

The Self and Self-Knowledge

Edited by Annalisa Coliva

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Investigation on the issue of the self and self-knowledge boasts a long-standing tradition that reaches back to seventeenth century philosophers and includes some of the main figures in twentieth century analytic philosophy, such as Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, P.F. Strawson and Elizabeth Anscombe. Reflecting about the self and self-knowledge implies asking such questions as: What is the nature of subjective states? How do we identify the self? What is the nature of our knowledge of ourselves? How are our beliefs about ourselves justified by our experiences? What makes a certain mental state first-personal? In virtue of what features can we gain knowledge of our states?

This collective volume, edited by Annalisa Coliva, offers an overview of the most influential contemporary perspectives on the topic, with contributions from distinguished scholars who have steered the debate for the last three decades, like Christopher Peacocke, Jane Heal, John Campbell and Lucy O'Brien.

In the Introduction, Annalisa Coliva makes it clear that the main motivation of the volume is vindicating a genuinely philosophical stance towards the issue of the self and self-knowledge, as against empirical research programs (especially in the field of psychology) that go as far as to even reject the idea of there being something like a first-person perspective. The Introduction also provides a useful overview of the background against which the articles contained in the collection place themselves: thus, theorists concerned with the individuation of the self are divided between approaches that are purely *metaphysical*, as opposed to *normative*, *phenomenological* and *epistemological*. As to self-knowledge, the issue has been tackled from a *naturalistic* point view, for example by claiming that self-knowledge is obtained through a reliable detection mechanism, or alternatively through inference. By contrast, *non-naturalists* and in particular constitutivists have it that self-knowledge relies on no epistemic achievement, but rather on a conceptual relation between our first-order and second-order thoughts. As the editor makes clear, the articles in this volume explore and refine aspects of positions already established in the debate rather than launch new research directions.

The volume is divided into three parts, each containing four articles. Part I is dedicated to the issue of how the self is individuated as well as to some

related methodological questions.

The volume starts with “Does Rationality Enforce Identity?”, where Carol Rovane offers a normative account of personal identity inspired by Locke. She rejects the animalist conception of personal identity as biologically given and, hence, indiscernible from human identity, claiming that it is determined instead by a commitment to satisfying the normative requirements that define individual rationality over time. It is by virtue of this normative commitment that individual agents can engage one another *as persons* and satisfy the ethical criterion of personhood Rovane proposes. This conception of identity also makes the idea of “quasi-reasoning” elaborated by Neo-Lockeans nonsensical, because these normative requirements can be satisfied also by *group* persons, whose joint activities and efforts can take on the characteristics of individual rationality, and by *multiple* persons, that is, a single person’s multiple projects. Rovane offers a revisionary theory of personal identity that equates persons with reflective rational agents whose identities are a product of effort and will.

Nida-Rumelin, in her article “The Conceptual Origin of Subject Body Dualism” develops a defence of subject-body dualism by uncovering its conceptual origin and revealing its intuitive appeal. By presenting several counterfactual thoughts experiments, she argues that we naturally understand our own individuality in a non-descriptive way. Subjects of conscious experience (like us) differ from material things in that they are not constituted by any of their properties, nor they are composed of a specific concrete stuff. Consequently, we conceive of conscious beings as perfect individuals whose nature transcends any description. This is supposed to vindicate a form of conceptual mind-body dualism, which is hidden in our conception of experiencing subjects. Through a purely metaphysical approach, Nida-Rumelin aims to show that subject-body dualism emerges from an intuition that is deeply ingrained in our cognitive architecture and whose conceptual and epistemic grounds would need further investigation. Otherwise, we would have to reconsider our concept of experiencing subject which, according to this view, turns out to be inadequate.

In “Subjects and Consciousness”, Christopher Peacocke tackles two issues: first, what is distinctive of first-person mental content and, second, what is the metaphysical status of subjects. Concerning the first issue, Peacocke claims that a mental content is of a first-person type just in case reference to the subject is achieved in it not *via* the satisfaction of any descriptive conditions, but *de jure*, that is in virtue of the nature itself of that type of content. Concerning the metaphysical status of the self, Peacocke advocates the following pair of claims: (i) if there is a conscious state, there is a subject which experiences what it is like being in that state; (ii) if there is a subject, there are conscious experiences, for it’s in the nature of a subject to be capable of conscious states. The latter claim

opposes both the Humean (and neo-Humean) view that there is no subject but only bundles of sensations; moreover, the overall view departs from Cartesianism in that it is compatible with the self being a material, embodied being.

