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BAKER'S FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVES: THEY ARE NOT WHAT THEY SEEM

abstract

Lynne Baker's concept of a first-person perspective is not as clear and straightforward as it might seem at first glance. There is a discrepancy between her argumentation that we have first-person perspectives and some characteristics she takes first-person perspectives to have, namely, that the instances of this capacity necessarily persist through time and are indivisible and unduplicable. Moreover, these characteristics cause serious problems concerning personal identity.

keywords

Personal identity, first-person perspective, fission, Lynne Baker

1. Introduction The notion of a first-person perspective (FPP) seems as natural as any that one could hope for. After all, each of us has his or her particular point of view, from which he or she perceives the world. To deny that such a point of view exists is absurd. To doubt that it plays a vital role in many practical respects is barely reasonable. Phenomenologically¹, neither the fact that we have FPPs nor their most essential characteristics are a matter of controversy.

Lynne Baker's concept of an FPP, as she develops it in her latest book, *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (2013a), is not quite as straightforward as our ordinary notion. Though she seems to take them to be identical, and though she justifies our having FPPs (in her sense) by an appeal to phenomenology and common sense, what she calls an FPP is more theory-laden. Or so I will argue. I start by indicating that something that has a point of view need not thereby persist through time, as Baker takes instances of FPPs to do, and that, for quite similar reasons, such instances need not be indivisible or unduplicable (section 2). I then point out metaphysical (in section 3) and practical (in section 4) complications concerning personal identity to which those unneeded characteristics give rise. These complications, albeit not irresolvable, should be regarded as sufficiently severe to cause us to think twice about FPPs. Indeed, one can give an account of FPPs that preserves Baker's irreducibility thesis – the defence of which comprises by far the most space and effort in her book – without having the disadvantages I criticise (section 5). Such an account, though quite unlike Baker's, is no less common-sensical than hers and is better supported by our intuitions on personal identity. The upshot of all this is that Baker's concept of an FPP, which seems to emerge so naturally, relies heavily on presuppositions in a way that is not made transparent by what she writes.

2. Dubious Characteristics of First-Person Perspectives Baker defines an FPP as the capacity to make self-attributions of first-person reference (Baker 2013a, pp. 33-35) such as

- (1) I am glad that I* am a philosopher now.
- (2) I deeply regret that I* once was a fortune-teller.

¹ Here and hereafter, I use "phenomenology" and its derivatives in the broadly analytic sense in which the word simply refers to the qualitative character of experience.

Both statements are self-attributions (since they are about the utterer of the sentence), and they are of first-person reference (since the “I” marked with an asterisk refers back to the same person as the “I” in the main clause). By making such statements, in which the utterer is both subject and part of the object of the thought, one shows one’s ability to think about oneself as oneself. As it is certainly true that normal human beings have the capacity to think and utter statements such as (1) or (2), it seems to be beyond doubt that human beings have FPPs in this sense.

Let us note, however, a difference between (1) and (2): In order to be a *self*-attribution, (2) presupposes that I persist through time, whereas (1) does not. I can be glad that I am a philosopher now without having to admit that I existed yesterday, whereas I cannot deeply regret that I once was a fortune-teller without assuming that I already existed in the not-too-recent past. Baker does not distinguish between *synchronic* self-attributions of first-person reference such as (1), which can be literally true without me persisting through time, and *diachronic* self-attributions of first-person reference such as (2), which cannot. However, her discussion of personal identity clearly shows that she assumes that a particular FPP can be exemplified by the same entity for longer than a moment (for instance, there would be no problem at all with fission cases if none of the persons involved lived for more than a short while). Thus, it is safe to assume that her concept of an FPP presupposes that we persist through time – a fact that is controversial, to say the least, from a phenomenological point of view. G. Strawson, for example, doubts our persistence through time for purely phenomenological reasons; all we can perceive, according to him, is a moment of consciousness that purports to have memories of other moments of consciousness (Strawson 2003, pp. 356-359).

