

An International Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry October, 2004 Volume 87, Number 4

# Personal Identity

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# THE MONIST

An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry

#### FOUNDED 1888 BY EDWARD C. HEGELER

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Paul Carus, the first editor of *The Monist*, was born in Ilsenberg am Harz on July 18, 1852, and died in La Salle, Illinois on February 11, 1919. After receiving his Ph.D. degree in philosophy and classical philology from Tübingen University in 1876, he taught briefly at the State Military Academy at Dresden. In search of freedom for expression of his independent views, he migrated first to England and then to the United States. In 1887, he accepted the invitation of Edward C. Hegeler (who later became his father-in-law) to edit *The Open Court* magazine, a monthly journal devoted primarily to comparative religion. In 1888, *The Monist* was established as a quarterly journal of the philosophy of science, and Paul Carus served as editor of both journals, and as editor of the Open Court Publishing Company until his death in 1919.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: United States: Annual (4 issues): Institutions, \$50.00; individuals, \$30.00; 2 years institutions, \$90.00; individuals, \$50.00. Single copies: \$12.00. Foreign postage: Add \$2.00 to single copy rate or \$2.50 per year of subscription.

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# THE FIRST PERSON, EMBODIMENT, AND THE CERTAINTY THAT ONE EXISTS

#### 1. Certainty

Descartes made vivid that my certainty as to which psychological states are mine seems to outrun by far my certainty about which body is mine, or even that I have a body. This can make it seem compelling that in our ordinary use of the first person, we are referring to purely psychological subjects, which just so happen to be specially related to particular bodies. This would explain why your certainty about your ownership of a particular psychological life can outrun your certainty about your ownership of a body. The problem is that it is difficult to make sense of this notion of the self as a purely psychological subject.

You might argue that Descartes was wrong to think that I can hold on to my knowledge that various psychological states are mine while questioning whether I have a body. For, you might argue, I undermine my own understanding of the first person when I question whether I have a body. So I cannot hold on to my knowledge that these psychological states are mine while questioning whether I have a body.

In this paper I want to explore the possibility of taking a different tack. I want to explore the possibility of acknowledging Descartes's point as correct, while resisting the need to make sense of the notion of the self as a purely psychological subject. I want to argue that our knowledge of our own psychological lives leaves it open what kinds of things we are. For our ordinary use and understanding of the first person leaves it open what kinds of things we are. The puzzle is to understand how it can be that you could hold on to your understanding of the first person while being radically uncertain as to which particular thing you are. For the first person is a singular term, and we would ordinarily think of understanding a singular term as a matter of knowing which thing it stands for.

In §2 I will take as my starting-point Sydney Shoemaker's account of the metaphysics of embodiment, his explanation of what it is for a particular psychological life to be embodied in a particular body. I will look at how this might be complemented by an account of the epistemology of embodiment: how I know that I am embodied in a particular body. In §3 I will sketch the tension involved in taking an understanding of the first person to be prior to a knowledge of embodiment. In §4 I will sketch an account of how we might nonetheless use the first person as a referring term in advance of having knowledge of how we are embodied. Finally, in §5, I will make some brief remarks about the content of the certainty that one exists.

### 2. The First Person as Programmatic

In "Embodiment and Behavior" (1984b), Sydney Shoemaker poses the question: What is it for a particular psychological life to be embodied in a particular body? Raising this question does not presuppose that psychological lives can be individuated otherwise than as the lives of particular people, or that people can be individuated in purely psychological terms. It asks only what the relation must be between a particular psychological life and a body for the life to be embodied in that body. And, of course, we are aiming to acknowledge Descartes's point that you can have knowledge of your psychological life without having knowledge of your body; so we might expect the metaphysical issue to illuminate the epistemological position here.

Shoemaker supposes that when a person acts voluntarily, there is always a "volition" mediating between whatever reasons the person has for acting in that way, and the action itself. Somewhat similarly, Shoemaker assumes, there are "sense-experiences" which mediate the external surroundings of a person and the beliefs and knowledge that the person forms about those surroundings. For present purposes I will not question these assumptions, their intuitive gist is straightforward enough and not without immediate plausibility. Armed with these notions, Shoemaker proposes two criteria of embodiment:

(1) A person is "volitionally embodied" in a certain body "to the extent that the volitions of the person produce in that body movements that

conform to them or fulfil them, that is, movements that the person is trying to produce or which are constitutive of actions he is trying to perform."

