

## A THIRD PERSON APPROACH TO SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

**Abstract:** Several authors have recently defended the idea that there is a “pre-reflective self-consciousness”, or “pre-reflective self”, which is regarded as a very precocious psychic function that grounds every conscious act. In particular, Prebble, Addis & Tippett (2013) argue that this kind of self-consciousness is a fundamental prerequisite for episodic memory and is very similar to the Jamesian notion of I, or subjective self (as opposed to Me, or objective self). In this paper we will argue that the identification of the Jamesian notion of I with pre-reflective self-consciousness is a misunderstanding of James’ account and that self-consciousness is, properly said, the result of a gradual process of objectification, which requires conscious (but not self-conscious) activities of representation. Indeed, the subjective self (or self-consciousness), far from being the grounding source of every conscious mental activity, is the result of a complex construction out of neurocognitive and psycho-social components.

**Keywords:** self, I-self, Me-self, mineness, consciousness, mind-reading, narrative identity.

### 1. A “TWO-BY-TWO” MODEL OF THE SENSE OF SELF

In a recent article, Prebble, Addis & Tippett (2013) argue that the sense of self varies along two axes or dimensions.

In the first axe we find the opposition between a subjective and an objective aspect of the sense of self, where the former is “our conscious, phenomenological experience of selfhood (subjective sense of self)”, and the latter is “our mental representation of self, comprising all the things that we perceive and know about ourselves (content of self).” They suggest that this division can be traced back to William James’ distinction between the psychological process that constitutes the subject of knowing and experiencing (the I-self) and the object of this awareness (the Me-self). (see *infra*, §3).

In the second axe we find the opposition between those aspects of the sense of self that are related to the present moment (“present self”) and those that are extended over time (“temporally extended sense”). In each particular moment, we experience a sense of unity in our conscious experience of selfhood (subjective sense of self) and in our mental representation of who we are (self-concept). Across time, we experience unity both in our subjective experience of selfhood (phenomenological continuity) and in the way we mentally represent our self across time (semantic continuity) (Prebble, Addis & Tippett 2013: 818).

Thus we get four components of the sense of self, the simpler functions being necessary precursors for more complex functions.

Now, Prebble, Addis & Tippett’s model distinguishes two hierarchically related forms of present-moment conscious self-experience: prereflective self-experience and self-awareness, which are essential for both autothetic recollection and episodic memory. Prereflective self-experience is to be understood as “an integral feature of our conscious experience of the world”:

It is an inherently perceptual or embodied phenomenon, meaning that our bodily interactions with the world impart information about our physical existence, allowing us to directly experience ourselves as separate from our environment [...]. It also involves a sense of ownership (i.e., my body and thoughts belong to me) and agency (i.e., I caused my thoughts and actions; [...]).

What characterizes this mode of consciousness as a “self” experience is that it is imbued with a particular phenomenological “flavor” that confers an “immediate and automatic full ownership of experience” [...]. No

matter what modality we are experiencing (e.g., sight, sound, taste, interoception), or what type of experience (e.g., thinking, remembering, knowing, feeling, dreaming), all our experiences are pervaded by a *subjective mineness* that leaves us in no doubt that they are our own [...]. (Prebble, Addis & Tippett 2013: 821).

Therefore, there is a subjective, phenomenological self -- a kind of self-consciousness -- which somehow precedes and grounds all the other conscious acts. In the following section we try to dismantle this view, which is yet recurrent (in different forms) in the history of philosophy.

## 2. AGAINST SUBJECTIVE MINENESS

The idea that every act of consciousness involves a “subjective mineness” can recently be found in several authors. The claim is that there exists a particular form of self-consciousness which precedes and grounds every conscious act. This is a *pre-reflective* kind of self-consciousness (see e.g. Gallagher & Zahavi 2008; Kriegel 2009). Indeed, the possibility of a non-intellectual or non-reflective self-consciousness seems to be perfectly coherent: since self-consciousness is but a particular case of object consciousness, the consciousness of that particular object which is the self, there could be, after all, a non-intellectual knowledge of the self. This kind of awareness amounts to experiencing themselves without possessing knowledge about themselves, without knowing what the self is.

