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TWO PROBLEMS WITH SHOEMAKER'S REGRESS AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

abstract

With his now famous regress argument, Sydney Shoemaker (1968) aimed to provide justification for the assumption that at least some cases of self-awareness cannot be based on identification. The overall goal of this paper is to discuss two possible worries one may have about Shoemaker's argument. I will show that these problems have far-reaching consequences that may diminish the argument's importance for an adequate theory of self-awareness and that another conclusion Shoemaker and other philosophers draw may be unwarranted.

keywords

First-Person Thought; Identification; Perception; Self-Awareness; Shoemaker; Singular Thought

1. Introduction With his now famous regress argument,¹ Sydney Shoemaker (1968) aimed to provide justification for the assumption that at least some cases of self-awareness cannot be based on identification. The overall goal of this paper is to outline Shoemaker's regress argument and discuss two possible worries one may have with it. Even though the argument has some appeal, it has far-reaching consequences that may diminish the argument's importance for an adequate theory of self-awareness and first-person thought.² Moreover, I will show that Shoemaker places excessive demands on the notion of *identification* and that another conclusion he and other philosophers (such as Musholt, 2015; 2019; Frank, 2011; Zahavi, 1999; 2004; 2005) draw may be unwarranted. They think Shoemaker's regress reveals a crucial difference between self-awareness and perception (and the distinct thought types based on them). They seem to assume that the identification involved in perception *requires* descriptive representations while in some cases of self-awareness this is not even possible. However, there is empirical evidence that identification in perception at the most basic level as well does not *depend* on any descriptive representations. Hence, perception and self-awareness are not so different in this specific respect.

In what follows, in the first instance I will reconstruct Shoemaker's regress argument and roughly sketch how philosophers have tried to account for its conclusion. Then, I will present the two aforementioned issues facing Shoemaker's reasoning which need to be addressed if one wants to accept the argument's relevance for a theory of self-awareness. I will discuss each of these problems and how they might affect the relevance of Shoemaker's regress. This task has yet to be done to date, but it is not a trivial one.

2. Shoemaker on Self-Identification Sydney Shoemaker (1968) once famously wrote:

It is clear, to begin with, that *not every self-ascription could be grounded on an identification of a presented object as oneself. Identifying something as oneself would have to involve either*

1 See, for instance, Bermúdez (1998), Musholt (2015), Williford (2006) or Zahavi (1999; 2004) on how Shoemaker's central ideas are most commonly portrayed in the more recent literature.

2 Shoemaker seems to want to make claims about self-awareness more generally rather than just about its conceptual instantiations at the level of thought. However, if we are able to show that not all first-person thoughts can be based on identification, then it follows that not all cases of self-awareness can be based on identification since first-person thought is a peculiar type of self-awareness.

(a) finding something to be true of it that one independently knows to be true of oneself, i.e., something that identifies it as oneself, or (b) finding that it stands to oneself in some relationship (e.g., being in the same place as) in which only oneself could stand to one. In either case it would involve possessing self-knowledge – the knowledge that one has a certain identifying feature, or the knowledge that one stands in a certain relationship to the presented object – which could not itself be grounded on the identification in question. This self-knowledge might in some cases be grounded on some other identification, but the supposition that every item of self-knowledge rests on an identification leads to a vicious infinite regress. (Shoemaker, 1968, p. 561, emphasis added)

