

Eight Arguments for First-Person Realism

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Abstract

According to First-Person Realism, one's own first-person perspective on the world is metaphysically privileged in some way. After clarifying First-Person Realism by reference to parallel debates in the metaphysics of modality and time, I survey eight different arguments in favor of First-Person Realism.

1. Introduction

There is a widely discussed analogy between debates in the metaphysics of modality and time.¹ With respect to modality, we can ask: is the actual world metaphysically “privileged” in some way, or all possible worlds metaphysically “on a par”?² Of course, this question is very imprecise, but different views in the metaphysics of modality will go on to give more precise views that fit into one of these categories. For example, some say that the actual world is metaphysically privileged because it is the only world that *exists*. Others say the actual world is the only world that is *concrete*. Others say that, while all possible worlds concretely exist, only the actual world bears a distinctive fundamental property, which we can call *being actual*.³

With respect to time, we can ask the same question: is the present time metaphysically privileged in some way, or all times metaphysically on a par? In response, some say that the present time is metaphysically privileged because it is the only time that exists.⁴ Others say the present time is the only time that is concrete.⁵ Others say that the present time is the leading “edge” of a growing

¹ See, e.g. Rini and Creswell (2012), Emery (2018, 2020), Skow (2022), and Builes (2023).

² Recently there has been some debate about whether metaphysical debates about modality and time are best formulated using the concepts of “actual” and “present” (e.g. see Williamson 2013 and Deasy 2017), but I will be working with the assumption that these standard concepts are at least helpful starting points in framing the relevant debates (e.g. see Cameron 2016, Menzel 2020, and Ingram and Tallant 2021).

³ For a defense of this last view, see Bricker (2020). For the alternative view that all possible worlds are metaphysically on a par, see Lewis (1986).

⁴ See, e.g., Builes and Impagnatiello (Forthcoming).

⁵ See, e.g., Crisp (2007).

block containing past and present times.⁶ Others say that, while all past, present, and future times concretely exist, only the present time bears a distinctive fundamental property, which we can call *being present*.⁷

Within the metaphysics of modality, those who think that the actual world is metaphysically privileged only think that it is *contingently* privileged. Although it is privileged, it could have failed to be privileged. Similarly, within the metaphysics of time, those who think that the present time is metaphysically privileged only think that it is *temporarily* privileged. Although it is privileged, it will soon fail to be privileged.

These structural similarities can be extended to debates in the metaphysics of perspective. Is your own first-person perspective on the world metaphysically privileged in some way, or all perspectives on the world metaphysically on a par? Those who believe in *First-Person Realism* believe that their own first-person perspective is metaphysically privileged.⁸ However, just as one might think that the actual world is only contingently privileged and the present time is only temporarily privileged, First-Person Realism states that one's first-person perspective is only *subjectively* privileged.⁹ We can understand "subjective" facts in an exactly similar fashion to how we understand contingent facts and temporary facts.¹⁰ A contingent fact is a fact that obtains according to some possible worlds but does not obtain according to others. A necessary fact is a fact that obtains according to all possible worlds. A temporary fact is a fact that obtains according to some times but does not obtain according to others. A permanent fact is a fact that obtains according to all times. A subjective fact is a fact that obtains according to some points of view but does not obtain according to others. An objective fact is a fact that obtains according to all points of view. In general, "points of view" play an analogous role to "worlds" and "times".¹¹ So, according to First-person Realism, although one's own first-person perspective is metaphysically privileged, from other points of view, it is not metaphysically privileged.

Just as there are different versions of the view that the actual world or the present time is metaphysically privileged, there are different versions of the view that one's own first-person perspective is metaphysically privileged. According to List (2023), there are "first-personal facts", such as "I am in pain" or "I am David", that are not grounded in, or identifiable with, "third-

⁶ See, e.g., Tooley (1997) and Forbes (2016).

⁷ See, e.g. Deasy (2015) and Cameron (2015).

⁸ The label comes from Fine (2005), who discusses (but does not endorse) the view. For one of the earliest discussions of a view like First-Person Realism, see Prior (1968).

⁹ This terminology comes from Merlo (2016).

¹⁰ The following definitions appeal to "possible worlds", "times", and "points of view". Those who do not wish to be ontologically committed to such entities can understand the following definitions in terms of primitive modal, temporal, or perspectival operators.

