



Artículo de Investigación

First Person and Body Ownership

La Primera Persona y Posesión Corporal

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Sebastián Sanhueza Rodríguez

Universidad de Concepción, Chile

sebastian.rodriguez.10@ucl.ac.uk

Abstract: Bodily and mental self-ascriptions are forms of first-person thought where a subject attributes physical properties and psychological states to herself. The *body-ownership view* argues that a necessary and sufficient condition on such self-ascriptions is the existence of causal links between a spatio-temporal body and the self-ascribed properties or states. However, since P.F. Strawson's influential attack, this view has been dismissed as a bad philosophical idea. The goal of this brief piece is to outline the body-ownership view and neutralise two classic lines of objection against it: on the one hand, that the stance is incoherent; and, on the other, that it has counterintuitive implications.

Keywords: first-person thought - body-ownership - causal links - P.F. Strawson - Animalism

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Dirección Postal: Departamento de Filosofía, Universidad de Concepción, Beltrán Mathieu #15-A, Barrio Universitario, Concepción, Chile

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Resumen: Las auto-atribuciones corporales y mentales son formas de pensamiento en primera persona donde un sujeto se atribuye propiedades físicas y estados psicológicos a sí mismo. La *teoría de posesión corporal* sostiene que una condición necesaria y suficiente de tales auto-atribuciones es la existencia de conexiones causales entre un cuerpo espacio-temporal y las propiedades o estados auto-atribuidos. Sin embargo, desde el influyente ataque de P.F. Strawson a esta teoría, ella ha sido descartada como una mala idea filosófica. El objetivo de este breve artículo es delinear la teoría de posesión corporal y neutralizar dos líneas clásicas de crítica contra ella: por una parte, una según la cual la teoría es internamente incoherente; y, por otra, una según la cual ella tiene implicancias contraintuitivas.

Palabras clave: pensamientos de primera persona - posesión corporal - nexos - causales - P.F. Strawson - Animalismo

1. Introduction

Bodily and mental self-ascriptions are forms of first-person thought where a person attributes physical properties and psychological states to herself. On one account of self-ascriptions, known as the *no-ownership* or *body-ownership view*, a necessary and sufficient condition for the possibility of this form of first-person thought and its resulting reports, is the existence of causal links between a spatio-temporal body and the self-ascribed properties or states (cf. Strawson, 1959; Ayer, 1963; Foster, 1979). Although this account promises to solve problems regarding the synchronic and diachronic identity of persons in terms of the synchronic and diachronic identity of spatio-temporal bodies, it was also the target of an influential critique in P.F. Strawson's *Individuals*. I'm not sure whether the body-ownership view—from now on, (BOV)—is correct. But I do think it was dismissed way too swiftly. Again, this account of self-ascription fits well with currently popular animalist views of personal identity (cf. Olson, 1999, 2007; Snowdon, 2014; Blatti & Snowdon, 2016). As such, the goal of this modest piece is to articulate (BOV) and partially defend it from classic objections.

The previous task is divided into three sections. First, I formulate what I take to be (BOV)'s crucial positive claim. Next, I turn to two classic objections. On the one hand, I assess whether Strawson is right in claiming that (BOV) is incoherent. Then, I examine whether (BOV) opens the door to counterintuitive possibilities such as those of subjectless and transferable experiences.

2. Stating the Body-Ownership View

(BOV) primarily accounts for bodily and mental self-ascriptions: that is, it aims to capture the conditions of possibility of the ways in which we think about ourselves, as opposed to the ways in which we think of or ascribe things to other items. As previously anticipated, this view also says something about the concept of a person, for (at least in the Anglo-American philosophical landscape) the latter is often understood as that of a subject capable of self-ascribing actions, intentions, sensations, thoughts, feelings, spatial location, among other (propositional or non-propositional) attitudes (cf. Strawson, 1959, 1966; Ayer, 1963). To focus the present discussion, however, this piece will be mainly concerned with what (BOV) has to say about self-ascriptions.

Again, for the sake of simplicity, I shall assume that there is a one-to-one correlation between propositional thoughts and the statements that express them, whereby bodily and mental self-ascriptions may refer here either to 'I'-thought or to 'I'-sentences.

(BOV)'s core claim could be characterized in terms of two claims:

- (1) Self-ascriptions explanatorily depend on a causal relation between self-ascribed properties/states and a spatio-temporal body.
- (2) (1) is contingent.

