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from the WINTER 2010 EDITION of the

STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY



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Library of Congress Catalog Data

ISSN: 1095-5054

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Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

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The Metaphysics Research Lab

Center for the Study of Language and Information

Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305

Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness

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Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness

First published Sat Feb 19, 2005; substantive revision Tue Oct 5, 2010

On the phenomenological view, a minimal form of self-consciousness is a constant structural feature of conscious experience. Experience happens for the experiencing subject in an immediate way and as part of this immediacy, it is implicitly marked as *my* experience. For the phenomenologists, this immediate and first-personal givenness of experiential phenomena must be accounted for in terms of a pre-reflective self-consciousness. In the most basic sense of the term, self-consciousness is not something that comes about the moment one attentively inspects or reflectively introspects one's experiences, or in the instant of self-recognition of one's image in the mirror, or in the proper use of the first-person pronoun, or in the construction of a self-narrative. Rather, these different kinds of self-consciousness are to be distinguished from the pre-reflective self-consciousness which is present whenever I am living through or undergoing an experience, i.e., whenever I am consciously perceiving the world, whenever I am thinking an occurrent thought, whenever I am feeling sad or happy, thirsty or in pain, and so forth.

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1. Pre-reflective self-consciousness

One can get a bearing on the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness by contrasting it with reflective self-consciousness. If you ask me to give you a description of the pain I feel in my right foot, or of what I was just thinking about, I would reflect on it and thereby take up a certain perspective that was one order removed from the pain or the thought. Thus, reflective self-consciousness is at least a higher-order cognition. It may be the basis for a report on one's experience, although not all reports involve a significant amount of reflection.

In contrast, pre-reflective self-consciousness is pre-reflective in the sense that (1) it is an awareness we have before we do any reflecting on our experience; (2) it is an implicit and first-order awareness rather than an explicit or higher-order form of self-consciousness. Indeed, an explicit reflective self-consciousness is possible only because there is a pre-reflective self-awareness that is an on-going and more primary self-consciousness. Although phenomenologists do not always agree on important questions about method, focus, or even whether there is an ego or self, they are in close to unanimous agreement about the idea that the experiential dimension always involves such an implicit pre-reflective self-awareness.^[1] In line with Edmund Husserl (1959, 189, 412), who maintains that consciousness always involves a self-appearance (*Für-sich-selbst-erscheinen*), and in agreement with Michel Henry (1963, 1965), who notes that experience is always self-manifesting, and with Maurice Merleau-Ponty who states that consciousness is always given to itself and that the word 'consciousness' has no meaning independently of this self-givenness (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 488), Jean-Paul Sartre writes that pre-

reflective self-consciousness is not simply a quality added to the experience, an accessory; rather, it constitutes the very mode of being of the experience:

This self-consciousness we ought to consider not as a new consciousness, but as *the only mode of existence which is possible for a consciousness of something* (Sartre 1943, 20 [1956, liv]).

The notion of pre-reflective self-awareness is related to the idea that experiences have a subjective ‘feel’ to them, a certain (phenomenal) quality of ‘what it is like’ or what it ‘feels’ like to have them. As it is usually expressed outside of phenomenological texts, to undergo a conscious experience necessarily means that there is something it is like for the subject to have that experience (Nagel 1974; Searle 1992). This is obviously true of bodily sensations like pain. But it is also the case for perceptual experiences, experiences of desiring, feeling, and thinking. There is something it is like to taste chocolate, and this is different from what it is like to remember what it is like to taste chocolate, or to smell vanilla, to run, to stand still, to feel envious, nervous, depressed or happy, or to entertain an abstract belief. Yet, at the same time, as I live through these differences, there is something experiential that is, in some sense, the same, namely, their distinct first-personal character. All the experiences are characterized by a quality of *mineness* or *for-me-ness*, the fact that it is *I* who am having these experiences. All the experiences are given (at least tacitly) as *my* experiences, as experiences *I* am undergoing or living through. All of this suggests that first-person experience presents me with an immediate and non-observational access to myself, and that consequently (phenomenal) consciousness consequently entails a (minimal) form of self-consciousness. To put it differently, unless a mental process is pre-reflectively self-conscious there will be nothing it is like to undergo the process, and it therefore cannot be a phenomenally conscious process.

The mineness in question is not a quality like being scarlet, sour or soft. It doesn't refer to a specific experiential content, to a specific what; nor does it refer to the diachronic or synchronic sum of such content, or to some other relation that might obtain between the contents in question. Rather, it refers to the distinct givenness or the how it feels of experience. It refers to the first-personal presence or character of experience. It refers to the fact that the experiences I am living through are given differently (but not necessarily better) to me than to anybody else. It could consequently be claimed that anybody who denies the for-me-ness of experience simply fails to recognize an essential constitutive aspect of experience. Such a denial would be tantamount to a denial of the first-person perspective. It would entail the view that my own mind is either not given to me at all — I would be mind- or self-blind — or is presented to me in exactly the same way as the minds of others.

