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How to Have Self-Directed Attitudes

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Self-directed and self-evaluative attitudes are often connected to one's social position. Before investigating the dependence relations between individual self-evaluation and social positioning, however, there is a prior question to answer: What are the conditions under which an individual can have any self-directed attitudes at all? In order to be the subject of self-directed or self-evaluative attitudes, I shall argue, an individual must have linguistic and social relations. I'll discuss the first-person perspective, self-concepts and their acquisition—all from a radically nonCartesian, externalist point of view. This paper will combine my work on first-person perspectives with my work on “content externalism” in the philosophy of mind in order to understand how someone can have self-directed attitudes at all.

Having self-directed attitudes—attitudes about oneself—is a precondition for making any individual self-evaluation. Self-directed attitudes and self-evaluative attitudes—such as self-love, self-esteem and self-loathing—“are [in the words of our organizers] often closely tied to the position one occupies within a network of social relations.”¹ Quite so. But before investigating the particular dependence relations between individual self-evaluation and social positioning, there is a prior question to answer: What are the conditions under which an individual can have any self-directed attitudes at all? That is the question that I want to address here. Then, I want to draw a moral about what it is to be a human person.

In order to be the subject of self-directed or self-evaluative attitudes, I shall argue, an individual must have linguistic and social relations. Some self-directed attitudes obviously require the subject to have linguistic and social relations. For example, pride in one's class rank requires comparison between oneself and others (as well as having the concept *class rank*.) By contrast, other attitudes of self-satisfaction (such as one's self-satisfaction in sticking to a healthful diet) do not obviously require one to have linguistic and social relations. However—as I shall argue—obvious or not, self-satisfaction in anything (even in having a healthful diet) does require that one have linguistic and social relations in a less specific way. Indeed, anyone who has any self-directed attitudes has linguistic and social relations.

All self-directed attitudes are reflexive in that their object is always the person who has the attitude. But some self-directed attitudes are individuated not only by object (the person who has the attitude) but also by content. What makes pride in one's class rank and pride in one's social standing different attitudes is that they have different contents. Other self-directed attitudes, such as narcissism and self-esteem, do not seem to require such specific content. But, as I said, my aim here is to show that every self-directed or self-evaluative attitude requires that its subject have linguistic and social relations—regardless of whether or not the attitude is individuated by

1 In the words of the organizers of the conference on Self-Evaluation—Individual and Collective, held at the University of Basel, Switzerland, January 16-18, 2009.

specific content (like pride in one's social standing) or is more generalized (like narcissism) and regardless of whether or not the attitude is tied to the position that the subject occupies within a network of social relations.

Self-Directed Attitudes

I shall begin with some preliminary remarks about self-directed attitudes. First, by 'self-directed attitudes', I mean attitudes toward oneself as oneself, not just attitudes directed toward someone who happens to be oneself. Let me adapt an example from Ernst Mach. Mach got on a bus at the back and saw at the other end an unkempt fellow getting on the bus.² Mach thought to himself, "How disgusting of that fellow to be so unkempt and shabby." Mach did not realize that he was seeing himself in a large mirror that buses have to keep up with the passengers. His disgust was, in fact, directed toward himself. But, as I am using the term, this is not a case of self-disgust; Mach didn't realize that he himself was the object of his disgust. His disgust was directed toward someone who happened to be himself—but who he did not recognize as being himself. So, his disgust was not self-disgust. To have a self-directed attitude, one must realize in a first-personal way that the object of one's attitude is oneself.

One may think of oneself under any number of concepts expressed by, e.g., 'the person in the mirror,' or 'the winner of the lottery'. But from a first-person perspective, one thinks of oneself as oneself, under a special first-personal concept, a self-concept. A self-concept is the vehicle by means of which one thinks of oneself from a first-person perspective. This does not imply that there is a special entity "the self." What one thinks of from a first-person perspective is oneself, a person. It is the ability to think of oneself under a self-concept that makes self-directed attitudes possible. There is an enormous range of self-directed attitudes—from self-disgust to self-love, self-admiration, self-loathing, amour propre, and so on. Among these attitudes, there may be complicated relations—as when, say, recognition of one's narcissism gives rise to self-loathing. To have a self-directed attitude of any sort, one must be able to conceive of oneself from the first-person. To be able to conceive of oneself from the first person is to have a self-concept that can be a constituent of thoughts about oneself as oneself.