In addition, merely having an FPP does not entail that someone who utters a diachronic self-attribution thereby makes a true statement of personal identity: To have the capacity to make a certain kind of self-attribution does not include the truth of this self-attribution. According to Baker’s definition of FPPs, conclusive evidence for the fact that each of us has an FPP comes from our use of sentences such as (1) and (2); it is not required by that definition that the use is correct. Take, for example, a theory according to which there are many short-lived instances of FPPs that follow one another and together form what we commonly call a person. Given that we have our FPPs essentially, as Baker claims, I would then exist for only a moment; hence, it would be literally false for me to utter sentences like (2), which

presuppose my persistence through time². Such a theory is not ruled out by Baker's definition. In order to preclude it, she has to presuppose that our capacity to utter and understand diachronic self-attributions of first-person reference guarantees the literal truth of these sentences. In doing this, she dismisses from the outset the theories of philosophers such as Hume, Russell, Perry, Parfit, Lewis, Noonan and Strawson, all of whom claim that a person is nothing more than a series of interrelated mental and (perhaps also) physical events³.

Of course, Baker could claim that having an FPP indeed presupposes persistence through time because it involves having literally true memories, making literally real commitments, and so on. Then, however, we are in need of a further argument for the claim that we have FPPs⁴ because we cannot rely on phenomenology or on common sense anymore. The reasons are that persistence through time is phenomenologically doubtful and that common sense is silent when it comes to highly theoretical ontological matters, such as whether we are enduring or perduring entities. Baker thus faces a dilemma: The more interesting the characteristics she takes FPPs to have, the less clear it is whether we have FPPs at all.

Similar lines of argument can be put forward against the presumed indivisibility and the presumed unduplicability of instances of FPPs. For Baker, "[a]n exemplification of the first-person perspective is like a haecceity, or individual essence" (Baker 2013a, p. 149 n. 6). However, this haecceitistic nature, in which properties such as indivisibility and unduplicability are grounded, does not follow from her characterisation of an FPP as "the capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself* in the first person" (Baker 2013a, p. 35)⁵. For instance, if we regard diachronic self-attributions such as (2) as true only in the less literal way described in the footnote 2, or if we regard them as understandable only if their subjects and their objects share the same brain or body, then our capacity to make them does not require anything like an individual essence.

Besides not being entailed by the relevant definition, indivisibility and

2 Uttering such diachronic self-attributions could still be correct in a less literal way, because we can, when faced with their obvious falseness, reinterpret our personal pronouns by taking them to refer not to what we essentially are but to what we would commonly call a person, namely, an aggregate of instances of FPPs that extends over time.

3 See Hume (1739, pp. 164-171), Russell (1957, p. 89), Perry (1972), Parfit (1984, pp. 210-217, 261-266), Lewis (1983), Noonan (2003, p. 228) and Strawson (2003).

4 An argument on that point is defended in Nida-Rümelin (2010, pp. 198-201). According to Nida-Rümelin, self-attributions are conceptually prior to self-identifications and cannot sensibly be regarded as false. Taken together, these two claims establish that our capacity to make them entails our persistence through time.

5 Strictly speaking, this is her explication of *robust* FPPs but we can safely ignore this difference here.

unduplicability are also highly questionable characteristics of FPPs. To see this for indivisibility, take a fission case, in which the brain of a person, say, Angela Merkel, is split into two half-brains, each of which is transplanted into the head of another person sufficiently similar to the original. The resulting person who has received the left half-brain is called Lefty and the resulting person who has received the right half-brain is called Righty. Both Lefty and Righty, it is assumed, are in every relevant respect proper mental successors of Merkel: They remember being her and share her thoughts, desires, beliefs and character traits. Thus, each of them has the impression of experiencing Merkel's FPP, though they now obviously have different FPPs. It appears that Merkel's FPP has been divided.

For unduplicability, take a scenario in which Merkel is scanned, and the screening data is used to generate a perfect physical duplicate of her. It is then plausible to assume that this duplicate remembers being her as well. In other words, the duplicate has the impression of experiencing Merkel's FPP up to the point of time at which the duplication procedure started, though she now obviously has a perspective different from Merkel's. It appears that Merkel's perspective has been duplicated.

