

Book Review

Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective, by Lynne Rudder Baker. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xxiv + 248. H/b £64.00, P/b £16.99.

While phenomenal consciousness is often thought to raise a “hard problem” for naturalism, self-consciousness may seem to pose no such difficulty. Lynne Rudder Baker disagrees. In *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective*, Baker argues that our distinctive capacity to think about ourselves as such—what she calls the ‘robust first-person perspective (“FPP”)’—is ineliminable and resists naturalistic reduction. Consequently, ontological naturalism, the view that what exists “is exhausted by the entities and properties invoked by scientific theories” (p. 5), is false.

Though some of the themes here will be familiar from Baker’s previous work, many of her ideas have been sharpened or extended—and this is the most comprehensive statement of her views on the FPP to date. The book is richly argued and fruitfully engaged with much relevant cognitive science. Since Baker draws out ramifications of her view for a wide array of issues, it will be of interest not only to those concerned with self-consciousness, but also to those working on related topics in areas such as metaphysics (e.g., reduction), philosophy of mind (e.g., concepts), and even ethics (e.g., responsibility).

Baker begins in chapter 1 by providing a useful taxonomy of varieties of naturalism. Baker charges that most naturalistic views—be they reductive or even nonreductive—are problematic insofar as they leave the world without FPPs. Baker avers, however, that naturalism minimally requires only “consistency with the laws of nature” (p. 17); she promises to develop an account that includes the FPP in our basic ontology, but is nonetheless naturalistic in this way.

Chapter 2 then advances Baker’s distinction between two kinds, or stages, of FPP. The first stage, which she calls the ‘the rudimentary FPP’, involves the capacities for consciousness and intentionality—that is, the ability to perceive the world from a spatiotemporal location in order to engage in goal-directed behavior. Baker maintains that this is a nonconceptual capacity, which we share with human infants and nonhuman animals. The second stage, the robust FPP, is “the ability to conceive of oneself as oneself, in the first-person” (p. 32). This disposition to form these kinds of conceptual thoughts, Baker claims, is unique to suitably developed human beings.

Though admirably straightforward, Baker’s characterizations of these FPPs will not be uncontroversial. Those who maintain that ordinary perceptual content is conceptual, for example, will quibble with Baker’s assumption that the rudimentary FPP does not require concepts. Similarly, proponents of higher-order theories of consciousness, according to which a mental state is conscious just in case one is suitably aware of oneself as being in that state, hold that ordinary (non-self-)consciousness requires conceptualizing oneself as oneself. However, since Baker’s focus is the irreducibility of the robust FPP, perhaps she could amend her view to remain neutral on such issues.

The robust FPP has been discussed under various guises and the evidence for it includes cases that will be familiar to most from Perry's work on the so-called essential indexical and Lewis' treatment of *de se*, or self-locating, attitudes. For instance, Baker discusses Perry's famous example of the messy shopper, who at first notices only that someone is spilling sugar and later realizes that it is *he himself* who is spilling the sugar. Our behavior in such cases seemingly can be explained only by positing a difference between thoughts of oneself as oneself (in the first-person), and thoughts of a person who merely happens to be one. Baker proposes that the former but not the latter involve applications of what she calls 'self-concepts', concepts that putatively refer to oneself "without aid of a name, description, or other third-person referring device" (p. 71).

On Baker's view, self-concepts refer to irreducible first-person properties. And, in chapters 3 and 4, she criticizes several attempts to naturalize the robust FPP either by eliminating it or reducing it to scientific posits such as the particles of physics. She considers, among others, Perry's and Lewis' own reductive theories, a range of reductive theories from cognitive science, as well as the eliminativist views of Dennett and Metzinger. Baker's critiques of these accounts are meticulous, fair, and generally compelling.

While Baker explores several naturalistic views in detail, the literature on self-reference is large and growing—and so it does remain open that there are other promising naturalistic accounts of it available (see, e.g., the essays in Liu, J. & Perry, J. (eds.), 2012, *Consciousness and the Self: New Essays*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press). Of course, no book can reply to every alternative, but one would like to know what Baker would think of such views.

