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BOOK REVIEW:

José Luis Bermúdez, *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA 1998.

José Luis Bermúdez has produced a well-written and well-argued book about an exciting topic: the nature of self-consciousness and its basis in mental and bodily states with non-conceptual content. He focuses on primitive (in both a logical and ontogenetical sense) forms of self-consciousness, in order to show how full-fledged self-consciousness arises from these. Below, I will give an overview of the contents of the book, and then briefly discuss a few things that I find problematic.

The paradox of self-consciousness, around which the discussion revolves, emerges when we try to explain the characteristic features of self-consciousness (for instance, the immunity to error through misidentification of judgements in the first person) by giving an analysis of the first-person pronoun. This common strategy relies on what Bermúdez calls the Thought-Language Principle: that the only way to analyse the capacity to think a particular range of thoughts is by analysing the capacity for the canonical linguistic expression of those thoughts.

The problem is that mastery of the semantics of the first-person pronoun requires the capacity to think first-person thoughts, while the latter capacity is in turn to be explained by mastery of the first-person pronoun. The paradox of self-consciousness consists in two sorts of circularity.

Regarding the first one, explanatory circularity, Bermúdez points out that any theory that tries to explain first-person thoughts through linguistic mastery of the first-person pronoun will be circular, because the explanandum is part of the explanans.

The other kind, capacity circularity, arises because an understanding of the first-person pronoun requires the capacity to think certain self-conscious thoughts that can only be expressed with the first-person pronoun 'I'. It seems to make it impossible to understand how mastery of 'I' could ever be learned.

To solve the paradox Bermúdez initially rejects the Thought-Language Principle. He argues that the range of concepts that one may use in ascribing content to a creature is not determined by the concepts that the creature actually possesses. A creature can be in representational states even though it does not possess any concepts. Such states carry non-conceptual content, that is, content that can be ascribed to a thinker although that thinker does not possess the concepts required to specify the content.

An example of an ascription of non-conceptual content would be when we attribute thoughts to toddlers to, for instance, explain their behaviour, although they themselves cannot be said to have the concepts we use. Another example would be the description of colour experience with the help of concepts such as mauve or blue. The experiential content itself is more fine-grained than the conceptual content used to articulate it.

I believe that Bermúdez is correct in his diagnosis of what is the wrong with the reasoning that leads to the paradox of self-consciousness, and that the Thought-Language Principle in fact should be rejected, as I have argued myself elsewhere. Non-conceptual first-person thoughts seem fit to figure in an explanation of mastery of the first-person pronoun and how such mastery is acquired in the course of human development. But to justify his claims, Bermúdez must show first, that there is such a thing as non-conceptual content, and secondly, that this notion can be applied to first-person thought.

Bermúdez characterises non-conceptual content as content that is independent of concepts, or, as he writes, autonomous. He finds evidence for the claim about autonomy in, among other places, developmental psychology concerning the capacity of infants to parse the visual array, and in studies of visual agnosias. Experiments show that infants are capable of parsing their visual array into spatially extended and bounded segments, although they cannot be said to have a complete understanding of the notion of an object as it is normally described.

Patients with visual agnosia suffer from deficits in visual object perception and recognition. The deficits can be described in terms of the distinction between conceptual and non-conceptual content in the following manner. The patients apparently parse the visual array into spatially extended and bounded individuals that are spatially related, but do not show a conceptual or explicit understanding of what they perceive.

Bermúdez argues as well that we need non-conceptual content to explain the richness of perceptual experience that neither can be captured by perceptual beliefs nor be assimilated to sensations. Perceptual experiences represent the world in an analogue fashion. Concepts only pick out certain features of the representations. For instance, colour perception and perception of spatial features do not neatly map onto the concepts we use to describe the experiences. Moreover, a subject may be able to recognise the difference between different shapes, while not having the concepts to describe the shapes.

Non-conceptual content is also needed to explain behaviour that does not rely on a lawlike relation between perceptual input and behavioural output, and that cannot be genuinely explained by attributing concepts to the agent. The latter situation occurs when the agent does not possess the concepts used to explain the behaviour. Such behaviour is found in, for instance, animals and infants. The way these agents represent the environment, and which lies behind their behaviour, can not always be captured by concepts, since the concepts do not map onto the experiences. It is necessary to refer to non-conceptual content to give an adequate picture of the underlying representations.

