alternative of the self and acting upon it as personal identity management (Bransen, 2008). He states that management, in this sense, consists of making efforts that contribute to the improvement of the way one lives his life. This improvement comes to be through the pursuit of a goal, or *telos*, as Bransen calls it. This goal is one's identity, in the sense that it furthers one's embodiment of that identity. To avoid falling into the trap of engaging in too much abstract reasoning, we will, once again, turn to an example.

Peter has been an animal rights advocate for many years now. He has lobbied for better treatment of animals and the end of animal testing. Now he wants to take this a step further and become a vegetarian, even though he has always thoroughly enjoyed the taste of beef, pork, and chicken. Peter, however, identifies as a person who wants animals to be treated justly and believes that this means that he should also stop eating them. Him becoming a vegetarian is him managing his personal identity.

Key to this process of personal identity management is recognising the right alternative of the self. Bransen states that when considering different alternatives of the self, we imagine ourselves as both alternatives, in what he calls a 'dry run' of the situation. The chosen alternative must then fall into place with our perspective and minimise the expected regret. Personal identity management, if done right, leads to peace of mind.

Let's apply this to Peter. At some point, Peter has started considering becoming a vegetarian. To stop eating meat would entail lending his hand to stop animal suffering because of the food industry and setting the right example for others. This would, however, also mean that he would have to give up the taste of

his favourite kinds of food forever. Alternatively, to keep consuming meat would mean that he does not fully commit to his ideals, participating in an industry that he feels exploits animals and treats them cruelly. When he imagines both these scenarios, executing a dry run, he concludes that being a vegetarian would fit more properly with his identity as an animal rights advocate and that the loss of eating meat would cause less regret and yield more peace of mind than abandoning his ideals. He has recognised that the right alternative of himself is that of a person who is motivated by his ideals about animal rights, rather than by his love of meat.

We can now start to see how this aligns with our notion of the self as a narrative. The right alternative, that one that grants the subject peace of mind, is the alternative which is most compatible with the perspective of the subject. In the last chapter, we have seen how this perspective comes to be: by forming the narrative of the self. Bransen himself states that his position '[...] *is congenial to narrative accounts of personal identity, although it emphasizes, perhaps more than most narrative accounts, that the telos of life has normative import, that a person is not entitled to live every life that is narratively possible*' (Bransen, 2008, p19). Of course, in the previous chapter, we have established a narrative account that was quite restrictive, because the continuation of the narrative is based on what has come before. Even if the person is entitled to live every life that is narratively possible, this account places quite a few constraints, like Bransen does. A narrative has to flow in a more or less logical way. There has to be a plot that makes sense. A better way to state this might then be narratively *plausible* or *reasonable*. The continuation of the narrative, which constitutes a person's identity, must take place in such a way that it aligns with the narrative in a reasonable way. It would not be a reasonable continuation of animal rights advocate Peter to suddenly start following a diet that was entirely carnivorous. It would be completely unreasonable for us to say that this is an action of *animal rights advocate* Peter. Thus, if an action does not reasonably continue one's narrative, which forms one's identity, we cannot say that that person has ownership of an action. For ownership, this action must be narratively reasonable.

Another example might help further clarify this. A student - let's call him John - is enjoying a lovely night at his local university bar. As always, he has had a great time, but now it is getting quite late and he has an exam coming up in a few days. Upon informing his friends of this fact and expressing his desire to leave soon, they apply good old-fashioned peer pressure. Surely, he can stay for another few drinks? Tomorrow he will have plenty of time to rest. After sleeping in, he will have enough time left to study the last of the subjects. It will all be fine, he can just stay for another drink! John, however, knows himself to be a committed student, who values his good results and his reputation as a hard working student who takes his education seriously. He recalls the past days during which he went home early to study for his exams and that resulted in excellent results. In doing so, he is constructing a narrative about himself that creates constraints on his actions. He is - historically - a person that is motivated by his desire for good results. Thus, in order to coherently further that narrative, he must act in such a way that logically progresses that story. That is to say, when confronted with this choice, there may be two alternatives of John that he must choose from: one that decides to stay and one that goes home early. The former would not align with the story of John, but the latter would. Thus, John wishes his friends a fun night and heads home. Because his actions are now in accordance with the actions of a person he recognises himself to be, a person who is motivated by the desire to act in such a way that will help him get good grades, John has ownership of his actions. He has this ownership, because his behaviour is determined by himself, because it is coherent with the narrative that makes up John.