Baker does, however, offer independent arguments against the project of naturalizing the FPP in general in chapter 5. For example, she provides a linguistic argument to the effect that self-concepts, and thus the properties that they express, are irreducible because sentences expressing such concepts are not interchangeable with sentences using only third-person terms. Whether or not that's so, Baker's arguments are sure to provoke discussion.

Chapter 6 traces the ontogenetic development of FPPs and persons. Without a robust FPP, it would seem, we could not perform many complex behaviors distinctive of being persons such as promising, planning for the future, and writing memoirs. Baker thus proposes that the capacity to develop a robust FPP is what makes persons persons. Importantly, Baker argues that we acquire concepts in general by participating in the social activity of language. So while both human infants and nonhuman animals have rudimentary FPPs only, according to Baker the former but not the latter are persons because they will eventually acquire language and thus self-concepts.

Some, however, have urged that certain kinds of self-consciousness operate via nonconceptual content (e.g., Bermúdez, J. L., 1998, *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press). And even if the robust FPP is conceptual, it might seem reasonable to think that it involves simple concepts that nonhuman animals might possess. But Baker offers interesting arguments for her position. For example, she contends that self-reference always involves awareness of oneself as having certain features, which requires conjoining concepts of those features with self-concepts. Likewise, she defends the Wittgensteinian line that concept deployment requires conditions of accurate or inaccurate application, which in turn requires public language.

There is, of course, indication from cognitive ethology that many nonhuman animals—from prairie dogs to honey bees—do engage in simple forms of communication, so one might wonder whether some nonhuman animals nonetheless enjoy robust FPPs. But Baker argues that there is no compelling evidence for this. For example, she claims that the fact that many animals pass the so-called mirror test—seemingly recognizing themselves in mirrors—is too low a bar.

Chapters 7-9 develop Baker's account and extend it to various debates in metaphysics and ethics. Baker clarifies the dispositional nature of first-person properties and proposes that FPPs play a central role in explaining, among other things, personhood, the persistence of persons over time, rational agency, moral responsibility, and even the nature of artifacts. For example, Baker suggests that one's FPP is what makes one persist over time. This account, she claims, constitutes an advance over uninformative alternatives that invoke immaterial souls or selves, but she admits that what makes my FPP *mine* as opposed to yours cannot be explained in a nonreductive way. Similarly, she argues that the robust FPP figures in rational agency insofar as acting rationally requires the capacity to reflect on and weight one's attitudes and goals.

Though Baker is surely right to highlight the importance of the robust FPP, one might question whether it underwrites all of the functions that she proposes. For example, though controversial, there is experimental evidence suggesting that, when faced with complex decisions, reasoning of which we are not aware can lead to better decisions than conscious reasoning (e.g., Strick, M., Dijksterhuis, A., Bos, M. W., Sjoerdsma, A., Van Baaren, R. B., & Nordgren, L. F., 2011, *A Meta-Analysis on Unconscious Thought Effects*, *Social Cognition*, 29, 6: 738-762). Perhaps all there is to rational agency, then, is the appropriate weighting of and connections between attitudes at the first-order level, without self-conscious reflection.

In chapter 10, Baker closes with a discussion of the ramifications for naturalism, outlining a metaphysical picture that she calls 'near-naturalism'. On this view, irreducible higher-level properties such as the FPP are constituted by, but not identical with, lower-level microphysical properties. This is a form of emergentism that affords causal powers to the FPP. Baker argues that the view is nonetheless naturalistic insofar as it does not violate the causal-closure of the physical and avoids Kim's well-known worries about downward causation. While some critics have objected that Baker's views resemble substance dualism (e.g., Olson, E., 2001, Review of *Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View*, by Lynne Rudder Baker, *Mind*, 110, 438: 427-430), Baker does much here to weaken the force of this sort of worry.

Baker's book is a fine defense of a view worth taking seriously. It is a delight to read and peppered with interesting arguments throughout. Just as Chalmers enjoined us two decades ago to take phenomenal consciousness seriously, Baker wisely advises us to face up to the problem of self-consciousness.

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