THE INESSENTIAL ROBUST FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

Master of Arts

In

Philosophy

by

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San Francisco, California

Fall 2015
CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *The Inessential Robust First-Person Perspective* by Christopher Frank Masciari, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

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There are many opposing theories concerning the first-person perspective, ranging from hardline eliminative theories to more extreme “Cartesian” theories. Without considering those theories which clearly fall under the heading of Cartesian, I would like to examine two theories which classify as extreme in two other senses. The purpose of this paper is then to evaluate those possible senses and ultimately to argue that a compromise is in order. Not only should we reject any theory which attributes ontological primacy to the first-person perspective, but we should also be skeptical of theories which outright reject any belief pertaining to that perspective. In other words, I will argue that even if we should reject the first-person perspective as a metaphysically robust property, it may be possible to have knowledge pertaining to the first-person perspective.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Carlos Montemayor and Dr. Isabelle Peschard for their guidance throughout the construction of this paper.
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1 Introduction

There are many opposing theories concerning the first-person perspective, ranging from hardline eliminative theories to more extreme “Cartesian” theories. Without considering those theories which clearly fall under the heading of Cartesian, I would like to examine two theories which classify as extreme in two other senses. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate those possible senses and ultimately to argue that a compromise is in order. To begin, I will evaluate what I take to be a quite radical view of the first-person perspective, namely Lynne Baker’s distinction between the rudimentary and robust first-person perspective. The first is closest to the Cartesian tradition without properly being included in it. Lynne Baker argued substantially for this position in her most recent book, Naturalism And The First-Person Perspective. Her goal is to make room in our current scientifically funded ontology for the property of having a first-person perspective. Baker presents her view in contrast to the generally accepted reductive and eliminative criteria for property naturalization. Neither option, Baker argues, in its current form, includes any substantive notion of the first-person perspective nor attributes any causal powers to the first-person perspective that are not ultimately attributed to its physical base. So, according to Baker, since the first-person cannot be reduced or eliminated from ontology, and since it does in fact have causal influence, the first-person perspective is an essential property that is required for an exhaustive description of reality as it exists now. She presents her

1 Lynne Rudder Baker, Naturalism And The First-Person Perspective (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)
2 I emphasis “now” because Baker argues for an “ontology-at-a-time” view rather than “ontology-simpliciter”.
view as a version of a 'near-naturalism'. I take this view to be a thoroughgoing realist (prima facie non-Cartesian) view of the first-person perspective.

I will present a critique of Baker’s project by examining what I take to be the problematic metaphysical consequences of her non-reductive ‘near naturalism’. First, in section 2 I will go over Baker’s most substantial positive claims. In section 3 I will present a view of causality developed by Stephen Yablo\(^3\) that I will argue creates problems for the distinction between the causal powers of the rudimentary and robust first-person perspective. Furthermore I will argue that in order to make clear the causal role of the robust first-person perspective Baker needs to provide further argumentation. In section 4, after I highlight what I take to be an important problem with her theory, I will then present some alternative theories which could be considered completely antithetical to her view, namely Thomas Metzinger’s thoroughgoing eliminative view of the first-person perspective. The purpose of this will be to highlight some difficulties with his position as well in order to possibly find a compromise between the extreme positions. Namely, there may be theoretical and empirical reasons for distancing ourselves from a thoroughgoing error theory with respect to perspective dependent content. Ultimately, I will suggest that even if we have good reason to reject a substantive conception of the first-person perspective (thought of in the most extreme, yet non-Cartesian sense), we may have to admit to the existence of contents or properties which might be construed as first-personal in a minimal sense (a sense that applies to non-linguistic organisms, i.e., knowing that

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oneself is hungry, etc). To this end I want to briefly suggest two other theories which I believe do just that, namely, Daniel Dennett’s notion of a center of narrative gravity and Peter Carruthers theory of mind-reading. But for now I will examine Baker’s non-Cartesian, “extreme” view.