The notorious complaint against this kind of reasoning is that it relies heavily on unrealistic, "far-out" thought experiments. For example, it is taken for granted that it is indeed possible that both Lefty and Righty are proper mental successors of Merkel, and that there are perfect physical duplicates of her. But why should that be so? Moreover, even if it were so, why should we build our philosophical theories around scenarios that are far from being realised?

Though I think that these questions can be answered⁶, this is not the place to discuss them. The point to make here is that Baker, though she has "little patience" (Baker 2013a, p. 153) with thought experiments such as fission, uses them to bring out certain features of her position more clearly⁷, and, more importantly, she does not seem to regard a rejection of far-out thought experiments as a precondition for her theory. So even if she, who considers herself to be a "Practical Realist" for whom it is of considerable interest whether a scenario is a real-life case (Baker 2013b, p. 38), rejects any lesson drawn from highly hypothetical cases, she certainly would not wish her theory to be attractive only for those who share her scepticism. If this is true, it is legitimate to confront her account with critical thought

⁶ See, for example, Sorensen (1992, pp. 21-50, 274-289), Gendler (2004) and Williamson (2007, pp. 179-207) for general considerations about the significance of thought experiments, as well as Nagel (1971), Parfit (1984, p. 219, pp. 245-247, p. 255), Kolak (1993) and Eklund (2002) for a defence of bizarre thought experiments on personal identity, including fission.

⁷ See in Baker (2013a) e.g. pp. 153f. for fission and p. 149 for a perfect replica.

experiments.

In short, our intuitions on personal identity (and hence, if we take qualitative experience to include thought experiment intuitions, our phenomenological evidence) give us no reason to suppose that instances of FPPs are indivisible or unduplicable or persisting through time; quite the contrary. Neither do these characteristics follow from Baker's definition of FPPs. Moreover, to suppose that their instantiation is warranted by common sense would mean misinterpreting the role of ordinary judgment in theoretical discussions, in which the uncritical preservation of an alleged mode of thinking is not, by default, a requirement of rationality. What Baker's account lacks is either further argumentation or an explicit statement that it rests on highly controversial preconditions.

3. Metaphysical Complications Concerning Personal Identity

Baker dubs her theory of personal identity the "Not-So-Simple Simple View". A simple view of personal identity is one that offers no non-trivial, non-circular, non-identity-involving conditions for personal identity. Baker's theory is simple in this sense because she defines persons as entities that have an FPP essentially (Baker 2013a, p. 149), and because one cannot give, according to her, any informative identity criteria for FPPs (Baker 2013a, pp. 154ff.). As her theory is nevertheless compatible with materialism (Baker 2013a, p. 151), it is not-so-simple.

Since persons are individuated by FPPs, Baker's theory relies heavily on her assumption that the instances of FPPs persist through time and are indivisible and unduplicable. This can best be illustrated by means of a fission case, such as the one in which Angela Merkel's brain is divided. Here, the indivisibility of instances of FPPs entails that at most one of the two fission products can share Merkel's FPP. But which one? According to Baker,

[t]he answers are either Lefty, Righty, or neither, and the Not-So-Simple Simple View is compatible with all three answers. We may not know which is the correct answer, but the Not-So-Simple Simple View implies that there is a fact of the matter that depends on whether Lefty or Righty or neither has the original person's first-person perspective (Baker 2013a, pp. 153-154).

Like adherents of theories of immaterial substances, Baker claims here that there is a fact of the matter whether Lefty, Righty or neither has the original person's FPP, although there is no empirical evidence whatsoever concerning who shares her perspective, given that the scenario is perfectly symmetrical. Thus, Baker has to admit that we may not know which person

shares the original person's FPP, even though the case seems quite clear because both Lefty and Righty are perfect mental successors of the original person. One cannot help having the impression here that instances of FPPs are indivisible precisely because being the same person should be defined in terms of having the same FPP.

