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# BEYOND THE CARTESIAN SELF

## abstract

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*In this paper, I challenge two Cartesian assumptions. The first assumption to be challenged is that there is an independent solitary self (material or immaterial) that is a proper part of a person (i.e., a human being). I challenge this assumption by setting out a materialistic alternative to Descartes – one that, on the one hand, abandons solitariness, yet on the other hand, retains the significance of the first-person perspective so prominent in Descartes' view. On my view, persons have first-person perspectives essentially, and first-person perspectives provide persistence conditions for persons. However, persons do not have inner selves or inner agents; they have no parts that are selves at all.*

*The second assumption that I challenge is one that equates what is real with what is in some strict sense mind-independent. The assumption, so widespread today, is that what has ontological status can exist in a world without mentality. On this assumption, nothing mental or intentional belongs in the basic ontology of the world. I'll try to show that this assumption is traceable to Descartes' view of minds and bodies, and that it is wrong.*

## keywords

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*Descartes, self, first-person perspective, person, metaphysical realism*

The legacy of Descartes' view of the mind has influenced contemporary philosophy in ways that extend far beyond Descartes' own beliefs. The received interpretation is that Descartes took mind and body to be distinct substances, each of which bears its own kind of property, mental or material. Bodies are characterized by being extended in space, and minds are characterized by being the locus of all thought and consciousness. According to Descartes, no conscious being is extended in space and nothing extended in space is a conscious or thinking thing.

After arguing that the mind is spiritual, Descartes assumed that the mind is identical with "the self" (Gaukroger 1997, p. 347). So, I shall assume that the words 'self', 'mind', 'ego' and 'soul' purport to refer to the same thing. Also, like Descartes', my interest is ontological. I am not here concerned with a narrative self or a self as an experiential dimension. Rather, my concern is with a self, mind or soul as an entity that is part of a human being<sup>1</sup>.

Many philosophers reject the distinction between mind and body that Descartes draws, but not all do. For example, John Foster takes us fundamentally to be non-physical subjects. He says, "Jones and the non-physical subject to which the pain is attributed in the philosophically fundamental account are one and the same"<sup>2</sup>. And numerous contemporary views that reject Descartes' dualism have elements that are noticeably Cartesian: Consider, for example, Chisholm's theory of knowledge based on what is directly evident to the mind, or Fodor's view of the mind as having "narrow" content that is wholly independent of the "external world", or Galen Strawson's materialist version of inner selves. These views all share

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<sup>1</sup> A neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, infers from what he takes to be two kinds of consciousness, for which he claims empirical support, that there are two kinds of self: core self and autobiographical self, which he takes to be our traditional notion of the self and to be linked to our idea of personal identity (Damasio 1999, pp. 16-17). I see no reason to make any inference about selves from hypotheses about consciousness. In any case, neither of these kinds of self would be what I am discussing here.

<sup>2</sup> Foster J., *The Immaterial Self: A Defense of the Cartesian Conception of the Mind*, Routledge, London 1991, p. 238.

the Cartesian idea of a solitary self that is completely self-enclosed and independent of everything else.

In this talk, I challenge two Cartesian assumptions. The first assumption to be challenged is that there is an independent solitary self (material or immaterial) that is a part of a person (i.e., a human being). I challenge this assumption by setting out a materialistic alternative to Descartes – one that, on the one hand, abandons solitariness, yet on the other hand, retains the significance of the first-person perspective so prominent in Descartes’ account. On my view, persons have first-person perspectives essentially, and first-person perspectives provide persistence conditions for persons. However, persons are not, and do not have, inner selves or inner agents; they have no parts that are selves at all.

The second assumption that I challenge is one that equates what is real with what is, in some strict sense, mind-independent. The assumption, widespread today in analytic philosophy, is that what has ontological status can exist in a world without mentality. On this assumption, nothing mental or intentional belongs in the basic ontology of the world. I’ll try to show that this assumption is traceable to Descartes’ view of minds and bodies, and that it is wrong.

- 1. No Solitary Selves** By “No Solitary Selves”, I mean a conjunction of two theses: (1) There are no selves that are mental, nonmaterial parts of persons; and (2) Persons – the bearers of mentality – are not solitary; it is impossible for a world to contain a single person and nothing else. So, no selves, and no solitary persons.

First, I’ll argue that there are no selves or minds as parts of persons. My strategy is to show that there is no need to postulate selves as parts of persons: the mental aspects of persons do not need special subpersonal or immaterial bearers.