It may be that this example has now given rise to some doubts. For instance, one may think that this sketch is overly rationalistic and that we do not actively construct a narrative for every little decision to weigh the different factors, before we come to a conclusion. Sometimes we just do things without really considering.



Such a criticism, however, is the result of a misinterpretation of the proposed theory. I am not proposing that, when faced with a decision, we actively construct a narrative in a fully rational way, by taking into account all factors that could be relevant and weighing them to determine which choice we should make in order to stay true to ourselves. Of course, from the outside, it may look like we are doing that, or something that resembles it. Internally, however, we do not consciously construct a narrative to decide on how to act. That would not only contradict common sense, but that would also put us in a logical trap, for the narrative is what forms the person that faces the decision and with it the perspective that he takes. So the narrative is already formed, before I can even speak of *me*. And because it is the narrative that constitutes the person that is me, the choice that I would have to make to give me ownership of the action is the one that is narratively reasonable from this perspective. Conversely, if I acted in a way that is not narratively reasonable from this perspective, we would not say that I have ownership of this action. In the case of the example, the choice John makes, the choice to go home, follows reasonably from his perspective of caring about his grades.

A bigger criticism, I suspect, is that the proposed theory is circular. Such a criticism might go something like this: 'if ownership is based on following our narrative, and our narrative places constraints on our actions, then we must have ownership of everything we do, because our narrative determines everything we do!'

I ask you to consider John's first scenario one more time: standing in a bar, considering if he should stay, even though he has an important exam coming up. This time, however, John makes the radical decision to stay at the bar all night, not caring that he has an exam in a few days that could have enormous consequences if he failed. Imagine being one of John's friends, who knows that he has never done such a thing. John, the dutiful student, who always worked hard to complete his exams and acted responsible, even when everyone else acted like they did not have a care in the world. You would probably be somewhat shocked that John acted in such an uncharacteristic way. Normally, John would

undoubtedly put his education first and such a strange act would leave you wondering what happened what had happened for him to make such a decision. In other words, you would ask yourself what would have caused John to act so unlike himself. In doing this, you are asking what has caused him to act in a way that is inconsistent with his narrative.

And John may well have a reason for this. This may be some mundane reason such as him being drunk, because he had had a few more drinks than he thought. As a result, come the exam, he will probably deeply regret having stayed. But maybe he had an experience which fundamentally changed his perspective on life. One that made him realise the futility of his old ways (in his eyes) and that realised an enduring shift in his thoughts and actions.

In the first instance, John has just had a case of clouded judgement, an inability to conform to the sensible person that he normally is, because of his inebriation. Because of circumstance, he lacked the cognitive power to conform to his commitments. His cognitive limits have prevented him from finding the best alternative of himself. Because of his drunkenness, he is unable to do a dry run of the both alternatives and recognise which is the right one, unable to minimise regret and maximise peace of mind. He cannot determine which alternative is narratively reasonable. The second instance, however, constitutes a lasting change that he follows upon in future actions and that determines the future course of his autobiography. This divergence from what we would normally expect from him is not a feat of inconsistency, but a change in direction of the whole narrative. Because of this new insight he has had, this addition to his narrative, he sees what has come before in a completely new light. This insight makes that what might have seemed completely unreasonable before reasonable, because it has changed his perspective on his identity. As such, in the first instance John fails to perform an action over which he has ownership, while the second instance he succeeds.

Thus, we can perform an action without actually having ownership of it. Our narrative places constraints not on the actions we execute, but on the actions we can be said to have authorship over. And it is very well possible to execute an

action that we do not have ownership of, just as I can drive a car that is not mine, like we have seen above with John's drunken mishap.

Now it is time for us to conclude the theoretical groundwork for the answer to our research question. Let's now turn to the People's Temple of the Disciples of Christ, or People's Temple, for short. How did it come to exist and what was life like for those who joined it? That will be the subject of our next chapter, after which we can finally answer our research question.

