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# FIRST-PERSON MORALITY AND THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE

*abstract*

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*I build on Baker's insight concerning the relationship between having a robust first-person perspective and being a moral agent in order to show the defects of some recent projects of naturalisation of morality. I argue that morality depends upon having conscience, and is an inherently first-personal experience. I then move on to criticise Baker's too neat distinction between a rudimentary and a robust first-person perspective, and suggest that Baker excessively downplays the role of embodiment in her account of what it is for the same first-person perspective to be instantiated across time.*

*keywords*

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*First-person perspective, conscience, embodiment, natural kind*

1. In *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (2013) Lynne Baker convincingly argues that the first-person perspective (FPP) is an irreducible element of a complete ontology, and one that cannot be accounted for in terms of neural processes. I agree with this important conclusion, and with the idea that the possession of a FPP accounts for many relevant aspects that distinguish the lives of persons and make them peculiarly valuable and important. In the first part of this article, building on Baker's insight, I will stress the peculiar link existing between moral experience and the FPP: I will suggest that we cannot adequately explain morality unless we acknowledge the peculiarity of the FPP. In the second part, focusing on human infants' early capacities for social relations, I will suggest that Baker excessively downplays the role of embodiment in her characterisation of the FPP, and that her neat distinction between the rudimentary and the robust FPP might be revised. I will conclude suggesting that Baker's theory suffers from a difficulty in the definition of what counts as an instantiation of the same FPP across time, and that this depends on her view of the relationship between persons and their bodies.
2. One central contention in chapter 9 of *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* is that "nothing can be a moral agent without a robust first-person perspective. Since only persons can have robust first-person perspectives, only persons can be rational or moral agents" (Baker 2013, pp. 192-193). This point, I think, is well taken. At the same time, it runs against some recent views coming from empirical studies of moral judgment. In these studies, it is suggested that morality is a much less complex phenomenon than we usually think; particularly, that moral judgment is inherently based on our emotions (Dalglish 2004), and that all beings showing some form of empathy or possessing a system of unreflective, automatic emotions (the so called system 1) can roughly be considered moral agents. Research on the neuroscientific bases of moral judgments, as well as on the psychological and neuroscientific dimensions of empathy (Moll, de Oliveira-Souza, Zahn & Grafman 2008), have contributed much to these developments, and to the considerable revival of Humean views on morality (Nichols 2004 and Prinz 2007). According to these views, moral judgments are nothing more than gut feelings, or emotional, automatic reactions mediated by our 'sentimental' brain (Haidt 2001 and 2007);

alternatively, they can be reconstructed as the outcome of a double level of processing by different areas of our brain, that is, the automatic reactions by system 1, as corrected and integrated by the reflective, computational processes of system 2 (Greene 2008 and 2009).

While it would be wrong to neglect the importance of the neuroscientific findings for an adequate understanding of morals, it must be stressed that reconstructions such as these account in a very partial way for the whole of moral experience. The lesson to be learned, no doubt, is that morality has its roots in the deep structures of our 'sentimental' brain; however, the recent focus on emotive, automatic processes, leaves much out of consideration. The concept of morality with which these studies are working is in fact centred on swift judgments in very specific, often dramatic and sometimes bizarre quandary situations, such as those dealing with 'trolley cases', crying babies and the like (Greene, Sommerville, Nystrom, Darley & Cohen 2001). But this focus fails to account for the perhaps most important part of morality, *i.e.* the one that has to do with the development of more general patterns of reaction and disposition to act, patterns which crucially involve an idea of oneself. To put the point somehow more bluntly: an account of moral experience centring exclusively on the generation of outputs, in the form of third-person judgments on the rightness or wrongness of some considered course of action, misses most of what morality is all about. And, following Baker's point, I would like to say that most of what such an account misses has to do with the FPP.

The basic fact about the moral point of view, I would say, is that it is not third-personal, or at least, that it cannot be wholly accounted for in third-personal terms; it is an essential element in moral evaluation that rightness and wrongness cannot be defined from a spectator's viewpoint on the facts of the world (not even on 'moral', or 'axiological' facts there to be valued), but involve the adoption of a FPP. When I ask myself what is it right to do, I am not contemplating this question from an external viewpoint, I am not asking what would be the best thing to do 'from the point of view of the Universe', as it were: what I am actually asking is what *I* should do, what are the best reasons on which *I* may act, and therefore on which *I* ought to act. Of course, my gut feelings, or emotional automatic reactions, may mark the beginnings of a moral response, and may suggest the adoption of an attitude: what is crucial, however, and distinctive of an authentic moral judgment, is the fact that I decide to endorse that reaction. I stop for a while, reflecting on what are my best reasons to act on in the circumstances, and end up with the decision that that reaction is the most appropriate way to face the situation. This decision involves the consideration of my practical

identity as a moral subject, that is, the consideration of my personal values, commitments and ideas of the good life (Reichlin 2014).

