

On the Impossibility of Solitary Persons

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1. The first-person perspective as relational

According to Baker, the first-person perspective is relational: "it would be impossible for a being truly alone in the universe to have a first-person perspective" (Baker 2000, 69-70). On Baker's interpretation, there could be no persons without there being objects external to the entity's first-person perspective. Baker argues for this as follows:

(1) x has a first-person perspective [iff] x can think of herself as herself*. (2) x can think of herself as herself* only if x has concepts that can apply to things different from herself. (3) x has concepts that can apply to things different from x only if x has had interactions with things different from x. Therefore (4) If x has a first-person perspective, then x has had interactions with things different from x. So, x's having a first-person perspective depends on x's relation to other things (Baker 2000, 72).

Basically, this is a refutation of solipsism: if (3) were true, then solipsism cannot be true. Conversely, if (3) were false, then we would have no plausible account of concept-acquisition. But curiously, Baker claims that language is dispensable for the first-person perspective: "Although the first-person perspective does not depend on natural language, it is often manifested [...] in a person's use of I* sentences" (Baker 2000, 76). (The oneself*-locution means: "S can think of herself as herself" [iff] S can think of herself in a way naturally expressible in the grammatical first-person as the bearer of the first-person thoughts. 'I am tall' expresses a simple first-person thought. S can express her thought of herself as the bearer of the thought 'I am tall' by saying 'I am having the thought that I* am tall'" (Baker 2000, 65).) This is a peculiar claim, on which I strongly disagree with Baker, as language seems to be necessary for the development of the first-person perspective. Baker's argument, as it stands, seems to tacitly invoke the (Cartesian) thesis that word-meanings can be known privately. Granted, Baker admits that she lacks a theory of concept-acquisition, and that she would look at Wittgenstein's work for this (Baker 2000, 75). Yet Baker's theory of personhood is dependent on Wittgensteinian ideas more than she acknowledges. Baker understands the notion of an entity's being "alone in the universe" as indicative of there being no objects external to the entity. I claim that this interpretation is too weak; the notion needs to encompass individuals permanently isolated from a community. I claim that in such a condition, there could not be persons in Baker's sense of the term. If language is indispensable to personhood, and language is essentially social, there must more than one entity for there to be persons.

2. The impossibility of solitary speakers

To show that language is indispensable to personhood, I will turn to Wittgenstein's private language argument. In the secondary literature we find two primary interpretations of the claim that there could be no solitary speakers, namely, the individualistic and the communitarian interpretations. These can be found in the works of Peter Hacker (Hacker 1984/2001 and 1990/2001) and Norman Malcolm (Malcolm 1989), respectively. On Hacker's view, there could be Crusoe-like speakers who have been

forever isolated. For Malcolm, individuals permanently isolated from a community could not develop a language. There are analogues of these two claims for persons. Baker's claim is akin to Hacker's: there could be solitary persons provided that there are external objects. My goal is to defend the thesis that there can be no persons in absence of a community. This communitarian conception rests on two premises, namely, on the social nature of language and on the necessity of language for representation. Thus, a forever-solitary individual would be unable to develop the first-person perspective requisite of personhood. Notice that the communitarian view makes it possible that an individual who already is a language-user could be isolated from the community without losing their linguistic ability. *Mutatis mutandis*, a person who gets isolated from her community would still remain a person.

To establish the impossibility of solitary speakers, I will turn to Donald Davidson's argument. Davidson argues that language is necessarily a social enterprise: "Language [...] does not depend on two or more speakers speaking in the same way; it merely requires that the speaker intentionally make himself interpretable to a hearer" (Davidson 1992, 260). Davidson argues that minimally, language requires two parties and, thus, a solitary language-user is a conceptual impossibility. Davidson offers a triangulation argument, grounded on primitive language-learning situation:

Some creature [...] learns to respond in a specific way to stimulus [...] The child babbles, and when it produces a sound like "table" in the evident presence of a table, it is rewarded; the process is repeated and presently the child says "table" in the presence of tables. The phenomenon of generalization, of perceived similarity, plays an essential role in the process (Davidson 1992, 262).

Here there are more than just one perceived similarity involved. To say that the child makes a sound like "table" in the evident presence of tables, the child's sounds in the evident presence of tables have to be observable. This makes for *three* similarity patterns:

The child finds tables similar; we find tables similar; and we find the child's responses in the presence of tables similar. It now makes sense to for us to call the responses of the child responses to a table (Davidson 1992, 263).

Now, Davidson claims, we can triangulate these responses and find the common object:

one line goes from the child in the direction of the table, one line goes from us in the direction of the table, and the third line goes from us to the child. [...] If I am right, the kind of triangulation I have described, while not *sufficient* to establish that a creature has a concept of a particular object or a kind of object, is *necessary* if there is to be any answer at all to the question of what its concepts are concepts of (Davidson 1992, 263).

The solitary speaker fails at triangulation because she has no confirmation of her responses being similar. We can conclude, with Wittgenstein: "In the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that

only means that here we can't talk about 'right' (Wittgenstein 1958/1999, §258).

Nevertheless, there are reasons to question Davidson's conclusion. Claudine Verheggen defends Davidson's claim after pointing out that Davidson's argument, albeit unsuccessful, makes considerable progress in the right direction. As presented, Davidson's claim is vulnerable to an objection from the relativity of perception. Two people, even if they are viewing the same object in one sense, are viewing different objects in another sense, given their different perspectives. Now, if we fail to locate the *common* cause to the responses of interacting people, then we should not be worried that we cannot locate *the* cause for the solitary individual's responses. Verheggen revises Davidson's argument by introducing a requirement for objectivity. Instead of focusing on the *common* object as the cause for responses, Verheggen shifts the focus to *recognizing* the commonality. Thus,

possession of language requires the possession of the concept of objectivity. [...] one could not have a language unless one knew, if only in an unarticulated way, that one's use of words is governed by standards, and that whether or one's use meets those standards is an objective matter (Verheggen 1997, 365).

