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EMBODIED FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE

abstract

In this paper I will argue that self-awareness and world-awareness are inherently embodied, with the embodied first-person perspective as their primary structure. Challenging dominant views, I contend that the first-person perspective is not reducible to subjective ownership of experiences or linguistic self-reference but arises from the body's role as the zero-point of an oriented spatial field. This structuring feature of perception and action grounds the cognitive agent's interaction with the environment. The study examines the relationship between first-person perspective and bodily self-awareness, particularly the interplay of ownership and agency, critiquing accounts by De Vignemont, Baker, and Zahavi. It argues that bodily ownership is rooted in the first-person perspective rather than independent of it. Drawing on phenomenology, the paper emphasizes that first-person experience is an intrinsic, pre-reflective structure of embodiment, irreducible to epistemic judgments or conceptual ascriptions, thus challenging reductionist views and reaffirming the primacy of the lived body in self-awareness.

keywords

embodied first-person perspective, bodily self-awareness, sense of ownership and agency, phenomenology of perception, embodied cognition

1. Introduction In this contribution I uphold the thesis that our awareness of ourselves and of the world around us is intrinsically embodied, at least at its basic level. Embodied first-person perspective serves as the indispensable and primary component of this awareness. To elucidate this claim, a revised definition of first-person perspective is necessary, one that diverges from the dominant approaches proposed in the current literature. First-person perspective is not primarily the awareness of being the owner of subjective experiences and mental states, such as a qualitative feeling of mineness which should attest their belonging to their bearer, or a higher-order conceptual and linguistic capacity which presupposes, among other things, the mastery of the use of the pronoun “I”. The expression “first-person perspective” must rather be taken literally, with an explicit reference to the perceptual field of a given cognitive agent as the first, basic occurrence of this phenomenon. Having a perspective is a structural feature inherent to any perceiving being, whose sentient and moving body allows her to disclose an oriented topological space of coordinates, namely a surrounding environment which extends proportionally to her powers of action and perception. As shown by Husserl’s analysis of the constitution of space based on the role played by a subject which is essentially and not only contingently embodied, the lived body acts as the absolute zero-point of this space. Conversely, all objects located in it are relative to the position occupied from time to time by the cognitive agent’s body and acquire relevance depending on the relationship of proximity or distance to it and as targets of possible or actual actions.

2. Bodily self-awareness: beyond subjective ownership? A critical task for such an account lies in assessing the link between first-person perspective and sense of bodily self-awareness. The concept of bodily self-awareness needs further clarification due to its multifaceted nature. A key distinction must be drawn between the sense of bodily ownership and the sense of agency (Gallagher, 2000). Bodily ownership consists in the sense of belongingness of our body and its parts to ourselves, while agency encompasses the awareness of being the initiator of one’s own actions. Both features contribute, to varying degrees, to the production and refinement of bodily self-awareness. While bodily ownership manifests as a continuous and passive sense of embodiment, persisting during stillness and involuntary movements, agency emerges solely during active engagement in purposeful and intentional actions. Phenomenologically, the sense of ownership and the sense of agency appear intricately interwoven in our everyday interactions with the world, often blurring into a seemingly indistinguishable whole. Only when we pause our actions do we become aware of our body as an inert and voluminous inner space, vaguely delimited by the boundaries of

our skin, yet distinctly separate from the external world. Both the sense of ownership and the sense of agency operate in a pre-reflective and non-conceptual manner. Our body is not a prominent object of intentional focus; rather, it is “lived through” during action, receding into the background as our attention fixates on the objects we manipulate. It is only when we actively refrain from action, allowing our body to rest, that we can thematically shift our attention inwards and turn it towards the body itself.