Let us grant that there is decisive evidence for the existence of non-conceptual content. But how shall this notion be applied to first-person thoughts? Bermúdez finds non-conceptual first-person thoughts in somatic proprioception (the perception of position, orientation, movement, etc., of one's own body), navigational abilities, and non-linguistic social interaction. This is argued for by inference to the best explanation, that is, by pleading that certain kinds of behaviour are best explained by appealing to states carrying non-conceptual content.

Somatic proprioception, first, offers a non-conceptual awareness of the body as a spatially extended and bounded physical object that is responsive to the will. Furthermore, the ability to navigate through a spatial environment lies behind the emergence of a non-conceptual point of view, which consists in an integrated representation of the environment over time. Bermúdez claims that conscious place recognition and explicit memory are necessary for having a point of view, since they are prerequisites to temporally extended awareness. These capacities do not require conceptual knowledge.

Bermúdez then relates the two kinds of physical self-awareness mentioned in the last paragraph to a psychological self-awareness, grounded in a constitutive link between psychological self-awareness and awareness of other minds. He criticises, as it seems, correctly, the suggestion that this link is best explained in terms of the conditions for ascription of psychological predicates. The reason why this suggestion is not correct is that, although it recognises that mastery of a psychological predicate requires the capacity to apply it to a range of different individuals, the argument itself does not show that this requirement actually has to be fulfilled. One can acquire the capacity in question, and grasp that psychological predicates have a general application, simply by ascribing the predicates to oneself at different times.

To be aware of oneself as distinct from the rest of the world requires, Bermúdez holds, a contrast space, in this case of other subjects. He suggests that psychological self-awareness depends on a capacity to count instances of the sortal categories of perceiver, agent, and bearer of reactive attitudes. These categories define the core notion of a psychological subject, and can be grasped non-conceptually. The understanding of them has its origin in social, but non-linguistic interaction.

To support his view, Bermúdez describes different cases of adult-infant interaction that allegedly depend on grasping the aforementioned categories and are best explained by making reference to non-conceptual first-person contents. The interaction comprises joint visual attention, co-ordinated joint engagement (collaborative activities that infants engage in with their caregivers), and social referencing. The latter occurs when the subject adjusts her behaviour to the emotional reactions of others.

The three kinds of primitive self-consciousness that Bermúdez has called attention to form the backbone of full-fledged self-consciousness. How then can mastery of the first-person pronoun be based in them? Bermúdez holds that the intention to refer to oneself that lies behind self-reference ultimately can be explained in terms of non-conceptual content and primitive self-consciousness. This intention together with the token-reflexive rule, that every token of 'I' refers to whoever produced it, account for the competent use of 'I'. Circularity is thus avoided, since first-person thoughts have been shown to be independent of linguistic abilities.

As this exposition probably has indicated, Bermúdez has written a complex book with acute and highly interesting discussions mainly of forms of primitive self-consciousness. In the following, I will all the same point to a few issues that I find problematic with his account.

Bermúdez tries to make his thesis about non-conceptual content more substantial by spelling out in what the non-conceptual representations consist. To do so he uses J. J. Gibson's ecological theory of direct perception. For instance, Bermúdez maintains, quite correctly in my view, that the emergence of an integrated spatial map depends on the subject's being engaged in goal-directed, active behaviour. But he then argues that the perception of so-called affordances (higher-order perceptual invariants) governs movement and action.

The idea is that a subject who understands how affordances are spatially related and subsequently can distinguish them from the places at which they hold, will be able to form a spatial map by calibrating the affordances. Bermúdez adds that since affordances most probably are innate, there is no difficulty in explaining how integrated spatial representations emerge.

I find the major difficulty with Bermúdez' approach in his reliance on Gibson's theory. It is used in several different contexts. Gibson held that perception consists in picking up invariants (co-varying variables or features), considered as species-relative affordances, that are objective and exist in a publicly accessible world. Affordances can be described as making suggestions for actions. They are what a situation or an item offers to a subject, and may be both positive and negative. For instance, a surface may support one animal but not another, grass may be edible to some creatures but not to others. Through the affordances, information acquires a meaning.

That affordances are picked up directly means that perception does not rely on inferences or on representations, created from incoming information. There is nothing in-between the perceived affordance and the agent. On the contrary, the affordance incorporates information about both the environment and the subject and arises at their interface.

When it comes to information about oneself, the affordances are somewhat different in practice, but not in principle. Self-specifying information too consists in invariants. Although any points of observation are public, there is always some information that discriminates the observer that cannot be shared by other observers. It specifies the self as distinct from the environment, but simultaneously it specifies the environment. The two sources of information coexist, cancelling the apparent dichotomy between subjective and objective.

