

DISCUSIONES

MR. WALKER ON THE SELF

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I write as an admirer of much of Mr. Walker's work. But his paper on the self¹ seems to me to be incurably muddled. First, there is his statement that "I am enough of an empiricist to believe that it is a necessary truth that *there can be no a priori concepts of empirical entities.*"² This is not only not a necessary truth, it is necessarily false. It is counter-instanced not only by the case of imaginary entities or fictional beings, but by the concept of 'empirical entity', which, as part of the taxonomic scheme, is by definition non-empirical. It is usually "empiricists" such as Walker who fall into the unfortunate trap of making blanket assertions about the character of experience and the sources of knowledge, in such a way that their own programmatic utterances become self-refuting. Walker's putatively "necessary truth" is a case in point —and if it were a necessary truth, it would by definition be non-empirical in status. The issue may turn here not so much on terms such as 'empirical' and 'concept', but on the scope of the term 'of' as employed in a phrase such as "...concepts of empirical entities". Clearly, such concepts are themselves not empirical entities, so that Walker's statement should be amended to read "there can be none but a priori concepts of empirical entities".

¹ Jeremy Walker, "Logical Questions Concerning the Concept of the Empirical Self", *Crítica*, Vol. V (1971), 73-89.

² *Ibid.*, 73. Italics in original. The fourth italicized word is misprinted in the original as "not".

Second, there are Walker's criteria for selfhood. He lists four, of which three are either superfluous or inessential. He writes:

In order to be a self an entity must (1) be *continuous* over a certain period of time (2), possess an *individual identity* — be *individuable*— (3), suffer *change*, or be capable of suffering change, of a certain type, over a period of time, & (4) possess *consciousness* at specifiable times and *over* certain periods of time.³

Of these, (1) to (3), inclusive, fail to distinguish a self from, say, a plant or item in nature. It is ironic that while Walker's attempted exclusion of "a priori concepts of empirical entities" fails to exclude such postulations as the soul from being logically possible, his criteria (1) through (3) would allow for the instantiation of selfhood in places where we would not normally recognize its existence. It is, of course, (4) that makes all the difference, but this raises the thorny issue: what is consciousness? Is it a substance, as Fichte thought: a conscious stream, as James suggested; or something like Kant's transcendental unity of apperception, i.e. that which ascribes experiences to itself, conceived as experiencer? Mr. Walker's remarks on the subject are unhelpful, not to say obscure. He speaks of "possessing" a self,⁴ but it is (or should be) obvious that one does not possess or own one's personality the way one does a coat, or a piece of land — a point made abundantly clear by upholders of soul-body dualisms, from Plato to Descartes. Walker recognizes that to speak of the self in terms of "self-consciousness"⁵ as its *identifying* property or predicate is at once vacuous and false, unless this is meant to follow from or be entailed by an analysis of the contents of consciousness. But what are those contents, and how do they

³ *Ibid.*, 77. Italics in original.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 86. This concept surely *arises* in our experience, or as a result of it.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

enable Walker to justify his postulated "... *distinction*... between the substantial principle and the phenomena"⁶ without engaging in circular argument? Walker speaks vaguely enough of a "principle of unity"⁷ and concedes, it seems, that it can be reduced, in phenomenalist categories, to its contents; yet he goes on to contend that it is "... guaranteed... by possession of any mode of self-consciousness... that one is a *being of a kind that normally has a self*..."⁸ Here not only has the level of argument slipped from inference to empirical generalization, but the question of the explanatory value of the concept of self (in the domain of philosophy of mind) has not even been raised; nor has the simple challenge to Walker's guarantee, namely, how does one *know* that 'self-consciousness' is "normally" accompanied by selfhood, unless this is made over into a tautologous equation?

More examples of slipshod thinking could be pointed out, but I think it suffices to say that (1) Walker over-concentrates on the empirical *conditions* for selfhood, which, while they may be necessary, are not sufficient (as any Humean analysis of the mind makes all too clear) to characterize it; in doing so, he not only omits all consideration of the (necessary) interplay between empirical and non-empirical categories, but refuses or fails to come to grips with the most essential of all empirical conditions: objective existence. While there are some elaborations on the self's extension in time,⁹ its extension in space is never taken up—a startling omission in light of the remarkable ad-

⁶ *Ibid.* Italics in original.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88. Walker's numerous references to potentiality make his error all the more grievous, since a) they beg the question of the existence of a self, while (b) collapsing philosophical argument into quasi-empirical speculation.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 78, 82, 83. Most emphatic is the statement on 77: "... there can be no such entity as a *non-temporal self*..." (italics in original), a contention which, if true, would either rule out the possibility of God's existing or at least seriously curtail the permissible range of predicates in discussions of the nature of divinity, in philosophical theology. Walker's policy is at least

vances pioneered in this field by Strawson.¹⁰ (2) Walker's metaphors for dealing with the self are largely unilluminating, and to the extent that they are something more, they seem mere echoes of the subjective principles enabling the synthesis of the manifold to take place, in Kant's transcendental deduction;¹¹ repetition without enlargement. I conclude that Walker's paper provides no new insights but only a succession of old blunders, whose significance has been misconstrued and whose logical force, by parity of ill reasoning, is overestimated. Unless my interpretation is drastically mistaken, I cannot understand how Walker could both miss the non-empirical aspects of selfhood and fail to see what the most hidebound of empiricist-inspired explanations of entitative status demand. But I am afraid in happened, nonetheless.

even-handed, in that, as he recognizes (74), without instantiations for his would-be empirical concept of the self, there could be *no* empirical selves: a plain instance of *a priori dictation* of what can and cannot exist, but one forced upon Walker by his assumptions.

¹⁰ P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, 1959), esp. Chapter on "Persons".

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 131, B 135.