(2) A person is "sensorily embodied" in a certain body "to the extent that the interactions of that body with its surroundings produce in the person sense-experiences corresponding to, and constituting veridical perceptions of, aspects of those surroundings."

Finally, Shoemaker says, "I suggest that volitional embodiment and sensory embodiment are together the primary criteria of, or constitutive factors in, embodiment *simpliciter*." (Shoemaker 1984b, p. 117). This is an account of the metaphysics of embodiment. I take it that the intended gist of the two criteria of embodiment is again evident enough. Though further discussion of them doubtless would not go amiss, I want, rather than refining those criteria, to continue roughing in the picture.

I want to propose that we should think of an understanding of the first person as constituting a grasp of a particular programme: the programme of finding which thing embodies one's psychological life. Understanding the first person does not demand that one should actually know which thing embodies one's psychological life. Nor does the appeal to "embodiment" here carry immediate commitment to any particular view of the identities of persons, though of course in the end the programme may have a uniquely correct outcome, there may be a single determinately correct answer to the question which thing embodies my psychological life.

On this account, one element in knowing in which body I am embodied is knowing which movements are actions caused by my volitions. This knowledge of my own actions ordinarily depends on the use of subpersonal mechanisms. A number of psychologists have recently appealed to the classical "comparator" model which physiologists have used to explain how animals can distinguish between changes which are internally generated by the animal, and changes which are externally caused (von Holst 1954; Sperry 1950). When a change is internally generated, a motor instruction is sent to the animal's motor system. A copy of that instruction is sent to the comparator. The comparator therefore has information about what changes are to happen. When the animal does move, information—from proprioception, vision or some other perceptual system—as to what

has happened is also sent to the comparator. If what has happened matches what was expected, this is registered as a successful, internally generated action by the animal. If there is a mismatch between what has happened and what was expected, this mismatch is registered. If there is an observed change and no copy at the comparator of an instruction to perform such an action, this is registered as an externally caused change. Psychologists have proposed that some such mechanism in humans is what allows us to calibrate our movements to achieve the results we intend; it is what allows us, for example, to compensate effortlessly for the effects of wearing prisms that shift the apparent locations of objects. So long as the prisms are worn over a period, the comparator can be used to calibrate actions so that the movements reach to the intended objects. And again, it has been proposed that such a mechanism is what allows us to differentiate our own internally generated actions from changes in our bodies or the environment that are externally caused. If the comparator has a copy of an instruction to produce an observed change, then that is experienced as an internally generated action by the agent. If there is no copy of any such instruction, then the movement is experienced as an externally generated change. It is important that this comparator mechanism is viewed as a subpersonal cognitive mechanism which affects the subject's experience of agency. People do not in general know the detailed contents of the movements they are making, so the person is not, in general, in a position to make detailed assessments of the comparison between their motor instructions and the exact movements performed. That information is typically possessed and used only by relatively low-level cognitive mechanisms, themselves remote from consciousness. Nonetheless, whether there is match at the comparator is what explains the subject's having, or not having, the sense of having been the agent of a particular change. Jeannerod puts the proposal by saying "agency judgments made by the subject are based on the state of the comparator." (Jeannerod 1999, pp. 17–18).

Is there a role for the comparator model in explaining how I can identity the thing which embodies my psychological life? I think it is helpful here to contrast two kinds of understanding that we might have of our own causal relations to our surroundings. First, there is the kind of implicit grasp that an animal or a young child might be said to have of their causal relations to their surroundings. You display this implicit grasp in what you do or do not try to do to influence or affect your surrounding.