2 Naturalism And The First-Person Perspective

According to Baker the first-person perspective is divided into two stages, the rudimentary and the robust. The rudimentary stage is constituted by an entity’s capacity to interact consciously and intentionally with the environment. Moreover, it is the ‘origin’ of the perceptual field. In other words, the rudimentary stage can be likened to phenomenal unity, i.e., the unified experience constituted by in part by cross-modal representations. Metzinger calls this a weak first-person phenomenon: “Weak first-person phenomena are those in which, for instance, animals can be conceived of as operating under an egocentric world-model forming the center of their own universe and the origin of their own perspective.” (Metzinger, 574) The robust stage, however, is the rudimentary stage enhanced by language and society such that a human person gains the capacity to refer to herself as herself in the first-person. The first stage is first-personal and is shared by all and only conscious organisms in virtue of having a particular point of view (and appropriately complex biologies), whereas the second stage is first-personal in virtue of an agent’s possession of an I*-concept and thus an I*-property (ostensibly requiring an even more complex biology). It should be noted that Baker does not think that conscious

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4 Baker, p.173
awareness is necessary for the robust first-person perspective. She argues that even if consciousness does turn out to reducible to brain states there will still be robust I* phenomena which are irreducible. For Baker, the major obstacle will be twofold. First, Baker needs to justify the move from simply possessing a concept to possessing a property that systematically corresponds to that concept. Second, Baker needs to show that if there is an I*-property, it does not simply sit idly by (as a sort of epiphenomenon) whilst its constituents do all the causal work. Since I am willing to accept the move from concepts to properties for the moment (although I think it is problematic), for the sake of brevity I will simply mention the linguistic and metaphysical arguments and move on.

2.1 The Linguistic and Metaphysical Arguments

First, in order to justify the transition from concepts to properties, and then, to justify the inclusion of that property in a complete ontology, Baker provides two arguments. The first is called the linguistic argument and the second is called the metaphysical argument.

The linguistic argument seems to imply that because we systematically associate the I*-concept with some set of related instances where the I*-concept is invoked (e.g., I* am hungry, I* am CM, etc.) we can conclude that the I*-concept expresses a property. In other words, it is non-empty, unlike terms like phlogiston. Unlike phlogiston cases, where nothing in reality could satisfy the concept “phlogiston” (the concept is empty), the I* concept is satisfied in virtue of its being invoked in particular cases, particularly when a person makes a claim about some intention or belief by making use of a self-referring

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5 Baker, p.105
indexical (I* intend to X, I* believe that Y, etc).

Next, Baker presents a metaphysical argument against naturalistic ontologies from the premises that there are I*-properties and that I*-properties are not naturalizable (under the standard criteria of reduction or elimination), to the conclusion that naturalism (reductive and eliminative) is false. The metaphysical argument holds assuming that reduction and elimination exhaust the possible criteria for naturalization. I am willing to accept that assumption.

So, because the I* property exists (in virtue of it being non-empty, unlike phlogiston), and the fact that neither reductive nor eliminative naturalistic ontologies include the I* property, it follows that naturalism in its current form is false. For the remainder of this paper I am going to assume the truth of the linguistic argument and the metaphysical argument.

2.2 Dispositionalism

The property of having a first-person perspective for Baker is a single capacity to interact consciously and intentionally (at a minimum) and/or, if certain conditions are met (i.e., being part of a linguistic community and actually possessing an ability to use language), to refer to oneself as oneself* in the first person. In other words, it is a disposition; call it F.

Baker defends her view of the disposition F by appealing to Nancy Cartwright's criteria for dispositionality. So, F is a disposition if it is (1) Two-Sided and (2) Malleable. Two-sidedness refers to the fact that some x can exemplify a disposition without also
manifesting it, e.g., when a normal adult speaker is sleeping they exemplify the first-person perspective but they do not manifest it. It is the second feature (malleability) which makes the robust first-person perspective impossible to capture by a standard functional analysis, according to Baker. Namely, both the triggering conditions and manifestation conditions vary quite a bit given context, i.e., moral responsibility, acting on a desire, remembering, etc.