Baker aptly suggests that the possession of a rudimentary FPP does not enable the adoption of this specifically normative perspective, since moral reasons are always reasons bearing on the relationship between myself and others: therefore, in order to make moral judgments, I must have some image of myself as myself, and of myself in the web of my relationships with others. To eliminate or reduce the FPP, therefore, is also to reduce moral decision-making to the image of an evolutionary mechanism wired into our brains in order to produce useful behavioural outputs, as judged from the evolutionary viewpoint of the reproductive fitness of the individual and of the social group. Alternatively, it is to reduce it to the consequentialist image of a tool for correcting our biased automatic reactions with a view to maximising utility, thanks to our reflective, computational inputs from system 2. I am not suggesting that these processes play no part in the complex phenomena of our moral experience: rather, that they do not capture the whole of it, nor its main core.

A robust FPP is needed to account for a plausible view of morality. Living a moral life primarily has to do with constructing one's character or moral personality, that is, with developing habits and dispositions to feel, judge and choose according to an ideal image of oneself and an ideal of a good life. Morality, therefore, is first-personal in its essence: it does not have to do only (nor, I would say, mainly) with producing consequences (even though, of course, consequences too matter in a moral decision); its main core concerns establishing relationships with other people, and adopting principles to shape our treating one another with respect. Morality has to do with the contribution that I\* – a symbol that Baker uses to refer to our capacity to think of ourselves as ourselves – give to the state of the world, through my choosing the kind of person that I\* want to be, in my relationship with others. As Thomas Nagel famously put it, morality cannot be entirely accounted for in terms of agent-neutral reasons, that is, of reasons that are valid and applicable whoever is the agent (Nagel 1986); there is a fundamental aspect of morality in which agent-relative reasons are involved, that is, moral rightness and wrongness also depend on the fact that it is *me* who will be doing *x*, or producing consequence *y*. And the fact that I will be doing the action bears on my self-image, it is mirrored in it and will accompany my self-conception from this moment onwards. If the 'naturalisation' of morality is the project of translating this basic first-person experience of the commitment to moral principles and to an idea of the good life in a wholly third-personal language, then it means to miss the

main point of morality, or to explain it away.

The Western philosophical and theological tradition has an apt word to capture this specifically first-personal character of moral experience: this word is 'conscience'. Conscience is perhaps no longer a fashionable word in philosophical language; nonetheless, we can say that morality depends on having conscience, in the precise sense of having a first-personal view on our agency and relationship with others. The etymology of the word tells us this very clearly, for *conscientia* refers to a peculiar kind of knowledge. It is knowledge (*scientia*) of something that is not entirely separated from the knower, since it is knowledge that, at the same time, involves an idea of oneself (*cum-scire*): knowledge that binds the knower, that directly involves the one who has it. Conscience, therefore, is not equivalent to moral sense, if this is conceived in the standard Humean meaning, according to which all that there is to morality is feeling some pleasurable or unpleasurable sentiments with reference to actions and characters. Conscience, in fact, has to do not with simple 'moral perceptions', but with the progressive structuring of one's framework of attitudes and patterns of reaction, in the light of our experience of interhuman relationships and aided by the internalisation of other people's looks and judgments on ourselves. Friedrich Nietzsche once famously wrote that conscience depends on authority and therefore "it is not God's voice in man's breast, rather the voice of some men in man" (Nietzsche 1996, II, 2, § 52). He was partly right, because the authority of conscience depends in part on internalising others' reactions and judgments, so that their voice resonates in us and their gaze on us shapes the way in which we look to ourselves. But of course, he was also partly wrong, because our conscience is the form of our practical identity, that is, of that conception of virtue and of the good life that we define for ourselves and we aim to instantiate in our choices and actions. In Baker's terms, we can say that conscience is also a product of our FPP. This is therefore my conclusion for this first section: there is a relationship between having conscience and having the capacity to conceive of oneself as oneself; the two are generated in a common process and mutually support each other.

3. I have suggested that there is an important and reciprocal relationship between conscience and the robust FPP, and that this is why some recent projects of naturalisation fail to grasp what really is at stake in morality. I now want to show that this is no reason to forget the close relationship pointed out by empirical research between the emotional experience of human relationships and morality; moreover, that we should also take into

account the role played by very early experiences of sociality in establishing both conscience and the robust FPP.

