

The Distribution Model and Its Explanatory Limit

Why Reassignment Alone Cannot Establish the Explanatory Connection

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Abstract

Why is this life actually mine rather than another? Ordinary reflection often suggests that something must fall to this life rather than another and that its being “here” makes the first-person difference. The *distribution model* isolates the explanatory commitment in that picture: an assigned item x bears a relation R to an eligible center c , and that relation is offered to explain the stronger actuality contrast $T(c)$. Nagai’s 2008 discussion supplies a genuine candidate-selection structure, including selection among possible candidates for actuality and the comparison with choosing one person from countless human beings. Selection becomes a distributional explanation, however, only when some relation between an assigned item and a center is given explanatory significance. Holding fixed background facts insufficient to settle T , reassignment shows where x bears R but cannot by itself establish that T must move with it. If the target shift is stipulated or inferred through the proposed explanation, the evidence already depends on the connection at issue. A reassignment case that specifies R and the relevant background without building the actuality contrast into R may still provide defeasible support; what reassignment cannot do is establish the connection by means of a target shift whose interpretation already depends on it. A primitive explanatory connection remains possible, while Hare and List show respectively that relocatable first-person privilege is metaphysically coherent and that first-person realism need not take a distributional form.

Keywords: first-person actuality; candidate-selection; assignment; reassignment; explanation; Hitoshi Nagai; egocentric presentism; centered worlds.

§1 The Contrast to Be Explained

Why am I this person rather than someone else? The question has several nearby versions. Perry’s shopper lacks a piece of *de se* knowledge until he realizes that he himself is making the mess; Lewis uses centered possibilities to represent a subject’s location within a world (Perry 1979; Lewis 1979). Phenomenological accounts of mineness ask how an experience is given as mine before reflective self-ascription (Zahavi 2005). Neither problem should be identified without argument with the stronger actuality contrast at issue here.

Hitoshi Nagai presents that contrast through a scene in a library. The person writing can suppose that the unfamiliar reader beside him is *I!*—actually me in Nagai’s technical sense—while Hitoshi Nagai retains the same body, parents, memories, character, activity, and ordinary self-consciousness. He can also suppose that Hitoshi Nagai remains exactly as he is while *I!* does not exist. The question is what makes it the case that *I!* exists as this person rather than as the reader, or not at all (Nagai 2007, 45).

The supposition leaves biographies, psychological streams, and ordinary first-person capacities intact. Each person can still think “I,” experience the world from a perspective, and treat one history as his own. What varies is the stronger actuality contrast: which life is not merely lived from its own standpoint but is lived as *this one*. That contrast is the target; an account of *de se* thought or generic experiential mineness need not explain it.

Nagai’s next installment gives this contrast a genuine selection structure. In the fission discussion he speaks of more than one possible candidate for actuality and of Leibnizian will choosing among

them; he also compares God's choice of one among countless possible worlds with choosing one among countless human beings and making that person me (Nagai 2008, 19, 21). Candidate-selection is therefore not merely an external reconstruction. It still does not by itself amount to the distribution model defined below. The further move from a selection structure to an explanation by reassignment is the reconstruction examined here; it is not attributed to Nagai, Hare, or List.

Let $T(c)$ abbreviate the claim that this stronger target obtains at an eligible center c . A center is only a placeholder for the locus selected by the theory under discussion: it may be a person, organism, experiential history, or centered world. Here $T(c)$ records the stronger actuality contrast as the theory describes it; the notation does not decide whether reality contains one such domain or many equally real first-personally centered worlds. For two eligible centers c_1 and c_2 , the contrastive question is why $T(c_1)$ obtains rather than $T(c_2)$.

The notation merely states the contrast without repeating the library story; it does not turn Nagai's $I!$ into a property or object. Nagai's story also posits no item that travels between persons. Distributional explanation begins only when an assigned item x is introduced and the difference is said to consist in x 's being related to c_1 rather than to c_2 .