Unlike theorists of immaterial substances, Baker can claim that there is a fact of the matter in fission cases without claiming the existence of philosophically suspect soul-like entities (note that FPPs are properties, not objects). However, we should not be too quick to credit that to her concept of FPP because a simple view need not involve this concept in order to be not-so-simple. Many properties that supervene on, or are emergent from, physical ones can do the work of FPPs with respect to personal identity. For instance, a view according to which personal identity supervenes (for some reason or other) on the identity and intactness of a certain part of the brain would yield the same results: There is a (perhaps unknowable) fact of the matter as to what happens in thought experiments such as fission cases, namely, that the post-fission person who owns the critical part of the brain is identical to the original person, and we need not invoke immaterial substances but only particular supervenience facts. In addition, only FPPs in Baker's sense are sufficient for her theory of personal identity because having an FPP in the ordinary, phenomenologically harmless sense does not imply persisting through time or being indivisible and unduplicable. In short, Baker-style FPPs are not necessary for a not-so-simple simple view of personal identity, and ordinary FPPs are not even sufficient for such a theory.

Things are even worse. Baker's account also has severe metaphysical consequences that she does not discuss. In order to explain them, I will present two thought experiments, one given by Parfit, the other inspired by him. In Parfit's so-called "Combined Spectrum" (Parfit 1984, pp. 236-240), a series of cases is described in which one person is transformed by a molecule per molecule exchange into another, say, Angela Merkel into Vladimir Putin. In the first case, only one molecule of Merkel's body is replaced by the respective molecule of Putin's body (it does not matter which molecule). In the second case, a second molecule of Putin replaces a second molecule of Merkel. And so on. In the last case of the spectrum, all of her molecules are replaced by Putin's. Near the one end of the spectrum, the resulting persons are clearly more similar to Merkel and thus can be said to still have her FPP. Near the other end of the spectrum, the resulting persons are clearly more similar to Putin and thus can be said to have his FPP. However, what can be said about the cases in the middle of the spectrum? As Merkel and Putin obviously do not share the same FPP, and as there can be no persons without

an FPP at all, the persons in the middle either share Merkel's perspective or Putin's or have a new one. Whatever option one chooses, there have to be, somewhere in the spectrum, two adjacent cases that differ only by one molecule (and hence are qualitatively more or less identical) but exemplify different FPPs (for example, either Merkel's and Putin's, or Merkel's and a new one). This is highly implausible.

In another series of cases (call them "Reunion Spectrum"), a fission case is followed by the fusion of the fission products. Imagine Merkel's brain split into two half-brains that are kept separate for some time and then unified again, so that the unified brain has memories of Lefty, of Righty and of pre-fission Merkel. In this Reunion Spectrum, the cases vary with respect to the time that passes between fission and fusion. At one end of the Reunion Spectrum, several years lie in between, and during that time obviously two distinct persons existed, exemplifying two distinct FPPs. At the other end of the spectrum, only a very short time – a second, say – has gone by, and only one person was involved, namely, Angela Merkel⁸. Somewhere near the middle of the spectrum, however, there have to be two adjacent cases, differing only in that the reunion takes place a second earlier in one of them, such that in one of them only one FPP is exemplified, whereas in the other one two FPPs are exemplified. This, again, is highly implausible. So each of the spectra reveals the implausibility of the assumption that personal identity depends on a property that is – in the cases under consideration, in which all persons have robust FPPs – either definitely exemplified or definitely not exemplified. The easiest way out seems to be to deny outright the validity of these spectra. However, to say it again, denying the validity of far-out thought experiments is only an option for Baker if she is prepared to view scepticism concerning such thought experiments as a necessary condition for her account, and thereby to limit its scope and persuasive power.