On my view, all persons have first-person perspectives essentially. Newborn human babies, like chimpanzees and other higher mammals, have rudimentary first-person perspectives; then as an infant grows and learns a language, she develops a robust first-person perspective. All normal mature human persons have robust first-person perspectives. A robust first-person perspective is a conceptual ability, an ability to conceive of oneself as oneself, from the first-person without recourse to a name, description or other third-person referring device.

Here’s a true story that illustrates a toddler who has developed a robust

first-person perspective: when one of my nieces was two years old, she had a birthday party to which her many cousins were invited. One of her cousins (his name was Donald) went into her bedroom and began systematically taking toys out of my niece's toybox. When my niece saw what was happening, she was outraged. She cried out, "Dammit, Donald, mine!" Her parents were appalled: Where, they wondered with embarrassment, had she learned the profanity "dammit"? What interested me, however, was not her saying "dammit", but her competent use of the word "mine". She had a robust first-person perspective of herself: she knew that she – she herself – was the rightful owner of the toys, and that her permission was required for anyone else to play with her toys. This little story illustrates, I think, what is unique about human persons. Of all the beings in the world, we alone have robust first-personal perspectives. We alone can conceive of ourselves from "within," so to speak; we can think of ourselves without the need to identify ourselves by means of any description, name, or other third-person referring device.

My niece's shouting – "Dammit, Donald, mine!" – is a clear manifestation of a robust first-person perspective. A robust first-person perspective is typically manifested in English by first-person clauses embedded in first-person sentences with psychological or linguistic main verbs – e.g., "I believe that I am in Holland" or "I'm glad that I am here". The second occurrence of "I" (which I mark with an asterisk, as "I\*") is the expression of a robust first-person perspective. Contrast "I wonder whether I\* have enough money to retire" with "I wonder whether Lynne Rudder Baker has enough money to retire". A robust first-person perspective is the ability to distinguish between thinking about oneself as oneself and thinking about someone who just happens to be oneself.

A robust first-person perspective, as I am using the term<sup>3</sup>, brings with it an awareness of one's own thoughts as one's own and makes possible an interior life, but as the above examples show, a robust first-person perspective is not just subjective. It also brings with it an awareness of one's own material possessions as one's own. I won't try to survey all the ways that we manifest our robust first-person perspectives. Suffice it to say that a first-person perspective, as the defining element of persons, attaches to whole entities, not just to parts of them.

Human persons, the bearers of robust first-person perspectives, are

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<sup>3</sup> My usage differs from Dan Zahavi's. Zahavi says "one can be aware of a mental happening from the first-person perspective and fail to realize that the happening occurs to oneself" (Zahavi 2005, p. 126).

necessarily embodied. If you grieve for your friend who died, I may see the grief on your face or in your step. The sadness in your eyes is not just caused by your grief; it's part of your grief. No part of you – brain or mind – is the subject of your grief; you are. We whole persons are constituted by whole bodies. Brains have a special role in providing the mechanisms that make possible our mental lives. But it is not my brain itself that would like to go on a river cruise; it is not my brain that regrets having offended you. I did it; I regret it. And I am not identical to a brain. Neither brains nor minds are subjects of experience or are rational or moral agents; we persons are.

Although we are essentially embodied, we do not essentially have the bodies that we now have. Our bodies can be made of anything – organic material, silicon, whatever – as long as they provide the mechanisms that support our person-level activities and states. The relation between us and our bodies is constitution – the same relation that a statue has to the piece of bronze that constitutes it. We are constituted by our bodies, and the bodies that constitute us now are organisms. With enough neural implants, brain-machine interfaces, and prosthetic limbs, we may come to be constituted by nonorganic bodies. What is required for our continued existence is the continued exemplification of our first-person perspectives, along with some kind of body that has mechanisms capable of doing our our brains do.

In short, although human persons are essentially embodied, what makes us unique are our robust first-person perspectives. Descartes was exactly right about the importance of the first-person point of view. But he was mistaken, I think, in two ways that are often linked to a first-person point of view. First, Descartes thought that he himself could exist in isolation – that even if he were alone in the world with an Evil Genius, he could entertain the thought that he was sitting in his dressing gown in front of the fire. I'll discuss this point in the next section. Second, the other way that Descartes was mistaken was in supposing that his thinking required that he have a substantial mind or self. However, first-person perspectives do not require a substantial mind or a self. First-person perspectives are properties that may well have evolved by natural selection. We know from Darwin that the animal kingdom is a seamless whole, and it is not a stretch to imagine that first-person perspectives emerged from non-human organisms. (After all, non-human animals have rudimentary first-person perspectives.) When brains evolved to the point of being able to support robust first-person perspectives, a new kind of being came into existence, persons: perhaps not biologically new, but ontologically new – beings with new kinds of causal powers (e.g., causal powers to learn complicated syntax and to form complex organizations to

govern the transfer of property). There is simply no need, or even a place, for a self or mind as distinct from a person. To be a person, on my view, is already to have a first-person perspective. Any further self or mind would be gratuitous.

