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THE FIRST-PERSON PERSPECTIVE REQUIREMENT IN PRETENSE

abstract

According to Lynne Baker we need to investigate the performances to understand if someone has a first-person perspective. My claim is that language has not the main role in the formation of epistemic states and self-consciousness. In children's performances, we have evidence for a self-consciousness without "I" thoughts. We investigate if it is possible to understand the difference between a case of false belief and one of pretense. My aim is to demonstrate that pretense is not a proto-concept but a first-person fact, endowed with a rich phenomenology.

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1.
Introduction

According to Lynne Baker: "To have a robust first-person perspective, one must be able to manifest it" (Baker 2013, p. 154). Well, how can children manifest their first-person perspective? If we consider this ability as our *desideratum*, I think it is instructive to compare it to its closest early manifestation, i.e., pretend play. It seems that intentionality is a necessary condition for the activity of pretense. In the first part of the paper I investigate if it is possible to understand the difference between a case of false belief and one of pretense. Against the notion of *prelief*, an early status of indistinction between pretence and belief, our claim is that awareness is not dissociable from the first person perspective. However, a phenomenological approach must be supported by an epistemology that can explain how the mind is sensitive to the *refractory* nature of the world. The theory of agency allows us to highlight some relevant differences between first and third-person perspective. Then, we try to understand the limits of a theory that attributes to the language the main role in the formation of epistemic states and self-consciousness. Pretense, as an early manifestation of a set of pre-reflective self- and social cognition abilities, represents evidence for a self-consciousness without "I" thoughts.

2.
Why Should We Distinguish between First and Third-person Perspective?

Angeline Lillard (2001) has observed that every pretense act involves certain features, several of which are defining and necessary: there must be an animate pretender and a reality that is pretended about, a mental representation of an alternative situation must be involved and projected onto the reality, and, this is the Austin's requirement, action must be intentional. Without intention there is no pretense, as Searle has noted too: "One cannot truly be said to have pretended to do something unless one intended to pretend to do it" (Searle 1975, p. 325). Finally, "full awareness" of the actual situation and the represented one is required. I think that Baker's suggestion to investigate the performances brings us on the right track. However, at the outset, we need to better understand the ways one can talk about the "manifestation" of an ability. So, some insist on stressing the difference between imagination and explicit behavior emphasizing a more evident transparency and the intentional nature of mental states compared to simple behavior. As a consequence, transparency of the imaginative states is regarded as a logical prerequisite to understand the limits of the principle of "semantic innocence", whereby the semantic value

of a referential expression ought to remain constant inside and outside the scope of a verb of attitude like "believe". Imagination would be the gateway to intensional contexts, namely those contexts in which two expressions with the same extension cannot be substituted *salva veritate*. I think that, to avoid confusing the transparency of the imagination with the opacity of the mind-world epistemic relation, it would be better to consider the transparency of imagination from the perspective of an epistemology of understanding, letting epistemic states, such as belief and desire, to pertain to an epistemology of knowledge[1]. Mind, here, *should* learn to keep track of the world. In imagination the world offers us props, but what you must keep track of is different from the truth. Now, we know, pretense and imagination are not overlapping phenomena. Normally pretense acts are visible and children align their pretense responses with action. Yet, pretense is well adapted because it is an activity able to combine features of acting with the epistemic ones of the intentional attitude[2].

Pretense is not a fact about what happens to the body in acting, but, on the other side, it is neither, as for Baker, a rudimentary, by default, first-personal perspective. It is, rather, a first-person fact, endowed with a rich phenomenology. Nevertheless, some have considered it a mere proto-concept, not a full-developed mental concept. Theorists will naturally balk at referring to children's "belief" at all, so for example, according to Joseph Perner (1994), at the age of three children possess a concept, "prelief" (or "betence"), in which the concepts of pretense and belief coexist undifferentiated. The concept of prelief allows the child to understand that a person can "act as if" something was such and such (for example, as if "this banana is a telephone") when it is not. At the age of four, they understand that, like the public representations, inner representations can also misrepresent states of affairs. This hypothesis lends itself to several criticisms. The idea of an early lack of distinction between pretense and false belief contains a confusion between ascriptions in the first and third-person. For example, a first element that demonstrates the implausibility of the argument of indistinction is the recognition that engaging in pretense involves a certain degree of awareness that one is dealing with a not-real

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1   Following a rationalist tradition in meta-knowledge, we could formulate an approximate difference between transparency of imagination and opacity of full epistemic states in terms of weak and strong transparency:
- An epistemic state E is weakly transparent to a subject S if and only if when S is in state E, S can know that S is in state E;
- An epistemic state E is strongly transparent to a subject S if and only if when S is in state E, S can know that S is in state E, and when S is not in state E, S can know S is not in state E.

