

The First-Person Perspective and its Relation to Cognitive Science

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I should have entitled this talk “The First-Person Perspective as a test case for Naturalism.” Naturalism, as I shall construe it here, is the philosophical claim that natural science is the exclusive arbiter of reality. Natural science is “objective” in that it regards reality from, as Thomas Nagel put it, “the view from nowhere.” Whatever a first-person perspective is, it decidedly is not a view from nowhere.

So right off the bat, we have an apparent tension between the first-person perspective and the nonperspectival natural sciences. Dennett explicitly says that “all science is constructed from [the third-person] perspective.” (Dennett 1991, 71) I’ll join Dennett in saying that science is ‘third-personal’, although the real contrast is not between first- and third-person perspectives, but between a world with irreducible first-personal perspectives and a world without perspectives at all. Many naturalists, including Dennett, are unworried about the apparent tension between the first-person perspective and the natural sciences inasmuch as they think that the first-person perspective can be either reduced to third-personal terms or eliminated altogether.

I hope to show that such philosophers are mistaken: the first-person perspective is neither eliminable nor reducible to non-first-personal elements. I intend to focus on a single datum that entails that there is a first-person perspective and to argue that none of several examples from cognitive science either eliminates or reduces the datum to third-person terms. Of course, this is not a conclusive argument against naturalism, but it does provide reason to suspect that scientific naturalism is not correct.

Here is my plan: First, I'll formulate the datum. Second, I'll consider whether the Datum collapses at the outset. Third, I'll look at some empirical literature from cognitive science and argue cognitive science neither eliminates the datum nor reduces it to the third person. Finally, I'll give empirical and theoretical reasons not just to throw out the datum altogether.

The Datum

The datum is that there is a distinction (D) that we routinely make. This distinction depends on our having robust first-person perspectives, which I discuss in detail elsewhere (Baker 2013). The robust first-person perspective is a cognitive capacity—not simply an ability to refer to oneself by some means or other, but a conceptual ability to conceive of to oneself as oneself, in the first person. The robust first-person perspective enables us to make distinction (D), where

(D) is a distinction between conceiving of oneself as oneself in the first-person and conceiving of someone who is in fact oneself (perhaps unbeknownst to the thinker).

The distinction (D) issues in two kinds of attitudes about oneself, one tied to a first-person conception of oneself and the other not. Here is an example of the distinction close to home. Suppose that Mitt Romney did not realize that a certain New York *Times* columnist (Maureen Dowd) referred to him as Mittens. Suppose that one of the *Times*'s columns was accompanied by a photograph of Romney from behind. Suppose that Romney reads all about Mittens, sees the photo and comes to believe that Mittens is the man in the photo. Although Romney himself is the man in the photo, he does not come to believe that *he (himself)* is pictured in the photo or that he (himself) is Mittens. He would

express his belief by saying, “I believe that Mittens is the man in the photo,” not by saying, “I believe that I am the man in the photo.” But Romney refers to himself by ‘Mittens’ just as surely as he refers to himself by ‘I’; so the difference between his saying “I believe that Mittens is the man in the photo” and “I believe that I* am the man in the photo” is not merely in who is being referred to. The difference is that the latter, but not the former, manifests Romney’s capacity to conceive of himself as himself.

So, distinction (D) is right there in ordinary phenomena and deserves to be considered as a datum. Distinction (D) is at least an apparent distinction. If it is not reduced to third-person terms or eliminated altogether without loss, then it is a genuine distinction and the dispositional property of conceiving of oneself as oneself in the first-person must be included in ontology, in a complete inventory of all the kinds, properties and individuals that there are.

As I mentioned, distinction (D) depends on the capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself in the first-person—the robust first-person perspective.¹ It is a capacity that is directly manifested in thoughts and sentences like, ‘I am glad that I am a philosopher,’ or ‘I believe that I am a fair-minded person’ or ‘I wonder how I’m going to die.’ In each of these sentences, the second occurrence of ‘I’ is not referentially transparent: No name, description or other third-person referring device can replace the second occurrence of ‘I’ salva veritate. If I say, “I am a philosopher,” my assertion is true if and only if LB is a philosopher; but if I say, “I’m glad that I am a philosopher,” my assertion is not true unless I can conceive of myself as myself from the first-person.