Second, self-directed attitudes are manifested in thoughts and actions. Let me say a word about how I construe thoughts. Thoughts are individuated by content, and their content is determined by the concepts that are deployed in the 'that'-clauses of their attributions. Concepts are individuated by their application conditions. Application conditions determine what falls under the concept. If there is some x such that concept C applies to x and concept C' does not apply to x , then C and C' are distinct concepts. So, application conditions determine the identity of concepts, and the identity of concepts, in turn, determines the identity of thoughts of which the concepts are constituents.

My self-concept applies to me and only to me, and can only be used by (as opposed to being attributed to) me. Thoughts that manifest self-directed attitudes contain, not only a self-concept,

² This example is adapted from one cited by John Perry (2002: 192-193). Perry used the example to argue for an essential indexical generally. My interest is narrower. Nonlinguistic animals have indexical knowledge, but if I'm right, they do not have self-directed attitudes. My interest is specifically in the self-directed attitudes.

but also various empirical concepts. A man going to a white-tie affair glances in the mirror and thinks, “Wow! I look great in formal clothes.” He thereby expresses pride that requires that he have a concept of *formal clothes*. If he hadn’t had such a concept, he could not have had the attitude that he had. This point generalizes to all self-directed attitudes that are individuated partly by specific content. You take pride in something (such as your appearance in formal clothes). You are disgusted with yourself about something (such as a mean-spirited comment you made about a colleague). In order to take pride in something, you have to have a concept of what you take pride in; in order to be disgusted with yourself about something, you have to have a concept of what you are disgusted about.

Even the global, generalized self-directed attitudes that seem to lack specific content presuppose that their subject has other attitudes about herself that do have specific content. In order to be self-interested, for example, one has to be able to locate oneself, in a first-personal way, in a group of people with competing interests. In order to have self-esteem, one must be able to recognize and conceive of a variety of situations with oneself in them. For example, a person invited to a formal dinner at the White House manifests her polished self-control only if she recognizes the situation she is in—only, that is, if she has concepts that apply to political elites like *president*, or maybe *crème de la crème*. Any self-directed attitude requires that the subject have a battery of empirical concepts. So, self-directed attitudes require not only that the subject have a self-concept, but also that the subject have requisite empirical concepts to give content to the attitude.

Third, although there are no self-directed attitudes without a self-concept, one may have a self-directed attitude without recognizing that one has it—just as someone may be stingy, yet sincerely assert that she is generous. You do not have to be in a position to assert that you love yourself in order to have the attitude of self-love. One’s self-love may be manifest in one’s actions (e.g., always putting oneself first) and attitudes (e.g., believing that one is more important than anyone else). One may have the attitude of self-love without believing that one has it.

To summarize: (i) Self-directed attitudes are attitudes that require the subject to have a self-concept, which refers to the subject in the first-person. An attitude that just happens to have oneself as object (as in the case of Ernst Mach on the bus) is not a self-directed attitude. (ii) A person’s self-directed attitudes are manifested in the person’s thoughts and actions. Thoughts that manifest self-directed attitudes have as constituents empirical concepts, as well as self-concepts. (iii) A person may have a self-directed attitude without realizing that she has it.

My main argument for the conclusion that all self-directed attitudes require linguistic and social relations is simple: Having self-directed attitudes at any time t requires having a robust first-person perspective at t . Having a robust first-person perspective at t requires having social and linguistic relations at t or earlier than t . Therefore, having self-directed attitudes at any time requires having social and linguistic relations at that time or earlier. (I’ll drop the references to time from now on.)

What I need to do is to defend the two premises of the following one-step argument—I’ll call it ‘the simple argument’:

The Simple Argument

- (1) If x has self-directed attitudes, then x has a robust first-person perspective.

- (2) If x has a robust first-person perspective, then x has social and linguistic relations.
∴ (3) If x has self-directed attitudes, then x has social and linguistic relations.