## **(The End of) Life in Jonestown**

Now that we have laid the theoretical groundwork to answer our question, let us turn to Jonestown and see what we can determine about the inhabitants' ownership of their actions. Of course, to do this, it is not enough for us to know what it entails to have ownership of an action. We also have to know the circumstances under which this revolutionary suicide took place and what the lives of those in Jonestown consisted of. In this chapter, we will use James T. Richardson's comprehensive account of Jonestown's history, as a way to acquire some insight into the workings of the People's Temple. This will help us determine what the answer to our question.

In his essay *People's Temple and Jonestown: A Corrective Comparison and Critique* (1980), Richardson establishes an account of Jonestown by drawing a comparison with other new religions that were active at the time. The result is a reconstruction of Jonestown that is subdivided into eight areas: 1) social location and time of their inception; 2) characteristics of members and potential members; 3) organisational structure and operation; 4) social control techniques and contact with the outside world; 5) resocialisation techniques; 6) theology or ideology; 7) general orientation; and lastly 8) ritual behaviours. For our investigation, we will take a closer look at these areas, after which I will try to forge an answer to our current question.

### *Time and Place of Origin*

Richardson notes that, while the tragedy took place in 1978, the People's Temple had been around for over twenty years, based in America for most of that time and only moving to Jonestown in Guyana in 1977. Bewildered by the thoroughly segregated American society of the 1950s, Jones founded the People's Temple as an inclusive church, which was open for all types of people. The main mission of the church was to help the disadvantaged, an indication of the socialist orientation of the People's Temple. This inclusive, socialist orientation heavily

clashed with the American culture of the day, which had some wildly unfavourable views regarding socialism and civil rights. Unsurprisingly, the church was met with suspicion.

### *Member Characteristics*

Also uncharacteristic of its time, the People's Church's membership consisted mostly of black people, whereas most new religions were comprised almost entirely of white people from higher social classes. Jones' church, however, consisted of up to 80% of African-Americans and most of them stemmed from lower social classes. Worth noting is that entire families joined the People's Temple and that among the residents of Jonestown were 137 children of 11 years or younger and that 199 residents received social security benefits because of their old age. According to Richardson, the People's Temple was *'something of a perverted extension of a long tradition of urban blacks affiliating with sects and cults that offered them some "this-worldly" relief from their extreme destitution'* (Richardson, 1980, p.243).

### *Organisational Structure*

The People's Temple had a fairly simple organisational structure. At the very top was Jim Jones himself, who kept the strings firmly in his hands and was involved in the daily operations of the church to a large extent. This means that Jones himself held strict control over the activities of the People's Temple. Below him was a group of 15 to 20 people, who were at times referred to as 'the angels'. These were Jones' advisors and workers and were mostly women. A third level was called the planning commission, which carried out many of the day-to-day tasks. All the others in the church were the followers.

### *Social Control and Contact with Outside World*

For most, I suspect, this is where we are reaching the elements that may have compromised the members' autonomy, that which makes us wonder if the actions of the church members really can be said to have ownership of the actions they execute. And it's not hard to see why. Richardson's assessment paints a picture of a strongly controlled environment in Jonestown, with almost no contact with anyone outside of the commune, as it was far removed from any other settlement. Furthermore, residents were fed tales of many dangers in the jungle surrounding them, including warnings about tigers, snakes and hostile humans. Richardson mentions that there was at least one false flag attack on the settlement, meant to support these claims. Furthermore, any contact with the outside world without permission was prohibited, as was access to the commune for outsiders. As a result, members were completely isolated, which strengthened social control in Jonestown.

### *Resocialisation Techniques*

The term 'resocialisation techniques' refers to the techniques used by the People's Temple to make sure that the social order that was put into place was upheld by the church followers. It must be said that many of the accounts of these practices were given by defectors. Therefore, it might be that some exaggeration has taken place, because of a self-serving bias from these defectors. However, Richardson states that even when one takes into account that these practices may have been overstated '*one is left with the impression that life in the People's Temple was at least rigorous and perhaps even grim for many members during the latter years of the organisation's history*' (Richardson, 1980, p.247). He describes techniques that are used to break down family ties and encourage exclusive loyalty to the church. Among these techniques were the use of sex as a way to break marriages and the rewarding of children for reporting on their parents' undesirable behaviour.