Dispositions are typically thought to be either, dispositional essentially or ultimately reducible to their categorical base\(^6\). The I* disposition, for Baker, is an essential property because it is not reducible to categorical properties. A disposition is reducible to categorical properties if and only if it strongly supervenes on "appropriate" categorical, and ultimately on "appropriate" micro-properties\(^7\). A massive definition (Baker's term) that functionalizes all I* properties at once would suffice for a reduction (though not elimination), however, Baker suspects that such a project is hopeless, as I mentioned above\(^8\). As far as elimination is concerned, she presents arguments against Dennett and Metzinger.

Baker's view has certain other features. For example, "x-exemplifies-F-essentially \(\star\) \(\mathbf{t}\)" is a state of affairs such that identities between individual first-person perspectives

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\(^7\) Baker, p.176

\(^8\) See Baker (2013) for her arguments
can be made explicit. For example:

1. I=CM iff I&CM share one instance of exemplifying-F-essentially

2. I≠CM iff I&CM do not share an instance of exemplifying-F-essentially

However, at this point Baker has not explained exactly how her dispositional account of the first-person perspective is 'nearly' naturalizable. Thus far, we have only been told that if it is a property it is at least nearly-naturalizable

2.3 Emergence

Baker claims that her account is a property-constitution view as opposed to a standard mereological account. In her view, properties are not constituted, but property-instances are. In other words, this view rejects standard mereological accounts of ontological levels and reduction. According to Baker, “Constitution only obtains in certain circumstances; the very same mereological sum of water molecules scattered all over the world would not constitute a tidal wave.” The important feature of this example is the notion of a circumstance. For Baker, a circumstance is not simply some set of physical constituents that is the putative subvenience base for a property at a given time. Rather, constitution should be thought of contextually; although it is not obvious what should specify the context. Obviously the context in which a certain set of water molecules constitutes a vortex or tidal wave will be whatever context guarantees the satisfaction of the property of being a tidal wave or a vortex. In any case, it seems clear that the purpose of introducing

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9 Although Baker spends quite a bit of time explicating her view of dispositions, I should note that it is orthogonal to my criticism of her since I will be focusing almost exclusively on causality.

10 Baker, p.210
the notion of a circumstance is to reject the notion of the necessary connection between a
certain mereological sum of physical constituents and the emergent phenomena that they
constitute. So, the story goes, mereology is inadequate to explain the disposition F.

2.4 Causality

According to Baker, since mereology is an inadequate metaphysical view and upper-
level phenomena have causal powers, the causal powers of the phenomena must be over
and above the causal powers of their physical constituents. For example, a person can seek
a mate, but the mereological sum of particles that constitute the physical base for a person
at a time cannot. Therefore, we can conclude that the first-person perspective has causal
powers over and above the causal powers of its physical constituents. Baker defends her
position against some concerns related to causal closure and over-determination but I take
them to be adequate responses because they rest on a mereological or supervenience
relation between upper and lower level phenomena—which she rejects—so I will not
explain them. Interestingly, although Baker does not really have a thoroughgoing theory of
causality (at least that I am aware of), it does seem to be initially compatible with Stephen
Yablo’s theory of mental causation (Yablo 1992). Roughly, it is the view that the problem
between mental and physical causation can be dealt with within the framework of
determinates and determinables. It should be mentioned that not only is Yablo’s theory
initially compatible with Baker’s theory, it actually seems like the best theory because it
allows for mental (upper level) causation; however, I will expand on this idea below.

I have just given a rough sketch of Baker’s metaphysical account of the first-person
perspective. For the remainder of the paper I will try and explain some of the issues with her view.

3 Problems With The Metaphysics Of The First-Person Perspective

At least two questions come to mind with respect to Baker’s view of emergent properties and the causal powers thereof. First, what is meant by causality? So far, Baker has only said that the I* property F is an emergent property and it is causal, but in the absence of a definition of causality it is not obvious what the precise relationship is between some upper-level phenomenon and its effect(s), particularly with respect to F. In order to clear up the issue I want to introduce Stephen Yablo’s defense of mental causation as I see at least a prima facie similarity with Baker’s view. Second, if disposition F is emergent and causal, and F can be understood with respect to both the rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives, when we attribute causal powers to the first-person perspective, are we attributing them to the rudimentary stage or the robust stage? I will take up both ambiguities in turn.