No single school advocates the *distribution model* in this generic form. Nagai's selection language supplies a real candidate-selection structure, but it does not commit him to every ontology that could instantiate the model, or to the claim that reassignment establishes its explanatory authority. The model isolates a narrower commitment that also appears in ordinary attempts to answer the question: the fact that $R(x, c)$ obtains is offered to explain why $T(c)$ obtains. Talk of souls, presence, or centered worlds does not by itself incur that commitment.

The assigned item x belongs to this formulation, not to the original intuition. It may stand for an entity, trope, marker, content, or fact-like posit; R may be possession, realization, embodiment, location, or a sui generis tie. "Distribution" does not imply a distributor acting in time. It names the explanatory move by which a difference in where something is borne, instantiated, or located is asked to account for the first-person contrast.

Positing souls is not enough to enter the model. A soul theory does so only when a soul's association with a life is asked to explain why that life is actually mine. Likewise, a theory of experiential mineness enters only if a token of first-personal form is assigned to one center to explain the stronger asymmetry. The question is conditional: once assignment is given this explanatory role, what exactly does it explain?

§2 Assignment and Reassignment

Reassignment makes the attraction of the model vivid. Hold fixed the background facts that the theory itself regards, even taken together, as insufficient to settle the stronger actuality contrast. This does not require a theory-neutral inventory of third-person facts. If the proponent thinks that bodily and psychological facts leave the contrast open, those facts remain fixed.

Now compare two descriptions. In the first, x bears R to c_1 and not to c_2 . In the second, x bears R to c_2 and not to c_1 . The library story makes the comparison especially vivid: the entire public history stays the same while $I!$ seems to move from writer to reader.

It is tempting to say that $T(c_1)$ obtains in the first description and $T(c_2)$ in the second. But the reassignment descriptions do not yield that result by their logical form alone. The fixed background was stipulated to be insufficient for T , and changing only where x bears R specifies the assignment rather than the actuality pattern. A theory may of course connect R to T by essence, law, primitive grounding, or some other constraint. That connection is further theory, not something contained in the reassignment description itself. Absent such a constraint, either assignment remains compatible with the target obtaining at the assigned center or failing to obtain there; whether the target is unique, plural, or absent must be settled elsewhere. This is a claim of underdetermination, not a verdict about actuality.

To obtain the intended result, a theory needs a further explanatory connection: whenever x bears R to an eligible center c , that fact explains why $T(c)$ obtains. This says more than that R and T never come apart; it assigns explanatory significance to the R -fact.

Only with such a connection can the theory say that moving x from c_1 to c_2 moves the target with it. Assignment describes a relation; this connection gives the relation significance for the target. Nothing in this reasoning requires both descriptions to be metaphysically possible. If the theory rules one out, the comparison cannot provide modal evidence that the target tracks the assignment; the question why the actual assignment explains the target remains. No general principle of free recombination is presupposed.

Reassignment has a legitimate but limited use. Once this connection is accepted, reassignment can show how the theory treats counterfactual changes in R , reveal its modal commitments, and test their coherence. What it cannot do is establish the connection merely by presenting a target shift whose interpretation already depends on it. If the target shift is built into a reassignment story and then cited to show why assignment explains the target, the connection at issue has already been assumed.

Suppose someone understands x and R , accepts the two assignment descriptions, but denies that the R -fact explains the T -fact. Telling her that T moves when x is reassigned cannot resolve the disagreement. If the target shift is stipulated, the connection at issue has been built into the case. If it is inferred, that connection licenses the inference. If the shift is presented as intuitive, its evidential force depends on what generates the intuition. When R has already been described in terms that carry the actuality contrast with it, the intuition is not independent evidence for the proposed explanation. A reassignment case that specifies R and the relevant background without building the actuality contrast into R may still provide defeasible evidence. Reassignment may reveal, test, and compare what the proposal implies; without a further reason, it cannot establish that R explains T . The central point is evidential rather than the familiar observation that entailment is not explanation: a target shift cannot function both as a consequence licensed by the proposed explanation and as an independent reason to accept that explanation.

Covariation can still matter: stable counterfactual dependence may be evidence, and an explanatory theory may have systematic modal consequences. What leaves the first-person target unsettled is the bare distribution of x under R . Its explanatory force, if any, comes from the significance the theory assigns to that distribution.