¹¹ See Merlo (2016: 314-315) for further discussion of the relevant notion of "point of view". For further relevant discussion, see Valberg's (2007) notion of "personal horizon" and Lipman's (2023) notion of "standpoint".

personal facts”, such as “David is in pain” or “David is David”. Other First-Person Realists posit other kinds of irreducible facts that do not involve the first-person indexical. For example, Hare (2009, 2010) argues that only the direct objects of one’s awareness bear a distinctive fundamental property of *being present*. If I am directly aware of a table in front of me, then that table is *present*. However, if someone else is aware of another table, then that table isn’t present (although of course it is still true that: *according to their point of view*, that table is present). For Hare, “I” simply refers to whoever it is whose direct objects of awareness happen to be present.¹² Merlo (2016) develops a version of First-Person Realism according to which the mental states that constitute one’s own first-person perspective have a distinctive character that no one else’s mental states have.¹³ One’s own mental life consists of (say) PAIN and PLEASURE, while no one else’s mental life contains PAIN or PLEASURE. However, it is still true that: *according to their own point of view*, others experience PAIN and PLEASURE. In virtue of these “points of view” facts, others can be truly said to have a mental life of their own. In general, it is true that someone has a particular mental state because: from their own point of view, they have the corresponding MENTAL STATE. For example, it is true that other human beings are conscious because: from their own point of view, they are CONSCIOUS. However, although all human beings are equally conscious, only the person who has a metaphysically privileged perspective is CONSCIOUS.¹⁴ In general, our primary understanding of MENTAL STATES comes from our acquaintance with those states in our own first-personal case, and we can only understand how others have a mental life in a derivative way: by asking what things are like from their own point of view.

The goal of this paper is to survey eight arguments in favor of First-Person Realism (generally construed). Although much more can be said about each of these arguments, my main goal here is to collect these arguments together and convey why they might at least seem to be initially compelling.

¹² This raises the problem: are everyone else’s “I” thoughts mistaken? See Hare (2009: 52-55, 2010: 765-768) for a number of different ways of thinking about the “I” thoughts of others (none of which imply that others are incorrect for thinking in the standard ways that they do). For further relevant discussion, see Merlo (2016: 329-331).

¹³ Following McDaniel (2012), Merlo (2016: 326-328) argues against Hare’s view (convincingly, in my view) on the grounds that attributing *being present* to external physical objects gives rise to awkward metaphysical questions that are best avoided (e.g. if I am directly aware of a table, are all of its parts also present, including its microphysical constituents and the back of the table?).

¹⁴ One might naturally wonder whether other people are better thought of as “zombies” who lack consciousness according to First-Person Realism. However, they should not. According to First-Person Realism, if you imagine what it is like to be someone else, your imagining can be more or less accurate, depending on what things are like from that person’s point of view. However, if other people were zombies, then any such imagining would be equally inaccurate, since that other person would simply lack a point of view entirely.

2. From Anti-Physicalism to First-Person Realism

As Chalmers (2003) argues, perhaps the most influential arguments for Anti-Physicalism about consciousness (the view that facts about consciousness are not grounded in, or identifiable with, physical facts) proceed from an *epistemic gap* to a *metaphysical gap*.¹⁵ Here are two ways that an “epistemic gap” between consciousness and physics has been motivated:

Knowledge Gap: An ideal reasoner could know all the physical facts, but not be in a position to know (say) what it is like to see red.¹⁶

Explanatory Gap: Physical facts don’t adequately explain facts about consciousness. Why do physical states give rise to the particular conscious states that they do, rather than some other ones? Moreover, why do physical states give rise to consciousness at all?¹⁷

However, as others have noted before, analogous epistemic gaps exist between “third-personal” non-indexical facts and “first-personal” indexical facts.¹⁸ So, if the epistemic gaps in the case of consciousness motivate the metaphysical conclusion that facts about consciousness are not grounded in, or identifiable with, physical facts, then there is *prima facie* reason to think that the same kinds of epistemic gaps in the first-personal case motivate the metaphysical conclusion that first-personal facts are not grounded in, or identifiable with, third-personal facts.

The following gap has been widely discussed under the heading of the “essential indexical”:

Knowledge Gap: I could know all the third-personal, non-indexical facts, but not know first-personal indexical facts about who I am in the world (even given ideal rational reflection).¹⁹

For example, suppose I lost all my memories and found myself locked inside a room in New York, while someone else (David*), who is an exact duplicate of me, found themselves locked inside an exactly similar room in Australia. Then, even if I knew all the third-personal facts (including how David is locked in a room in New York and David* is locked in a room in Australia), I would not be in a position to know whether I was in New York or Australia (or whether I am David or David*).