Ultimately, I will argue that if we follow Yablo’s Commensuration Criteria for causality, the distinction between the causal powers of the rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives collapses. Thus, the robust first-person perspective loses much of its metaphysical appeal and we are only left with the rudimentary stage.

3.1 What Is Meant By Causality?

Baker does not supply a formal definition of causality, although she does provide a principle that is meant to illustrate the relation between F (presumably any mental property
or event would do) and its constituting property-instance (its physical constituents). Baker calls it Independent Causal Efficacy\(^{11}\), it is stated as such:

\begin{enumerate}
\item x’s having F at t has an effect e, and
\item x’s having F at t would have had the effect e even if its constituting property-instance had been different, and
\item x’s having F at t confers causal powers that could not have been conferred by its constituting property instance alone.
\end{enumerate}

So, the first-person perspective is causal in a way that the constituting property instance alone is not.

The form of the ICE principle is strikingly similar to Yablo’s notion of causal commensuration. Yablo suggests that causal influence should be attributed to the thing that seems to make the difference: Among causation’s prerequisites is that the cause should be, as far as possible, commensurate with its effect; and part of commensuration is that nothing causes an effect which is essentially overladden with materials to which the effect is in no way beholden\(^{12}\).

He presents four conditions for commensuration. They are as follows:

\begin{enumerate}
\item C=if x had not occurred, then y would not have occurred either (Contingent)
\item A=If x had not occurred, then if it had, y would have occurred as well (Adequate)
\item R=for all (x-)<(x), if (x-) had occurred without (x), then (y) would not have occurred (Required)
\item E= for all (x+)> (x), (x+) was not required for (y) (Enough)
\end{enumerate}

We should understand Yablo’s conditions for causality with respect to the distinction between determinates and determinables. Yablo argues that a physical base P is the determinate of a determinable mental property M. The relation is like that of crimson and

\[^{11}\text{Baker, p.216}\]
\[^{12}\text{Yablo, p.279}\]
red or red and color. One way to think about the distinction is in terms of ways that a thing X (determinable) could be. In the previous example, MP is the determinate of the determinable M. In that case, MP is simply a particular way that M is manifested (the particular MP base). Crimson is a particular way that the kind RED could be.

This formulation of causality is applicable to intentional actions as well as actions resulting from the I*-capacity because mental properties or events are formulated more generally for Yablo. Since Baker does not provide any strict conditions for causality and Yablo's theory is at least prima facie compatible with Baker's view, I think it is unproblematic to flesh out Baker's theory with Yablo's. However, this is just to say why it is not problematic to incorporate Yablo's view into Baker's. Furthermore, I think that Yablo's view provides Baker with the most plausible way to avoid the threat of epiphenomenalism. Roughly: Baker spends a great deal of time contrasting her theory with a thoroughgoing Cartesian theory of mind, thus giving up on the sort of assumed causal influence (by the mental) associated with a Cartesian view, so it would be nice to see a possible way to avoid the possibility that our mental lives have no causal influence whatsoever, while also remaining non-Cartesian.

I will now shift the discussion to the second ambiguity: the causal distinction between the rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives.

3.2 What Does The Robust First-Person Perspective Contribute To Causality?

The causal distinction between the rudimentary and robust stages is unclear. Baker

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13 Yablo 1992 (246)
defines the rudimentary perspective as the capacity to interact consciously and intentionally, including the capacity to act with regard to desires. Because the examples of mental (higher-level) causation include desires and intentions—the desire to curtsy or the intention to pay bills—it is not obvious if we ought to interpret those desires as resulting the rudimentary perspective or the robust perspective. Ultimately, or so it seems, the robust stage is not causal or it collapses into the rudimentary stage.