Simply in moving around and acting you display this implicit grasp of the causal relations between you and the world. This does not demand selfconsciousness. But it may well involve the use of a comparator; the model was after all first introduced to explain the behaviour of relatively simple animals. In contrast, secondly, there is the explicit grasp that we also usually have of our causal relations to our surroundings, that we exhibit when I explain just how I did something, or why I think I am the one responsible for something that happened. This is a matter of making explicit how the world is affecting me and how I am affecting it, and this kind of explicit understanding of the causal relations really does demand self-consciousness, that I should be able to think of myself using the first person. I am proposing that we should think of self-consciousness as a matter of having the programme of characterising what it is that stands in causal relations to one's surroundings. It is this kind of explicit understanding that allows one to form ideas like: "I am the one who broke that vase," or "I am the one they are all looking at." The comparator model will have a role to play here, too. For at the foundation of this kind of explicit understanding of your causal relations to your surroundings, there has to be the sense of which actions are to have their causes and effects characterised using 'I'. And the starting-point here will still be supplied by the sense of perpetrating some actions but not others. That sense of perpetration is what provides the initial specification of which actions are to have their causal relations to the surroundings characterised explicitly using 'I'. And this sense of perpetration is exactly what the comparator is supposed to provide.

If this is right, then, could we but find an agent whose comparator is malfunctioning, we ought to be able to point to illusions to which that agent is subject, about whether he is embodied in what is in fact his own body. That is, it ought to be possible to find an agent who is volitionally embodied in a particular body, but who is subject to two types of illusion: (a) that actions which are performed to fulfil his own volitions are not actually performed to fulfil his own volitions, and (b) that actions which are not performed to fulfil his own volitions are performed to fulfil his own volitions. Certain schizophrenic patients do seem to illustrate these illusions. Such patients may voluntarily initiate an action, and perform that action, yet have the feeling that alien forces made them perform the action. The analysis here is that breakdown in the comparator means that the agent has not recognised the volition as his own. Or again, an agent

may have the volition to perform an action, and such an action may be performed by someone else, and the agent may have the sense that the other's action was performed to fulfil his own volition. Jeannerod writes that such patients "are convinced that their intentions or actions can affect external events, for example, that they can influence the thought and actions of other people. As a consequence, they tend to misattribute the occurrence of external events to themselves, as if the effects of actions of others were interpreted through the intentions of the self." (Jeannerod 2003, p. 145). The deviation here is a matter of degree, of course.

# 3. Immunity to Error Through Misidentification

The first person is a token-reflexive term: every token of the first person refers to the thing, whatever it is, that stands in a certain systematic relation to that very token. The systematic rule for the first person is: any token of 'I' refers to whoever produced it. Now, in some imaginable cases, the use of a token-reflexive term is relatively easy to analyse. These are cases in which the use of the token-reflexive is entirely dependent on a pre-existing vocabulary which is entirely prior to, and independent of, the token-reflexive. The trouble with analysing the first person is that it is not of this dependent kind.

Let me give an example of the case in which the analysis of a token-reflexive is relatively straightforward. Suppose we consider a tribe of humans who, though intelligent and possessed of a shared language, do not have the use of the first person, or any sign like it. Suppose they have, though, demonstratives with which they refer to one another: 'this human', 'that human over there', and so on. They may also have names for particular humans. And a particular human may use a demonstrative or name to refer to what is in fact that very human. They also, of course, have mastered a range of predicates which they can apply to the humans so identified; let us suppose that they include only broadly physical terms. Suppose now that our tribe introduces a new sign 'H' to their language, which is governed by the following rule:

Any token of 'H' refers to whichever human produced it.

This sign 'H' is a token-reflexive; its reference is fixed by a rule identifying the reference of any token of 'H' as whatever stands in a certain relation

to that very token. We can make a distinction between what I'll call a level-1understanding, at which you simply recognise that the term used is 'H' and that it is governed by the rule that any token of 'H' refers to whichever human produced it. At level-2, you go one step further and identify which human it was that produced that token of 'H'. At level-2, you identify the human in question using the demonstratives or names for referring to humans which were already in the language prior to the introduction of 'H'. A level-1 understanding of any statement using 'H' will generally be of little value in itself; it will only be of use as a stage on the way to achieving a level-2 understanding. It will only be when you have identified which human it was that produced that token of 'H' that you will know what to make of the statement.

On the face of it, there will be no need for, or possibility of, introducing a new range of predicates for use specifically in connection with 'H'. There are the predicates already in use in connection with the demonstratives 'this human', 'that human over there' and so on. And the use of 'H' will be dependent on the use of those demonstratives. In fact, it would only be possible to introduce new predicates for use in conjunction with 'H' by first explaining and understanding them in the context of use in conjunction with the demonstratives.