Second, consider:

¹⁵ Different versions of Anti-Physicalism are developed in Chalmers (1996), Goff (2017), Albahari (2019), and Builes (forthcoming).

¹⁶ See Jackson (1982).

¹⁷ See Levine (2001).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Ismael (1999) and Perry (2001).

¹⁹ See, e.g. Perry (1979), Lewis (1979), Cappelen and Dever (2013), Magidor (2015), Torre (2018), and Shaw (2019).

Explanatory Gap: Third-personal facts don't adequately explain first-personal facts. Why am I David, rather than someone else? Moreover, why do I exist at all?

Hellie (2013) argues against "egalitarian" views of consciousness, which treat every stream of consciousness as metaphysically "on a par", on the basis of this kind of explanatory gap. Egalitarian views of consciousness do not explain what he calls the "vertiginous question": why am I David, rather than someone else (or no one at all)?

It is a controversial question whether the epistemic gaps in the case of consciousness should be treated in a similar way to the epistemic gaps in the case of first-personal facts, but there is reason to think that they should be. For example, in the case of consciousness, the epistemic gaps are typically taken to motivate a *modal* gap between truths of consciousness and truths of physics: truths of consciousness are not necessitated by truths of physics. This modal gap is then used to motivate the view that truths of consciousness do not reduce to truths of physics. This inference from an epistemic gap to a modal gap has been defended by appeal to *Modal Rationalism*, which is the view that there is a constitutive connection between what is necessary and what is (ideally) knowable *a priori*.²⁰ Rabin (2020) has argued that Modal Rationalism supports:

Fundamental Scrutability: All truths are (ideally) knowable *a priori* given knowledge of fundamental truths.

In brief, Modal Rationalism supports Fundamental Scrutability since all truths are *necessitated* by fundamental truths, and given the constitutive connection between necessity and (idealized) *a priori* knowledge, Rabin argues that Modal Rationalists should think that all truths are not only necessitated by fundamental truths, but they are also (ideally) *a priori* knowable given fundamental truths.

However, **Fundamental Scrutability** implies First-Person Realism. Since the totality of third-personal truths do not *a priori* entail indexical, first-personal truths, it follows that fundamental truths need to be supplemented with indexical, first-personal truths, just as First-Person Realism says that they should be.²¹

Chalmers (2012: 404-409) defends **Fundamental Scrutability** with the single exception of indexical facts²², however it is natural to think that a more principled philosophical view would be to accept **Fundamental Scrutability** without any exceptions. Chalmers (2012) justifies the

²⁰ See Chalmers (2002) for further discussion of how this connection should be made more precise.

²¹ The fundamental facts could also be supplemented with other kinds of non-indexical facts (such as facts involving Hare's property of *presence*), which themselves *a priori* entail the relevant first-personal indexical facts.

²² However, in earlier work, Chalmers tentatively defends fundamental indexical facts (e.g. see Chalmers 1996: 84-86).

exception of indexical facts as follows (in the relevant context, a truth is (in)scrutable if it is (not) a priori knowable given fundamental truths):

I think the case of indexical truths is special, though, in that one can straightforwardly explain why even in a world that is fundamentally objective, one would expect that there are inscrutable indexical truths, and this objective truth (like all others) is itself scrutable.... (408)

However, it is not at all clear that “even in a world that is fundamentally objective, one would expect that there are inscrutable indexical truths”. Let us grant, for example, that it is an a priori truth that: if someone who is F utters “I am F”, then that utterance is true. Then, it will be scrutable that various people have uttered sentences using “I”, and it will be scrutable that many such utterances are true. However, this meta-linguistic fact is not itself an indexical fact (it mentions but does not use “I”). It is a priori compatible with all the fundamental non-indexical facts that, although there are many people (including David) who utter true “I” sentences, *I do not exist*. So, as a consequence, it is a priori compatible with the fundamental non-indexical facts that *there are no indexical facts at all*.²³ So, one should not expect that there are inscrutable indexical facts in a world that is fundamentally objective, because one should not expect that there are any indexical facts at all (whether scrutable or inscrutable) in a world that is fundamentally objective.²⁴

3. From the A-theory of Time to First-Person Realism

The view that the present time is metaphysically privileged is known as the “A-theory” of time. According to the rival “B-theory” of time, there are no fundamental tensed facts about what *was*