Imagine a world completely physically and behaviorally identical to ours but lacking the I*-concept and property\textsuperscript{14}. In that world, subjects have intentions and conscious awareness and their behaviors are structured accordingly (as with any non-linguistic creature). In other words, they have a rudimentary first-person perspective. However, in that world no subject knows who they themselves* are because they do not have the I*-concept. In fact, David Lewis’ two gods\textsuperscript{15} are very much like this. He even stipulates that the two gods (the one on the tallest mountain and the one on the coldest mountain) have causal powers; one can throw manna and one can throw lightning. In other words, they can plan and act accordingly. So, since they know all third person facts about the world (what baker would call impersonal facts) all they don’t know is who they are in the first-person*. Or as Baker would say, they lack the capacity to conceive of themselves as themselves* in the first-person. I realize that my argument rests on whether or not a world like that is really imaginable, so I will take up that criticism in the objections section.

\textsuperscript{14} David Lewis’ ‘Two Gods’ thought experiment shows that this hypothetical is not very difficult to imagine.

Since that world is in fact imaginable (or so I think), it becomes clear that the capacity to entertain I* thoughts, and thus, to self-attribute a self-property, has no bearing on an organisms’s causal powers. Let us call our hypothetical world, The Zombie+ World (ZPW). Now let’s compare that world to our world with respect to a first-personal behavior, say ‘acting on a desire’.

Let...
X*=A Robust First-Person Perspective Cause (I* desire x)
X=A Rudimentary First-Person Perspective Cause (CM desires x)
Y*=Some Effect E of X*
Y=Some Effect E of X

Then, the following argument holds: (The Indistinguishability Argument)

1. X is the cause of Y iff X is proportional to Y; meets the criteria {C,A,R,E}
2. X and/or X* are part of ontology if and only if they are needed for a complete description of reality (Naturalistic Hypothesis)
3. X is a cause Y (Hypothesis @ Zombie+ World)
4. X* is a cause Y* (Hypothesis @ Our World)
5. X and X* are both part of ontology (3 and 4)
6. Y and Y* are indiscernible (effect of acting on some desire)
7. So, (Y could be the effect of X or X*) and (Y* could be the effect of X or X*)
8. Therefore, the addition of I* contributes nothing to causality
9. Therefore, if I*-property exists it is causally inert
10. If it is causally inert, it does not contribute to a description of reality

∴ I* IS NOT PART OF ONTOLOGY

Another way of putting the argument is as such: because the causal effects in the zombie+ world and our world are indiscernible, in our world, even if we stipulate that certain kinds of causes have certain kinds of effects, which stage caused which effect at a particular time is an open question. Because the causal powers of the rudimentary perspective are commensurate with the effects in both worlds, it becomes less obvious what
role the supposedly more complex capacity has for causality. Take for example the event of Socrates guzzling hemlock (Yablo 1992). It would be strange to say that the guzzling per se caused his death. More likely, if he hadn’t guzzled it, he would have drunk it in some other determinate way, and his death would still have occurred. So this highlights an example of a determinable being the cause of a certain effect. If we agree with Baker and allow for the attribution of desire-action pairs (general intentional attitudes and their effects) at the rudimentary stage (and those are the sort of situations we invoke when trying to identify particular manifestations of the robust stage), then what exactly should we assume the robust stage contributes? I suspect that we cannot specify an answer without circularity. For the moment I would like to consider three possible objections to my argument so far.

3.3 Objections

One may agree that it seems perfectly plausible that the robust stage is a determinate of the rudimentary stage (namely, a particular way of having a first-person perspective, i.e., one afforded by language and in particular the self-referential indexical “I”, at least according to my reading of Baker). However, that entails, they might argue, that it is possible that the robust stage (the determinate) is causally relevant for a given effect. Yablo thinks this is possible. This I believe is a natural way to argue against the indistinguishability argument. However, what would need to be satisfied at a minimum is the following conditional: if the robust first-person perspective did not manifest, then the effect $E$ would not have happened either. This would be to argue against the conceivability
of the ZPW. But because of the attribution of desire-action pairs to rudimentary agents (i.e., dogs, cats, infants) I do not see this move as open to Baker. This however, may lead into yet another objection.