What does it mean “experiencing themselves”? A few authors have proposed to identify pre-reflective self-consciousness with the consciousness of one’s own body, arguing that this consciousness appears very precociously. Indeed, it could be argued that one’s own body is the best candidate of perceivable object that can be identified to the self. So, for instance, according to Bermúdez (1998, 2009) 3-4 month babies who perceive their own hand are (pre-reflectively) self-conscious insofar as they are conscious of a part of themselves.

This suggestion, however, disregards the fact that *the self is not an ordinary object among the others*. The self cannot simply be reduced to the body. Indeed, the hand is for a child a sensory object among the others. (The infant can be said to suffer from the limitation of Flaubert’s Catoblepa, one of the monsters tempting Saint Anthony: this beast did not distinguish itself from the panorama, and being hungry, devoured its own front paws.) In order to talk about a pre-reflective self-consciousness, it is required, to say the least, that the child is conscious of her entire body, her body as a whole. And we know that the ability of recognizing themselves in a mirror, which we take to be the minimal condition to ascribe consciousness of one’s own body, develops not before the age of 15-18 months (Anderson 1984; Nielsen, Suddendorf & Slaughter 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, when a bodily form of self-consciousness just begins to appear, many cognitive abilities are already in place, and, in particular, basic object consciousness is already in place.

Bermúdez (1998, ch. 6) claims that precocious bodily representations are vehicles of *first-person* contents. What does it mean, in this context, ‘first-person’? Of course, we have no quarrel with his claim if ‘first-person contents’ means that they are contents concerning the organism. However, the relevant point is that these contents are not *experienced in* first person, that is to say, they are not experienced *as* being about the self. Only this latter case seems to deserve the label of ‘self-consciousness’. One thing is to say that an organism is (*de facto*) a subject (= a mere

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<sup>1</sup> More precisely, infants first become capable of physical self-monitoring, i.e., focusing attention on the material agent as the *physical* executor of actions; and then (around the 24<sup>th</sup> month) their bodily self-monitoring comes to completion as the objectivation of a ‘lived’ body (Merleau-Ponty’s *corps propre*), and thus as a rudimentary self-consciousness.

functional center organizing action, existing in any animal with a brain); quite another thing is to say that it perceives itself as a subject of experience; only in the latter case we are in the territory of self-consciousness. In other words, the experience a newborn has of the world and of herself as a body is *bona fide* experience, in the sense that it is *conscious* from the start; but this consciousness is just object consciousness.

The concept of pre-reflective self-consciousness is the current version of an “evergreen” notion in the history of philosophy, whose popularity is explained by the following reason: there seems to be something in our very way of self-thinking which pushes us to believe that, when we are conscious of something, we are also, at the same time (and in a certain way), self-conscious of being so. Yet, if we take seriously this intuition as an empirical hypothesis, this concept of self-consciousness is, to say the least, quite elusive. Even if there are, as we saw, empirical data showing that 3-4 month babies have some form of consciousness of parts of their own body, this can hardly be regarded as an instance of self-consciousness.

From a methodological point of view, there is no difference between the study of animal subjectivity and the study of the 0-1 year-old baby’s subjectivity; and ethology teaches us that with the exception of very few species (such as chimpanzees, orang-outangs and dolphins), animals do not need self-consciousness, not even an embryonic one, to produce intelligent behavior.<sup>2</sup> Where does self-consciousness come out, then?