John Campbell devotes his article, entitled “Does Perception Do Any Work in an Understanding of the First Person?”, to the issue of how we understand the causal relations among our mental states (beliefs, desires and so on). He first remarks that understanding whether there is a causal link between two elements implies knowing what would happen if something “intervened” on the item which is the hypothetical cause. He then rules out that, when the elements at issue are mental states, what plays the intervening role is an agent; rather, it seems that it could be *perception*. Through perception, the world intervenes on our beliefs so as to reveal whether or not they play a causal role. In understanding the first-person, perception then plays two roles: firstly, it provides the subject with her own “route in the world”; and secondly, as suggested by Campbell, it allows the subject to know which causal relations hold among her own mental states.

Part II contains three articles all revolving around Christopher Peacocke’s views as to the role of conscious experiences in providing reasons for self-ascriptions. This part is closed by a commentary of Peacocke on two of the three essays.

To start with, Peacocke’s idea that conscious states somehow ground or justify our self-awareness is discussed by Jane Heal in her article “Consciousness and Self-Awareness”. Her critical target is Peacocke’s view to the effect that whenever: (i) someone consciously Fs, that is, she has a distinctively phenomenal experience of F; (ii) and she has the concept of F, then she has non-inferential justification for the belief that she Fs. Heal questions that (i) and (ii) suffice to provide one with justification for one’s self-aware beliefs. She notes that, when what’s at issue is Freudian unconscious states, that is, phenomenally distinctive states one is not able to avow, concept possession will not help to provide one with a (suitably internalistic) justification for her self-ascriptions: what is required is an *additional skill* to interpret the (phenomenologically distinctive) experiences one undergoes, which are a manifestation of the unconscious state. In his comments to Heal’s article, Peacocke retorts that the conscious manifestations of an unconscious state F (for instance, discomfort experienced as a manifestation of an unconscious fear) do not provide the subject with any non-inferential justification for the judgment “I am Fing”. Only a conscious state *experienced as such* (for instance, fear experienced as fear) can provide such justification.

Conor McHugh’s article “Reasons and Self-Knowledge” stands in defence of Peacocke’s view. McHugh first considers, and resists, Coliva’s objection to

Peacocke, according to which it is not clear how his notion of phenomenological consciousness can make it rational for a subject to perform certain self-attributions. He then proceeds to outline two possible variations on Peacocke's proposal: (i) a simple internalism, in which the mere presence of the conscious state is accessible to the subject and justification supervenes on the features of such state; (ii) a strong internalism, in which the subject has access to the justificatory status of the conscious state and justification arises through a *non-theoretical, sub-doxastic* appreciation of it.

The main focus of Lucy O'Brien's article "Knowledge of Actions and Tryings" is the extent to which an appeal to tryings helps to explain the knowledge of our actions. O'Brien first considers and criticizes the account according to which we have knowledge of our actions just in case we have knowledge of our tryings. Next, she examines the theory (advocated by Peacocke) to the effect that we know our actions by taking apparent action awareness at face value, where this awareness is caused by a trying. O'Brien challenges Peacocke's account by pointing at examples in which there is no gap between the trying and the action: for example, trying to bring to mind something, judge that *p*, watch what one sees. If all these cases are genuine, then they prove inconsistent with Peacocke's account, for they fail to comply with the idea that knowledge of action is awarded by an apparent awareness which is caused by the trying. Peacocke's account is therefore incomplete. In his comments to O'Brien's paper, Peacocke replies that these examples do not compel him to relinquish his theory, only to broaden it. One may thus say that the action awareness is not caused by a trying, but by an "initiating event", which may be a trying (where applicable) but may also be the action itself, when this coincides with the trying. He then responds to some criticisms moved by O'Brien concerning the distinction between action awareness and perceptual awareness (which Peacocke wants to keep separate), as well as concerning disjunctivism on action awareness.