²³ More specifically, it is compatible with the fundamental non-indexical facts that there are no *positive* indexical facts. If one counts the fact that “It is not the case that I exist” as an indexical fact, then there will trivially be indexical facts in every possible world (either positive ones or negative ones). However, this phenomenon is perfectly general: if “there are no flying pigs” counts as a fact about flying pigs, then there will trivially be facts about flying pigs in every possible world. Chalmers (2012) argues that a “totality” fact should be included in the “scrutability base” to cover merely negative facts. So, the important point is that one should not expect there to be positive inscrutable indexical facts in a fundamentally objective, third-personal world.

²⁴ An alternative interpretation of Chalmers’ point is that it is scrutable that it will *seem* to various subjects as if there are inscrutable indexical facts concerning themselves, and the fact that this *seeming* is scrutable in a fundamentally objective world can be used to undermine the view that there are fundamental indexical facts. However, a similar move can also be made in the case of consciousness. Given just the fundamental physical facts, it will be scrutable that it will *seem* to various subjects as if there are inscrutable facts concerning their own conscious life (where the relevant “seem” is understood in a functional/behavioral sense (and the same sense of “seem” can be operative in the indexical case)). It is not clear what the relevant difference is supposed to be between these two cases. For more on the question of whether the existence of consciousness can be “debunked” by giving a physical explanation of why it seems to us as if we are conscious, see Frankish (2016), Chalmers (2018, 2020) and Kammerer (2019).

the case, what (presently) *is* the case, or what *will* be the case.²⁵ Rather, the only fundamental temporal facts are *tenseless* facts, which do not involve distinctions between past, present, and future, but instead describe how various times are related to each other by earlier-than and later-than relations. Unlike with tensed facts, tenseless facts do not change their truth-value across time. Some of the main motivations for the A-theory of Time also apply to First-Person Realism. Here, I will just mention one such motivation.²⁶

Prior (1959) famously argued against the B-theory on the grounds that it can't capture our attitudes towards time. Sider (2001) summarizes this argument as follows:

Suppose after a painful experience I remark 'thank goodness that's over!' If tenseless facts exhausted reality, then the facts after the experience would be the same as the facts before the experience, so the argument goes; thus it would not be clear what I was thanking goodness for. I am clearly not thanking goodness for the fact that the painful experience is over on 20 October 1998, at 5.23 p.m., for I might know beforehand the exact date and time when the pain will cease, but I will not then thank goodness for anything. (18)

However, as Sider (2001: 18-21) himself notes, if such an argument successfully shows that there must be fundamental tensed facts, parallel arguments seem to show that there are fundamental *perspectival* facts. Consider:

Thank Goodness I'm David: Suppose I find myself alone in a hospital room, without any memories of who I am. Over the intercom, I hear that there are currently two patients in the hospital, named David and Bob. Neither has any memories of who they are. However, Bob will undergo a very painful operation at noon, while David will not undergo any painful operation. At noon, I remark "Thank goodness I'm David!", because no painful operation is being performed on me.

All along, I knew the third-personal facts that Bob would be undergoing a painful operation at noon, while David would not be undergoing any such painful operation. So, I don't seem to be thanking goodness for any impersonal, third-personal fact. Rather, I seem to be thanking goodness for the first-personal fact that *I am David*.

²⁵ Others formulate the B-theory of time without using the ideology of fundamentality (e.g. that there are no "objective" or "non-indexical" tensed facts). For further discussion of how these views should be formulated, see Solomyak (2020).

²⁶ See Hare (2009, 2010) and Conitzer (2020) for further discussion of the parallel motivations behind the A-theory of time and First-Person Realism.

Those who have criticized Prior's argument often remark that it can't be right because similar reasoning leads to irreducible perspectival facts.²⁷ However, instead of rejecting both such arguments, First-Person Realists can consistently accept both such arguments.

4. From Anti-Haecceitism to First-Person Realism

Qualitative facts are facts that are not about any particular individuals. For example, the fact that someone is standing is a qualitative fact, whereas the fact that Alice is standing is a non-qualitative fact. According to *Anti-Haecceitism*, no two distinct maximal metaphysically possibilities share the same qualitative facts. According to *Qualitativism*, all fundamental facts are qualitative facts. Qualitativism and Anti-Haecceitism are closely related: if Qualitativism is a necessary truth, then Anti-Haecceitism is true (because any two distinct maximal possibilities must differ with respect to some fundamental fact).²⁸ More generally, among the possible worlds where Qualitativism is true, no two such worlds differ without differing in some qualitative respect.