There are also lines of argumentation in contemporary analytical philosophy of mind that are close to and consistent with the phenomenological conception of pre-reflective self-awareness. Alvin Goldman provides an example:

[Consider] the case of thinking about x or attending to x . In the process of thinking about x there is already an implicit awareness that one is thinking about x . There is no need for reflection here, for taking a step back from thinking about x in order to examine it...When we are thinking about x , the mind is focused on x , not on our thinking of x . Nevertheless, the process of thinking about x carries with it a non-reflective self-awareness (Goldman 1970, 96).

A similar view has been defended by Owen Flanagan, who not only argues that consciousness involves self-consciousness in the weak sense that there is something it is like for the subject to have the experience, but

also speaks of the low-level self-consciousness involved in experiencing my experiences as mine (Flanagan 1992, 194). As Flanagan quite correctly points out, this primary type of self-consciousness should not be confused with the much stronger notion of self-consciousness that is in play when we are thinking about our own narrative self. The latter form of reflective self-consciousness presupposes both conceptual knowledge and narrative competence. It requires maturation and socialization, and the ability to access and issue reports about the states, traits, dispositions that make one the person one is. To claim that every kind of self-consciousness is conceptual is overly cognitive. Bermúdez (1998), to mention one further philosopher in the analytic tradition, argues that there are a variety of nonconceptual forms of self-consciousness that are “logically and ontogenetically more primitive than the higher forms of self-consciousness that are usually the focus of philosophical debate” (1998, 274; also see Poellner 2003). This growing consensus across philosophical studies supports the phenomenological view of pre-reflective self-consciousness.

That pre-reflective self-awareness is implicit, then, means that I am not confronted with a thematic or explicit awareness of the experience as belonging to myself. Rather we are dealing with a non-observational self-acquaintance. Here is how Heidegger and Sartre put the point:

Dasein [human existence] as existing, is there for itself, even when the ego does not expressly direct itself to itself in the manner of its own peculiar turning around and turning back, which in phenomenology is called inner perception as contrasted with outer. The self is there for the Dasein itself without reflection and without inner perception, *before* all reflection. Reflection, in the sense of a turning back, is only a mode of self-*apprehension*, but not the mode of primary self-disclosure (Heidegger 1989, 226 [1982, 159]).

In other words, every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of itself. If I count the cigarettes which are in that case, I have the impression of disclosing an objective property of this collection of cigarettes: *they are a dozen*. This property appears to my consciousness as a property existing in the world. It is very possible that I have no positional consciousness of counting them. Then I do not know myself as counting. Yet at the moment when these cigarettes are revealed to me as a dozen, I have a non-thetic consciousness of my adding activity. If anyone questioned me, indeed, if anyone should ask, “What are you doing there?” I should reply at once, “I am counting.” (Sartre 1943, 19–20 [1956, liii]).

It is clarifying to compare the phenomenological notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness with the one defended by Brentano. According to Brentano as I listen to a melody I am aware that I am listening to the melody. He acknowledges that I do not have two different mental states: my consciousness of the melody is one and the same as my awareness of perceiving it; they constitute one single psychical phenomenon. On this point, and in opposition to higher-order representation theories, Brentano and the phenomenologists are in general agreement. But for Brentano, by means of this unified mental state, I have an awareness of two objects: the melody and my perceptual experience.

In the same mental phenomenon in which the sound is present to our minds we simultaneously apprehend the mental phenomenon itself. What is more, we apprehend it in accordance with its dual nature insofar as it has the sound as content within it, and insofar as it has itself as content at the same time. We can say that the sound is the *primary object* of the *act* of hearing, and that the act of hearing itself is the *secondary object* (Brentano 1874, 179–180 [1973, 127–128]).

Husserl disagrees on just this point, as do Sartre and Heidegger: my awareness of my experience is not an awareness of it as an object.^[2] My awareness is non-objectifying in the sense that I do not occupy the position or perspective of a spectator or in(tro)spectator who attends to this experience in a thematic way. That a psychological state is experienced, “and is in this sense conscious, does not and cannot mean that this is the object of an act of consciousness, in the sense that a perception, a presentation or a judgment is directed upon it” (Husserl 1984a, 165 [2001, I, 273]). In pre-reflective self-awareness, experience is given, not as an object, but precisely as subjective experience. For phenomenologists, intentional experience is lived through (*erlebt*), but does not appear in an objectified manner. Experience is conscious of itself without being the intentional object of consciousness (Husserl 1984b, 399; Sartre 1936, 28–29). That we are aware of our lived experiences even if we do not direct our attention towards them is not to deny that we can direct our attention towards our experiences, and thereby take them as objects of reflection (Husserl 1984b, 424).