One important conclusion of contemporary studies in developmental psychology is that infants show very early signs of the distinction between themselves and the others, and very rapidly set out for the development of a sense of agency. For example, infants in the first hours of their life already distinguish their body from others', as shown by their reacting more vivaciously to the experimenter's stimulation of their cheek, than to a similar self-stimulation (Rochat & Hespos 1997). An analogous observation is provided by the fact that four-month old babies try to reach for objects that are being shown to them only within the sphere of their grasp, and show much hesitation when the object's distance is such that the attempt would endanger their bodily equilibrium. This body-scheme, of course, is subpersonal, but it is nonetheless a very early sign of the beginnings of the consciousness of oneself.

Moreover, infants also show very early signs of agency, as evidenced for example by experiments in which two-month old babies modulate their way of sucking a 'musical' dummy, according to the different sounds that it produces (Rochat & Striano 2000). These findings suggest that there is a very early experience of one's body that is a constitutive element in the concept of oneself as a distinct and original source of action. Moreover, it is well known, as mentioned by Baker herself, that humans possess a unique capacity for social interaction, cooperation and mind-reading (Tomasello 1995 and 2009), as it is shown, for example, by their very early capacity to imitate and to distinguish facial emotions. We can also add that, in a few months from birth, infants start to develop attitudes of reaction to other's actions that are clear forerunners of social and moral behaviour. For example, two-month old babies react negatively to the sudden interruption of an interaction by an adult, as if there was a sort of 'breach' of an implicit rule (Rochat 2001), and seven-month old babies differentiate their social expectations according to the fact that they are interacting with some privileged person, or with an unknown one (Layton & Rochat 2007). The lesson that can be drawn from these data is that infants learn to identify themselves through the relationships with others: it is through the experience of the others' gaze, and the very implicit realisation of being the object of others' representation and care that the sense of oneself emerges. Self-consciousness, and the future development of the capacity for moral agency are rooted in our very early, and peculiarly human, interest for reputation, that is, for the way in which others see us. We can say that the emergence of the self is tied to the social interactions of the human infant

with other people: in fact, there is a sort of co-emergence of the ideas of the self and of the others.

Now Baker is of course aware of these data. Her strategy to mark the peculiarity of persons, as distinguished from human biological organisms, is to establish a distinction between a rudimentary and a robust FPP: human babies are provided with a rudimentary FPP, but what makes us unique and places us above the animal kingdom is the possession of a robust FPP, which does not emerge until the kid possesses language and the capacity for I-thoughts. This distinction is fairly persuasive, but I suggest that it should not be taken as marking a neat boundary. In fact, since the acquisition of a robust FPP is the acquisition of a sense of oneself as oneself, the infants' early capacities to distinguish themselves from others, and to interact with them in significantly complex ways, can be considered as early steps on the way to the development of a robust FPP. As a matter of fact, it would be implausible to suggest that the robust FPP 'magically' emerges with the appearance of language; it is much more plausible to say that the sense of the self is largely acquired through very early experiences of oneself as oneself in a non-linguistic dimension, and that the acquisition of language completes and perfects the process, enabling a much wider experience of one's agency and relationships with others. To put it bluntly: it seems possible to have a very robust sense of oneself without having developed those complex verbal capacities that eventually enable the individual to express one's self-awareness.

This, of course, is not meant to suggest the existence of any kind of proto-moral behaviour in very young infants; as already noted, I accept Baker's view that only individuals with a robust FPP can be full-blown moral agents. However, the preceding observations show that the early social interactions, essentially mediated by the experience of a lived body and characterised by an emotional load, are vital elements in the formation of a robust FPP, which – as we saw – is intertwined with the generation of conscience and moral agency: as Philippe Rochat put it, the process through which children attract the gaze of others, while independently exploring their environment, is a seminal element that leads them to become increasingly self-conscious, and represents "the ontogenetic roots of the human moral sense" (Rochat 2012, p. 390). It can be added that this progressively emerging conception of oneself as oneself is mediated by some specifically moral behaviour, that is, by the adults' behaviour of caring for the infant. In this sense, we can say that the child acquires the conception of herself partly by learning to be the object of a loving relationship for her mother and other privileged persons. The co-emergence of the sense of oneself and of the

sense of others is mediated by experiences of care and affection, so that we may say that the *primordia* of conscience – *i.e.* the implicit notion of being in an ethical relationship with others, and of laying claims to others' attention – are one basic factor in the emergence of a robust FPP.