(2) Having argued against selves or minds as parts of persons, I now want to argue against the other half of “No Solitary Selves”. I want to show that persons, who are subjects of experience and agents responsible for what they do, cannot exist in total isolation. Even if Descartes could have had the thought that he was the only thing that existed in the world, that thought could not have been true. The ability to think of oneself as oneself – a robust first-person perspective – has relational presuppositions that require the existence of other things besides the thinker.

There is empirical support for the social character of beings like us. The psychologist Michael Tomasello gave cognitive tests to 2-year old human beings, and to adult orangutans and chimpanzees, and found that the *only* places in which the human beings outscored the non-human primates were on tests that measured social skills: social learning, communicating and reading the intentions of others.

Human beings – Tomasello said – have evolved to coordinate complex activities, to gossip and to playact together. It is because they are adapted for such cultural activities – and not because of their cleverness as individuals – that human beings are able to do so many exceptionally complex and impressive things<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, a robust first-person perspective is developmentally subsequent to a great deal of social and linguistic interaction. It emerges from a rudimentary first-person perspective along with awareness of others (e.g., caregivers) as conscious beings. It seems to develop from the phenomenon of “shared attention”, in which the infant aligns his/her gaze with his/her mother’s. When infants notice a divergence between their own attention and the mother’s, they become aware of their mother as a conscious being. The activities of shared attention are necessary precursors of learning a language<sup>5</sup>. And it is only in a public language that a robust first-person

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<sup>4</sup> “How are Humans Unique?” <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/25/magazine/25wwln-essay-t.html?8br> Accessed July 28, 2010.<sup>7</sup> Dummett (1982), XI-XXX.

<sup>5</sup> According to Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1999), ch. 4.

perspective is manifest to others.

Now I want to ratchet up the argument from a mere *de facto* argument about social and linguistic interaction to a modal argument. But first, some preliminaries: I'll use the notion of *concepts* to individuate thoughts. If you don't like that notion, individuate thoughts in some other way, but you'll have to individuate thoughts in a way that distinguishes the thought that snow is white from the thought that snow is the colour of a cockatoo. I'll use the word "concept" to apply to propositional contents of thoughts, canonically expressed by "that"-clauses. For example, the thought that grass is green contains the concepts *grass* and *green*. I do not intend the term "concept" to carry theoretical weight. I am simply using the term in order to identify constituents of thoughts, the items that make up the contents of thoughts and determine the identity of thoughts. Canonical attributions of thoughts contain concepts that the thinker actually has.

Now apply this way of individuating thoughts to the notion of a first-person perspective. In order to have a robust first-person perspective, you must be able consciously to conceive of yourself as yourself, to be aware that it is yourself qua yourself that you are conceiving of. Call the self-concept in thoughts that manifest your robust first-person perspective, an "I\*-concept". Your thought that you would express by saying, "I wish that I were a movie star" contains the concepts *wish*, *movie star* and your I\*-concept.

To show that you cannot have a robust first-person perspective in isolation, I need to show that you cannot have an I\*-concept in isolation. Here is the argument:

No Robust FPP in Isolation

1. Necessarily, if x has a robust fpp, then x has an I\*-concept of herself.
2. Necessarily, if x has an I\*-concept of herself, then x has a public language.
3. Necessarily, if x has a public language, then x has social and linguistic relations.
4. Necessarily, if x has a robust fpp, then x has social and linguistic relations.

Since the argument is obviously valid, we need only check to see whether the premises are true.

Premise 1 is a conceptual truth that follows from the characterization of a first-person perspective and the method of individuating thoughts that I proposed. An I\*-concept is a "formal" (not a qualitative) concept: its role is to

refer to its user from a first-person point of view – in such a way that the user of an I\*-concept cannot be mistaken about who she is referring to.

Premise 2: An I\*-concept does not stand alone; it cannot be the only concept in one's conceptual repertoire. One cannot have an I\*-concept unless one has a store of ordinary empirical, qualitative concepts that one can differentially apply to oneself and others. Canonically, the person attributes to herself some psychological or linguistic state (believing, wanting, intending, hoping, saying and so on) that has qualitative content (e.g., "I hope that I\* won the election"). And qualitative content is conveyed by ordinary empirical concepts – like *winning, milk, sleep, sitting, hurt, apple*. Unlike an I\*-concept, such qualitative concepts can be correctly applied to various things, and they also can be misapplied. The difference between correct and incorrect application of an ordinary empirical concept is grounded in public language. As Wittgenstein said, without a public language, there would be no application conditions to ground a difference between using a concept correctly and using it incorrectly.