Regarding the question of the connection between bodily awareness and first-person perspective, it is worth considering De Vignemont’s account. According to her, first-person component is detachable from the experience of ownership, since the latter can occur without an explicit awareness of it. This suggests that the first-person perspective properly arises at the level of judgment, i.e., an explicit, conceptual self-attribution of body parts and mental states, which presupposes the mastery of the pronoun “I” and therefore linguistic capacities (De Vignemont, 2007, p. 444). However, separating the first-person component from bodily ownership leads to a rather counterintuitive consequence, namely postulating an anonymous level of bodily representations where the body is not yet qualified as “one’s own”. Moreover, De Vignemont (2018, pp. 49–64) seems to conflate the first-personal character of bodily self-awareness with the phenomenon of immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first person (IEM), analysed by S. Shoemaker. IEM denotes the *epistemic* infallibility of immediate self-ascription of both mental and bodily states to oneself, and as such, is a property of *judgments* rather than a feature of a phenomenological experience, let alone a perceptual one.¹ As Shoemaker puts it, self-awareness does not imply being presented to oneself as an object and therefore cannot be assimilated to a kind of perception, either internal or external. When I utter the sentence “I feel a pain”, I am pointing to myself as the one feeling the pain, not to the pain as something existing regardless of me and the feeling I am having of it (Shoemaker, 1968, pp. 563–564).

De Vignemont is right in distinguishing the first-person perspective from the subjective feeling of bodily ownership, provided that their difference is only conceptual. However, her account falls short in establishing the foundational relationship between both terms. It is bodily ownership what requires and is grounded in the first-person perspective, not the other way around. It is by virtue of structural constraints, such as the internal provenience of bodily sensations like proprioception and kinaesthesia, or the invariance of the egocentric visuo-spatial frame of reference, that we acknowledge our body as our own. De Vignemont herself mentions Ernst Mach’s famous self-portrait, which graphically represents our optical array – a faceless body around which a perspectively deformed environment spreads out. However, instead of considering this perceptual experience in its unique characteristic, she confines herself to merely underline its role in grounding epistemic IEM-judgments.

Even L.R. Baker appears to hold a similar intellectualistic view. She defines first-person perspective as “the capacity of thinking of oneself, conceived in the first person, as the object of one’s thought” (Baker, 2013, p. XIX). Baker rightly points out the basic fact that first-person perspective is a dispositional property that necessarily belongs to the ontological world array, distinguishing between two layers: rudimentary and robust first-person perspective, corresponding to consciousness and self-consciousness. However, she unilaterally overemphasizes the role played by the latter. Rudimentary first-person perspective does not

3. Rudimentary and robust first-person perspective: a too intellectualistic account

¹ Even more radically than De Vignemont, J.L. Bermúdez (2017) claims that bodily awareness and first-person perspective arise solely at the cognitive level of IEM-judgments: there is nothing like a qualitative feeling of ownership as a primitive phenomenological feature or, at least, it is devoid of any cognitive and epistemic function.

require fully developed self-concepts or language, but it is rather defined by the essential feature of having a point of view from the spatiotemporal location the organism occupies, from which it perceives and interacts with the world. This level requires only sentience and intentionality, as well as the capacity for goal-directed behavior. In contrast, robust first-person perspective entails the ability to use well-defined concepts and a fully developed language to refer to oneself as oneself from one's own point of view. A typical example of this ability is the use of the pronoun "I" within a complex first-person sentence introduced by a "that"-clause and governed by a psychological main verb.² Such sentences express I-thoughts, which consist of self-attributions of a first-person reference and are intertwined with our daily actions in several ways, such as when we are called to account for them by offering justifications and reasons. Thus, both rudimentary and robust first-person perspectives share the property of immunity to error through misidentification, albeit for different reasons: by referring to oneself through "I"-sentences and self-concepts, one never fails to recognize oneself as such, but in the case of rudimentary first-person perspective, no error occurs simply because this capacity is lacking at all (Baker, 2013, pp. 33-43).

Against Baker's view, it can be argued that bodily self-awareness is also immune to errors of misidentification because it constitutes a genuine and positive—albeit pre-reflective and implicit—way of referring to oneself as oneself. My ability to discriminate myself from other objects in my environment is not primarily due to the robust first-person perspective; rather, it derives from my self-awareness as an embodied subject, embedded in an environment and capable of action and perception. Having a first-person perspective entails as its basic condition of possibility the very fact that I am incorporated in a moving body as the center of an oriented space. Therefore, first-person perspective consists in the capacity to perceive the world from the standpoint afforded by one's body. I can distinguish myself from others by virtue of being rooted in my own body, making my perspective inherently non-interchangeable with anyone else's. The robust first-person perspective is grounded in and constituted by the rudimentary one to a greater extent than Baker admits. The only difference is that the robust first-person perspective includes the ability to refer to oneself through concepts. The act of recognizing oneself as oneself occurs entirely at the rudimentary level and does not necessarily involve a fully developed process of explicit self-reflection. While concepts are used at this level, they are best characterized as proto-concepts that do not require fully developed linguistic capacities and acts of predication. There is no substantial difference between pointing to oneself with a gesture and appropriately using the pronoun "I." The robustness of the higher-order stage of first-person perspective depends not so much on the appropriate use of "I"-concepts but rather on the capacity to elaborate complex narratives about oneself through reflection.

