

Pre-reflective self-as-subject from experiential and empirical perspectives

Dorothee Legrand *

CREA – CNRS, 1 rue Descartes, 75005 Paris, France

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Abstract

In the first part of this paper I characterize a minimal form of self-consciousness, namely pre-reflective self-consciousness. It is a constant structural feature of conscious experience, and corresponds to the consciousness of the self-as-subject that is not taken as an intentional object. In the second part, I argue that contemporary cognitive neuroscience has by and large missed this fundamental form of self-consciousness in its investigation of various forms of self-experience. In the third part, I exemplify how the notion of pre-reflective self-awareness can be of relevance for empirical research. In particular, I propose to interpret processes of sensorimotor integration in light of the phenomenological approach that allows the definition of pre-reflective self-consciousness.

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1. Pre-reflective consciousness of the self-as-subject¹

1.1. Self-consciousnesses

Self-recognition is by and large considered as an important criterion for self-consciousness. In developmental and comparative psychology, the so-called mirror-recognition task has occasionally been heralded as the decisive test for self-consciousness (TaylorParker, Mitchell, & Boccia, 2006). Children would be self-conscious only when capable of recognizing themselves in the mirror (cf. Lewis, 2003, pp. 281–282). The question whether chimpanzees (Gallup & Povinelli, 1998; Gallup, 1970; Povinelli et al., 1997), non human primates (Itakura, 2001), birds (Epstein, Lanza, & Skinner, 1981), dolphins (Reiss & Marino, 2001) or elephants (Plotnik, de Waal, & Reiss, 2006) are self-conscious is considered according to their ability or inability to behave in front of a mirror as if in front of themselves vs. in front of a conspecific.

* Fax: +33 1 55 55 90 40.

E-mail address: legrand@shs.polytechnique.fr

¹ A good deal of the content and structure of this first part is indebted to published as well as still unpublished writings of Dan Zahavi.

However, self-consciousness comes in many forms and degrees and does not only emerge the moment one recognizes one's own mirror image or scrutinizes one's experiences attentively. Rather, a more minimalist account defends the view that the most primitive form of self-consciousness simply corresponds to the subjective dimension of experience (cf. Zahavi, 1999, 2005). In what follows, I designate this primary form of self-consciousness as a *pre-reflective consciousness of the self-as-subject*. The first section intends to clarify this notion, by comparing it with other conceptions of self-consciousness.

1.2. Primary self-consciousness

Pre-reflective self-consciousness specifically corresponds to consciousness of the self as it is the *subject* of any given experience. Compare two different experiences: the smelling of fresh coffee and the seeing of mid-night sun. These experiences differ in their phenomenality, i.e. in “what it feels like” to undergo them. More precisely, the experiences differ from each other both in terms of content (coffee vs. sun) and mode of presentation of these contents (smelling vs. seeing). However, these experiences do not differ in every aspect. They share a specific dimension in the fact that they are all given from the first-person perspective, they are given (at least tacitly) as *my* experiences, as experiences *I* am undergoing: they feel like something *for me*. This quality of *mineness* or *for-me-ness* is what the notion of pre-reflective consciousness of the self-as-subject designates.

It is important to note that the specificity of pre-reflective consciousness of the self-as-subject is not fully captured by the notion of phenomenal consciousness (Block, 1997; Zahavi, 2005, p. 224). Indeed, as the previous examples illustrate, pre-reflective self-consciousness remains constantly present even when other aspects of phenomenal consciousness vary, implying that these dimensions of experience cannot be reduced to each other. The “mineness” or subjectivity in question is not a quality as bitter or bright, black or orange that varies with the intentional object experienced. Rather, it refers to the fact that every experience is characterized by a subjective mode of givenness in the sense that it feels like something *for the experiencing subject*. For this reason, pre-reflective self-consciousness does not vary either with the modulation of phenomenal experience of the self taken as an intentional object (just like it does not vary with the modulation of phenomenal experience of any other intentional object). For example, when I experience myself as being hungry, I experience myself in a double manner: I experience an intentional aspect (“hunger”), but the latter does not suffice to capture the subjective aspect at stake here: pre-reflective consciousness of the self-as-subject (“I”). The point here is that pre-reflective self-consciousness is not reducible to phenomenal consciousness, as evidenced by the fact that the latter can change without involving any modulation of the former. Note that this does not imply that pre-reflective self-consciousness always remains constant (it can be more or less recessive). It only implies that its potential modulations are not directly and systematically due to changes of the intentional aspects of experience.

1.3. Pre-reflective self-consciousness versus anonymity

One reason why this dimension of experience can be adequately described as a primary form of *self-consciousness* is because it corresponds to a quality or dimension of mineness. However, according to what might be termed the *anonymity objection*, there would be no experience of self at the pre-reflective level. Rather, experiences would be characterized by a certain anonymity or neutrality. To claim that every experience has a quality or dimension of mineness would consequently be a post-hoc fabrication.

In reply, it is crucial to understand that the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness does not suppose that the self would be experienced as standing opposed to the stream of consciousness. Rather, at the pre-reflective level, it is an integral part of conscious experience. I do not first experience a neutral or anonymous toothache or intention to act, then ask the question “Whose experience is this actually?” to finally find myself as the owner of these experiences (Legrand, *in press*; Shoemaker, 1968). Rather, any experience is pre-reflectively experienced as intrinsically subjective in the sense that it is experienced from the perspective of the experiencing subject (Zahavi, 2005). The latter is a first-person perspective; it is tied to a self in the sense of being tied to the point of view of the experiencing, perceiving, acting subject. It could consequently be claimed that

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