Defense of First Premise of the Simple Argument

According to the first premise, anything that has self-directed attitudes has a robust first-person perspective. Spelling out what I mean by a ‘robust first-person perspective’ will show that the first premise is a conceptual truth. A robust first-person perspective is the ability to conceive of oneself as oneself—from the first person, without any third-personal way of identifying oneself. If one can entertain thoughts like ‘I fear that I’ll live to see the melting of the polar ice caps’, then one has a robust first-person perspective. This is not just a simple first-person thought. It is a complex thought: the subject refers to herself in the first-person twice. The main verb is a psychological or linguistic verb (‘fear’, ‘believe’, ‘wish’, ‘say’, ‘wonder’, etc.) Following the main verb is a subordinate clause in indirect discourse that makes a second first-person reference. This second occurrence of ‘I’ expresses a self-concept by which one conceives of oneself without having to identify oneself by a name, description or demonstrative.

Any thought expressible by a sentence of the form ‘I believe (fear, hope, say, etc.) that I am F’ requires the thinker to have a self-concept and thus manifests a robust first-person perspective. Since to have a self-directed attitude requires that one have a self-concept and to have a self-concept is to have a robust first-person perspective, it trivially follows that anyone with a self-directed attitude has a robust first-person perspective.

The argument for the first premise of the Simple Argument thus boils down to a hypothetical syllogism:

(1a) If x has any thought expressible by a sentence of the form ‘I believe (fear, hope, say, etc.) that I am F’, then x has a robust first-person perspective.

(1b) If x has any self-directed attitudes, then x has thoughts expressible by a sentence of the form ‘I believe (fear, hope, say, etc.) that I am F’.

∴ (1c) If x has any self-directed attitudes, then x has a robust first-person perspective.

Thus, the first premise of the Simple Argument is true.

Defense of the Second Premise of the Simple Argument

According to the second premise of the Simple Argument, anything that has a robust first-person perspective has social and linguistic relations. How does an entity with only a rudimentary first-person perspective (a human infant) develop a robust first-person perspective? As the infant learns to speak, she acquires more and more concepts. Her repertoire of concepts increases dramatically as the toddler learns to talk, and her expanded repertoire of concepts makes possible an expanded range of thoughts. As the child moves from verbal behavior like ‘Want water’ to the ability to say, “I wish that I had some water”, she develops a robust first-person perspective. The ability to assert such things, and more generally to entertain thoughts of the form ‘I believe/hope/fear/desire (etc.) that I am F,’ requires not only that one have a self-concept, but also that one have a store of empirical concepts that can be used to think about oneself.

And by the time a toddler acquires a self-concept (between 18 months and 2 years), she already has a battery of empirical concepts that can be the constituents of thoughts.³ By ‘empirical concepts,’ I mean concepts that purport to apply to objects and properties in the world. I have in mind everyday concepts like wet, fun, supper, sleep, dog, home, water, star, hungry—concepts expressed by ordinary predicates.

Here is my argument for the second premise of the Simple Argument:

(2a) x has a robust first-person perspective only if x has a self-concept.

(2b) x has a self-concept only if x has many empirical concepts.

(2c) x has many empirical concepts only if x has social and linguistic relations.

∴ (2d) x has a robust first-person perspective only if x has social and linguistic relations.

By ‘having linguistic and social relations,’ I mean being in a community with certain linguistic and social practices; what makes it the case that one is in a certain community just are one’s linguistic and social relations to others who make up the community.

The first premise, (2a), is a conceptual truth that I have already argued for when spelling out the notion of a robust first-person perspective.

The second premise, (2b) is likewise conceptual: A self-concept is not a stand-alone item. One cannot have a self-concept unless one can use it in thought; if one can use a self-concept in thought, it follows that one is able to have thoughts about oneself. Thoughts about oneself have empirical concepts as constituents. Consider the thoughts expressed by ‘I’m afraid that I’ll be hungry’ or ‘I wish that I could see the stars tonight’. One cannot think of oneself from the first-person perspective unless one can entertain thoughts with concepts that one applies to oneself. To put it another way, one does not have a self-concept unless one has empirical concepts to apply to oneself. So, the second premise, 2b, is a conceptual truth.

