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A Life Hack with a Future

Overview

There's a way to see the mysterious objects that metaphysicians theorize about as much more down to earth than they're usually taken to be. We make up virtual overlays for different pieces of the world, which serve as intellectual accessories; they facilitate our reasoning. Selves or persons are traditionally in that category—that of the objects of metaphysics—and *A Life Hack with a Future* explores the idea that we construe ourselves as *selves* as a way of enabling, in the first place, inferences, and in addition figuring things out more generally (which isn't always a matter of drawing conclusions from what you already think).

Just to convey the gist of that proposal, if you notice a conclusion that follows from something (or from several things) that *I* think, but which I'm refusing to draw, you can take me to task. If I remain stubborn and insist on the contrary, I'm being inconsistent and irrational. Whereas you won't complain that I'm being inconsistent if I don't draw a conclusion from what various *other* people think: those are *their* commitments, not *mine.* That's to say, selves are scopes for the consistency requirements we impose on people, and those requirements drive inference. What's more, when we flag inconsistencies within the scope of a self, we charge that person with the mission of resolving them, and when it's not simply a matter of drawing a conclusion, the resolution can include giving up one or another assumption or plan or even firmly held commitment. You shouldn't be doing that by just *picking* one of them to drop—maybe by flipping a coin—and so sorting out inconsistencies is an occasion to investigate, to reconsider, and to get to the bottom of things. And that's the very big payoff of being, not just a human animal, but a self: you're built to look into things and figure things out—and especially, to figure out what to *do.*

To be clear, we've so far picked out only one of the several functions that selves or persons serve. But if I'm seeing matters correctly, this technique is explanatorily central, and one indication of that is the way that solutions to a number of philosophical puzzles fall into place around it. For instance, as the argument proceeds, we'll be able to make sense of personal identity, that is, of the longstanding question as to what makes who you are now and who you will be later the very same person. (We can see how it is that this very cool life hack comes with a future.) We'll have a frame to put around the Kantian demand that you always treat others as ends in themselves, and

never merely as means. We'll have an explanation for first-person authority, that is, of how it is that you know what you think, what you want, what you're in the middle of doing and so on, without looking. (Other people have to look to see what you're doing, but you *just know.*) We'll be able to say why we take moral requirements to apply to the creatures they do (that is, to *us*), but also why moral skepticism comes so naturally. We'll even have an account of why people philosophize.

However, against the background of this picture we won't just see puzzles being solved. I'll be arguing that a cluster of intellectually challenging and practically urgent problems emerges when you ask how those consistency requirements can be managed, and that this sets an agenda we had better take up.

The environment we have to move around in and understand is vastly complicated, but human beings have finite and computationally limited minds. (In the jargon: we're *boundedly rational.*) We can't take into account even everything we already know, and certainly not what we haven't yet picked up on. So we have to do our reasoning while allowing that we might need to take conclusions back, when it turns out there's something relevant we've overlooked. Such inferences—it gets said—are *defeasible* (because they could well have 'defeaters' amongst all those things we've overlooked), and almost all of our reasoning is going to be defeasible, rather than deductive.

This fact already complicates the administrative role of being a self. There are always *more* things you might have overlooked; if you think of inferences as going ahead 'other things equal,' there are indefinitely many 'other things' to check, to see if they *are* 'equal'. How can we call people out for inconsistencies, if we can't tell whether or not they should be drawing some conclusion, and how can we tell, if we can't get to the bottom of a list of things that might go wrong?

But the problem is even worse than it seems. Over the last few centuries, we've escalated our division of labor, so that it's now routinely intellectual and evaluative division of labor. It's become the job of some of the highly specialized members of society to know *these* things, and not those (while other members know those things but not these); it's the job of some people to be competent to assess *these* matters but not those (and the other way around for other people). So it's built into division of labor that there are more and more things you don't know about, and aren't competent to evaluate—and all of them are more issues you might be overlooking. I'll be arguing that the old-time methods of managing defeasibility that we once got by with are breaking down in our specialization-intensive social and

technological world.

Our failures at successfully managing defeasibility don't stay neatly confined; instead, they spill over into further philosophical problems. It's pretty much taken for granted that if there's one aspect of decisionmaking that *is* well understood, it's being a means to an end. But means-end reasoning is defeasible, and as the mysteries of defeasibility metastatize, we find that we scarcely know how to tell good choices of expedient from bad; that instrumental reasoning has a significant *aesthetic* dimension; even more problematically, that other people's means-end reasoning has to be tightly controlled, if your own is to have any chance of producing decent results. That last point, I'm going to suggest, throws a spanner into the works when we're articulating our moral and political ideals. As of the Enlightenment, we've taken on board the aspiration of autonomy for all, all of the time. But if your own autonomy has the heteronomy of others as its precondition—where this is a feature of the logic of practical reasoning—then we need to rethink. How much of that ideal can we keep? Is there a way to split the difference?

The problems that the argument puts front and center are daunting, practically pressing, and at this stage it's by no means clear they can be solved. But the book looks at ways to move forward. The threat to autonomy that we just flagged also indicates how standardizing people's intellectual and practical toolkits can make choices more tractable. Defeasibility management in a highly specialized world seems to have the problem that we can't, so to speak, produce enough understanding to go around; one chapter looks at a recent attempt to bypass the need to do that, by screening inferences without having to understand their defeaters.

To recap, *A Life Hack with a Future* introduces an account of the self, explaining what that remarkable virtual device is first and foremost there to do. It uses that account to develop treatments of a series of outstanding philosophical problems and puzzles. But the twofold upshot of the essays taken altogether is that we've never understood a crucial aspect of how the technique has worked—and we've put ourselves in a position where it's breaking down, which means that we need to find ways to *keep* it working.

All of that is admittedly a lot to put on readers' plates, and so that they won't have to take it in and digest it all at once, the volume is organized as a series of essays. These can be read as standalones, and each takes up some part of the account, often using as its focus one of those traditional philosophical problems. And the new angles this picture of the self gives you on those longstanding philosophical concerns are points of entry into the creature-construction methodology the book deploys, and an occasion assess and consider adopting it.