As I try to show throughout this piece, most problems surrounding (BOV) spring from difficulties in understanding the precise way in which (2) qualifies (1). The meaning of (1) is comparatively less controversial. Strawson formulates it as follows:

The 'no-ownership' theorist may be presumed to start his explanation with facts of the sort which illustrate the unique causal position of a certain material body in a person's experience. The theorist maintains that the uniqueness of this body is sufficient to give rise to the idea that one's experiences can be ascribed to some particular, individual thing, can be said to be possessed by, or owned by, that thing (Strawson, 1959, p. 95).

Meanwhile, A.J. Ayer described (1) as the idea 'that personal identity depends upon the identity of the body, and that a person's ownership of states of consciousness consists in their standing in a special causal relation to the body by which he is identified.' (Ayer, 1963, pp. 116-117) The general thought seems to be that bodily and mental self-ascriptions are possible if and only if a given spatio-temporal body A is causally related to the self-ascribed features.

By contrast, (2) is far more problematic at least for two reasons. (a) Since there are several types of modality—e.g. logical, metaphysical, nomological, epistemic—it is unclear what specific type of contingency (2) refers to. (b) It is unclear what the contingency of (1) would specifically amount to. To say that (1) is contingent is to say that, even if (1) is true as a matter of fact, it could be false—in other words, even if (1) is true in the actual world, there are possible worlds in which (1) would not be true. The problem at hand is that, since there are in principle different ways in which (1) could fail being the case, it is unclear which of those ways (2) allows for.

Regarding (a), I suspect that Strawson takes (2) merely to attribute metaphysical contingency to (1) insofar as his account of persons and self-ascription is part of an essay on descriptive metaphysics. Furthermore, he doesn't say anything that contradicts the idea that the relevant modal qualification should be a metaphysical one. Ayer, on the other hand, seems to have something else in mind. After stating (1), he qualifies it by saying that: 'I am not maintaining, of course, that this is how one actually becomes aware of one's own experiences, but only that the fact that they are one's own, or rather the fact that they are the experiences of the person that one is, depends upon their being connected with this particular body.' (Ayer, 1963, p. 116; also cf. 124) The underpinning thought here is, I believe, that (1) is epistemologically—rather than metaphysically—contingent: it would be possible to have knowledge of a given self-ascription token without having knowledge of the causal link between the spatio-temporal body and the self-ascribed features on which such a token relies. Bearing both readings of (2) in mind, it turns out that (BOV) could actually be described as the conjunction of (1) and either one of the following two claims:

- (2e) (1) is epistemically contingent;
- (2m) (1) is metaphysically contingent.

If (2) splits into (2e) and (2m), so does the problem referred to in (b): on the one hand, there is a problem of understanding what the claim that (1) is epistemically contingent, specifically amounts to; and, on the other, there is one of understanding what the claim that (1) is

metaphysically contingent, specifically amounts to. In the remainder of this section, I pause on both issues.

By endorsing (2e), (BOV) would endorse (1), but simultaneously reject that, in order to perform a given bodily or mental self-ascription, a person must become aware of a causal link between those experiences and the spatio-temporal object which happens to be her own body. That is, by endorsing (2e), (BOV) would commit to the following claim: for a subject *S*, undergoing a psychological state *s* without there being a causal link between *s* and *S*'s body *b* is not ruled out by what *S* knows. (2e)'s rationale seems to be the need for limiting the explanatory scope of an account of self-ascriptions such as (BOV). That is, the thought seems to be that, even if the nature of the logical subject and the logical predicate of self-ascriptive statements specified what the first-person pronoun refers to in such statements and what kind of subject such a referent is, it would not follow that bodily and mental self-ascriptions logically entail which particular subject perform such utterances. In other words, the logical and semantic properties of these statements would not settle in and by themselves the question which specific individual these self-ascriptions refer to. (2e) epistemic limitation on (1)'s explanatory scope, in the sense that it would reject the assumption that the identification of the specific spatio-temporal body that bodily and mental self-ascriptions refer to is a condition of possibility of self-ascriptions.