Unlike Baker, I do not believe that the rudimentary first-person perspective entirely lacks self-concepts. Even in non-human organisms and infants, consciousness always involves a form of self-consciousness, albeit not reflective in character and not developed through linguistic resources. For an infant or an organism to be self-conscious, only primitive, barely representational, and non-linguistic self-concepts are required. These proto-concepts are acquired through repeated acts of self-recognition of a purely perceptual nature, which imply an indirect intentional reference to one's own body alongside the straightforward

² Baker refers here to Castañeda's account, which posits that self-consciousness is irreducible to any form of third-person reference as shown by the use of the pronouns "I" and "he*" (i.e. "he, himself"). These expressions denote peculiar logical categories that cannot be replaced either by nouns or by descriptions in which they do not occur. First-person statements hold referential, ontological and epistemological priority over all names and descriptions, implying that every form of object awareness presupposes self-awareness as its foundations (Castañeda, 1966).

intentionality directed toward external objects. Only through these proto-concepts can more sophisticated and refined self-concepts develop, referring to the subject as an embodied being. I can use these self-concepts appropriately only to the extent that I perceive myself unceasingly within a specific environmental context. First-person states do not relate to an abstract self or ego but to whole embodied and embedded personal subjects.

Baker devotes considerable effort to her criticism of the semantics-based accounts of the first-person perspective, supported by scholars such as Kaplan and Perry, by opposing them with well-grounded ontological arguments. According to D. Kaplan (1989), a first-person statement like “I am DK” can be reduced to a third-person statement without any loss of content, as its truth conditions can be expressed without recourse to the pronoun “I”. Kaplan argues that there is nothing special distinguishing the use of “I” from other indexical terms. The statements in which it occurs do not provide any information on “further facts” about the irreducible subjectivity of my point of view, as “I” has no fixed, recognizable content and therefore does not denote a self-concept; hence, there are no genuine first-person facts or properties. Yet, as Baker points out, this line of reasoning misses the target. The bare fact of having a first-person perspective and being a person is the intentional correlate of a self-perception that obtains even in the absence of any thought and utterance. “No semantic rule seems adequate fully to explain my being LB” (Baker, 2013, p. XIV). Being me supposes that I am existing like an embodied person, which constitutes a primitive ontological category.³ My being the person I am is not captured by any statement about it, because I continue to be who I am even in absence of every thought or utterance about myself. It is not primarily the capacity to entertain I-thoughts that ensures the reference of pronoun “I” and other indexicals, but rather the mere fact of being an embodied subject centered on its own perspectival zero-point, always given in a continuous stream of internal perceptions.

A more moderate reductionist approach, such as the one supported by J. Perry (1979; 2002), acknowledges the existence of first-person thoughts expressible in genuine I-sentences that cannot be translated into third-person descriptions. These sentences display beliefs and others cognitive attitudes endowed with a motivational force that causally modifies the speaker’s behavior, which is lost once they are converted into third-person sentences. Despite this, Perry argues that these sentences possess at most an epistemic and pragmatic value and do not reveal any special facts about the existence of persons. Self-notions are merely “the normal repository of normally self-informative ways of perceiving and the normal motivator of normally self-dependent ways of acting” (Perry, 2002, p. 202). Therefore, there is no crucial difference between first-person and third-person notions of oneself from an ontological standpoint. Perry’s famous example of the messy shopper nicely illustrates this point. While pushing my shopping trolley in a supermarket, I notice someone leaving a trail of sugar from a punctured pack. As I try to find out who is making the mess, a glance in the mirror reveals to me that I am that one shopper. In this case I have two unlinked notions of myself that become unified once I recognize their identity through collecting information about objective facts – i.e. being someone else and being oneself – which are conveyed through different cognitive channels. With this said, the difference between being myself and being someone else is not ontologically unsurmountable; it depends only on the agent-relative role played by