To have a self-experience does not entail the apprehension of a special self-object; it does not entail the existence of a special experience of a self alongside other experiences but different from them. To be aware of *oneself* is not to capture a pure self that exists separately from the stream of experience, rather it is to be conscious of one's experience in its implicit first-person mode of givenness. When Hume, in a famous passage in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, declares that he cannot find a self when he searches his experiences, but finds only particular perceptions or feelings (Hume 1739), it could be argued that he overlooks something in his analysis, namely the specific givenness of his own experiences. Indeed, he was looking only among his *own* experiences, and seemingly recognized them as his own, and could do so only on the basis of that immediate self-awareness that he seemed to miss. As C.O. Evans puts it:

“[F]rom the fact that the self is not an object of experience it does not follow that it is non-experiential” (Evans 1970, 145). Accordingly, we should not think of the self, in this most basic sense, as a substance, or as some kind of ineffable transcendental precondition, or as a social construct that gets generated through time; rather it is an integral part of conscious life, with an immediate experiential character.

One advantage of the phenomenological view is that it is capable of accounting for psychological self-identity, that is, the experience of self-identity through time, without actually having to posit the self as a separate entity over and above the stream of consciousness (see the discussion of time-consciousness in section 3 below). Although we live through a number of different experiences, the experiencing itself remains a constant in regard to whose experience it is. This is not accounted for by a substantial self or a mental theater. There is no pure or empty field of consciousness upon which the concrete experiences subsequently make their entry. The field of experiencing is nothing apart from the specific experiences. Yet we are naturally inclined to distinguish the strict singularity of an experience from the continuous stream of changing experiences. What remains constant and consistent across these changes is the sense of ownership constituted by pre-reflective self-awareness. Only a being with this sense of ownership or *mineness* could go on to form concepts about herself, consider her own aims, ideals, and aspirations as her own, construct stories about herself, and plan and execute actions for which she will take responsibility.

The concept of pre-reflective self-awareness is related to a variety of philosophical issues, including epistemic asymmetry, immunity to error through misidentification, self-reference, and personal identity. We will examine these issues each in turn.

It seems clear that the objects of my visual perception are

intersubjectively accessible in the sense that they can in principle be the objects of another's perception. A subject's perceptual experience itself, however, is given in a unique way to the subject herself. Although two people, *A* and *B*, can perceive a numerically identical object, they each have their own distinct perceptual experience of it; just as they cannot share each other's pain, they cannot literally share these perceptual experiences. Their experiences are epistemically asymmetrical in this regard. *B* might realize that *A* is in pain; he might sympathize with *A*, he might even have the same kind of pain (same qualitative aspects, same intensity, same proprioceptive location), but he cannot literally feel *A*'s pain the same way *A* does. The subject's epistemic access to her own experience, whether it is a pain or a perceptual experience, is primarily a matter of pre-reflective self-awareness. If secondarily, in an act of introspective reflection I begin to examine my perceptual experience, I will recognize it as *my* perceptual experience only because I have been pre-reflectively aware of it, as I have been living through it. Thus, phenomenology maintains, the access that reflective self-consciousness has to first-order phenomenal experience is routed through pre-reflective consciousness, for if we were not pre-reflectively aware of our experience, our reflection on it would never be motivated. When I do reflect, I reflect on something with which I am already experientially familiar.

When I experience an occurrent pain, perception, or thought, the experience in question is given immediately and noninferentially. I do not have to judge or appeal to some criteria in order to identify it as *my* experience. There are no free-floating experiences; even the experience of freely-floating belongs to someone. As William James (1890) put it, all experience is "personal." Even in pathological cases, as in depersonalization or schizophrenic symptoms of delusions of control or thought insertion, a feeling or experience that the subject claims not to be his is nonetheless experienced by him as being part of his stream of

consciousness. The complaint of thought insertion, for example, necessarily acknowledges that the inserted thoughts are thoughts that belong to the subject's experience, even as the agency for such thoughts are attributed to others. This first-person character entails an implicit experiential self-reference. If I feel hungry or see my friend, I cannot be mistaken about who the subject of that experience is, even if I can be mistaken about it being hunger (perhaps it's really thirst), or about it being my friend (perhaps it's his twin), or even about whether I am actually seeing him (I may be hallucinating). As Wittgenstein (1958), Shoemaker (1968), and others have pointed out, it is nonsensical to ask whether I am sure that *I* am the one who feels hungry. This is the phenomenon known as “immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun.” To this idea of immunity to error through misidentification, the phenomenologist adds that whether a certain experience is experienced as mine, or not, does not depend upon something apart from the experience, but depends precisely upon the pre-reflective givenness that belongs to the structure of the experience (Husserl 1959, 175; Husserl 1973a, 28, 56, 307, 443; see Zahavi 1999, pp. 6ff.).