One might also argue that there are clear cases in which possessing an I* concept is ineliminable, such as when making judgments about the difference between appearance and reality and/or when making judgments about the contents of your perception versus the contents of someone else’s perception. My first inclination is just to say that other sorts of creatures can presumably make those distinctions as well. If it is assumed that non-human organisms can make those distinctions (at least to some extent), yet not possess an I* concept, then the I* concept is not necessary to make the relevant distinctions. However, I am not entirely certain that my argument is sound. In particular, it may be false that non-linguistic creatures can make those distinctions. However, there is some evidence that suggests the possibility (Lurz 2011). In any case, I suspect that this is an empirical question so I would like to put it aside for now.

Another possible response to my criticism of Baker would be to challenge the analogy between determinates and determinables on the one hand and the robust perspective and rudimentary perspective on the other. One might say, quite naturally, that crimson is a determinate of red, yet it is not obviously the case that the robust perspective is a determinate of the rudimentary perspective. Rather, it seems more plausible that it is the other way around; that the rudimentary perspective is a determinate of the robust perspective. This would lend credence to the view that the robust perspective actually does
supply some level of causal influence. I think this would be perfectly correct reasoning, if it were plausible. However, the sort of asymmetry that you would expect from a determinate/determinable relation (the determinate entails the determinable, but not vice versa), seems absent in this case. In other words, it is false that having a rudimentary first-person perspective entails having a robust first-person perspective. So, ultimately I think that objection is not problematic.

The previous considerations about indistinguishability suggest a reason to be skeptical of the assumed importance placed on the robust first person perspective. If the indistinguishability argument is accepted, it is clear that the regularity of the I*-concept does not entail the existence of an I*-property unless the I*-property is non-causal, in which case it seems better suited simply as a normative concept. This applies in general to views which place the utmost importance on conceptual differences rather than metaphysical differences. For example, any theory which treats the conceptual difference between Clark Kent and Superman as a metaphysical difference will be contentious, after all, they are identical in all possible worlds. I think the the rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives are much like that.

In the next sections I hope to present a more positive view of the first-person perspective and what I take to be the virtues of Baker’s view. That is to say that, the first-person perspective is not totally empty. I will argue that rather than identifying the robust first person perspective, we in fact most often invoke the concept of the first person perspective to mark sources of control, desire, attention, action, and memory (i.e., the sorts
of capacities which are necessary for manifestations of the first-person perspective Baker introduces). However, firstly, I would like to present, what I take to be, another “extreme” view, namely Metzinger’s Phenomenal self-model (PSM) theory.

4 Alternative Theories

4.1 Metzinger’s Phenomenal Self-Model

In “Being No One” (2003) by Thomas Metzinger, it is argued that rather than including the first-person perspective in ontology (as baker argues), the first-person perspective is ultimately explainable in terms of neuro-cognitive processes, thus apt for elimination (although there may be some sense in which his theory is best understood as a reductive theory). In any case, it is clear that Metzinger does not think that anything like a self or soul or essential property constitutive of the first-person perspective actually exists. Before I suggest a problem with his view (revolving around the concept of epistemic justification) I will provide a brief introduction.

Metzinger provides an account of the first-person perspective by introducing two theoretical entities. First there is the Phenomenal Self-Model (PSM from now on), and second, the Phenomenal Model of the Intentionality Relation (PMIR from now on). Roughly, the PSM corresponds to the rudimentary stage and the PMIR to the robust stage. In order to explicate Metzinger’s position I will, in part, utilize Baker’s interpretation as she directly deals with his theory. To begin, “the content of a Phenomenal Self Model (PSM) ‘is the conscious self: your bodily sensations, your present emotional situation, plus
all of the contents of your phenomenally experienced cognitive processes.\textsuperscript{16} For Metzinger, the model itself is transparent in that it is not experienced as a model. Furthermore, certain contents of the model are experienced and are thus considered opaque. So, for example, when a subject experiences the color “blue”, the content “blue” is experienced, it is not experienced as a representation. This aspect of the first-person perspective is highly related to what Baker calls the rudimentary perspective. It is simply the origin of the perceptual field, in Baker’s terminology. The PMIR, on the other hand, is what grounds a “cognitive first-person perspective”.\textsuperscript{17} Self-referential thoughts (I* thoughts) require integrating part of an opaque self-model into a preexisting transparent self-model\textsuperscript{18}. This means that the model itself is being represented as an object by the transparent phenomenal self model.