The third premise, (2c) is the one that I take to be controversial. I’ll say that one “has” a concept if one is able to entertain thoughts that have the concept as a constituent.⁴ If one is able to entertain the thought, *Grass is green*, one has the concepts *grass* and *green*. Admittedly, *grass* and *green* are both vague concepts, in that the application conditions for each leave borderline cases. Nevertheless, there are some conditions under which each definitely applies and some conditions under which each definitely does not apply. To have a concept in the relevant sense, one must be able to apply it correctly in a variety of contexts.

3 A self-concept is not acquired until after a toddler is able to recognize oneself in the mirror (at about 18 months). This is supported by empirical evidence from developmental psychology, together with casual observation.

4 My notion of having a concept deliberately collapses Peacocke’s distinction between attribution conditions and possession conditions of a concept: I hold that an attribution of a concept to x is correct if and only if x satisfies its possession conditions. See Peacocke (1992).

But, as we know from Tyler Burge's work,⁵ one need not have complete mastery of the conditions under which a concept is correctly applied in order to have the concept. If having a concept required complete mastery of its application conditions, most of us would have very few concepts: If you know that Bach wrote a lot of fugues, then you have the concept *fugue* even if you don't know a fugue from a toccata. If you believe that Smith died of a brain aneurysm, then you have the concept *aneurysm* even if you don't know an aneurysm from an embolism. If you do not have the concept *fugue*, then you do not know that Bach wrote a lot of fugues; and if you do not have the concept *aneurysm*, then you do not know that Smith died of an aneurysm. Indeed, without the relevant concepts you do not believe or even wonder whether Bach wrote fugues.⁶

So, one has a concept C if and only if one can entertain thoughts with C as a constituent, and one can entertain thoughts with C as a constituent if and only if, first, one is able to apply C correctly in a significant range of cases, and, second, one has at least partial understanding of the application conditions of C. Of course, there is vagueness in these latter constraints, but (as I have argued elsewhere) there is vagueness in almost everything in the natural world.⁷

What I want to show is this: There is a large class of concepts, such that having any of them requires that one be in a linguistic and social community—and hence that one have linguistic and social relations. I'll call such concepts 'L&S concepts' for 'linguistic and social concepts.' (The notion of an L&S concept concerns the having of a concept, not its individuation. A concept must already be individuated before one can have it.)

Although most, perhaps all, concepts may be had without complete understanding, partial understanding is not crucial to L&S concepts. As Burge has argued:

[E]ven those propositional attitudes not infected by incomplete understanding depend for their content on social factors that are independent of the individual, asocially and non-intentionally described. For if the social environment had been appropriately different, the contents of those attitudes would have been different.⁸

Here is a somewhat crisper characterization of L&S concepts:

Concept C is an L&S concept if and only if: for any S, if S has concept C, then holding constant S's internal physical states and physical history, if S had been in a community with relevantly different social or linguistic practices, S would have failed to have had C.⁹

5 Burge (1979).

6 A fugue is a polyphonic composition with a short subject harmonized by rules of counterpoint. A toccata is a composition for piano or organ characterized by full chords and running passages, and often used as a prelude to a fugue. An aneurysm is a pulsating tumor caused by dilation or rupture of the wall of an artery. An embolism is foreign matter (an air bubble or blood clot) carried in the blood stream.

7 Baker (2007c: ch. 6), "Metaphysical Vagueness."

8 Burge (1979: 84-85).

9 I discussed this notion under the label 'social externalism' in Baker (2007a) and (2007b).

A person's internal physical states are nonintentional states, and her physical history is the history of her nonintentional states and their nonintentional interactions with entities in the environment.¹⁰

L&S concepts include not only the obvious social and legal concepts like *passport* or *taxation*, and not only the concepts that Burge discusses—*arthritis*, *brisket*, *clavichord*, and *contract*—but also concepts, the having of which is not usually thought of as dependent on social and linguistic practices—in particular, natural-kind concepts. (I am not making the stronger claim that all concepts are L&S concepts, although I suspect that it's true.¹¹ I believe that Wittgenstein succeeded in showing that *pain* is an L&S concept; if he did, then it's difficult to see what concepts would fail to be L&S concepts. But this larger claim is beyond the scope of this paper.) I take it that Burge and others have shown that many ordinary empirical concepts are L&S concepts; what I want to add is that natural-kind concepts are L&S concepts.