§3 When Could Assignment Explain?

Suppose first that x and R have a specification independent of the stronger first-person target. A soul may control a body, preserve memories, and underwrite personal persistence. A self-model may organize information and guide action. These are intelligible roles, and they may explain a great deal. Their intelligibility does not yet show why the life in which they are realized is actually mine in Nagai's sense. Control bears directly on action; memory continuity bears directly on persistence. The relevance of either to the stronger actuality contrast requires a further claim.

Numerical individuality creates the same opening. Two qualitatively indiscernible assigned items could be primitively distinct and associated with two matching lives. Their distinctness explains why the items are not one and the same. It does not, without more, explain why association with the first rather than the second makes a life this one. The first-person burden cannot be discharged merely by replacing one unanswered asymmetry with a numerically distinct bearer.

The opposite strategy places the target inside the relation. One might define R as the relation in virtue of which a center is actually mine. The objection to bare assignment then no longer applies: $R(x, c)$ concerns the target by definition. Yet the original question has not thereby received an articulated answer. Asked why $T(c_1)$ obtains, the proposal says that x bears to c_1 the relation that makes $T(c_1)$ obtain. Unless the relation has further structure, the explanatory content remains exhausted by the

target.

The objection does not apply to every concept introduced through its effects. A posit may begin with a functional characterization and later acquire independent constraints, connections, and consequences. The difficulty arises when “whatever makes T obtain” remains its whole theoretical role. Adding x and R then says no more than that there is some unspecified basis for $T(c_1)$.

Experiential mineness helps mark the scope of this claim. If mineness is a structural feature of every conscious episode, it may explain why each subject’s experience is non-anonymous and first-personally given. By itself, however, this common structure does not single out any life as the bearer of the stronger actuality contrast. If instead a special token of mineness is said to be what makes one life actually mine, then either that token is characterized through the target or its relevance to the stronger contrast remains to be explained. This does not demote ordinary mineness; the same name cannot silently be made to answer a different explanatory question.

These examples do not exhaust the possible ontologies. Their point is simply to identify where the explanation must come from. If R is specified without the target, the theory must say why its structure bears on T ; if R is fixed only through the target, no explanation distinct from the target fact has yet been articulated. A theory that has such an explanation should state it rather than treating bare assignment as though it already did so.

§4 Can the Explanatory Connection Be Primitive?

A defender of the distribution model can give a direct answer: the explanatory connection is primitive. There is no deeper reason why this $R(x, c)$ fact explains why $T(c)$ obtains; that connection is simply part of the fundamental structure of reality. This does not begin a regress.

One precise way to understand such a primitive connection is as metaphysical grounding. A primitive ground may explain another fact without itself being grounded, and work on grounding commonly separates whether one fact explains another from whether that explanatory connection has a further ground (Rosen 2010; Fine 2012). Grounding is therefore one available analysis of the connection, not a commitment built into the distribution model itself.

Compare two proposals. On the first, $T(c_1)$ is a primitive fact. On the second, $R(x, c_1)$ is fundamental and is primitively explanatory of $T(c_1)$. The second proposal is not automatically equivalent to the first. A distributional theory may combine this primitive explanatory connection with further structural constraints governing R : whether one assigned item can be related to more than one center, how duplication, loss, and reassignment are treated, and how the assignment relation connects with independently motivated conditions of persistence or embodiment. Together, the connection and these constraints can give the view a modal profile and a unifying role not contained in the single fact $T(c_1)$. In that case the distributional theory has become a substantive explanatory proposal. Bare-assignment underdetermination does not refute it.

What is ruled out is a cheaper route. The distribution of x cannot first be presented without the explanatory connection, then treated as if it already made the target follow, and finally credited with explaining the target. Nor can reassignment provide the only support for the connection when the target shifts in those cases were generated by applying it. The theory must state its primitive explanatory commitment openly.