(2e)'s epistemic limitation to (1) could perhaps be better understood with the help of two ideas: on the one hand, the idea that one could draw a distinction between three different (albeit closely related) questions concerning bodily and mental self-ascriptions; and, on the other, the idea that an account of bodily and mental self-ascription such as (BOV) has to answer the first and the second, but not the third question. The three questions at stake are: (i) whether the first-person pronoun of a self-ascriptive 'I'-statement refers to something; (ii), if it does, what kind of thing it refers to; and (iii), which particular individual of the aforementioned kind it refers to. If we give a negative answer to (i), then (ii) and (iii) don't take off. Such a stance is unpopular, though (Anscombe 1975 is an emblematic exception). As such, I shall assume that the first-person pronoun involved in self-ascriptions has a reference, and hence, that (ii) and (iii) do get going. (ii) is the kind of question which an understanding of self-ascriptive 'I'-thoughts or 'I'-sentences is supposed to solve, at least by a philosophical mainstream according to which the question what kinds of entities the first-person pronoun of self-ascriptions refer to is to some extent settled by the kind of self-ascribed properties and states. For instance, a number of Oxford philosophers have stressed that an important component of the antidote against a Cartesian view of persons consists in realizing that such entities ascribe to themselves physical no less than mental predicates (cf. Evans, 1982; Martin, 1995; Brewer, 1995). Now, the point of (2e) would be that, unlike (i) and (ii), (iii) is not the kind of question that (BOV) should be required to answer. This wouldn't constitute an objection to (1), but only a modest acknowledgement of its explanatory scope. From our self-ascriptive performances, we could only read off whether the subjects of 'I'-statements refer to something and the kind of items they refer to: a subject would not be supposed to be capable of reading off an answer to (iii) from such utterances. The classic thought experiment of the amnesiac subject in a dark tank would be a case in point of someone who could answer (i) and (ii), but not (iii).

Turning now to (2m)—that is, the claim that (1) is metaphysically contingent—recall that even if it was clear that (BOV) should be understood as endorsing (2)'s metaphysical version, it would still be unclear what such a claim specifically amounted to. The gist of (2) seems to be something like this: (1), the claim that a particular spatio-temporal body is causally related to a physical property or a psychological state, is a metaphysically contingent one. That is, although a particular body could in fact be causally related to those features, there are possible worlds metaphysically accessible to ours in which that claim is false. Thus stated, there seems to be nothing especially controversial about (2m). As I previously mentioned, however, things are a bit more delicate, for, when we say that a given claim could be false, we have not said yet what could be the case. In short, to say that *p* could be false is just to say not-*p*: it is not yet to say that *q*, *r*, or *s*, are the case. The claim that a marble sphere is not black doesn't decide what colour the marble sphere actually is; for all that, it might be white, green, blue, etc. Likewise,

from the claim that (1) could be false, it does not follow what could alternatively be the case. This point seems crucial to me, for, according to one popular line of reasoning against (BOV), if (1) is metaphysically contingent, some unpalatable metaphysical possibilities loom. Section III will elaborate on this line of objection. For the time being, it is important to stress this: by holding that (1) is contingent, (BOV) does not specify what metaphysical possibilities it allows for; in other words, (2m) does not seem to determine in and by itself what metaphysical possibilities (BOV) allows for. I hope to show that, whenever it is said that (BOV) allows for a given (perhaps unpalatable) possibility, such a possibility doesn't actually rise from, but from additional metaphysical assumptions.

3. Is the Body-Ownership Internally Incoherent?

In what is left of this piece, I shall assess two well-known types of objections against (BOV): on the one hand, this view is said to be incoherent for endorsing (2); on the other, it is accused of entailing unpalatable metaphysical possibilities (e.g. subjectless and transferable experiences). This section focuses on the first kind: in a nutshell, my reply will draw on Ayer's 1963 response to the same kind of worry.

Strawson set forth the famous objection that (BOV) is incoherent because it endorses (2): in particular, it could not coherently endorse (2) because (1)—that is, the claim that bodily and mental self-ascriptions are made possible by the causal relatedness between some spatio-temporal body and the self-attributed properties and states—is analytic, and hence (assuming that it is a true claim) a necessary truth. According to (BOV), the identity of a person depends on the identity of a spatio-temporal body; persons' bodily and mental self-ascriptions, in turn, would depend on spatio-temporal bodies' ownership of the self-ascribed features. Strawson thinks that (BOV)'s core claim—that is, (1)—is captured by something like the following slogan:

(P) All my experiences are those which are owned by a spatio-temporal body B.