Part III contains four contributions all focussed on the topic of self-knowledge and on an evaluation of the commonly accepted view that transparency, authority and groundlessness enable a subject to gain knowledge of her own mental states.

According to content externalism, the contents of our thoughts are determined in part by our relations to the extra mental environment. If so, my self-ascription of a contentful state is not remarkably secure and privileged, as commonsense would have it, because, according to the skeptic, I could be under some kind of illusion in individuating that content. Bar-On, in her "Externalism and Skepticism: Recognition, Expression and Self-Knowledge", develops a neo-expressivist account of self-knowledge that reconciles first person author-

ity with externalism, thus withstanding the skeptical challenge. She rejects the recognitional conception that lies behind skepticism, which attributes the special security of our self-ascriptions to the introspective access we have to our own minds. Bar-On's neo-expressivist proposal supports instead the idea that avowals derive their special security from being direct *expressions* of a present state of mind in which subjects directly give voice to a self-ascribed mental state. This view allows to embrace a non-deflationist view of self-knowledge maintaining our mental self-ascriptions to be both secure and instances of knowledge.

In "One variety of Self-Knowledge: constitutivism as constructivism" Coliva advocates a form of constitutivism labeled "constructivism". The two peculiar features of self-knowledge (transparency and authority) are, according to constitutivism, a matter of conceptual necessity. On the one hand, in order for constitutivism to account for transparency (as Coliva clarifies), it would have to count only on a specific kind of propositional mental state, defined "commitment", whose characterization and difference from dispositions is here extended and deepened. In particular, Coliva considers *conceptual mastery*, acquired through a *blind drilling*, as the missing and essential ingredient for a subject to hold mental states such as commitments. On the other hand, in order to account for authority, she proposes a constructivist picture, according to which avowals, since they bring into existence the relevant first-order mental states, would be necessarily true. Anyway, Coliva points out that in order for a suitable account of self-knowledge to be complete, it would have to be pluralistic, given that we possess mental states of various sorts that, as such, are known in different ways.

In Chapter 11 "How to think about Phenomenal Self-Knowledge", Paul Snowdon criticizes Wright's analysis of self-knowledge in terms of avowals and norms, supported by a Wittgensteinian tradition, considering it a research programme developed on the wrong level. First, he chooses to focus on perceptual avowals, that is, self-ascriptions of sensations such as "I have a toothache", "I feel pain" and so on. Snowdon presents several cases showing that the properties of phenomenal avowals, as Wright describes them (authoritativeness, transparency and groundlessness), turn out to be dubious: our phenomenal judgements are not always incorrigible nor they are self-intimating and there are also cases where their non-inferentiality, borrowing McDowell's terminology, does not entail baselessness. In Snowdon's view, there is no need to formulate properties of self-knowledge in terms of speech acts, as avowals are, but we should rather look at them as properties of beliefs, playing a functional role in the internal mechanisms with which we are equipped, whose nature has to be revealed by science.

Bilgrami, unlike Snowdon, embraces a strong constitutivist view and, in Chapter 12 “The Unique Status of Self-Knowledge”, he defends his normative conception of self-knowledge. He elaborates the two properties, authority and transparency, which give self-knowledge its special character, in the light of Strawson’s idea of responsible agency. Self-knowledge is constitutive of a certain class of intentional states, namely those involved in responsible agency: whenever an intentional state potentially leads to an action or conclusion that can be the object of justified reactive attitudes, there must be self-knowledge, that is, the state is necessarily known by the human agent. It is the conceptual necessity of this network of relations (self-knowledge and values, agency and intentionality) that allows to account for self-knowledge without turning to any epistemological or perceptual explanation. Given that, transparency (including dispositional states, so long as they are known by the agent) and authority (allowing the possibility of the subject to be ignorant about his intentional states, as it happens in self-deception) can be reasonably considered as self-knowledge properties.

We recommend *The Self and Self Knowledge* as a collection of articles of indisputable relevance for the current debate on this subject. Each individual essay offers a demonstration of how the topic of self-knowledge can and indeed should be of concern of philosophy. It could be useful both for students interested in investigating the nature of self-knowledge and for specialists of this philosophical topic. The questions that surround the individuation of the self and its distinctive states, or self-knowledge and its foundations, still offer, indeed, a great amount of material for investigation, exploration, refinement and clarification.