Some philosophers who are inclined to take self-consciousness to be intrinsically linked to the issue of self-reference would argue that the latter depends on a first-person *concept*. One attains self-consciousness only when one can *conceive* of oneself *as* oneself, and has the linguistic ability to use the first-person pronoun to refer to oneself (Baker 2000, 68; cf. Lowe 2000, 264). On this view, self-consciousness is something that emerges in the course of a developmental process, and depends on the acquisition of concepts and language. Accordingly, some philosophers deny that young children are capable of self-consciousness (Carruthers 1996; Dennett 1976; Wilkes 1988; also see Flavell 1993). Evidence from developmental psychology and ecological psychology, however, suggests that there is a primitive, proprioceptive form of self-consciousness already

in place from birth.^[3] This primitive self-awareness precedes the mastery of language and the ability to form conceptually informed judgments, and it may serve as a basis for more advanced types of self-consciousness (see, e.g., Butterworth 1995, 1999; Gibson 1986; Meltzoff 1990a, 1990b; Neisser 1988; and Stern 1985). The phenomenological view is consistent with these findings.

2. One-level accounts of self-consciousness

It is customary to distinguish between two uses of the term ‘conscious’, a transitive and an intransitive use. On the one hand, we can speak of our being conscious of something, be it *x*, *y*, or *z*. On the other we can speak of our being conscious simpliciter (rather than non-conscious). For the past two or three decades, a dominant way to account for intransitive consciousness in cognitive science and analytical philosophy of mind has been by means of some kind of higher-order theory. The distinction between conscious and non-conscious mental states has been taken to rest upon the presence or absence of a relevant meta-mental state (cf. Armstrong 1968; Lycan 1987,1996; Carruthers 1996, 2000; Rosenthal 1997). Thus, intransitive consciousness has been taken to be a question of the mind directing its intentional aim at its own states and operations. As Carruthers puts it, the subjective feel of experience presupposes a capacity for higher-order awareness, and as he then continues, “such self-awareness is a conceptually necessary condition for an organism to be a subject of phenomenal feelings, or for there to be anything that its experiences are like” (Carruthers 1996, 152). But for Carruthers, the self-awareness in question is a type of reflection. In his view, a creature must be capable of reflecting upon, thinking about, and hence conceptualizing its own mental states if those mental states are to be states of which the creature is aware (Carruthers 1996, 155, 157).

One might share the view that there is a close link between consciousness

and self-consciousness and still disagree about the nature of the link. And although the phenomenological view might superficially resemble the view of the higher-order theories, we are ultimately confronted with two radically divergent accounts. The phenomenologists explicitly deny that the self-consciousness that is present the moment I consciously experience something is to be understood in terms of some kind of higher-order monitoring. It does not involve an additional mental state, but is rather to be understood as an intrinsic feature of the primary experience. That is, in contrast to higher-order accounts of consciousness that claim that consciousness is an extrinsic or relational property of those mental states that have it, a property bestowed upon them from without by some further state, the phenomenologists would typically argue that the feature in virtue of which a mental state is conscious is an intrinsic property of those mental states that have it. Moreover, the phenomenologists also reject the attempt to construe intransitive consciousness in terms of transitive consciousness, that is, they reject the view that a conscious state is a state we are conscious of *as object*. To put it differently, not only do they reject the view that a mental state becomes conscious by being taken as an object by a higher-order state, they also reject the view (generally associated with Brentano) according to which a mental state becomes conscious by taking itself as an object (cf. Zahavi 2004, 2006). As Thomasson has recently pointed out, the question is whether Brentano really succeeds in staying clear of the pitfalls of the higher-order view. Is it really consistent to defend a one-level account while at the same time claiming that each conscious state involves not only a primary awareness of its object but also a secondary awareness of itself, or might the latter claim not turn Brentano's supposedly one-level theory into a higher-order theory in disguise (Thomasson, 2000, 190–192, 199. Cf. Kriegel 2003 for a defence of Brentano)?

What arguments support the phenomenological claims, however? The traditional phenomenological approach is to appeal to a correct

phenomenological description and maintain that this is the best argument to be found. But if one were to look for an additional, more theoretical, argument, what would one find? One line of reasoning found in virtually all of the phenomenologists is the view that the attempt to let (intransitive) consciousness be a result of a higher-order monitoring will generate an infinite regress. On the face of it, this is a rather old idea. Typically, the regress argument has been understood in the following manner. If all occurrent mental states are conscious in the sense of being taken as objects by occurrent second-order mental states, then these second-order mental states must themselves be taken as objects by occurrent third-order mental states, and so forth *ad infinitum*. The standard response to this phenomenological objection is that the regress can easily be avoided by accepting the existence of non-conscious mental states. This is precisely the position adopted by the defenders of higher-order theory. For them a second-order perception or thought does not have to be conscious. It would be conscious only if accompanied by a (non-conscious) third-order thought or perception (cf. Rosenthal 1997, 745). The phenomenological reply to this solution is rather straightforward, however. The phenomenologists would concede that it is possible to halt the regress by postulating the existence of non-conscious mental states, but they would maintain that such an appeal to the non-conscious leaves us with a case of explanatory vacuity. That is, they would find it quite unclear why the relation between two otherwise non-conscious processes should make one of them conscious. Or to put it differently, they would be quite unconvinced by the claim that a state without subjective or phenomenal qualities can be transformed into one with such qualities, i.e., into an experience with first-personal character or mineness, by the mere relational addition of a non-conscious meta-state having the first-state as its intentional object.