### 3. THE SELF AS THE PRODUCT OF AN OBJECTIFICATION PROCESS

A good starting point to answer this question is James’ distinction between *I* and *Me*, the very same distinction quoted (but, as we will show below, misinterpreted) by Prebble, Addis & Tippett (cf. *supra*, §1). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century William James, pursuing Locke’s reflection, argues that the inner space, detached from both the somatic material space and the space outside of the body, appears to us as a *self-referring* psychic field; that is, the subject (both the common man and the spiritualist philosopher) is spontaneously led to suppose that in the phenomenological space there is an innermost center, the dynamic center of initiative and free will (“the active element in all consciousness”) denoted by the pronoun ‘I’. James defines it “pure ego”, and notices that philosophers’ interpretations of it lie along a spectrum that includes at one end the claim that it is “a simple active substance, the soul”, which is metaphysical guarantee of the presence of the self to the world; and at the other end a Humean perspective claiming that “it is nothing but a fiction, the imaginary being denoted by the pronoun I” (James 1890: 298).

In this dispute James is all for Hume and against the spiritualists. And like the Scottish philosopher, James too vainly strives to get a glimpse of his ego in the stream of mental events. Let us try to ask what ‘I’ refers to. In the sentence ‘I kick the ball’, ‘I’ refers to myself as a global agent subject, who opposes itself to an external object. And yet note: the ball is a completely external object, but what about my leg or my arm? They are not totally external, and still less are my eyes and my head, not to mention prototypically “inner” things like a smell or a remembrance, and so on. I realize then that there is no way to stop this “hemorrhage” of my ego; in probing my introspective consciousness, I keep on taking as an object anything it contains, thus detaching it from myself. But

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<sup>2</sup> The claim that there is no self-consciousness (not even partial) before 13-14 months or even 18-20 months is also clearly evidenced by Joseph Lichtenberg’s empirical work on the child’s interpersonal performances (see Lichtenberg 1983).

the ego, as wellspring of the whole process, can never be found. In the end, James says, the ego ends up in being a sort of sizeless point -- or, with more anguish, the *bestandloses Gespenst* evoked by Schopenhauer in a famous passage. As soon as we turn into ourselves, he writes, “we are lost in a bottomless void; we find ourselves like the hollow glass globe, from out of which a voice speaks whose cause is not to be found in it, and whereas we desired to comprehend ourselves, we find, with a shudder, nothing but a vanishing spectre” (Schopenhauer 1819: §54, note 64). The ego is therefore something evanescent; it (= the agent and observing self) is an abstract and depthless subjectivity. Ultimately, this subjectivity is a convention; it cannot be located anywhere. The subject, brought to its limit, does not exist.

After this disappearance of the pure ego, however, the subject regains the feeling of being-there in experiencing oneself as the “empirical self” (the Me-self). This is the way in which the individual presents oneself to oneself, thus objectifying oneself in the introspective consciousness of oneself. This self-presentation is a description of identity, which famously comes in three forms: the physical, material aspects of the self (“material self”) associated to the bodily subjectivity; the subject’s social identity (“social self”); and finally, the individual’s inner or subjective being, the psychological identity grasped in the interiority, viz. in the complexity of introspection (“spiritual self”). This is a “reflective process [...], the result of our abandoning the outward-looking point of view, and of our having become able to think of subjectivity as such, to think ourselves as thinkers” (James 1890: 296).

Following James, we claim that the I-self is an objectification process which produces the Me-self: the I-self is *not* an experience of itself; it is rather an *event*, which is a psychobiological system’s self-representing. There cannot be a ‘sense of self’ without a ‘content of self’: the sense of self *is* the produced content of self.<sup>3</sup>

On this view, psychological self-consciousness is one and the same thing with personal (or subjective) identity. This is the feeling of existing as an individual different from all others; it is the way the subject feels itself as a person, defining itself as a certain kind of person, and tracing one’s continuous identity of person across time and space (=diachronic unity). As James puts it, subjective identity consists in finding itself again among the intermittences of consciousness: “Each of us when he awakens says, Here’s the same old self again, just he says, Here’s the same old bed, the same old room, the same old world” (1890: 334).