Richardson compares these practices to thought-reform practices that were used to resocialise Chinese intellectuals during the fifties, which were more systematic, but maybe no less effective.

### *Theology or Ideology*

This was not the only link between the People's Temple and communism, because Jim Jones' primary goal seemed to lie in bringing a socialist commune to life. As mentioned before, the People's Church started as an inclusive church, open to all races, that supported those in need. The criticism he received because of this may have contributed to the paranoia that was present within the People's Church, where they were constantly convinced that there were outsiders trying to take them down.

This is closely linked to the People's Church's positive attitude towards suicide. Jim Jones' belief in revolutionary suicide as a means to further a cause was of course made famous by the tragedy, but it had been a long-time conviction of his. He viewed collective suicide as a just and noble action when on the verge of being attacked, something that would propagate the cause, even when the church itself would die. This led, among other things, to preparations for such an event, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

### *General Orientation*

In its earlier days, the People's Temple had an orientation that was relatively outward. Its socialist ideology led to an attempt to genuinely establish a change in the world. Members would operate in soup kitchens and other institutions that benefitted the poor. They would help the elderly, underprivileged children, mentally disabled and others who had fallen behind in society. They were also quite politically engaged on both a local and national scale. In later years, this orientation seems to have shifted inward, with the move to Jonestown resulting in a more isolated entity, although even then medical services were

provided for the people living in the surrounding jungle and who they deemed less fortunate and in need of assistance.

### *Rituals*

As is the case in most (if not all) other religions, the People's Temple practiced rituals. The most noteworthy of these, and the one that is tied to our question the most, was practicing drinking poison. Richardson writes about recurring rituals where members drank liquids that they believed to be poisoned or of which they were told afterwards were poisoned. Richardson interprets these rituals as an acknowledgement by Jones that ritual can often bear belief. These were ways to teach members the correct ways to respond to threats, instilling the belief in his members that revolutionary suicide is the right course of action. Thus, in Richardson's words: *'Leo Ryan's visit was a catalyst that triggered this most dramatic conclusion to People's Temple, but the stage for this tragic multiple murder/suicide had been set much earlier through Jones' use of ritual'* (Richardson, 1980, p251).

I will use Richardson's account of Jonestown as a base for the next step in our search for answers. With the help of this description of the circumstances within the People's Temple, the next chapter will see the construction of three different scenarios. These scenarios will serve as a clarification of how we should implement the theoretical notions we discussed in the previous chapters and, more importantly, they will help us answer our questions: if these three fictional followers of the People's Temple had been there on November 18, 1978, would the action of revolutionary suicide be their own?



## **So Who Did What?**

At this point, we have laid enough groundwork to be able to come to an answer to our question. As I have stated earlier, we will come to that answer by means of a thought experiment. In the previous chapters we have discussed how the action of suicide should reasonably fit into the narrative of a person in order for that person to be able to claim ownership of the action. The last chapter gave us some more insight in the workings of the Church over more than twenty years. In this last chapter, I will present to you three sketches of persons who could have plausibly been inhabitants of Jonestown. These three sketches will each represent a group of residents: those who do have ownership of their actions, those who don't, and those whose ownership is still up for debate.

Imagine a black man, we will call him Roger, living in the segregated United States of the 1950s. Because of his race, he faces terrible odds in society. Not only is a large part of the American people still overtly racist, but even federal law rates him as a second class citizen. This factors directly affect his chances of getting a good education and his options for climbing the social ladder.

As a result, he has fallen behind throughout his entire life. The capitalist society he lives in has failed him and others like him, causing them to lose faith in it. They long for a system that provides them and those others who have lost out with an equal chance in life. In the People's Temple of the Disciples of Christ, Roger finds a community that is different. Instead of the dog-eat-dog world that is the American society of the fifties, the People's Temple strives to create a society where everyone is equal, no matter the colour of their skin or their social class (indeed, social classes would not even exist). Its goal is to create a society in which no one is left behind and that would actively protect those like him. In this church, he sees a chance to start over and create a new, better life for himself, his family and all those like him. So he joins the People's Temple and his family joins the church with him.