The phenomenological alternative is to insist on the existence of pre-reflective self-consciousness. As Sartre writes: “[T]here is no infinite

regress here, since a consciousness has no need at all of a reflecting [higher-order]consciousness in order to be conscious of itself. It simply does not posit itself as an object” (Sartre 1936, 29 [1957, 45]). That is, pre-reflective self-consciousness is not transitive in relation to the state (of) which it is aware. It is, as Sartre puts it, the mode of existence of consciousness itself. This does not mean that a higher-order representation is impossible, but merely that it always presupposes the existence of a prior non-objectifying, pre-reflective self-consciousness as its condition of possibility. To quote Sartre again, “it is the non-reflective consciousness which renders the reflection [and any higher-order representation of it] possible” (1943, 20 [1956, liii]).

3. Temporality and the limits of reflective self-consciousness

Although, as pre-reflectively self-aware of my experience I am not unconscious of it, I do not attend to it; rather I tend to overlook it in favor of the object that I am perceiving, the thing I am remembering, etc. In my everyday life, I am absorbed by and preoccupied with projects and objects in the world, and as such I do not attend to my experiential life. Therefore, this pervasive pre-reflective self-consciousness is not to be understood as complete self-comprehension. One can accept the notion of a pervasive self-consciousness and still accept the existence of the unconscious in the sense of subjective components which remain ambiguous, obscure, and resistant to comprehension. Thus, one should distinguish between the claim that consciousness is characterized by an immediate first-person character and the claim that consciousness is characterized by total self-transparency. One can easily accept the first and reject the latter (Ricoeur 1950, 354–355).

In contrast to pre-reflective self-consciousness, which delivers an implicit sense of self at an experiential or phenomenal level, reflective self-

consciousness is an explicit, conceptual, and objectifying awareness that takes a lower-order consciousness as its attentional theme. I am able at any time to attend directly to the cognitive experience itself, turning my experience itself into the object of my consideration.

Phenomenologists do not claim the infallible authority of reflection over subjective experience. There are no epistemic guarantees connected with self-consciousness other than immunity to error through misidentification. If I cannot be wrong about who is living through my experiences, I can be wrong about all kinds of other things about my experiences. A brief consideration of the phenomenology of temporality will help to explain this, namely, why reflective self-consciousness is characterized by certain limitations. It will also help to clarify how pre-reflective self-consciousness, as a mode of existence, is possible in the first place, as well as elucidate the phenomenological account of psychological self-identity through time, an account that does not posit something called the “self” as a separate entity over and above the stream of consciousness.

According to Husserl's analysis, experience of any sort (perception, memory, imagination, etc.) has a common temporal structure such that any moment of experience contains a retentive reference to past moments of experience, a current openness (primal impression) to what is present, and a protentive anticipation of the moments of experience that are just about to happen (see Gallagher 1998). The retentive structure of experience, that is, the fact that when I am experiencing something, each passing moment of consciousness does not simply disappear at the next moment but is kept in intentional currency, constitutes a coherency that stretches over an experienced temporal duration. Husserl's favorite example is a melody. When I experience a melody, I don't simply experience a knife-edge presentation (primal impression) of one note, which is then completely washed away and replaced with the next discrete knife-edge presentation of the next note. Rather, consciousness

retains the sense of the first note as just past, as I hear the second note, a hearing that is also enriched by an anticipation (protention) of the next note (or at least, in case I do not know the melody, of the fact that there will be a next note, or some next auditory event). Husserl claims that we actually do perceive melodies—in opposition to an earlier view of Brentano, viz., that we construct or reconstruct such unities out of a synthesis of mental acts (e.g., perception of the current note plus memory of the past notes). This is possible only because consciousness is so structured to allow for this temporal presentation.

Importantly, the temporal (retentional-impressional-protentional) structure of consciousness not only allows for the experience of temporally extended objects or intentional contents, but also entails the self-manifestation of consciousness, that is, its pre-reflective self-awareness. The retention of past notes of the melody is accomplished, not by a “real” or literal re-presentation of the notes (as if I were hearing them a second time and simultaneously with the current note), but by an intentional retaining of my just past *experience* of the melody as just past. This means that there is a primary and simultaneous self-awareness (an awareness of my on-going experience in the ongoing flow of experience) that is implicit in my experience of the object. At the same time that I am aware of a melody, for example, I am co-aware of *my ongoing experience of the melody* through the retentional structure of that very experience—and this just is the pre-reflective self-awareness of experience (cf. Zahavi 2003).