To illustrate the point, imagine a modified two gods scenario where God A does not know who she herself is, but God B does.

A thinks to herself: “I want to throw manna”. So A retrieves the relevant information, (opaque content) subsumed under a transparent phenomenal self model, which serves the purpose of throwing manna. A responds to the information and throws manna.

B thinks to herself: “I believe that I* want to throw lightning bolts”. So B retrieves the relevant information (opaque content) in order to throw lightning bolts, but differently from A, B also represents herself as the subject of the desire to throw lightning bolts, i.e., she

\textsuperscript{16} Baker, 84
\textsuperscript{17} Baker, 85
\textsuperscript{18} Metzinger, 403
represents herself phenomenally (her phenomenal self-model is now represented to itself, i.e., it is opaque) and in an asymmetric intentionality relation to the world. B then throws lightning bolts.

The fundamental difference between A and B is that B represents herself as an object in some relation to the world, whereas A merely represents the world (her own desires included).

4.1 A Problem With Metzinger's Theory

Although I tend to err on the side of reduction with respect to the first-person perspective, I suspect that Metzinger’s view is overly skeptical. For example, Metzinger believes that any belief pertaining to the putative “self” is false because the contents that constitute it are merely phenomenal. Just as hallucinatory content entails a belief with that content is unjustified, so does all phenomenal content, namely the content associated with the putative self. Here is a quote:

If you say, “Sometimes I am a little isolated,” then the truth conditions for this statement are to be found in your social environment. Are you really? This intentional content is mediated through your PSM. The phenomenal content that you feel a little isolated, however, supervenes locally on brain properties. It might be a hallucination. You need independent means of verification. (Metzinger 579)

Although I agree that we can reject certain aspects of the self, namely the assumed causal efficacy of the cognitive first-person perspective and the putative ontological status of the self, I find it problematic to be committed to an error theory with respect to all content associated with the first-person perspective. I think that Metzinger’s error is the result of (1) a dubious notion of epistemic justification and (2) placing too much weight on
phenomenal indiscernibility. Firstly, he does not exactly define "epistemic justification" but merely alludes to when a belief might be justified. For Metzinger, a belief attained through scientific practice can constitute knowledge, whereas a belief attained by an individual cannot. He seems to be emphasizing the role of intersubjectivity and error reduction methods (independent means of verification: probability calculus, statistics, peer review, etc.) in justifying belief. However, I think it is perfectly reasonable to assume that agent based processes actually can and often do produce knowledge. The intuitive idea is that perception and other forms of cognition can be quite accurate. The only way this seems possible is if we form beliefs about the world and our own bodies via certain stable organism level capacities. It should be noted that even if reflection and introspection do often result in a decrease in epistemic access (Kornblith 2013), there will still be a class of agent based processes which do often yield knowledge.19.

Of course it does not follow that all beliefs held by an agent (whether self-directed or world-directed) will be justified, just that at least some of them can and must be justified. For example, individuals are quite bad at knowing how intelligent they themselves are, but they are very good at knowing how neurotic they themselves are (Brogaard 2013).