It is worth to point out that the link here established between psychological self-consciousness and identity is anti-idealistic in character. As it is well known, Kant agreed with Hume on the subject’s inability to take itself as an object; yet he thought that one could shift from the analysis level of psychological experience to that of transcendental arguing, and here capture the *pure* subject, so to speak: «I am conscious of myself, not as I appear to myself, nor as I am in myself, but only that I am», he writes in the first *Critique* (B157); and in B158 he adds that «[t]he consciousness [*Bewußtsein*] of self is [...] far from being a knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] of the self», i.e., the consciousness of existing is distinguished from the consciousness of existing in a certain way.

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<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, Prebble, Addis & Tippett interpret the Jamesian account according to their model, following McAdams (1996). However, their interpretation of McAdams is also misguided: he clearly states that the *I* is a process, and the *Me* is a product: “the I is really more like a verb; it might be called ‘selfing’ or ‘I-ing’, the fundamental process of making a self out of experience” (1996, 302). The *Me* is instead “the primary product of the selfing process”; it is “the self that selfing makes” (*ibid.*).

Kant's *Ich denke* is therefore something undetermined and void, which, not unlike Descartes' cogito, lays a claim to be a primary datum.<sup>4</sup>

However, against the philosophies that stem from the primacy of the *Selbstbewußtsein*, we oppose an interpretation of Brentano's theory of intentionality, arguing that it can be the ground of a definition of self-consciousness that dismantles its supposed givenness (cf. Marraffa & Paternoster 2013: 44 and *passim*). The idea is that we are not conscious in the abstract, but, rather, we are always conscious *of* something; and among all the objects which can be represented in consciousness, there is the subject itself, or rather the objectified image of the subject: the latter is seen as an object inasmuch as it is 'seen from outside' and made part of the world.

Working out Brentano's intuition, we suggest a conception of self-consciousness as a function, or better as a mental operation, which contradicts the traditional and intuitive hypothesis that self-consciousness is a primary datum. As Schopenhauer had already noted, and unlike Kant, Brentano thinks that self-consciousness is not a basic modality of consciousness, it is not a primary and simple 'knowing of being-there', but consists in watching itself, seeking after itself, and hence it is from the very beginning a knowing of being-there in a certain way. Indeed Schopenhauer had already raised the suspicion that this knowing of being-there is never exhaustive, in the sense that it is a search for itself always unsatisfactory, and hence interminable (cf. Jervis 2011: 71).

In brief, there is no consciousness of self without knowledge of self: I know that I exist insofar as I know that I exist 'in a certain way', as describable identity, constant through changes. The construction of self-consciousness coincides with the construction of identity.

#### 4. FROM BODILY SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS TO NARRATIVE IDENTITY

In its simplest form, the description of the self is a description of physical identity. The subject gains access to the idea of existing at the time it recognizes itself in a body distinguishable from others' -- at the time that it comes to cognize that it is a bearer of physical, physiognomic, bodily features. At an early stage this bodily self-consciousness is likely to be structured by a nonverbal and analogic representation of the (physical) self; but very soon it begins to be mediated by the verbal exchange with the caregiver. In other words, in our species the 'chimpanzee-style', purely bodily self-consciousness is almost immediately outstripped and encompassed by a form of descriptive self-consciousness that is strictly linked to linguistic tools and social cognition mechanisms.

This psychological and introspective self-description is supposed to form itself in the act of turning on ourselves the capacity to mindread other people. This hypothesis is incisively argued in Peter Carruthers' (2011) Interpretive Sensory-Access (ISA) account of the nature and sources of self-knowledge. According to ISA account, although we can have non-interpretive access to our own sensory and affective states, the self-attribution of propositional attitude events (henceforth simply 'thoughts') is always a swift and unconscious process of *self-interpretation* that makes use of the same sensory channels that we utilize when working out other people's mental states.