One cannot make up one's own application conditions for a concept. Suppose that a nonlinguistic Robinson Crusoe finds himself stranded alone on an island and it occurs to him to call the sea creatures he sees, "sharks". How could Crusoe's use of the sound "shark" express one concept rather than another? In the absence of a language, what would make it the case that any of Crusoe's mental events or vocalizations expressed any concept – *shark* or *fish* or anything else<sup>6</sup>? Crusoe's putative concept does not have an extension that would make his use of what sounds like "shark" on a given occasion right or wrong<sup>7</sup>. Whatever seems right to him is right: "And – as Wittgenstein said

<sup>6</sup> There are 350 species of sharks that are radically dissimilar in appearance from one another. Some sharks have anal fins; others don't. Some sharks have flat raylike bodies; others don't; and so on. Sharks range in size from a few centimeters to (perhaps) 18 meters long. Some sharks with raylike bodies have elongated, sawlike snouts; others with raylike bodies have short, un-sawlike snouts. Some sharks have 6 or 7 gill slits and one dorsal fin; others have 5 gill slits and 2 dorsal fins. Some sharks have dorsal fin spines; others have no fin spines. Of the sharks without fin spines, some have mouths behind their eyes, and others have mouths well in front of their eyes. The whale shark (*Rhiniodon typus*) is the world's largest fish. Sharks, John D. Stevens, editor (Facts on File, Inc., New York 1987), pp. 18-35.

<sup>7</sup> I have been influenced by Kripke here. In virtue of what would a person, considered in isolation, mean addition rather than "quaddition" by "+"? See Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Natural Language* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par. 258.

– that only means that here we can't talk about *right*"<sup>8</sup>. So, what sounds like "shark" does not express a qualitative concept.

What's true of the concept expressed by the English word "shark" is also true of more mundane empirical concepts that are needed for thoughts that contain an I\*-concept. For example, for my niece to wish that she\* had more toys, she would have to have an I\*-concept and the qualitative concept *toy*. Acquisition of the concept *toy* requires a public language. ("That's not a toy; put it down and be careful with it", her mother would tell my niece if she picked up a fragile vase.)

In short: In order to have an I\*-concept, one must have a store of empirical concepts whose acquisition depends on a public language – at least for beings like us.

Premise 3: As just suggested, in order to acquire the empirical concepts expressed by a public language, the learner has to stand to be corrected; and to stand to be corrected is to have social and linguistic relations. So, anyone who has a public language must have social and linguistic relations to others.

Given its validity and the support for its three premises, I think that we can take the argument for "no-robust-first-person-perspective-in-isolation" to be sound and the conclusion to be true.

If my argument is correct, then it is impossible for any entity that was truly alone in the world to have a robust first-person perspective. And nothing that lacked a robust first-person perspective could have thoughts about herself as herself. So, Descartes' resolution to *regard himself* as having "no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, no senses" is not a thought that Descartes could have had if it had been true: the very fact that he had that thought (if he could have had it) would guarantee that it was false. Solipsism is a philosopher's fantasy. Individual human beings – persons – are social entities through and through. In the absence of communities, there would be no persons: human organisms, perhaps, but no persons, no individuals who could reflect on themselves as themselves.

So, a first-person perspective – not a substantial self or ego – is what is crucial for the existence of persons and their self-reflection. There would be no phenomenology without a robust first-person perspective. There would be no inner life at all. Nevertheless, the notion of a robust first-person perspective that I have discussed is clearly non-Cartesian. Entities cannot have robust

first-person perspectives unless they have numerous linguistic and social relations by which to acquire a store of ordinary empirical concepts to apply to themselves and to others. Consequently, I suggest that we dissociate the idea of the first-person perspective from the Cartesian ideas of transparency, infallibility and logical privacy.

In sum, on my account of persons, solitary selves are gratuitous. Persons are neither solitary, nor do they have parts that are substantial selves or minds. The person herself – embodied and embedded in an environment – essentially has a first-person perspective and is the subject of experience and the agent who is responsible for her deeds. Both these Cartesian errors (as I think of them) – the possibility of solitary thinkers and the need for a self or mind – are closely related to what Descartes was right about, namely, the ineliminable importance of a first-person perspective.

- 2. The Assumption that Reality is Mind-Independent** The assumption that reality is mind-independent is what is known as “metaphysical realism”. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines “metaphysical realism” as “the world is as it is independently of how humans take it to be”<sup>9</sup>.