The temporal structure that accounts for pre-reflective self-awareness is also the structural feature that accounts for the limitations imposed on reflective self-consciousness in the strict sense of a reflection on my own stream of consciousness. Reflective self-consciousness yields knowledge of pre-reflective subjectivity that is always after the fact. Reflective self-consciousness, which takes pre-reflective experience as its object, is itself

(like any conscious experience) characterized by the same temporal structure. In principle, however, the retentional-impressional-protentional structure of reflection cannot overlay the retentional-impressional-protentional structure of pre-reflective experience in complete simultaneity. There is always a momentary delay between reflection and the pre-reflective object of reflection. One might say that the pre-reflective experience must first be there if I am to turn my reflective attention to it and make it an object of reflection. Husserl writes: “When I say *I*, I grasp myself in a simple reflection. But this self-experience [*Selbsterfahrung*] is like every experience [*Erfahrung*], and in particular every perception, a mere directing myself towards something that was already there for me, that was already conscious, but not thematically experienced, not noticed” (Husserl 1973b, 492–493). This delay is precisely the difference or distance that intervenes between the reflecting subject and the reflected object, even though the reflected object is my own experience. As a reflecting subject, I never fully coincide with myself. When I reflect, there is always something about my experience which will evade my reflective grasp: the very reflective moment itself.

As Merleau-Ponty puts it, our temporal existence is both a condition for and an obstacle to our self-comprehension. Temporality contains an internal fracture that permits us to return to our past experiences in order to investigate them reflectively, but this very fracture also prevents us from fully coinciding with ourselves. There will always remain a difference between the lived and the understood (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 76, 397, 399, 460). Self-consciousness provides us with the sense that we are always already in play. This leads some phenomenologists to note that we are born (or “thrown” into the world) and not self-generated. We are caught up in a life that is in excess of our full comprehension (Heidegger 1986). There is always something about ourselves that we cannot fully capture in self-conscious reflection.

If reflective self-consciousness is limited in this way, this does not relieve us of a certain responsibility to exercise it. Indeed, reflective self-consciousness is a necessary condition for moral self-responsibility, as Husserl points out. Reflection is a precondition for self-critical deliberation. If we are to subject our different beliefs and desires to a critical, normative evaluation, it is not sufficient simply to have immediate first-personal access to the states in question.

We take as our point of departure the essential ability for self-consciousness in the full sense of personal self-inspection (*inspectio sui*), and the ability that is based on this for taking up positions that are reflectively directed back on oneself and one's own life, on personal acts of self-knowledge, self-evaluation, and practical acts of self-determination, self-willing, and self-formation. (Husserl 1988, 23).

Self-consciousness is, therefore, not epiphenomenal. Our ability to make reflective judgments about our own beliefs and desires also allows us to modify them.

One might see the position of Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty as being situated between two extremes. On the one hand, we have the view that reflection merely copies or mirrors pre-reflective experience faithfully, and on the other hand we have the view that reflection distorts lived experience. The middle course is to recognize that reflection involves a gain and a loss. For Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, reflection is constrained by what is pre-reflectively lived through. It is answerable to experiential facts and is not constitutively self-fulfilling. At the same time, however, they recognized that reflection consisting in thematic self-experience does not simply reproduce the lived experiences unaltered and that this is precisely what makes reflection cognitively valuable. The experiences reflected upon are transformed in the process, to various

degrees and manners depending upon the type of reflection at work. Subjectivity consequently seems to be constituted in such a fashion that it can and, at times, must relate to itself in an “othering” manner. This self-alteration is something inherent to reflection; it is not something that reflection can overcome.

4. Bodily self-awareness

Much of what we have said about self-consciousness may still seem overly mentalistic. It is important to note that for phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, pre-reflective self-awareness is both embodied and embedded in the world. The first-person point of view on the world is never a view from nowhere; it is always defined by the situation of the perceiver's body, which concerns not simply location and posture, but action in pragmatic contexts and interaction with other people. The claim is not simply that the perceiver/actor is objectively embodied, but that the body is in some fashion experientially present in the perception or action. Phenomenologists distinguish the pre-reflective body-awareness that accompanies and shapes every spatial experience, from a reflective consciousness of the body. To capture this difference, Husserl introduced a terminological distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, that is, between the pre-reflectively lived body, i.e., the body as an embodied first-person perspective, and the subsequent thematic experience *of* the body as an object (Husserl 1973a, 57).

If I reach for a tool, I know where to reach because I have a sense of where it is in relation to myself. I also sense that I will be able to reach it, or that I will have to take two steps towards it. My perception of the tool must involve proprioceptive and kinaesthetic information about my bodily situation, otherwise I would not be able to reach for it or use it. If in such cases, we want to say that I have an awareness of my body, such bodily awareness is quite different from the perception that I have of the tool. I

may have to look or feel around in order to find where the tool is; but, under normal circumstances, I never have to do that in regard to my body. I am tacitly aware, not only of where my hands and feet are, but also of what I can do with them. This tacit awareness of my body always registers as an “I can” (or “I can't,” as the case may be). Pre-reflective body-awareness is not a type of object-perception, but it is an essential element of every such perception. Primarily, my body is experienced, not as an object, but as a field of activity and affectivity, as a potentiality of mobility and volition, as an “I do” and “I can.”