According to (BOV), he continues, (P) is a contingent proposition which aims to account for the sense of ownership which distinguishes self-ascriptive from other-ascriptive practices. (P) itself is problematic, though: by talking of 'my experiences', (BOV) reintroduces into the explanans the notion to be explained. Suppose that the sense of ownership which emerges in (P) was again rephrased in (BOV)'s terms. This would make of (P) circular, but not ipso facto self-defeating. What makes it self-defeating is that, by cashing the demanding sense of ownership in terms of body-ownership, (P) turns out to be equivalent to something like the following proposition:

(Pa) All the experiences owned by a particular spatio-temporal body B are those owned by a particular spatio-temporal body B.

This proposition is naturally analytic, and hence, fails to satisfy (2). (BOV) could not make use of another sense of ownership in order to dodge this objection, for this view is precisely driven by the rejection of other senses of ownership beyond body-ownership. Thus, (BOV) would endorse (2), the claim that (1) is contingent, when (1) actually fails to be contingent. Contradiction!

In reply, it seems to me that Ayer offers an elegant assessment of how and why the previous objection is off-key. First, he assumes that (1) is supposed to be contingent and that (P) is partly analytic; however, he denies that (P) exclusively captures (1). In a slogan, his diagnosis could be described as follows: although (BOV) implies (P), the latter would not be equivalent to (1), nor, a fortiori, to what (BOV) claims to be contingent (cf. Ayer 1963, 116-117). Ayer apparently thinks that (P) should be analyzed into two propositions: on the one hand, (Pa), and, on the other, the contingent proposition

(Pc) Given a particular bodily state *p* instantiated by a spatio-temporal body B, a psychological state *e* would follow.

In other words, Ayer concedes two things: first, that (BOV) implies (P); and secondly, that (Pa), which captures part of (P), is analytic. However, he disagrees with Strawson in supposing that (P), and by extension, (Pa), is what (BOV) claims to be contingent; rather, Ayer thinks that (2) only qualifies another part of (P) besides (Pa), namely, (Pc): what is contingent is that, given a physical state *p* of a spatio-temporal body *B*, a psychological state *e* has to follow. Hence, (Pa) would be analytic but not contingent; (Pc), contingent but not analytic. Hence, no contradiction. Strawson of course understands (P) in a different way: a given psychological state, *e*, is my experience if it is owned by a certain spatio-temporal body *B*; by claiming that this is metaphysically contingent, what (BOV) would claim to be contingent is that my experience *e* has to be causally related to the body it is actually related to and not some other body.

The issue concerning what (2m) specifically amounts to reemerges here, for Strawson and Ayer take (2m) to mean different things: the former, that my experiences could exist detached from the body they happen to be causally related to—a possibility I term here (S); the latter, that it is merely contingent that my body caused the experience it actually caused—a possibility here termed (A). (S) and (A) are different possibilities: indeed, one could be the necessary and the other merely contingent. It could be merely contingent that a given state of consciousness is realizable by different bodies or by none at all; and, at the same time, necessary that, given a bodily state *p* instantiated in a spatio-temporal body *B*, a certain psychological state *e* had to follow. Again, it might be merely contingent that, given a bodily state *p* instantiated in a spatio-temporal body *B*, a certain psychological state *e* has to follow; and, at the same time, be necessary that a given psychological state *e* has to be realized in one and only one spatio-temporal body. Ayer would deny that (2) entailed (S), and he tries to explain why Strawson reads off that entailment in (BOV): Strawson assumes the possibility of identifying one's own experiences independently of the identification of the body to which they belong—in other words, he thinks that it is possible to understand what 'my experiences' means with independence of understanding the causal link between such experiences and my body. The latter assumption, however, would be ungrounded: Hume to the contrary, (BOV) holds that a subject of experiences could not latch onto a heap of experiences and take them to be her experiences independently of their causal relatedness to a spatio-temporal body (cf. Ayer, 1963).

Ayer's diagnosis seems sound to me, but it might require further support, insofar as the entailment between (2m) and (S) still needs to be rejected in a principled way. Thus far, it has only been said that (BOV) would not entail the possibility of unowned or transferable experiences only if (2m) failed to entail (S): the latter entailment has not actually been rejected yet. If unowned and transferable experiences were metaphysically possible, it would be unclear why, as Ayer contends, we should reject the assumption that my experiences could be identified as mine independently of the body to which they are causally related to. Thus, although different lines of objection, the charge that (BOV) is incoherent and the charge that it entails strange metaphysical possibilities seem to complement each other. Accordingly, the corresponding replies in defense of (BOV) are mutually dependent. That's why I briefly pause on the second line of objection next.