There are many arguments in favor of Qualitativism and/or Anti-Haecceitism. For example, Dasgupta (2009, 2017) argues that we should be Qualitativists on the grounds that non-qualitative facts are both redundant and empirically undetectable.²⁹ Anti-Haecceitism has also been motivated by the "Hole Argument" in the philosophy of physics, according to which determinism fails in General Relativity due to the presence of non-qualitative facts concerning particular space-time points.³⁰

However, Anti-Haecceitism seems to face counterexamples, and in particular "first-person" counterexamples to Anti-Haecceitism seem especially compelling. Consider the following two examples, inspired by the discussion in Adams (1979):

Third-Person Castor and Pollux: There are two qualitatively indiscernible planets, Castor and Pollux, in an otherwise empty universe. However, one of them is about to go out of existence. Are there two possibilities for *which* planet goes out of existence?

²⁷ In addition to Sider (2001), see Suhler and Callender (2012).

²⁸ One complication here is that, according to some views, "maximal possibilities" differ from "possible worlds", and only distinct possible worlds must have distinct fundamental facts. For further discussion of different versions of this view, see Lewis (1986), Skow (2008), Kment (2012), Russell (2013), and Dasgupta (2021). Spencer (2022) also discusses how those who endorse a certain kind of relativism ought to reject the view that all facts supervene on the fundamental facts.

²⁹ See Turner (2011) and Builes (2021) for different examples of Qualitativist theories.

³⁰ For further discussion, see Brighouse (1994), Hoefer (1996), Pooley (2006), and Teitel (2019, 2022). For generalizations of this problem beyond the case of General Relativity, see Hawthorne (2006) and Builes and Teitel (2022). Builes and Teitel (2022) defend the view that the relevant version of determinism should not be given up.

According to Anti-Haecceitism, the answer is *no*, since the possibility where Castor goes out of existence is qualitatively indiscernible to the possibility where Pollux goes out of existence. This verdict might be slightly counterintuitive, but it's not clear whether we can clearly conceive of two distinct possibilities here, or whether we are really conceiving of a single possibility described in two different ways. However, the first-personal variant of this case seems like a clear counterexample to Anti-Haecceitism:

First-Person Castor and Pollux: There are two qualitatively indiscernible planets, Castor and Pollux, in an otherwise empty universe. You inhabit one such planet, and your twin inhabits the other. However, one of them is about to go out of existence. Are there two possibilities for *which* planet goes out of existence?

In this case, the answer seems to be clearly yes: there is one possibility where you *live* and another possibility where you *die*. These possibilities are not only different, but you very much care about which one is about to happen: you hope that you will live rather than die.³¹

These kinds of examples support the view that, according to Cowling (2017), “the most compelling conceivability arguments for haecceitism are [first-personal] arguments” (42). Luckily, certain versions of First-Person Realism allow the Anti-Haecceitist to entirely avoid first-personal counterexamples, while at the same time explaining why first-personal counterexamples to Anti-Haecceitism are much more compelling than third-personal counterexamples. For example, according to Merlo’s (2016) version of First-Person Realism, there are two distinct *qualitative* possibilities in First-Person Castor and Pollux, namely one where there are MENTAL STATES after a planet goes out of existence and another where there are no MENTAL STATES after a planet goes out of existence. However, there is only one qualitative possibility left open by Third-Person Castor and Pollux.

5. Personal Identity: Dissociation

There are puzzles of personal identity over time where I seem to have judgements about how *I* can persist through time that differ from my judgements about how *David* can persist through time. First-Person Realism can explain this, but other views can’t.³²

³¹ It is important to note that the relevant intuition here is that there are two possibilities for what might happen *in the world*, rather than the mere intuition that there are two possible properties (where a possible property is a property that is possibly had by some individual) that one can self-ascribe, which is the position taken in Lewis (1979).

³² For further defense of this kind of argument, see Hare (2009: 57-89). Ninan (2016) and Glazier (2020) also discuss whether it is possible (or imaginable) that I am someone who is numerically distinct from the person that I currently am. See Fine (2005: §12) for further discussion on how to understand claims of the form “I am David” given First-Person Realism.