So begins his time with the church and its inspiring leader and founder Jim Jones. Jones' vision to create a better society for everyone leads Roger to have

great faith in him. Under Jones' direction, Roger participates in many initiatives that help those less fortunate: he and his family regularly work in a soup kitchen and take part in programs that aim to benefit underprivileged children. Furthermore, Jones would encourage them to take part in the political arena, as voters, but also to run for public office, in one form or another.

These involvements and practices gave Roger the opportunity to get engaged more in his vision for a more equal world and the church's contribution to accomplishing that vision leads him to grow more fond of the church and its other members, who are likeminded. Meanwhile, the more time and effort Roger invests in the People's Temple, the bigger the distance between him and those outside the church gets. His involvement only helps him to see the need for change and the implementation of the church's socialist views, while he drifts apart from those who do not share his activist convictions. As time goes by, Roger's life is immersed in the church more and more, and so is his family's.

With every effort Roger invests in the People's Temple, his commitment to the church grows larger, as does his distance to those outside of it. More and more, Roger's life centres around the socialist and egalitarian cause that the People's Temple advocates and the better life that it promises. And with this greater commitment, come more extreme measures. A stricter system of social control starts to form, in which Roger, and others in the church, can scrutinise the loyalty to the cause of other members. This way, steps can be taken to increase their loyalty.

As Jim Jones sees more threats to the cause of the People's Temple, social control gets ever more strict. When Jones finds that the church is being threatened more and more, up to the point that being based in the United States is no longer sustainable, Roger and his family follow the church to the settlement in Jonestown, Guyana. The remote location and the isolated character of the settlement, of course, make social control much easier: the church members all live in close proximity of each other and defiant actions are easily identified and acted upon to protect the cause. Actions must be taken that some might consider extreme, but this is just for the greater good: they must not let anyone defer from

the cause of creating a society in which everyone is equal and no one is left behind.

And that should always be understood: the cause is all that matters in the end. That is also the reason that the members of the People's Temple are always prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice if necessary. On a regular basis, Roger and his fellow members ceremonially practice a possible event of what Jim Jones calls 'revolutionary suicide', during which they simulate ingesting poisoned substances. These rituals simulate an occasion when the destruction of the church is imminent, because the threats of the outside world are closing in on it. Jones has informed the members that the outsiders are constantly trying to undermine and eliminate the People's Temple, and that they are increasingly putting effort into those attempts. They want the church's cause to fail and will probably not stop until they succeed.

November, 1978 sees Jones' prediction come true. After an investigation into Jonestown by United States senator Leo Ryan goes awry, resulting in the killing of him and several of his companions, the church's enemies are closing in fast. It is only a matter of time before they come and shut the church down for good, ending the cause with it.

So Jim Jones summons all the church's members, who gather round to hear him speak. Their time has come to make the ultimate gesture for the church and its cause. Through their sacrifice, people will see their commitment to the church and to bringing about a better world. Along with the others, Roger drinks his cyanide cocktail and ends his life.

Does Roger perform an action of his own? Can we say that he takes ownership of his action? For that to be the case, it must be that the action of revolutionary suicide fits robustly into his narrative. In the case of Roger, we see that there is a trend of ever escalating commitment to the People's Temple's goals. And although Roger, in 1953, would probably not have done some of the things he did in Jonestown, every action he took to support the church enhanced his commitment and the more he became committed to the People's Temple, the more he became isolated from those who did not follow the ways of the church and

opposing views, only strengthening his opinions. This way, Roger enters a vicious circle, ever radicalising his convictions and actions, but in such a manner that they do form a coherent narrative: that of a radicalising member of the church, who, through the years, has become ever more committed to the church and prepared to do increasingly extreme things to protect the People's Temple. Roger, then, did reasonably conform with his narrative and can be said to have ownership of his suicide. He was following the path that was prepared through a twenty year long narrative and during which he denied every alternative that had him not following the ways of Jim Jones.