4. From “I” to “It”? Why “I” won’t fit into third-person statements

3 In a similar vein, S. Kripke opposes Kaplan’s assertion that the pronoun “I” has no fixed meaning and cannot denote a self-concept, claiming that its reference is exhausted by a linguistic rule of use. On the contrary, Kripke argues that the reference of “I” is fixed, though not by means of a concept or representation, but through one’s own immediate self-acquaintance. “I” refers to the subject of such awareness, which involves “the whole person in the ordinary sense” (Kripke, 2011, p. 308) including her own body.

the subject who ascertains the identity of both through practical and epistemic procedures. The beliefs “I am JP” and “JP is JP” share the same subject matter content but differ only in their reflective content, that is, the way they are held. Baker objects to this view by asserting that the act of recognition of oneself as oneself precedes the evaluation of information and any (subpersonal) association between self-concepts and third-person concepts. From the very first moment, I must be endowed with a first-personal perspective of myself as *myself*, which alone allows every act of self-recognition (Baker, 2013, pp. 53-54).⁴ Hence, the first-person perspective is not the by-product of an epistemic attitude but an irreducible and ineliminable ontological feature of reality, as I am simultaneously both the bearer and the intentional object of every perception and thought about myself.

5. The “same old body” strikes back again: Why “I” can’t escape the flesh and the world

Similar considerations concerning the original and irreducible nature of the first-person perspective are developed by D. Zahavi (1999; 2005), who emphasizes the role of embodied experience in its foundation. Like Shoemaker, Perry, Baker and the other philosophers mentioned earlier, Zahavi appeals to the property of IEM which distinguishes first-personal statements containing the pronoun “I”. As a pure indexical, “I” unfailingly refers to its denotatum without requiring further description, guaranteeing not only the existence but also the immediate experiential presence of its referent whenever is uttered, without presenting it as an object. According to Zahavi, to be aware of myself as a subject, I do not need positive knowledge about my objective properties, such as being a physical object, a biological organism or a person. Every form of objective knowledge about myself must be grounded in the end on self-awareness, under pain of falling into infinite regress. “My awareness of myself [...] is not mediated by the awareness of any identifying property” (Zahavi, 1999, p. 9). The subject of which I am aware is neither something beyond my experience nor the intentional correlate of an experience. Instead, it simply expresses the first-personal mode through which all experiences are given, making them irreducible to intentional objects.

I disagree with this statement. “I” is not merely an empty reference point, being defined in its properties by the thoughts or mental states occurring here and now, even though it cannot be reduced to them. The necessary and contingent condition for using “I” lies in its connection to a moving and perceiving body. Serving as the zero-point of orientation, the body grounds us in our environment, enabling us to refer to every perceptual object and, conversely, to position ourselves in relation to them. The presence of indexicals in language indicates, prior to any rule of usage, the fundamental fact that I, as an embodied subject, possess a first-person perspective on the world. In every act of perception directed toward a particular object, there is always an implicit reference to myself and to the zero-point where my body is situated. Consequently, the use of demonstratives like “this” and “that” gains its proper function only in relation to a pure and absolute (i.e. “essential”) indexicals such as “I”, “here” and “now”. Understanding the rules governing the use of indexicals presupposes to exist as a bodily subject who simultaneously encounters herself and the worldly context where she perceives and acts. The first-person perspective, as rooted in a moving and perceiving body, is not an

⁴ Baker’s objections can also be raised against C. Peacocke’s (2017) “agency-involving account”, where he argues that only representations of action can allow the shift from the mere awareness of the presence of an anonymous body to the awareness of this body as mine. According to Peacocke, a set of subpersonal representations of both bodily actions and objective properties, generated by an “integrating apparatus”, is necessary for this. However, contrary to Peacocke’s assertion, first-person non-conceptual content is inseparable from a basic form of embodied consciousness. Moreover, it seems highly counterintuitive to propose representational first-person contents that cannot be directly experienced.

ineffable feature merged with experiential contents. Despite its pre-reflective nature, it is a structural datum that can be subject to thematic attention.