In consequence of this, whenever someone knowledgeably makes a judgement of the form, 'H is F', that will have to be based on a judgement of the form, 'that human is F', and the identity 'that human is (identical to) H'. So when someone makes a judgement of the form, "H is F", it will always be possible to challenge them as follows: to accept that they have evidence for 'that human is F', but question whether they have evidence for 'that human is (identical to) H'. In Shoemaker's terms, judgements made using 'H' will in general be vulnerable to error through misidentification.

However, it has generally been recognised to be a significant insight of Shoemaker's that first-person present-tense psychological judgements are not, in general, subject to error through misidentification (Shoemaker 1984a). If I judge, 'I see a mountain', it is possible to question whether I am in fact seeing a mountain. But it is not possible for me to be right that someone is seeing a mountain, but wrong only about whether it is me that is seeing the mountain. To question my evidence that it is I that is seeing the mountain is to question whether my evidence is evidence that anyone at all is seeing a mountain.

Psychological terms are generally first introduced and explained in the context of first-person propositions. You do not understand the use of a term like 'x sees a mountain' unless you know how to use it in the context of propositions such as 'I see a mountain'. This marks a related difference between 'I' and 'H'. For the predicates used in conjunction with 'H' are all explained already in contexts which do not involve the token-reflexive.

Shoemaker's point about immunity to error through misidentification has been generally recognised to be a significant contribution to the analysis of the first person. But its significance is difficult to locate precisely. For it has also been generally recognised that there are many other terms than 'I' which can be used in judgements that are immune to error through misidentification. For instance, many uses of perceptual demonstratives seem to be immune to error through misidentification. Suppose that you and I are wondering whether the objects around us are all in just the places they seem to be-or are there unobtrusive mirrors or prisms around us? If I point to a particular object I can see quite well and say, "that thing is there (where it seems to be)," then I might be mistaken there might after all have been that prism in the way. But it does not seem possible that I could have made a mistake of identification. It hardly seems possible that I could be right that there was something at that position, only not the object I demonstrated; to question whether I have evidence that it was that object that was at that position is to question whether my evidence is evidence that anything at all was at that position. So there are uses of perceptual demonstratives which seem also to be immune to error through misidentification.

I want to propose that we mislocate Shoemaker's insight if we put it as the point that 'I' is a singular term whose uses are immune to error through misidentification. That does not actually describe what is distinctive about our ordinary use of 'I'. For as I have just said, there are many uses of singular terms other than 'I' which are immune to error through misidentification. What is really distinctive and striking about the first person is that it is a token-reflexive term whose uses are often immune to error through misidentification. The real challenge, in understanding how the first person works, is to understand how it can be that we have here a token-reflexive term whose uses are immune to error through misidentification. Let me try to give a canonical statement of the problem as follows:

The Problem: In all its uses, the first person is governed by the token-reflexive rule, that any token of 'I' refers to whoever produced it. On the face of it, using the term in accordance with this rule demands that the use of the term be dependent upon the use of some prior range of ways of identifying persons, which can be used to identify the producers of tokens of 'I'. How then can it be that uses of the first person are often immune to error through misidentification?

What is deceptive about the first person is that it combines two characteristics which are individually relatively innocuous. The first person being a token-reflexive seems innocuous enough, because there are token-reflexives, such as 'H', whose use is entirely dependent on the availability of some more fundamental range of referring terms. These terms therefore do not themselves pose any great theoretical problem. The crucial point about 'H', though, is that for that very reason its use is characteristically in statements which are vulnerable to error through misidentification. The second apparently innocuous characteristic of 'I' is that its uses are characteristically immune to error through misidentification. This seems innocent, because, as I said, there are many terms, such as perceptual demonstratives, which may be used in judgements that are immune to error through misidentification, so that it is hard to see why this factor alone should raise any problem special to the first person. But what is problematic about the first person is that it has both characteristics, being a token-reflexive whose uses are characteristically immune to error through misidentification. It is seriously difficult to understand how there can be such a term.