I’ll say ‘I*’ (‘I’ followed by an asterick) to signal manifestation of the capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself in the first-person. Similarly, I’ll use ‘she*’ to attribute to

someone else the capacity to conceive of herself in the first-person. For example, if I say, 'Jill wonders how she* will die,' my sentence is not true unless Jill would express her attitude by manifesting her capacity to conceive of herself as herself* in the first-person: She would say, "I wonder how I* will die." Since a robust first-person perspective is just a capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself in the first-person, any psychological or linguistic sentence with a 'he*' or 'she*' or 'I*' presupposes that there are robust first-person perspectives.

The problem posed by distinction (D) for the natural sciences is this: distinction (D) seems neither to be formulable in wholly third-personal terms nor eliminable altogether. Since the natural sciences cannot countenance anything that is irreducibly first-personal, any genuine phenomenon that entails distinction (D) seems to elude the net of the natural sciences.

Can Distinction (D) Just be ignored?

Dennett may quickly retort that the distinction (D) does not underwrite a genuine datum, and hence that the first-person perspective does not *need* to be treated by science. Distinction (D) can be accommodated by heterophenomenology, he may say, which interprets the world from a subject's first-person point of view in third-person terms. For example, a heterophenomenological theorist can distinguish between a hospice patient's saying, "I hope that I will die peacefully, and the same patient's saying, "I hope that patient number 4 will die peacefully," even though the speaker is, unbeknownst to herself, patient number 4.

The patient who said, "I hope that I will die peacefully," is interpreted by the theorist as expressing a hope that she will die peacefully. The first-person element

disappears! But does it? When the theorist interprets the subject, a hospice patient, as expressing a hope that she will die peacefully, the theorist must attribute to the subject a first-person reference. That is, the *theorist's* interpretation, "She hopes that she* will die peacefully" entails that the subject can conceive of herself as herself in the first-person. In that case, the *theorist* is committed to there being a robust first-person perspective, and the data are not purged of the first-personal elements. So, heterophenomenology does not eliminate the first-person perspective.

Maybe Dennett would say, "OK, but talk of the first-person perspective is talk from the intentional stance, and the intentional stance has no ontological import. It is only from the physical stance that we reach reality." "But wait," I reply, "that's just what I'm challenging." If distinction(D), and hence the Datum, cannot be reduced or eliminated, then the first-person perspective belongs in the ontology.

Does Cognitive Science Step in on Behalf of Naturalism?

I anticipate an objection that goes like this: "Cognitive science is a natural science in the broad sense, and there are myriads of experiments concerning what may be called 'the first-person perspective.' The thrust of the experiments is to call into question the reliability of the first-person perspective and thus to diminish its significance.² So, rather than saying that the first-person perspective impugns naturalism, the cognitive-science-objector concludes, we should say that naturalism (by means of empirical studies) impugns the first-person perspective."

In the first place, this objection from cognitive science misses the point of my position. The cognitive-science objector unsurprisingly is concerned with cognition, but cognition is only a small part of my concern. I'm concerned with the fact that we (many

of us) have a capacity for inwardness. We can think about our own desires and resentments—and perhaps try to conceal from other people. My concern is not with the accuracy of our own assessments of our desires and resentments. (For all we know, we may be deceiving ourselves.) My concern is how we can have inner lives in the first place. The Datum is part of the answer: We can have inner lives only because we can conceive of ourselves in the first person (“from the inside,” as it were) and can distinguish the way that we can think about ourselves in the first-person from the way that we can think about entities (ourselves and other things) as just further objects in the world. Regardless of how reliable or unreliable first-person perspectives are for acquiring beliefs about ourselves, we do make distinction (D) and thus have robust first-person perspectives.

Now I want to consider six particular cognitive-science theories to see whether any of them reduces or eliminates the first-person perspective.