Baker rightly insists on the fact that it is the robust FPP that makes morality possible: but it is also clear that some causal work goes in the opposite direction. Though the definitive acquisition of a robust FPP is the result of acquiring language, the early experiences of one's lived body and of being thrown from the start into the basic forms of ethical relationship contributes much to that result. As noted by Baker, the robust FPP implies acquiring the empirical concepts expressed by a public language, and this implies "to have social and linguistic relations" (Baker 2013, p. 139). What I want to stress is that social and linguistic relations of a specifically ethical kind are present in early infancy, and help the construction of the child's sense of oneself as oneself long before the child acquires the active use of language. This may suggest that the distinction between rudimentary and robust FPP should not be overemphasised, and the continuity between the two should be given proper recognition.

4. I have argued that there are reasons to doubt that the acquisition of cognitive abilities (*i.e.*, the use of a syntactically complex language) is the only means through which a robust FPP becomes effective, for the pre-linguistic, lived experience of embodiment in a biological organism, with the emotional experiences that this allows, is a relevant step towards the establishment of a robust FPP. Before the acquisition of the *concept* of oneself, the fact of being situated in a bodily condition, of experiencing one's body as a causal factor in effecting changes in the world of things and persons, and of experiencing a complex set of perceptions and emotional reactions associated to this embodied situation, are vital contributions to reaching a *sense* of oneself, which in turn is a major contribution to the establishment of a robust FPP. In other words, I have argued for a softening of the distinction between the rudimentary and the robust FPP. Now, I wish to give a look at the consequences of these observations for Baker's definition of the boundaries of personhood.

Baker does not assume that the possession of a robust FPP, with the associated linguistic competence, is a necessary condition of personhood, and of the full moral status that is proper to persons: she subscribes to the view that human children, also at an age at which they certainly lack a robust FPP, are already persons. The reason she gives for this view is that human infants have a rudimentary FPP *essentially*: and the reason why they



have it essentially is that they are “of a kind that develops robust first-person perspective” (Baker 2013, p. 44, emphasis added). This makes a difference with other mammals who have rudimentary FPP: these are of kinds that do not develop robust FPP, and therefore have the rudimentary FPP only contingently. Now, this seems to mean that, according to Baker, there is no need to *presently* possess the capacities for a robust FPP in order to be a person; it is enough that you have the *capacity to develop* a robust FPP in the ordinary history of development that is proper of your natural kind. And in fact, in the paper read at the Summer School on “Naturalism, First-Person Perspective and the Embodied Mind”, Baker writes that the dividing line between a human infant, who is person, and a nonhuman organism, who is not, is that the first, but not the second, “has a remote capacity to develop a robust first-person perspective” (Baker 2014, p. 22-23); and, as defined by Baker, a remote capacity “is a second-order capacity to develop a capacity” (Baker 2014, p. 23).

I see two possible objections to this. The first is that, in the light of the scientific evidence very sketchily summarised in the preceding section, this capacity can hardly be said to be remote: infants in the first years of age are in fact actively making their way on the road that brings to the full possession of a robust FPP, and their level of individual agency and social interaction is so high that they can fairly be said to possess a stable sense of themselves, in a way that cannot be said of most nonhuman animals. There is in fact much more continuity between human infants and grown children than Baker seems willing to allow: specifically, it seems that we can justifiably say that pre-linguistic infants enjoy some relatively complex form of inner life, so that Baker’s contention according to which “without a robust first-person perspective, there would be no inner life at all” (Baker 2013, p. 140) is highly questionable.

The second, and more important, objection is that, if being *of a kind that naturally develops* a robust FPP is a sufficient condition in order to be recognised as a person, even though the relevant capacities are still in the process of construction, than it is not clear why a sentient human foetus should not be considered a person as well. The two conditions that Baker stipulates for having a rudimentary FPP are the possession of consciousness and of minimal agency: now, there is convincing evidence that a foetus with a sufficiently developed cortical function (starting from about the 24<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy) does satisfy the first condition for it (Lagercrantz 2014), and, depending on how minimal agency can be, it might be said to partly satisfy the second as well. Therefore, since a sentient foetus is likely to possess a rudimentary FPP, and is a being *of a kind that naturally develops a robust first-*

*person perspective*, it should be considered a person, according to Baker's criterion.