For example, consider a classic fission case. Suppose I am about to go to sleep, and while I am asleep, half of my brain will be put into a body that is in a red room, and the other half of my brain will be put into a body that is in a blue room. From an external third-person perspective, it seems to me that David cannot survive this operation. After all, David can't be in both rooms, and it would be arbitrary if David went to either room, and the persistence of biological organisms like David is not a "further fact" beyond various relations of physical and biological continuity. However, when I adopt a first-person perspective and imagine myself going to sleep before the operation, it seems that I can clearly conceive of three possibilities: I can wake up the next day in a red room, I can wake up the next day in a blue room, or I can never wake up again.

However, if I judge that David *can't* wake up in either room tomorrow even though I *can* wake up in either room tomorrow, then it seems that I can't also consistently judge that I am identical to David. However, according to certain versions of First-Person Realism, it is clear how to make sense of these intuitions. For example, according to Hare's (2009) view, it is possible that tomorrow the red room is *present*, it is possible that tomorrow the blue room is *present*, and it is possible that no room will be *present* tomorrow.³³ Furthermore, all three of these possibilities are consistent with David not surviving the operation.

Moreover, conceiving of David as a biological organism is not essential to the point. Even if David is a Cartesian immaterial soul, it still seems that what can happen to *me* can dissociate from what happens to an immaterial soul, just as what happens to me can dissociate from what happens to a biological organism.³⁴

6. Personal Identity: Binary, Determinate, and Non-Conventional

Suppose I were told that someone from my home town will be tortured tomorrow. Then I would start wondering: will *I* be tortured tomorrow?

There are three natural reactions to this question. First, it seems that the answer has to be *yes* or *no*. It's hard to make sense of the view that it will be *partly* me who gets tortured. Second, it seems that the question has a determinate answer. It's hard to make sense of the view that, when tomorrow comes around, it will be *indeterminate* whether I am being tortured, just as it might be indeterminate whether some grains of sands count as a "heap". Third, it seems that the answer doesn't depend on any individual or societal conventions about the referent of "I". For example, it doesn't seem to be a fruitful way to spend my time to try to change how people talk about persons in order to avoid getting tortured.

³³ Recall that, for Hare (2009), "I" refers to whoever's direct objects of awareness are present.

³⁴ For an early discussion of this point, see Nagel (1986: ch. 4).

However, perhaps the most popular theories of personal identity across time conceive of identity as a matter of bodily or psychological continuity³⁵, and it is hard for such theories to accommodate the above three desiderata. After all, (i) bodily and psychological continuity comes in degrees, (ii) there doesn't seem to be a relevant sharp cut-off point for *how much* continuity is necessary and sufficient for identity, and (iii) there doesn't seem to be any objective, non-conventional standard for how much one should “weigh” various kinds of bodily and psychological continuity. Does continuity of one's brain matter more than overall bodily continuity? Is continuity of memories more important than continuity of personality?³⁶

In contrast, First-Person Realism straightforwardly accommodates the above three desiderata, at least if one accepts the view that there can be no fundamental metaphysical indeterminacy.³⁷ According to First-Person Realism, there are fundamental binary, determinate, non-conventional first-personal facts that determine whether I will be tortured tomorrow. For example, it is a binary, determinate, non-conventional fact whether the person who will be tortured tomorrow will have MENTAL STATES.³⁸

7. Structural Features of Consciousness

Our conscious life is rich and varied, but if we abstract away from its detailed character, then we can notice certain “structural” features of consciousness that have proven difficult to explain without First-Person Realism. Below, I will briefly mention two such examples, but further discussion of these and other examples can be found in Merlo (2016, 2021), List (2023), and Lipman (forthcoming).³⁹

Much of the discussion on why consciousness seems difficult to explain in physicalist terms concerns the *qualitative* character of consciousness. How can the qualities we experience be explained in terms of the abstract causal structure described by physics? However, in addition to the qualitative character of consciousness, one might also wonder how the *subjective* character of consciousness can be explained in purely physical terms. Consciousness seems to be an essentially

³⁵ Defenders of the psychological theory include Lewis (1976) and Parfit (1984), and defenders of the bodily theory include Thomson (1997) and Olson (1997).

³⁶ See Braddon-Mitchell and Miller (2004, 2020) for a defense of the view that personal identity can come in degrees and be partly a matter of convention.

³⁷ For an overview of metaphysical indeterminacy, see Torza (2023).