How do we get from Descartes to such a view? Well, one of the achievements of *The Meditations* was to establish corporeal nature as completely distinct from the mind, and as completely distinct from, but dependent on, God. “By starting from those ideas of the corporeal world which are genuinely clear and distinct, Descartes arrives at a mechanistic picture of how the world is to be described at a most fundamental level” (Gaukroger 1997, p. 352). The physical world is a “self-sufficient mechanistic system” (Carriero 2009, p. 18). Descartes’ metaphysical legitimation of mechanism, together with the divorce of the mind from the corporeal world, lays the groundwork for the assumption that corporeal reality is wholly mind-independent. And with the later turn to materialism, minds themselves – now thought of as brains – are likewise mind-independent. So, reality *tout court* is thought of as mind-independent.

However, I believe that metaphysical realism is entirely wrong-headed. We live in a world full of objects whose existence depends ontologically (not just causally) on intentions and conventions – from legal documents, to economic instruments like credit cards, to manufactured tools, to artworks.

<sup>9</sup> Semantic Challenges to Realism, Drew Khlentzos. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-sem-challenge>) Accessed January 29, 2010.

Such objects could not exist in a world lacking entities (like us) who have intentions and create conventions. I call such objects “intention-dependent” or “ID” objects.

To see that the dependence of ID objects on beings with intentions is ontological and not merely causal, consider making a solid gold sphere that weighed 100 kg. The gold sphere would be causally dependent on beings with intentions, but not ontologically dependent on them. In another possible world, there could be naturally occurring gold spheres weighing 100 kg. Contrast this with building a boat. Nothing is a boat unless its intended function is to travel across water. If by quantum accident, matter coalesced in outer space that was indistinguishable from the boat that won the 2010 America’s Cup, the matter in outer space would not be a boat. Unlike the 100 kg gold sphere, which is causally dependent on the existence of beings with intentions, a boat, like any other artifact, is not just causally, but ontologically dependent on the existence of beings with intentions. Hence, unlike the gold sphere, the boat is an ID object.

Since intentions are included in what we call “minds”, ID objects are mind-dependent. (I think of minds as the mental aspects of persons.) Some philosophers want to draw a mind-independent/mind-dependent line between subjective phenomena like dreams and afterimages and everything else. But it could not be right to call objects that are ontologically dependent on the existence of beings with intentions mind-independent. Doing so just conflates a mind-independent/mind-dependent distinction with an objective/subjective distinction. To see that these are different distinctions, consider: it is an objective fact that some boats are propelled by motors; if you deny that some boats are propelled by motors, you are making as much a mistake as if you thought that the earth was flat. And the objectivity of this fact is not threatened by the likewise objective fact that there could be no boats in a world without minds. There are objective facts about ID objects, whose existence depends on intentions (i.e., on mental phenomena). Hence, objectivity and mind-independence are not equivalent. If we are going to include artifacts and artworks in reality (as artefacts and artworks), then we cannot take reality to be confined to what is mind-independent.

This discussion suggests another consequence of Descartes’ framework that should be rejected: the consequence that takes minds to be were purely subjective and the material world to be purely objective. We have now seen from both sides the infelicity of the equation of mind with pure subjectivity and of the material world with pure objectivity. On the mind-side, the

contents of our thoughts are not ontologically independent of the material world (our water-thoughts are not independent of the existence of H<sub>2</sub>O). And on the material-world side, the material world contains much that is not ontologically independent of our thoughts (artefacts and artworks). Mind and world are thoroughly implicated in each other, and can be disentangled only conceptually.

We persons are part of the natural world as much as electrons are. And there is no reason that we cannot contribute to basic reality by our intentional activity. I am told that this idea cannot be part of “serious metaphysics” or “fundamental ontology”. But the only basis that I see for this objection is a prior commitment to a “ready-made world” (in Ted Sider’s phrase)<sup>10</sup>. Since I believe that there is ontological novelty in the world, I do not share this commitment<sup>11</sup>.

- 3. Conclusion** With the rejection of the idea of a solitary self, I have replaced two Cartesian convictions: there is no pure self contingently connected to the so-called “external world” by the senses, and hence no pure self can form the self-evident starting point of a philosophical system. With the rejection of the idea of reality as mind-independent, I have rejected a contemporary idea that reality can be understood as what Descartes would have thought of as the “external” world. Whether this puts me any closer to the continental philosophers, I leave for you to decide.

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<sup>10</sup> I have discussed the difference between ontology at a time and ontology simpliciter in *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, and I cannot take it up here.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of ontological novelty, see *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life*, pp. 234-239.

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