4.
Practical
Complications
Concerning
Personal
Identity

In addition to these metaphysical complications, there are practical ones. One of the most prominent reasons why we are interested in personal identity at all is that we hope to find answers to questions such as "What matters in survival?" and "Under what conditions is someone responsible for particular actions?". It is hard to believe, however, that virtually imperceptible deviations (such as in adjacent cases of the spectra) can make all the difference when it comes to survival or moral responsibility. Take

⁸ In Baker (2000, pp. 162ff.), Baker states that there is only one FPP exemplified in reunion cases, though there are two streams of consciousness. This explanation makes it even harder to individuate FPPs.

the fission case: If the original person committed a crime *before* the fission took place, who is morally responsible for that crime, Lefty or Righty? It is implausible that it is whoever shares the original person's perspective, for two reasons. For a start, we are simply not able to determine if this is Lefty or Righty or neither. More importantly, sameness of memories, beliefs, desires and character traits seems far more important for moral responsibility than some non-empirical and unknowable fact. If this is right, then being morally responsible does not consist in having the same FPP. Similarly, what matters for me in terms of my survival? That there is some future person who is psychologically continuous to me in the sense that this person shares my thoughts, feelings, memories and so on, or that there is some future person who shares my FPP? Normally, psychological continuity and having the same FPP go hand in hand. In thought experiments in which they come apart, however, it becomes obvious that psychological continuity is of primary importance for us and that we do not care about things we may not even know, namely, whether our FPP is still the same. Therefore, Baker-style FPPs are inappropriate to capture what lies at the heart of the debate on personal identity: Questions concerning rationality and morality.

5.
An Alternative
Account of
Irreducible
First-Person
Perspectives

If it were clear that we have FPPs in Baker's sense, then we would have to live with these consequences. We can, however, save the most central feature of Baker's account, namely, the claim that FPPs are irreducible to impersonal properties, without being committed to an implausible view of personal identity. As I have explained, instances of FPPs need not persist through time. We could, alternatively, take them to be, for example, moments of consciousness (MOCs). Consider an aggregate, a mereological sum, of MOCs that are psychologically interrelated, so that there is continuity of memories, desires and beliefs between earlier and later MOCs. There is no entity (or, if we take the mereological sum itself to be an entity, only a trivial entity) that unifies these MOCs. Nevertheless, we could, as a matter of convention, regard all these MOCs as sharing the same FPP.

If we do so, there are two FPPs involved in a fission case: One that is the exemplification of the MOCs that together made up the original person plus the MOCs that together make up Lefty; and one that is the exemplification of the MOCs of the original person plus those of Righty. Thus, the original person is divided into two persons. Similarly, one could show that instances of FPPs are duplicable. Furthermore, we could understand FPPs in this way when we read Baker's explications of agency and moral responsibility (Baker 2013a, pp. 183-206); though agency and moral responsibility presuppose, according to her, an FPP, there is no reason to think that a

phenomenologically harmless one whose instances need not persist through time does not suffice. Of course, Baker would not accept this account; and neither would I like to endorse it; I just state it to show that there is a theoretical option that Baker does not consider.

Why are FPPs, as they appear in this view, irreducible? Compare what Baker writes about the uninformativeness of simple views of personal identity:

[I]t is impossible to have informative necessary and sufficient conditions for transtemporal personal identity: Persons are basic entities; being a person does not consist in satisfying nonpersonal conditions. So, any correct account of personal identity must be uninformative; otherwise, it would be reductive (Baker 2013a, p. 154; footnote omitted).

If we take the instances of FPPs to be MOCs rather than persisting entities, we reduce persons to specific aggregates of MOCs. We give a reductive account of personal identity. That is what Baker criticises in the quotation: The reductiveness of accounts that deny that the owners of FPPs persist through time. She overlooks, however, that we have to distinguish two kinds of reductionism: reductionism that reduces persons to, for example, MOCs, and reductionism that reduces intentional states to neural states. It is this last kind of reductionism against which Baker's arguments for the irreducibility of FPPs are directed: A reductionism of the mental in terms of the physical. Logically independent from it is the first kind of reductionism, the reductionism of the persistent in terms of the momentary.

To be sure, there are philosophers who argue for a close tie between these two kinds of reductionism, most notably Sydney Shoemaker⁹. Whether there really is such a close tie, however, is a matter of controversy. Therefore, it is best not to take it for granted that the irreducibility of intentionality entails the irreducibility of persons as persisting entities. Arguably, it seems possible to combine an account of irreducible FPPs both with a more conclusive phenomenology and with a complex, and hence more informative, theory of personal identity.

⁹ See, e.g., Shoemaker (1984) and Shoemaker (1997).

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