This is well in line with the global workspace model of human neurocognitive architecture (Baars 1997). This model posits a range of perceptual systems that broadcast their outputs

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<sup>4</sup> Arguably, the concept of subjective mineness is the result of the psychologistic hypostatization of the 'empty' form of self-consciousness, that is -- to put it in Kantian terms --, the unity of synthesis. If this conjecture is correct, friends of subjective mineness have exchanged the integration of experience for the experience of integration.

(including visual, auditory, and motor imagery as well as perceptions of the world and of one's own body) to a collection of concept-using consumer systems. Among these there are systems that use the perceptual input to form judgments or make decisions; and among the judgment-forming systems there is a mindreading system which, driven by a folk-psychological theoretical framework, generates higher-order, metarepresentational, beliefs about the mental states of others and of oneself.

The mindreading system, then, has access to all sensory information broadcast by our perceptual systems; and thus it can recognize sensory states, generating self-attributions of the form 'I see something red,' 'It hurts,' and so on. (The self-attribution of present sensory states is based on recognitional, rather than interpretative, abilities, and so in this sense we can introspect these states.) However, the system cannot directly self-attribute thoughts. For thoughts are not globally broadcast but are the output of conceptual consumer systems; and there aren't any causal pathways from the outputs of these systems to mindreading, which would be necessary to allow introspective access to one's own thoughts. Consequently, the mindreading system must exploit the globally broadcast perceptual information, together with some forms of stored knowledge, to *infer* the agent's thoughts, precisely as it happens with the reading of other minds. Thus self-attribution of thoughts always occurs by means of a swift and unconscious process of self-interpretation, based on sensory awareness of data concerning one's own behavior, contextual data and/or sensory items in working memory (e.g., imagery or sentences in inner speech).

The mindreading system can be said to be focused outwards on the world rather than inwards on the agent's own mental states. And this, Carruthers (2011: 64) notes, is what is legitimate to expect in light of the hypothesis that mindreading, as an ingredient essential to our social intelligence, evolved to provide an adaptive advantage both in pursuing the aims of competitive system, as the advocates of the so-called 'Machiavellian Intelligence' hypothesis have argued for over 20 years now (Byrne & Whiten 1988; Whiten & Byrne 1997), and in compliance with the requirements of cooperative system, as it has been suggested more recently (Richerson & Boyd 2005; Hrdy 2009).

In this perspective, one virtue of the ISA account lies in its explanatory parsimony from an evolutionary point of view; for it assumes a single phylogenetic route for both 3<sup>rd</sup> person and 1<sup>st</sup> person mindreading. If, as the ISA account holds, 1st person mindreading results from turning one's 3<sup>rd</sup> person mindreading capacities upon oneself, the emergence of the former will be a by-product of the evolution of the latter. By contrast, theories to the effect that 1<sup>st</sup> person and 3<sup>rd</sup> person mindreading are subserved by two (or more) neurocognitive mechanisms, bear an explanatory burden, because then there should plainly be a distinct evolutionary story to be told about the emergence of each. But what kind of evolutionary pressure can account for the emergence of 1<sup>st</sup> person mindreading mechanism(s)? One suggestion is that the capacity to represent one's own mental states (or some subset thereof) evolved first (Couchman *et al.* 2009), presumably to enable animals to accrue the benefits of metacognitive monitoring and control. Once evolved, the conceptual and inferential resources involved were later exapted for 3<sup>rd</sup> person mindreading. This could have happened in two ways: either these 1<sup>st</sup> person resources were redeployed to form the basis of a distinct mindreading faculty of the sort defended by Nichols and Stich (2003); or they were combined with emerging capacities for imaginative perspective-taking to enable simulations of the mental lives of others, as Goldman (2006) suggests.

However, the claim that 1<sup>st</sup> person mindreading evolved for purposes of self-monitoring and executive control of one's cognitive processes can be challenged, and for at least two reasons

(Carruthers 2011: ch. 9; Carruthers & Fletcher 2012; Carruthers & Ritchie 2012; Carruthers *et al.* 2014). The experimental literature shows at least two things: that in many cases the supervisory role of metacognition does not require an introspective capacity distinct from the 3<sup>rd</sup> person mindreading; and that our metacognitive interventions aren't capable of the sort of direct impact on cognitive processing that would be predicted if metacognition had, indeed, evolved for the purpose.