4.3 Dennett and Carruthers

19 I take it that most naturalistic philosophers and/or scientists generally accept something like a bayesian calculous or an enhanced process based view (relabilism for example) to explain agent based epistemic states. These views are quite distinct (internalism versus externalism about content and justification, respectively, however, in neither case is there either and entailment of skepticism nor an increase in its probability.
The previous considerations about justification suggest a problem with Metzinger’s theory of the self, however I suspect that there are alternatives. Maybe as Daniel Dennett claims, the self is the center of narrative gravity. Namely, an artifact of our (mainly unselfconscious and innocent) efforts to solve the myriad little problems of interpersonal activity we encounter every day, from the moment of our birth. (Dennett 2014). However, assuming a theory of this sort, at least some of the beliefs we have about ourselves would turn out to be true. Alternatively, Carruthers’ mind-reading view could also suffice to explain putatively perspectival beliefs. Namely, that our capacity to conceive of ourselves is derivative of other-directed mind reading. In other words, our capacity to conceive of ourselves is simply the redirecting of our mind-reading skills inward. I will not argue for any particular theory, I just wanted to highlight that all of the theories mentioned are good third-personal alternatives to Baker’s view. Interestingly, all of the theories (accept perhaps Metzinger’s) allow for some of the activities of the robust first-person perspective that Baker invokes. Instead of being essentially first-personal in the robust sense, however, they would be thought of as resulting from a more minimal view of the first-person (much like how we think of the rudimentary perspective).

However, I want to make it explicit that even if one of the alternative theories are correct we may still be left wondering why it is we find a conceptual distinction between rudimentary and robust first-personal phenomena. Even if the arguments presented in this paper suggest a reason to be skeptical of the first-person perspective as a property, it would be nice to have a theory that explains the conceptual difference or at least casts doubt on
the importance of the conceptual distinction. This would be to argue against the essentiality of the first-person indexical

Although I think that Cappelen and Dever (2013) present a nice theory that attempts to do just that, I would like simply conclude my discussion thus far.

5 Conclusion

I began this paper by introducing what I take to be an extreme-realist theory of the first-person perspective, namely, the essentially dispositional account provided by Lynne Rudder Baker. However, by attempting to provide a theory of causation that could make sense of Baker’s view (while avoiding both Cartesianism and epiphenomenalism) I attempted to show that if the first-person perspective is causal at all, it is causal in virtue of the sort of minimal perspective shared by humans and non-human organisms rather than in virtue of the capacity of conceiving oneself as oneself in the first-person (as it is typically invoked in the case of humans or possibly other hypothetical linguistic creatures). After casting doubt on Baker’s original thesis I considered an entirely antithetical theory, namely Thomas Metzinger’s Phenomenal self-model. Although I think it fairs better than Baker’s,

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20 So far I have shown that there is good reason to be doubtful of arguments which conclude that the cognitive first-person perspective is an essentially dispositional property. Furthermore, it also seems that there are problems with an error-theoretic approach to first-person phenomena (as in there are some beliefs associated with the first-person that are justified and thus constitute knowledge). However, there is a way to capture the beliefs, about or resulting from the putative cognitive first-person perspective within a purely third-personal relational theory, while not supposing that all beliefs about oneself are false. Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever (2013) present such a theory. Their view is directed towards theories which take the essentiality of indexicals at face value. By using the Kaplanian distinction between content and context, they argue that ultimately the assumed essentiality of the first-person perspective is due to opacity. They also argue that “there’s no evidence of a distinctive kind of opacity for indexicals” and furthermore, even if there is no straightforward way of explaining typical Perry/Lewis style (messy shopper or two gods), it shows nothing particularly interesting about indexicality, i.e., the issue arises with respect to the non-substitutivity of co-referential terms in general given an opaque context.
at least with respect to its consistency with a naturalistic metaphysics, I believe it also has problems, though they are epistemic in nature. I think that there are also theories which maintain some of the virtues of both Baker’s and Metzinger’s respective theories without suffering some of the same metaphysical and epistemological consequences. Although I did not argue for any particular theory it seems that following the direction of an essentially cognitive approach will yield the most fruitful theories concerning the first-person perspective.
References:

Lynne Rudder Baker, Naturalism And The First-Person Perspective (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)


Herman Cappelen and Josh Dever, the Inessential Indexical, Oxford United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2013)