³⁸ Another view that can accommodate these three desiderata is the view that we are immaterial souls (e.g. see Swinburne 2019). Also, see the phenomenal theory of personal identity developed in Impagnatiello (manuscript). However, such views cannot accommodate the intuition of dissociation from the previous section.

³⁹ Just to mention two other examples, Merlo (2016) argues that First-Person Realism helps to address certain problems concerning the contents of self-awareness and that First-Person Realism helps to explain the fact that knowledge of one's own conscious experience is not communicable in the way that knowledge of “objective” facts is communicable.

perspectival, first-personal, and subjective phenomenon, but how can such a phenomenon be explained in terms of non-perspectival, third-personal, objective physical science? Even if we were to posit that the world contains fundamental *qualities*, it still seems like there would be an explanatory gap: how do we explain the existence of different *perspectives* on the world, if the world is fundamentally non-perspectival?⁴⁰ As Nagel (1979) writes:

If physicalism is to be defended, the phenomenological features must themselves be given a physical account. But when we examine their subjective character, it seems that such a result is impossible. The reason is that every subjective phenomenon is essentially connected with a single point of view, and it seems inevitable that an objective physical theory will abandon that point of view. (167)

First-Person Realism avoids this problem by positing that no description of the world is complete without mentioning irreducible “point-of-view” facts, just as other philosophers maintain that no description of the world is complete without mentioning irreducible tensed or modal facts.

Another notable aspect of consciousness is that it seems *unified*: all of my mental states seem to coalesce into a single mental life, whereas the mental states of distinct streams of consciousness seem essentially divided and separated. This radical separation of distinct streams of consciousness seems true despite the fact that, from a scientific point of view, it can seem that the entire world is seamlessly continuous and integrated (the tension between these two views can become especially acute when considering the case of “split-brain” patients).⁴¹ However, there is a metaphysical distinction that one can draw from within certain versions of First-Person Realism that nicely characterizes the (dis)unity of mental states: for some pairs of mental states, there is a single point of view from which they are both MENTAL STATES, whereas for other pairs of mental states, there is no such point of view. The former kind are unified, while the latter kind are not unified.⁴² Structurally similar metaphysical distinctions play important roles in the metaphysics of time and modality. With respect to time, two events are *simultaneous* if there is a single time at which they both occur, and with respect to modality, two events are *compossible* (or *world-mates*) if there is a single world in which they both occur. While there are of course alternative ways of

⁴⁰ This is related to the kinds of problems faced by “Panqualityism”. See Coleman (2014, 2017) and Milhálík (2022).

⁴¹ For further discussion of the unity of consciousness, including in the case of split-brain patients, see Bayne (2010) and Schechter (2018).

⁴² One might think one can easily mimic this kind of solution by saying that experiences are unified if they are instantiated by a single subject, whereas they are disunified if they are instantiated by numerically distinct subjects. In response, Merlo (2016) writes, “Kant argued (convincingly, according to many) that from a mind having unified consciousness, nothing follows concerning the numerical unity of anything. By treating the unity of consciousness as the unity of a thing (be it a Cartesian soul or a physical object in the ball park of bodies and brains), we fail to do justice to this point, while effectively ruling out certain prima facie possible scenarios – a single subject having disunified consciousness or (more speculatively, perhaps) two or more subjects having unified consciousness” (333). For further discussion of the Kantian position, see Brook and Wuerth (2023).

understanding the unity of consciousness, First-Person Realism at least involves fundamental structural resources that can be used to address the phenomenon.

8. From Mild Egocentric Hedonism to First-Person Realism

Most (if not all) of us cannot help but be “mild egocentric hedonists”: we value our own pains and pleasures more than those of others. Of course, there are plausible scientific accounts for why we would all be disposed to be mild egocentric hedonists. However, we can step back and ask the normative question: *should* we be mild egocentric hedonists? Answering “yes” to this question seems to be in tension with the “default” metaphysical view that none of us is special: no one’s point of view is metaphysically privileged. My pains and pleasures are not more pleasurable or more painful than anyone else’s simply in virtue of being *mine*.

In the face of this tension, there are two uncomfortable positions one can take. First, one could think that we *shouldn’t* be mild egocentric hedonists, and instead we should value our own pains and pleasures just as much as anyone else’s. Although this view is theoretically attractive, it is at odds with our most basic ways of valuing things, and it also seems to impose on us a normative standard that it is impossible to live up to. Second, one could think that we *should* be mild egocentric hedonists, even though there is nothing special about our pains and pleasures over anyone else’s. On this view, there is a normative asymmetry (that one should care about one’s own pains and pleasures more than those of others) that seems hard to reconcile with an underlying metaphysical symmetry (that one’s pains and pleasures are just like everyone else’s).