# 4. The Role of the Comparator in Trading on Identity

The issues that have to be addressed here are quite far-reaching, and I will not attempt a comprehensive resolution. Just to give a statement of the general issue: for the first person, just as for 'H', we can distinguish between a level-1 and a level-2 understanding of a statement made using 'I'. That is, we can distinguish between the level at which one has grasped only that 'I' has been used and that this term is governed by the rule that any token of it refers to whomever produced it, and the level at which one has achieved some further identification of the person who produced that token of 'I'. The problem is to understand how, while still at the stage of

a level-1 understanding of one's own use of 'I', one can knowledgeably make judgements about one's own current psychological states.

For the moment I want only to propose that the ideas I set out in §2 above may bear on this problem in two ways. First, the "further identification" of the self—that is, what makes it possible to advance to a level-2 understanding of one's own use of the first person—is typically provided by one's identification of the thing which embodies one's psychological life. Secondly, thinking and talking using the first person are themselves actions; and the comparator model I briefly set out in §2 may also help explain how you can, while still at a level-1 understanding of the first person, be sensitive to the distinction between tokens of 'I' which were produced by you and tokens of 'I' which were not produced by you. Let me briefly suggest how this second point could be developed.

Suppose you say to yourself: "I am tired; I am thirsty; hence, I am both tired and thirsty." For that inference to be correct, it has to be that it was the same person who spoke throughout. With what right then do you draw the inference? If you were at a level-2 understanding of the first person, then your right to draw the inference might be thought to be derived from your knowledge of which person was using the term both times. You would have identified the producer of each token of 'I', and you would have identified that person in the same way both times, and that would be what gave you the right to draw the inference. But while still at a level-1 understanding of your own uses of the first person, what gives you the right to draw inferences which trade on the identity of reference of two tokens of 'I'?

It is at this point that the comparator model comes into play in explaining how we can grasp the inferential role of the first person. We can view speech or thought as action. So the comparator model can apply here. In self-generated speech, internal signals, which are copies of the instructions to make those remarks, are sent to the comparator. If those signals match the content of the speech one hears or sees oneself produce, then one has the feeling of agency in relation to that speech. So one will be in a position to perform the inference from 'I am F' and 'I am G' to 'I am both F and G'.

This point applies to internally generated thoughts as well as to internally generated speech. Of course, in solitary thought, one will not typically hear or see the thoughts produced; but one does have introspec-

tive knowledge of what one is thinking. And if one has the introspective knowledge of those thoughts, whether one has the sense of agency will depend on whether the thoughts one introspects match the content of the copies of the instructions to produce those thoughts that one finds at the comparator. Applying the comparator model here assumes that when I think a thought, a motor instruction to think that thought has to be issued, and a copy of that instruction sent to the comparator, so that when the thought is available to introspection it can be experienced as a thought that one produced oneself. You might wonder whether it is even coherent to think of the control of thoughts in this way. For what is the source of the motor instruction to think a particular thought? To address this you need only recall that thinking is itself causally explained; there are causal explanations for why you have the particular thoughts that you do. Thinking is not itself somehow outside the reach of causal explanation. Which thoughts you have depends in part on your prior memories and other knowledge, on your objectives and fears, and on your current perceptions and concerns. You can see the comparator as a cognitive mechanism linking your long-standing beliefs and memories and so on, on the one hand, and your current occurrent thoughts, on the other. And part of the role of the comparator here is to help to keep your thinking on track. It is easy to suppose that thinking is somehow an unregulated process; but that is certainly untrue. To see that you need only ask how it is that your thinking manages not to be exclusively the jumble of disconnected thoughts characteristic of the formal thought disorder of some schizophrenic patients. Part of the answer here is that there are cognitive mechanisms which help to keep your thinking connected. As a by-product of this ordinary operation, match at the comparator, between the content of the thought to be generated by this mechanism and the content of an introspected thought, is responsible for the sense of being the agent of that thought (for more on this see Campbell 1999).