Shoemaker argues that if all cases of first-person thought (or “self-ascriptions” to use his term) were based on an identification, then they would presuppose infinitely many further beliefs about oneself. This is easy to see given the conception of identification he proposes. According to Shoemaker, identifying an object as myself requires me to already have some descriptive beliefs about relational or non-relational properties of myself that allow me to infer that I am identical with the object that I am in a different way aware of (e.g. through perception or a description given in discourse). Accordingly, in order to identify an object *o* as oneself *i* one needs to have descriptive beliefs³ with a content of the form *a is F* (where *a* is an object and *F* is a relational or non-relational property) about *o* and *i* that help to resolve the question of whether *o* really is *i* (*o=i*). We might call Shoemaker’s account of identification on which his regress is based *the descriptivist view of identification*, since it defines identification as requiring descriptive beliefs about its relata.⁴ Shoemaker apparently has situations like the following in mind when writing about self-identification. Let’s say that I see this person in a mirror who has a face that looks very similar to mine and conclude that it must be me whom I am seeing. In this case I already need to have some prior beliefs about what my face looks like, which lead me to believe that I am identical with the person I see in the mirror. The question is how I came to know what my face looks like. I probably observed my face at some previous point in my life, which enabled me to recognize it on different occasions from that moment on. Still, the question remains: How did I know in that first moment that it was me and my face

3 I believe that the notion of *descriptive belief* is adequate to capture what Shoemaker had in mind here. According to Shoemaker, to identify something as something else, we apparently need some beliefs which *represent actual properties* of the objects of an identification. This notion excludes, for example, mere existential or modal beliefs about these objects.

4 One might wonder if Shoemaker’s (1968) argument really rests on a general conception of identification or whether it just needs a concept of self-identification (i.e. those cases of identification where oneself is involved). One might say that Shoemaker’s argument is merely based on a descriptivist view of self-identification. I think there are major exegetical reasons that speak against interpreting Shoemaker (1968) in this way. Shoemaker (and this is also how interpreters tend to understand him) aims to justify the claims that some cases of self-awareness cannot be based on identification at all and that this reveals a crucial difference between these cases of self-awareness and cases of perception (or to use different terminology “object awareness”). He and others (e.g. Musholt, 2015; 2019; Frank, 2011; Zahavi, 1999; 2004; 2005) do not argue that the types of identification involved in different types of thinking are distinct types, but that the thought types are distinct due to their modal relation to the same sort of identification. And to show that some cases of self-awareness cannot depend on any sort of identification seems to require a general conception of identification. Finally, and more importantly, I do not think that there is any positive textual evidence for the claim that Shoemaker thought that self-identification is a *sui generis* form of identification. In my view, this strongly suggests that Shoemaker really has a generalist conception of identification in mind which underlies his reasoning. However, for systematic rather than exegetical reasons, one could still try to provide a related argument which does not rely on a general view of identification. Yet, I am not sure what the motivations for this kind of argumentative move would be, given the lack of textual evidence that Shoemaker held such a position. And to say that cases of identification substantially differ depending on their objects (oneself or others) seems to require more justification than the default view that identification works the same in both cases. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for posing these interesting questions, which I cannot satisfactorily discuss here.

I was seeing? How was I able to recognize any property as mine or an object as me in the first place? I could not have acquired all of these beliefs about myself through identification (as defined above), since each belief would have required more beliefs about myself, which in turn would have been in need of further beliefs for which we can pose the same question again. To break down the argument a little more, we might summarize it in the following way:

- 1) Identifying something as oneself (henceforth “self-identification”) requires beliefs about relational or non-relational properties of oneself (which may pick out oneself uniquely).
- 2) If all beliefs about oneself were gained through self-identification, then all beliefs about oneself would be based on an infinite number of further beliefs about oneself.
- 3) As a finite being, one can have only a finite number of beliefs about oneself.
Not all beliefs about oneself can be gained through self-identification.

Hence, the central question is: How was I able to identify an object as me in the first place, if self-identification requires some descriptive beliefs about oneself prior to any self-identification? How do we receive that information about ourselves? Do we have innate beliefs about ourselves? Or is there something in experience that directly marks particular properties – such as perceptions, pains or beliefs – as belonging to us? Many researchers believe that there must be something in experience that has these regress-stopping qualities. I am not aware of anyone who has taken a *nativist* route and maintained that there are innate self-beliefs enabling self-identification. Quite a few philosophers (among others Frank, 2011; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Kriegel & Horgan, 2007; Kriegel & Zahavi, 2015; Williford, 2014; 2006; Zahavi, 2004; 1999), especially those who endorse Shoemaker’s argument, argue that conscious proprioception, pains, perceptions or beliefs must already convey the immediate information that these states belong to oneself.⁵ Note how, for instance, Kenneth Williford (2006) summarizes Shoemaker’s regress argument and concludes that there must be some kind of immediate self-acquaintance:

I could not, for all properties P, know that I have P by inference from a known identification of myself with an object O that is P. In order to know that I=O, I need to know that O has a property – by hypothesis distinct from P – only I have. [...] If all such knowledge of my properties depends on knowledge of such identifications, in knowing myself to have even one property, I must already know myself to have infinitely many. So there must be a regress-stopping property we non-inferentially know ourselves to have. [...] The relation I have in mind is what Russell called acquaintance. It is not a straightforward representation relation. (Williford, 2006, pp. 3-4)

I agree that the most plausible way to deal with Shoemaker’s regress is to rely on something given in experience. However, granting that the sketched regress argument has some plausibility, there might be at least two worries attached to it. The first issue – which I call *the scope problem* – addresses the argument’s far-reaching consequences. The second – let’s call it *the implausible constraints problem* – is concerned with the truth of one of its premises. After

5 Arguably there are other theoretical possibilities to conceptualize these non-identificatory ways of becoming aware of those properties that belong to oneself. We might say, for example, that self-awareness is in its essence a social phenomenon and its most basic (non-identificatory) forms are grounded in intersubjective relations. Or we could argue that unconscious emotions provide us with a sense of self. However, the paper is not intended to (and cannot) discuss all these options since its central purpose is to assess whether such solutions to Shoemaker’s regress argument need to be addressed in a theory of self-awareness in the first place.

quickly presenting each worry, I will discuss whether they should be regarded as a threat to Shoemaker's proposal.

With regards to the first problem, if we accept – as Shoemaker apparently did – that identification requires some descriptive beliefs about the objects identified, then this has consequences for theories of first-person thought as well as theories of singular thought in general. In order to avoid a regress of beliefs, I need to have non-identificatory awareness not just of some properties of myself, but also of anything that can be a constituent of an identification. Given the definition in Section 2, to identify, for instance, a perceived object *p* as another object *o* that I am already familiar with, I need to have at least two descriptive beliefs: one about *p* and another about *o*. However, these cannot be based on other identifications, since this would require even more descriptive beliefs, and so on. In addition, we can construe very similar non-first-personal cases to the one presented in Section 2: Let's suppose that I am seeing this person in a mirror who has a face that looks very similar to *Peter's* face and conclude that it must be *Peter* whom I am seeing. In that case I already need to have some prior beliefs about what *Peter's* face looks like that lead me to believe that *Peter* is identical with the person I am seeing in the mirror. The question is how I came to know what *Peter's* face looks like in the first instance. I could not have acquired all of these beliefs about *Peter* through identification (as defined above), as each belief would have required more beliefs about *Peter*, which in turn would have been in need of further beliefs for which we can pose the same question again. Hence, it is easy to construe Shoemaker-esque regress arguments for all those things which can be part of an identification. Here is just one example of how we might offer a similar argument to that presented in the previous section:

- 1) Identifying something as *Peter* (henceforth “*Peter*-identification”) requires beliefs about relational or non-relational properties of *Peter* (which may pick out *Peter* uniquely).
 - 2) If all beliefs about *Peter* were gained through *Peter*-identification, then all beliefs about *Peter* would be based on an infinite number of further beliefs about *Peter*.
 - 3) As a finite being, one can have only a finite number of beliefs about *Peter*.
- Not all beliefs about *Peter* can be gained through *Peter*-identification.