(I) Many cognitive scientists have a “dual-process” conception of cognitive processing. They distinguish between what they call ‘System 1’ and ‘System 2’. System 1 operates “automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.” (Frankish and Evans 2009) System 2 “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice and concentration.” (Kahneman 2011, 20–1) System 1 seems to coincide with what I elsewhere have called ‘the rudimentary first-person perspective’: “The capabilities of System 1 include innate skills that we share with other animals. We are born prepared to perceive the world around us, recognize objects, orient attention, avoid losses and fear spiders.” (Kahneman

2011, 21–22) By contrast with System 1, Kahneman says, “When we think of ourselves, we identify with System 2, the conscious, reasoning self that has beliefs, makes choices, and decides what to think about and what to do.” (Kahneman 2011, 21)

Without a doubt, System 2 is a capacity more similar to the robust first-person perspective than is System 1. However, the dual-process approach does not make conceptual space for the distinction between thinking of oneself as oneself in the first person and thinking of someone who happens to be oneself. Kahneman’s examples of the operations of System 2 do not track a robust first-person perspective. Some examples seem to presuppose conceiving of oneself as oneself in the first person (“Tell someone your phone number”); others do not (“Look for a woman with grey hair.”), and still others are ambiguous with respect to whether or not they entail that there is a robust first-person perspective (“Monitor the appropriateness of your behavior in a social situation” is ambiguous between monitoring the behavior of yourself as yourself, in the first person, and monitoring the behavior of someone who is in fact yourself, via a surveillance camera. (Suppose the theorist said, “Pretend that you’re the person on the surveillance camera. Now monitor the appropriateness of that person’s behavior,” where that person is in fact you).

The examples of System 2 have in common only that they “require attention and are disrupted when attention is drawn away.” (Kahneman 2011, 22) Requiring attention is not going to distinguish between cases in which you are manifesting a robust first-person perspective and cases in which you are not. Dogs and other nonlinguistic animals that lack a robust first-person perspective are able to pay attention when, say, they are

tracking their prey. So, requiring attention is not even sufficient for ensuring that a robust first-person perspective is manifested.

Although the dual-process conception may make an important distinction about mechanisms, the mechanisms of System 1 and System 2 do not provide resources to make the crucial distinction between conceiving of oneself as oneself in the first-person and conceiving of someone who happens to be oneself; hence, the dual-process view does not recognize distinction (D).

(II) Some philosophers regard introspection as a kind of self-monitoring. Armstrong, for example, says, “[I]ntrospection is a self-scanning process in the brain.” (Armstrong 1968, 324) However, self-scanning or self-monitoring is inadequate to accommodate Distinction (D). To make distinction (D), a self-monitoring system would have to be able to distinguish between monitoring (the thing that is) itself and monitoring itself as itself*. From the point of view of self-monitoring, all there is is an object x’s monitoring x; there is no object’s monitoring itself as itself from the first person. And without a difference between x’s monitoring x and x monitoring itself as itself in the first person, there is no distinction (D).

(III) Some philosophers will respond—and this is the next cognitive-science approach that I’ll consider—that I overlooked an obvious reply: the difference between thinking of oneself as oneself* in the first-person and thinking of someone who is in fact oneself may be thought to lie in the different functional roles of the representations that one tokens of oneself.³ Even if we cannot provide an impersonal definition of, say, the I*-concept, perhaps we can provide a third-person account of *the capacity* to conceive of

oneself as oneself* in the first-person by showing (in the third-person) the causes and effects of tokens of I*-thoughts.

Here's an example from Hilary Kornblith (in conversation): Suppose that a computer program has a special mental representation—'+'—an indexical that is directly connected to action.⁴ The symbol '+' plays the role of 'I': e.g., '+ sees Fs within reach' and '+ wants to get Fs' leads, *ceteris paribus*, to '+ reaches for Fs'. One problem, as I see it, is that the special mental symbol, '+', at best could play the I-role, not the I*-role (even if there were such and we knew what it was).