It is an implication of this model that if there were a breakdown of the comparator, so that copies of the motor instructions were not sent to the comparator, or it did not assess match correctly, then the subject would not be in a position to engage in those elementary inferences. You might think that this could not be right. After all, if Descartes simply found himself to have the thoughts, "I am tired" and "I am thirsty" then surely he is already in a position to draw the conclusion that he is both tired and

thirsty, even if there is some sub-personal breakdown at the comparator. But this does not seem to be correct. Breakdown at the comparator should produce something like the experience of thought insertion suffered by schizophrenic patients. That is, the subject will find himself with thoughts in his mind, but no sense of having been the author of those thoughts. Frith gave a memorable example of this kind of phenomenon; the patient who said: 'Thoughts come into my mind, thoughts like "Kill God." It's like my mind working, but it isn't. It's this chap, Chris. They're his thoughts'. (Frith 1992). If you find yourself with the thoughts, "I am tired" and "I am thirsty," and one or both of them seems to have to have been inserted into your mind, then you won't have the right to draw the conclusion that there is someone who is both tired and thirsty, even if you think both thoughts are true. For if one of those 'I'-thoughts was actually produced by someone else, and you only happen to have introspective knowledge of it, then you won't have the right to assume that it refers to the same person as does the other 'I'-thought. You might point out that thought insertion does not actually happen, so far as we know. It is only a puzzling delusion that people experience. But the point is that if you are in the grip of this delusion, then you don't have the right to make inferences that depend on it being the same person who was referred to both times.

Of course, in a case of this kind, it will in fact be one and the same person who has produced both of those 'I'-thoughts. So since the same person produced them both, they will both refer to the same person, since 'I' is throughout being governed by the token-reflexive rule. But the subject will not have the right to take it that they do refer to the same person. For what gave the subject that right was the fact of match at the comparator, leading to the sense of authorship of both thoughts.

# 5. Certainty Again

I have been setting out a view on which knowledge of one's own psychological states can be prior to knowledge of which thing one is, that is, knowledge of how one is embodied. And this prior knowledge of one's own psychological states does involve exercise of the first person proper; it does involve an understanding of the first person as a singular term. It is not merely the use of subjectless Lichtenbergean propositions such as 'there is thinking'. What makes the use of the first person here recognisable as the use of a singular term is that the subject has the capacity to go

beyond a level-1 understanding of her own uses of the term, to a level-2 understanding, by identifying in which particular thing she is embodied. There will, though, always be something provisional and open to revision about any such further identification of the self.

I have been suggesting that it is a mistake to think that self-consciousness involves knowing which thing is the self. Self-consciousness does require that you should be able to use and understand the first person; that requires that you should recognise when first-person thoughts are inferentially integrated. Further, self-consciousness requires that you should be capable of forming provisional hypotheses as to which thing you are. I suggested that the basis for this ability is the capacity to make explicit your implicit understanding of your causal relations to your surroundings. And here again, the comparator has a role to play, as providing you with your initial specification of the actions of which you are the perpetrator so that you can form your hypotheses as to which thing it is that perpetrated those actions.

If this approach is correct, then the certainty that you have in your own existence and identity is actually the certainty that a particular programme can be carried out: the programme of achieving a reflective understanding of your own engagement with the world. If this is right, then someone who has given up on engagement with the world ought to lose that certainty in her or his own existence and identity. Now Descartes's sceptic does not count as having given up on the possibility of engagement. The sceptic is after all only sceptical. The sceptic does not claim that the perceived world really is an illusion, or that the self does not exist. Sceptics only challenge the idea that we are engaging as we think.

I think it is instructive here to consider cases of Cotard's delusion. People who suffer from Cotard's delusion tend to make remarks like "I am dead" or "I do not exist." In a recent article, Philip Gerrans links this loss of certainty in one's existence to extreme depression. He says that the complete flattening of affect, that is a kind of limit of depression, has the effect of eliminating the subject from the world. "She has effectively effaced herself from the universe: nothing which occurs is of any significance to her and, hence she describes the world without implicating herself in that description." (Gerrans 1999, p. 604). What Gerrans describes here, I suggest, really is someone who has given up on engagement with the world. Consequently there can be no such project, for this

person, as achieving a reflective understanding of her own engagement with the world. And as a result of that, the patient reaches the loss of that certainty in her own existence that seemed so impossible to Descartes.

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July 2004	87:3	Simples	July 2003
Oct. 2004	87:4	Personal Identity	Oct. 2003
Jan. 2005	88:1	Humor	Jan. 2004
Apr. 2005	88:2	Conformism	Apr. 2004
July 2005	88:3	Time Travel	July 2004
Oct. 2005	88:4	Ordinary Objects	Oct. 2004
Jan. 2006	89:1	Truth	Jan. 2005
Apr. 2006	89:2	The Foundations of International Order	Apr. 2005
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ISSN: 0026-9662