But, even though we should accept that a sentient human foetus does not satisfy the second condition, the mention of the concept of a natural kind invites the following line of argument: if being of a kind that *naturally develops* a robust FPP is sufficient in order to be considered a person, than being of a kind that *naturally develops* first rudimentary, and then robust FPP should be taken as sufficient ground for personhood as well. To stress the role of being an individual of a certain natural kind, in order to grant the human newborn the status of a person, is to accept – at least implicitly – that there is some ontological significance in being human, that is, in being a living organism “of a kind that typically develops a robust first-person perspective” (Baker 2013, p. 148). Therefore, one might be tempted to say that, at the time that the human individual is present, what you have is a biological individual of a kind that naturally develops a rudimentary FPP, at some time (perhaps late) during pregnancy, and then a robust FPP within the first three years after birth. Where should we stop this regress? Probably at the time when a human organism is present, which can safely be said some two weeks after fertilisation, when the cells' totipotency is lost and twinning can no longer occur (Ford 1991). This move would partly reconcile Baker's view with animalism, in that it would acknowledge the relevance of human biology among the conditions that account for what we essentially are: it would acknowledge that embodiment in a biological organism is a basic condition for the future emergence of the robust FPP, *i.e.*, of the distinctive mark of full-fledged personhood.

Baker comes close to recognising the importance of biology for persons when she objects to Descartes' conception of the self as a solitary thinker, with no hands, nor flesh, nor blood (Baker 2013, p. 140). However, her recognition of our necessary embodiment is limited by her insistence that our body might be substituted by a bionic, wholly engineered one, while we continued to exist so long as we had our FPP. Baker's confidence in asserting this view is based on the well-known cases of the implantation of artificial limbs and other prosthetic parts that can be meaningfully integrated into our bodily scheme. I agree that an individual with an artificial arm is still the same person, because – among other things – she exemplifies the same FPP: but I think that there are limits to the alteration of our bodily image, beyond which a bionic body, made up of entirely engineered parts, can no longer support the same FPP.

Baker's view greatly underestimates the connexion between my having *this* body and my having *my* FPP. My body is not a mere biological object, it is

a lived body and the very condition of *my* being open to the outside world, that is, of *my* having consciousness and a FPP: what does the fact that my FPP is the condition of my persistence mean, if it does not mean that such perspective emerges from *this particular* body? If the single fact that accounts for your being the same person that you were as an infant is that “there is a single exemplification of the dispositional property of having a first-person perspective both then and now” (Baker 2014, p. 2), is it not the case that such a FPP can be the same because it is a dispositional property of the same body? In particular, it might be said that I can be the same individual and have the same FPP only so long as I have the same brain; but we may also add, so long as I conserve the experience of looking at the world from the same bodily perspective, of acknowledging myself as the bearer of certain expressions and the user of certain gestures that mirror my inner life. It is the importance of our embodiment for our sense of ourselves that makes cases of deep and persistent disfigurement so dramatic, and imaginary tales such as Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* so irretrievably tragic. It is simply the fact that the alteration of our body affects our sense of ourselves, and we cannot exemplify the same FPP while inhabiting an utterly different body. It is true, of course, that my body is ever in the process of changing, and the cells that constituted it years and even months ago, are no longer those that constitute it now; and my brain, that coordinates all living functions and enables consciousness, is constantly changing its neurons as well. But it is also clear that a form or some other principle of unity testifies to the permanence of the same organism across the changes of its material constituents. If it is not this continuing human organism that displays the dispositional property of conceiving oneself as oneself, who or what does? If the ‘miness’ of the FPP across time is not accounted for by my biological continuity, than it can only be linked to my psychological continuity, as in standard psychological views of identity. But this conclusion would run into the difficulties that Baker herself raises against psychological views (Baker 2000).

5. For all her insistence on the anti-Cartesianism of her position, a slight element of dualism still lingers in Baker’s view: once severed from its emergence in *my* specific bodily condition, my FPP seems an analogous either of a Cartesian soul, that might be transferred in a different, non biological body, or of a Parfitian collection of connected mental states that might be teletransported into another planet. Baker surely is not willing to accept either view: and she would also reject the partly ‘animalistic’ one I suggested. But has she the conceptual resources to avoid this move? And

more importantly, does the reconciliation so accomplished of the FPP with the relevance of embodiment in a biological organism necessarily condemns its defender to naturalism? In other words, is the irreducibility of the FPP necessarily tied to the constitution view and to the denial of the role played by our biological bodies in shaping our identities as persons? I do not think so. It is persons – I concur – not brains nor minds who “are subjects of experience, or are rational or moral agents” (Baker 2013, p. 142); however, we persons cannot think of ourselves as ourselves outside this organic body, for a non organic, bionic body would not be *me*, in that it would not support *my* FPP. Perhaps this is only an intuition, but it is a very robust one.

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