But maybe Roger is too easy a case. He joined the church coming from noble motives, but radicalised without looking back. These intentions eventually led him to be cruel to some of his fellow church members to keep them in line and even to killing himself. Should we not consider different possibilities? Let us do precisely that. We will consider Jessica. Like Roger, Jessica joined the People's Temple with noble intentions. She too had been left behind by society because of race and social class. The People's Temple of the Disciples of Christ promised an escape from these injustices for her and those who suffered the same fate. For years she engaged in activities for the church, to raise funds, but also for helping people. She partook in local politics and worked in soup kitchens, like many others with her.

Of course, she had heard some of the rumours about misconduct taking place within the church, but she did not believe it. The People's Temple was a church that existed to better the world and its followers were friendly people, like church leader Jim Jones. And even if there would have been some misconduct, so what? Every organisation had some bad apples. The People's Temple was a well-meaning, wholesome organisation that had the world's best interest in mind.

But these mean-spirited accusations kept rearing their heads in the mid-seventies. So when Jim Jones explained that the church would be moving to the Jonestown settlement, Jessica travelled to Guyana with the other followers. However, now that she has spent some time in the settlement, she starts to see that these accusations may not have been as concocted as she thought. Social control is

incredibly strict, and those who are suspected to be deferring from the cause are kept in line with harsh measures. Slowly but surely, Jessica is losing her faith in the church. What started as an movement that was out to better the world, now seems to have lost its way, turning into a small-scale tyranny, just out to sustain itself. Jessica is careful, however, not to show these doubts, because she is afraid of what might happen if someone were to find out. So she conforms to the rules of the settlement and to the system of social control. Keeping a careful eye on others, so that no one will suspect her of defecting.

When United States senator Leo Ryan travels to Jonestown for an investigation into the People's Temple, Jessica silently hopes that this will present an opportunity to leave, but his visit goes terribly wrong. During a shootout at the airport, just as the senator is leaving, he and several others are killed. Jim Jones declares that there is only one option left to fight for the cause, as the church's enemies are now certainly going to end the church and all it has fought for. The only way to keep the cause alive is by committing revolutionary suicide. Isolated from the rest of the world, Jessica sees no choice but to go along. What else could she do? If she would resist, they would only force her to comply. Full of regret, Jessica's life ends with those of the others in Jonestown.

We can easily see that the case of Jessica differs greatly from that of Roger. While both committed themselves to the church and its ideals, escalating their involvement through the years, until they passed the point of no return, and both acted in pretty much the same way, it is much easier to say that Roger's final action was his own. This is because Roger, unlike Jessica, identifies with his actions, those actions he performs in the name of the People's Temple. Roger acts the way he does, because he recognises himself as a person motivated by the church's goals. He shares the beliefs and motivations that the church propagates, and his actions are a natural continuation of the narrative of such a man. Jessica, on the other hand, lost her identification with these goals and beliefs when living in Jonestown. She gains the insight that the People's Temple and its leader are not the wholesome organisation she thought. She does perform the actions the church asks of her, but not because she identifies with the motivations for these actions,

because these motivations fit in her story, but because of fear. Likewise, Roger drinks the cyanide to further the cause, to allow the cause to live on, as Jones has expressed.

Jessica, however, simply sees no other way. She can conceive the alternative that would fit her identity, her perspective as someone who was wrong about the People's Temple and does not want to give her life for its cause. Collective suicide does not suit who she recognises herself to be, but the option that she imagines would reasonably follow her narrative is out of reach. She is not a person that is willing to give her life for the People's Temple. At best, she is a person that is willing to give up her life to prevent even worse.

While Roger and Jessica represent people of whom can be judged if they truly have ownership of their actions, I would present a final example, for whom ownership will be somewhat harder to determine. For such a case, let's first return to Jessica. Like Roger, she did not join the People's Temple just by herself. Jessica was a young, single mother, whose son, who we will call Sebastian, was three when they became members of the church. Jessica knew how she had been left behind by American society, but did not want the same for her son and she knew that the People's Temple would help establish a society in which her son could have a better life than she had had.