Thus, Shoemaker's regress argument turns out to imply very general conclusions about singular thought, rather than stating a specific problem for theories of self-awareness and first-person thought. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it provides much more space for criticism. There are quite a few contemporary philosophers – such as Bach (1987, p. 12), Burge (1977), and Recanati (2010) – who believe, following Bertrand Russell (1910), that genuine singular thought is based on some immediate epistemic access to the objects thought of (see also Jeshion 2010). However, this need not concern us here. The important point seems to be that if Shoemaker's regress argument has these general implications for singular thought, then it apparently also requires a solution on a more general level. If there are good reasons to believe that all genuine singular thoughts are in need of some sort of non-identificatory acquaintance, then this is no longer unique to first-person thought. Thus, we may be inclined to think that what Shoemaker was able to point out is nothing that specifically needs to be addressed when speaking about self-awareness and first-person thought, but rather is something for which a more general theory of singular thought has to account.

It is debatable whether the *scope problem* should be regarded as a real threat to Shoemaker's argument for non-identificatory self-awareness. After all, his argument is not supposed to vindicate the assumption that *only* first-person thought depends on some non-identificatory

3. The Scope Problem

3.1. The Problem

3.2. Discussion of the Problem

awareness. Hence, it is not a problem for his argument *per se*. However, it is still relevant to the general importance of the argument and the question of who should be concerned about it. Thus, the central question is if the demand for this non-identificatory awareness is not tied to first-person thought, why should it be specifically addressed in a theory of first-person thought? One way to end this discussion could be to hint at the general work on singular thought and by relying on a division of labor in philosophy and science. This would be a relatively common and uncontroversial step to take. When a biologist is investigating a specific type of mammal, say dogs, his peers do not assume that he is obliged to say much about mammals in general except that there is something *specific* to dogs that distinguishes them from most other things that fall under the category *mammal*. I think similar normative presuppositions underlie philosophical discourse, and for good reasons. No one is expected to offer a theory of everything; one is allowed to exclude things that are not specific to the field studied. Thus, I suppose that one could *prima facie* think that the scope problem justifies the view that a theory of first-person thought need not address Shoemaker's regress.

However, I tend to think that there are other reasons to accept that Shoemaker's argument is still relevant for someone concerned with self-awareness. This is so because of the *elusive* and *immediate* nature of the "object" at which self-awareness is directed. It has been rightly stressed that it is hard to find *ourselves* in experience (Hume, 1896) or that we cannot observe ourselves from different perspectives or even focus our attention on ourselves. At the same time, however, we seem to have some immediate awareness as to which conscious states belong to us and which ones do not. Objects of perception are quite different in this regard. And if we assume – as we should – that the nature of objects plays an essential role in our ways of being aware of them, then we might conclude that a theory of first-person thought has to deal with the regress outlined above in a quite different manner from, say, a theory of singular thought based on visual perception. Thus, even when we accept that all singular thoughts need to be based on some non-identificatory access to the objects thought of, the kind of access obviously has to be different relative to the nature of the objects.⁶ Whereas the concept of *acquaintance*, for instance, might be a good candidate to explain how some singular thoughts are, roughly speaking, immediately connected to things in the visual field, one might still think that this will not work for our singular thoughts about abstract entities and how we can have direct access to them.⁷ Similarly, it appears that the phenomenological features of selves – e.g. their *elusiveness* and simultaneous *familiarity* – require a quite different solution for Shoemaker's regress problem. Thus, the scope problem may not pose a serious threat to the relevance of the issues raised by Shoemaker since they demand quite different solutions that vary with the nature of the things under investigation. Shoemaker's regress might pose a challenge for theories of all kinds of singular thought, but this alone does not suffice to justify the assumption that there must be a uniform solution to it.⁸

4. The Implausible Constraint Problem

4.1. The Problem

Another, more fundamental problem with Shoemaker's argument might be that arguably there are forms of identification that are not in need of any descriptive beliefs. If this is so, then self-awareness might be based on those forms of identification without involving an infinite number of further beliefs. In this respect, we might even argue – *pace*

⁶ Thanks to Bill Brewer for pointing out that this might be a viable option.

⁷ See Giaquinto (2001) for an opposing view. He claims that we can be acquainted with cardinal numbers. Even so, I think the example is appropriate to see what I am getting at here.

⁸ In this section I have only highlighted phenomenological and metaphysical peculiarities of self-awareness, but we might also appeal to epistemic (e.g. restricted forms of infallibility) or normative (e.g. first-person authority) peculiarities of self-awareness. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this idea.