The body provides not only the egocentric spatial framework for orientation towards the world, but also the constitutive contribution of its mobility. Perception does not involve a passive reception, but an active exploration of the environment. Husserl calls attention to the importance of bodily movements (the movements of the eye, manipulations by the hand, the locomotion of the body, etc.) for the experience of space and spatial objects. He further claims that perception is correlated to and accompanied by proprioceptive-kinaesthetic self-sensation or self-affectation (Husserl 1973c). Every visual or tactile appearance is given in correlation to a kinaesthetic experience. When I touch a shaped surface, it is given in conjunction with a sensation of finger movements. When I watch the flight of a bird, the moving bird is given in conjunction with the kinaesthetic sensations of eye movement and perhaps neck movement. Such kinaesthetic activation during perception produces an implicit and pervasive reference to one's own body. This is the basis for a bodily self-awareness that contributes to organizing perception. The implicit self-awareness of the actual and possible movements of my body helps shape the experience that I have of the world. To be clear, however, bodily self-awareness is not an awareness of the body in isolation from the world; it is embedded in action and perception. We do not first become aware of the body and subsequently use it to engage with the world. We experience the world bodily, and the body is revealed to us in our exploration of the

world. Primarily, the body attains self-awareness in action (or in our dispositions to action, or in our action possibilities) when it relates to something, uses something, or moves through the world.^[4]

Bodily self-awareness, like self-consciousness more generally, has limitations. I am never fully aware of everything that is going on with my body. Indeed, my body tends to efface itself as I perceive and act in the world. When I jump to catch a ball that is thrown over my head, I certainly have a sense of what I can do, but I am not aware of my precise movements or postures—for example, that my right leg bends at a certain angle as I reach with my left hand. I can execute movements without being explicitly conscious of them, and even what I am tacitly aware of is somewhat limited—for example, I am not aware of the shape of my grasp as I reach to grab the ball. Although I may not be aware of certain details about my bodily performance, this does not mean however that I am unconscious of my body. Rather it means that the way that I am aware of my body is fully integrated with the intentional action that I am performing. I know that I am jumping to catch the ball, and implicit in that, as an immediate sense rather than an inference, is the experience of my body jumping to catch the ball. Furthermore, . Experiential aspects of my embodiment permeate my pre-reflective self-consciousness. There is something it is like to jump to catch a ball, and part of what it is like is that I am in fact jumping. There is something different to what it is like to sit and imagine (or remember) myself jumping to catch the ball, and at least part of that difference has to do with the fact, and the experience that I am sitting rather than jumping, although none of this may be explicit in my experience.

Another way to think of this is to consider the sense of agency that is normally an aspect of pre-reflective self-awareness in action. If, as I am walking down the street, I am pushed from behind, I am instantly aware of my body moving in a way that I did not intend. The fact that I feel a

loss of control over my actions suggests that there had been an implicit sense of agency or control in my walking prior to being pushed. In voluntary action, I experience the movements of my body as my own actions, and this is replaced by a feeling of loss of bodily control in the case of involuntary movement. Voluntary actions feel different from involuntary actions, and this difference depends respectively, on the experience of agency or the experience of a lack of agency—as the case may be if my body is being moved by someone else.

5. Social forms of self-consciousness

A focus on embodied self-experience inevitably leads to a decisive widening of the discussion. The externality of embodiment puts me, and my actions, in the public sphere. Self-consciousness involves not only an ability to make reflective judgments about our own beliefs and desires but also includes a sense of embodied agency. I am, as Paul Ricoeur (1950, 56–57) points out, conscious of being the author of my actions, and this kind of awareness often comes about as my actions are reflected in the presence of others. I can become aware of myself through the eyes of other people, and this can happen in a number of different ways. Thus, embodiment brings intersubjectivity and sociality into the picture, and draws attention to the question of how certain forms of self-consciousness are intersubjectively mediated, and may depend on one's social relations to others. My awareness of myself as one person among others, an awareness that I may frame from the perspective of others, attempting to see myself as they see me, involves a change in the attitude of self-consciousness. Within this attitude, judgments that I make about myself are constrained by social expectations and cultural values. This kind of social self-consciousness is always contextualized, as I try to understand how I appear to others, both in the way I look, and in the meaning of my actions. I find myself in specific contexts, with specific capabilities and dispositions, habits and convictions, and I express myself in a way that is

reflected off of others, in relevant (socially defined) roles through my language and my actions.

The role of the other in this mode of self-consciousness is not unessential. According to Husserl, I become aware of myself specifically as a human person only in such intersubjective relations (Husserl 1973b, 175; 1952, 204–05; see Hart 1992, 71; Zahavi 1999, 157ff. Also see Taylor 1989, 34–36 for a similar idea). Thus Husserl distinguishes the subject taken in its bare formality from the personalized subject and claims that the origin and status of being a person must be located in the social dimension. I am not simply a pure and formal subject of experience, but also a person, with abilities, dispositions, habits, interests, character traits, and convictions, and to focus exclusively on the first is to engage in an abstraction (Husserl 1968, 210). Given the right conditions and circumstances, the self acquires a personalizing self-apprehension, i.e., it develops into a person and as a person (cf. Husserl 1952, 265). And this development depends heavily upon social interaction (Husserl 1973b, 170–171).