Granted, even a solitary individual could be in disagreement over whether or not her use of words conforms to the standards (by comparing her word-usage at two different occasions) but this kind of disagreement fails to be objective, as it is resolved by the speaker alone. Genuine (dis)agreement is possible only with interpersonal interaction; anything short of this is insufficient for language: "The person who can interact only with a languageless creature is no better off than the person who can interact only with himself. He has the last and only say on everything, i.e. no say at all" (Verheggen 1997, 367).

3. The impossibility of solitary persons

Verheggen's modification of Davidson's argument establishes the social nature of language, which subsequently entails the impossibility of solitary speakers. Next, I want to comment on the notion of solitary *persons*. Despite the different positions advocated by Hacker and Malcolm, both of them seemingly regard the solitary individuals as persons. Malcolm writes:

Let us *arbitrarily assume* that Wittgenstein was imagining someone who had always lived alone, and who was employing a picture-language (Bildersprache). Would Wittgenstein be implying that there could be a forever solitary person with a language? (Malcolm 1989, 25)

Hacker answers this in the affirmative:

Wittgenstein demands [...] a behavioral context rich enough to provide adequate grounds for ascription of the mastery of the technique. This may (logically) be found in the behaviour of a solitary person, whether or not he had ever been part of a community (Hacker 1990/2001, 321).

Moreover, we see Verheggen conceding to this possibility (in talking of "solitary persons"), her denial of the possibility of solitary speakers notwithstanding. This suggests that both sides accede to the possibility that a forever-solitary individual is a person. This is quite expected on Hacker's individualistic approach, but when

Verheggen accedes to this, her communitarian view seems to falter. More pointedly, both sides can be seen as being under the shadow of Descartes in thinking that there could be solitary persons, explicit disavowals of Cartesianism notwithstanding. My aim here is to demonstrate this to be false.

Let us turn to Baker's claim that "a first-person perspective is a defining characteristic of all persons" (Baker 2000, 91). In delineating the first-person perspective, Baker writes: "One has a first-person perspective [iff] one has the ability to conceive of oneself as oneself", where this ability is signaled by the linguistic ability to attribute (as well as to make) first-person reference to oneself (Baker 2000, 68). Two points are crucial here. First, Baker claims that "Although the first-person perspective does not depend on natural language, it is often manifested [...] in a person's use of I* sentences" (Baker 2000, 76). On her interpretation, language is not necessary for the first-person perspective to emerge. But if this is so, then the first person with the first-person perspective (since, assumedly, there had to be one) was able to achieve this with *private* language in the strongest sense. Alternatively, she had to be able to represent herself as herself* without any linguistic apparatus, but I am not certain what this would be like, or even that this possibility is coherent. So the *first* person, were she to achieve personhood, would also have to be, *per impossibile*, a solitary speaker. This doesn't bode well for Baker's argument. Second, although Baker doesn't mention this, we've seen that *there can be no such thing as a private language in the sense required for Baker's argument*. And thus, either (i) there are no persons, or (ii) language is requisite for personhood. As (i) is clearly false, it follows that (ii) language is requisite for personhood.

Here I foresee someone raising the following objection (due to Hacker against Malcolm) against my claim that there could not be solitary persons:

Crusoe will continue speaking English whether or not there are still English-speakers elsewhere. If the English-speaking peoples are wiped out by a catastrophe, Crusoe's utterances do not thereby become gibberish. [...] But, Malcolm will reply, these *were* social practices, and were learnt from others. That is true, but constitutes an objection only insofar as it presupposes the dubious principle that the genesis of an ability is relevant to the determination or identification of the current ability (Hacker 1990/2001, 321).

That is, one could object that this renders the persistence of persons extremely fickle. But is the principle to which Hacker alludes really dubious? Suppose the entire human population is decimated, save for one individual. It seems that the last individual would not be a person if personhood depended on a community. Or would she? The crucial fact here is that constituted entities are governed by two (not-at-all-dubious) conditions for their existence:

If x constitutes y at t, and y's primary kind is G, then x is in what I called 'G-favourable circumstances' at t. [...] We should distinguish two kinds of G-favourable circumstances for [entities], say: (i) the circumstances in which [an entity] may come into existence, and (ii) the circumstances in which an existing [entities] continues to exist. The circumstances in which [an entity] comes into existence are more stringent than those for [an entity's] remaining in existence (Baker 2004, 103).

For instance, it takes creative more work to create an artifact – say, a statue – but once this act is completed, the artifact persists, even if the culture in which the artifact emerged disappears. Likewise, moving in and out of isolation doesn't endanger the personhood of someone who already is a person.

4. Conclusions

Baker argues that there could be no persons if there were no objects external to the entity. This leaves open the possibility that the person develops the first-person perspective independently of others. So Baker is forced back to the (Cartesian) individualistic theses. In order to avert this, language needs to be a prerequisite for personhood. However, my proposal seems to carry the implication that if the conditions requisite for personhood can materialize only in a community, then personhood seems to be a social artifact of sorts. I defend this conclusion elsewhere; regrettably, this paper does not allow for a detailed exploration. For now, we have (i) that language is requisite for personhood, and (ii) that language is necessarily social. Thus, personhood is dependent on an external element, which makes persons closer to *social* artifact-kinds rather than to natural kinds.

References

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