Shoemaker – that all cases of self-awareness ultimately rest on identification. Thus, the question is whether Shoemaker places implausible (overly demanding) constraints on the concepts of self-identification and identification.

There certainly is some form of identification involved in tracking objects over time. Yet, this ability might not be grounded in the capacity to entertain descriptive beliefs as there are many creatures which are able to track objects over time but which do not have the conceptual tools to entertain the right sort of beliefs. When a cat observes and subsequently chases a mouse, she does not need and possibly is not able to think this mouse under the concept of a *mouse* or as *this grayish thing in front of me*. Recanati (2012, p. 87) proposes, albeit for different reasons, that something like this is quite common among human beings as well. He calls those cognitive performances “immediate recognition” and contrasts them with what he labels “slow recognition”.

This distinction is not just supported by philosophical armchair reasoning. An empirically informed account of visual perception, which might prompt some reservations about Shoemaker’s claims, is Pylyshyn’s *Visual Indexing Theory* (2003; 2011). According to this theory, the recognition of an object’s identity in visual perception is foremostly independent from the ability to ascribe relational or non-relational properties to these objects. Pylyshyn believes that basic visual reference over time is in this sense directly demonstrative rather than *satisfactorily* descriptive. Pylyshyn conducted a series of experiments that putatively support the existence of what he calls *Visual Indexes* or *FINSTs* (Fingers of INSTantiation). The so-called *Multiple Object Tracking* (MOT) experiments are intended to demonstrate that humans’ early vision uses *indexes* which function in accordance with demonstratives familiar from linguistic communication. These indexes contain no descriptive content and ultimately acquire their reference through causal relations to external objects.

During the MOT experiments, test subjects are confronted with a small number of target objects (usually four) which are briefly distinguished from a couple of visually identical non-target objects by short blinking. Subsequently, both sets of objects arbitrarily move around and the test subjects are asked to track the target objects during their period of moving. The result is that the subjects are quite successful in performing this task. Pylyshyn concludes that this is best explained by his theory of visual indexes since the seen objects look exactly alike (e.g. in color, size, and shape) and therefore have no distinguishing properties. Moreover, Pylyshyn undertook some variations of these initial experiments that further support this conclusion. If the representation of properties were to play a particular role in visual tracking, then one would expect the presence of more salient properties to enhance the performance of object tracking (e.g. being faster or more accurate). However, a variety of MOT experiments have shown that this does not happen. Furthermore, when the target objects change some of their non-relational properties, the test subjects very often do not notice this change but still manage to identify the objects afterwards.

Nevertheless, one might still assume that the observers represent and use the location of each target object to determine serially where the objects have moved. After the recording was made at the beginning, they just see which object is closest to the initial location they have documented and do so for the remainder of the test. This is a possibility which cannot be ruled out experimentally. Yet, Pylyshyn tried to exclude this theoretical option by simulating this way of keeping track of the identity of objects. The issue with this way of tracking is that the simulations have shown that even under almost perfect conditions, this method would be much more prone to errors compared to the average of humans who actually performed the MOT experiments. Hence, it is quite reasonable to conclude that humans do not necessarily track perceived objects in virtue of representing properties (Pylyshyn 2011, pp. 36-37).

Of course, the results may be contested for a variety of reasons.⁹ Notwithstanding these difficulties, if one accepts the picture presented by Pylyshyn – which is not the most unreasonable thing to do – we might have to worry about Shoemaker's claim that perceptual identification requires descriptive representations. So, what are we to make of these considerations?