This kind of self-consciousness is also the occasion for a self-alienation, famously explicated by Sartre in terms of the other's gaze. For Sartre, because “our being, along with its being-for-itself, is also for-others; the being which is revealed to the reflective consciousness is for-itself-for-others” (1956, 282). On this view, the primary experience of the other is not that I perceive her as some kind of object in which I must find a person, but I perceive the other as a subject who perceives me as an object. My experience of the other is at the same time an experience that involves my own self-consciousness, a self-consciousness in which I am pre-reflectively aware that I am an object for another. This experience can further motivate a reflective self-consciousness, as I consider how I must appear to the other.

Merleau-Ponty (1945, 415) suggests that the other's gaze can motivate this kind of self-consciousness only if I already have a sense of my own visibility to the other. This sense of my own visibility, however, is immediately linked with the pre-reflective, proprioceptive-kinaesthetic sense of my body, an insight that goes back to Husserl's analysis (mentioned above), through Merleau-Ponty, who sees its connection to the infant's capability for imitation, and forward to more recent advances in developmental psychology (see Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 165, 404-405; 2010; Gallagher and Zahavi 2008; Zahavi 1999, 171–72). In effect, we find ourselves related to others through self-conscious experience that is motivated by the other's gaze.

This is not the place to enter into a detailed discussion of these rich and complex issues, issues that extend to analyses of phenomena such as empathy, shame, guilt, and so on (see Zahavi 2010). But it is important to realize that self-consciousness is a multifaceted concept. It is not something that can be exhaustively analyzed simply by examining the inner workings of the mind.

6. Conclusion

The notion of self-consciousness has been the subject of a rich and complex analysis in the phenomenological tradition. Aspects of the phenomenological analysis also show up in other areas of research, including feminism (Stawarska 2006; Young 2005), ecological psychology (Gibson 1966), and recent analyses of enactive perception (Noë 2004; Thompson 2008). The recognition of the existence of a primitive form of pre-reflective self-consciousness is an important starting point for an understanding of more elaborate forms of self-consciousness that are concept- and language-dependent. Phenomenological analyses show these processes to be more than purely mental or cognitive events since they integrally involve embodiment and intersubjective dimensions.

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Other Internet Resources

- Philosophy of Mind Bibliography, Part 1.6: Self-Consciousness, David Chalmers (Australian National University).
- Joint Philosophy and Psychology Project on Consciousness and Self Consciousness, Naomi Eilan (Warwick University).
- Center for Subjectivity Research, Danish National Research Foundation, Dan Zahavi (Director).

Related Entries

consciousness | Husserl, Edmund | Merleau-Ponty, Maurice | phenomenology | Sartre, Jean-Paul | self-consciousness: empirical approaches to | self-knowledge

Notes to Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness

1. We will use the terms ‘self-awareness’ and ‘self-consciousness’ interchangeably.
2. For some recent interesting new attempts at articulating the differences and similarities between the standard higher-order accounts, Brentano's two-object account, and the non-objectifying approach of the phenomenologists, cf. Kriegel and Williford (2006), and Kriegel (2006).
3. Drawing on Gibson's ecological approach, and the notion that the very

flow pattern of optical information provides us with an awareness of our own movement and posture and that all perception consequently involves a kind of self-sensitivity, a co-awareness of self and of environment (Gibson 1966, 111-126), Bermúdez (1998, 128) writes: "If the pick-up of self-specifying information starts at the very beginning of life, then there ceases to be so much of a problem about how entry into the first-person perspective is achieved. In a very important sense, infants are born into the first-person perspective. It is not something that they have to acquire *ab initio*." See Gallagher and Meltzoff (1996) for the connection between the developmental research and phenomenological conceptions of self-consciousness. For a more extensive discussion of the similarities between the non-conceptual self-awareness and the phenomenological view, see Zahavi (2002).

4. Husserl's analysis is not inconsistent with the concepts of ecological perception and sensory-motor "affordances" as they are later worked out in Gibsonian psychology. My actual and potential bodily movements specify the possible uses for things that I encounter in the world. This kind of analysis is further developed in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and embodiment. This view on perception also shares some obvious similarities with the recent so-called enactive approach to perception. Compare Husserl's views with the following programmatic statement by Alva Noë in the beginning of his book *Action in Perception*: "Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. Think of a blind person tap-tapping his or her way around a cluttered space, perceiving that space by touch, not all at once, but through time, by skilful probing and movement. This is, or at least ought to be, our paradigm of what perceiving is. The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction. ... [A]ll perception is touch-like in this way: Perceptual experience acquires content thanks to our possession of bodily skills. What we perceive is determined by what we do (or what we know how to do); it is determined

by what we are ready to do. In ways I try to make precise, we enact our perceptual experience; we act it out" (Noë 2004, 1).

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