As members of the church, Sebastian and his mother led a happy life. Together they grew to love everything the church stood for. His mother taught him that the People's Temple was put on this earth to better the lives of all people and that they should be proud that they were part of this great change. And throughout his childhood, he and his mother were a close family, their bond strengthened by their membership of the church. His mother also helped him make friends to play with, setting up play dates with the sons of fellow members with whom he would form lasting friendships. Sebastian's was a happy life, a life full of family, friendship, and love for his community.

As he grew older, he started becoming an active member of the church, just like his mother was. He worked in soup kitchens and other charitable activities, took part in politics, and did everything a devoted follower would do.

He was proud of his part in changing the world for the better. This way Sebastian spent his childhood and adolescence as a loyal follower of the church, together with his mother, whom he loved and who was his best friend.

After some twenty years, they moved to the settlement in Guyana, along with the rest of the People's Temple. In Jonestown, things were a little more complicated, and some more extreme measures had to be taken to secure the future of the cause, but Sebastian knew that it was all for the good of everyone.

However, one day, after a visit from United States Senator Leo Ryan, his mother came to him, full of fear. She told him that since they moved to Jonestown, she had learned the terrible truth that the People's Temple was not what she had thought it to be, or at least not what it had been. For all their dreams of creating a better world, the People's Temple had turned into a repressive sect, which only strived to benefit itself and Jim Jones. His mother had known for some time now, but could not tell her son, because she was afraid of what the church members would do to them - how they would tear apart their family. However, now she had no choice, because senator Ryan's visit had spiralled out of control and it would certainly mean the end of their lives, as Jim Jones had called the members together for a final act to save the church's cause.

This revelation of his mother's loss of faith in the church causes Sebastian's worldview to crack, but, importantly, not to break. He finds himself in a bind, in a crisis of identity. For on the one hand, he has always believed that the church does the right thing and acts for the sake of all the people. On the other hand, he has always trusted his mother to be right and want the best for him. The two factors in his life, which he has always trusted without doubt, are now standing on completely opposite each other.

What would be the right alternative of Sebastian? It would be narratively reasonable to wholeheartedly go along with the collective suicide of the People's Temple. He has always had complete and utter faith in the teachings and instructions of Jim Jones and the church. However, he has also had the same faith in what his mother told him, and it would be just as reasonable to go along with his insights in the church. For Sebastian, there is no answer to the choice between

two identities, or two alternatives: the alternative of the devoted follower of the People's Temple, who wholeheartedly participates in revolutionary suicide or the alternative his mother's son, who believes her fear and disappointment, and yearns to refrain from ingesting the cocktail, if only he could. For the end result, it does not matter: Sebastian died with the rest of the church members, but because Sebastian was at a crossroads between these two alternatives, which are both equally reasonable from a narrative point and between which the conflict was never resolved, we cannot say if Sebastian had ownership of his death.

With these three scenario's I have attempted to indicate in what cases we can determine ownership of the actions in Jonestown and in which cases we cannot. Due to the 39 years that have passed since that day, a definitive answer will probably be forever out of reach, but hopefully the theory presented here will give us a better understanding of ownership of actions in these kinds of circumstances. In the last section of this thesis I will discuss some implications and limitations of the proposed theory.



## **Conclusion**

The events that happened on November 18, 1978 in the Jonestown settlement will forever go down in history as one of the greatest tragedies of our time and the debate about who is ultimately to blame will probably continue for quite some time. It is important to note, however, that this question probably has no definitive answer. The People's Temple of the Disciples of Christ consisted of hundreds of members in its final days and all those members, however similar, will have had different stories leading up to that terrible day, small differences and shifts of perspectives in which could lead to different answers to that question.

In this thesis, I have proposed a theory that could provide us with an insight into how we come to own the actions that we execute. This theory is not exhaustive, in the sense that we cannot provide a definitive answer for every action, or every person, but that is exactly the point. Our narratives are shaped by circumstance and our interpretation of those circumstances, in turn, shapes how we act upon our circumstances. We must understand that ownership of our actions is not a black-and-white question.

I hope that this thesis will provide an insight into how we come to our actions and may help us to understand how some can come to actions that, for us, seem unimaginable, but that for others form a reasonable progression of their life story.

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