4.2. Discussion of the Problem

I think that the arguments provided in Section 4.1 are quite persuasive and suggest that there are forms of identification which do not require any descriptive representations about their relata, as Shoemaker apparently thought. It is not entirely clear whether Shoemaker merely wanted to make claims about identification involved in first-person thinking or rather had something stronger in mind and intended to pose a regress for all kinds of self-awareness (including non-conceptual ones). In the passage mentioned at the beginning of this article, he is just speaking about self-knowledge, yet the title "Self-Reference and Self-Awareness" and later passages in his paper suggest that the regress was set up for broader purposes. Nevertheless, one possible way of defending Shoemaker's proposal against the accusation of placing implausible constraints on the notion of *identification* could be to argue that the alleged counterexamples are actually not instances of identification but something else (we might categorize them as instances of some sort of *non-descriptive identity recognition*). It could be argued that the concept of identification requires one to think its relata as having particular properties. Even though this seems rather absurd – since the term "identification" is arbitrarily used for a cluster of different things outside and inside of philosophy – one could maintain that for conceptual reasons the ability to perform genuine identification is dependent on the ability to think things as having this or that property. If this were true, then Recanati's idea of an *immediate recognition* or Pylyshyn's concept of *visual indexes* could be understood as not referring to counterexamples to Shoemaker's definition of identification, but instead as viable solutions to his regress problem. If creatures had the ability to individuate objects and recognize their identity over time before being able to predicate something of them, then this ability could be regarded as a regress stopper, since descriptive identification could then be based on this pre-descriptive ability to visually trace identity without presupposing infinitely many further descriptive representations. This immediate self-recognition could work very similarly to regular perception if we suppose that both forms of identity recognition involved are able to track things in these non-descriptive ways – even though they possibly differ in many other aspects.

5. Some Consequences for the Relation between Self-Awareness and Perception

Yet, Shoemaker – and others (e.g. Musholt, 2015; 2019; Frank, 2011; Zahavi, 1999; 2004; 2005) – probably would not agree that a basic kind of self-awareness could be based on the same mechanisms as visual perception. Shoemaker (1968, pp. 563ff) argues at length that self-awareness is fundamentally different from perception or even object cognition in general. More recently, Kristina Musholt (2015) has also argued that Shoemaker's regress argument was precisely introduced to highlight a substantial difference between self-awareness and perception. She maintains that if all instances of self-awareness were a form of perception – her term is "self-perception" – then they would require identification and already presuppose some descriptive beliefs about oneself. Since not all cases of self-awareness can be based on identification, understood in this way, there must be cases of self-awareness which are substantially different from perception, so Musholt claims:

⁹ For a critical discussion of the Visual Indexing Theory, see the reviews of Abell (2005), Hill (2008), and Shapiro (2009).

Shoemaker argues that self-consciousness cannot ultimately rely on self-perception, or in fact on any kind of subject-object relation, for to perceive myself as myself, I must already possess a first-personal knowledge of myself that can help me to identify a certain property as my own. (Musholt, 2015, p. 4)

As said before, I think there is something to this assumption. However, I believe that Shoemaker's argument itself is not able to establish a substantial difference between perception and self-awareness. Self-awareness could have the same underlying mechanisms as visual perception, which apparently, at the most basic level, works completely independent from the ability to represent any properties. If this is Shoemaker's – and his followers' – main reason for the assumption that self-awareness is fundamentally different from perception, then it might not be a very good one.

Therefore, the overall conclusion which might be conveyed is that Shoemaker was right in arguing that self-awareness at the most basic level works independently from the ascription of any identifying properties. But he and others were wrong in assuming that this is the quintessential feature which distinguishes self-awareness from perception. There are clearly no beliefs (or other forms of representation) about unique features of conscious episodes needed to enable us to track ourselves and our own mental life. Yet, the very same is true for ordinary things of perception. Apparently, humans are able to identify objects without having any descriptive beliefs about these objects. However, as argued in Section 3.2, these observations should not prevent researchers working on self-awareness from finding a way to deal with Shoemaker's regress. Even if all kinds of theories of singular thought are prone to this problem, and self-awareness and perception do not differ in their relation to identification, it seems that the objects of the states in question are (phenomenologically and perhaps also metaphysically) different enough to warrant distinct theoretical approaches to the same problem.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Part of the research leading to these results has been conducted during a research stay at King's College London and has received funding from the Baden-Württemberg Stiftung and University College Freiburg.

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