Concepts, as I mentioned, are individuated by their application conditions. Application conditions determine what the concept correctly applies to. The concept diamond and the concept cubic-zirconium apply to different natural kinds. Despite their superficial resemblance, diamonds and cubic-zirconia have different chemical compositions—diamonds are composed of pure carbon, cubic z's are composed of zirconium oxide plus yttrium or calcium structures, and hence the concepts *diamond* and *cubic-zirconium* are different concepts.¹² Although application conditions are independent of social and linguistic practices, which concepts one has is not independent of social and linguistic practices.

To show that *diamond* is an L&S concept, I need to show that a person who has the concept *diamond*, and whose internal physical states and physical history are held constant, would not have the concept *diamond* in a community with relevantly different linguistic and social practices. Suppose that Jill lives in a community in which there are lots of diamonds and no cubic-z's. Although she has not seen any diamonds, she knows a great deal about them. She has read about diamonds and talked with her schoolmates about them. She knows, for example, that diamonds are minerals that are often used in engagement rings and in decorative jewelry, that they are often given as gifts, and that they sparkle. Indeed, she knows that she wants a diamond. Jill knows how to apply the concept *diamond* in a significant range of cases, and she has (perhaps partial) understanding of its application conditions. Jill thus has the concept *diamond*. Now, without changing any of her internal physical states or any of the nonintentional ways that Jill interacted with her schoolmates or with anything else in her environment (including books

10 Say that a state is nonintentional if it can obtain in a world without entities with propositional attitudes.

11 Carol Rovane brought up the question of whether self-concepts are L&S concepts. I do not think that self-concepts nonvacuously satisfy the constraint on L&S concepts. However, the having of a self-concept does presuppose the having of empirical L&S concepts—even though a self-concept is not itself an L&S concept.

12 On the other hand, sameness of chemical composition does not suffice for sameness of natural kind. Graphite is also pure carbon, but with a different arrangement of atoms from diamonds.

and magazines), suppose that Jill had lived in an alternative community in which there were no diamonds, but a lot of cubic-z's. Suppose that the word used for cubic z's in the alternative community is a homonym of the word used for diamonds in the original community. (So, it sounds as if the same word is used in both communities.) In this alternative community, Jill has not seen any cubic z's, but she knows a great deal about them. She knows, for example, that cubic z's are minerals that are often used in engagement rings and in decorative jewelry, that they are often given as gifts, and that they sparkle. Indeed, she knows that she wants a cubic-z. Jill knows how to apply the concept *cubic zirconium* in a significant range of cases, and she has (perhaps partial) understanding of its application conditions. In the alternative community, Jill thus has the concept *cubic zirconium*.

In the original community, Jill had the concept *diamond* but not the concept *cubic zirconium*; in the alternative community, with no nonintentional changes in Jill or in her interactions with entities in her environment, Jill had the concept *cubic zirconium* but not the concept *diamond*.¹³ Thus, the natural-kind concepts, *diamond* and *cubic zirconium*, are L&S concepts. Similar stories can be told for other natural-kind concepts.

Many, if not all, of the store of ordinary empirical concepts needed in order to have a self-concept—and hence to have a robust first-person perspective and self-directed attitudes—are L&S concepts; and by definition, L&S concepts require that anyone who has them has linguistic and social relations. So, the third premise—that x has many empirical concepts only if x has social and linguistic relations—is also true. Since the argument for the second premise is valid and has true premises, its conclusion is also true: If x has a robust first-person perspective, then x has social and linguistic relations. So, the argument for the second premise of the Simple Argument is sound, and the second premise of the Simple Argument, like its first premise, is true.