However, a naturalist like Kornblith may reply: Analogously to the 'I' case, suppose that there is a different special mental representation for 'I*'—say, '@'—which can be rendered in English as, for example, 'she believes that she*....' if the representation '@' is in her "belief box". The inferential role of I*-thoughts, then, may be characterized by the relationship between certain representations containing '@'. For example, my belief that I* am a registered voter may be caused by my belief that I* received a notice about the location of the polling place. Perhaps the 'I*' can be eliminated by showing a causal connection between representations in my belief box—between, for example, '@ received a notice about the polling place' and '@ is a registered voter'. So, Kornblith may continue, the functional role of 'I*' can be characterized the by the relationship between '@' representations.

This seems inadequate for at least three reasons. (i) I*-beliefs are not particularly connected with action as I-beliefs are said to be. I*-thoughts are typically connected to self-evaluation and to self-reflection more than they are to action or perception and hence neither I*-thoughts nor their causal connections typically issue in any overt action. (See

Baker 2011) Indeed, there are often no observable phenomena at all causally connected to I*-thoughts. So, even if functionalists are right about the ‘I’ cases, there is a significant disanalogy between the ‘I’ and the ‘I*’ cases. ‘I*’ does not seem to have a functional role, comparable to the role of ‘I’ in action.

(ii) The story about ‘@’ (i.e., about ‘she believes that she*...’) is not generalizable. Suppose that I hope that I* will get a such-and-such job, and that one of the causes of my hope is that I believe that I* would make more money in that job; and one of the effects (assuming that I get the job), is that I am glad that I* make more money. Now we have the following connected ‘@’ representations: ‘@ will get such-and-such job,’ in my hope box, caused by ‘@ will make more money in that job’ in my belief box and causing ‘@ got the job’ in my glad box. It is one thing to have inferences among mental representations in one’s belief box (if you can swallow the metaphor of a belief box); but it is quite another thing to suppose that there are systematic relations between mental representations in belief-, hope-, glad- and all the other boxes.⁵

(iii) Finally, since tokening @-representations entails that the thinker has a robust first-person perspective, @-representations are not themselves third-personal representations. We have no idea what (non-first-personal) neural mechanisms, if any, “realize” them. Even knowing which neural mechanisms “realized” I*-thoughts would no more reduce or eliminate the I*-thoughts than would knowing which neural mechanisms “realized” your joy at winning the lottery reduce or eliminate that joy.

These considerations give us good reason to doubt that there will be a third-person functional account even of the capacity to have a robust first-person perspective.

And without such an account, a scientific theory cannot even recognize distinction D or the Datum.

(IV) Some cognitive scientists (e.g., Carruthers) appeal to metacognition.

Metacognition is a trivial shift of mindreading—i.e., a trivial shift from third-personal attribution of mental states to other people on the basis of their behavior to attributions of mental states to ourselves: Metacognition is “merely the result of turning our mindreading capacities on ourselves.” (Carruthers 2009, 123) This is ambiguous between my turning my mindreading capacities on someone who is in fact myself and turning them on my myself conceived of as myself in the first person.

The ambiguity starts with the notion of metacognition: If metacognition is, as billed, a trivial shift to ourselves of third-personal attribution of mental states to other people on the basis of their behavior, then mindreading will have to exclude attributions like ‘Bill believed that he* could get away with plagiarizing his term paper.’ Such attributions are true only if Bill had a robust first-person perspective. And as we saw in the discussion of heterophenomenology, attributions of robust first-person perspectives are not wholly third-personal: They attribute to Bill the capacity to conceive of himself as himself from the first-person, and hence are not true in a world without robust first-person perspectives.

So, there seems to be a dilemma: Either we take mindreading to have room for attributions like ‘Bill believed that he could get away with plagiarizing his term paper’ or not. If we take mindreading to have room for ‘Bill believed that he could get away with plagiarizing his paper’, then mindreading is committed to appeal to a robust first-person perspective and is not wholly third-personal. In this case, the trivial shift to

metacognition retains the commitment to a robust first-person perspective. On the other hand, if mindreading does not have room for attributions like ‘Bill believed that he could get away with plagiarizing his paper’—if mindreading really is only third-person—then mindreading cannot even account for all of our attributions to others—not to mention attributions to ourselves—of mental states that explain behavior.

In neither case—whether mindreading can accommodate ‘Bill believed that he could get away with plagiarizing his term paper’ or not—in neither case can metacognition, understood as mindreading turned on ourselves, make the distinction D without presupposing a robust first-person perspective. Metacognition either fails to recognize distinction D or it does not reduce the first-person perspective.