Even the singular claim that this very $R(x, c_1)$ fact primitively explains this very $T(c_1)$ fact is coherent. Its explanatory force comes from the primitive connection, not from the bare fact that an assigned item occupies a location. If the singular claim has no consequences beyond the actual target fact, it may still add something to the ontology; reassignment, however, gives no reason to regard it as explanatorily superior to taking the target fact itself as primitive. Extra ontology and explanatory gain are separate questions.

The negative conclusion reaches only this far. Assignment acquires explanatory force through a claim that gives the relation significance for the target. Once that claim is explicit, the theory stands or falls with it, not with the image of placing an item. Primitive explanation remains possible.

§5 Relocation and Alternative First-Person Structures

Caspar Hare’s egocentric presentism supplies a genuine case of relocatable first-person privilege. He asks us to imagine that “the one with present experiences” is Michael Schumacher (Hare 2007, 366). Hare then defines a subject world, or S-world, as one in which the experiences of exactly one functionally sentient creature have the monadic property of being present, and a system of S-worlds as a set of physically identical such worlds differing in where that property is instantiated (366–367). Structurally, this is close to reassignment: the physical facts remain fixed while the locus of monadic presence varies.

At the level of structure, Hare’s view fits the minimal schema $R(x, c)$: monadic presence plays the role of x , and its instantiation by a center’s experiences supplies the relation. Hare does not, however, offer this structure as an explanation of Nagai’s stronger target. His egocentric presentism is introduced to underwrite claims about egocentric value and to provide a semantics for points of view. It shows that a metaphysics can contain a precisely relocatable first-person privilege, not that this privilege explains Nagai’s contrast. If presence is recruited for that purpose, the theory must still say why it matters to the target. The S-world contrasts show what such an explanatory connection would imply; they do not support it independently.

Christian List’s many-worlds theory of consciousness provides a different first-person structure. His first-personally centered worlds are represented as ordered pairs $\langle \omega, \pi \rangle$, where ω is a third-personal world and π encodes a subject’s first-person perspective. These centered worlds may share all third-person facts while differing in first-person facts, and List treats them as equally real; for each subject, one such centered world is present for that subject (List 2023, 325–327; List 2025, sec. IV.4). This is not a third-personal world plus a separately assigned private item. The presence relation is part of List’s first-personal structure, but containing such a relation does not by itself make the view distributional. List offers no independent assigned item x whose bearing R to one centered world is meant to explain $T(c)$. His theory may or may not resolve Nagai’s stronger contrast, but it shows that first-person realism need not take a distributional form.

The distribution model reappears only if one further asks why I am assigned to this centered world rather than another and offers this world’s presence for me as the explanation of that difference. Reassignment then bears on that explanatory claim, not on List’s ontology as such. Hare shows that relocatable privilege is a genuine metaphysical structure; List shows that first-person realism need not use distributional explanation. Neither explains, merely by relocating or locating a first-person center, why location matters to the stronger actuality contrast.

§6 Conclusion

Nagai’s 2008 text supplies a genuine candidate-selection structure. The further move from such a structure to an explanation by reassignment is the reconstruction examined here; it is not attributed to Nagai, Hare, or List. The question is whether the relation of some assigned item to one center rather than another explains why the stronger actuality contrast obtains there.

Merely saying that x bears R to one center rather than another does not settle where T obtains. The theory must either build the target into the assigned item or relation, or add a claim that the R -fact explains the T -fact. In the first case, assignment has not yet articulated an explanation distinct from the target. In the second, reassignment can display, compare, and test what that claim implies, but it cannot establish it by presenting target shifts whose interpretation already depends on it. That evidential asymmetry, rather than a general objection to assignment or primitive explanation, is the

explanatory limit of reassignment.

A primitive explanatory connection remains possible. Together with independently stated constraints on the assignment structure, it may give the distribution a modal profile and explanatory role absent from the target fact alone. Hare shows that a relocatable first-person privilege can be metaphysically coherent without thereby explaining Nagai’s contrast; List shows that first-person realism need not use distributional explanation at all.

The conclusion is therefore not that the first-person contrast is inexplicable, or that every distributional ontology fails. “Why this one?” is not answered by “because x is here” until a theory says what “here” amounts to, why it bears explanatory weight for T , and what reason there is to accept that connection.

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