2 See Albergo 2012, 2013; Harris 2000.

situation. Lynne Baker has strongly highlighted the connection between awareness and first-person perspective. Furthermore, whoever does not distinguish between the point of view of the first- and the one of third-person, is mistaking by way of making the risk of representational abuse something more than a mere logical possibility. To say that an observer can also confuse a wrong action for a case of pretense does not mean that from the first-person perspective he is unable to distinguish between reality and fantasy. Indeed, the first situation seems quite common among children under the age of three, and this is easy to explain if, as noted above, we use the concept of acting "as if". Wendy Custer (1998), for example, in a series of studies with three years old children, has used images of people engaged in the action of fishing but catching a boot instead of a fish. In the pretense condition researchers described a man as pretending to fish. Then, two drawings with "thought pictures" were presented. In the first one the man was thinking to catch a fish, in the other one the real situation was depicted. Children were asked to choose which one represented what the man had in his mind during pretense. Custer reported the high percentage of correct answers even among children of three years, i.e., the tendency to choose the thought picture with the hooked fish in the pretense condition. These results could suggest a mentalistic interpretation, i.e., one might conclude that behind these performances lies the understanding that pretense comes from thoughts entertained by the minds of the characters. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to give an alternative explanation of deflationary kind. Before using meta-representational hypothesis, we may give an account of the results in this kind of test using the ability of the subjects to recognize that pretending is different from reality, and this would explain the choice of combining the thought picture containing a false thought with the pretense condition. Our hypothesis has the effect of showing how children usually see the wrong actions as cases of pretense. However, this does not mean that those who make mistakes are acting according to the same relation to the world that is supposed in the act of pretending. We can try to understand the difference between these two perspectives considering both as our 'constructions'. A construction is usually something that we realize for a purpose. For example, when we observe an action, we can also imagine the consequences that usually, *ceteris paribus*, accompany it. Among our constructions some may be true, some may be false. In addition, every fiction turns out to be a construction. Nevertheless, the reverse is not valid because, by definition, no fiction is true. If this removes, at least at the conceptual level, the possibility of confusion-dementia, however, it only provides us a tautological solution to the issue of the alleged confusion

between an incorrect action and pretense from the perspective of the third-person. We could indeed recognize that, from the perspective of third-person the one who observes maintains a positive attitude towards the set of things observed. There is some kind of regularity between our actions and the world. As a matter of fact, our actions are usually in keeping with the world because our beliefs are quite often in agreement with it.

Now, to be conscious is to be conscious *of* something. We can imagine someone who has not acquired the Brentanian 'intentionality of the mental', because he is not able to put together objects of thought and mental orientations. He would be unable to think that something is 'so and so' because he would not have achieved the three-term relation between 1) subject, 2) propositional attitudes, and 3) contentful thoughts. However, it would be always possible to ascribe to this subject some kind of consciousness, at least the one of getting experience of objects, and, consequently, the self-consciousness obtained by distinguishing objects in the world and the experience of them. To be able to have different mental attitudes towards intentional objects would then be secondary to the ability to achieve different physical orientations towards real objects. The notion of agency is more primitive than thought.

3. Agency and Cognitive Development

Piaget thought that children develop the self-world dualism through exercising agency, because their actions would become progressively more spontaneous, differentiated, and integrated. According to James Russell, this position would be a modest proposal, because its claim is that interaction with objects is a necessary feature of mental development and self-awareness. We usually work with the idea of an organism equipped with representational capacities supposed to be the *explicantia*, the starting-point having its *explicanda* in successful interactions with objects out there. Instead, from the Piagetian point of view, the theoretical starting-point will be an acting and sensing organism, of course not a pure agent, within a world of objects. This does not mean that we do not need representations, it is just that they lose their priority in the relation of the mind with the world. This is captured by James Russell when he writes that the question for the representational theorist is "What kind of representational medium or content must be innately present or must develop if this is to become the mind of a successful thinker and agent?" (Russell, 1996, pp. 75-76). Yet, focusing on the responsibility for our own actions and on the experience of the constraints that reality sets on what we can experience, the question becomes "What does this organism have to be able to *do* in relation to objects if it is to develop an adequate representational system?". Cognitive