(V) Cognitive scientists are concerned with introspection and its epistemic warrant or lack of it. For example, (Carruthers 2010) argues that we do not have introspective access to our decisions and (nonperceptual) judgments; our attributions of decisions and judgments to ourselves depend on self-interpretation, just as our attributions of decisions and judgments to others depend on interpretation of their behavior. The only difference is that we have a much greater evidential base in our own case. However, whether we know our decisions and judgments by introspection or by self-interpretation is irrelevant to my case for the robust first-person perspective. Self-interpretation raises the same basic issue about the first-person as introspection.

What is self-interpretation? Cognitive science seems not to distinguish between an interpretation of somebody who happens to be yourself, and interpretation of yourself from the first person. But this, again, is the crucial distinction (D). Suppose that a cognitive scientist is studying the results of an Implicit Association Test of an anonymous

subject, and judges that the subject is biased. Unbeknownst to the cognitive scientist, he (himself) is that subject. His judgment is indeed about himself, but not about himself in the relevant (first-personal) sense. (The scientist may recommend therapy for the subject, but balk at the idea of therapy for himself.) This (very plausible) example shows the need to recognize distinction (D).

If self-interpretation is to have to do with what we want from self-knowledge, it had better be interpretation of oneself conceived of as oneself, from the first-person, and not just interpretation of someone who happens to be oneself. If this is right, then the robust first-person perspective is presupposed as much by self-interpretation (of the sort that we are interested in) as by introspection. So, appeal to self-interpretation does not eliminate the commitment to a robust first-person perspective any more than does appeal to introspection.

(VI) However, perhaps Carruthers' views may be brought to bear against distinction (D) altogether. In an important new book, *The Opacity of Mind*, Carruthers (2011) argues that "there is a single mental faculty underlying our attributions of propositional attitudes, whether to ourselves or to others." (Carruthers 2011, 1) In that case, given the inference from an underlying mechanism to the the phenomena of attribution that it supports, 'self-knowledge' and 'other-knowledge' are on a par.⁶ This view clearly has no room for distinction (D), which implies a distinction between two kinds of belief and other attitudes about ourselves. Suppose then that we follow the line of Carruthers and reject distinction (D).⁷

Which half of distinction (D) do we reject? (Since the term 'self-knowledge' implies truth, I'll switch the locution to 'self-belief.')

On Carruthers's theory, there is

nothing distinctive about self-belief except that it happens to be about ourselves—that our access to our own current discursive mental states is “no different in principle from our access to the mental states of other people, at least insofar as both are equally grounded in sensory input [as Carruthers thinks they are].” (Carruthers 2011, 1)

This passage strongly suggests that Carruthers’s theory would retain the notion of self-belief as belief about someone who is in fact ourselves, and reject the notion of self-belief as belief about oneself as oneself in the first person. If this is right, then to follow Carruthers, we should reject the robust first-person perspective and distinction (D).

However, there are good reasons not to reject the robust first-person perspective and distinction (D). Here are two empirical reasons: (i) The fact that we need distinction (D) to make sense of what people do and say is good empirical evidence that there is such a distinction. (Remember the scientist who took the Implicit Association Test.) (ii) Moreover, instances of distinction (D) have effects. Distinction (D) makes a difference in behavior. Contrast: ‘I believe that I was the one who injured the woman with a long-range hunting rifle,’ vs. ‘I believe that Suspect 2 was the one who injured the woman with a long-range hunting rifle’, where without his knowing it, the speaker is in fact Suspect 2. If the former is true, then the speaker may take steps to make restitution to the woman and her family; but if the latter is true (and the former is false), then the speaker will not take steps to make restitution. Since the beliefs lead to a difference in ensuing action, and the only difference between them is that the former manifests a robust first-person perspective, distinction (D) makes a difference in what happens (in whether the speaker will offer restitution). Or, to take another example, if I didn’t know that my taxpayer ID number was #23456789, my fear that I’m under surveillance would affect my behavior in

different ways from my fear that taxpayer #23456789 is under surveillance would not. Only a genuine distinction can have differential effects. So, there are empirical reasons to accept (D) as a real distinction.