At the age of 3-4 years, therefore, the children's mentalistic self-description forms itself in the act of turning on themselves the capacity to mindread other people; and lets note: this act occurs in an interpersonal context, i.e., in the relationship with the caregiver. Through the dialogue with the latter (and then with other social partners) the 3-4-year-old child builds itself by constructing its own identity, both objective (i.e., for others) and subjective (i.e., for itself). And following Georg H. Mead's lesson, we can say that the identity for itself largely derives from the identity for others; namely, we see ourselves, and define ourselves, in the first place introjecting the way in which others see and define us.

But here we have to be cautious. Our interpersonal approach to the ontogenesis of subjective identity builds on Mead's social-constructivist conception of the self. But such view should be handled with care, definitely distancing ourselves from the most radical interpretations, which lead to the disappearance of subjective identity. If this happens, only social identity is left, with consequent loss of the information-processing dimension of the agent. This sociolinguistic constructivism completely dismisses cognitive sciences, or tries to replace them with a 'psychology of the surface' which is relational and linguistic. On this view there are not information-processing mechanisms, not even mental states and processes: these things are opaque and unproductive; only relations and language hold. Rom Harré, for example, argued that psychological phenomena are produced in social interaction, and above all in the context of 'conversation', beyond which there is no mental process; our conversational interactions *are* the mental processes (1993: 135). From here it is a short step to seeing persons not as the actors or the agents of discourses but rather as the products of the discursive practices themselves.

Now, we definitely admit that the subject builds itself, *inter alia*, in social and conversational interactions, but, being advocates of a cognitive-science-driven explanatory approach, we think that neither social structures nor linguistic and conversational schemes can be treated as Minerva born from the godhead of Jupiter with weapons. These things must be understood as *explananda*, and not as *explanantia*.<sup>5</sup>

With this clarification in mind, let us return to the 3-4 year old intent on constructing one's identity. Introspective awareness develops as *narrative identity*. By the end of the preschool years the child begins to experience herself as a person, to define herself as a certain kind of person, and to trace her own continuous identity as a person across time and space. This diachronic dimension of self-consciousness, viz. the possibility of tracing a unity that persists through time in one's inner life, evolves as children attain a level of linguistic-narrative capacity which enables them to organize their own experiences in a chronological biography of self. This is 'narrative identity' which McAdams & Olson (2011: 527) define as "an internalized and evolving life story that a person begins to develop in late adolescence to provide life with meaning and purpose."

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<sup>5</sup> For example, lexical acquisition invokes the mechanisms of mindreading; if children were not able to grasp the speaker's referential intentions, learning the meanings of words would not be possible (cf. Bloom 2002).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have put forward an approach to self-consciousness that can be characterized as a ‘naturalistic narrativism’. Taking as our starting point data from cognitive ethology and developmental psychology, which tell us that psychological forms of self-consciousness cannot be found in animals and in children under 3 years old, we complied with the precepts of a bottom-up method that demands that we pursue the study of consciousness starting from the more basic psychological functions (that can be investigated precisely in animals and infants) to gain then those more complex psychological functions that subservise the adult self-conscious mind. Thus self-awareness, a phenomenon that has been traditionally seen as primary, simple, given, turns out to be a *constructed* phenomenon, the product of the interaction of a multiplicity of cognitive subsystems which play functions relating to language, memory, socialization.

In this perspective, the claim that the self is socially and culturally constituted turns out to be compatible with a naturalistic cognitive science. The existence of a pre-reflective self-consciousness is a hypothesis, expressing a sort of unnecessary ‘ultra-naturalist’ attitude, allegedly justified by evidence on babies’ consciousness of their body. However, as we argued above, consciousness of one’s own body is not self-consciousness.

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