Now, Bermúdez maintains that if perception is understood in Gibson's terms, perceptual contents are first-person contents, because perceptual information, bridging the gap between private and public, is immediately connected to behaviour. But this contention surprisingly seems to do away with the need for non-conceptual content.

The reason is that picking up affordances does not involve processing of the information that is gained, but reaction to invariants. The concept of affordance explains the link-up between input and output, without postulating something in-between. In Gibson's framework, content, as it usually is conceived of, that is, as some kind of representation subject to processing in the mind, is not needed to explain behaviour. The benefit of a theory of non-conceptual content, on the other hand, is exactly to provide something more elaborated than just a link between input and output, while still being independent of concepts.

The point is that Gibson's theory is not a theory about content. This stands clear if we consider the problem of misrepresentation. To Gibson, misperception occurs when a subject fails to pick up the appropriate affordance, that is, when she fails to co-ordinate herself with the environment. She does not grasp what it offers, or how it can co-operate. This means that misperception is not to be explained as a case of (mis)representation at all. It is a case of picking up misinformation, or the wrong affordance. The shortcomings have nothing to do with representation.

This can be seen if we consider what a representation is, and consequently what it means to misrepresent, that is, to have an incorrect representation. A representation presents the environment to the subject in a particular way. It arises when the information that the subject receives from the environment is treated by the subject's cognitive apparatus. Misrepresentation occurs when the representation that the subject has formed from the received information inadequately depicts the source of the information. But Gibson's theory does not involve misrepresentation in this sense. Instead, it makes use of the notion of perceiving, or picking up, the wrong affordance. Bermúdez asserts that in some cases we need to explain behaviour by referring to how things are taken to be, or are represented as being. But Gibson's theory of perception cannot help with this. It seems to be at cross-purposes with Bermúdez' intentions.

Still, many of the merits of Bermúdez' book remain even if the role that Gibson's theory plays in it is disregarded. Certainly perception grounds developed self-consciousness. But if Gibson's theory will not do, another account must take its place, to make the nature of non-conceptual content appear less evasive.

Let us move on to another topic. As mentioned above, Bermúdez distinguishes between different kinds of primitive self-consciousness. The discussion of psychological self-consciousness is stimulating, although regrettably not as exhaustive as of the one of physical self-consciousness. One problem is that the empirical material can be interpreted in different ways and therefore not univocally supports the use to which Bermúdez puts it. How to interpret the kind of interaction he brings up is an issue that is much debated not only within the field of human, but also animal, cognition. It seems that in some cases the behaviour could be accounted for without attributing any forms of representation or intentionality to the subjects involved.

The categories of perceiver, agent, and bearer of reactive attitudes, as well as what it means to be aware of oneself as instantiating them, remain somewhat nondescript in spite of the examples. Each sortal representation is supposed to have certain criteria of application and identity, but what these criteria are in the particular cases is not obvious. It would also be interesting to know how primitive psychological self-consciousness relates to more advanced forms and awareness of oneself as a person. This leads over to what Bermúdez has to say about 'I'-thoughts and full-blown self-consciousness.

It may be that, as Bermúdez suggests, mastery of 'I' can be accounted for by the intention to refer to oneself in combination with the token-reflexive rule. But this cannot be all there is to full-fledged self-consciousness. Such consciousness involves an awareness of oneself as belonging to a social sphere with normative relations and conventions that partly are constitutive of what it is to be a person. This awareness enters also into the competence required for the use of 'I'. Moreover, it is not simply a matter of conceptual knowledge, but is also partly a non-conceptual or tacit capacity, that neither can be explained in terms of the first-person pronoun, nor can be reduced to the primitive forms discussed by Bermúdez. The question is how it is to be incorporated into the theory while leaving the rest intact.

Primitive self-consciousness is no doubt a precondition for becoming a person, or a social being, and Bermúdez' account of its different forms is very interesting. But the step from that to full-fledged self-consciousness is more complicated than the book suggests. Although some of the secrets of self-consciousness have been uncovered, the map still contains many unexplored regions.

Nevertheless, this is an excellent book. The exposition is clear, and Bermúdez provides many important insights into the primitive forms of self-consciousness. His account shows convincingly that these kinds of self-consciousness can be sources of non-conceptual first-person contents. It is delightful to find a book that in such a competent way examines the role of non-conceptual content in explanations of behaviour as well as of consciousness. I also find the interdisciplinary approach, with its mix of philosophical arguments and empirical results, very appropriate to the topic.

Ingar Brinck, Department of Philosophy, Lund University, Sweden 98-01-18