development is not only a matter of representing how things are out there. Representations distinguish between a subject and a world of objects, but activity is necessary to establish the self-world dualism. Experiencing the refractoriness of reality is necessary for subjectivity and self-awareness, because making a contribution to the object of experience, paired with the phenomenological value of participation, allows us to develop a subjective mental life set off from an objective reality. Moreover, if we assume the dependency of subjectivity and self-awareness on agency we can also understand the obvious conceptual links between considering others as rational beings and considering them as agents. The giving and asking for reasons in practical reasoning presupposes that there is not a mere passivity in relation to putative objects of knowledge. This does not mean that minds may be known entirely from the outside. Knowledge of our own actions might not have a representational character. Being an agent is an intrinsically first-person fact, it is known immediately and non-observationally. As Thomas Nagel puts it, there is "a clash between the view of action from the inside and *any* view of it from the outside. Any external view of an act as something that happens [...] seems to omit the doing of it" (Nagel 1979, p. 189). Saying that the subject-attitude-content triad is not a form of primary behavior does not mean that children conceive of others in behavioristic terms. To perceive others as agents means, at least in a modest form, to recognize them as endowed with minds, and it is possible to perceive others as agents only if we experience being agents in the first-person. Nevertheless, experiencing one's agency does not require the concept of agency. It is not the problem of ascribing a mental category to others after picking oneself out as the referent for a predicate. Here, predicate ascription, the germinal form for the following I-thoughts, is not at issue. However, it is not enough just to enunciate such a conceptual claim, we should also look for experimental confirmations. For example, Andrew Meltzoff (1990) showed that one year old babies are able to take a third-person perspective in relation to their own actions. The way in which they recognize when they are imitated drives us to hypothesize the existence of two parallel abilities: the one of realizing that it is their activity what is reproduced in the behavior of others, and the one of being able to project agency in others[3].

A first important contribution that the present theory offers us consists in recognizing the necessity of separating the points of view of the first- and

3   To avoid any possible confusion between the hypothesis illustrated and the thesis supported by the theorists of simulation by reflection, it is enough to recognize that we are talking about abilities that demarcate a pre-theoretical competence, while for the simulationists, there is no a theory that should be acquired but only a set of concepts that need to be developed.

the third-person. Recognizing that situations of direct experience lead to a wealth of mental activity much greater than that involved, at least in these early stages, in the processes of attribution to others, it also means having good reasons to keep a distance from the supporters of the *theory-theory* approach[4]. To develop a theory means to increase our own capacity to access to the relevant theoretical concepts, whose existence is assumed in a disembodied way. Children's access to their own mental life in first-person is just a special case of access to the notions of belief, pretense, or, in general, of mind. Access to these notions is independent by the epistemic perspective. One of the most common result of this kind of solution is to put different proto-abilities under a single category, with the consequence of having to explain mistaken performances with strange *ad hoc* hypotheses, such as Perner's idea of prelief, failing to recognize that they are actually two different competences. When working with proto-concepts concerning explanatory theories it would be advisable to make sure that attributions to child were constrained. It is not just a matter of how fine-grained you are prepared to be. About pretense, a very clear example of this kind of error is offered to us by Leslie and Happé, as in their opinion "solitary pretense comes out simply as the special case in which the agent of PRETEND is self" (Leslie & Happé, 1989, p. 210). These approaches forget that the subject has developed the ability to understand pretense in others because he himself is able to pretend. The theory of agency, therefore, allows us to support the hypothesis of the difference of the two perspectives even on the logical level. We need to recognize that being able to pretend in first-person is a necessary condition for being able to recognize it in the others. Now, we may ask whether it is also a sufficient condition. It is not only a conceptual problem, rather, formulating it allows us to go back to the problem from which we started, in order to clarify how it is possible that children assimilate false actions of others to cases of pretense. The theory of agency allows us to consider children under three years of age as subjects capable of conceiving the other as an agent and not merely as producer and consumer of representations. Action maintains a relation with the idea of experience that is not present in the explanations based on the passivity of subjects in relation to putative objects of knowledge. In addition, it is possible to interpret the tendency to see errors as cases of pretense as an example of the attribution of the ability to change the nature of perceptual inputs at will, as Piaget would say. It also allows us to put this kind of performance

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4   According to some authors concepts do not capture only salient features in objects. Children would develop concepts as mini theories using knowledge about causal mechanisms, teleological purposes, hidden features, and a biologically driven ontology (see Carey 1985; Keil 1989).

within a growing executive ability rather than an emerging theory. Thus, the first-person perspective in pretense is only a necessary condition for the attribution in third-person. Its insufficiency, if we put in these terms the inability to exclude from its extension erroneous situations, turns out to be an additional argument in favour of the existence of a non-observable, irreducible element, belonging to the first-person.