4. Is the Body-Ownership View Counterintuitive?

(BOV) also seems unpalatable for some of the apparent metaphysical possibilities it allows for, such as the possibility of subjectless and transferable experiences. Whether it allows for such possibilities turns out to be all the more important insofar as Ayer's reply to the objection from incoherency seems to depend on it. This section thus focuses on this worry.

John Foster, for instance, objects that (BOV) allows for the possibilities of experiences which have no subject (cf. Foster 1979, 171). I take the main thought to be something like this: once it is granted, as (BOV) seems to do, that there is a distinction between mental states and bodily states, it is logically possible that there were exact duplicates of mental states which were not causally related to any body, and hence, to any subject at all. Thus, there could be a mental item which, by definition, is different from a bodily state; insofar as it is not a bodily state, such an

item would not necessarily be tied to a body; furthermore, such a mental item would not have to be defined in terms of a person or a subject of experiences. All this seems to entail that (BOV) allows for the possibility of subjectless experiences. Another possibility (BOV) apparently allows for is that of transferable experiences. By rejecting the necessary link between an experience and a particular body, (BOV) seems to allow for the logical possibility that one temporally extended experience (say, a burning pain) was owned now by this body, then by another one. This kind of possibility makes Strawson uncomfortable: he rejects this view, in part, because it does away with the non-transferable or private character of one's own experiences.

I suspect that the previous line of objection could be met by contending that the metaphysical possibility of unowned and transferable experiences does not actually arise if (BOV) denied that experiences could be individuated apart of the causal links which relate them to bodies. The 'body-ownership' theorist could contend that such mental items could not exist apart of their causal relationship to some body, for that causal relationship individuates the mental item at stake. This would not be *ad hoc*: if we take experiences or psychological states in general to be Davidsonian events or states conceived as property- or relation-instantiations, it would follow that experiences could not be individuated independently of their corresponding causal links to the objects in which they occur (cf. Davidson, 1969; Tye, 1996; Bennett & Hacker, 2003).

The previous proposal would preempt the possibility of unowned experiences, for the latter states would, by definition, lack any causal relation to a (bodily or mental) substance. It would also cut off the possibility of transferable experiences: unless it was thought that an experience *e* could be related to bodies *b*₁ and *b*₂ by means of the exact same causal relation *c*₁, the 'body-ownership' theorist could hold that *e* could not be transferable. Different causal relations, different experiences: since transference would entail different causal relations, it would also rule out the transference of one and the same experience *e* from one body to another. All that could happen is that an experience *e*₁ of a certain type *E*—say, of a pain-type—instantiated in a body *b*₁ would somehow be causally responsible of the emergence of a numerically different experience *e*₂ of type *E* in another body *b*₂; however, if the individuation of experiences does depend on their causal relations to a body, as *ex hypothesi* (BOV) contends, it would be impossible that the same experience *e*₁, now related to *b*₁ by means of a causal link *c*₁, was later related to *b*₂ by means of a causal relation *c*₂.

The previous reply seems plausible as far as things go, but it is important to note how much is at stake by endorsing it: specifically, it requires rejecting a Humean account of object- or event-individuation which was independent of the causal relations which bring those objects or events about. In principle, I do not see any reason to stick to the Humean thesis, but, as anything in philosophy, actually showing that we shouldn't do so surely requires harder work than I've put here.

5. Conclusion

To sum up. My goal was to articulate a body-ownership view of mental and bodily self-ascription and partially defend it from some prominent objections. I divided this task into three sections: first, I articulated (BOV)'s core claims, namely, (1) and (2); secondly, I discussed Strawson's famous objection according to which (BOV) is incoherent for endorsing (2); and thirdly, I focused on the charge that (BOV) allows for counter-intuitive metaphysical possibilities, such as unowned and transferable experiences. Both objections are different, but their replies complement each other. The driving force of this piece is to vindicate an account of self-ascriptions which, in spite of nicely fitting with currently popular metaphysical accounts of persons, has been dismissed rather too swiftly. I suspect that (BOV) is germane to physicalist accounts of personal identity, such as animalism. Since the latter accounts have several theoretical advantages, it seems to be high times to revisit the prospects of (BOV).

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