One motivation for (at least certain versions of) First-Person Realism is that it allows one to avoid both horns of this dilemma.⁴³ According to First-Person Realism, my pains and pleasures *are* metaphysically special. After all, according to Hare (2009), only my pains and pleasures are *present*, and according to Merlo (2016), I am the only one who experiences PAIN and PLEASURE.

9. The Symmetry Defense Against Arbitrariness

The last argument we will consider is defensive rather than offensive. It is natural to feel that First-Person Realism is objectionably *arbitrary*. Why did *I* happen to be the lucky one that is metaphysically privileged, rather than someone else?⁴⁴

⁴³ For further discussion, see Hare (2009: 1-40).

⁴⁴ Another natural objection is skeptical: even if First-Person Realism were true, how could I know whether I am the privileged one? However, if the privileged one’s MENTAL STATES are different than the mental states of others, then I would be able to know I am privileged by being able to know my own MENTAL STATES. In response, one might object that everyone else will think the same thing. However, no one else will THINK the same thing. Compare: would I be able to know I am conscious if everyone else is a zombie? It seems like I would, since I am able to know that I am

In response, one can point out that exactly symmetric worries arise if one privileges the present time or the actual world.⁴⁵ Why is *this* time or *this* world privileged rather than some other one? For example, it could have been that some entirely different possible world was actual. Is it just a random coincidence that this world turned out to be the actual one? Anyone who thinks that First-Person Realism is objectionably arbitrary must either (i) point out a relevant asymmetry between the case of time and modality, or (ii) endorse the symmetry and think that it is also objectionably arbitrary to privilege the present time and/or the actual world. However, endorsing (ii) involves endorsing the extremely controversial view that all possible worlds are just as real and concrete as the actual world.

One way one might try to justify an asymmetry here is by pointing out that, for example, in the metaphysics of time, the present time is only *temporarily* privileged. Every other time will be privileged at some point. This might seem to reduce the threat of arbitrariness in the case of time. However, there is still a symmetry here. Just as the present time is merely temporarily privileged, the actual world is merely *contingently* privileged, and my own perspective is merely *subjectively* privileged. Although it is true that, for every time, there is some point in history relative to which it is privileged, it is also true that, for every perspective, there is some point of view relative to which it is privileged. Given these parallels, it remains unclear why these views should be treated asymmetrically.

Lastly, there are varieties of First-Person Realism that directly address this arbitrariness worry. For example, List (2023) defends a “many worlds” version of First-Person Realism, according to which we each inhabit our own “first-personally centered” world. So, although I am metaphysically privileged according to one such world, others are metaphysically privileged according to other (equally real and concrete) worlds. Following Fine (2005), one could also adopt a “fragmentalist” interpretation of First-Person Realism, according to which reality is composed of incompatible “fragments”. According to a fragmentalist version of First-Person Realism, although I am uniquely metaphysically privileged according to one such fragment, others are uniquely metaphysically privileged according to other such fragments.⁴⁶

conscious, despite the fact that all the other zombies would “think” (in a different, functional/behavioral sense) that they are not zombies. For parallel discussion of whether we can know that we are (temporally) present given an A-theory of time, see Russell (2016). For responses to other natural objections to First-Person Realism, see Hare (2009: 91-98).

⁴⁵ This point is made by Merlo (2016: 324).

⁴⁶ One worry about these kinds of proposals is that it is not clear if they do justice to the main motivations behind First-Person Realism, which require that I am special *simpliciter* (not merely relative to a world or fragment). For further discussion, see Merlo (2013).

10. Conclusion

I have argued that First-Person Realism can be motivated by a wide variety of central considerations throughout philosophy, concerning consciousness, time, (anti-)haecceitism, ethics, personal identity, and modality. However, I have yet to mention what is perhaps the most forceful reason to endorse First-Person Realism, at least according to some First-Person Realists. Namely, when one fully understands what First-Person Realism is saying, then its truth becomes (allegedly) an obvious matter of common sense. In fact, Hare (2009) describes the view as “*the most obvious thing in the world*” (98). However, by considering the eight arguments above, I hope to have motivated the view that First-Person Realism is theoretically attractive even independently of its alleged obviousness.⁴⁷

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