Hence, the Simple Argument is sound as well. The Simple Argument is valid and both its premises are true. The first premise of the Simple Argument is supported by an account of the robust first-person perspective: Anyone who has any self-directed attitude has a self-concept, and to have a robust first-person perspective just is to have a self-concept. The second premise of the Simple Argument is supported by an argument backed by a thought experiment. Anyone who has a self-concept has a battery of empirical concepts; and anyone with the requisite empirical concepts is in a community with certain linguistic and social practices. Since both premises are true and the argument is valid, the conclusion of the Simple Argument is true. Therefore, any entity that has self-directed attitudes has social and linguistic relations.

A Moral about Individuals

Individual human beings—persons—are social entities in an ontological sense. 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, the fact that there are individuals

¹³ Notice that my use of this example has nothing to do with linguistic deference to authorities, or even with error. Jill is using the words properly in both communities; there is not mistake.

who can have self-directed attitudes at all presupposes that there are social and linguistic communities.¹⁴

Let me illustrate this moral by recalling a famous scene from Descartes' first Meditation. If my argument has been correct, then, if Descartes had been alone in the world—as he imagined—then he could not have had the thoughts he had in his first meditation. He would have lacked the linguistic and social relations required to have the concepts—e.g., *I*, *fire*, *dressing gown*—that were constituents of those thoughts. My argument has the consequence that if Descartes' had been alone in the world, he would have lacked the concepts to entertain any self-directed attitudes. He could not have wondered whether or not he was dreaming. He could not have entertained the hypothesis that he was not sitting in front of the fire in his dressing gown. A Cartesian entity—one that was alone in the world—could not have self-directed attitudes at all.

The notion of a robust first-person perspective that is required for self-directed attitudes and for self-evaluation that I have discussed is clearly nonCartesian. Entities cannot even have robust first-person perspectives unless they have numerous linguistic and social relations by which to acquire a store of empirical concepts to apply to themselves. Many of these concepts, I have argued, are L&S concepts. Consequently, I suggest that we dissociate the idea of the first-person perspective from the Cartesian ideas of transparency, infallibility and logical privacy.

If my argument is correct, then it is metaphysically impossible for any entity that was truly alone in the world to have a robust first-person perspective or self-directed attitudes. And nothing that lacked a robust first-person perspective could have thoughts about himself as himself. So, Descartes's 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 guaranteed that it was false. Solipsism is a philosopher's fantasy.

Someone may object that all I have shown is that empirical concepts are, in fact, social, not that they *must* be social. The best way for a pragmatist like me to show that they empirical concepts must be social is to give a range of examples of empirical concepts that surprisingly turn out to be social. For such a battery of examples, see Baker 2007a and 2007b. Of course, it is possible that there is a counterexample, but I do not know of any. So, the conclusion about self-directed attitudes seems to have rather global consequences. A universe that contains beings like us, with our self-directed attitudes, must contain communities with linguistic and social practices.

Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this paper is to bring together two strands of thought that I have developed separately over the past two decades—concerning the first-person perspective and

14 The question of the conditions under which a social and linguistic community exists and who its members are is a thorny one that I cannot pursue here. I simply want to say that a community is not a mere aggregation of independent atoms; nor does a community supervene on an aggregation of independent atoms. Persons are not independent atoms. The collectives that make possible phenomena like nationalism, religious solidarity or schism, “ethnic cleansing,” and so on are likewise not aggregations of independent atoms. So, the moral is only a negative one: however we understand collective self-evaluation, we cannot understand the relevant collectives in terms of independent atoms.

content externalism—and I have applied the combined result to understanding the conditions for self-directed attitudes. I have aimed to make the modest point that self-directed attitudes require robust first-person perspectives. A robust first-person perspective, far from being a Cartesian perspective that isolates individuals from communities, instead implicates communities. The neuroscientist who discovered mirror neurons, Giacomo Rizzolatti, commented that mirror neurons show “how bizarre it would be to conceive of an I without an us.”¹⁵ Perhaps we can take this as empirical support for my thesis.

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¹⁵ Quoted in *The New York Review of Books* LX, no. 11, June 26, 2008, p. 65.