4.
A Non-
conceptual
Point of View

With respect to self-consciousness, I think that Baker's insistence on the inescapable role of language goes beyond what is justified by the facts. Early pretense is just an example of this problem. For example, according to Jose Bermudez (1998) when we say that without language there would be no self-consciousness, we meet two circularities. The first is that the ability to entertain thoughts with self-consciousness precedes the competence with the pronoun "I", while the hypothesis of language first makes the ability to entertain I-thoughts dependent on the linguistic competence. Moreover, and this is the second circularity, the circular dependency of the two abilities makes it difficult to explain also how we can become self-conscious. So, if each of the two capacities presupposes the other one, what do we learn first, to entertain I-thoughts or to use I-sentences? For Bermudez there are also kinds of non-conceptual self-consciousness, something similar to self-recognition. These forms of thought would not be based on any linguistic mediation. If the thought may be non-linguistic, then even self-consciousness can be non-conceptual. Thus, the competence in the pronoun "I" is far from being regarded as a prerequisite of self-conscious thought. We know that Bermudez adopts Peacocke's idea that there are non-conceptual contents that are not representational in nature. For example, the function of objects in pretense games may be a good example of this kind of content. The pretender projects a minimum image onto the real situation, therefore realizing real departures from reality. So a stick becomes a horse, a sceptre, a sword[5].

Looking for a primitive form of self-consciousness in infants lacking language, Bermudez relies upon scientific data about growing abilities, such as reaching-behavior, object-focused attention and pointing. According to Bermudez, a lot of evidence pushes a primitive self-consciousness back into pre-linguistic stages of human development. So, in order to abandon the idea that self-consciousness is a matter of having "I" thoughts (thoughts immune to error through misidentification) we need to investigate the evolutionary path starting from its lowest stages, such as "the capacity to feel sensations" and agency. In fact, Bermudez argues that:

5 See Gombrich (1963).

> Distinguishing self-awareness involves a recognition of oneself as a perceiver, an agent, and a bearer of reactive attitudes against a contrast space of other perceivers, agents, and bearers of reactive attitudes. It can only make sense to speak of the infant's experience of being a performer in the eyes of the other if the infant is aware of himself as an agent and of his mother as a perceiver (Bermudez 1998, pp. 252-253).

Many abilities usually related to "I" thoughts of language users would be detectable into a broadened non-conceptual point of view, but I think we need to take into account a further two cognitive abilities, so far forgotten and not in plain sight in Baker's account. First, we need conscious memory. Without it, a child cannot distinguish his experience from permanent features of the environment which instantiate a given experience. You can find your way back to a particular place by sheer luck or, as Bermudez recognized, because you consciously remember it. A continuous present gives way to a temporally extended point of view. Moreover, this point of view also depends on "basic inductive generalizations at the non-conceptual level".

5. A Two-ply Account of Self-consciousness

I would add that it is not obvious that if we had an explanation of how we can entertain I-thoughts, then we would have explained everything there is to explain. What would remain to be explained is the phenomenal side of self-consciousness that is not reducible to the introspective accessibility to information. For example, according to Pietro Perconti (2008) the Thought-Language principle is wrong because it does not distinguish between the phenomenal aspects and the cognitive ones of self-awareness. Having the ability to refer to my-self my own mental states and being aware of them belongs to the cognitive aspect of self. The feeling of being yourself is instead something that has to do with the phenomenal aspects of the matter. To explain how we get I-thoughts is a psychological issue, but it leaves out the phenomenology linked to them. The notion of non-conceptual content allows us to introduce the idea of nonrepresentational properties, that is to say, a kind of sensational properties that an experience has in virtue of what it is like to have that experience.

It can be concluded that between the simple consciousness and self-consciousness would be appropriate to recognize intermediate states, in order to avoid reducing the first to the mere ability to intentionally generate relevant stimulus-response correlations, therefore making self-consciousness a function of language with the consequence, for example,

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of not attributing self-consciousness to people suffering from speech disorders, such as aphasia. Consciousness is not just a matter of ability to discriminate environmental stimuli and to select from a range of possible responses, but it is also a matter of being aware of this experience and feeling something while being in this state of awareness.

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