Moreover, there is a theoretical reason not to reject distinction (D): Distinction (D) and the robust first-person perspective unify all our self-directed attitudes—being glad that I*..., anticipating that I*..., being embarrassed that I*..., regretting that I*... and all the rest. Carruthers' theory, which concerns only epistemic states like knowing and believing, leaves us with a disunified motley of attitudes. In the interest of theoretical unity, we should prefer the robust first-person perspective to a view that provides no natural way to unify all of our self-directed attitudes.

So, rather than denying the robust first-person perspective, I suggest taking Carruthers' theory to cast doubt on the notion, which I believe is his own, that “differences at the personal level are only possible if realized in subpersonal differences.” (Carruthers 2011, 23–4) The problem with focusing on subpersonal levels—on levels of mechanisms—is that we leave out the actual phenomena that we are really interested in, such as the robust first-person perspective. To try to understand person-level phenomena in terms of subpersonal mechanisms is like trying to understand Beethoven's 9th Symphony in terms of sound waves.

Let me conclude with a methodological query: Our ability to conceive of ourselves as ourselves* is a personal-level capacity. Why does it resist being reduced to or replaced by subpersonal phenomena? If I am right about the robust first-person perspective, then we have an answer to this methodological question: The personal level of reality—the level at which we work and play, love and cherish—is neither eliminable

nor reducible to subpersonal levels that provide the mechanisms that make it possible for us to work and play, love and cherish. We live our lives on the personal level. The subpersonal mechanisms are just the scaffolding that allow us to live as we do.⁸

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¹ More precisely, a robust first-person perspective is the second stage of a first-person perspective, the first stage of which I call a ‘rudimentary first-person perspective.’ Language users, who have self-concepts, have a robust first-person perspective, and human infants and higher animals have only a rudimentary first-person perspective. The robust first-person perspective develops along with the ability to use language; neither is ontologically prior to the other. I have a whole theory of the first-person perspective (Baker 2013), but the datum at issue does not depend on the theory.

² For example, “reflection on the manner in which our beliefs are formed may...lead to entirely erroneous beliefs about the source of our first-order states.” (Kornblith 2012, ms 189)

³ I do not think that a functionalist view of belief is adequate. Many (if not most) of our beliefs are not even connected with causing behavior—all beliefs about the past, many about the present (“There are now seven billion people on Earth.”), some about the future (“There will be a lunar eclipse in 2015”), and some that are nontemporal (“ $f = ma$ ”). Even if we are concerned only with first-person beliefs, their action-causing role is matched in importance with their other roles: being vehicles for conveying information (“I was born in Atlanta”), for correcting misunderstanding (“I was here on time, but the door was locked”), getting to know someone or articulating truths about oneself (“I have a fear of flying”), narratives that make sense of our lives (“I had a happy childhood until I met Frank....”), and so on. So, a functional definition of ‘belief’ (first-personal or not) seems to me not to capture the actual concept at issue. And belief would be just a start: we would also need functional definitions of hope, regret, and so on.

⁴ Just for the record, let me note that I am extremely dubious about representations as physical tokens in the brain.

⁵ Moreover, there is the perennial problem of the semantic interpretation of mental representations. In (Baker 1991), I tried to show that Fodor’s view of the semantics of mental representations in terms of ‘asymmetric dependence’ did not work. Philosophers today have just moved on, as if we either had, or did not need, an account of the semantics of ‘mentalese.’ I side with

those who have given up the notion that we have incommunicable representations in our heads.

⁶ Although I do not have space to argue for it here, I think that such inferences from internal mechanism to person-level phenomena are fallacious. In the last chapter of (Baker 2013), I sketch an alternative account that avoids such inferences.

⁷ Alternatively, Carruthers may accept distinction (D), but on pain of admitting an ineliminable and irreducible first-person element into his view. The general tenor of his view suggests that he would reject The Datum.

⁸ Many of the ideas here were developed in a graduate seminar on Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective that I co-taught with Hilary Kornblith in the fall semester, 2012.