The first fact that immediately captures our attention is the distinctly different way our body manifests itself compared to any other object, prompting us to question whether it can be considered an object at all. First and foremost, we must discern between perceiving our body in an object-like fashion through exteroceptive sensations and feeling it from within via bodily interoceptive sensory channels. It is only in the former case that the body can be equated to any other external object, whereas, when experienced internally, it constitutes something uniquely its own without parallel. These two ways of experiencing the body correspond to what E. Husserl calls material body, or body as object (*Körper*), and lived body, or body as subject (*Leib*) (Husserl, 1989).

Indeed, only the lived body comes into appearance through bodily sensations such as proprioception, internal passive touch, kinaesthesias, vestibular and nociceptive sensations, and so forth, filling its internal space. This intracorporeal space contrasts with external worldly space due to its relative uniformity and lack of perspectivity and constitutes the central focus from which the latter unfolds, according to the power of action of the lived body. Husserl characterizes the lived body as an “I sense” and an “I can”, namely as a twofold but unitary power of sensation and movement, corresponding at least in part to the sense of bodily ownership and the sense of agency. Both aspects belong to a unitary phenomenon. Whereas proprioception and inner tactile sensations give rise to the body sensed from within, kinaesthesias are responsible for the awareness of the body as a center of movement and action and as a source of a functioning intentionality that is directed toward external objects, enabling the deployment of an oriented space which has the lived body itself as its zero-point. The body not only appears from a first-person perspective but also acts as its condition of possibility by virtue of its sensorimotor constitution. The first-person perspective is rooted in the spatial location occupied by the subject due to its embodied constitution and therefore is co-given with the self-manifestation of the body. The metaphor of the ego as a pole of action and affection, from which our intentional acts radiate, acquires its full meaning only by virtue of its reference to a lived body as the center of orientation for perception and action.⁵

However, contrary to what Zahavi claims (1999, p. 104), the lived body too is the intentional term of a perceptual act, albeit of a peculiar way, since it can be accessed from the inside. The fact that the body is the center of my perspective on the world, and it is not comparable to an external object does not prevent me from perceiving it. While the body itself is not given perspectively, I cannot reduce its entire dimensional field to the absolute “here” in which it is located. The scope of perception is not limited to the body as object, as the self-constitution of the lived body implies its self-manifestation. As far as the first-personal mode of givenness reveals a conscious state belonging to someone with all its qualitative contents, this bearer – especially when considered in her embodied constitution – must be understood as more than an evanescent and not-objectifiable entity. As Zahavi himself admits (2005, pp. 26 and 205), for the lived body to constitute the objective side of bodily self-awareness, it must be an integral part of our common world. As an embodied subject I have a perspective to the world, but this does not imply that I am entirely foreign to it, as claimed by the proponents of

5 According to Alsmith (2017), an embodied subject can develop an awareness of being located in a world of things that afford her actions without needing an explicit representation of herself as the perspectival center of her perceptions. However, the way we interact with objects through our actions requires at least a pre-reflective awareness of the different spatial relationships we have with them, depending on their varying distances from our body.

a supposed “purity” of a transcendental subject that hovers over the world from a perspective fundamentally alien to it.

6. Conclusions In this study I have argued that the first-person perspective is inherently embodied and irreducible to higher-order cognitive processes or linguistic self-reference. The body, as the zero-point of an oriented spatial field, structures perceptual and motor capacities, enabling self-awareness and interaction with the environment. Through a critique of De Vignemont, Baker, Kaplan, and Perry, the analysis has tried to show that bodily ownership and agency are not independent from, but rather rooted in, the first-person perspective. While conceptual and linguistic capacities can offer an invaluable contribution to refining (bodily) self-awareness, they do not constitute however its fundamental basis. Instead, selfhood is primarily grounded in the pre-reflective lived experience of the body, which remains irreducible both to epistemic and representational accounts relying on the dogma of reducibility to a third-personal “view from nowhere”. By reaffirming the primacy of embodiment, this perspective challenges reductionist views and underscores the necessity of a phenomenological approach to understanding first-person experience.

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